Film Futures

David Bordwell

In the story by Jorge Luis Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths," a character discovers that the sage Ts'ui Pen has devised a labyrinthine novel:

> In all fictions, each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the work of the virtually-impossible-to-disentangle Ts'ui Pen, the character chooses–simultaneously–all of them. *He creates*, thereby, several future, several times, which themselves proliferate and fork....In Ts'ui Pen's novel, *all* the outcomes in fact occur: each is the starting point for further bifurcations. Once in a while, the paths of that labyrinth converge: for example, you come to this house, but in one of the possible pasts you are my enemy, in another my friend. (125)

Ts'ui Pen did not shrink from the ultimate consequences of this:

> He believed in an infinite series of times, a growing, dizzying web of divergent, convergent, and parallel times. That fabric of times that approach one another, fork, are snipped off, or are simply unknown for centuries, contains all possibilities. In most of those times, we do not exist; in some, you exist but I do not; in others, I do and you do not; in others still, we both do. (127)

Borges's conceit has its counterpart in quantum physics, which has played host to the idea of parallel universes–an infinite array of possible worlds, each as real as the one we apparently know.[1]

To this conception of time Gary Saul Morson objects, in his exacting and stimulating study *Narrative and Freedom*. If all possibilities exist equally, then ethical action, indeed personal identity, is rendered   impossible. "Because all choices are made somewhere, the totality of good and evil in existence becomes a zero-sum game.....Everything that happens had to happen, and nothing that could have taken place fails to take place" (232). For Morson, this idea cannot ground a responsible conception of human action, let alone an adequate scheme of narrative time.

Yet Morson need not worry, I think. While he finds many examples in Dostoevsky and Tolstoy of his preferred method of conjuring up alternate futures (he calls it "sideshadowing"), narratives derived from the forking-path conception don't really approach Borges's "growing, dizzying web."

In fiction, alternative futures seem pretty limited affairs. Folklore bequeaths us the two-doors problem (the lady or the tiger?) and the motif of the three paths leading to three fates. If we take *A Christmas Carol* as a forking-path plot, Scrooge is offered a meagre binary choice about his future, and in "Roads of Destiny," O. Henry's 1903 short story, the poet-hero faces only three futures: to take the road on the left, to take the one on the right, or to return to town.

As for film, recent years have brought us several intriguing efforts at forking-path plots. Like "Roads of Destiny," they proceed from a fixed point—the fork—and purportedly present mutually exclusive lines of action, leading to different futures. Consider Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Blind Chance* (*Przypadek,* 1981), which after a rather enigmatic prologue shows the medical student Witek racing for the train that will take him on his sabbatical from medical school. He leaps aboard just in time and is carried to a life as a Communist functionary. But when he reaches a crisis in that life, the film cuts back to the railroad station, and he is a young man again, once more racing for the train. Now he fails to catch it, he stays at home, and is given a brand-new future. That future will be altered once more when the narration flashes back to his run along the platform and a new chain of events starts. A similar pattern is enacted in the Hong Kong film *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1* (*Yat goh chi tan dik daan sang,* 1997) and Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* (*Lola Rennt,* 1998). These films present their futures seriatim, returning to the switchpoint after each trajectory is finished. By contrast, Peter Howitt's *Sliding Doors* (1998) presents its alternative plotlines in alternation, continually intercutting one future with the other.

None of these films hints at the radical possibilities opened up by Borges or the physicists. *Blind Chance* and *Run Lola Run* present only three alternative worlds, while *Sliding Doors* and *Too Many Ways to Be Number One* offer the minimum of two. Just as important, all these plots hold the basic characters, situations, and locales quite constant across stories. In both trajectories of *Sliding Doors,* Helen must cope with losing her job and coming to terms with her partner Jerry (who is having an affair with Lydia). *Too Many Ways to Be Number One* centers on Wong, a petty triad who's offered a chance to work with a Mainland gang trying to smuggle automobiles into China. The plotlines pivot around his decision to either grab the cars and flee or to walk away from the deal. *Run Lola Run* concentrates on a crisis: Lola's boyfriend Manni has lost money belonging to the gang boss Ronnie and she must come up with 100,000 marks before noon, when Manni intends to rob a supermarket to make up the deficit. The plot traces various consequences of her efforts to get the money to save Manni.

In *Blind Chance*, the situation facing the protagonist offers somewhat more diffuse possibilities, but the action eventually revolves around how Witek will live after the death of his father. If he catches the train, he winds up becoming a functionary in the Communist government. If he misses the train, he either becomes an activist in an underground Catholic youth movement, or he stays behind and returns to medical school, marrying a woman he met there. In *Blind Chance* the outcomes boil down to thematically grounded alternatives: in Poland of the late 1970s, every choice turns out to be political, even the apparently non-political choice of being a doctor.

