Paradigmatic Forking-Path Films: Intersections between Mind-Game Films and Multiple-Draft Narratives

Philipp Schmerheim

Abstract

In diesem Beitrag geht es um Überschneidungen und Verzweigungen zwischen sogenannten ‚multiple-draft narratives' und ‚mind-game films' (Gedankenspielfilmen). Während jene primär über Eigenheiten der filmischen Plot-Struktur definiert sind, zielen Gedankenspielfilme vorrangig auf ein Spiel mit der Filmwahrnehmung der Rezipienten. Anhand von Beispielfilmen wie Butterfly Effect (Eric Bress & J. Mackye Gruber 2004), Groundhog Day (Harold Ramis 1993), Lola rennt (Tom Tykwer 1998) und Mulholland Drive (David Lynch 2001) werden Ansätze einer Typologie beider Filmkategorien entwickelt. Dabei wird klar, dass sich Filme mit multiplen Plots und Gedankenspielfilme zwar voneinander unterscheiden lassen, sich aber in den meisten Filmbeispielen Elemente der jeweils anderen Kategorie finden. Der Kurz-Animationsfilm Fast Film (Virgil Widrich 2003) stellt einen speziellen Fall einer solchen Überschneidung zwischen beiden Filmtypen dar: Fast Film ist eine bewegte Collage aus Filmbildfragmenten, die von fast 400 verschiedenen klassischen Filmen stammen. Dadurch verbindet der Kurzfilm einen traditionellen, linear aufgebauten Plot mit hochkomplexen audiovisuellen Rezeptionsangeboten. Ich argumentiere dafür, Fast Film als eine Variante der Idee, dass es mehrere Versionen desselben Plots geben kann, aufzufassen. Da die Filmfragmente sowohl sequenziell als auch paradigmatisch (innerhalb eines jeweiligen Filmrahmens) angeordnet sind, präsentiert Fast Film ‚paradigmatic forking paths' (paradigmatische Gabelwege), verschiedene Möglichkeiten, denselben Plot wahrzunehmen.

1. The Mind-Game Film and the Multiple-Draft Narrative

The rise of the DVD not only enabled the inclusion of deleted scenes and alternative endings on DVD-editions of theatrical releases but also fostered the production of films that explicitly invite multiple viewings. One way to invite such revisits to a film of which one already knows the ending is through developing complex narratives that often cannot be understood in a single viewing.

However, there are various forms of complex narratives: for instance, so-called multiple-draft narratives/forking-path plots (Bordwell 2002, Branigan 2002) play with "alternative tellings of the [same] story, and alternate stories" (Branigan 2002, p. 107) but in the end still tend to favour a definite final version. Mind-game films, another tendency in contemporary cinema (cf. Elsaesser 2009), deliberately play with spectatorial expectations and often leave open the question what really happened in the film.

Multiple-draft narratives such as *Lola rennt* (Tom Tykwer 1998), *Sliding Doors* (Peter Howitt 1998), or *It's A Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra 1946), explore different plot lines "seriatim" (Bordwell 2002, p. 89). The film audience is challenged to keep in mind the different versions

of the film plot s/he is presented with one after another. In contrast, mind-game films such as *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch 2001), *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly 2001), or *Ashes of Time* (Wong Kar-Wai 1994) usually present one single plot line, but do so in such a way that spectatorial interpretations of the film can differ greatly. Both 'film categories' are not mutually exclusive. For example, the mind-game film *eXistenZ* (David Cronenberg 2000) confuses its spectators: it remains unclear on which level of reality a given scene takes place. At the same time, the film uses a kind of video-game logic in which the characters move from one game level to the next.

In the following, I will develop in more detail the phenomenon of multiple-draft narratives by expanding on contributions by Bordwell (2002) and Branigan (2002). The paper concludes with a discussion of *Fast Film*, an experimental film which adds new aspects to the notion of "multiple-draft narratives" and "forking-path plots" as discussed by Bordwell and Branigan.

