

Looking Back And Talking It Over The Use And Abuse Of Flashbacks And Voice-overs

By Wout Thielemans

Flashbacks and voice-overs are two major narrative techniques that have acquired a rather dubious reputation in screenwriting circles. The literature (predominantly American) generally warns against their use, and according to most reports their very presence will land a script immediately in the “reject” pile of the Hollywood reader.

However, writers keep using flashbacks and voice-overs with all of their might. Why not? Many classic films make excellent use of them. Flashbacks and voice-overs are very powerful ways to enrich a screenplay’s narrative, IF they are used well.

I’m sure that the negative attitude against them is due to the fact that there are so many scripts out there which use these techniques badly. It is certainly a very common occurrence in student screenplays. The reason for this? Many beginning writers regard the linear storytelling as too boring or cliched, and therefore try to spice things up by an indiscriminate use of flashbacks, whether these are right for the story or not. The results are usually disappointing, to say the least.

Let’s take a closer look at flashbacks and voice-overs, investigating a number of instances when they work wonderfully well while also examining some common mistakes which partially account for the (largely undeserved) low esteem with which they are generally held.

FLASHBACKS

Using flashbacks generally has one major advantage and one possible major danger in screenwriting. The advantage is that it allows past incidents to be dramatized in all their impact instead of just recounted verbally. The old “show, don’t tell” rule put into practice, so to speak.

The problem is that they can interrupt the forward flow of the narrative, dissipating all the tension and momentum which the screenplay had garnered.

So, how does one avoid this?

First, you should make absolutely sure that the use of the flashbacks are indeed the most effective way of making the desired point.

For instance, a therapy-drama like *Prince Of Tides* has at its center a traumatic experience which the hero had when he was a child; at the climax of the film, when he opens up about the events to his lover-therapist, a flashback is used to let the audience experience, first hand, the horror that befell him.

Secondly, it helps if the audience really wants to know the information contained in the flashbacks. It then becomes a question of constructing the story in such a way that the flashback becomes the logical next step in its development.

Take a look at *Casablanca*. The audience has been wondering about Rick's background for a long time, and the way Ilsa's arrival has upset him, increases our curiosity even more. The flashback, revealing their love affair in Paris and its sudden tragic end, fills in the blanks and allows us to fully appreciate the following scenes of conflict and bitterness between the lovers. By the way, the flashback sequence is often felt to be the least interesting part of the film by contemporary audiences.

Let's now investigate a few ways in which flashbacks are used and what the narrative benefits can be. First off, there is the framing flashback: after an opening scene, the entire story is told in flashbacks, generally without interruptions, finally taking us back to the beginning of the script. This is a very simple effective technique.

The first scene poses a very clear question and hooks us into the story immediately. A potential downside could be that the ending of the story is already known to us, so that suspense is lessened. This risk is offset, however, if the contrast between the end situation and the development of the flashback story creates a strong sense of dramatic irony. Excellent examples of this technique can be found in *Sunset Boulevard* and *Double Indemnity*, to name but two.

Also, a clever writer can create the illusion that the story might as yet end differently. In *Carlito's Way*, for instance, we know from the outset that Carlito is doomed. Yet, near the end of the story, he triumphs over his enemies, and we start to hope against hope that the opening scene was some kind of dream or fantasy. When tragedy strikes, it does so from an unexpected, yet logical, direction maximizing the impact on the audience.

Some of these story frameworks do not present us with the end of the entire tale. In Preston Sturges' masterful *The Miracle Of Morgan's Creek* for instance, an inhabitant of the titular small town calls the state governor (who happens to be the lead character of Sturges' earlier *The Great McGinty*) to inform him of an incredible occurrence.

We see the hilarious past events develop up to the point where ?berwimp hero Norval Jones has been arrested and his girlfriend Trudy Kockenlocker has given birth to sextuplets (the result of a drunken one-night stand with an unknown soldier). At this point, the governor and his crew jump into action and provide us with a frenetic climax, one of the few times when the deus-ex-machina technique has been used to excellent effect.

