Subjectivity in the New Hollywood Cinema: Fathers, Sons and Other Ghosts

Vojkovic, S.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Chapter 2

Back to the Future: Time Travel and Difference
Traveling through Time, Rescuing History

The state of things in the film *Back to the Future* by Robert Zemeckis is as follows: Marty McFly's father George is not good at confrontations. He is so afraid to stand up to his boss Biff that even when Biff wrecks George's car, George takes the blame. This feature of the father has a negative effect on the entire McFly family: his wife Lorraine, Marty's mother has a drinking habit which helps her to slip away into the fabricated memories of her past, Marty's sister does not have a boyfriend because her mother is advising her to wait until destiny brings her together with someone, Marty's brother Dave believes he is better off with no ambitions, and finally, Marty himself is afraid to send his demo tape to a record company because he fears rejection. For this state of affairs to improve father George McFly would have to go back to his teenage years and resolve his fears of confronting Biff.

According to Thomas Elsaesser, the time travel genre in contemporary American cinema reflects America's sense of being troubled. The overt preoccupation of time travel films with a disordered past, signifies that the symbolic order is no longer in place, that it is no longer functioning (Elsaesser 1998b). Elsaesser puts forward the case that these pasts are usually not official pasts, but secret, personal, often painful pasts to which characters return, "contrary to the so-called 'end of history' - because of a persistence of history, the 20th century has left us with a hard core of history that returns, as a symptom, compulsively and over and over again" (2). Elsaesser's claim is that "time" in the time travel genre relates less to the future than it does to the past, less to nostalgia than to trauma (2).

Because time travel is about encountering the self, as Elsaesser asserts, these films can yield important insight into the ways public, historical and civilizational traumas affect subjectivity and identity. Cinematic representations of the self are not arbitrary, however. The only way social roles and markers of difference can enter public domains of representation is through symbolizations, and in the case of American popular cinema these representations are circumscribed by the roles found in the nuclear family (4). What we learn from these films, on the basis of the relations within their nuclear family is, that paternity is traumatized, and is no longer secured by the white totemic father. More precisely, the home is
troubled because as a subject, the father no longer functions.\footnote{Elsaesser's discussion on time travel brings to the fore the crucial concerns of this chapter, that is, the connection between the structuring of subjectivity, the structuring of the narrative, and time. When taking into account the narratological terms for the operation of rescuing both history and subjectivity, it is useful for a start to consider the Dutch term \textit{geschiedenis}. While it corresponds to the term fabula, \textit{geschiedenis} can also be translated as - history.\footnote{The correspondence in meaning between fabula and history has important implications for the theorizing of subjectivity on the level of the fabula. In the first instance it underscores the mobilizing of vision on the level of the fabula. This vision, I would argue, plays a crucial role in the process of "telling" history. More precisely, and this will be even more clear from the analysis of the specific scenes, the reframing of the fabula in \textit{Back to the Future} is produced by the narration that "tells" that both the father and history need to be rescued. This preoccupation with rescuing the father is socially and ideologically determined and it is bound up with focalization which exceeds the fictional world. In the case of the film in question, this subjective vision not only informs, but also (re)fashions both history and the fabula.}

The re-\textit{vision} of history presupposes a reordering of the events as well as traveling through time. Just as importantly, however, the necessary improvement cannot occur without subjects who engage in the process of time traveling. The analysis of the film will show that while the father's traumatized subjectivity is symptomatic of a troubled home, world or history, the doubling of the son's character-image is symptomatic of the pressure this dysfunctional symbolic order puts on the offspring. As is the case with \textit{Back to the Future}, the rescue is dependent on the multiple functions of the son's character-image; in the course of the film, Marty's character-image is ultimately doubled into two images, thus two Marty's: the image of Marty who has just arrived from the past to the present (thus back to the past's future), and the image of another Marty, the one who is just about to embark on his time travel to the past.

As in \textit{ET-The Extraterrestrial}, the main characters are not elaborated as fixed entities. There is a difference, however: in the former film the character-image is decomposed; here, as I have already mentioned, it is doubled and even tripled. In both films we
are dealing with a crisis of paternity: in the former, the crisis is resolved through the arrival of the substitute father; in the latter film, the son will have to go back in time and act in place of the father. In other words, the son will have to re-visit the past which haunts the entire family. Precisely because Marty is doubled and tied to different temporal continuums, he has the capacity to see both prospectively and retrospectively. Marty’s vision structured through the tension between the future and the past, models the vision of the higher focalizing agency. The structural dependency between his past and his future vision is a semiotic product of the narration that “tells” that the (re)framing of history is predicated on the intersubjective dependency between the father and the son.

Subjectivity as an Allegory of Différance
Changing history is thus interrelated with an individual process - Marty is doomed to remain split in time, locked in the tension between his past and his future self. The doubling of his character-image enables him, however, to perpetually revisit the past and “improve” the father. One Marty can have a “new” successful father because another Marty is engaged in the re-construction of the “old” father. The structure of meaning we can trace on the basis of the relations between Marty’s character images points both forward and backward; as a meaningful entity, Marty can only be traced in the movement between temporal continuums, and between other characters. Marty McFly’s diegetic function is interrelated to that of his father George and his father’s adversary, Biff. Marty functions as a symptom of Biff, and a trace of George. In both guises he is an indexical sign of his own self split in time.

I read the conceptual process reflected in this structure as that of spacing, temporization, différance. In the work of Saussure, Derrida starts from the idea that every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to other concepts, by means of a systematic play of differences. In opposition to Saussure, however, Derrida argues that the differences, continuous on the level of the signifier, always postpone the attachment of the signifier to the signified so that signification remains an ongoing process. His theorizing of the sign is part of his ongoing project to undo the myths of origin, in the first instance, that of speech as the origin of language. Derrida argues his way out of the opposition between meaning as
effect and language as cause via the notion of the trace; a trace, as he explains, is no more an effect than it has a cause. He introduces the term *différence* which points to the undecidability between the referent and the meaning, and alludes to a continuous alternation which does not rely on synthesis. *Différence* also reminds us that the production of meaning occurs in time, hence, meaning is dependent on the event, but it can be disclosed on the basis of a structure. The French verb *différer* means to differ and to defer. *Différance* sounds exactly the same as *différence* (to differ) and as the progressive form of *différer* (to defer). The ending -ance effectuates not only a new meaning, but it designates the space and time between difference as differing, and difference as deferring. Hence, it points to a particular structure of meaning.\textsuperscript{v}

This decentering of the sign provides a basis for theorizing the narrative modality predicated on this decomposition. I suggest that in the new Hollywood narratives such as *Back to the Future*, *différance* is thematized, and here it is in the first place related to the structuring of subjectivity.\textsuperscript{vi} As a character, Marty McFly is produced through difference and deferral. He goes back in time to his own origin, but as it turns out, he is the condition of that origin; as such, he can be understood as both a sign and the condition of signification. As a sign Marty at the same time designates the differences on which that sign is predicated; he is dependent on - that is, he is both different and the same as - his father George, as well as his father's adversary Biff. The close reading of the sample scenes will show that the dynamic process of producing difference as a literalization of meaning production through deferral of time emerges as a prominent feature of this mode of filmic narration.\textsuperscript{vii}

For the purpose of articulating the specificities of the modality of narrative produced through the structure of *différance*, as well as its effects, I will endorse Bal's semiotics of narrative. Since this modality of narrative is closely related to the structuring of subjectivity we need to establish the relations between the subject positions. Conversely, when it comes to establishing the *trace* of subjectivity we need to take into account the structuring of the narrative:

The notion does not necessarily point backwards to some origin it allows one to reconstruct. Rather, the trace, as symptom or index, relates to its co-text by contiguity. Projecting
the network of a semantic space onto the continuous parts of the enunciated, it becomes progressive rather than regressive, pointing, not to the outcome of an original activity but to the form of a structure. (Bal 1994:105)

Bal’s statement implies that meaning is not something stable that is to be filled in, but it is processed via nonsynonymous forces; a trace, symptom or index should not be thought of in terms of what they mean or where they come from, but in relation to the structure we can extract on the basis of specific relations between subject positions as well as characters. Hence, these structures embody the Derridian theory of meaning production, inflected by Bal’s emphasis on the narrativity of that process.

