Nearly True:
Forking Plots, Forking Interpretations

A Response to David Bordwell's "Film Futures"

Edward Branigan

I would like to examine what is "nearly true." This phrase is not meant to characterize David Bordwell's exceptional essay, "Film Futures," which I would summarize with Orson Welles's film title, *It's All True*. However, since Welles never quite finished that film, perhaps I might supplement Bordwell's argument with a few thoughts about the matter of *interpreting* film, specifically, about interpreting what is "nearly true" in a plot. I believe that what is "nearly true" is an important kind of "fork" in a plot and has an impact on a film's future, that is, how a film acquires value after having been seen.

Bordwell demonstrates that what he calls "forking-path" plots in such films as *Sliding Doors* and *Run Lola Run* have certain fundamental properties that are quite familiar to us from classical narratives. For example, forking-path plots are well-marked, linear, developed, cohesive, unified with one another, ordered sequentially to make the final path a climax, and designed to pinpoint clear, contrasting parallels (e.g., the parallels among the three different women in the three lives of the protagonist of *Blind Chance*). One might say that "chance" is anything but "blind" in forking-path narratives. The river of time may have divided two or three times (so that a person may step into the same river more than once) but otherwise this most familiar sort of time just flows on—on course. Wittgenstein, Lakoff and Johnson, and others have analyzed this folk psychological concept of the river of time.[1] In the present context, I want to emphasize that the river flows in those channels that have been dug out and excavated by both a filmmaker and spectator as well as constructed through, shall we say, a history of filmmaking and interpreting.[2] As Bordwell shows, narrative is not built on principles of physics or philosophy, but with the use of folk psychology. The screen is not blank before a film begins: a spectator does not watch with no preconceptions, memories, or reasoning strategies. Hence in comprehending a narrative we normally reason from a single case using

105

an enormous variety of judgment heuristics (which also generate appearance/reality motifs); we focus on first impressions using stereotypes and prototypes; we rely on shortcuts, templates, and schemata; and, in general, we cheerfully risk faulty inferences and erroneous conclusions. We do this because it is efficient and adaptive to our everyday environment. I am not forgetting that our environment is always ideologically charged, for a social setting provides one of the major shaping influences on folk psychology.

Filmmakers employ the psychology of the everyday in order to aid spectators in comprehending a narrative. Filmmakers also employ this psychology *against* spectators when it is important that something not be seen or fully understood during the telling of a story (e.g., to create mystery or surprise), or when the spectator must understand in a new way (e.g., in a metaphorical way or through a sudden revelation), or when something disturbing or traumatic must be reconfigured by the text *or repressed*. As spectators, we make mistakes in making inferences because we are systematic in drawing inferences, and authors count on that.

Bordwell's detailed analyses of our thought processes while watching a forking-path narrative is reminiscent of Daniel Dennett's argument for a "multiple drafts" model of consciousness as opposed to the traditional notion of a "Cartesian theater." (Indeed, at the conclusion of his essay Bordwell renames the forking-path narratives as "multiple-draft" narratives.) Dennett speaks of *consciousness* not as located in some special place like a movie theater in the mind, but instead as a series of "distributed" internal states, a series of disparate "causal trains." "At any point in time," Dennett says of the stream of consciousness, "there are multiple drafts of *narrative* fragments at various stages of *editing* in various places in the brain" (135, my emphases). This sentence, invoking both "narrative" and "editing," illustrates how the activities of both writing and filmmaking have become fertile metaphors for the study of mind. I might add that for Dennett the *sound track* of a film —in the form of the ceaseless phonological loop of consciousness and in the form of verbal behavior—is fundamental to a person's comprehension of the world. I believe that such a theory of mind, emphasizing verbal descriptions mixed with *possible* descriptions and alternative paraphrases drawn from memory, provides a firm basis for theorizing film as a "language."[4]