So instead of the infinite, radically diverse set of alternatives evoked by the parallel-universes conception, we have a set narrow both in number and in core conditions. None of these plots confronts the ultimate Borgesian demands: Lola is not shown as Manni's sister in a rival world, Matt does not become Wong's enemy, Helen does not turn into her rival Lydia, and in no version does the protagonist fail to exist at all. We have something far simpler, corresponding to a more cognitively manageable conception of what forking paths would be like in our own lives. Far from representing a failure of nerve on the part of film directors, I think that this tendency offers clues to the way forking-path narratives actually work and work upon us.

Narratives are built not upon philosophy or physics but folk psychology, the ordinary processes we use to make sense of the world. Often, particularly in media like film, perceptual skills we've developed to give us reliable information about the world are deployed no less commandingly in following stories. These skills sometimes fail the most stringent deductive tests, as experiments in everyday rationality suggest.[2] Yet the shortcuts, stereotypes, faulty inferences, and erroneous conclusions to which we are prone play a central role in narrative comprehension. In following a plot we reason from a single case, judge on first impressions, and expect, against all probability, that the rescuer will arrive on time because we want it that way. Granted, this is partly a matter of convention, built up over decades of filmmaking; but the conventions rely partly upon the propensities of folk psychology. Film flashbacks, for example, are seldom questioned, while flashforwards are always under a cloud, apparently because we assume the past to be knowable in a way that the future is not.

Since we bring folk psychology to bear on narratives all the time, why should parallel-worlds tales be any different? Consider the counterfactuals we might spin in ordinary life. If I had left the parking lot a minute or two later, I wouldn't have had the fender-bender that became such a nuisance to me for the next month. This sort of homely reflection on short-term outcomes,

in which only small things change, seems the basis of *Sliding Doors, Too Many Ways*, and *Run Lola Run*. Occasionally, of course, we also meditate on our life-course. Here, for instance, is Brian Eno explaining how he found his career: "As a result of going into a subway station and meeting Andy [Mackay], I joined Roxy Music, and as a result of that I have a career in music I wouldn't have had otherwise. If I'd walked ten yards further on the platform or missed that train or been in the next carriage, I probably would have been an art teacher now" (Prendergast, 118). It's this sort of speculation that seems to be captured in *Blind Chance*, and even if the cast may change more drastically than in short-term imaginings, we remain the hero of our imagined future.

Likewise, at any moment we can easily imagine two or three alternative chains of events, as Eno does, but not twenty or sixty, let alone an infinite number. It may be relevant that outstanding examples of forking-path tales in literature conform to similar constraints. *A Christmas Carol* and "Roads of Destiny" display the same limitations–a very, very few options and no deep ontological differences between the futures displayed. Storytellers' well-entrenched strategies for manipulating time, space, causality, point of view, and all the rest reflect what is perceptually and cognitively manageable for their audiences, and the multiple worlds of Borges and quantum mechanics don't fit that condition. Add to this the canons and conventions of the medium as well, and these may work to limit the proliferation of forking paths. In film, powerful storytelling traditions reshape such uncommonsensical ideas into something far more familiar. This tendency may have the additional payoff of setting to rest Morson's worries about a nihilistic reduction of an action's ethical dimensions; by opening up only two or three forking paths, these plots make certain choices and consequences–about politics, crime, and love—more important than others.

My main purpose in what follows is to chart some key conventions on which four recent forking-path films rely. This will let us see how the exfoliating tendrils of Borges's potential futures have been trimmed back to cognitively manageable dimensions, by means of strategies characteristic of certain traditions of cinematic storytelling. I hope to show that these forking-path movies, calling forth folk-psychological inferences and designed for quick comprehension, have stretched and enriched some narrative norms without subverting or demolishing them. Indeed, part of the pleasure of these films stems from their reintroduction of viewer-friendly devices in the context of what might seem to be ontologically or epistemically radical possibilities.[3]

I'll be tracing out seven conventions.

1. Forking paths are linear.

In our films, each path, after it diverges, adheres to a strict line of cause and effect. There is usually no later branching after the first fork, none of what Borges calls "further bifurcation." After missing or catching her train, Helen in *Sliding Doors* doesn't divide again, and although Wong and Witek must make further choices along each path, the plot doesn't split into more proliferating consequences. The narratives assume that one moment of choice or chance determines all the rest.