2. Multiple-Draft-Narratives and Forking-Path-Plots: The Contingency of Film Plots

Films are a result of a series of decisions made by filmmakers during the pre-production, shooting, and post-production process. Theoretically, each release version of a film could have turned out differently, at least in minor respects: Lead roles could have been cast with different actors, the film could have been set in different locations, and the film could have been shot in black-and-white instead of colour. Most importantly, the entire plot of a film, or elements of it, could be different. For instance, any given film could have been shot with a different ending. The film seen and heard during a screening is only one possible result of the creative process of filmmaking.

Of course, some of these decisions are more important for the overall structure and impression of a film than others. E.g., the actor chosen for the lead role arguably influences the overall character of the final film more than the choice of extras. Lead characters are among a film's most visible features, and a different actor's appearance, acting style and abilities might completely change a film.

Although the thought experiment of substituting the face of one actor with the face of another is quite interesting for film spectators (and a routine procedure for casting agents), changes in a film's plot arguably have the most far-reaching consequences. Traditionally, we are presented with only one way the story goes. This parallels real life: in everyday life, things happen as they do, and there are rarely ways to make them happen (again) in a different way, although we are able to imagine things differently. But a life merely imagined is a counter-factual life.

In short: each film suppresses "alternative tellings of the story, and alternate stories [...] in favour of the final version" (Branigan 2002, p. 107). On screen it is the final draft of the screenplay that counts. It is hardly news that film release versions are not written in stone. Almost every DVD release contains alternative endings and deleted scenes. A film's plot line

and structure, as well as other aspects, are contingent, i.e., could be different.[1] Films have been and frequently are altered before they are released in other countries. For instance, many European releases of Hollywood films contain more sexually explicit scenes. As Miriam Hansen writes, in the early decades of American Cinema happy endings were often exchanged for tragic endings before these films were exported to Soviet movie theatres (see Hansen 2000, p. 341).

3. Same Film, Differing Interpretations

Not only could any single film *be* different, it can also be *interpreted* in many different ways (and, actually, each film *is* interpreted in many different ways). Arguably, there is no such thing as the 'one and only' correct interpretation of a film. There are various reasons for this. First, films are collaborative endeavours that can never be completely controlled by one person alone. Second, even if a film mirrors a filmmaker's intentions to a high degree, this does not mean that the members of the audience interpret it accordingly. There is always room for a different interpretation of the mass of images and other sensual impressions a spectator is confronted with.

Of course, some basic facts about a film are pretty disambiguous, such as its duration, whether it was shot in colour or black-and-white, its cast, and so on. In addition, it is normally possible to provide at least an approximation of the events in a film, although it might not always be possible to assign a clear meaning to these events. Such films are usually regarded as confusing by their audience. David Lynch's *Inland Empire* (2006) is an example for this. Films with no clear meaning, which are open to differing interpretations, are core examples of mind-game films.

There is a third point in favour of multiple interpretations: Each interpretation is tied to a specific vocabulary. Even filmmakers have to rely on such a vocabulary in order to be able to talk about their films. The words we use also influence the way we regard what we are talking about, and how much we can find out about the objects of our talk. In short: different interpretations of a film might still fit this film well. A specific interpretation of a film usually examines it from a certain perspective without exhausting all meanings a film might possess. For a brilliant elaboration of this point, see Branigan 2006.

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[1] Here I use the distinction between necessary and contingent properties of entities, which is often used in philosophical literature. For a famous discussion of necessary and contingent properties (in the context of analytic philosophy of language), see the first two lectures of Kripke (1980). Note that contingent properties are not arbitrary properties. Something is arbitrary only if it is the way it is by pure chance, while the term 'contingent' only indicates that something could have been different. It is a contingent circumstance that I am writing this paper for publication in this anthology, but this circumstance is not arbitrary, since it results from a series of circumstances and decisions, but under different conditions (in counterfactual situations) I might never have written this paper (e.g., because I never heard of the conference this paper was originally prepared for).

