

## CHAPTER 2

### Time and Time Again

That picture had an involved story, with flashback within flashback, and I hated it. The interesting thing is that not long ago I saw the film, and it looked better than when I made it.

Vincent Sherman, director of *Backfire* (1950)<sup>1</sup>

A WOMAN IS SPEAKING. THE CAMERA CREEPS IN ON HER. TO musical accompaniment, the image dissolves. A new image emerges: a scene in the past. When that action in the past concludes, another dissolve carries us back to the present, again smoothed over by the character's dialogue in the present.

We're so used to flashbacks that we seldom notice how strictly codified they are. True, there are some variations. The character might be not speaking but thinking, so we're hearing her inner monologue. Maybe what we see just before the dissolve isn't the character but a significant object, or someone she's watching. The music might be tonally uncertain, or the transition may be eased by noise rather than a melody, or there may be no sound at all.

The cues might vary, but their patterning is constant. We understand that events moving forward in the present have been put on hold so we can skip back to the past. That is, we grasp the schematic structure underlying the flow of images and sounds.

The silent cinema had utilized plenty of flashbacks, and film-

makers then established the schema *emphasis on a character/optical device/past-tense action/optical transition/return to character*.<sup>2</sup> In the early days of sound filming, when musical underscoring was difficult, filmmakers could get away with some dialogue cues plus an optical transition. In *The Trial of Vivienne Ware* (1932) the dead man's butler asserts, "I was serving breakfast." Abruptly the camera whip pans, and we see the butler leaving the breakfast table.

By 1940, however, sound usually bleeds over the transition. The courtroom scenes in *A Woman's Face* (1941) ease into the past through the musical score or through tunes from the upcoming scene. Even so, when we come out of a flashback in the film, there might be no music. The silence can emphasize a last line of dialogue or a gesture, as when at the end of one flashback in *A Woman's Face* the woman on trial gently kisses the shirt cuff of the man she thinks she loves.

The flashback is a fundamental resource of 1940s cinematic storytelling. While often associated with film noir and the woman's melodrama, it's extensively used in musicals, romantic comedies, war pictures, and fantasy films. It's not too much to say that in this era filmmakers went flashback-goofy.

Studying the proliferation of flashbacks in this era can teach us a great deal about them as a resource of narrative at any time. Although the 1940s didn't invent the flashback, writers and directors of the period twisted it into fresh shapes, and those are being repurposed in our movies today.

#### STARTING AT THE FINISH

The trend began early in the decade. Between August 1940 and December 1941, every top studio tried out flashbacks in a major release: *The Great McGinty* (Paramount), *Kitty Foyle* (RKO), *I Wake Up Screaming* (Fox), *H. M. Pulham, Esq.* (MGM), and *Strawberry Blonde* (Warners). A May review of 1941 claimed that the "retrospective viewpoint" technique "had of late become commonplace."<sup>3</sup> In June Hedda Hopper counted half a dozen flashbacks in the season so far.<sup>4</sup> "Life travels so fast nowadays," complained a *Variety* columnist in the same month, probably referring to

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*Citizen Kane*, “that a motion picture starts at the finish and flashes back to the hero’s youth as an aftermath.”<sup>5</sup> By September 1941 a critic considered the technique overused.<sup>6</sup>

Flashbacks were rare in the 1930s, as historian Maureen Turim has pointed out.<sup>7</sup> Screenwriter Wells Root recalls that studios sometimes forbade writers to use them.<sup>8</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald seems to have considered the lengthy flashback in his screenplay *Infidelity* (1938) fairly risky.<sup>9</sup> From 1942 through 1950, however, the studios released at least twenty-five flashback features each year. As an absolute percentage of the industry’s annual output of five hundred to seven hundred features, the number is minuscule, but it nonetheless stands out in contrast to the previous decade. A single year, 1944, boasted more flashback features than did the whole of the 1930s.

More important, many flashback films were prominent ones. While flashbacks in the 1930s were chiefly relegated to B pictures, during the next decade they featured in A pictures as well. After *Wuthering Heights* (1939) won several Academy Awards, flashbacks became something of a mark of prestige. The Oscar contenders of 1941 included *Citizen Kane*, *Hold Back the Dawn*, and *How Green Was My Valley*; the last won Best Picture. Throughout the decade, the use of flashbacks did not prevent *Casablanca* (1943), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), *Spellbound* (1945), *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946), *Crossfire* (1947), and *The Snake Pit* (1948) from being nominated for Best Picture and occasionally winning. At the end of the decade, two unusually complex flashback films, *A Letter to Three Wives* (1949) and *All about Eve* (1950), scored top Academy honors.

Film-makers seemed besotted. After Warners producer Jerry Wald saw *Double Indemnity*, he announced, “From now on, every picture I make will be done in flashback.”<sup>10</sup> Remakes added flashbacks to the originals, notably *Waterloo Bridge* (1931, 1940) and *Roxie Hart* (1942, a remake of *Chicago*, 1928). *A Woman’s Face*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Mildred Pierce*, *The Big Clock*, *Madame Bovary*, *I Wake Up Screaming*, and other literary adaptations became flashback movies. Hemingway’s brief flashback in the “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” was expanded to consume most of the plot in *The Macomber Affair* (1947). Selznick

initially wanted three flashbacks in *Since You Went Away* (1944), even at the cost of swelling the film to four hours.<sup>11</sup>

Executives, writers, and directors began discussing the best ways to rearrange chronology. Planning *Leave Her to Heaven* (1946), Darryl Zanuck and Otto Preminger debated the best point of attack: What scene should frame the film’s return to the past?<sup>12</sup> Preston Sturges’s *The Great Moment* (1944) was designed with a complicated flashback layout. It was recut by the studio, but the final version yielded a different, no less unusual timeline. One producer, adapting a Cornell Woolrich novel, ordered up two screenplays, one that followed the book’s flashback structure and another that was more linear, because “the market is glutted with flashback pictures.”<sup>13</sup>

Naturally there was resistance. Leo McCarey, John Ford, Howard Hawks, and other filmmakers of the period largely avoided the device. When Selznick considered including scenes of the title character in *Rebecca* (1940), Hitchcock replied, “Flashback? Ugh!”<sup>14</sup> Adapting the novel *All the King’s Men*, writer-director Robert Rossen wanted to respect the novel’s flashback structure, but studio boss Harry Cohn forbade it, saying that ordinary viewers were confused by discontinuous storytelling.<sup>15</sup> The distaste was shared by some in the press. *Citizen Kane*’s flashbacks were called difficult and disruptive.<sup>16</sup> Although the *Los Angeles Times* critic admired *Double Indemnity*, he confessed, “I am sick of flashback narration and I can’t forgive it even here.”<sup>17</sup>

The most extensive critique came at the end of the decade, when the minor screenwriter Lewis Herman declared the device useful only for mystery plots. He argued that usually a flashback slowed momentum and lost suspense. Too often the plot played down the principal action in favor of present-time telling or recalling, highlighting minor characters reporting on the doings of major ones. Worse, flashbacks were too easy. The device, Herman concluded, was cheap. “The flashback is flashy.”<sup>18</sup>

The objectors were fighting a losing battle, though, because flashbacks were firmly entrenched in other narrative arts. In a way, 1940s Hollywood was simply catching up with traditions in adjacent media. Flashbacks in literature stretch back to ancient Egyptian narrative, the *Odyssey*, and biblical tales. Nineteenth-

century novels, both literary and popular, employed the device. Modernist fiction made time juggling commonplace, and the strategy filtered into mass literature as well. Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1935) framed a dance marathon ordeal with glimpses of the future, in which a judge sentences the protagonist to death. *That Flannigan Girl* (1939), a novel of Hollywood, alternates the shooting of a film in 1938 with chapters tracking the rise of the female star. Pulp stories had recourse to flashback construction too, as in Don Tracy's *Criss Cross* (1934) and *Round Trip* (1934).

The device wasn't so common on the stage, but as early as Edward Sheldon's *Romance* (1913), a long central flashback was framed by a prologue and an epilogue. Elmer Rice's *On Trial* (1914) attracted attention for its nonchronological dramatizing of witnesses' testimony.<sup>19</sup> As we've seen, the Stage Manager of the play *Our Town* (produced 1938) interrupts George and Emily's wedding to reenact their first confession of love. Flashback technique was important in radio drama, which frequently relied on a narrator reflecting on incidents in the past.<sup>20</sup> Arch Oboler's and Orson Welles's 1930s programs made daring use of flashbacks. By the time flashbacks took over moviemaking, audiences were well prepared to understand them.