I have isolated three interrelated processes of meaning production in Back to the Future where the structure of time travel governs the structuring of subjectivity. In each of the processes, difference (between subject positions and characters) is produced through time travel, and in that sense, the process of meaning production can be observed as an allegory of différence. In this chapter I will address the following manifestations of différence produced through narrative structuring: 1) the process whereby the father is elaborated as incapable of intersubjective exchange and thus emerges as the negative emblem of différence; 2) the intersubjective process located in the exchangeability of subject positions and characters; and 3) the process of producing difference as sameness.

Actually, in all three instances the process of producing difference as sameness is at work. The reason I have nevertheless isolated this process is to problematize the relation between vision and the narrated content. Via the story a new fabula is produced, but this is only possible due to the fact that Marty is acting simultaneously from the past and the future. He is both different and the same, and his ability to focalize, to color the story with subjectivity is inextricable from his capacity to act upon the fictional world of the fabula.

The Father as the Negative Emblem of Différence

As I have already noted, the structure we can trace on the basis of subject positions and characters points both backward and forward and can thus be brought into relation with the notion of différence.
The tracing of this process of meaning production involves a parallel examination of the story and the fabula. This implies that we need to take into account the subject positions expressed on the level of the story, as well as the elements of the fabula such as actors and events. The crucial issue here is the production of difference through time, or rather the conceptualizing of subjectivity in relation to time. The father's inability to act, to move through space, that is to trace his presence in time, echoes his inability to assert himself as a subject of vision.

Scene 1 revolves around three characters who are locked together in the wheel of history of this filmic narrative: the father, (George McFly), the son (Marty McFly) and Biff. It is the opening of the film, we are in the year 1985, in the McFly home. We enter the scene with Marty and encounter George and his boss Biff in the midst of a discussion. Biff has wrecked George's car but George will have to take the blame. George is forced into a defensive position, because Biff insists that the car had a "blind spot" which supposedly caused the accident and made him spill beer on his suit. Marty is the indirect victim of Biff's brutality, for as we soon find out he needed the car to go to the lake with his girlfriend Jennifer. Marty's function in the scene is twofold: he challenges Biff's dominating force by offering himself as the object of confrontation, and later, he challenges George's weakness by positing himself as the subject of confrontation. As it turns out, the confrontation between Biff and Marty cannot be radicalized because George is attached to it as the other side of the coin, or, in terms of Saussure's definition of the sign, as the two sides of a sheet of paper, such that the confrontation between George and Marty cannot even begin in Biff's absence. In this set-up, the father appears to be "stuck" between Biff as his nightmare from the past, and Marty, who functions as the reminder that the unresolved past comes back from the future.

Underneath George's humiliation and Marty's hopelessness it is possible to extract a succession of three interactions: Biff/George versus Marty (shots 1-5), Biff versus Marty (shots 6-10) and Marty versus George (shots 11-13). In shots 1-5, Marty acts as the observer of the interaction between George and Biff; in shots 7-10 he is placed in the confronting position with Biff; and in shots 11-13 Marty attempts to confront George but George immediately gives in.
Marty versus George/Biff: Who Controls the Flow of Time?

In shots 1-5 where Marty acts as the observer, the space he occupies is rather undefined, though it is a vantage point from which the interaction between George and Biff is presented. The shots of Marty (shots 2, 4 and 8) interpolated into the 3/4 medium shot of George and Biff confirm Marty’s position as the outsider, but their main function is to “cut 1” and thus block the excess of Biff’s dominating force. The excess can be noted in the duration of the shots where Biff and George are interacting; shot 1 (21”), shot 3 (11”), shot 5 (24”) and shot 7 (20”). Their interaction appears a well-known routine where George is subordinated and passive and Biff is dominant and active. Marty’s arrival into the above situation interrupts the ritual, but more importantly, it throws the power relations out of balance. In shots 1, 3 and 5 Marty is posited as the focalizor, both Biff and George are objects of Marty’s observation and thus equally subordinated to his point of vision.

Marty versus Biff: A Force Blocked by Vision

Biff’s urge to move and frustrate the set-up in which he is being watched is thus a logical outcome; Biff exits shot 5 and intrudes upon Marty’s space (shot 6). There is not much he is able to do there except take a few candies from the bowl, exit the shot and finally return to his original position (shot 7). In shot 7, Biff takes a long walk all the way to the kitchen “pulling” the camera along, again trying to expand his territory as it is defined by the frame. At the end of shot 7, however, Biff still remains no more than the object of Marty’s vision. This irritates him to such an extent that he starts marching (shot 9) toward Marty forcing the camera to withdraw backwards, and on top of that forcing Marty’s internal focalization to shift to external focalization. After having physically attacked Marty’s vision he will also attack it verbally. From the shot/reverse shot relationship established between Biff and Marty in shots 7-10, it is evident that Biff cannot really disturb Marty’s position as the focalizing agent. Even though the shift in focalization from internal to external suggests Biff’s momentary advantage, the camera moving backwards is expressing an imaginary retreat, for
Marty is standing still, ready to face Biff. And in fact, as it is evident from shot 11, Biff cannot cause Marty to move, nor can he cross Marty's space; instead, to leave the McFly house Biff takes a turn to the left.

Biff's question, "What are you looking at, butthead?" does not cause Marty to withdraw, but it "intimidates," paradoxically enough, the higher, invisible focalizing agent. The focalizer's reaction to Biff indicates that the power of the invisible authority is weaker than that of Marty. It is a moment where story clashes with the fabula; as a character Biff is intervening into the vision which exceeds the fictional world. At the same time, Marty's vision, elaborated as superior to that of the highest authority is affecting Biff's action. We have to recall here the technical difference between the story and the fabula; the fabula has been defined as a series of events and can be understood as material or content that is worked into a story. But, as is the case with the filmic narrative in question, an aspect of storytelling and concretely Marty's focalization, determines the events of the fabula. Conversely, Biff as the agent of action affects the position of the highest narratorial agency.

**Marty versus George: The Father Stuck in Time**

The third interaction (shots 11-13) between George and Marty could better be described as a confrontation which is resolved before it even had a chance to begin. Marty exits shot 11 disengaging himself from George and in shot 12 assumes a position which potentially allows an exchange of looks. In shot 13 George immediately gives in and thus misses the opportunity to act as a subject.

The three interactions described above can be distinguished in terms of focalization as well as action. The cinematic signifier which proves pertinent for determining the characters' capacity to act is the camera movement. The intrinsic capacity of film to capture time is most evident through movement. It involves the characters' movement through space, and in that respect, the subjects' presence in time is confirmed through action. Each of the three interactions, Marty versus George/Biff, Marty versus Biff and Marty versus George, can be observed in terms of the characters' movements through space. In the opening of the scene, before the first interaction is set up, it is Marty who makes the camera move when he walks into the house and assumes his position as the observer. In
the interaction George/Biff versus Marty, it is Biff who traverses the space of the McFly home, pulling the camera along.

