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Navigating the Fourth Dimension: Nonlinear Narratives in Film, Literature, and Television

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Introduction:

Hello everybody. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Jay Boulanger. I am an English and math major here at URI. Though the topic of my presentation today has to do exclusively with my English studies. The title of my project is "Navigating the Fourth Dimension: Nonlinear Narratives in Film, Literature, and Television." The titles comes from the fact that time is often considered the fourth dimension and is intrinsic to this very nature of being in the world, and my project is an introspection into this "fourth dimension." By analyzing nonlinear novels, films, and television programs which deal with topics of time and temporality. Mostly focusing on how time works similarly and differently within each medium, and how authors and directors deal with representing time as it truly functions within the real world.

Before getting into my presentation, I wanted to share with you all a little about how I came up with this topic for my honors project. I remember that I had been struggling for a few weeks to come up with a topic and had been batting ideas around in my head, but I hadn't been able to come up with anything concrete that I found particularly attractive. That is until one day when I was sitting in my U.S. literature II class. We were reading a novel by William Faulkner called *Sanctuary*. I hadn't read anything by Faulkner before, but I was very interested in his writing style, which was very similar to the styles of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf both of whom I had read before and loved. The style in which they write is modernist in the sense that they employ a "stream of consciousness" writing style which allows the reader insight into the minds of the characters and as a result the reader gets a glimpse into their pasts presents and futures.

While discussing *Sanctuary* in class another student brought up the similarity of Faulkner's writing style with how the television series, LOST, presents its narrative by way of flashback cut scenes that delve into the pasts of the characters. This connection from Faulkner to LOST made me realize how interesting concepts of time can be within all kinds of narratives, and by the end of that class I had come up with a diverse list of films, novels, and television shows (many of which were favorites of mine) which dealt with similar concepts of time.

The complexity of time is what most interested me. Like how a character is not just in the present moment, but their thoughts and actions are constantly enmeshed with their pasts and anticipated futures. In the real world we don't just see people or things, we see through them into what memories we associate with them, and our actions will frequently be motivated by what sort of future or present effect will arise from our interaction with them.

It is this kind of concurrent interaction between past, present, and future for every individual, which complicates the job of the author and director who must work to present this complexity to the reader or audience in a manner that is as true to life as possible. This is what I feel is a primary motivation of the production of nonlinear narratives in that their goal is to present reality in the most "real" manner possible since the real world as it is experienced by the individual is anything but linear.

So to begin my presentation I am going to discuss each medium: the novel, film, television, and finally the graphic novel, followed by a account of a few of the many reoccurring themes and ideas presented throughout many of the works I studied.

[Start power point]

The Novel:

The first narrative form I will speak about is the novel. For centuries the standard practice of authors was to present their narratives in a linear fashion much like how you or I would, when relating a personal anecdote to a friend. The reason this is, is because it is the most approachable and comprehensible means of understanding a story. This was the case up until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Just prior to this time period the literary movement known as realism was the central style of literature. Realism focused on ordinary subject matter and shied away from things like the super natural. The idea being that literature should focus on what is real and reflect the actual lives of the readership. However, authors associated with the modernist movement, which succeeded it, such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and William Faulkner to name a few, felt that realism didn't present reality as it actually is, because reality isn't linear. To truly represent the experience of living in the world modernist authors wrote in a stream of consciousness style. As I mentioned before it is a style that reads similar to how one thinks in that allows for the free flow of thoughts within the minds of characters. These thoughts much like yours mine that transition from past and present fluidly.

One of William Faulkner's most famous novels, *The Sound and the Fury*, employs this writing style.

[Slide change]

Here we have a few pages from the first chapter of *The Sound and the Fury*. By simply looking at the text, as it currently printed not much is evident in terms of Faulkner's writing style. However, Faulkner's original intention was to have the first chapter of *The Sound and the Fury* printed in multiple ink colors with each color representing a different period of time in life of the narrator, Benjy. Unfortunately having his novel printed in this manner was not possible due to a combination of technological limitations of the 1920s and William Faulkner's relative obscurity at the time of its first publication. Had it been published with multiple inks it would have looked something similar to this.