In principle, as Borges's Tsui Pen indicates, any instant at all could initiate a new future. As Kieslowski remarks of *Blind Chance*: "Every day we're always faced with a choice which could end our entire life, yet of which we're completely unaware. We don't ever really know where our fate lies" (quoted in Stok, 113). In our specimen films, however, narrative patterning obligingly highlights a single crucial incident and traces out its inevitable implications. Instead of each moment being equally pregnant with numerous futures, one becomes far more consequential than the others, and those consequences will follow strictly from it. Such linearity helps make these plots intelligible, yielding two or three stories that illustrate, literally, alternative but integral courses of events–something fairly easy to imagine in our own lives and to follow on the screen. "Of course the number of parallel universes is really huge," remarks physicist Bryce DeWitt. "I like to say that some physicists are comfortable with little huge numbers but not with big huge numbers" (quoted in Folger, 24). As film viewers, we like the number of parallel universes to be *really* little.

Still, forking-path plots offer some wiggle room; although causality becomes strict once certain processes are put into motion, they can be set in motion by felicities of *timing*. Split-seconds matter. If Witek's hand had clutched the handrail at just the right moment; if Wong had decided to pay his share of the bill and walk out of the massage parlor; if Lola had not been slowed down by this or that passerby; if Helen's path had not been blocked by a little girl...things would be very different. Again, the films pivot around a folk-psychological if-only: we are back with Eno on the Tube platform, when *Music for Airports* owes everything to a momentary encounter.

Sometimes one of these films does open up a new fork, but it tends to do so retrospectively, by looping back from a later point; and even then it will presuppose yet another linear trajectory stemming from *that* moment.[4] *Sliding Doors* concludes by showing the upshot of one story, in which Helen survives a fall downstairs, breaks off with Jerry, and leaves the hospital just when James does. At this point the film starts to reenact a moment in the

film's leadup; that is, it marks a switchpoint *earlier* than the one that launched the film's alternative futures. The result is a neat closure device I'll discuss in a little more detail later. By contrast, *Too Many Ways to be Number One* creates a new choice-point in order to generate a somewhat open ending. Initially the fork comes when Wong, invited to meet with the Mainland triads, is asked to pay the bill for a meal and entertainment at a bathhouse. In the first version, he doesn't pay and robs the Mainland gang, leading his pals on a frantic race out of Hong Kong and over the border. In the second version, he does pay, avoids a fight, and runs to Taiwan. Once we return to the initial situation of the fortune-teller, the epilogue presents Wong's friend Bo inviting him to dinner and the bathhouse, but Wong's reaction implies that he may not accept. In effect, the epilogue suggests that a new choice-point has been opened: instead of *not paying/paying*, there's *going to the meeting* (the outcomes of which we've seen) and *not going*. Staying in Hong Kong and avoiding Bo's scheme altogether becomes a third option, one that fits into a broader theme suggesting that Hong Kong's future lies neither with the Mainland nor with Taiwan.

The chief exception to my claims about causal linearity and timing in these tales comes in the interpolated flash-forward passages in *Run Lola Run*. These present very quick montages of stills, prefaced by a title ("and then..."), which trace out the futures of secondary characters. Most of these also adhere to a linear chain of cause and effect, but in one instance things are more complicated. In each trajectory, Lola bumps (or nearly bumps) the same woman on the street, and the film provides a flash montage of the woman's future; in each story she has a different future.

But why should the timing of Lola's passing create such sharply different futures for the nameless woman? This hardly seems to be an action that could launch radically different outcomes. Tykwer's insert works well as a mockery of the "butterfly effect," but I suspect that audiences would have difficulty understanding an entire film based around divergent futures that aren't causally triggered by an inciting incident.

2. The fork is signposted.

Tykwer's "And then" titles can stand as an emblem of the explicitness with which forking paths must be marked. Within the story world, characters may comment upon their divergent futures. During *Blind Chance*'s second tale, Witek remarks to the priest, "Imagine! If a month ago I hadn't missed a train, I wouldn't be here with you now." Helen says of her mugging, which delayed her return home, "If I had just caught that bloody train it'd never

have happened"–to which Jerry, relieved he wasn't caught philandering, replies dismissively, "If only this and what if that..." These are what-if plots.

To reinforce such bald announcements, each film's narration sets up a pattern that clearly indicates the branching-points–a kind of highlighted "reset" button, usually emphasizing matters of timing. As we've seen, *Blind Chance* uses a freeze-frame, a return of the same musical accompaniment, and the return of nearly identical footage of Witek pelting through the station. *Sliding Doors* employs a rewind-mechanism; Helen fails to catch the train, but the action is then reversed so that she strides backward up the stairs and, after another pause, comes down and does manage to hurry on board. *Run Lola Run* replays the fall of Lola's bright red phone receiver and her racing through her mother's room, down the stairs, and out into the street. In addition, before each new future, Tykwer provides a slow, red-tinted scene of Lola and Manni in bed brooding on their love.