Although Marty stands still in this part of the scene, his disadvantage is recuperated through his ability to see. Marty’s position as a subject is confirmed in the second part of the scene, in his interaction with Biff; that is, Biff’s ability to move can be understood as symmetrical to Marty’s ability to see. In the third interaction, Marty versus George, Marty takes control of the camera movement. The one who does not have the ability to move through space is George. He is “moved” when Biff pulls his tie, he does not dare to do more than appear on the edge of Biff’s newly conquered territory (shot 17), or remains far away in the background (shot 11). Thus it is not only his fifties image, hairstyle and glasses that anchor George in another time. In the given situation George’s inability to trace his presence in movement through space echoes his inability to trace his presence in time. Finally, his inability to cause action or produce vision infers a crisis of subjectivity.

This father is introduced as stuck in space and time and thus, in terms of spacing and temporization, he can be understood as a negative emblem of différance. He is not capable of making himself present in space and time and this has a negative effect on the entire family. As the following scene demonstrates, the family members are framed by a vision of the past.

**Framing the Present Through the Past**

While in *ET-The Extraterrestrial* the low camera angle functions as a sign of subjectivity, in *Back to the Future*, the camera movement, apart from confirming the characters’ capacity to make themselves present in space (and time), proves to be a very prominent sign of subjective vision. In the subsequent scene (scene 2), time functions as a focalizing agent, and it is the camera movement that enables us to trace this invisible subjective vision. The following events dovetail directly to the previous scene. The McFly family is having dinner, they seem to be actively communicating but in fact there is a constant play of evading the possibility of a dialogue. Either a character who is addressing another character looks away not expecting the other person to return the look, or, as is the case with George, he is completely unaware that he is being addressed. It is a situation where the father appears as one of the kids, watching TV and doing
his “homework” at the same time.

Through her ability to motivate the camera to move, the mother is presented as the dominant figure in the McFly family. Her ability to move through space, however, is connected to the alcohol she fetches every time she rises from the table. Apparently, Lorraine’s drinking habit helps her to sustain her role in this family. Because George is busy watching a rerun from 1955 and writing a report for Biff, she is left to deal with family matters and parental guidance. She is very judgemental and her views on how teenagers (especially the girls) should act are based on the rules which held in the 50s. Her lecture is supported with a story she has told a million times about her and George as teenagers and how destiny brought them together. In shots 4, 6, 9, and 11 she is directing her attention toward the opposite side of the table where George is seated, for he is the one who plays such an important role in her idealization of the past. In shot 5 he reacts as if he just woke up from a dream, in shots 7 and 10, he is not even looking at Lorraine. Instead she provokes a reaction of the invisible focalizer. More precisely, in shots 6, 9 and 11, the camera is moving toward Lorraine.

Since there is no one on the other side of the table who could motivate the camera to move forward, it is possible to conclude that the camera movement is provoked by Lorraine’s story about the events from the past. The romantic story about “The Enchantment Under the Sea Dance” which took place in 1955 can thus for the millionth time find its “happy ending” in the present only because the present is re-framed according to the past. Framed by the past, Lorraine finishes her story and waits for George’s response. In the next shot, (shot 12) George indeed turns toward Lorraine, but not to react to her story, for he wasn’t even listening. He is cracking up with laughter, totally absorbed with his Jacky Gleason show.

There is an additional conclusion we can draw here: if we recall the “timid” focalizing agency from the previous scene we could possibly infer that this father is a personification of such an authority. In this scene, the absence of the father’s reactions again makes way for this subjective vision. The only thing this authority seemingly has to offer to the McFly family is the time-frame of the past. By tracing the father’s subjectivity it is easy to conclude that this father needs to “repaired.” The improvement will entail inserting
this father into the structure of *différence*. In that respect, Derrida's term helps us not only to illuminate the working of a subjectivity conditioned through the tension between the past and the future self, as is the case with the son, but it is equally useful for characterizing the negative emblem of this type of subjectivity. Clearly, the father, as the negative emblem of *différence* is stuck in between the past and the future. The implied crisis of paternity carries a promise, as Elsaesser suggests, “not only for men, but also for women, not only for Americans but for all multi-cultural societies” (10). While the time travel genre may give way to another, improved masculinity and paternity, it also reconfirms the already dominant preoccupation of Western culture with fathers and sons.

More precisely, in the films in question, we can trace the productive value of time travel, but the rescue of the “world,” of history, and of the symbolic order is conditioned by the relationship between the father and the son. Even though the mother is suffering a crisis of subjectivity, the troubled father personifies the crisis of the higher narratorial authority. In chapters five and six I will demonstrate that within the symbolic universe of the father, the female characters are traditionally posited in between an intersubjective exchange, as a negative emblem of *différence*. As a result of this tendency the production of subjectivity is obstructed. Unlike the troubled male subjects, however, who are ultimately inserted into the structure of *différence*, the female subjects do not have this option. This has to do with the vision which determines the limits of what is conceivable and acceptable, vision which ultimately (re)structures the possibilities of existence. If time travel is about encountering the self, the rescue operation can work insofar as the subject is capable of engaging in an intersubjective exchange. As is the case with new Hollywood blockbusters, only the male characters are envisioned as capable of doubling and exchanging places with each other.

**The Play With Future History**

Blockbuster films such as *Back to the Future* are preoccupied with restoring the symbolic universe of the father, but the regressive nature of this narrative-ideological purpose is established through strategies which, paradoxically enough, put pressure on this fixation. One clear example is the elaboration of the narratorial authority as a
vulnerable entity in scenes 1 and 2. The clash of contradictory paradigms is particularly evident, however, in the new Hollywood’s narrativizing of time travel. As far as time travel in Hollywood films is concerned, two prominent SF inventions made such a journey possible. One is the apparatus known as the time machine, the other is teleportation or “beaming down.” Both time traveling devices owe their efficacy to “science.” A close analysis of the film Back to the Future confirms, however, that time travel, and accordingly “science,” owe their efficacy to the strategies of narrative.

In the film in question, the working of “science” in the production of time travel is manifested on two levels. On a more obvious level, time travel is elaborated as an illusion, as a cinematic attraction in its own right. On another level, time travel is elaborated as an intersubjective process. In the beginning of the film, Doc Emmet Brown invites his young friend Marty to witness the time travel experiment. He asks him to record this “historical event” on video. Doc’s experiment commences with the launching of his dog Einstein on a journey through time. The experiment is elaborated as a spectacle staged by the scientist; Doc’s ability to manipulate his object of knowledge is emphasized in his toying with the time machine via the remote control. The “scientific” object being put on display gives a Cartesian twist to this brief episode: “third person” vision emerges as a major factor in the production of time travel.