We should not forget that the unity of forking-path plots together with the unity and efficiency of working memory is always purchased at a price, namely, the suppression and masking of disorder, excess, other 'causal trains,' and *other*-ness. Thus it may be possible to imagine more radical kinds of

forking-path films (as Bordwell does at the end of his essay), especially when one considers that in narrative generally, the phenomenon of alternative futures is merely a form of alternative pasts, since the end of the story is already known at the beginning of the film; that is, the beginning of the film, in effect, is already past with respect to the film's narration, which proceeds from the future. The perfect premonition of narration must be carefully restricted in order to allow the spectator to imagine (with occasional foreshadowing) a variety of outcomes flowing from each particular present moment. The spectator must be convinced that events are being told as they happen and that any design evident in the telling is merely blind chance. Alternative tellings of the story, and alternate stories, are suppressed in favor of the 'final version,' the 'final draft.'

Therefore if one were to force films with multiple plot lines like *Nashville*, *Short Cuts*, *City of Hope*, *The Chase*, *The Kingdom*, *Timecode*, and *After Hours*, or films with multiple (hidden) histories like *The Lovers of the Arctic Circle*, *Voyager*, *Tape*, *Before the Rain*, and *Underground*, or films about "reunions" (where forking paths reconnect) like *The Big Chill* and *Four Friends*, or films with multiple partial plot lines like *The Thin Red Line*, *An Autumn Afternoon*, *Flowers of Shanghai*, and *After Life* to undergo additional fragmentation and dispersion, then one might move toward films with such unconventional and demanding temporal structures as *Not Reconciled*, *Red Psalm*, *From the Cloud to the Resistance*, *Je tu il elle*, *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, *The Phantom of Liberty*, *The Element of Crime*, *Mirror*, *Persona*, *Death by Hanging*, *The Man Who Left His Will on Film*, *Last Year in Marienbad*, *Ashes of Time*, *Stalker*, *Dead Man*, *Until the End of the World*, *Landscape Suicide*, *Sans Soleil*, and *Weekend*. These latter sorts of films cannot be understood by simply reordering the plot or changing the emphases placed on details. Instead, a spectator will need to discover the processes through which elements were *selected* for the plot (displaced, condensed, personified, revised, disguised, elided). One should keep in mind, as Bordwell notes, that forking-path narratives flaunt their parallels whereas classical narratives "often *bury* their parallels" amidst minor characters and subplots that exist to work out versions of the main plot line (97, my emphasis).[6] What I am suggesting is that there exist other types of plotting not dependent on the "river of time" metaphor, where the relationship among parallels and alternatives is neither flaunted nor buried, but is ambiguous or indeterminate, as if the parallels were seen in parallax. In addition, since objectivity and subjectivity are reversible (i.e., an objective image may abruptly be revealed to have been subjective, and vice-versa, ad infinitum) a narration can easily convert a tangle of traditional subplots into a more radical, subjectivized form of forking paths that depict

altered, ulterior, and alternative states of awareness.[7] For example, films like *8 1/2, Belle de Jour, Jacob's Ladder, A Letter to Three Wives, Lantana, The Three Faces of Eve, Sybil, Hangover Square, Psycho, Julia and Julia, Shattered Image, Vanilla Sky, Mulholland Dr.,* and *Lost Highway,* along with "memory problem" films where characters experience dual identities like *Total Recall, The Matrix, Dark City, Mister Buddwing, Shattered, Angel Heart,* and *Memento.* In general, a character may have various degrees of awareness, or no awareness, that he or she is living an alternative existence (*eXistenZ, A Nightmare on Elm Street, Groundhog Day*).

It would seem to be a fact that many filmmakers conceive their work on the basis of a kind of 'forking-paths' or 'multiple-draft' model of narrative thinking (including the evasions and detours provoked by censorship). The wide popularity of DVD's permits the ordinary viewer to gain access to storyboard comparisons and the cutting-room floor: we can now witness the director's cut of a film along with deleted scenes, alternate endings, rehearsals, trims, out-takes, even deliberately scripted *false* out-takes (*A Bug's Life*) and after-endings (*Carrie, Wild Things, Married to the Mob*).