4. Multiple-Draft Narratives: Counterfactual vs. Alternative Plot Lines

My remarks so far explained the unsurprising fact that films can be made and understood in different ways. These remarks provide the background for the following discussion of a set of remarkable films. These films explicitly examine different versions of plot lines and thus make open to view what, in Branigan's perspective, is normally suppressed in films. David Bordwell terms such films "multiple-draft narratives" and "forking-path plots" (Bordwell 2002, pp. 92, 102). Multiple-draft narratives as well as forking-path plots rely on the idea that any story only contingently goes the way it does. Such films are structured around the question "what if this-and-that circumstance had been different?" and present counterfactual or alternative plot lines, i.e. alternatives to a certain 'favoured' plot line (which usually concludes with the last scene of the film). According to Bordwell, standard multiple-draft narratives explore alternative plot lines "seriatim" (Bordwell 2002, p. 89). One plot line follows another in screen time, although not necessarily in plot- or story-time. Examples for such films are *Lola rennt*, *Sliding Doors*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, and *Melinda & Melinda* (Woody Allen 2004). Each film uses the idea that there are 'multiplicities of a story' in different ways. For instance, while *It's A Wonderful Life* elaborates one plot line marked as *counterfactual* with respect to the dominant plot pattern, *Melinda & Melinda* entertains *alternative* tellings of the way the protagonist's life goes, without rendering either one as dominant. Let me explain this in more detail:

It's a Wonderful Life establishes a 'standard' state of the diegesis and its characters during the first part of the film. Subsequently, this state is altered through the introduction of counterfactual occurrences and circumstances: Faced with bankruptcy, the film's protagonist George Bailey intends to commit suicide and wishes he had never been born. God, in one of his more merciful moods, fulfils this wish and one of his angels leads George back to his hometown. However, a lot of bad things happen in the wake of George Bailey's absence (remember, he never was born). His brother dies as a little boy, since there was no George to save him from the frozen lake he once fell into. His wife becomes a sad, lonely, aging woman, and his hometown, formerly a Disney-esque haven for the good and faithful, transforms into a small-scale version of Sin City. As classical Hollywood narrative wants to have it, George realizes how foolish he was and refrains from his wish. Coming home at the end of the movie, the whole town is already waiting for him and everybody donates money in order to save him from bankruptcy.

In *It's a Wonderful Life*, a hypothetical thought – what if I had never been born – is temporarily transformed into filmic reality. The narrative locates a forking point of the story – George Bailey's birth/non-birth – and elaborates two subsequent plot lines which are counterfactual to each other. These plot lines are not left open: at the end of the film, the plot line the film started with – Bailey's life up to the point of his bankruptcy – is continued again, while the alternative plot line, in which George has never been born, is 'closed' and rejected. Of the two plot lines, the first one is *dominant*, while the other plot line recedes to a mere possibility. This does not mean that the latter is non-existent. There *is* a state of the world in which George has never been born. This state of the world is, in Deleuzian parlance, virtual, non-

actualized. Bailey only managed to find out about another, virtual state of the world because the film's God allowed him to see it.

In contrast, *Melinda & Melinda* envisions a tragic and a comic version of the life of the film's protagonist Melinda (Radha Mitchell). In one version she is a depressive, suicidal, woman, in the other one an urbanized single who is enjoying her life. Allen films both plots: the two stories are introduced by characters having a dinner in a restaurant while contemplating the question whether life is essentially comic or tragic. In order to come closer to an answer, they imagine a comic and a tragic version of Melinda's life. This means that from the outset none of the alternative plot lines is privileged over the other.

Films such as *Melinda & Melinda* present *alternative plot lines* (where none is privileged over the other), while films such as *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Lola rennt* present *counterfactual plot lines* (counterfactual compared to a dominant, favoured plot line). The comparison of *It's a Wonderful Life* to *Melinda & Melinda* also shows that multiple plot lines are no privilege of contemporary cinema, but are already present in classical Hollywood cinema.