The Cartesian subject, traditionally defined through its ability to produce “objective” vision, and by extension “objective” knowledge, has been one of the central concerns of contemporary epistemology. Philosopher Lorraine Code explains that within the Cartesian paradigm the construction of the subject–object relation in the production of knowledge is conditioned through the privileged role of vision:

With its roots both in Platonic philosophy and in the sophisticated development of optics in the early modern scientific era, it is no wonder that vision would have emerged as a model both of knowing per se and of the best and most natural relationship between knower and known. [...] For Descartes, who contributed to the science of optics and for whom vision figures preeminently as a source of sensory experience, the choice of this model is not surprising. But the (often unspo-
The new Hollywood cinema plays on the illusions this paradigm promotes. On the one hand, the film is introducing the myth of science via sophisticated optical illusions, on the other hand, the myth is also decomposed via the structuring of the narrative. In the episode described above from the film’s opening, Doc operates his machine with the remote control, in the film’s closing, however, Doc himself will be incorporated into the time machine. What is implicitly put on display in the former case, is the new Hollywood technology; the goal of the implied “scientists” is not to make time travel work, but to produce the illusion that it works. Time travel as demonstrated in the scene owes its “objectivity” to a large crew of specialists, animators, pyrotechnicians, still photographers who are all actually covering up the impotence of “science” to make time travel possible.\(^x\)

But the closing scene reframes this relation between science and vision. In the latter case, as it is elaborated in the scene of Marty’s departure to the future, and contrary to the implicit scientists from Industrial Light and Magic, Doc Brown is engaged in an intersubjective process with the time traveling vehicle. To harness the energy from the bolt of lightning which is about to strike the clock tower and transport Marty back to the future, Doc employs his own body as a conductor of electricity. Doc’s “becoming” of the time machine is emphasized in his hanging from the clock tower trying to reconnect the broken circuit.\(^xi\) Doc’s arm becomes the third hand of the clock doubling the composition of his invention - the flux capacitor - that enables time travel.

The scientist’s becoming the object of knowledge, or the ultimate suspension between Doc and the time machine, literalizes Code’s assertion that if primacy is given to intersubjectivity, knowledge produced can change both knower and the known. In that respect, through the narrativizing of time travel, this new Hollywood film incorporates the concerns of contemporary epistemology influenced by feminism and postmodernism.\(^xii\) The primacy given to
intersubjectivity, traceable particularly through the structure of *différance*, displays in addition a postmodernist desire to rescue those histories and subjectivities which were silenced by the dominant fiction. Or, to put it in Elsaesser's terms, because time travel is about encountering the self, the acts of self-displacement make possible a re-assessment and reconciliation with the present. Nevertheless, the play with the intersubjective exchange and the demythologizing of the Cartesian subject is enveloped within a vision which forges its own "scientific enterprise" - the re-invention of the father.

There is another instance in the film where the narrativizing of time travel underscores the new Hollywood's capacity to absorb cultural information from heterogeneous domains. It is an instance of "second person" discourse which dovetails with the above discussion and illuminates the relation between narrative and epistemology. Bal explains that the concept of second-personhood has a triple allegiance: 1) it indicates the derivative status of personhood; the fundamental impossibility to be, both psychologically and socially, a person without the traces of the person's grafted being; 2) as presented by Benveniste and subsequent theorists in his vein, second-personhood indicates the reversible relationship of complementarity between "first" and "second person" pronouns whose use produces subjectivity and constitutes the essence of language precisely because the pronouns do not refer to fixed positions; and 3) second-personhood indicates those persons, subjects or discourses formerly referred to as the "object" but now engaged in the dialogue of the performance. Considering that the "first" and the "second person" positions are by definition reversible, Bal explains that one of the ways to measure the engagement of the "second person" in the production of knowledge is precisely by examining the actual reversibility of "first" and "second" person (Bal, 1996: 165-194).

In *Back to the Future*, the second person discourse is staged through Doc's look into the camera as a way to simulate time travel. Dr. James Watson "accidentally" discovered that the DNA code is a double-helix spiral after a "flash" while descending a spiral staircase at Oxford. In a similar manner, Doc Emmet Brown in *Back to the Future*, had a flash when he fell from his toilet and hit his head on the sink while he was trying to hang a clock. This caused him to accidentally discover the flux-capacitor which makes time travel possible. In "practicality," the flux capacitor is built into a DeLorean
racing car and it needs the electrical power of 1.21 gigawatts, generated by plutonium, before it can transport someone through time at the speed of 88 miles per hour. Doc Brown’s plan to travel through time is frustrated, however, and the one who accidentally finds himself in the year 1955, is Doc’s friend Marty. In the year 1955 there is no plutonium. Hence, the only way Marty can be launched back to 1985 is through a bolt of lightning. Doc Brown is so excited when this possibility is confirmed that he moves towards the camera, points to it, looks at the camera and exclaims, “Next Saturday night we’re sending you back to the future!”

The cases in which a character looks at the camera in a fiction film are quite exceptional because the effect is that the character is actually addressing the viewers. The illusion of the filmic world thus far created is momentarily disturbed and the viewer is thrown out of his or her hitherto experience of the screening. In relation to the experience of temporality, what occurs is the collapse of the physical time of the screening onto the physical time of the viewing. The look into the camera therefore has the effect of a stress which can be described as the filmic expression of a “real” present. In thrillers, particularly those by Hitchcock, the character’s look into the camera can be understood in terms of its psychological value. It increases tension and discomfort, and foregrounds the sense that a character is at a “dead end,” he or she could be “facing” the danger that is either coming from within, or threatening from the outside. The fact that there may be no one out there to return the look does not make it any less subjective. On the contrary, this unidentified subjectivity can yield important conclusions regarding the characters’ psychological make-up.

A look directed to the camera has been used in cinéma vérité or documentaries as a means to sharpen the viewer’s sense of “everyday reality” and to underscore the moment of “truth,” so to speak. This is particularly noticeable in the films of Jean Luc Godard: the actors often address the camera creating a distanciation effect in the Brechtian sense. What is more, the “apparatus” itself is revealed and directed at the viewers, as in Mépris, for example. The specific feature, which accompanies the engagement of the second person, is a direct intervention of the text into the time of the viewer. By directly addressing the viewer, the text assumes not so much the role of the speaker, but instead it assumes the role of the
performer. In Ernst van Alphen’s terms, it is an instance where the text is looking for an encounter with the viewer (Alphen van, 1997). It is for this reason, I would suggest, that second person discourse can also be seen as a performative event. In that respect, I would add, rather then showing us the image of the second person, second person discourse puts the “phatic” dimension of the text into play, where the viewer’s experience becomes the defining part of the film.xviii

In that particular moment, the second person discourse engages the viewer in the production of the present. It engages him or her in the process of exchanging the present with the future and the past. By addressing the camera Doc Brown is directly addressing the viewer so that the viewer momentarily becomes involved in the discourse. The viewer’s present is Doc Brown’s future; if Marty is to go back to the future he needs to return to the viewer’s very present. In that particular instance Doc Brown and the viewer are both “first” and “second persons”; Doc’s solicitation of the “second persons” works to constitute Doc’s “I,” but since it is also the solicitation of the “second person’s” present, only the return of the look, thus the exchange of positions can place Doc in the past. Clearly, in Back to the Future the second person discourse is not employed to show the image of “you” but to engage both “first” and “second person” in the process of time travel.

The reason I am going into such lengths to describe a single moment in a new Hollywood blockbuster film is two-fold. Firstly, I want to dispel the notion that a second person needs to have its own image in order for Benveniste’s concepts to work. Second, I want to emphasize this cinema’s overall tendency to initiate a play between narrative and epistemology, albeit for regressive purposes. The second person discourse has epistemological implications particularly through its insistence on the historical present. The “phatic calling” of the text to communicate with us, is thus appropriated as a means to take us for a ride through time. The off-screen space Doc is addressing is inhabited by me. For that one brief moment, I experience myself as the object of Doc’s focalization, and accordingly I experience “my time” as constitutive of the structure of time travel. The main issue here is the narrative modality of the discourse not its linguistic nature; my “I” becomes operative only
through the relation with a “you.” Hence, the deixis staged through Doc’s look into the camera requires my presence, but, even more importantly, for the time travel to work the deixis requires my present.