Given the ways (mentioned above) that the notion of "alternative plots" may be expanded into new territories and films, I would prefer to retain the name "forking-path" narrative as a way of marking a conservative, generic form of narrative (as exemplified by the films Bordwell discusses), while leaving the name "multiple-draft" narrative as a way to cover a more general phenomenon.

In the spirit of an everyday heuristic known as "vividness," I would like to offer an image of the type of fascination we feel toward these forking-path narratives. The image I have chosen is the special effect in film termed "computergraphic morphing." This special effect is conspicuous, for example, in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day,* where a villain is able to effortlessly—and with dazzling liquidity—shape-shift among various animate and inanimate forms. Moreover, the "digital morph" device looks different from special effects that appear in purely "analogue cinema" (note that the phrase "analogue cinema" is already a suggestive idea). In the digital morph, according to Kevin Fisher, there is

> a *difference at the center* (or apex) of transformation between the "source" and "target" of the digital morph. Within any morph between two objects there is a midpoint at which the morph is minimally recognizable as either "source" or "target" image. It is at the moment of midpoint that, if only just for an instant, the morph lapses from the order of known things. Most important, this lapse (or lack) of formal definition is still figured in full three-dimensional extrusion, and the paradoxical presence of *being-without-thing-ness* blinks at us.... (118, original emphases)

I believe that in forking-path narratives we feel in the shift from one path to the next the indefinable presence of a *being-without-yet-possessing-thing-ness*, that is, we feel an 'in-between existence,' or inexistence, without being encumbered by a fixed identity, body, or gender.[8] Furthermore, I believe that this feeling (pleasure, panic) of 'open existence' may result from a film that raises the *mere possibility* of a transformation between alternatives. That is, there are situations in which an actual transformation need not occur for the spectator to experience an 'alternative world.' There are limits, of course, to how freely we will re-conceive a character's identity, life story, or our own life story when we respond to that momentary state of 'inexistent animation' that appears in a morph, a forking path, or a 'hypothetical forking path.' As Bordwell shows in his essay, explicit forking-path narratives are often rather modest in their ambitions, perhaps because we can hold only a small number of alternatives in conscious awareness and classical narrative strives for a certain economy of thought: "at any moment we can easily imagine two or three alternative chains of events . . . but not twenty or sixty let alone an infinite number" (91).

Nevertheless, if the image of the digital morph captures something of the experience of forking paths, then a new group of films appears in which a character is shown to have radically separate "identities" (and usually chooses to move between separate lives) though alive only once in only one world: *As You Desire Me, Two-Faced Woman, Vertigo, The Idiots, Being There, In a Year with 13 Moons, Face/off, Sunshine, Fiorile, Orlando, Zelig, All of Me, A Zed & Two Noughts, Braindead a/k/a Dead Alive, Re-Animator*, the *Body Snatchers* films, *Strange Days, Being John Malkovich, K-PAX, The Man Who Fell to Earth, That Obscure Object of Desire*, and *The Double Life of Véronique*. Closely related are those films that concern "twins" and alter egos (*Dead Ringers, Cat Ballou, Twin Falls Idaho, A Zed & Two Noughts, My 20th Century, Nouvelle Vague*) as well as films that repeat a scene (i.e., provide an alternative point of view on an event) but usually only to create a measure of uncertainty about what happened only once in only one world: *Rashomon, Blow-Up, The Exterminating Angel, The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, Courage Under Fire, The Barefoot Contessa, Stage Fright, Pulp Fiction, Go, Flirt, Les Misérables* (Lelouche, 1995), and *Sátántangó*.