5. Gardens of Forking Paths and Narrative Conventions

In the preceding parts, I used the term "counterfactual" to stress that many multiple-draft narratives rest on dominant plot lines. Bordwell uses the additional phrase "forking-path plots", borrowing from José-Luis Borges' short story "The Garden of Forking Paths" (Borges 1998). At one point in that story, the narrator describes an ontological account in which every conceivable state of affairs in the world – in the past, present, and future – is extant. That is, according to the forking-path-account each state of the world that we, from our position in the world, would call 'counterfactual', actually *is* extant, somewhere else, in some other (state of the) world. Deleuzians would say that there are many virtual states of the world, while only some of them are, at certain moments, actual.

In Borges' story this is visualized by the picture of the garden of forking paths. All possible states of the world(s) are contained in this garden, and each life takes place on several of the forking paths there. According to this account there is, properly speaking, no such thing as a counterfactual occurrence, because each of these occurrences subsists somewhere.[2] This does not mean that talk of 'counterfactual occurrences' does not make sense. It does, but only in relation to a favoured point of view or favoured 'path through the garden', or in relation to a favoured telling of the film's story that, it seems, has already been chosen by the filmmaker or spectator in advance (see Branigan 2002, p. 107).

Even if the endings of multiple-draft narratives tend to favour a final, definite outcome, this does not supersede the other preceding plot lines. In *Lola rennt*, Lola apparently advances in

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[2] The notion of subsistence, coined by Alexius Meinong, is similar to, but not identical with, Deleuze's notion of virtuality. See Meinong (1904).

mastering her obstacles from repetition to repetition. She learns from her failures in preceding plot lines and eventually manages to save Manni from death.[3]

Note that the film also blurs the distinction between counterfactual and alternative plot lines: On the one hand, the non-dominant plot lines are counterfactual, since they contradict the final, favoured plot line. On the other hand they are alternative and extant, since the favoured outcome apparently is made possible because Lola learns from her preceding failures to perform the right actions. Expressed in terms of the Borgesian framework, this means that not only are all the alternative states of (our) world extant, but they even influence one another. Bordwell calls this phenomenon a "crosstalk between futures" (Bordwell 2002, p. 98 f.).

Lola's (unconscious) learning process is similar to the one Phil Connors (Bill Murray) goes through in *Groundhog Day* (Harold Ramis 1994). Connors, a misanthropic and cynical television weather forecaster, all of a sudden finds himself waking up every morning on the same day. He is forced to live through this day again and again and again and only manages to break the curse put on him in this filmic adaptation of the Nietzschean "Ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen" by becoming a good human being and winning the heart of the woman he loves.[4]

Butterfly Effect (Eric Bress & J. Mackye Gruber 2004) even explicitly relies on the idea that events in one plot line influence other plot lines as well. The film's protagonist, the teenager Evan (Ashton Kutcher), suffers from blackouts and cannot remember the catastrophic events that happened during these blackouts. His therapist advises him to keep a diary. Years later, while he is a college student, he discovers that he is able to travel back in time to these events, where his grown-up mind takes over the body of his childhood alter ego. He decides to change the horrible things that happened back then, but each time he returns to the present he has to realize that the changes made in the past often have disastrous effects on his and his friends' future life. Consequently, he returns to another one of his childhood blackouts – which for the later Evan basically are doorways, or switch points, into the past – in order to literally get the future right. This, however, does not work: every time he manages to rescue one person, someone else has to suffer. Finally, he realizes that the disastrous chain of events originated at the moment his childhood girlfriend Kayleigh (Amy Smart) fell in love with him while she was still a child. He returns to the earliest switchpoint he is able to find, a children's birthday, and whispers a threat into the young girl's ears. As a consequence, she never develops the affection for him that later would indirectly cause so many tragic circumstances. The final scene in the director's cut is even more radical: Evan returns to the moment before he was born and strangles himself with his umbilical cord while still being in his mother's womb.

Butterfly Effect is the clearest example of an entanglement of different plot lines and even comes close to creating a garden of forking paths, because it is easy to imagine that even small changes at any point in Evan's life could alter its future course in important respects.