In parallel with the fashion in Hollywood, several Broadway successes, from *I Remember Mama* (1944) and *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) to *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and *Edward, My Son* (1949), presented more or less stylized versions of characters' recollections, often with narrators accompanying the action. Some plays deployed such frequent shifts of time and locale that we might suspect the influence of cinema. An early version of *Glass Menagerie* took shape as a screenplay. Robert Penn Warren turned his 1946 novel *All the King's Men* into a play with over twenty scene changes.<sup>21</sup> *I Remember Mama* mimicked cinematic technique in its complicated staging, with two revolving turntables and over a hundred blackouts to allow rapid changes of scene.<sup>22</sup>

Mass-market storytelling continued to rely on flashbacks throughout the 1940s. Historian Neil Verma has found that over two hundred installments of the radio program *Suspense* began by launching a flashback.<sup>23</sup> Best-selling novels like Eric Knight's *This*

*Above All* (1941), Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943), Louis Bromfield's *Mrs. Parkington* (1943), Ben Ames Williams's *Leave Her to Heaven* (1944), J. B. Priestley's *Bright Day* (1946), and Mary Jane Ward's *The Snake Pit* (1946) showed that readers could take suitably signaled time shifts in their stride. Echoing *Citizen Kane*, *A Lion Is in the Streets* (1945), by Adria Locke Langley, begins with the funeral of a corrupt politician and then revisits the past when phrases in a radio tribute prod his widow's memory. Several of these books became films.

Alongside these middlebrow entertainments, there came thrillers and mystery novels with intricate time schemes. Jim Thompson's hard-boiled *Nothing More Than Murder* (1949) and Evelyn Piper's *The Motive* (1950) rely on flashback architecture. Chris Massie's *Green Circle* (1943) features symmetrically embedded flashbacks, and Joel Townsley Rogers's *The Red Right Hand* (1945) multiplies time shifts to the point of bewilderment.

In sum, flashbacks became common tools of storytelling throughout high-, low-, and middlebrow culture.<sup>24</sup> By 1951 a how-to article was advising novice writers that flashbacks big or small, scattered or in blocks, were a necessary component of fiction.<sup>25</sup> Most filmmakers today would agree. Yet when every young director, influenced by *Pulp Fiction* (1994) or *Memento* (1999) or *21 Grams* (2003), wants to chop linearity to bits, we may find the objections of Herman and others appealing. Flashbacks can seem a tiresome dodge.

During the 1940s, however, flashback plotting was more than a fashion. Its proliferation in all genres encouraged filmmakers to probe a range of creative possibilities. A flashback, it became evident, could yield a complex experience for the viewer. And because the device caught on so quickly, it set up a dynamic we'll see throughout this book: a challenge to compete within the bounds of classical storytelling. The task for the ambitious moviemaker is to come up with variants—switcheroos, again—that reveal fresh possibilities while still keeping the story clear enough to be understood by a mass audience. The expansion of flashback options neatly illustrates the variorum quality of 1940s Hollywood, as of popular cinema generally.

## A NEW VIRTUOSITY

In cinema's earliest years the term flashback sometimes referred to crosscutting: we "flash" from one line of action to another, then "flash back" to the first one. Still, from the late 1910s on, we find the term used in our modern sense as well.<sup>26</sup> For a time in the 1930s and 1940s, "retrospect" was a synonym, but it died out. By 1940 both the term and the practice were well established.

Silent cinema relied on flashbacks of all types, from brief reminders of earlier scenes to more complex constructions. Probably the most famous instance of the latter is Victor Sjöström's *Phantom Carriage* (1921), which included flashbacks within flashbacks. An American instance is *Beau Geste* (1927), which followed the original novel's shifts in time and point of view fairly closely. Filmmakers of the silent era laid out some standard templates that would survive for decades: the condemned man recalling events leading up to his crime (*Silence*, 1926); a soldier on the battlefield remembering peacetime (*Forever After*, 1926); a defendant in court musing on her past (*The Woman on Trial*, 1927); a drowning man recalling his life (*The Last Moment*, 1928).<sup>27</sup>

Although flashback construction was rare in 1930s features, we find some adventurous uses of the device. In *Beyond Victory* (1931), four soldiers under fire recall, in turn, how they came to be in the trenches. Bolder were the flashbacks to investigation testimony in *The Phantom of Crestwood* (1932). *Variety*'s reviewer found this film "the heaviest use of this device since the talking picture came to the fore."<sup>28</sup> *Two Seconds* (1932) showed an executed man's last moments as he remembers his life. Josef von Sternberg, who had used flashbacks powerfully in *The Last Command* (1928), jammed several into the first forty-five minutes of *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935). The 1931 remake of *Silence* has the prisoner recounting past events to a priest, rather than simply remembering them as the accused heroine of *Midnight Mary* (1933) does. The 1939 remake of *Beau Geste* respected the overlapping time frames and disparate viewpoints that were on display in the silent version.

Above all, there was *The Power and the Glory* (1933). Preston

Sturges's screenplay remains a remarkable piece of construction. The tycoon Thomas Garner has just died, and his friend and assistant Henry tries to justify Garner's life in a conversation with his wife. Henry's flashbacks jump back and forth along two parallel tracks: Tom's early days, as he rose to success with the help of his wife, Sally, and his last days, when he fell in love with Eve, a superficial young woman. The two phases of Garner's life are presented in chronological order, but episodes are sharply contrasted.<sup>29</sup> We see the young Tom falling in love with Sally, then the older Garner being smitten by Eve. Then Henry's voice-over commentary segues back to Tom and Sally's early married life. Likewise, the sequence showing the birth of the couple's son Tommy is followed by a segment devoted to Garner's and Eve's wedding, with Tommy as best man. The bold double-entry format of *The Power and the Glory* seems to have remained unique in its day.

The silent days and the 1930s, then, can't be considered primitive compared with what came later. As with most narrative techniques I'll be analyzing, nearly every striking case we can find in the 1940s has some precedents. But in the forties the flashback became far more common, and it invited filmmakers to experiment. A powerful and original treatment of the technique became a mark of prestige, even virtuosity, to a degree we don't find earlier.

The splashiest flashback film of its time owes a good deal to its forebears, but it also gained a unique stature. *Citizen Kane* was recognized as extraordinary, and its flamboyance of plot and style was both celebrated and deplored. From our standpoint, *Kane*'s flashback construction can be seen as one crystallization of possibilities already opened up in film, radio, theater, and other media.

*Kane*'s central premise—a dead man's life is recalled by others—had been rehearsed in *The Power and the Glory* and in *The Life of Vergie Winters*, which begins with a funeral procession and flashes back to the start of a backstreet love affair. *The Escape* (1939) centers on a doctor who tells a crime reporter about a recently deceased neighborhood gangster.

These earlier examples stick to a single teller, while *Kane* offers reports on its dead man from five characters. Here again,

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however, there are precedents. Multiple tellers recounting events in flashback were staples of Hollywood courtroom dramas.<sup>30</sup> *Kane* assembles views on a person rather than evidence of a crime, but playwrights had tried out what screenwriter Herman Mankiewicz had called the “prismatic” approach to an absent central character.<sup>31</sup> Sophie Treadwell’s play *Eye of the Beholder* (1919) portrays an offstage woman as seen through the eyes of her former husband, her lover, her lover’s mother, and her own mother. The play *These Few Ashes* (1928) presents the life of a (supposedly) dead roué through the recollections of three women. Welles’s radio programs had welcomed multiple storytellers as well, sometimes embedding them within one another’s tales, sometimes letting them banter with each other.<sup>32</sup>

Then there’s reporter Jerry Thompson’s investigation. *The Power and the Glory*’s exhumation of the tycoon’s past is presented simply as his old friend’s recounting; there’s no mystery to be solved. *Kane* innovated in the biographical film genre by creating curiosity based on the dying man’s last word, “Rosebud.” That device takes us to the terrain of the detective story. The dying message had become a mystery-tale convention from Conan Doyle onward.<sup>33</sup>

In blending conventions from several genres, *Kane*’s plot motivates the flashbacks on diverse grounds. The film’s detective-story side is anticipated by *The Phantom of Crestwood* and *Affairs of a Gentleman* (1934); in both, flashbacks represent the suspects’ answers under questioning. As something of a newsman movie, *Kane*, like *The Escape*, uses a reporter’s search for a story to justify its flashbacks.<sup>34</sup> And as something of a biopic, Welles’s film can trace the rise of a great man from the vantage point of old age, as in *Edison, the Man* (1940).

Significantly, *Kane*’s flashback organization skips around in the past. Episodes of *Kane*’s life are not presented in 1-2-3 order. Nonchronological strings of flashbacks weren’t common in film, but *The Trial of Vivienne Ware* and *The Power and the Glory* used them significantly. Plays set in courtrooms, such as Rice’s *On Trial*, had rendered flashbacks out of sequential order, and so had radio dramas. Welles’s 1938 radio adaptation of *Dracula* shuffled episodes in the manner of the source novel.