[Slide change]

Here, red denotes present time, blue denotes Benjy's childhood, and green denotes Benjy's adolescence. Benjy is mentally handicapped and doesn't understand how time works and frequently experiences past events as if they were currently occurring to him. As you can see Benjy's is constantly jumping from one period of his life to the next and these jumps are frequently based on his interactions with his environment. For instance,

Benjy's sister is named Caddy and in present day Benjy lives next to a golf course. So, whenever Benjy overhears a golfer speaking about his caddie (a person who carries golf clubs), he will frequently be thrust into a past experience he had with his sister. These sorts of jumps in time occur consistently throughout the novel and demonstrate how literature has the ability to intermingle past and present within its text and represent genuine human relation to time.

[Slide change]

Film:

Next we're going to turn our attention to how film can illustrate these same sort of time shifts using techniques, which are related to, but are different from those used in novels. The film, Memento, is about a man names Leonard, who's perception of time is skewed by a mental disorder which prohibits him from forming new memories. Leonard is on a mission to find the man who both killed his wife and caused his mental disorder.

[Slide change]

The plot of the film unfolds in two separate alternating narratives. One of the narratives is told in chronological order and the other in reverse chronological order. This graph gives a visual depiction of how the plot is set up. The red lines at the top are the scenes, which appear in reverse chronology while the blue ones at the bottom appear chronologically and both converge upon one single event. As you can see, as the film progresses there is a constant back and forth between these two kinds of scenes.

[Slide change]

Here is a clip from the film that demonstrates the interaction of these scenes throughout the film.

[Play clip #1]

The main plot of the film is the one that occurs in reverse chronological order; that which you just saw in color. The idea behind this representation is that with each new scene the audience is unaware of what actually preceded it. Representing it in this way, the audience gets to perceive the world in the manner which Leonard perceives it. Since he cannot create new memories he is constantly forgetting events he had just experienced, so, as you just saw, he is constantly in a state of confusion and disorientation. A state which the director, Chris Nolan, hoped to recreate for the viewing audience. Another aspect about this clip that I found particularly relevant was the use of color vs. black and white to help the viewer distinguish between the two concurrent narratives; similar to the intended use of multicolored inks by Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury*.

[Slide change]

Television:

Television functions very similarly to how film does in that the "tools" and how they are used are quite similar. As I mentioned earlier, the television program LOST, which is about a group of strangers who get stranded on a deserted island after their plane crashes, has character flashbacks interspersed throughout each episode. These flashbacks allow for a greater understanding of the characters in the show by illuminating their past experiences.

[Slide change]

I am going to show you a scene from season one of LOST where one of the main characters, Jack, discovers his father's coffin in the plane wreckage.

[Show clip #2]

Notable in this clip is how memory is represented. In seeing the coffin, Jack's mind is triggered to the memory of this confrontation he had before the flight. The audio of his flashback overlaps the video of Jack's present state on the island. This not only eases the transition into the past but also demonstrates the overlapping nature of past memories into present experiences. These sort of auditory interconnections are unique to television and film since a novel cannot function in this way. In addition, beyond this particular scene there are many instances of flashbacks within the entire series of LOST. In these flashbacks, characters can appear younger with the use of clothing changes, makeup, and/or different hairstyles. These sorts of indications display to the viewer shifts in time and to help distinguish between the character's past and present self.

[Slide change]

The Graphic Novel:

The last narrative form was one that I hadn't even thought about using until my faculty sponsor, Prof. Yates, suggested it. The graphic novel is essentially a lengthier comic book. The graphic novel I used for my project is called *Maus*, which is the story of Vladek Spiegelman's experience during the Nazi holocaust. It is illustrated by his son, Art, who used mice to depict the Jewish people and cats to depict the Germans. The story alternates between Vladek's experience during the holocaust and his present day life living in New York.