The motif of timing is also made manifest in the branching-point of *Too Many Ways to Be Number One*. A close-up of Wong's wristwatch opens the film and leads directly to his session with the palm-reader (played silent). Wong goes out to the street where his pal Bo begins to urge him to attend the meeting. At the end of the first story, as Wong and his gang lie dead, we cut back to the watch–this time not at the palm-reader's but placed on the street, as Wong is revealed once more scuffling with his pal. The epilogue will be built around a return to the watch at the palm-reader's, this time with the soundtrack giving us full information about his (forking-path) predictions. The close-up of the watch becomes a singularized device marking a return to the point at which the stories diverge.

3. Forking paths intersect sooner or later.

If we think about forking paths in ordinary life, we tend not to populate our scenarios with drastically varied characters. My fender-bender in the parking lot leads me home to my wife, and then to telling my friends about the other driver's reckless abandon and my prudence. Accordingly, forking-path tales are populated by recurring others. In both trajectories of *Sliding Doors*, four characters—Helen, her partner Jerry, Jerry's lover Lydia, and James, the man who in one story-line comes to replace Jerry—carry the burden of the action; and secondary characters recur as well. *Run Lola Run* works with the same core cast in all three lines: Lola, Manni, her mother, her father, her father's lover, her father's business associate, and the security guard at the bank.

In *Blind Chance* and *Too Many Ways to Be Number One*, there is less overlap of characters in the alternative futures, but these films do include some recurring figures: the dean of Witek's medical school appears in all three stories, and his aunt recurs in two; while in *Too Many Ways*, Wong's partner Matt is a constant presence. Both these films do find other ways to weave in characters we've already met. In *Too Many Ways*, the hero's partners in crime are killed in the first story, set on the Chinese Mainland; in the second story, centering on Wong and his partner Matt as they try to make money as hitmen in Taiwan, the partners reappear as the men who committed a crime for which Matt and Wong are blamed.

Blind Chance has a prologue covering some early events in the hero's life, and this serves to create familiarity further along. A pal from Witek's boyhood reappears in the second story, and in the third story, while Witek is standing on the train platform, the plot reintroduces another medical student, a woman who has been highlighted in the prologue as his lover. She has come to see him off–though she's not been shown in any of the replays of his race through the station—and in the third story they end up marrying. Finally, the three stories in *Blind Chance* are linked by certain pervasive social conditions. In each future, Witek is involved directly or indirectly with the unofficial student movement and their samizdat publications. In his Communist career he turns a blind eye to the movement; in his Catholic career he is an activist within it, helping print the leaflets; during his medical career he must replace his mentor, who is fired because his son is involved with the movement. Once more, even divergent futures are rendered more cognitively coherent, thanks to recurring characters and background conditions.

4. Forking-path tales are unified by traditional cohesion devices.

By cohesion devices I mean formal tactics that link passages at the local level–from scene to scene or from one group of scenes to another. The classical narrative cinema of Hollywood and the narrational strategies characteristic of off-Hollywood art cinema have developed many such tactics to aid the viewer's comprehension. We find them in the forking-path tales as well, usually serving to tighten up linear cause and effect.

Two primary cohesion devices of mainstream cinema are *appointments* and *deadlines*, and we find these in profusion in our forking-path movies. *Run Lola Run* is built around a looming deadline: If Lola doesn't meet Manni by 12 noon, he'll try to rob a supermarket to get 100,000 marks. *Sliding Doors* is structured around a cascade of appointments–in one line of action, the

appointments necessary to find Helen a new job; in the other, the dates she makes with James, the man who attracts her after she leaves Jerry. *Too Many Ways to Be Number One* is somewhat more loosely organized, but Wong's alternative futures are based on appointments (with the Mainland and Taiwanese gangs) and deadlines (chiefly, in the second plotline, the one pushing Matt to kill rival triad bosses).

Again, our "art movie" *Blind Chance* is somewhat looser at this level, relying more on the sheer successiveness of events, and leaving appointments and deadlines offscreen. In the second story, for instance, Witek's childhood friend Daniel appears at a meeting of the underground students' organization, along with his sister Vera. Witek's subsequent romance with Vera is shown in brief scenes of them meeting on the street, or spending time together in his apartment: these scenes, like Vera's departures by train, aren't set up by explicit appointments, though such arrangements must have been made. Indeed, when the couple splits up, it's because of *not* making an appointment (Witek is told she's gone to Lodz, but actually she's waited outside his apartment for hours before finally leaving). This sort of loosening of causal and temporal bonds is characteristic of much ambitious filmmaking in Europe after World War II.

