

**TURIM, Maureen. *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History*.
New York : Routledge, 1989, 278 p.**

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TURIM, Maureen. *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History*. New York: Routledge, 1989, 278 p.

This is a book of great seriousness and ambition. Anyone concerned with this figure in film narration (whose central importance this book demonstrates beyond a doubt) will turn to this book for its consideration of flashbacks and (especially) its detailed case studies of how they operate in specific films across a range of periods and styles. Turim has not stayed within the well plowed ground work of a few canonical examples, but balances thorough analyses of well known classics (such as *Citizen Kane*, *Rashomon* or *Hiroshima mon amour*) with lesser known films (like *The Power and the Glory*, *No Regrets for Our Youth* and *La Glace à trois faces*) or even the nearly unknown (*Hoo Doo Ann*, *Joe Smith*, *American* or *Yawar Mallku*). Besides digging deeply into archive vaults (or the cables channels), Turim brings together a diverse range of films, as the titles above suggest, treating in the same book Hollywood melodrama and avant-garde experiments. Clearly this is an original contribution to an area that has been neglected.

Further, within the vast extent of history and practice that this book takes as its territory, Turim places both individual films and broader groups of style into cultural and ideological complexes. The Hollywood flashback film of the 40s, for instance, is probed in relation to American wartime ideology. Among the most useful of these discussions of the flashback's place within cultural discourse are Turim's use of psychological or philosophical theories of memory. She convincingly relates Munsterberg's rather pictorial theory to the flashbacks of early American silent film; Bergson's theory of the interpenetration of past and present in memory images to the highly subjective and temporally complex flashbacks of silent French Impressionist films; and more modern constructivist theories which stress the open and frequently fragmentary nature of memory images to the brief and ambiguous flashes of memory in films by Resnais or Bunuel.

But beyond these undoubted contributions, this is a book that allows us to reflect on the current state of film study as a

conjunction of theory, history and film analysis. I believe that Turim's book raises a number of questions of method which, if it doesn't always solve (or even necessarily frame in the way I will), nonetheless stand as issues film study must deal with at this juncture. Like a number of recent books (Mary Ann Doane's *The Desire to Desire* or Dana Polan's *Power and Paranoia* — both of which deal with the 40s in the U.S. — a topic of central chapters of Turim's book as well), *Flashbacks in Film* interweaves a form of film analysis derived primarily from psychoanalytical theory with a consideration of history both diachronically (in its temporal unfoldings) and synchronically (in its simultaneous relations to other forms of cultural discourse). In this encounter with history it both acknowledges a mode of discourse which theory had earlier ignored and challenges the way it has been done.

Turim is perhaps boldest in her challenge as she contrasts her work with what has become the monument of recent historical research: Bordwell, Thompson, Staiger's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*. Stating near the beginning that one of her strongest concerns has been "to integrate theory and history" (20), Turim nonetheless makes clear that her method is not "primarily empirical or quantitative" (26-27). This means that although Turim makes some general statements (that are clearly based on a wide viewing of flashback films) about the ebb and flow of the popularity flashback techniques (frequent in the teens, 20s and 40s, relatively infrequent in the 30s and 50s, returning in the 60s), this book does not offer statistical accounts of the occurrence of flashbacks in periods, nations or genres. *Flashbacks in Film* does not offer a history of the flashback in this sense. Indeed one hardly sees how such a project could be completed in a thoroughly empirical and quantitative manner, covering the extent of Turim's area ("all of film history" is given as the subject of the book in the blurb on the back) by one person, in one life time.