[Slide change]

The form of the graphic novel allows time to function in a way that is different from the other narrative forms we've already discussed. Looking at this page of the novel, you can see present day Vladek on the left and Vladek's past on the right. What is unique about the graphic novel is that it allows this sort of simultaneous past and present occurrence. In

Memento and *The Sound and the Fury* there is an interaction between past and present but it is limited by the fact that Memento must alternate between scenes and *The Sound and the Fury* must alternate between words on the page. So neither truly allows for concurrent presentation of past and present the way that a graphic novel can.

[Slide change]

Frequently appearing throughout *Maus*, are frames such as these, where present day Vladek appears on the periphery of frames depicting his past experiences. It's interesting what this says about how one experiences the past within the present. Though present day Vladek isn't completely within the frame he isn't completely outside of it either. His recollection of his experience acts as an experience in and of itself, but not one that he has any control over. These sort of "on the periphery" depictions are again unique to graphic novels since the traditional novel isn't visual in this sense and since everything within a film is confined the frame of the screen.

[Slide change]

Now that we have a sense of the various narratives forms that I used throughout my project, I wanted to now turn our attention to some of the more interesting reoccurring themes throughout these narratives. There's a famous literary critic named Jacques Derrida who famously said, in regards to literary criticism that, "there is nothing outside the text." What he meant by this is that everything from personal history to world history informs and contributes to the production, reading and interpretation of texts. This "greater context" of historic temporality was an evident theme in much of the works that I read.

[Slide change]

As an illustration of this "greater context" of time, I wanted to play for you a recording Vladek Spiegelman speaking about his experiences in conjunction with the frames of the graphic novel, which depict those experiences. The start of the recording is a bit difficult to understand for about the first ten seconds, but after that it's pretty understandable. What he essentially says at the beginning is that his wife's sister had just found out about the death of her uncle and that the Nazi's are now going to send everyone in the town to Auschwitz for the gas chambers.

[Play clip #3]

[Slide change]

I know it's a pretty heavy clip, but the point I wanted to illustrate is that this graphic novel transcends what is simply in the text. It has an interconnection to a time outside the novel to the real Vladek Spiegelman whom the story is about and to the holocaust in a greater historical context.

[Slide change]

This "greater historical context" is most evident in Virginia Woolf's last novel, *Between the Acts*. This novel is about a small community play about the history of England and about the community for whom the play performed. Throughout the novel there are references to the history of the world dating back to prehistoric time all the way into the early 1940s, which would have been present day for Virginia Woolf. Most importantly however, is Woolf's message regarding the present day in which she lived. While Woolf was writing this novel WWI had recently ended and the threat of WWII was looming. In the novel, the play is interrupted by two fighter planes flying overhead. What Woolf intended to do was call the reader's attention to the time in which the reader was currently living and express the inescapability of the present situation in which England found itself in the early 1940s. So she was essentially calling to attention the reader's personal history within the context of the country's history as a whole within her novel.

[Slide change]

Though the works I studied call attention to paramount historical moments, they also provide a great analysis of how significant a "trivial" moment can be. In our everyday we are faced with tough decisions and must deal with their consequences. However, some experiences may seem so insignificant that we don't realize or only realize in retrospect how important some of our most mundane interactions can be. The film Run Lola Run is about a girl who must collect 100,000 marks in 20 minutes to save her boyfriends life. The film is an hour long and shows three different scenarios of how Lola attempts to procure the money and how the slightest difference in her experience has drastic consequences.

[Slide change]

The clips I am about to show you are of Lola's interactions with three of the tertiary characters whom she has minimal interactions with in each scenario, but through photographs the audience can see the drastic impact this minimal interaction have on these characters lives.