*Kane* has occasion to present a brief replay from differing character viewpoints. Susan’s opera premiere is first treated quickly, via a stagehand’s scornful gesture. Later, in her flashback, we see the action as several characters, including Susan, react to it. Replay flashbacks were very rare in the 1930s, although *The Witness Chair* (1936) provides one example. After *Kane*, they would become more common.

Even the *coup de théâtre* of following Kane’s death with a newsreel can be seen as revising a schema. *News on the March* isn’t exactly a flashback, but it provides exposition by hopscotching among time periods in a manner characteristic of the film to come.<sup>35</sup> Projected headlines and documentary footage, faked or actual, had found their way into 1930s theater practice, from the WPA Living Newspaper productions to Sidney Kingsley’s *Ten Million Ghosts* (which Welles performed in).<sup>36</sup> Many 1930s films opened with montage sequences using headlines, stock footage, and voice-overs like those in newsreels; *The Roaring Twenties* (1939) is a bold example. *Gabriel over the White House* (1933), with its mix of library footage and staged shots, anticipates *Kane* somewhat, as does Welles’s script for an uncompleted 1939 RKO project, *The Smiler with a Knife*, which includes a newsreel surveying the career of the fascist villain.<sup>37</sup>

It takes nothing away from *Kane*’s originality to see it as a blend of schemas that had been circulating for some years in popular media and high culture. Welles draws on his predecessors (and himself) for formal devices; the result blends and exaggerates and sometimes surpasses its sources. Because of their film’s prestige, Welles and Mankiewicz gave complicated time shifts a new prominence in Hollywood filmmaking.

## THE SHAPES OF TIME

In any period, Hollywood flashbacks don’t necessarily represent a character’s memory. Some flashbacks aren’t motivated as recollections, and many that are will show us things the character didn’t or couldn’t know. A flashback’s basic purpose is to present story events out of chronological order. Those events explain why or how something happened.

Why would storytellers, in cinema or other media, want to skip back in time? Flashbacks typically create two sorts of effects. In the prototypical case, a flashback answers questions about how something in the present-time action came about. Accordingly, the film will reveal earlier events we haven't already seen.

Alternatively, a flashback can remind us of something we've already seen or heard. At the climax of *Hangover Square* (1945), as George Bone frantically plays his concerto and the police close in on him, a rapid montage recalls moments in and around the murders he committed. Reminding us of past events has obvious advantages of emphasis, especially in subjective sequences probing the mind of a haunted character like Bone.

The reminder flashback was common in silent cinema. The most famous example is probably the moment in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) showing Margaret Cameron wooed by a Northern suitor. When she hesitates, Griffith cuts back to her brother's death on the battlefield. It isn't exactly her memory (she wasn't there to witness his death), but it reiterates her continuing bitterness about the Union victory's toll on her family. In sound films, purely auditory flashbacks can momentarily hark back to scenes shown earlier. Nan, the imprisoned heroine of *City Streets* (1931), broods about her boyfriend's return to the beer racket, and over her face we hear snatches of earlier dialogue between them. Sitting in the booth she once shared with her lover, Kitty Foyle drinks wine that recalls his proposal to her, and we hear it as well.

Revelation flashbacks and reminder flashbacks can blend to create the replay flashback. Here we revisit incidents we have already seen or heard (so it's a reminder), but we also learn about aspects of the action that weren't previously shown (so it's a revelation too). Typically this is a gap-filling gesture: the filmic narration has omitted something on the first pass. For example, in *The Witness Chair*, a few moments missing from one piece of trial testimony are filled in when a replay dramatizes the witness's full confession. *Black Angel* (1946) does much the same thing through memory, and with typical forties bravado.<sup>38</sup>

Replay flashbacks were tempting options, but they were often considered a waste of time. George Cukor claimed he wanted a replay in the witnesses' testimony of *A Woman's Face*.<sup>39</sup> Joseph

Mankiewicz filmed a replay from different characters' viewpoints in *All about Eve* (1950), but it was eventually excised.<sup>40</sup> According to a biographer of Herman Mankiewicz, Welles wanted *Citizen Kane* to include long replays that would present contradictory action and lines of dialogue, to convey conflicting memories of what Kane did and said.<sup>41</sup>

Still, the replay gained some prominence in the 1940s. The prototypical case is *Mildred Pierce* (1945), where the murder that opens the film is revisited in flashback to reveal the real killer. The device was available to B films as well. *Crime Doctor's Warning* (1945) uses a replay flashback (solicited under hypnosis) to show that a shadowy figure we thought was one character was actually another.

Reminders and replays often tend to be short, while revelation flashbacks can be any length. This option reminds us that flashbacks can vary a lot in size. Some are very brief, perhaps consisting of only a shot or a line of dialogue. Others constitute single scenes, as with trial testimony. Still others, like the "we'll always have Paris" passage in *Casablanca* (1943), run for a few scenes. And some are quite long, with a few large ones or even a single one consuming the bulk of the running time. These "architectural" flashbacks can become the major parts of the film, with present-time scenes largely serving as connective material. Indeed, the tendency to treat flashbacks as the pillars of the plot is distinctive of 1940s dramaturgy and yields some of the era's most memorable movies, from *Citizen Kane* to *All about Eve*.

If the purpose of a flashback is to rearrange the chronology of story events to achieve particular effects on the viewer, we can ask how that rearrangement gets motivated. As a first approximation, we can distinguish nondiegetic options from diegetic ones: that is, motivation from outside the story world and motivation from within it.

Nondiegetic motivation is common today. By convention we have come to accept that the overall filmic narration may scramble episodes at will, as when chapter titles break up *Pulp Fiction*'s timeline. Here no one in the fictional world is telling or recalling events in the past. Again, this tactic was anticipated in the silent cinema, when a series of titles shift us backward in time, as in

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*Beau Geste*. In the 1939 remake, the external “voice” is an intertitle that interrupts in a similar way: “About fifteen years earlier in England . . . at Brandon Abbas.” A more equivocal case occurs in *A Man to Remember* (1938), which departs from the present when city fathers open the strongbox left behind by a deceased doctor. No voice-over explicitly recalls Doc’s life, although there’s a sense that this shift to the past represents the men’s collective discovery of his value to the town.

This lack of diegetic motivation for a flashback is rare in early sound cinema, but it becomes more common in the 1940s. The prototype is that convention of semidocumentary film, the external voice-over narrator. In *Back to Bataan* (1945), a peremptory Voice of God tells us, reportage style, what led up to the US victory we see at the start. More abrupt is the intrusion of such a voice in *Confidence Girl* (1950). After a mind-reading stunt in a nightclub, the impersonal narrator interrupts the action to provide a replay flashback showing how the trick was done.

#### RECOUNTING, RECALLING, AND IN BETWEEN

Most flashbacks in 1940s films aren’t nondiegetic intrusions into the story chronology. Almost invariably the time shift is triggered by a character who recounts or recalls the past. (Very rarely flashbacks issue from noncharacter story elements, as we shall see in *Ringside*.) My prototype at the start of the chapter is an example, with the track-in to a woman lost in thought.

It’s worth pausing on the two options. In recounting, the character tells a listener or reader or public gathering about events in the past. These are dramatized in images and sounds. For example, in *Tight Shoes* (1941), a reporter explains to his pals how pinching shoes helped him score a story. By contrast, the recall flashback is motivated as memories in a character’s mind, usually accompanied by a voice-over. In *The Hard Way* (1943), a woman who has tried to drown herself is lying in her hospital bed and thinking about what brought her here. The recalled flashback has a private dimension that can reveal a growth in awareness. The recounted flashback typically gains some of its force from the re-actions of the characters who receive it.

In literature, recounted and recalled flashbacks can be colored by the personality of the character, especially if the writer has used first-person narration. Archie Goodwin’s voice in Rex Stout’s Nero Wolfe novels permeates his descriptions, the reported conversations, and the selection of information. In 1940s film, most flashbacks aren’t usually refracted so markedly through the consciousness of the source character.

In fact, film flashbacks are oddly unliterary in being freed from the character recalling or recounting them. A novel’s flashback is traditionally confined to the knowledge of the character experiencing it. A literary character can’t tell or recall events she hasn’t experienced at first or second hand. By contrast, a film flashback is almost never restricted to what a character could plausibly know. It may mark a stage in the character’s awareness, but it rarely does so through rigid attachment to that character only.

There are exceptions, as when *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) and *Dead Reckoning* (1947) strain to keep the telling or remembering character present for everything we see in the past. In preparing the *Kane* screenplay, Welles and Mankiewicz worried about deviations from what the various narrators could have known.<sup>42</sup> But few films resort to such an alibi. In almost every sustained flashback in classical Hollywood films, things take place that the speaking or recalling character didn’t or couldn’t know about. The default mode in such films is objective, strategically unrestricted narration, with no apologies. This convention confirms the primary purpose of a flashback: rearranging the order of story events, not confining us to a single character’s range of knowledge.