I would like to mention one final idea that will bring me back to my starting point (thus effecting something like the closure device of swallowing-the-tail that Bordwell mentions in conjunction with some forking-path narratives). Daniel Dennett discusses a large number of mental operations concerned with *eliding* information that is *already present* within

the mind through a process he calls "overwriting." This "overwriting" creates what a literary theorist would perhaps call a "palimpsest" and what narratologist Gerald Prince calls "the disnarrated." I would like to suggest that a "film text" with its narrative structure stands intermediate between a filmmaker and a spectator, not unlike the crucial 'in-between moment' of a digital morph. When a "film text" is seen less as an object and more as a procedure or interactive ground, then it will be seen to be marked by a double process of 'overwriting' by filmmaker and spectator as well as bear the traces of a double suppression—but only barely—of alternative plots and hypotheses that are *nearly true*, that *nearly* become realized through filmmaker and spectator. That is, within any film narrative lie alternative plots and failed stories whose suppressed realization is the condition for what is seen to be more safely offered in the explicit text. Thus I believe that one of the valuable tasks of interpretation is the uncovering of these hidden 'narrative morphs,' of these *nearly true* versions (or drafts) of the plot, which may lead toward—or be the result of—an experience of déjà vu or the uncanny in watching a fiction. A forking-path plot makes explicit the causal hypothetical, "What if?" In other cases this sort of hypothetical is merely implicit or else suppressed in a text under a more general, "as if." Nevertheless, the ability to imagine "What if?" and "What if I have already experienced this in another form?" is at the very center of what makes us human.[10]

Bordwell expresses something like my idea of the "nearly true" when he says that the spectator tends to treat the ending   phase—the last fork—of a forking-path narrative as "the culmination of what went before it...even if what went before couldn't really have come before" (102, suspension points in original). In fact, I think there are many situations that arise routinely in narrative comprehension that solicit us to consider an embedded counterfactual, a kind of fiction about 'what went before, even if it couldn't really have come before.' To put it another way, Bordwell finds a 'causal' logic among forking-path plots despite the absence of any chrono-logical support. I am arguing that a further step should be taken where one searches for the psycho-logical and socio-logical alternatives underlying a spectator's feeling that an (arbitrary) causative has acquired value and pertinence.[11] This remains true when narrative in general is seen as a set of multiple drafts subject to multiple viewings.[12]

I have space for only one example. (My next example would have been *Dekalog 1*.) The film, *The Sixth Sense*, is the story of a psychiatrist, Malcolm (played by Bruce Willis), who has been grievously wounded in his own bedroom by a mysterious, former patient. As he lies dying on his bed,

Malcolm projects two forking paths: a narrative *future* (his next wedding anniversary) that he hopes will represent the true state of his present life with his spouse while at the same time re-living a version of his *past* by imaging the existence of an eight-year-old boy, Cole (played by Haley Joel Osment). Malcolm himself has constructed Cole as a sort of "ghost," a convenient mental hypothesis, that permits him to re-evaluate his past as a therapist to discover how he failed so disastrously in diagnosing a former patient's illness that the patient grew up to return, like the repressed, to kill him. Although the boy, Cole, apparently sees ghosts, Malcolm was not shot by a ghost nor need the story of Malcolm's past life be about ghosts at all, but about real, though unrecognized, *family violence*. The end of *The Sixth Sense* returns to its beginning: Malcolm lies dying on his bed. He has solved the problem concerning the faithfulness of his wife so that he can now die in peace knowing that he is living on the fork of a path that leads to marital happiness. Malcolm has not, however, discovered the motive of his killer or the meaning of the killer's words to him.

Nonetheless, I believe that the spectator who is willing to look for what has been 'overwritten' and suppressed by the film in creating its 'final draft,' what is at least *nearly true* about the abuse suffered by Cole, will sense an alternative that is all too real in this world: the abuse of a child at the hands of a parent — a parent who takes shape in distorted forms in "ghost" stories that are told to a psychiatrist. Malcolm visualizes the "ghosts" on the basis of hearing the tape-recorded words of his former patient. Malcolm fails, however, to see through the ghosts, to see through the dreams and 'multiple drafts' of a patient; to see the significance, for example, of Cole's story about a little ghost girl who needs desperately to tell her story about being slowly poisoned by a mother.