[Play clip #4]

Though these interactions may seem like exaggerations or caricatures of what may happen in real life, they in actuality hold a great deal of truth. Every seemingly mundane interaction may not have such drastic consequences, but many can. A chance meeting on a train or bus may lead to marriage or a great friendship, or taking a particular course may change your career plans, and there many more instances where had a small chance event not occurred your whole life would be drastically different as a result.

[Slide change]

The significance of these "trivial" moments now leads us into the experiences that from very moment of their occurrence we know will be significant. These moments being the ones consider traumatic. Trauma is interesting in the fact that when something is traumatic it simultaneously affects a person's past, present, and future. Trauma is a past experience that is so distressing that the very thought of it in the present has a profound effect on how the individual can function. This debilitation in the present can be seen as a fear of a reoccurrence of this past trauma in the future.

[Slide change]

In *Maus*, Vladek is constantly dealing with the traumatic moments of his past. In this frame, Vladek is telling his son the story about when he witnessed a public hanging by the Nazis. Here we have Vladek, his wife Anja, and their son, Richieu immediately after they witnessed the hanging. What I find interesting about this frame is how Art has illustrated how when we experience something traumatic it is initially very difficult not think about it, and the disturbing thoughts sort of loom in the back of our minds much like how these images loom at the top of the frame.

[Slide change]

Later on in the graphic novel we have a similar looming in Vladek's present day. In this frame Vladek is driving home while speaking with his son about his past. In these present day scenes the looming figures are not as prominent. This reflects the distancing affect time can have on trauma where when we experience something traumatic it isn't as close to the front of our minds as it what when we first experienced it, but it never quite leaves our day-to-day, because there are always "triggers" in our everyday lives that can easily thrust us back into our traumatic experiences without warning which we will discuss more in depth in just a moment.

[Slide change]

But I first wanted to discuss more in depth the distancing effect time can have on an individual's trauma. In this scene, Leonard discusses time's ability or inability in his case to assist in coping with the loss of his wife.

[Play clip #5]

This scene demonstrates the entirely cliché, but also entirely accurate ability of time to heal emotional and mental injuries by illustrating an instance where time loses it's ability to do so. Since Leonard cannot create new memories beyond his run in with the men who injured him and killed his wife, he cannot put the temporal distance between himself and the incident as most could in order to alleviate some of the turmoil associated with his experience. For most, as time passes there is a distance placed between the individual and the traumatic incident. This allows for the proper emotional consideration of the incident and allows for the impact of the incident to affect the individual differently. In such a way that it can be dealt with in the day-to-day.

[Slide change]

These sorts of triggers become a huge issue for Septimus Smith, a WWI veteran, in Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Upon hearing a car backfire Septimus reaction is described where, "Everything had come to standstill. The throb of the motor engines sounded like a pulse irregularly drumming through an entire body. The sun became extraordinarily hot because the motor car had stopped outside Mulberry's shop window; old ladies on the tops of omnibuses spread their black parasols; here a green, here a red parasol opened with a little pop. Mrs. Dalloway, coming to the window with her arms full of sweet peas, looked out with her little pink face pursed in enquiry. Every one looked at the motor car. Septimus looked. Boys on bicycles sprang off. Traffic accumulated. And there the motor car stood, with drawn blinds, and upon them a curious pattern like a tree, Septimus thought, and this gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames terrified him. The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames. It is I who am blocking the way, he thought. Was he not being pointed at and looked at; was he not weighted there, rooted to the pavement for a purpose? But for what purpose?"

The sound of the car backfiring, which is reminiscent of gunfire, immediately sends the "shell-shocked" Septimus back into his traumatic war experience. Though the trauma he faced during the war may not have been at the front of his memory at the time it only took a slight reminder, this "trigger," for him to be thrust back into trauma. Interspersed throughout this scene are signs that Septimus is amongst the everyday and the normal in the physical sense but mentally and emotionally he is experiencing turmoil and distress on par with and as a result of his past trauma.