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[3] See Bordwell 2002, p. 100, where he talks about "getting the future right", and Bordwell 2002, p. 102, where he argues that multiple-draft films like *Lola rennt* search for the "most satisfying revision" of the plot.

[4] For Nietzsche's account of the "Ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen", see the chapter "Vom Gesicht und Räthsel", in: Nietzsche 1968, p. 197 ff.

This idea closely resembles the structure of the notoriously popular example for chaos theory: the flapping wings of a butterfly in a South American rainforest might be able to (indirectly) cause a hurricane in Florida. This example also explains the film's title.

Bordwell argues that (mainstream) films only employ a limited amount of alternative plot lines in order to keep the film cognitively manageable by an average spectator (Bordwell 2002, p. 88). One of the limitations of standard multiple-draft narratives, compared to a Borgesian garden of forking paths, is that usually the alternative plot lines start from a "fixed point – the fork", and, once the alternative plot line is finished, return to this "switchpoint", in order to start another plot line (Bordwell 2002, p. 89). Additionally, the plots are overall relatively stable. Unlike multiple-draft narratives, films working with the forking-path model would potentially overwhelm a spectator's cognitive capacities. In other words: even if conventional multiple-draft narratives are more complex than traditional narratives, they are usually designed in such a way that they do not pose too high demands on an audience's average cognitive abilities. They do not push forward the philosophical idea of forking paths as consequently as would be possible in theory.

6. Narrative Structure and Spectatorial Expectations

A sequence of alternative or counterfactual plot lines does not only often have effects on (the development of) the characters, but on a spectator's interpretation and expectations regarding the film as well. For example, a film's beginning shapes a spectator's expectations about subsequent developments of the plot line. For Bordwell, the first plot line shown in a forking-path film "supplies some preconditions for later ones, always for the audience, and sometimes for the character" (Bordwell 2002, p. 99). This means that plot events shape spectatorial expectations about what is going to happen at later points in the plot. Sometimes events in earlier plot lines of multiple-draft narratives even influence the characters' behaviour, whether they might be aware of this or not. In *Groundhog Day*, Phil Connors is fully aware that he is re-living the same day again and again, while all the other people around him do not share this experience – the plot of the film even depends on this awareness. Otherwise there would be no point in his regular visits to the piano teacher (in order to become a respectable pianist), or in his conversation with a woman named Nancy in the coffee bar. On the following day, he uses his knowledge about her in order to seduce her by pretending to be her former classmate from high school.

In contrast, in *Lola rennt* Lola and Manni do not seem to know explicitly that they are living through the same situation three times in a row. Contrary to film spectators, film characters are not always aware that they are stuck in a multiple-draft story. Even if plot lines do not intermingle or cross each other's paths, a spectator's knowledge about different plot lines shapes his or her viewing experience. E.g., if a character dies in the first plot line, a spectator might expect him to avoid death in at least one of the subsequent plot lines.

These spectatorial expectations influence the structure of multiple-draft narratives: the film-makers might decide to go along with these expectations and to alternate the course of events

in repeated plot lines. Or they might decide to exploit these expectations. For instance, in *Groundhog Day* Phil Connors steps into the same puddle for a number of times before he learns to circumvent it. The audience knows about Connors' earlier missteps, and the repetitions have a comical effect.

Repetitions also play an important role in forking-path films because they provide the background or frame for plot alternations. For example, Phil Connors as well as Lola live through repeating situations, but they learn from the mistakes they committed: Connors remembers the mistakes he made on preceding days and achieves new skills through daily training (such as playing the piano); Lola gains a seemingly intuitive ability to avoid mistakes committed in earlier plot lines. In both cases, the audience knows that the characters are in forking-path situations precisely because the new situation looks roughly like the preceding one(s). In short: alternative or counterfactual plot lines are embedded in a structurally stable pattern within which only crucial elements change.