An additional element in this scene indicates that subjectivity is not something given that can be shown in an image but that it is a product of relations between the past and the future. Doc Brown not only looks at the viewer but he also points his index finger in the same direction. His index finger is an indexical sign; it suggests the indexical relationship between the pointer and that which is pointed to, the inside and the outside of the frame. The fact that Doc Brown points forward but actually says “back to...” underscores once more the paradox of traveling through time. Time travel evidently cannot be conceived on the basis of the opposition presence/absence or inside/outside. Instead, it is the systematic play of differences, of traces of differences, of the spacing by which elements relate to one another. This suspension between the inside and the outside, the past and the future, helps us grasp the notion that subjectivity cannot be illustrated as a unified investment.

**Remembering the Future**

Unlike his father who is stuck in space and time, and does not have the ability to assert himself either as a subject of action or a subject of vision, Marty can see both prospectively and retrospectively. When he arrives in the past, his vision is informed by the future, when he returns to the new improved future he has helped to create, his vision is informed by the old state of things. In scene 3 time is again inscribed as a focalizing agent. In contrast to scene 2, where the family relations are framed through the subjective vision of the past, here, it is the present framing the past as a present, that is, it is an instance of “remembering the future.”

Upon his arrival to the year 1955 Marty goes to the local diner. He accidentally witnesses an interaction between Biff and George as teenagers. He becomes aware that he is seated next to his future father when he recognizes the Biff-George relationship from the present. Marty is framed next to George when Biff shouts off-screen, “Hey, McFly!” (shot 1). Both Marty and George turn their heads synchronously to the left, towards Biff. Biff is looking left-right addressing George (shot 2). In shot 3, which has the function
of a reverse shot, in place of a shot of George, a shot of Marty follows. He is looking left-right, hence, he is not looking at Biff, instead he is sharing Biff’s point of vision. He seems to belong to a space outside the mise-en-scène; he is focalized from a very subjective position, yet this vision cannot be attributed to any of the characters. In shot 5 the camera even moves closer to Marty in an extreme close-up. Again no one in the diner is looking at him. It is therefore possible to conclude that the memory of the relationship between George and Biff from the future, triggered this camera movement. The situation in shot 6, the shot Marty is observing, is elaborated as a *déjà vu* - Biff is abusing George, George is afraid to fight back. The seemingly unmotivated camera movement provides a time-frame for Marty’s vision. It underscores both the difference and the sameness of what was/is happening in the past/present and that which is/was happening in the present/past. This time-frame secures a privileged position for Marty. As the one who is coming from the future, he has the power to redeem the past as both fabula and history.\(^{xx}\) This power to see both in prospect and in retrospect, as I have already noted, conditions Marty’s capacity to affect the actions and events.

**Taking the Place of the Father**

In sample scene 4, Marty follows George to a street in the suburban area where he discovers that George is sitting on a tree branch looking through binoculars. He realizes that George is looking at the figure of a semi-nude woman behind a window on the opposite side of the street. George’s vision (shot 3) is mediated by Marty; that is, George’s looking is embedded into Marty’s vision. In shot 5 Marty is looking and in shot 6 we see the product of his internal focalization, a figure of a woman in her underwear. Even though Marty refers to George as a Peeping Tom, he is the one who produces a subjective vision of the female body. George, framed together with the object of his vision, is only the implied Peeping Tom.

Marty is elaborated as a focalizing agent with a higher authority, but more importantly, here, the father’s vision is embedded into the vision of the son. This capacity to see in place of the father, will soon be complemented with the capacity to act in place of the father. If we recall the father’s incapacity to function as the agent of vision or the agent of action in scenes 1 and 2, we can
grasp the potentially productive effect of Marty's capacity to act and see in father's place. At one moment George slips from the branch and lands in the middle of the street. To prevent George from getting hit by a car, Marty pushes him away from the street (shot 13). As a consequence of this heroic action, Marty interferes with the course of events. He gets hit by the car and ends up lying unconscious on the street. It just happens that the accident occurs in front of Lorraine's house and that it was Lorraine's father driving the car. Marty will be brought into the house and Lorraine, Marty's future mother will fall in love with him instead of with his future father George.

This apparently successful execution of the Oedipal trajectory is the convenient starting point for the operation of rescuing history, because it will need to be undone. George should have been the victim of the accident that occurred in front of Lorraine's house, for it was an ideal chance for him to provoke Lorraine's interest in him. Marty's interfering with the course of events prevents his parents from falling in love and brings his own existence and that of his siblings into danger. It is extremely difficult for Marty to repair this damage because George's self-esteem is so low that he does not dare act on his interest in Lorraine. Marty is so desperate that he decides to play a trick on George. Having found out that George is obsessed with science fiction, Marty dresses up as a visitor from another planet and orders George to ask Lorraine to the dance. Interestingly enough, Marty appears as the notorious Darth Vader, a cult father figure of the new Hollywood cinema. This intertextual reference, coming from George's future, points to the mobility of diegetic roles and underscores Marty's function as both the son and the father. Just as importantly, it places Marty on the side of the Father - the authority who rules the symbolic universe.

Focalizing the Story, Revising the Fabula
Marty's multiple vision conditions his simultaneous presence in the future and the past, but also in the story and the fabula. Scene 5 takes place the morning after Darth Vader's visit. George is finally ready to take action and approach Lorraine. Marty accompanies George to the diner where all the high school kids hang out; he gives George a few last tips and remains in the background. George manages to approach the table where Lorraine is seated and com-
mences his speech. Everything is going fine at first but then the speech is brutally interrupted, twice. On the level of the fabula he is interrupted by Biff and on the level of the story he is interrupted by Marty. In shot 8, he is interrupted by Marty’s vision, and in shot 13, he is interrupted by Biff’s action.

Although it is in Marty’s interest that George and Lorraine fall in love, in this scene he is elaborated as both the rescuer and the aggressor. The shot of Marty at the bar (shot 8) interpolated into George’s speech has a disturbing effect and for the first time interrupts George’s action. In the sequence of shots 4-7 a shot/reverse shot is established between George and Lorraine. Just as George has succeeded in getting her attention (shot 7), the shot of Marty (which comes in place of the shot of George), interrupts the flow of this event. George even stumbles in his speech. He tells Lorraine she is his density, instead of destiny.

Nevertheless, when Biff definitely obstructs George’s attempt to ask Lorraine to the dance and humiliates him, Marty stands up to Biff. On the one hand, functioning as the aggressor, Marty’s role in George’s life is similar to the role Biff plays. On the other hand, however, by being able to act like Biff, Marty is also able to confront Biff and thereby fulfill the role that George is unable to perform. In the previous scene, Marty overpowers George’s focalization of Lorraine, but he saves him from being hit by a car. Here, in a similar manner, Marty’s multiple function occurs simultaneously on different levels: on the level of the story he is the aggressor, while on the level of the fabula he is the rescuer. As in the previous scene, Marty’s rescue causes more damage. Lorraine’s infatuation with Marty is confirmed, but in the long run, as sample scene 6 shows, the conflation of Marty and Biff enables George finally to confront Biff, and as if by mistake, change history - Marty’s capacity to stand in for the other characters as a subject of vision and a subject of action, makes this time travel possible.
The Exchangeability of Diegetic Agents

On the basis of the information gathered so far we can conclude that Marty is represented as a character who comes into being, so to speak, on the account of his capacity to exchange places with George and Biff. This is radicalized in scene 6 where Marty stages an act that is supposed to offer George the possibility of proving that he is a man who can stand up for himself and the woman he loves. The purpose of the scheme is to undo the mother’s infatuation with the son, and thus in the first place, it involves an exchange of the paternal and the filial position. The act involves the exchange of characters: Marty will take Lorraine to “The Enchantment Under the Sea Dance” but he will first talk her into “parking” with him. When he starts getting “fresh” George will arrive on the scene, punch Marty in the stomach and rescue Lorraine.