The same porosity of cinematic narration permits a film to combine recounting and recalling. *The Glass Menagerie* is framed as the son Tom’s private flashback during his days at sea, enhanced by voice-over. Within that frame, another flashback presents Tom’s mother recounting incidents involving her suitors.<sup>43</sup> Not surprisingly, even though the film is framed as Tom’s memory, many things occur in “his” flashback that he wasn’t present to witness.

Both recallings and recountings are often anchored in certain prototypical situations, most obviously interrogation. A trial or

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a police investigation obliges people to tell about events in the past, so mystery films abound with recounted flashbacks. Some recount past events in 1-2-3 order while others, even B films like *Behind Green Lights* (1946), break up chronology.

When trial dramas made their way into early talkies, critics seemed to suggest that audiences would have trouble adjusting to the convention of flashback testimony.<sup>44</sup> By 1941, however, viewers had no problems with the ten flashbacks packed into *A Woman's Face*, with one pulled out of chronological order. The film likewise shows the growing penchant for courtroom scenes; neither the original play nor the original Swedish movie is structured as trial testimony via flashbacks.

The trial template was flexible. It could absorb a typical crime story line (*They Won't Believe Me*, 1947) or a literary adaptation like *Madame Bovary*; in the film Flaubert recounts the plot of his novel during his trial for indecency. *None Shall Escape* (1944) anticipates a postwar tribunal at which Nazis are accused, in flashbacks, of war crimes. But the device risked becoming a cliché. By 1948 a trade paper could complain of the “trite courtroom-to-flashback pattern” of *I, Jane Doe* (1948).<sup>45</sup> Hitchcock's trial scenes in *The Paradine Case* (1947) won praise for their refusal to dramatize testimony.<sup>46</sup>

Another recounting scenario lets one character confide in another. The sense of voluntarily sharing a secret lends an intimacy that is usually lacking in a formal inquiry. This is the format of *The Power and the Glory*, when the tycoon's assistant and boyhood friend convinces his wife that she has judged the dead man too harshly. Letters and diaries, almost invariably accompanied by voice-over, can launch a flashback as well. The memoir in *Keys of the Kingdom* (1945) presents a priest's missionary career, while the message in *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948) stirs a casual seducer to regret and remorse.

Recollection has its prototypical situations as well. One is the deathbed, as in *The Hard Way*. In *The Big Shot* (1940), a dying gangster revisits his past. An extreme instance occurs in the B picture *Scared to Death* (1947), in which doctors bend over the body of a dying woman and she “recalls” what led up to her demise. (The title gives a hint.)

Another standard trigger for memory flashbacks is isolation. The character sits in a room or paces the floor or settles down in a park or forest, and the solitude provokes a return to the past. The tormented reporter of *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940), caged in his apartment, is plagued by flashbacks to clashes with his obnoxious neighbor Meng. Even on a crowded street, a moment of detached reverie can set the stage for remembering, as when the officer recalls his tragic love affair in the opening of *Waterloo Bridge*. A character sitting down to write, as at the start of *I Remember Mama* (1948), is a standard cue for a recall flashback. It's as if Hollywood can't let the story slow down to dwell on any action that isn't charged with psychological meaning. If there isn't dialogue and conflict “outside,” there had better be monologue and psychic tension within.

Recounting and recalling are the twin poles of traditional flashback framing, but no less traditional is the urge to move beyond them into a no-man's-land. Sometimes it seems that the character is neither quite recounting (no listener is shown) nor quite remembering (the voice-over is too well shaped, even rhetorical). We know who is “having” the flashback, but we don't know who, if anyone, is being addressed. At the start of *How Green Was My Valley*, the grown-up Huw Morgan's voice announces that he is leaving the valley. At the end he asserts, “Men like my father can never die.” Huw's narration isn't addressed to another character, but his declarations would seem oratorical for an inner monologue.

This unsituated character-based commentary gave cinema some of the discursive freedom of literature, which often presents first-person narration without explaining whom the narrator is addressing. In 1940s cinema, and not just in the United States, this manner of handling flashbacks became a common cinematic resource.

## THE VIEWER'S SHARE

All these formal dimensions of the flashback—recounting and recalling, providing revelations or reminders or replays—open up a huge variety of possible effects. Some commentators may have

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disparaged time-shifting tales, but filmmakers showed that the flashback could engage viewers in vivacious ways.

Most simply, a scene in the present arouses curiosity about how something came about, so the flashback, quickly or slowly, answers that question. It makes the plot cohere in terms of cause and effect. We know at the start of *Cheers for Miss Bishop* (1940) that the elderly heroine has never married her doting friend Sam. Why not? The opening of *Leave Her to Heaven* shows the protagonist returning from prison and taking a boat to meet an unseen woman. What sent him to jail, and whom will he meet?

These framing situations are stable and nonthreatening, posing their questions mildly. By contrast, in a tactic that became widespread in the 1940s, a flashback can be launched from a point of crisis. If *Smash-Up: The Story of a Woman* (1947) were to present its story events in order, we'd have an initial half-hour of things going very well, with almost no conflict. It's far more engaging to start with our heroine wrapped in bandages and moaning, before she recalls how she wound up in the hospital.

Starting the film near the story's climax and then skipping back to provide slow-paced exposition has a double benefit. It teases our curiosity about how we got here, and when that is more or less satisfied, we can look forward to an exciting resolution. The flashbacks in films like *The Big Clock* and *D.O.A.* (1950) delay a life-or-death outcome. As they unfold, they provide a double layer of uncertainty: we want to know what happens next in the flashback (microlevel uncertainty) and what will ultimately happen in the frame story (at the macro level) Once we're familiar with the heroine's descent into alcoholism in *Smash-Up*'s flashback, we can look forward to seeing whether she will survive.

Sometimes the film can exploit the doubled time scheme by being rather unspecific about the framing situation. *Pittsburgh* (1942) starts with two pals celebrating the success of their coal-mining business. Their mentor points out that they owe it all to Josie, the woman seen in a portrait in their office. His voice-over narration accompanies a series of flashbacks showing how the partners grew their business. But Josie is absent from the opening scene and from every return to the frame situation in the office. Is she dead? Has she abandoned the men who wooed her?

The question sharpens our expectations about what we see in the past.

A more teasing use of the ambivalent frame story occurs in *Roxie Hart* (1942). At a bar a reporter recounts the wild days of press mania, when Roxie was the murderess of the moment. His audience is a gravelly bartender. But during one flashback, the jury foreman at Roxie's trial is suddenly revealed as the very same bartender. Does the reporter telling the story not recognize him from the old days? And why is the bartender asking questions about Roxie, since he knows the answers very well? Enigmas like this heighten our curiosity about the framing action as well as the framed flashbacks.

Characterization can be enhanced by flashbacks. The brief scenes of domestic life before the war in *Tender Comrade* (1944) not only portray Jo's husband Chris as a decent, loving man but explain to us the source of her dogged energy. Without those brief flashbacks, neither Chris nor Jo would be as vivid. Likewise, an adaptation can use a flashback frame to give secondary characters a new prominence. Ernst Lubitsch's silent version of *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1926) centered on Lord and Lady Windermere and the threat to their marriage represented by Mrs. Erlynne and Lord Darlington. In *The Fan* (1949), Otto Preminger and his screenwriters set the frame in postwar London and depict the romantic tangle through the recounting of Darlington and Mrs. Erlynne, both in solitary old age. Since the Windermeres have died in the Blitz, the social comedy and happy ending of the original are replaced by a poignant sense of missed happiness. The flashback structure has turned secondary characters in the source play into major ones.

In *The Fan*, as often happens when the central action takes place in the distant past, the structure sharpens our sense of the change. Old people instantly become young again. A similar sharpening can take place with character development. A chronological plot can show how a character gradually changes, but a flashback-based plot can summon up a crisp before and after, or rather an after and before. *The White Cliffs of Dover* (1944) initially presents its heroine as a loyal friend of England during the Blitz. The shift to the past shows her to us as a proud Yankee, quickly

taking umbrage at British snobbery. The plot will trace how, by marrying a lord, she comes to love England as much as she loves America.

Less harsh are the character-trait shifts on display in *Pilot #5* (1943). A pilot is picked for a suicide mission, and his mates discuss what they know of him. One friend reveals him as an idealist, but another attests to his gradual corruption when he began working for a quasi-fascist governor. Another, more intimate friend is himself morally compromised, but he explains the circumstances that led to the pilot's embrace of the American cause. Despite being presented out of story order, the flashbacks add up to a portrait of a young man who strayed from democratic ideals but found his way back to them. This sort of film appeals to our intuition that human action is most fully understood in retrospect.