As human beings, we are at every moment engaged in constructing hypotheses and making inferences about our world. At every moment films, too, prompt us to entertain many sorts of hypothetical situations. All films thus have ghosts. In an important way, it is *we* who may choose to deceive ourselves through the failure to see ghostly "alternative plots," since the final author of a film is the spectator, and the final arbiter is the spectator's encounter with a world that he or she calls real. It is for this reason that the value of a film may lie not with the explicit outcome of its plot, but with the "crushed potentials for the future that were contained in the past"[13]—in what was nearly true.

University of California, Santa Barbara

Notes

My thanks to Christy Cannariato, Torben Grodal, John Kurten, Melinda Szaloky, and Charles Wolfe for their insightful comments. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference "Narrative at the Outer Limits," organized by H. Porter Abbott at the Interdisciplinary Humanities Center, University of California, Santa Barbara, in May 2001.

1. On the river of time, see, e.g., *Wittgenstein's Lectures: Cambridge, 1932-1935,* From the Notes of Alice Ambrose and Margaret Macdonald, ed. by Alice Ambrose (New York: Prometheus Books, 2001), Part I, §§ 12-14, 22; George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 34-49.
2. On the conventions and history of interpretation, see, e.g., David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989). See also James Elkins, *Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts: Art History as Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
3. On the social grounding of cognition, see, e.g., Ziva Kunda, *Social Cognition: Making Sense of People* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999); Susan T. Fiske and Shelley E. Taylor, *Social Cognition* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2nd ed. 1991); Paul Hernadi, *Cultural Transactions: Nature, Self, Society* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995); Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). For an account of second-generation cognitive science, see, e.g., George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); on time as a path, pp. 137-169. On narrative itself as a schematic 'pathway,' see Johnson, pp. 150-184, and Lakoff and Johnson, pp. 32-34, 36, 42-44.
4. On how a visible narrative acquires its meaning and circulates through society in a verbal, synoptic form, see esp. David A. Black, *Law in Film: Resonance and Representation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), chaps. 1, 2, 5, and 7. A "multiple drafts" model of consciousness would seem to touch on deep issues of language comprehension involving 'forking paths'; consider, for example, mental "tree diagrams," garden path sentences, and lexical and syntactic ambiguity. See, e.g., Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), pp. 192-230.
5. It is no accident that when the comprehension of a narrative begins to focus on problems of selection and omission, rather than on ordering and emphasis, interpretation of the narrative often aims to investigate varieties of subjectivity, such as the subjectivity of an author, narrator, or character.
6. The endings of *Cast Away* and *Down by Law* dramatize the idea of forking paths by showing roads that fork. There is even dialogue in the latter film, and in *The Family Man,* focusing on Robert Frost's classic poem on the subject, "The Road Not Taken." Of these three films only *The Family Man* elaborates the forking paths as distinct plots.
7. Gilles Deleuze discusses forking paths in film plots by situating them within a general context of flashbacks and memory. See *Cinema 2: The Time-Image,* trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. 47-55.
8. There may be a negative side to the freedom and fluidity of morphs, metaphors, and forking paths. For example, there may be a suggestion that "identity" is arbitrary, illusory, or empty. Vivian Sobchack observes, "Making formally visible the very *formlessness* at its center, the morph also makes visible our national and political sense that although

there is power, there is no center, that centers no longer have substance (at least as we once believed)...." Sobchack, "Introduction," *Meta-Morphing*, p. xii (my emphasis). Another visualization of the feeling induced in a spectator by forking paths and morphs may be found in those moments in *Timecode* when two of the "plots" come together and we see an event simultaneously from two perspectives, or rather our attention shifts restlessly between the perspectives (as it does also with mirror imagery). Cf. the scene when Veronika and Véronique "cross paths" in *The Double Life of Véronique*. Interesting variations on these ideas may be found in *Win, Place or Show* (Stan Douglas, 1998) and *Nantes Triptych* (Bill Viola, 1992).