The Oedipal drama which Marty accidentally triggered in scene 4 is endangering his existence. To undo the damage he has to create the conditions for the mother to fall in love with the father. The mother’s infatuation with the son comes to symbolize the sense of a troubled history, and therefore, setting history in order presupposes that the two major protagonists of the symbolic order, the father and the son, exchange places. In Marty’s scheme, however, George is required to play a courageous man of action instead of a wimp who gets the girl because the girl’s father hit him with a car. The son is the one, then, who decides which role the father is going to play in the operation of rescuing history. Interestingly, the role Marty assigns to himself corresponds to the role Biff plays in George’s life. As the one who could potentially molest a girl, Marty is at the same time assuming Biff’s role in history.

As soon as the rescue operation starts to unfold the problems arise. First of all his mother is behaving in a way totally opposite to the role Marty had in mind for her. Lorraine does not at all mind “parking” with him, she smokes and drinks, and what is
More, she seems ready to be seduced. Just as he is trying to recover from the shock, the car door opens and instead of being confronted with George, Marty is suddenly faced with the wrong character - Biff. Biff pulls him out of the car and takes his place (scene 6A, shots 8-14). As a consequence of this intervention from the "outside," resulting in the exchange of places between Marty and Biff - when he arrives to the parking lot a few moments later ready to perform his "hero" act, instead of a fictional bully George finds the worst nightmare of his life - Biff. The process whereby Marty's scenario is being played out is gradually turning into a different scenario. It is an instance, I would suggest, where the story, or the process of telling is reconstructing the fabula.

Even though Marty and Biff have exchanged places, George's role remains the same - he has to rescue Lorraine. The question is whether he can go through with it in a situation where the story and the fabula, or rather fiction and reality have collapsed onto each other, and where he has to execute not only his role in the story but also his role in history. In scene 6B, shot 2 George puts on an act, raises his finger threateningly and orders that Lorraine be left alone. When he discovers that Biff is in the car with Lorraine and that she is really crying for help, he hesitates and then repeats the gesture and the rehearsed line. This has unwanted consequences: when he attempts to punch Biff in the stomach Biff grabs his arm and starts twisting it. To get out of this situation George needs to be more than the puppet hero he was going to play in Marty's narrative. His ultimate victory over Biff is elaborated as a call of masculinity: in the series of shots 11 to 17 (scene 6C), before he strikes Biff, there are three interpolated shots of George's hand in the process of clenching (12, 14 and 16). The hand is dismembered, and it appears that George is suddenly becoming aware that this unfamiliar object loaded with an extreme power is at his disposal. Firm and erect, it enables him
to produce a historical knock-out. Marty's journey into the past causes a severe disorder because by mistake he takes his father's place. Nevertheless, by creating the conditions to put the father back into place, Marty not only secures his own existence but succeeds in procreating a new and improved father. The effect exchanges places with the cause - the son “engenders” the father.

We can additionally notice that the deferral of subjectivity staged in the story, an example of which is the second person discourse, can also be observed on the level of the fabula. The exchangeability of “I” and “you” mirrors the structure of time travel generated through the exchange of diegetic agents. The “first” and “second person” are neither different persons nor one and the same person, just as Marty is neither the son nor the father, and the present is neither the future nor the past. Whether we are dealing with an exchange of “I” and “you,” Marty and George, the past and the future, each of the terms appear as the difference of the other, or to put it in Derrida’s terms, “as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same.” It is a process where Marty is going back in time to the origin, yet he is both the origin and the trace. As a character Marty is “deferred”: he is never functioning as Marty because he is at the same time functioning as George, as Biff, or as we shall see below, as his own self split in time.

**Doubling the Character-Image**

If Marty is deferred and suspended between the past and the present, how can he return to where he came from? Evidently, time travel confronts us with a paradox, especially in its backward sense. If one can exist in a time before one was born, then what was the nature of that existence? As we learn from the film *Back to the Future*, Marty’s “repairing” the events from the past endangers his own existence. But if he were to be deleted from existence then he could not have traveled into the past in the first place to do the reparation.
The logical problem is the subject of a study by Umberto Eco (1990).

In his study on possible worlds in the humanities, arts and sciences, Eco distinguishes this type of world as an “impossible possible world.” According to Eco, an impossible possible world does not merely mention something inconceivable, it rather builds up the conditions of its own conceivability. Eco explains that when we are dealing with language, the temporal or spatial linearity of signifiers makes the recognition of inconsistency more difficult. Thus the representation of impossible possible worlds can be taken superficially as conceivable for pages and pages before one realizes the contradiction they display:

It is impossible to accept a situation where the same character splits into four different Toms. But in the course of the narrative discourse the contradiction disappears because of a simple linguistic trick: the Tom who says “I” is always the one with a higher exponent. (Eco 1990:79)

As I have argued, this is not due to the linguistic nature of discourse but to its narrative modality. Hence, it also holds for a cinematic narrative. Eco mentions *Back to the Future* as an example of a filmic impossible possible world. He asserts that what is at stake in the film is that we see the situation from the point of view of the “higher” Tom. The scene Eco is referring to takes place at the location of Marty’s departure to the past, and his arrival back to the future (scene 7). In the film’s opening, Doc Brown is shot by a group of revengeful terrorists and thereby, his plan to travel through time is forever frustrated. To save his own life Marty jumps into the time machine and accidentally escapes to the past. Once he is in the year 1955 Marty repeatedly tries to inform Doc Brown about this unfortunate future event, but Doc refuses to listen. Marty has only one option left; to undo his friend’s
death, he must return to the future a few minutes before the terrorists arrive on the scene and finally warn Doc.

Scene 7 opens as Marty is rushing towards the "past event" only to find out that he has arrived too late. There is nothing he can do except observe the replay of the past where Doc Brown is shot while he, that is, his past self, jumps in the De Lorean time machine and speeds off into the past. It is a scene where two temporal continuums overlap, so to speak, yet we are not confused because we are offered the point of vision of Marty 1 who has just arrived into the future, and we can easily discern him from Marty 2 who is just about to leave to the past. The entire scene is elaborated as a spectacle for Marty 1; in shots 5, 7, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20 and 22 he is placed in the position of the observer. The scene is elaborated as Marty 1 sees it. In other words, the events are focalized through Marty 1, which implicitly alludes to his higher subject position. He is the implied "I" or the "first person," not the one who says "I" but the one who looks, the subject of vision. Through my analysis of both ET-The Extraterrestrial and Back to the Future, I have demonstrated that the linguistic category of person can be constituted in cinematic texts as well, as it is primarily narrative structure not language that produces it.

One of the semiotic activities of the subject position of Marty 1 is in the first place to differ from Marty 2. He differs in the sense that he is granted the point of vision upon which narration depends, from which I infer that Marty 1 has a higher status as a potential subject than Marty 2. Having witnessed Marty 2 literally take off into another temporal continuum, we can possibly draw the conclusion that the splitting of Marty's subjectivity is irreparable, and that he is therefore locked in a time loop, in the unbridgable difference between the past and the future.