But beyond the limits of human energy, Turim's approach also differs from the quantitative for more theoretical reasons. The center of this book is the analysis of individual texts, rather than broader statements about the technique. Turim does offer a number of such statements, but she focuses instead on the differences one finds in uses of the technique. These differences

encompass contrasts between different periods (American silent melodrama vs French Impressionist films, say) or even (and here the sense of the individual text gains particular prominence) between different films within a common tradition (the difference between Resnais *Hiroshima mon amour* and his *Je t'aime, Je t'aime*, for instance, with the analysis of these two films being among the finest stretches of this book). In other words, Turim prizes the intricacies of the individual text over the generalities of a quantitative history. And in this approach she raises, I believe, an important question for film history, the place of individual textual processes within broader cultural discourses.

However, it is here that I find the book incomplete. Too often the historical dimension of the flashback remains elusive. Many of the individual textual analyses are of a depth and insight that can match the best textual readings that film study has produced over the last decade (although a number of others seem more perfunctory, lapsing into sometimes too detailed resumes of plots). If her historical project is to be taken seriously (and I must emphasize that my criticism comes only from taking this book very seriously), then I believe Turim needs to give more attention to the way such individualities are defined against a sense of common practice. If the individual text and its unique processes deserve more attention in film history, nonetheless its place in history needs to be carefully specified, an issue that Turim seems to take for granted.

The first question I have about the individual analyses that make up the bulk of this book is simply how Turim selected the films she treats. Turim emphasizes in differentiating herself from the *Classical Hollywood Cinema* approach that she makes no claim to being either exhaustive, or, (the method adopted by Bordwell, Thompson, Staiger) to taking a random sample. Now I believe there are approaches other than these, but I can't really follow Turim when she states, "[f]ilms have been taken as examples in a manner that makes qualified claims for what they illustrate, claims appropriate to my goal of film analysis as an historical and theoretical activity" (26-27). This seems to me to beg the question rather than probe it, and unfortunately is about the extent of Turim's explanation of why she chose the films she did. If the method isn't random, then the book lays itself open to a reader

wondering such things as: why she chose *The Killers* rather than *Crisscross* or *Detour* as examples of film noir flashbacks? Why no treatment of *Lola Montes*? Why not analyze Joe May's *Confession* (one of the richest flashback films of the 30s) or Porter's *Fireside Reminiscences* from 1907 (as an illustration of the ambiguities of early film flashbacks)? Such criticisms may seem silly in a book so chocked full of examples, but they are also inevitable when so much of this work rests on individual analyses and the basis for selection remains tacit. If another method for assembling a corpus for study is needed than the more empirical ones Turim rejects, it needs some discussion, if the undertaking is, in fact, a theoretical and historical activity and not simply an assembly of a number of different analyses grouped together because they all involve flashbacks.

Clearly Turim must feel the films she selects are representative and this is implied in much of her discussion. But with some brilliant exceptions (such as the use of theories of memories cited above, or the very coherent discussion of French Impressionist films) such grouping as one finds in Turim's work are assumed more than argued. At points the categories seem so expansive that it is hard to see them as little more than convenient ways to fit disparate analyses together. This is particularly true in her last chapter on modernism, in which the term becomes so all embracing that it includes *Hiroshima mon amour* and Costa Gravas's *Missing*. Admittedly *Missing* is placed in the subcategory of political modernist films, but does it (and *Breaker Morant*) really have much in common with Oshima's *Ceremonies*, also part of the category? Again, Turim's analysis of *Ceremonies* is outstanding, and her effort is clearly directed towards the individual film rather than the category (which in this case seems to be little more than a thematic grouping). But the point is precisely that the way individual texts belong to larger categories remains a lesser concern of the work (or one less satisfactorily worked out), and this raises the question of the role history plays in the book, other than as a chronological way of stringing together the various analyses. A historical treatment of individual films must involve an interplay between such texts and broader groups or categories, between norms that are historically established. The norms of flashback practice

remain unspecified in Turim's book, or it is unclear on what they are based.