9. Gerald Prince, "The Disnarrated," *Style* 22, 1 (Spring 1988), pp. 1-8; Marie-Laure Ryan, "Allegories of Immersion: Virtual Narration in Postmodern Fiction," *Style* 29, 2 (1995), pp. 262-286. Cf. Bordwell's notion of "superscription" (as opposed to "inscription"), analogous to a palimpsest, which he uses to analyze the fragmentary appearance of various stages of film production in the films of Godard; *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 325. In *Numéro deux*, I believe, Godard relies on a different strategy that uses enigmatic conjunctions and catachresis to force the viewer to discover concealed sociological layers which justify the 'border crossings' undertaken by the characters. Note that "overwriting" is related to such psychological mechanisms as decay, fading, interference, and masking.

10. Forking-path plots dramatize our ability to construct a "What if?" scenario which is an ability central to human language and subjectivity. According to Ian Tattersall:

> When we speak of "symbolic processes" in the brain or in the mind, we are referring to our ability to abstract elements of our experience and to represent them with discrete mental symbols. Other species certainly possess consciousness in some sense, but as far as we know, they live in the world simply as it presents itself to them. Presumably, for them the environment seems very much like a continuum, rather than a place, like ours, that is divided into the huge number of separate elements to which we humans give individual names. By separating out its elements in this way, human beings are able constantly to re-create the world, and individual aspects of it, in their minds. And what makes this possible is the ability to form and to manipulate mental symbols that correspond to elements we perceive in the world within and beyond ourselves. Members of other species often display high levels of intuitive reasoning, reacting to stimuli from the environment in quite complex ways, but only human beings are able arbitrarily to combine and recombine mental symbols and to ask themselves questions such as "What if?" And it is the ability to do this, above everything else, that forms the foundation of our vaunted creativity. (60)

The fact that humans seem to be unique in not being confined to a 'present continuum' may be one reason Deleuze claims that the root of forking path plots lies in memory and flashback. See note 7 above.

11. Writing in 1916, Hugo Münsterberg argued that a film device should be defined in terms of its effects on the mind — on attention, memory, imagination, and the emotions. Film editing, for example, has the power to make our speculations mingle and *coexist* in a moment rather than making definite a single interpretation or possibility; that is, editing may depict by showing possibility. Münsterberg describes editing as follows:

> It is as if different objects could fill the same space at the same time. It is as if the resistance of the material world had disappeared and the substances could penetrate one another. In the interlacing of our ideas we experience this superiority to all physical laws. (Dover:79; Routledge:135)

12. The felt presence of multiple drafts and ghostly alternatives may partially explain why a spectator may watch a film many times even though the end (and all else apparently) is already known. See generally Richard J. Gerrig, "Reexperiencing Fiction and Non-Fiction," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 47, n. 3 (Summer 1989), pp. 277-280.

13. Slavoj Zizek, *The Fragile Absolute or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (New York: Verso, 2000), p. 90. I have taken this quote out of context. Zizek is concerned with the "disavowed ghosts" that haunt a consciousness of history, not narrative (p. 3). In this connection an interesting film example might be *To Sleep with Anger*. See also Avery F. Gordon's compelling argument that literary fiction contains ghostly truths that are not registered in social science or historical narratives; *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

Works Cited

Bordwell, David. "Film Futures." SubStance #97 (Vol. 31, no. 1, 2002) pp. 88-104.

Dennett, Daniel C. *Consciousness Explained.*Boston: Little, Brown, 1991.

Fisher, Kevin. "Tracing the Tesseract: A Conceptual Prehistory of the Morph" in *Meta-Morphing: Visual Transformation and the Culture of Quick-Change*, ed. Vivian Sobchack. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, pp. 103-129.

Münsterberg, Hugo. *The Film: A Psychological Study—The Silent Photoplay in 1916*. New York: Dover, 1970 [1916]. Currently available as *Hugo Münsterberg on Film: The Photoplay—A Psychological Study and Other Writings*, ed. Allan Langdale. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Tattersall, Ian. "How We Came to Be Human," *Scientific American* 285, n. 6 (December 2001) pp. 56-63.