The "prismatic" flashbacks of *Pilot #5* are, we might say, midsize. Unlike the single long flashback that constitutes the bulk of *How Green Was My Valley* or *Smash-Up* or *D.O.A.*, midsize flashbacks often issue from different characters' accounts of story action. Occasionally, as in *Lady Be Good* (1941), the same character's testimony (in three separate court sessions) can emphasize parallel circumstances.

Midsized flashbacks can build up a sense of parallel blocks—chunks of action we're invited to compare. This effect is common in trial and investigation plots; we must weigh the different versions of events. Parallels also come to the fore in *Brute Force* (1947). Here four cellmates' plans for a prison break are interrupted by each man's account, dramatized in flashback, of how he ventured into crime. These parallel episodes have a characterizing function as well, since they invite us to observe that although each man has wound up in prison because of his blind devotion to a woman, their sacrifices show them to be rather different personalities.

#### MEMORY, MADE AND UNMADE

Flashbacks work quite directly on the viewer's memory. Once we're in a flashback, we may easily forget the frame, especially if the past-time action lacks voice-over accompaniment. Mod-

ern films often indicate flashback scenes with stylistic markers (slow motion, distorted imagery or sound, a different color palette, handheld footage), so that we're aware we're in the past. But 1940s films almost never did this, so it's even harder to maintain a sense that a flashback is distinct from its framing situation.

As a result, some films exploit our forgetfulness and simply never return to the framing action. The original script of *Guest in the House* (1944) contained a tidy frame, with a woman on a cliff recalling her involvement in a homicide and, at the end, giving herself up to the authorities.<sup>47</sup> As released, the film begins with the woman's recollection but never returns to the opening situation. Reviewers seem not to have noticed the anomaly.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, *I Wanted Wings* (1941) begins its flashback with a military board in closed session; the chairman is reviewing the evidence against a bomber pilot. But when we come out of the flashback, the bomber's pal is finishing up the story begun by the chairman. He entered the proceedings and began his testimony "behind" the flashback.

Because of the double layer of anticipation that flashbacks introduce—What will happen in the frame story? What will happen in the flashback?—it's possible to use them to enrich a story that is simple or diffuse. *Forever and a Day* (1943) is a family saga tracing the history of the Trimble mansion from 1804 to the nights of the London Blitz in World War II. Presented chronologically, the story would give equal weight to many generations and end, somewhat lamely, with the American heir coming to sell the home. Instead, the plot starts in the present with Gates Trimble arriving to sell the house and learning of the building's history through the young woman living there. The result is a tension—Will Gates decide to sell the old place?—and a budding romance. The flashback has enabled a rather episodic story action to be focused and given emotional resonance.

"I didn't get the money and I didn't get the woman," admits the insurance salesman Walter Neff at the start of *Double Indemnity* (1943). The flashbacks he narrates into a tape recorder create what might be called inevitability suspense: we will learn how Neff's fate unfolded. Unlike the similar James M. Cain adaptation, *Money and the Woman* (1940), which is told chronologically,

*Double Indemnity* uses the flashback to create the sort of “doom” plot associated with Cain’s novels and film noir generally. (Cain wished he had thought of the tape recorder device.)<sup>49</sup> Flashbacks in other types of film are likely to prepare us for destiny from the beginning. The separation of the central couple is announced immediately in *Wuthering Heights* (1939), while the opening of *Lost Boundaries* (1949) assures us that community acceptance eventually awaits the black couple passing for white.

Flashbacks trade on what cognitive scientists call hindsight bias.<sup>50</sup> Once we know an outcome, we tend to think that it was obvious before the fact. Who couldn’t see the 2008 financial crisis coming? By logical standards this isn’t very good reasoning, but narrative plays on our folk psychology, not on strict rationality. Hindsight bias is thus a handy resource for story makers.

For example, a story told linearly might include a whopping coincidence. But begin your plot after the coincidence and flash back to it, and it will seem plausible, even inevitable, because it has “already” had consequences in the present. At the start of *The Strawberry Blonde*, we know that Biff did not marry the girl he yearns for. As a result, his accidental date with Amy seems inevitable; we know she will become his wife.<sup>51</sup>

Likewise, hindsight bias can engage us in fitting together bits of information introduced in the frame story. We get a sort of breadcrumb trail. The frame story of *The Long Night* (1947) begins near the story’s climax. After establishing Joe’s murder of Maxilian, the plot shows Joe holing up in his room, a classic isolation cue for recollection. When the flashbacks ensue, they explain the significance of objects that were highlighted in the opening tour of Joe’s apartment. These items add mystery to the action—Why is a teddy bear important?—in a way that wouldn’t happen if the plot were purely chronological. We enjoy seeing a diffuse pattern gradually become firm.

Accordingly, motifs in the frame story may be swiftly and discreetly planted. At the start of *Penny Serenade* (1941), Julie is about to leave her husband. She picks up an album of phonograph records. The film will be structured around her playing various records, each one evoking a particular moment in her marriage. She has decorated the album with keepsakes, and as she leafs through

it, we glimpse a birthday card, baby booties, and a travel folder from Japan, all of which prophesy action in the flashbacks. Most tellingly, on her way to the phonograph Julie passes a bedroom where a doll perches on the bed. At this point we’re unaware that her daughter has just died, but the doll will reappear in one of the most poignant scenes in the past.<sup>52</sup>

The breadcrumb trail gets more elaborate in plots with lengthy setups. The framing situation of *The Searching Wind* (1946) lays out a host of clues that will be explained and developed in the embedded story. In 1945 Alex Hazen is a discharged ambassador. His son Sam has returned from the war with a damaged leg, and his wife Emily coasts along as a brittle socialite. Now that Alex is at liberty, he has a final chance to be united with Cassie Bowman, the liberal journalist he loves. At a tense reunion dinner, the three principals, along with Emily’s father, Moses, try to explain to Sam how their lives have intertwined over the past twenty-three years.

The framing situation establishes Sam’s troubled recovery from battle and Alex’s confusion about his responsibility for America’s failure to stop fascism. Sam wants to understand the compromises made by his father, his mother, and his grandfather (who laments the errors of the Treaty of Versailles). The central flashback, which takes up an hour of screen time, traces European history from Mussolini’s march on Rome in 1923 through Hitler’s rise, the Spanish Civil War, and the appeasement of Germany in 1938. Throughout these years Alex has been assigned to various countries, always reluctant to face Europe’s march toward total war. Cassie loves him but recognizes his weakness as being both personal and symptomatic of the cowardice of international diplomacy.

*The Searching Wind*’s present-time setup runs nearly thirty minutes and lays down a host of hints about the flashback. Picking up his things, Alex dwells fondly on an old photo of him with Cassie and Emily, but Emily laughs at their dated clothes. The moment characterizes him as regretful and her as superficial. He says he needs time to think, “to assess things and my part in them”; this what the evening ahead will do by force. Alex announces to Emily that he wants a divorce, and their conversation alludes to a promise made in Paris—one we’ll see enacted in the

flashback. Cassie at work in the newsroom learns that Emily's father sold the newspaper company; in the flashback, we will learn why. Even small details, such as Cassie's dropping her purse when she comes to dinner, are explained in the flashback as her habitual signs of nervousness. As often happens, the frame story motivates our acceptance of a coincidence: Alex and Cassie rekindle their love as a result of a chance meeting during the bombardment of Madrid in 1936.

Given the interwoven lives of the characters, the transition to the long central flashback in *The Searching Wind* assumes an unusual form. As Sam sits at dinner, the camera moves up to isolate him, music comes in, and the image shimmers—all very traditional cues for the time shift. But as we watch Sam tensely waiting, we hear the voices of family members offscreen, speaking to one another in sentences beginning “I can remember . . .” The result is a sort of collective flashback, produced by the conversation.

Our return to the present is similarly marked by group recounting. As the flashback ends on Sam, listening, Grandfather Moses says, “There's no point in people sitting around the table talking about the past.” Soon Sam will pass his own judgment: “You've all been sort of talking to yourselves.” The climax shifts dramatic focus to Sam and the lesson he has learned about his elders' lack of vigilance.

*The Searching Wind's* source, Lillian Hellman's 1944 play, was an entry in the Broadway flashback vogue. The play's brief first scene, set in 1944 in the Hazen drawing room, plants some of the clues we note in the film's opening stretch, but there is no dinner table framing of the flashbacks. The film replaces the play's abrupt time shifts with a vague collective recounting. In the process, the film's expansion of the play's setup illustrates how a breadcrumb trail can drop many hints that will be taken up in the body of the past action. We'll see the same slow tease at work in *Body and Soul* (1947).