[Slide change]

One of the most common traumatic experiences that most people go through is a break up. Though this sort of trauma pales in comparison to the sort of trauma experienced by Vladek or Septimus, it still merits investigation. As it is a common experience and one that functions similarly to what most would consider "genuine trauma." The film, Eternal Sunshine of a Spotless Mind, tells the story of Joel Barrish who after his long term relationship ends he decides to have his ex-girlfriend removed from his memory by a company who specializes in such matters called Lacuna Inc.

[Slide change]

In the scene I am about to show you, Joel is meeting with the doctor who is responsible for planning his memory removal.

[Play clip #6]

The doctor is essentially asking Joel to gather everything that would trigger a memory of Clementine, his former girlfriend. This scene speaks to how intertwined our pasts become with the objects in our lives. When Joel sees these objects, he doesn't see what you or I would. He sees passed them into his own experiences and certain memories are elicited as result. So in order to remove the trauma of losing Clementine, Joel is essentially removing everything that would trigger a memory of her and the procedure itself removes from his mind that which would have been triggered. So by removing the memory of the traumatic event the trauma itself removed as a result. The interesting nature of this sort of trauma is that it does not come as a result of the introduction of a distressing experience, but due to the removal of joyful one. Breakups are typically painful, because we have the past memories of how the relationship once was and knowing that the relationship can never be as it was before is what makes these sort of experiences traumatizing.

[Slide change]

Though Eternal Sunshine of a Spotless Mind is completely fictional and somewhat science fictional, the idea of removing someone or something from memory is not completely far-fetched. Often time's people will remove from their lives the people and things, which elicit memories of past experiences in hopes of removing the memory of the experience itself.

[Slide change]

In *Memento*, Leonard's unique handicap allows for this sort of manipulation of memory taken to an extreme. In the scene I am about to show you, Leonard has discovered that he had found the man he was looking for many years earlier and had already exacted his revenge upon him.

[Play clip #7]

Upon his discovery, Leonard is not elated by his discovery but dejected. Without a man to hunt down and without revenge to exact, his life loses purpose. His whole world is shattered as a result. Instead of accepting this, he opts to destroy the evidence and live his life in ignorance. Though, as I mentioned, this is an extreme case, but people everyday practice this sort of selective memory. Instead of dealing with these sorts of disheartening and life altering revelations many will choose ignorance and attempt to mislead themselves in order to preserve the mental state and perception of the world to which they had been accustomed.

[Slide change]

A holocaust survivor, Primo Levi, speaking about an interaction with individuals speaking "High German" said, "They looked at me in astonishment. The term [I had used] belonged to a different linguistic register from that in which our preceding conversation had been conducted in and is certainly not taught in 'foreign language'

courses. I explained to them that I had not learned German in school but rather in a Lager called Auschwitz; this gave rise to a certain embarrassment, but since I was in the role of buyer they wanted to treat me with courtesy. I later realized also that my pronunciation is course, but I deliberately have not tried to make it more genteel; for the same reason, I have never had the tattoo removed from my left arm." What I find interesting is what Levi is saying about an individual's prerogative to manipulate the perception of his own past. Levi refuses to change the way speaks German as it would not hold true to his original experience of it, and likewise he refuses to remove his tattoo from his arm. Despite the disturbing experience within the concentration camp, Levi realizes that the experience itself is part of his past and so part of himself. He sees the memory not as something from which he needs to escape, but as something, which informs his past and his identity. So the removal of the tattoo would then in turn be the removal of a part of himself.

[Slide change]

The repercussions of self-selective memory and relation to time lead to the final topic, which I would like to touch on. This is how time itself is subject to the individual experiencing it.

[Slide change]

To illustrate the uniqueness of time for each individual, I want to turn our attention again to *The Sound and the Fury*. The novel centers on the Compson family, who are former Southern aristocrats who struggle to deal with the dissolution of their family and its reputation. The first three chapters are narrated by each of the three Compson boys, Benjy, Quentin, and Jason. Each character has a unique personality and relationship to time that drastically differs from their brothers.