Alternative/counterfactual plot lines are an integral part of the overall plot structure of forking-path films, and plot lines explored at the beginning of a film determine subsequent plot lines to a great extent. Of course, since we are talking about *alternative* and *counterfactual* plot lines here, something has to be different the next time the same scene is shown. But not *everything* can be different. Still, the environment, or basic structure, of alternative situations has to be similar or the same, because only a basic (structural) resemblance between two scenes allows talk of alternative/counterfactual plot lines, and only such a resemblance enables a spectator to recognize that a character is in a forking-path situation.

7. Alternatives to Multiple-Draft Narratives

Later in his essay, Bordwell attempts to distinguish multiple-draft narratives from forking-path narratives by categorizing the former as a sub-category of the latter (Bordwell 2002, p. 102). He describes multiple-draft narratives as a special occurrence within the wider phenomenon of forking-path narratives. Branigan suggests that "the notion of 'alternative plots' may be expanded into new territories and films" (Branigan 2002, p. 108). Branigan does not so much talk about films with 'alternative plots', but rather about films that are structured around ideas of alternative identities, alternative interpretations, and so on. These films do not present different plot lines but instead play with ambiguities, and with characters whose identity is not clear at all (to themselves as well as the spectator). For instance, *Memento* (Christopher Nolan 2000) experiments with a reversed, thus non-chronological, ordering of the plot line. A reversed order of scenes emphasizes the ruptures between them, splits them into blocks and units. This clearly is an alternative way of dealing with the temporal, normally chronological, order of plot lines. *Spider* (David Cronenberg 2002) and *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoeven 1990) explore alternative states of minds or alternative existences of the (main) characters. In Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950) four people give completely different accounts/interpretations of events they happened to witness or participate in. *Rashomon* makes a statement about the inability or unwillingness of human beings to tell the truth. While Bordwell focuses on ontological issues raised by film plots, e.g. the question of alter-

native states of the world, Branigan focuses on films that deal with different ways of *understanding* phenomena in the world. He is more concerned with epistemological aspects. *Rashomon* is a very clear example for such a film: The Samurai is killed and his murderer has sexual intercourse with the Samurai's wife, but the narrators of this incidence cannot agree on what really happened. How exactly did the Samurai die? Did the wife consent to sexual intercourse or was she raped? In the diegesis of *Rashomon*, the Samurai's death and the wife's sexual engagement with the thief have an ambiguous status, and are reinterpreted several times, from different perspectives.

8. Shaping Film the Experimental Way – Fast Film

In the following section, I explore the idea that forking paths or multiple drafts may not only be explored by a succession of different scenes/subsequences, i.e. temporally, but by a spatial re-arrangement within the film frame as well. This idea is explored by the found footage animated short film *Fast Film* (Virgil Widrich 2003).[5] This film is open to a multiplicity of readings, but does only employ a single plot line, contrary to multiple-draft narratives. Instead, the parallels and alternatives (that Branigan talks about) are incorporated structurally, for example through the film's 'casting' of the character roles with not only one actor, but a series of different ones.

Fast Film is a narrative animation found footage film that assembles footage fragments from different narrative fiction films within one frame. Each of the frames of the 14-minute film is basically a collage consisting of elements taken from printouts of screenshots of different films. *Fast Film* offers an intriguing blend between one simple, linear plot line, highly complex visual and aural information which calls for multiple viewings, and a sophisticated variation on the idea of multiple versions of the same plot. The film is a moving collage of frame fragments that arranges frame fragments from almost 400 different classical films in sequential and paradigmatic order, i.e. within single frames (compare figures 1 to 3).