This historical problem may have its roots in the some problems with book's theoretical approach. Turim gives a very workable definition of flashbacks and, as I have indicated, supplies intricate tracings of their actualization in various films. But she never works out a clear typology of flashbacks, classing of their varieties in the manner, say, of Edward Branigan's exemplary book on the point of view shot. Such a typology might allow a clearer definition of different periods in the use of the flashback and clarify some of Turim's most interesting general discoveries. Turim criticises Gerard Genette, who provides her main reference for a discussion of the figures of temporal inversion, for risking remaining on a level of typology. "Genette's major contribution in *Discours du récit* is not the typology itself, but his sensitive analysis of Proust's language in relationship to temporality, its rich comparison with a wide range of literature, and the theoretical speculations that occur over the course of the essay" (9). If on the one hand this returns to Turim's privileging of analysis of the individual text, it is hard to see how Genette's reading of *Remembrance of Things Past* could be so nuanced without the clarity supplied by his typology. When one is engaged in a historical treatment of a technique, a typology becomes even more crucial.

If Turim's approach does profit from her use of Genette, it might have gained even more specificity by recourse to Meir Sternberg's *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction*, a key work to which Turim does not refer. Following Sternberg, I believe that it is essential to approach the flashback from two different (but not necessarily antithetical) view points: that of exposition and that of subjectivity. The former would refer primarily to temporal ordering of story events and the effects that come from this ordering. The other deals primarily with memory and relates to character subjectivity. Turim is fully aware of both uses but never really separates them (undoubtedly because in most texts they are combined). In fact, she very much privileges the flashback's relation to memory and subjectivity, seeming to feel that to stress subjectivity in a film is a more authentic style.

If one paid more attention to the expositional function of the flashback its use as a memory might at points appear as a convention whose real import lies in narrative devices of suspense or limited communication. Turim's intriguing comparison of Hollywood melodramas and what she calls modernist works (whether of the 20s or post World War II cinema) frequently reveals that the Hollywood films take the issue of subjectivity less seriously than their modernist counterparts. In fact this often forms the basis of Turim's ideological critique of Hollywood film as somehow cheating by not fully exploring the subjectivity of the supposed source of the flashback. However, if exposition is an equal motivation for flashback form (and I believe it is the dominant one in most Hollywood films), then the issue is not so simple. This is not to say that cloaking exposition in memory may not be subjected to an ideological critique, but rather that Turim seems to implicitly privilege one motivation over the other. It is the implicit quality of this position that is more troubling than its substance.

It seems that more time is needed to lay out the terms of analysis than Turim is willing to grant. Flashbacks can function outside of character memory or use memory simply as a naturalizing device and a clear typology of the possible relations between exposition and memory could make comparisons between films easier and allow a clearer construction of historical periods of the use of the technique. Such typologies could also clarify Turim's occasionally blurry use of the term, such as her description of Norma Desmond's old films in *Sunset Boulevard* as flashbacks, or her relation of the fragmentary nature of the framing story in Munk's *The Passenger* (due to the director's death before the film was finished) to flashback stylistics. Such leaps as these, based on a range of temporal inversions, are tempting, and perhaps relevant, but become confusing without a clear typology of flashback practices to keep them differentiated. (Turim herself, seems to be infected by such blurry "flashbacks" when she incorrectly attributes Jacques Tourneur's direction of *Cat People* to his father Maurice, or George Cukor's direction of *Les Girls* to Herman Mankiewicz, dead four years before the film was made).

The values of this book, due to its strong analysis of many films,

its pioneering in-depth treatment of the flashback and its historical and theoretical ambitions, are certain. If I feel it does not live up to its promises, I believe this is partly due to the fact that its promises are too vast to keep. A thorough history of the flashback will probably have to be built up monograph by monograph, but such works will unfortunately lack the broad sweep of comparison that Turim provides. There is no question that this book leaves much to be said about flashbacks and that some basic ground work will have to be laid theoretically before scholars can proceed. But anyone doing future work in this area will have to begin with Turim's account. Anyone who reads it will learn from it, even if I feel we will at points profit from also noting those things it has neglected.

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