[Slide change]

Here we have the colored coded text that I showed you earlier from Benjy's chapter. In order to illustrate how each brother deals differently with time, I have also color-coded some pages from Quentin and Jason's chapters as well.

[Slide change]

Here we can see a few pages from Quentin's chapter. As compared to Benjy's, you can see how drastically different Quentin's section is. The first thing to notice is the introduction of purple text. This additional color doesn't denote a different time period, but Quentin's imagination. Many times throughout Quentin's chapter he strays from reality into his own fantasy. For Benjy this imagination would be impossible as his mental handicap precludes him from this sort of cognition. What is also important to notice is that unlike Benjy's section…

[Slide change backward]

…which jumps around to different time periods in a some what organized fashion into paragraphs…

[Slide change]

…Quentin's section sort of walks all over itself in that the past seems to be constantly encroaching his present day thoughts and fantasy. This speaks to Quentin's fragile mental state, which we'll discuss in a moment. The final brother to narrate a section is Jason.

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As you can you see Jason is very much concerned with only the present state of things. He is characterized as the cruel brother who has no concern for anyone but himself, so the past is of no concern to him as well. He is only interested in how he can make money and take care of himself in the present. Faulkner knew very well that each individual deals with time in his own unique way and that time is a matter interpretation. Furthermore, time is not experiences by individuals in the same manner at all times. Time is very situational. For instance, I'm sure a minute up here for me appears much longer than it would say watching television. So that minute may be quantifiably the same amount of time, 60 seconds, but the experience of those 60 seconds is drastically different between each situation.

[Slide change]

So, I want to turn our attention to the last few pages of Quentin's section. At the end of Quentin's chapter, he ends up being so haunted by his past that he ends up losing his mind and committing suicide, and this descent into madness can be seen through his relationship to time within the last pages of his chapter. We see here at the start that he is still in the present by the majority of the page being filled with red text.

[Slide change back and forth between next two]

But, as he continues, the pages have less and less red text, which denotes Quentin losing his touch on reality, and his inability to stay within the present. In this state, Quentin would most likely perceive time at a frenzied and disorientating pace. This sort of frenzy and disorientation would be easy to portray on film with hurried music or visually disorienting effects, but in a novel, which does not have these luxuries, a difficulty is created in illustrating this sort of relationship to time. However, Faulkner creates this frenzy using only text.

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If we look at a close up of the actual text during Quentin's suicide we can see that it is completely devoid of punctuation and as we saw earlier is constantly jumping around in time. The lack of punctuation forces the reader to read at a more hurried pace since it is

natural to only pause at the ends of sentences. Furthermore the reader too would become disoriented and confused by this sort of presentation of text. This disorienting response was Faulkner's intent since he wanted the reader to experience the same sort of response to time that Quentin himself was experiencing in that moment.

[Slide change]

This individualistic perception of time also creates a hierarchy of memories or aspects of memories within the minds of each individual. In this scene in *Eternal Sunshine of a Spotless Mind* is, Joel's memory is being erased of Clementine. What I want to note particularly is the manner in which Joel's surroundings disappear.

[Play clip #8]

The manner in which Joel's surroundings disappear is indicative of how Joel exalts some aspects of this specific memory over others. The tertiary elements, the other people in the store, the book covers etc., seem to melt away quickly while aspects of Clementine and her speak are noticeably vivid and are the very last to disappear. This suggests that this is what is the most engrained within Joel's mind and what he has chosen to cling to.

[Slide change]

So, in conclusion the lived experience of time is a difficult concept to accurately portray within the arts. Though authors and film and television makers have various tools at their disposal with which to assist in recreating time as it is experienced, the complex nature of time still problematizes its accurate portrayal. However, through different media several aspects of time can be illuminated within created works and as creators of these forms of media continue to experiment with these much more can be and will be learned through these various works.

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