Fig. 1: Screenshot from Fast Film (Virgil Widrich 2003)

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[5] I want to thank Peter J. Bloom (University of California, Santa Barbara) for making me aware of this film.
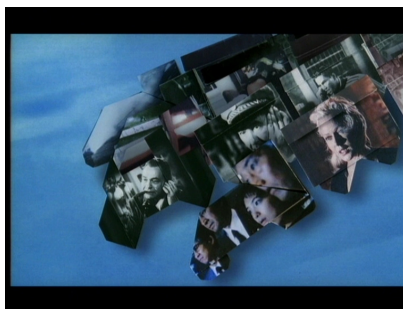
Fig. 2: Screenshot from Fast Film (Virgil Widrich 2003)

Fig. 3: Screenshot from Fast Film (Virgil Widrich 2003)

Because different spectators have different background knowledge of film history, they each perceive their own 'spectator's cut', although the film, unlike multiple-draft narratives, presents only one plot line: The hero rescues his woman from an evil villain and survives a chase scene. It is remarkable that each of the main roles is 'cast' with a number of Hollywood's quintessential 'type actors'. For instance, the male hero is 'played' by Humphrey Bogart, Harrison Ford, John Wayne, Cary Grant, and others, while the role of the heroine is 'played' by Audrey Hepburn, Grace Kelly, Lauren Bacall, and so on.

The method used for the production of the film is similar to stop-motion technology. Frame fragments taken from subsequent film frames were arranged in order to create an impression of movement. The sound track, too, was created entirely by using sounds from historical film soundtracks.

Fast Film tells a typical Hollywood action-romance plot: the protagonist's girlfriend is kidnapped by an evil villain. The hero immediately sets off to rescue his beloved from the hands of the wrongdoer. After meeting the usual obstacles, he manages to slip into the vault of the villain, gets captured, too, but miraculously manages to escape together with his girl. A fast-paced chase scene follows, in which all odds seem to be against our heroes, until, like a *deus*

ex machina, all the last-minute-heroes from film history come to their rescue. The reward for all this heart-stopping adventure is, as usual, a kiss. The hero gets his girl.

Fast Film presents 'paradigmatic forking-paths' by deliberately offering multiple possibilities to perceive the same plot, encouraging a spectator's independent interpretation and viewing experience more than standard multiple-draft narratives do.

Film elements can be arranged spatially (collage, single frames) as well as in time (montage, succession of frames). Traditional found footage films only arrange their material temporally, i.e. as a succession of different footage elements (e.g., *A Movie* [Bruce Conner 1958], or *Rose Hobart* [Joseph Cornell 1936]). There, the experimental filmmaker technically performs the job of a film editor. In *Fast Film*, though, the material taken from different movies is, in addition to the syntagmatic sequence of frames, assembled *within* single frames into a moving collage of footage fragments. This collage is not simply two-dimensional (layers of paper arranged on one another), but in some scenes comprised of a spatial arrangement of printouts folded into three-dimensional objects. If in traditional found footage films the spectator can detect interplay between successive sequences from different films, in *Fast Film* one is able to detect this interplay within single frames, quasi-paradigmatically.

Fast Film presents its audience with fragments from several movies at the same time. Instead of choosing one example from the pool of films available, a number of them are presented. This means: a single film plot is presented with material from different films. As a consequence, this single plot is told in many different ways or styles. It deliberately offers multiple levels or possibilities of perceiving the plot, involving the spectator (and expanding his interpretative autonomy) to an even greater extent than standard multiple-draft narratives do. Because *Fast Film* uses so many different film fragments, and because each member of an audience supposedly has different background knowledge of film history, each spectator literally creates his or her own 'spectator's cut'. The filmmaker's control over the spectator diminishes. Put differently: *Fast Film* is an interactive film.

It is possible to follow only the plot of *Fast Film* in the same way as one would consume a typical Hollywood blockbuster, but it is also possible to try to identify all the different films from film history (which are part of one's personal biography). Alternatively, one could pay attention to how the elements of the film interact. It is possible to watch *Fast Film* as a film, or as a film about – or on – film, a meta-discourse on the typical Hollywood movie, because the story it presents stands as typical for the story (development) of many Hollywood films. *Fast Film* does not only tell a story, it also reveals the typical plot structure of the films it uses. In variation of the title of Vladimir Propp's famous book *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (Propp 1968), *Fast Film* is a filmic morphology of the classical Hollywood film.