Itemizing all these advantages of flashbacks doesn't imply that every film would be improved by adding one. Most 1940s filmmakers avoided them because juggling time risked confusing the audience. One reviewer complained that the “episodic flashbacks” in *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948) “make the story too

complex to be easily understood.” The reviewer pointed out that the film had to be watched from the beginning “lest the confused story seem even more confusing.”<sup>53</sup> In an era when theaters screened films nonstop, viewers who came in partway through might be baffled by time shifts.<sup>54</sup>

## SCHEMA AND VARIATION

Only in the 1940s could Olive Higgins Prouty, author of the source novel for *Now, Voyager* (1942), suggest that the flashbacks to the heroine's youth be played as silent scenes with subtitles. Producer Hal Wallis rejected Prouty's suggestion: “I had visions of the entire audience moving quite rapidly into the street.”<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, a surprising number of films tweak flashback schemas in ways more peculiar than those we've seen so far.

Some large-scale flashbacks “lose the frame” by not returning to the narrating situation, as in *Guest in the House*. The use of parallel scenes can create a sort of surrogate frame. In *The Great Gatsby* (1949) the opening sequence shows Nick and Jordan, now middle-aged, at Gatsby's grave. We flash back twenty years, and within that stretch we get further flashbacks revealing Gatsby's past. At the climax, Gatsby is shot by the cuckolded gas station owner Wilson. At the burial Nick and Jordan meet at Gatsby's grave and vow to return to the Midwest. We never return to the 1948 situation that opened the film, but the couple at graveside in 1928 suffices to recall it and provide closure.

More striking and precise is the abandoned frame of *How Green Was My Valley*. The present-time opening shows a bleak, depopulated village scarred by the slag from the coal pits (fig. 2.1). As Huw wraps his belongings in his mother's shawl, he reflects on the past and carries us into his boyhood (fig. 2.2). At the end of the long flashback, cradling his dead father in his arms, the boy Huw ponders (fig. 2.3). Instead of returning to the opening frame, in which we would need to see Huw the man trudge out of his ruined village, the voice-over initiates a string of reminder flashbacks. The film plunges back into the best days of Huw's childhood, ending with images showing his father, his brothers, his sister Angharad, and the reverend Mr. Gruffydd, striding through



2.1. *How Green Was My Valley* (1941): The mining village today.



2.2. Huw and his father stroll through the village in happier times.



2.3. The end of the flashback: The death of the father.



2.4. After replays of scenes from happier times, the final shot of the epilogue loops back into Huw's memory, as if starting the flashback over again and never returning to the present-day frame.

the unspoiled valley (fig. 2.4). Locked in the past, *How Green* need never return to the desolate present, proving Huw's opening maxim: "You can go back and have what you like of it."

Sometimes we don't exactly return to the frame situation because the action in the flashback seamlessly catches up with the events first shown there. Examples are *The Bamboo Blonde* (1946), *The Return of January* (1948), and *Alias Nick Beale* (1949). At other times there seems to be a careful refusal to go back to the frame. That may be simple time saving. *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye* (1950) presents a criminal trial, and one character's testimony will launch a flashback that is concluded by another character when we return to the trial. More strategically, the voice-over narration of the protagonist of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*

(1946) begins in the past as he describes what brought him to the lonely gas station. At the end, however, it's revealed that he is telling this story to a priest in his cell on Death Row. Cain claimed he could write first-person narration only if he could provide an actual scene of recounting; the film follows the novel by creating a surprise in revealing that scene.<sup>56</sup> If *Gatsby* and *How Green* lack a concluding frame, *Postman* lacks one up front.

Since flashbacks aim to explain the present by finding causes in the past, they're presumed to be reliable. Thanks partly to hindsight bias, they usually are. But doubt can arise when they're anchored in an investigation or a trial situation. Here the film may indulge in what Meir Sternberg calls "a rhetoric of anticipatory caution."<sup>57</sup> Because courts and police questioning are trying to ascertain the truth, there's always the possibility that one or more flashbacks may not be accurate.

For example, in the B picture *Backlash* (1947), which jams eight flashbacks into sixty-six minutes, a dramatized diary entry is incompatible with another (recounted) flashback; in the epilogue, the entry is revealed to be faked. More explicitly, the very title of *Thru Different Eyes* (1942) warns us to expect unreliable accounts. *Crossfire* (1947) arranges its flashbacks so that one witness or the other must be telling lies. Two lying flashbacks in *Phone Call from a Stranger* (1952) are marked not only by exaggerated performances and music but by dissolves that briefly turn the shot into a negative image. More diabolical is the famous lying flashback in *Stage Fright* (1950). The film's narration abandons the rhetoric of anticipatory caution and leads us to trust our first impressions.<sup>58</sup>

Then there's the strategy of using flashbacks to push the film toward calculated unintelligibility. Critic Manny Farber found *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) "by all odds the most incomprehensible film in years."<sup>59</sup> The basic story is familiar enough, centering on a treacherous woman covering up a murder she has committed. A typical investigation plot would dramatize for us how the femme fatale committed the crime. But the flashbacks in *Murder, My Sweet* show Philip Marlowe, under police questioning in the present, recounting how he *investigated* the case. To clarify the crime plot, the film would have to embed flashbacks within Marlowe's flashback, and these aren't supplied. We learn the backstory of

the woman's crime wholly through confessions blurted out at the climax. For this reason Farber wished he could take the movie's dialogue home "to study at length."

At least the flashbacks in *Murder, My Sweet* come from a single character and proceed in chronological order. *The Killers* (1946) provides a more mind-twisting intricacy. An insurance investigator discovers that Ole, the murdered Swede, was lured into a holdup, double-crossed by the boss's girlfriend, and eventually killed by hit men. The plot has eleven flashbacks, and, in terms of story chronology, they are presented in this sequence: 11-10-1-2-3-4-5-8-6-9-7. In addition, the testimony from witnesses erodes the framing situations somewhat. One past-time episode doesn't return to the charwoman who launches the tale, and another, mumbled by a dying hood, seems to be barely intelligible to the investigators.<sup>60</sup>

Or consider *Backfire* (1950). Bob Corey, a recovering veteran, is waiting for his army buddy Steve to take him out of the hospital. Instead, Bob gets a late-night visit from a mysterious woman, who he later suspects was a hallucination. When Bob is discharged the hospital, he learns that Steve has disappeared, probably because he was involved with a murder. Bob's search leads him to seven people who knew Steve, and the flashbacks enacting their reports run through story events in 3-5-2-4-1-6-7 order. The final, most recent episode explains why the woman visited Bob and what happened to her afterward. Critics praised *The Killers* and mostly castigated *Backfire*, but regardless of the responses, evidently no flashback movies from earlier eras, not even the early forties, play with chronology as freely as these two. They point forward to Stanley Kubrick's juggling of chronology in *The Killers* (1956) and the flashback mosaics of *The Pambroker* (1965) and *Petulia* (1968).

Time can get kinked even more aggressively when we have flashbacks embedded in other flashbacks. Sometimes these are pretty perfunctory, as in *I Love a Mystery* (1945), *Ladies of the Chorus* (1949), and *The Enforcer* (1951). As brief patches of exposition, they supplement the overall flashback. More ambitious embeddings form a quasi-geometrical pattern. The 1940s furnish two paradigm cases in which symmetrically parallel flashbacks are

neatly nested, like Russian dolls. One is *The Locket* (1947), which I'll have more to say about later. The other prototype is *Passage to Marseille* (1944), which lays out six years' worth of action with a kind of fanatical fussiness.<sup>61</sup>

The outermost frame story of *Passage to Marseille* opens with Manning, a war correspondent, visiting a camouflaged air base in the English countryside. From here Free French pilots launch bombing raids on Germany and occupied France. Struck by the intensity he sees on one gunner's face, Manning asks his host Freycinet about the man. Freycinet answers with "the story of a little group of whom Matrac was one."

First embedded flashback: Freycinet's story takes us back a few years to a French cargo ship, which rescues five men in a drifting boat. After Freycinet realizes they are convicts escaped from Devil's Island, the men start to recount how and why they got away.

Second layer of flashback: The convicts plot to escape and fight the Germans, but one—Matrac—withdraws to brood. We're confronted with a sharp disparity: the zealous anti-Nazi of the present-day frame story is reluctant to join the fight in the past. Then the prisoner Renault explains Matrac's story to the other prisoners.

Core flashback: In 1938, Matrac denounces the sellout to Hitler at Munich. Right-wingers smash his newspaper office while police and citizens look on passively. Having lost his faith in politicians and the people, Matrac flees Paris with his lover Paula. But he is arrested, tried on trumped-up charges, and sent to Devil's Island.

Return to the second layer, as the prisoners resume telling their tale to Freycinet: On Devil's Island, Matrac is tortured, intensifying his hatred for France and everything associated with it. Soon afterward, the five men escape. The old man who helps them asks only that they promise to serve French freedom. But Matrac refuses to pledge his loyalty. The disparity persists: What has turned this angry, disillusioned idealist into the dedicated gunner Manning sees in the opening scene?