Yet in *Blind Chance* cohesion operates from another angle. The film opens with an enigmatic prologue showing Witek sitting in a train or airplane seat, facing us and starting to scream. The credits unroll over his open mouth. After the credits, we see an enigmatic image of a hospital emergency room, with a woman's leg in the foreground and a bloody corpse hauled away in the background. Only at the end of the film will these images make sense: in the final story Witek is aboard a plane to Paris and it explodes in mid-air; this is the last image of the film, over which the final credits appear. Now we can place the opening shot of his shriek–presumably his last moments; and now we can understand that it is apparently his body that is dragged through the emergency room. The film curls around on itself, back to front.

Whether the devices are classical or indebted to art-cinema norms, they still call upon skills we already possess, notably our ability to bind sequences together in the most plausible way in terms of time, space, and causality.

5. Forking paths will often run parallel.

One consequence of sticking to a core situation, the same locales, and the same cast of characters is that certain components emerge as vivid variants of one another. Thus in *Blind Chance* we're inclined to contrast the three women with whom Witek gets involved: the politically committed Chyushka,

the more ethereal Vera, and the practical, somewhat nervous Olga. After the death of his father, Witek finds a replacement figure in each future–the veteran Communist Werner, the sympathetic priest, and his medical school dean. Similarly, Lola seems to have the power to restore life: to herself at the end of the first trajectory, to Manni at the end of the second, and to the security guard Schuster, whom she revives in the ambulance at the close of the third tale. *Sliding Doors* brings out parallels even more sharply by intercutting its alternative futures rather than presenting them seriatim: in one scene Helen is tended to by her friend Anna before she showers; in the following one, Jerry ministers to the cut on her forehead before she takes a shower. The cleverest moments in this organization come when the two futures converge on the same locale, so that in one scene, the bereft Helen drinks woozily at a bar while at a nearby table the happily ignorant Helen dines with the boyfriend who's cheating on her.

Two Many Ways to Be No. One handles parallels in a joking manner characteristic of the whole film. The second, longer story takes Wong and Matt to Taiwan, where Matt lets it be known that he's a contract killer. They fall in with an enormous, hirsute triad boss named Blackie White, who hires Matt to wipe out his twin brother Whitey Black. Matt already has accepted a job from an unknown boss, who turns out to be Whitey, asking him to wipe out Blackie. The entire confusion comes to smash at a party where the two brothers sit side by side in complementary outfits and Matt bursts in to earn his money....unsure which one to terminate. The flamboyantly symmetrical staging and repetitions make the alternatives comically explicit. *Too Many Ways* can be taken as a sendup of forking-paths stories generally, and this hyperexplicit parallel can be seen as parodying a central convention.

Most narratives contain parallel situations, characters, or actions, and strongly profiled parallelisms, as we know from *Intolerance* (1916) and *The Three Ages* (1923), are a long-running cinematic tradition and have become fairly easy to follow. Forking-path plots can bring parallelisms to our notice quite vividly, thereby calling forth well-practiced habits of sense-making. Indeed, one can argue that parallels are easier to spot in such films, with so many elements held constant in each variant, than in more traditional narratives, which may often bury their parallels. Once more, the forking-path narrative calls upon skills we've learned in ordinary life and in consuming narratives.

6. All paths are not equal; the last one taken presupposes the others.

A narrative, in Meir Sternberg's formulation, involves telling in time, and as a time-bound process, it calls upon a range of human psychological

propensities.[5] What comes earlier shapes our expectations about what follows. What comes later modifies our understanding of what went before; retrospection is often as important as prospection.

Forking-path films thus tend to treat replays of earlier events elliptically. When action leading up to a fork is presented a second or third time, the later version tends to be more laconic. The three runs for the train made by Witek are rendered in ever-briefer versions (88 seconds, 67 seconds, and 59 seconds). Similarly, the first stretch of *Too Many Ways* shows Wong meeting Bo, going to a café with his pals to propose dealing with the Mainlanders, and then meeting the Mainlanders at the bath house, where the fight over the bill ensues. After the massacre on the Mainland, the narration jumps back to the meeting with Bo, and the following café session is rendered very elliptically–in 42 seconds, as opposed to the two minutes it took in the first version. Since we know what happened there already, the scene can be presented more pointedly the second time around, even though it is, in that trajectory, still happening for the first time.