In order to further problematize the role of focalization in time travel, it may be useful to briefly draw a comparison between Back to the Future and two other time travel films - Chris Marker's La Jetée and Terry Gilliam's Twelve Monkeys. Gilliam's film is a remake of La Jetée, yet it employs the essential strategies of Back to the Future, rather than those of its pre-text. Twelve Monkeys, just as Back to the Future narrativizes the logical paradox, or the time loop paradox, whereas in La Jetée, the time traveler ends up caught in the paradox, in between two temporal continuums, as it were. In
Marker's and in Gilliam's films, the time traveler is haunted by a childhood dream. In the former, the dream takes place on the jetty where the protagonist as a boy sees a man get shot. In the latter film, the dream is situated at the airport. As in La Jetée, the boy sees a man get shot and die. In both La Jetée and Twelve Monkeys the time traveler is the one who ends up being shot in the end, realizing that what the boy saw in the dream was the scene of his own death.

As in Back to the Future, in Twelve Monkeys the time loop paradox is also resolved through the structure of focalization. The boy, James Cole is the focalizer of his own death as an adult, and it is on account of his point of vision, that his death is “undone.” He will grow up and continue to be haunted by this scene he saw as a boy. He will travel in time, get shot, and this event will again be focalized by the boy. The loop will continue ad infinitum. In La Jetée, the scene of death is elaborated in entirely different way. As an experimental film, it is composed of still photographs, and the time traveling story is told by the off-screen narrator. In the first instance, the deferral of time is not achieved through the exchangeability of subject positions or characters, but through the negation of the first mobility of film, made possible by the alteration of frames. With regard to focalization, the protagonist who ultimately dies on the jetty is elaborated as the agent with the highest authority; he focalizes the scene where he has both returned to the beginning and arrived at the end. This opens up a whole new dimension. Regarding this time travel in retrospect, the protagonist can be understood as a specter, a ghost who comes to visit the scene of his death.

Whether the time traveler visits the scene of his death, or the scene of his procreation, the telling of this traveling through time is dependent on the time-frame of the narratorial authority. This time-frame points both backward and forward. A character such as Marty McFly whose character-image is doubled and even tripled in the course of the film, personifies this narratorial authority. This is particularly evident in the following scene.

Between the Prospective and Retrospective Vision

In scene 2 Marty is able to frame the past/present according to the future, but it is in the film's closing that he definitely emerges as the agent with the highest authority. Once he has arrived back in
the future, Marty is shocked by all the changes that took place in his family. He wakes up and finds that everything is different. The house is redecorated, his brother has a good job, his sister has several boyfriends, and finally, his parents seem happy and satisfied with their lives. Back in the future, Biff is not George’s boss anymore, rather he waxes George’s two cars. Marty is especially surprised by all the new discourses (in the sense of Foucault). His parents are talking about their tennis game, Linda wants to know which one of her boyfriends called her, and most surprising of all, the mother approves of Marty’s trip to the lake with his girlfriend Jennifer. Everything and everyone is so different in the McFly family; only Marty has remained the same.

But by way of the hierarchy of the points of vision and the camera movement, we can also notice that the “new” state of things echoes the old power relations. Via Marty, in scene 3, we were able to recognize the signs from the future. Here, Marty’s vision helps us to note that the power relations have not actually changed. In the interaction George/Marty versus Biff (shots 29–34) the camera angle suggests that George and Marty have a considerable advantage over Biff. Nevertheless, Marty and George need to focalize together in order to see Biff, (shots 30, 32, 34), whereas Biff can act alone (shots 29, 31, 33). What is more, Marty and George are fixed to their position by the door, while Biff is moving freely. When George moves away from the door in shot 34, Marty is still looking in the same direction but without George he cannot produce a vision of Biff. And indeed, Biff’s vitality is confirmed in the shots that follow (shots 37–39). First he barges into the house carrying the copies of George’s new book. Then he chooses where he will place the box and thereby arranges the entire mise-en-scène. And finally, by ostentatiously dangling with the keys of Marty’s dream-car, Biff definitively confirms his status as the “key figure” in the McFly family.

This double-faced closure is mirrored in the temporal tension that Marty’s presence in the scene evokes. He is back in the future, suspended between the familiarity of the past and the unfamiliarity of the future. His sense of displacement is marked in the unmotivated camera movements. When Marty is talking to Lorraine in the shot/reverse shot set up (shots 20-24), we can notice that in the shots of Marty (shots 20, 22, 24) the camera is constantly mov-
ing closer on Marty, stressing the presence of an unidentified agency. This subjective vision marks Marty’s disbelief and astonishment, but it also indicates that the rescuing of history is far from completed. We can interpret this closure in terms of the sequel, Back to the Future 2, and 3, where setting the future history into order, again requires a confrontation with Biff. More importantly, however, this unidentified subjective vision that underscores Marty’s suspension between the past and the future reminds us that time travel is always about the “now” of history, and that our pasts and futures are always determined by our present.

footnotes

1 For an indepth exploration of the connection between narrative and the models of signification operative in our society see Christine van Boheemen’s The Novel as Family Romance: Language, Gender, and Authority from Fielding to Joyce.

2 I am referring to the Dutch edition of Bal’s Narratology, titled De theorie van vertellen en verhalen. In Dutch, the third narrative layer, the fabula is referred to as geschiedenis.

3 To index, trace, symptom, we could add here parergon, as in Derrida’s The Truth in Painting, or pharmakon as in Dissemination; thus according to the necessity of the context, we could add to the chain in which différance lends itself to a certain number of nonsynonymous substitutions. Derrida explains that each substitution is also a displacement; he points out that the word “trace” refers to a certain number of contemporary discourses and relates the concept of trace to what is at the center of the latest work of E. Lévinas and his critique of ontology (“The Trace of the Other”), and he refers also to Nietzschean and Freudian discourse (Derrida: 1982). In this study I will especially focus on the notion of trace as related to Bal’s semiotic of narrative, and elaborated in her discussion of subjectivity in language in On Meaning Making: Essays in Semiotics.

4 It is necessary to break away from the logocentrism of metaphysics and cast aside the view that there is effective presence of an origin in a historical development. The philosophical position which presupposes a critique of the authority of presence will determine the way we theorize the sign, and just as importantly, the way we relate to the sign. The most influential concept of the sign was elaborated by Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure defines language as a system of signs and
the central question for him is the identity and the function of the sign. He argues that signs are arbitrary and conventional and that each is defined not by essential properties but by differences that distinguish it from other signs. A language is thus conceived as a system of differences. Derrida sees Saussure's concept as representative of the Western tradition of thinking about language, and therefore, his critique of Saussure's concept of the sign is at the same time a critique of Saussure's philosophical position which treats speech as superior to writing. Derrida explains that the signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself.

V Important for this discussion is the text "Différance" from *Margins of Philosophy* and "Freud and the Scene of Writing" in *Writing and Difference*.

VI Bal contends that narrative is the exemplary type of discourse where *différance* is generally thematized - the features which allow conceptual reversals and double teleology. "Visual Storytelling: Fathers, Sons and the Problem of Myth," in *Reading Rembrandt, Beyond the Word Image Opposition*.

VII I will be referring to sections from Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, and *Margins of Philosophy* especially the section "Différance." I will treat the notion of *différance*, as an economic concept designating the production of differing/deferring. Although Derrida at the same time states that *différance* is neither a word nor a concept, and points to the danger of employing terms such as production, constitution and history, in *Margins of Philosophy* he also states that these concepts can be employed for their strategic convenience and in order to undertake their deconstruction at the currently most decisive points.