Return to the first layer, as narrated by Freycinet: On the ship,

word comes that Marshall Pétain has signed an armistice with the Germans. The captain secretly swerves the ship away from Marseille, a Pétain-controlled city, and sets his sights on England. A fight ensues, with the crew and the Devil's Island brigade pitted against the pro-German officers. In the heat of the moment, Matrac's genuine patriotism surges back. He leads the battle to kill the Pétainists and, moved by a cabin boy's heroic death, vows to drive the enemy out of France.

Back in the frame story, all mysteries from the past have been cleared up. Now the journalist Manning appreciates what the pilots have sacrificed, and he understands what has turned Matrac into a fierce patriot. The film could close quickly here, but the plot sets up a fresh future-oriented suspense. Manning and Freycinet wait for the planes to return from the night's bombing run. Renault's plane, though, is delayed, and it brings back a fatally wounded Matrac. This time he has not been able to drop a message to Paula as his plane passes over their farm, but at Matrac's funeral, Freycinet assures everyone, "That letter will be delivered."

In *Passage to Marseille*, Matrac's 1938 adventure forms the core, wrapped in three layers. We have a flashback within a flashback within a flashback, the outermost one surrounded by a frame story set in the present. Dizzily, we have Freycinet recounting a story recounted by Renault, which includes another story recounted by Renault still further back in the past. Why build the movie's plot into a shape more complicated than in the source novel?<sup>62</sup>

For one thing, the embedded flashbacks refresh what had become a common wartime story schema, that of the self-centered man who learns that he must join the collective struggle against fascism. Matrac is played by Humphrey Bogart, who was associated with this conversion narrative in *All through the Night* (1941), *Casablanca*, and *To Have and Have Not* (1945). A linear conversion plot, such as that of *The Fighting 69th* (1940), tends to give us motives straightforwardly, and it explicitly traces the process of changing people's minds and hearts. A broken timeline creates more curiosity, as the Matrac we know at the start is very dif-

ferent from the Matrac presented in the flashbacks. What made him become a committed patriot? The Chinese-boxes layout of *Passage to Marseille* enhances puzzles of personality.

Still, there is something odd about this explanation of motives. Charles Foster Kane is also an enigmatic personality. Kane appears in most scenes of his film, yet Matrac is curiously absent from his. Matrac is initially glimpsed as the gunner in a bomber crew, but thereafter he vanishes for periods of ten or fifteen minutes. When Matrac reappears as one of the rescued convicts on the steamer, his presence is played down. He never recounts or recalls his past, and he remains a sullen, peripheral figure in the early shipboard scenes, turning away from the camera or sitting silently in the background. Not until forty-eight minutes into the film does the spotlight swivel to him, as Renault explain his backstory. One contemporary review noted that Claude Rains, who plays Freycinet, had the biggest part in the picture.<sup>63</sup>

Lewis Herman worried that recounted flashbacks shift too much weight to narrating characters. There's probably something to this: however much flashbacks would help iron out the plot of *The Big Sleep* (1945), they would deflect our attention from Marlowe's investigation and his sexual sparring with Vivian Sternwood. Still, *Passage to Marseille* makes a virtue of secondhand accounts by fleshing out Matrac's colleagues. Sharply contrasted with the Pétainist Duval, Freycinet emerges as a compassionate, good-natured man who can discern true patriotism, even in a convict. The Devil's Island escapees, all portrayed as men whose crimes were accidental, minor, or well justified, get vividly differentiated. Their escape is made possible by yet another side participant, Grandpère. He is a prisoner with privileges who yearns to fight for France but, because he would overload his comrades' canoe, stoically remains behind waiting to be recaptured. The convicts who survive the fight on shipboard remain central when we return to the frame story, where they play important roles in the Free French air campaign.

About halfway through *Passage to Marseille*, Matrac assumes a more central position, first as the one escapee who won't promise to fight for France, then as the leader of the shipboard skirmish. The film has filled itself with so much background informa-

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tion about his comrades, the Free French, their strategies of air combat, and the milieu of Devil's Island that his story emerges as one among many. Its emblematic function is summarized in an epilogue in which Freycinet reads Matrac's final letter to his son. The embedded flashbacks not only expose the core events in the protagonist's personal life but situate him in a wider political struggle. This is indeed "the story of a little group of whom Matrac was one."

### THE PAST IS PERSONAL

By the end of the 1940s, both A- and B-picture filmmakers could risk chopping up a linear plot through numerous flashbacks. The device could demote the protagonist from energetic agent to object of study, and it could expand the treatment of secondary characters. *Beyond Glory* (1948) affords a handy anthology of devices that over just a few years had become mainstream resources.

Told in chronological order, the action of *Beyond Glory* would trace how the military draft forces Rocky Gilman to give up a good job and a girlfriend. Despite rising to the rank of lieutenant, he is a little cynical about the army. During a battle in Tunisia, he suffers a concussion that delays his joining his superior, Harry Daniels, in an attack on a German tank. When Rocky comes to, his captain has been killed. Rocky takes out the tank, but he's unaware of the minutes he was unconscious. Convinced that he was too afraid to attack immediately, he leaves the hospital freighted with guilt over Harry's death. After a period of drifting at loose ends, Rocky becomes friendly with Harry's widow, Ann. He enters West Point as a cadet to atone for Harry's death.

In Rocky's fourth and final year, a young cadet convinces his influential father that Rocky has been bullying him. A hearing is held to probe Rocky's conduct and character. When his battlefield activity is brought up against him, Rocky resigns and tries to run off with Ann, who has come to love him. She refuses, sends him back to West Point, and testifies about their relationship. In the same session, Rocky's adopted father brings in the doctor who treated him. He attests to a gap in Rocky's experience of the Tunisian firefight. Another soldier who was in the unit states that

he now realizes Rocky must have been unconscious during the crucial minutes. The ornery cadet's father withdraws the charges, and Rocky is ready to graduate to a good job and a life with Ann.

So much for story-world chronology. But as one trade review noted, the plot layout of *Beyond Glory* provides "an interesting switch on the traditional treatment of war heroes."<sup>64</sup> The switch relies on presenting a crisis situation marbled with flashbacks from different phases of Rocky's military career.

We get a host of reminders, revelations, and replays. The plot starts near the end of the story's action, with the hearing into Rocky's conduct. Accordingly, the first clutch of flashbacks concentrates on charges that West Point is a brutal place where hazing is a matter of course. The complaining cadet, Ray Denmark, recounts incidents of Rocky's behavior, but his testimony is countered by Rocky's friend Eddie Loughlin, who establishes that Rocky's devotion to duty is unquestionable. These scenes skip back to Rocky's first days at the Academy. Loughlin drops important hints: Rocky had "something else to cope with—something pretty tough."

The familiar forties touch of mystery alerts us, although the authorities in the hearing seem oblivious. Instead, the investigation proceeds with Rocky's tight-lipped report on his being drafted and shipping out as a lieutenant. His testimony takes us still further back in time. He mentions the Tunisian battle briefly, leaving a notable gap to be filled by a later flashback. He then traces how he was discharged, returned to find his job and girlfriend gone, and decided, under the pressure of guilt on VE day, to visit Harry's widow.

Then Rocky signed up for West Point. Why? He will say no more.

New testimony from an orderly at the hospital carries us further back, to Rocky's days of recovery from combat stress. Under a drug, Rocky seems to confess dereliction of duty during the Tunisian firefight. "I was yellow." We're reminded that in his first days in the service he expressed the idea that disobeying an officer's order was sometimes a soldier's best option. As he leaves the hospital, he discards his Distinguished Service Cross, a gesture that seems to confirm his admission of cowardice under fire.

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Now the narration becomes flagrantly suppressive. After a long day of testimony Rocky gets a letter from Ann, and he breaks West Point rules by visiting her at her apartment. We don't see the result of the visit, but next day he comes late to the hearing.

The first part of the film has used flashbacks to render Rocky largely from the outside. His behavior is described by Ray, Loughlin, and the orderly. His own testimony is flat and detached, with much material withheld "for personal reasons." As in *Passage to Marsaille*, questions of loyalty linger. Early on, Rocky has expressed disdain for the military way of life. Why then did he sign up for the Academy and accept its stringent discipline? Why has he refused to defend himself under the attorney's grilling? And why has he returned after going AWOL? We'll learn in the final day's testimony.

Ann comes forward to testify and becomes the organizing center of the last section of the film. In a series of flashbacks running twenty minutes, she reviews events we've seen, but her information fills in gaps and traces a curve of change. She recounts how she met Rocky on VE Day and undertook to bring him back to normal life. But he follows her lead in his own self-lacerating manner: joining the Academy to assuage his guilt, "to pay his debt"—that is, compensate for his purported cowardice under fire. Ann sticks by him through three years of plebe life.