One of the main rules of a flashback is that if we close in on the face of one character as the flashback begins, it will represent his or her memories. This is an automatic assumption. Breaking this rule can probably be used to interesting dramatic effect, yet it shouldn't disorient the viewer or strike him as a cheat.

In *Saving Private Ryan*, the flashback starts linked to Tom Hanks' character (the blue eyes of the old man fade into Hanks' blue eyes at the time of the Normandy landing) but at the

end it's suddenly revealed that we were actually seeing Matt Damon's reminiscences! It feels like an unfair and pointless manipulation of the audience.

Then there are flashbacks within the developing story. When do these give the best results? In my opinion, there are two main ways in which they can be used effectively:

—Both the past and the present of the story have a clear narrative drive.

—The flashback is used creatively in order to make a point about memory or the principles of storytelling itself.

Let's look at this first point. A common failing in scripts by beginning writers is that the present of their story is totally un-involving and undramatic, while the past is where all the action is. A student script I once read showed a man moping around aimlessly in the present, whereas his past involved him murdering his girlfriend. The script ends with him committing suicide on her grave. This story obviously didn't need a flashback structure—it would have created far more impact had the writer treated it chronologically.

Citizen Kane, on the other hand, is a clear example on how to get it right. In the present, we follow the journalist who is looking for the meaning of Rosebud. He has an obvious goal, and his drive never flags. And every flashback segment has its own clear conflict, so that we never get the opportunity to lose interest.

As for creatively using the flashback, great examples abound. Rashomon remains justly celebrated: the way in which four different versions of the same incident are portrayed, neither of which may be the correct one, is brilliant.

In more recent years, Christopher McQuarrie's screenplay for *The Usual Suspects* is probably the most successful adaptation of postmodern narrative strategies to a mainstream film. Once again both present and past contain their specific narrative drives (Keegan the cop trying to get the truth behind the boat massacre from Verbal, the sole survivor; the gang being manipulated by Keyser Sæze in the past), and, as the icing on the cake, the revelation that everything we've been told has been a huge lie, constructed on the spot by the master criminal himself. Rarely has the unreliable narrator been used so effectively. Plus we are left to ponder the paradox that some of the facts of the story (the lineup, the massacre) are verifiably true, which makes the whole construction of the screenplay even more dizzying.

This is in strong contrast to David Koepp's *Snake Eyes*. Here a corrupt cop, played by Nicholas Cage, tries to get the truth behind an assassination at a boxing match and thus interrogates several witnesses.

The resulting flashbacks give us more information about certain events we saw earlier, but don't always seem warranted. Some impart very little essential information. Secondly, the only untrue flashback is the one told by Gary Sinise, but this fact is revealed to the audience

immediately after his testimony. So there is no further opportunity for any ambiguity, and the interest level of the audience drops palpably.

Finally, a warning about complexity is in order. It is perfectly possible to start working with flashbacks within flashbacks so that one confuses the audience. A good example can be found in *Bird*.

The film starts out in the early fifties, when jazz legend Charlie Parker was on the decline both creatively and health-wise. Soon, it flashes back to 1945, when he was at his peak. There, we get another flashback to 1936, told by a secondary character, in which Bird was humiliated in his first pro jam session. For jazz buffs this event is easy to contextualize; but for others this technique makes the film needlessly complex and disorienting. The accessibility of the movie suffers as a result.

VOICE-OVERS

It isn't hard to see the attraction of the voice-overs for the screenwriter. First, it allows him to express the thoughts of the characters, and thus give them more depth. Second, the first-person narrator as found in hard-boiled detective fiction (Raymond Chandler and Co.) holds great fascination. And last, it is also a convenient way to provide information, allowing the writer to either explain and motivate certain actions in the plot or quickly advance the story by letting the narration take care of certain leaps in the storytelling.