VIII This slippery narrativizing mode of signification binds trace to index and symptom. A trace just like an index is motivated by contiguity, one form of which is continuity; there is a juxtaposition in time or space or causality between the sign and the object for which it stands. Peirce defines the index as "a sign which stands for its object in consequence of having a real connection with it. A pointing finger is its type. Of this sort are all natural signs and physical symptoms" (1993: 379). Peirce places emphasis on the existential bond between the indexical sign and its object. Because the indexical sign is understood to be connected to the real object, (foot print, signature, a bullet hole), it is capable of making that object conceptually present.

Freud explains that a symptom actually denotes the presence of some pathological process, "A symptom is a sign of, an instinctual satisfaction which has remained in abeyance; it is a consequence of the process of repression." In his text "La Différence," Derrida relates his concept of the sign to Freud's project.
In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Zizek discusses the symptom in terms of its movement “back to the future.” In that respect he states that “symptoms are meaningless traces, their meaning is not discovered, excavated from the hidden depth of the past, but constructed retroactively - the analysis produces the truth; that is, the signifying frame which gives the symptoms their symbolic place and meaning” (56).

"Beaming down" was established as a standard device already in the *Star Trek* television series. It is also used in the new Hollywood cinema; one example is James Cameron’s *Terminator and Terminator 2, The Judgment Day.* G.H.Wells’s, *The Time Machine* appeared as a film only once, as George Pal’s *The Time Machine,* (1960). Time travel as a motif did not appear in many films, it is much more present in SF novels; Robert Heinlein’s *All You Zombies* or David Gerrold’s *The Man Who Folded Himself* are just few examples of narrativizing the paradox of time travel.

In *Cinefex* 24, the special effects experts give an extensive report about the complex task of making time travel work. It is interesting to compare J. G. Frazer’s discussion on sympathetic magic, from his study on magic and religion *The Golden Bough,* with the new Hollywood scientists’ engagement in the production of the “illusion” of time travel. Frazer discerns two basic principles of magic, the Law of Similarity and the Law of Contagion. On the basis of the Law of Similarity “the magician infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it: from the second he infers that whatever he does to a material object will affect equally the person with whom the object was once in contact, whether it formed part of his body or not” (14). He calls the former, Homeopathic or Imitative Magic and the latter, Contagious Magic. Frazer further adds that both branches of magic may be categorized under the term Sympathetic Magic “since both assume that things act on each other at a distance through a secret sympathy, the impulse being transmitted from one to other by means of what we may conceive as a kind of invisible ether, not unlike that which is postulated by modern science for a precisely similar purpose, namely, to explain how things can physically affect each other through a space which appears to be empty” (16). In the case of new Hollywood cinema, the scientific collapses onto the magical, as it were, for the scientists are engaged in enhancing the spectatorial belief (in the sense of Metz), in time travel. Metz’s notion developed from Baudry’s apparatus theory, that films come into being through the fictive work of their spectators is radicalized through the efforts of wizards working for Industrial Light and Magic.

The absurdity of Doc’s action is comparable to the situations characteristic of slapstick films where Harold Lloyd is holding on to a hand of a clock mounted on a skyscraper. The third hand of the clock reminds us at the same time of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis.*

See for example Jean-François Lyotard’s discussions “The Pragmatics of Narrative Knowledge,” as well as “The Pragmatics of Scientific Knowledge” in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.*

Bal examines three works: Lorraine Code’s *What Can She Know,* Johannes Fabian’s *Power and Performance,* and Hubert Damisch’s, *L’Origine de la perspective.* Bal explains that the specificity of these works lies in their concern with investing the object of knowledge with subjectivity by placing the sub-
ject in the position of the object.

xiv In his personal account of the discovery of the structure of DNA, *The Double Helix*, James D. Watson describes the connection between helical staircases he saw in Oxford and the helical symmetry of biological structures (Watson, 1968).

xv In the section “Glumac, mizanscena i kompozicija” (“The Actor, Mise-en-Scène and Composition”) of his *Pojam i struktura filmskog vremena*, (The Notion and Structure of Filmic Time, 1976, not translated), Ante Peterlic discusses the relationship of filmic characters in relation to time on film. He elaborates the ways in which a look at the camera creates the effect of a “real” present.

xvi An outstanding example is the opening of *Vertigo* where Kim Novak stares directly at the camera. For a close textual analysis of the structures of Hitchcock’s look see Bellour’s “The Birds: An Analysis of a Sequence.” The look addressed to the camera exceeds the diegetic world of the film and in that respect it also transcends its symbolic reality. For an analysis of the ways the Lacanian Real becomes embodied in Hitchcock’s films, see Zizek’s *Looking Awry* and (ed.) *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan... But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock*.

xvii In Godard’s *Une Femme est une femme*, for example, the process of telling is repeatedly interrupted with the tableaux which emphasize the theatrical, Brechtian influence. The actors are addressing, dancing or singing to the camera. The viewers are thereby urged to maintain a position both inside and outside the fictional world.

xviii The point of departure for van Alphen’s concept of phatic art is the emphasis on language’s capacity to constitute subjectivity and in that respect he brings forward the concepts of Benveniste. He foregrounds the use of deixis: the subject positions such as “I” and “you” is cosubstantial with the situation of language use. He particularly underscores the fact that deixis requires presence: “it only signifies within the historical present and in relation to others.” Van Alphen analyzes Christian Boltanski’s work and argues that these works should be seen as performative events in which the relationship with the viewer in the historical present is actively and insistently pursued.

xix The concept of the indexical sign, one of which is a pointer, pertains to Charles Sanders Peirce’s distinction between three types of signs - index, icon, symbol. For a discussion on Peircean semiotics see Bal, *On Meaning Making*.

xx Elsaesser suggests that Marty’s time travel has historical reasons which are specifically American and deeply implicated in questions of race and otherness. In relation to this particular scene, where Marty recognizes the future mayor of Hill Valley in the African American soda jerk, Elsaesser writes: “The trauma at the heart of the film, it would seem, is not so much - or not only - the inadequacy of this particular specimen of fatherhood which is George McFly, but the very idea of paternity and masculinity in relation to white American middle-class culture, which [. . .] must pass via the trauma of race if it is to find a stable identity inside the terms of a symbolic order [. . .] (6). In his view, this passage into the symbolic order via the traumas of race announced in *Back to the Future* is played out in another film with a time
travel structure - *Pulp Fiction*. This point was also raised by Sharon Willis in “Borrowed ‘Style’: Quentin Tarantino’s Figures of Masculinity” in her *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Film*. Willis argues that in *Pulp Fiction* racial difference operates in such a way as to interrupt white paternal authority by introducing an imaginary black male, either alternate father or rival brother.

There is an additional reference to the Star Trek series in the gesture the "Vulcans" use as a greeting.

See Gaudreault’s discussion in “The Cinema of the Lumière Brothers,” In *Early Cinema, Space Frame Narrative*. See also Constance Penley’s discussion on *La Jetée* in “Time Travel, Primal Scene and the Critical Dystopia,” in *Close Encounters, Film, Feminism and Science Fiction*. Penley analyzes different instances of time travel within the psychoanalytic framework, relating the journey to the past with the primal scene. She also discusses a prominent case of time traveling in the new Hollywood cinema - *Terminator 2 - Judgement Day*. In this film, to save the future, and to preserve his own future existence, the son sends an android to the past, to the time he was a boy. As the one who protects the boy and acts together with the mother, the robot comes to function as the father. For an analysis of *La Jetée* in relation to the haunting of time, see Chapter 3 of Paul Coates’s *Film at the Intersection of High and Mass Culture*, “Limits of Our Language, Limits of Our World: Beyond the Ideology of SF.”