9. Paradigmatic Forking-Path Film

I want to call *Fast Film* a 'paradigmatic forking-path film', because the alternatives offered by the film are located 'within' single frames or structures, within the (way of presenting the) structure of the single plot the film employs. Instead of being located on alternative plot lines,

the forks in this film are rather to be found in the way the images are constructed, in the material being used, and in the spectator's interpretational possibilities. Here are some forks the film offers:

- The simple plot line in *Fast Film* is presented with the use of material from different films. One diegesis is constructed out of fragments from a vast number of different diegetic worlds.
- A large set of material is used and at times the amount is so large that the spectator has no choice but to *select* from this set of image fragments s/he pays attention to or attempts to recognize.
- Film footage of different actors is used for the same character role/type of role.
- Spectators are free to draw connections between the different fragments, and to pay attention to their interplay.
- *Fast Film* invites meta-spectatorship, different levels of perceiving the film, e.g., simply watching the film, thinking about the plot, about the way the film is made, about its implicit statements on film in general.
- *Fast Film's* use of popular films invites the thought that they are all just forking paths in the same garden, or even only variations of the ever-same story. I already noted that many of the actors/characters we are presented with are icons of 20th-century popular culture. It is likely that each spectator recognizes a number of them.

The film critic Andrew R. Horbal describes *Fast Film* as "a celebration of Hollywood films and the Hollywood model of filmmaking. [...] *Fast Film* marries elements of experimental filmmaking [...] to the accessibility and familiarity of narrative film."[6] This is a nice description of the film's method: Widrich and his team use highly unusual methods to put the film images and the soundtrack together, but the narrative structure is conventional.

10. Conclusion

While multiple-draft narratives à la Bordwell develop forking narrative paths in sequential order, a paradigmatic forking-path film like *Fast Film* encourages what I would like to call multiple-level perception. It opens up for the spectator many more interpretative and perceptual possibilities than a conventional film, or even a traditional found footage film like *A Movie,* because *Fast Film* derives its material from countless different films that a) interact with one another on the level of the diegesis of *Fast Film* while b) at the same time bringing with them their own diegetic framework. This is because of the higher level of complexity of the visual information presented by *Fast Film*: *Fast Film* uses footage from films that are already well-known to any spectator with at least some film-historical knowledge. This inevitably triggers feelings of remembrance, recognition, or even *déjà vu* in a spectator, which adds to and influences the viewing experience and the spectator's interpretation of the film.

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[6] See his "Movie Review: Fast Film". Available at <http://blogcritics.org/archives/2006/04/10/015448.php> Published on April 10, 2008 [Accessed 14 June 2008].

According to Bordwell and Branigan, popular films more or less adapt to the average cognitive capacities of the film audience. For Bordwell, our limited ability in grasping multiple narratives normally limits the number of forking paths examined to four or five. *Fast Film* here offers an intriguing alternative to circumvent these limitations: on the surface, it presents one and only one plot line, a plot line that is made sufficiently clear by the visual and audio data provided in the film. However, because it uses material from a great number of different films, it is up to the spectator's knowledge of film history and his/her cognitive capacities how many 'films' s/he sees at once.

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A Movie (Bruce Conner 1958)

Ashes of Time (Wong Kar-Wai 1994)

Blade Runner (Ridley Scott 1982)

Butterfly Effect (Eric Bress & J. Mackye Gruber 2004)

Donnie Darko (Richard Kelly 2001)

Fast Film (Virgil Widrich 2003)

Groundhog Day (Harold Ramis 1993)

Inland Empire (David Lynch 2006)

It's A Wonderful Life (Frank Capra 1946)

Lola rennt (Tom Tykwer 1998)

Melinda & Melinda (Woody Allen 2004)

Memento (Christopher Nolan 2000)
Mulholland Drive (David Lynch 2001)
Rashomon (Akira Kurosawa 1950)
Rose Hobart (Joseph Cornell 1936)
Sliding Doors (Peter Howitt 1998)
Spider (David Cronenberg 2002)
Total Recall (Paul Verhoeven 1990)