So with all these potential pluses going for it, why the bias against the use of voice-overs?

The biggest drawback in using voice-overs is that it can easily be used as an undramatic way of storytelling. In other words, the writer may describe rather than show the action, and as such, go against the very essence of the filmic narrative. When using voice-overs, the screenwriter must make certain the technique is used to add to rather than to replace the image.

Voice-overs may also be unnecessary. If it merely repeats on-screen information or emphasizes the obvious, it can come across as boring or condescending. A good example is the recent *Payback*. The voice-over in this movie is superfluous as the development of the plot is easy enough to follow (with perhaps one exception, which becomes clear soon after). It is interesting to note that this narration was not to be found in Brian Helgeland's original script.

Thirdly, some literary effects cannot be recreated in film. When voice-overs are used in an attempt to achieve them anyway, the results are irritating or ridiculous. David Lynch's *Dune* is a case in point. In the original novel, both thought and dialogue are represented at length during each scene, a style typical of author Frank Herbert.

The film version tried to retain the flavor of the original by letting us hear the thoughts of the characters at certain points. However, these are mainly limited to repetitive musings on a major plot element (the connection between the giant desert worms and the extremely

valuable 'spice' found on the planet Arrakis), so that the end result seems aggravating rather than profound.

So, what DOES constitute good use of the voice-over technique?

There are numerous possibilities, of course—I will cover those I feel are most important. First, voice-overs can be a very valuable addition to a script when it is actively used in storytelling. In the excellent Hong Kong police comedy-drama *Task Force*, a nervous young man tells the audience (in V.O.) he hasn't done "this" before.

"This" turns out to be having a prostitute come to his apartment (shift of audience's sympathy). As the scene progresses though, it turns out the man is a cop and part of a sting operation to arrest illegal prostitutes (a second surprise and shift). The voice-over is essential here in surprising the audience twice in the same scene. The entire film keeps up this playful use of stylistic elements to the very end.

Secondly, voice-overs can be used to convey information which is very hard to express visually. In *The Age Of Innocence*, the narrator is used not only to keep the novel's gently ironic tone intact, but also explains many of the codes of behavior and thought which govern the lives of its main characters—information we need, but which would have been difficult to dramatize without falling prey to the 19th century "French maid"-style of exposition.

Thirdly, voice-over narration can be a part of the style of certain genres. I'm thinking in particular of mock documentaries such as Woody Allen's *Take The Money And Run* and *Zelig*. In both cases, the narration provides the thrust of the story, while the individual scenes expand on certain points or are humorously contrasted with the voice-over.

This same technique can also be used as a kind of "setting the scene": the Coen Brothers have their *The Big Lebowski* be introduced by a wild west-type narrator, emphasizing that what follows will be a "tall tale" and is not to be taken as serious drama.

Finally, voice-overs CAN also be used to enter the protagonist's mind (or that of other characters). It is not an easy thing to do but the results can be excellent. In *Pi*, for instance, the main character is an isolated, neurotic and obsessed mathematician who is delving into the secrets of the universe. As he has no real contact with the people around him, we regularly hear his thoughts—sometimes information is even repeated, so we can share his obsession and follow his thought processes. The result is that the audience empathizes with an ostensibly unlikable character and is truly immersed into the world of the film.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that flashbacks and voice-overs can be used to great effect in a screenplay. The screenwriter should make sure, however, that these techniques are applied creatively and because they are the best solution to a given narrative problem, not just as a shortcut or in

an attempt to look sophisticated. Who knows, if enough screenwriters follow these guidelines, the “ban” on flashbacks and voice-overs may finally be lifted someday.

Belgian Wout Thielemans is a SCREENTALK Staff Writer. He has worked as a script editor and TV writer since 1991. Wout is currently the script editor of the daily soap “Thuis.” For the past 5 years he was the head tutor of the Flemish post-graduate screenwriting program VOSS.

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