More importantly, forking-path narratives tend to treat what we learn about in one world as a background condition for what is shown later in another. Sometimes this pattern is fairly tacit, yielding the sense that alternatives are being exhausted one by one. The types of choices offered to Witek in *Blind Chance* have this cumulative quality: What if I took the path of least resistance and joined the Party? What if I summoned up more strength and opposed the Party? Since each of these choices fails, it seems that only through an apolitical stance can one maintain one's decency, and that option is enacted in the third alternative.

Alternatively, the earlier narrative can explicitly contribute certain conditions to this one. In O. Henry's "Roads of Destiny," the first story introduces the choleric Marquis; the second story elaborates on his plot to overthrow the king. The third variant can therefore be much more laconic in telling us whose pistol was responsible for the hero's suicide. Similarly, in the second tale shown in *Too Many Ways*, when Wong is reunited with his pals in Taiwan, the deaths of Bo and another gang member are reported in terms that indicate the men met the same fates as they did in the first story.

Makers of forking-paths plots seem unable to resist contaminating one by another. At one moment in *Sliding Doors*, the heroine has an inkling of what is happening in the parallel story. Walking along the river with her friend Anna, Helen seems to anticipate what's happening at the same moment in the other story, wherein her counterpart cheers on a crew team: "Fairly weird. I knew there'd be a boat race going on in purple and white shirts."

Shortly I'll show how the film's resolution depends on this kind of crosstalk between futures.

Most surprisingly of all, sometimes a film suggests that prior stories have taught the protagonist a lesson that can be applied to this one–thereby flouting any sense that parallel worlds are sealed off from one another. One critic has noted that Witek in *Blind Chance* seems to become more reflective from future to future, as if he were cautiously exploring his "trilemma."[6] The first story of *Too Many Ways* presents Wong as comically inept at nearly everything he tries; in the second story he is more self-possessed, while Matt is the one who seems incompetent. It's as if dying through bungling in the first plotline has made Wong wiser. And if the epilogue of *Too Many Ways* does suggest that Wong is considering not meeting the gang tonight, that hesitation might depend partly on his intuiting, through means we cannot divine, what happened in his first and second futures.

The clearest example of this tactic comes in *Run Lola Run*, where not only does the heroine seem to push the reset button at the start of each trajectory, but also she learns to control the chance that ruined her previous futures. During the lead-in, when Manni phones to beg for help, Lola screams in frustration, and her screech explodes bottles on her TV monitor. In the first story, when her father asks her to explain why she needs the money, the pressure of time and anxiety triggers another scream, this time bursting the glass on a clock face. But in the third alternative future, Lola tries to get the money at a casino, where she bets on a spin of a roulette wheel. She calculatedly emits another scream, and this one not only breaks glass but guides the ball into the winning slot. It's as if she has learned to tame what was initially a sheer expression of desperation, turning it to her purposes.

Due to the exigencies of telling in time, we might say, it's difficult for parallel futures to receive equal weighting. The future shown first supplies some preconditions for later ones, always for the audience and sometimes for the character. Psychologically, the primacy effect treats the first future as a benchmark setting down the conditions that will be repeated, varied, omitted, or negated in subsequent versions. Moreover, given the fact that the hero or heroine is a constant presence in all these futures, our entrenched expectations about character change–modification of personality, or growing knowledge–alert us to any cue that, contrary to the laws of nature, the protagonist may register and even learn from her or his alternative fates. This may be a vestige of the supernatural and time-travel versions of the parallel-universes tale, in which we had a protagonist–Scrooge or Marty McFly–who retains psychological continuity in visiting different futures and is therefore fully aware of all his options.

7. All paths are not equal; the last one taken, or completed, is the least hypothetical one.

If something like a primacy effect establishes the first future as a benchmark, the "recency effect" privileges the *final* future we see. Because endings are weightier than most other points in the narrative, and because forking-path tales tend to make the early stories preconditions for the last one, these plots suggest that the last future is the final draft, the one that "really" happened; or at least they reduce the others to fainter possibilities. And if the protagonist seems to have learned from the events shown earlier, the ending may gain still more prominence as the truest, most satisfying one.

I've already suggested how, at the close of *Too Many Ways*, Wong might be said to have assimilated what happens in his other futures, but the sense of "getting the future right" is much more evident at the end of *Run Lola Run*. Manni has recovered the stolen cash and returned it to Ronnie, while Lola has won big at the casino and now has 100,000 marks for both of them. In a classic happy ending, they walk off together, with Lola smiling at Manni's question: "What's in the bag?" The upbeat coda plays off against the grim consequences of the previous two futures (Lola shot, Manni run down) and renders them lesser options. A carefree ending is more in keeping with the ludic tone established from the start, when the bank guard Schuster introduced the action to come as a vast game. Tykwer goes even farther, seeing the last future as a consequence of the other two:

> At the end, the viewers must have the impression that Lola has done everything that we've just seen (and not just one part, a third of it). She has lived it all–she has died for this man, he has died, and everything that was destined to happen has happened. She has all that behind her, and at the end, she's rewarded. (134)

I think this corresponds with the intuitions of many viewers that Lola has somehow lived through, and learned from, all the futures we've witnessed.

Blind Chance privileges its third future by the swallowing-the-tail strategy I've already mentioned. The prologue, showing Witek starting to scream in what appears in retrospect to be a plane seat, links neatly to the film's final shot of the plane exploding, which also explains the second shot, that of the casualties in the emergency room. That shot, moreover, is glimpsed again in the beginning of the second story; in retrospect we can see it as adding more weight to the death-by-air outcome. Just as important, the ending is given saliency by the fact that in the other two lines of action, Witek has planned to take the plane to Paris but for one reason or another doesn't do so. In only

the third story does he catch the plane, and only the mid-air explosion shown in the final tale explains the images that open the film.

Sliding Doors offers a fresh, equally ingenious way to weight the last plotline. Recall that in one plotline Helen misses her train, arrives home late, and so for a long time remains unaware that Jerry is conducting an affair with Lydia. In the course of this path, Helen picks up day jobs as a waitress and food courier to support Jerry while he purportedly writes his novel. This line of action highlights the love triangle of Jerry-Helen-Lydia, making James virtually absent, and it adheres fairly closely to those conventions of deceit, superior knowledge, and abrupt emotional turns (including Helen's eventual discovery of Jerry's affair) that are characteristic of film melodrama. In the alternative plotline Helen catches her train, meets James, and discovers Jerry's affair. As a result she leaves Jerry, gains confidence, falls in love with James, and sets up her own public-relations firm. This pathway highlights the love triangle of Jerry-Helen-James; Lydia plays a secondary role, and thanks to James' stream of patter and a generally lighter tone, this line sketches out a typical romantic comedy. And of course these two lines of action are intercut.

Both futures climax in Helen's being taken to the hospital near death (through a fall downstairs/ through being hit by a truck). In one plotline she dies, in the other she lives. Remarkably, however, she *dies* in the *romantic-comedy* plot, and she *lives* in the *melodrama* plot. So the problem is: How to end the film? If we conclude with Helen's death, this would arbitrarily chop off the romance and punish someone who has not wronged anybody. As in *Lola*, there is a presumption in favor of a happy ending, preferably one in which she is united with James. But in the plotline in which Helen survives, she doesn't even know who James is! How to arrange a consummatory ending?

Early in *Sliding Doors*, before Helen's paths fork on the Tube platform, James runs into her in an elevator, when she drops her earring and he picks it up. At the start of the romantic-comedy plotline, distraught from just having been fired, Helen can't accept his cheerful flirtation on the Tube. Later in the romantic-comedy plot it is established that James's mother is ill and must be taken to the hospital. So at the end of the melodrama plot, after breaking up with Jerry, Helen is discharged from the hospital. She enters an elevator; James, leaving his mother, steps on to the same elevator. Again she drops her earring, again he picks it up. Like *Blind Chance*, *Sliding Doors* lets its epilogue fold back on its prologue, but instead of dooming the protagonist it allows the romantic comedy plot to restart, and properly this time: Helen

is already wised up to Jerry's unfaithfulness and can appreciate James. Helen also gets another disquieting glimpse of her parallel life, for she is able to respond to his question with the tag he uses throughout the romantic-comedy line of action ("Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition").

Here again, the last future we encounter is privileged by its absorption of the lessons learned in an earlier one. Instead of calling these "forking-path" plots, we might better describe them as *multiple-draft* narratives, with the last version presenting itself as the fullest, most satisfying revision. Once more, this conforms to our propensity to weight the ending, to treat it as the culmination of what went before it...even if all of what went before couldn't really have come before.

As in any study of genre conventions, mine has had to slight major differences among the films (the techno rush of *Run Lola Run* versus the sober, philosophical pacing of *Blind Chance*, for instance). Moreover, I haven't gone on to examine other forking-path films, such as Iwai Shunji's *Fireworks, Should We See It from the Side or the Bottom? (Uchiage hanabi, shita kara Miruka? Yoko cara miruka?*1993) and Ventura Pons' *To Die (or Not) (Morir [o no],* 2000). By the turn of the millennium, the conventions of such films seem so well-known that new movies can play off them, as when the plot initially sets out two parallel futures but then concentrates on one, bringing the other one in at intervals (*Me Myself I*, 1999, and *The Family Man*, 2000). I can only speculate on why the 1990s should see such a resurgence of forking-path narratives— though video games, cited explicitly in *Lola*, would seem a major inspiration.

The films I've selected, moreover, aren't the only texts that can enlighten us. There is far more luxuriant binary branching to be found in Alan Ayckbourne's eight-play cycle *Intimate Exchanges* (1982), from which Resnais drew his pair of films *Smoking/No Smoking* (1993). There is something closer to true parallel worlds in Stephen King's duplex novels *Desperation* and *The Regulators* (both 1996); characters from one tale reappear in the other with only partly recurring attributes (same name, different body; or same name and body, different personal histories and fates). A milder variant of this recombinant strategy can be found in Mohsen Makhmalbaf's film *Time of Love (Nobate Asheghi,* 1991), in which, across three episodes, four actors swap roles as husband, wife, lover, and onlooker, each episode yielding a different outcome.

Whatever films or novels or plays we choose, though, I suggest that we will find that the concept of alternative futures will be adapted to the demands of particular narrative traditions–pruning the number of options to those few that can be held in mind, finding new uses for cohesion devices

and repetition, relying on schemas for causality and time and space. In fact, we might even postulate that the more radically the film evokes multiple times, the more constrained it must be on other fronts. *Smoking/No Smoking*, presenting two feature-length alternative futures, can permit itself no more than two characters, always male and female, per scene. *Groundhog Day* (1993) breaks with one of my hypothetical conventions by proliferating a great many futures for its repellant protagonist. To compensate, it presents those futures as very short-term alternatives, and it multiplies redundancy around its forking point (the clock radio's wake-up song) and the parallel events in the repeated day.[7]

If such a trade-off between innovation and norm seems to cramp the infinite vistas opened up by Borges, we shouldn't underestimate the extent to which stretching traditional narrative requires care. Narratives are designed by human minds for human minds. Stories bear the traces of not only local and historical conventions of sense-making, but also of the constraints and biases of human perception and cognition. A film, while moving inexorably forward (we can't stop and go back), must manage several channels of information (image, speech, noise, music). It must therefore work particularly hard to shape the spectator's attention, memory, and inference-making at each instant. No wonder that filmmakers balance potentially confusing innovations like the multiple-draft structure with heightened appeal to those forms and formulas that viewers know well. Artists should test the limits of story comprehension, but those very limits, and the predictable patterns they yield, remain essential to our dynamic experience of narrative.

University of Wisconsin, Madison

Notes

1. See Fred Alan Wolf, *Parallel Universes: The Search for Other Worlds* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988).
2. The classic studies on heuristics and rationality are collected in Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic, and Amos Tversky, eds., *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). See also Richard Nisbett and Lee Ross, *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ:

Prentice-Hall, 1980). A more recent account is Gerd Gigerenzer, *Adaptive Thinking: Rationality in the Real World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

3. It seems that the Internet, which doesn't offer the predetermined temporal experience that a film does, is far more hospitable to widely branching narrative futures. See N. Katherine Hayles, "Reconfiguring Narrative in Electronic Environments," lecture delivered at the conference "Narrative at the Outer Limits, May 2001.

4. A clear example from outside my set of films here can be found in the *Back to the Future* series. In the first film (1985), the switchpoint is established as the moment when Marty, having travelled back to 1955, pushes his future father out of the path of the car driven by Lorraine's father. As a result, George McFly doesn't win Lorraine's pity, they don't go to the prom together, they don't kiss and fall in love and marry...and Marty doesn't get born. Having disturbed the past, Marty must restage the kiss under new circumstances, along the way allowing his father to become more courageous and self-confident. But *Back to the Future II* (1989), which presents an alternative future for Marty and his family, shifts the switchpoint to an earlier moment on the day of the prom, when the villain Biff receives an almanac from the future that will allow him to win any sports bet he lays down today. This earlier moment becomes the crucial fork for that film in the series–which Doc obligingly diagrams for us on a blackboard in his lab.

5. Meir Sternberg, "Telling in Time (I): Chronology and Narrative Theory," *Poetics Today* 11, 4 (Winter 1990): 901-948; "Telling in Time (II): Chronology, Teleology, Narrativity," *Poetics Today* 13: 3 (Fall 1992): 463-541.

6. Alain Masson, "Nécessité et variations," in *Krzysztof Kieslowski*, ed. Vincent Amiel (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1997), p. 57.

7. On the patterns of redundancy in *Groundhog Day*, see Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Analyzing Classical Narrative Technique* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 131-154.

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