At this point Ann's flashbacks catch up with the time span of the hearing itself. Earlier in the film, we've seen Rocky break a date with her. This was the only moment we saw Ann during the first fifty minutes of the film. In her enacted testimony we again see Rocky break the date; the reminder stresses her puzzled reaction. On the following night Rocky calls on Ann, and now this repetition becomes a fleshed-out replay. It continues what had earlier been cut off: their confrontation, in which he asks her to flee West Point with him. She refuses and insists he return to the Academy.

Ann's flashback has humanized Rocky to a degree that his rigid self-presentation failed to do in the early stretches of the film. There remains only the question of what really happened in Tunisia. Rocky's doctor testifies, without benefit of flashback, that he felt there was a gap in events as officialdom knew them. Our old friend amnesia is waiting in the wings.

Then Rocky's friend Loughlin returns to the stand. Discussions with the doctor have led him to understand that Rocky got a concussion from the shelling. Loughlin hadn't realized this at the time because Rocky didn't know he'd blacked out. All that remains is for the young cadet Ray Denmore to admit he lied about Rocky's abuse. An epilogue presents General Eisenhower addressing the West Point cadets with a homily about the need for a first-rate military.

*Beyond Glory*, complained a critic at the time, moved "slowly and confusingly through a great many flashbacks."<sup>65</sup> True, there are ten flashbacks in a mere eighty-two minutes. But the purpose of the time shifts is strategic. As *Passage to Marsaille* maps the wartime conversion narrative across many time shifts, this film splinters a familiar postwar story. The tale of a traumatized vet plagued by amnesia and guilt feelings is recast as a series of mysteries of both incident and character. What happened in the battle? Why is Rocky so remote, bitter, and laconic? These questions arise from a radical scrambling of chronology. The order of past incidents as we encounter them runs 10-9-8-1-4-3-5-6-7-2. Unlike *Passage to Marsaille*, which exposes its protagonist's motivation in a central chunk of action, *Beyond Glory* reveals the critical event at the end.

The film sidles into Rocky's story by means of a secondary drama, the accusations of hazing at the Academy. This conflict does more than fill out the tale with the arresting West Point surroundings and an array of vivid secondary characters (Pop, the attorney Proctor, the supervising general). The hazing pretext permits the examination of Rocky's past via the familiar trial schema. Significantly, the inquiry is recast as a nonjudicial investigation; several times we're reminded that this hearing has much greater leeway than a court of law would. So it should, because it is explicitly investigating the sort of personality who ought to serve in the military.

*Beyond Glory* presents Rocky as moving from cynicism to a grudging acceptance of discipline and then to genuine commitment to service. By starting with the accusations of bullying, the plot contrasts him with the rich, shallow Ray. In the second half, Ann's tenderness toward Rocky further softens our attitude. If

this widow can forgive him, can't he forgive himself? Anyway, he turns out to be a genuine war hero.

*Citizen Kane*, another film that used time shifts and varying perspectives to probe changes in a personality, had blended 1930s devices into a new and striking flashback construction. By 1948, *Beyond Glory* was able to absorb and extend those devices. It constitutes an instructive anthology of techniques that had in just a few years slipped more or less comfortably into Hollywood's storytelling tradition.

The flashback vogue illustrates some key themes of this book's argument. The trend shows how quickly novelties get absorbed, revised, and elaborated. Critics were divided; some lamented "the flashback plague" and complained that films were becoming confusing, while others admired the skill with which different time frames were juxtaposed.<sup>66</sup> So quickly did flashbacks become a part of 1940s cinematic storytelling that films could distinguish themselves by not using them. A *Kane*-like invention of a suspect tycoon in *Keeper of the Flame* (1942) confines itself wholly to the present, while the second remake of *The Trial of Mary Dugan* (1941), whose source play is a courtroom-flashback warhorse, conspicuously sticks to chronological order.

The viral spread of flashbacks also indicates how dependent filmic innovation became on mainstream versions of mildly modernist technique in literature, radio, and drama. Yet many adaptations, from *Our Town* to *Stage Fright*, are more than the sum of their influences. Dropping frame stories, mixing character viewpoints, leaving breadcrumb trails, creating embedded plots and scrambled timelines—all these tactics freshened up movie flashback schemas. In transposing literary devices to film, filmmakers revealed distinctively cinematic effects.

Flashback construction is so pervasive that our survey of other techniques will inevitably return to this central device. It can support further innovations, from subjectivity to block construction. Shuffling story events out of order seems a pretty simple creative choice, but it can have far-reaching results.

## INTERLUDE

### Kitty and Lydia, Julia and Nancy

FLASHBACKS ASKED AUDIENCES TO CREATE A PATTERN OF actions joining the past and the present. The device could also create more complex characterizations. If the results didn't prove "prismatic" in the strong sense of showing contradictory sides of a personality, flashback films did have the ability to sharpen character change more vividly than in more chronological storytelling. The changes in attitude tracked in *Passage to Marseille*, *Beyond Glory*, and other films show the possibilities of this approach to portraying character.

The examples I've considered in the previous chapter centered on stoic, emotionally inexpressive male protagonists like Matrac and Rocky Gilman. This is one traditional way of portraying men in popular media. What about the women?

The cultural stereotype of woman as a mysterious being, mercurial and unpredictable, unwavering when a mother but uncertain in young love, was also pulled into the flashback vortex. "Women's films" are often about critical decisions, personal secrets, and hidden vulnerabilities. If the men become opaque and need others to explain them (a comrade in *Passage*, colleagues and a girlfriend in *Glory*), female characters are often more confessional. This makes them ideal for flashback exploration. They take us through their search for happiness, their mistakes, their

impulsive decisions and later reconsiderations. Thanks to emerging flashback schemas, filmmakers could make fresh and compelling stories out of some stereotypes associated with women.

### WOMAN. ACCEPTING LESS

Christopher Morley's 1939 best seller *Kitty Foylye* adapts the stream of consciousness technique of literary modernism to middlebrow fiction. This novel of an Irish girl in love with a scion of wealth presents its action in a torrent of free associations. What starts as a family memoir quickly becomes a cascade of memories from all phases of Kitty's life. Early on she is distressed by her father's death, but the scene of his dying is postponed for two hundred pages. Kitty's first-person narration flits to and fro across years and ends in a reader-friendly counterpart to Molly Bloom's monologue in *Ulysses*.

Two major screenwriters, Donald Ogdden Stewart and Dalton Trumbo, turned Kitty's whirligig memories into something more linear.<sup>1</sup> First, they provided a deadline-driven crisis. Kitty, on the eve of her marriage to the idealistic doctor Mark, is visited by her old love, Wyn. He asks her to go off with him at midnight, but with the condition that he'll never divorce his wife. She accepts his terms and starts to pack. Then the flashbacks start, creating a sort of working girl's *Citizen Kane*.

Stewart and Trumbo give us two time-travel guides. As Kitty packs, she looks at the snow globe that once adorned her father's mantelpiece. She then finds her mirror reflection demanding she think over her decision (fig. KLJN.1). "You're making a mistake, you know." Mirror Kitty, an illusion wrought by RKO's superb special effects department, will furnish the film with a detached second-person narration. This analytical voice-over will review nine phases of Kitty's past. Meanwhile the globe accompanies the voice as a reminder of her father's advice not to mix with high society. Inside the snow globe a little girl rides a sled, raising her arms in triumph (fig. KLJN.2).<sup>2</sup>

A brief scene shows Kitty at fifteen, in awe at the sight of a Philadelphia society ball. The rest of the film dismantles these illusions about the upper crust, as the genial but weak Wyn falls in



KLJN.1. *Kitty Foylye* (1940): In the mirror, Kitty's better judgment tries to warn her.



KLJN.2. Inside the snow globe: the girl on the sled becomes fully visible only in the final moments of the film.

love with her but doesn't dare leave his family. The drama comes from the struggle between Kitty's love for him and her proud independence. After Kitty and Wyn have secretly married, she denounces his family's plans to "prepare her" to enter their class. She divorces Wyn, only to find herself pregnant. In the book she has an abortion; in the film the child dies at birth.

During periods of Wyn's inattention, Kitty has casually dated Mark, who has begun to practice medicine at a children's hospital. After her baby dies, she decides to accept Mark's marriage proposal. This is what leads into the film's opening stretch, when Wyn turns up as she's packing for the wedding.

The first few minutes prepare us to exercise hindsight bias. As Mark and Kitty are arranging the wedding trip, he asks if she's sure her old romance is over. Although she promises it is, we must be curious about what that love was like and whether it's indeed finished. The romance is rekindled by the surprise return of Wyn, and in trying to persuade Kitty to run off with him he mentions high points of their affair. He reminds her of their favorite restaurant, their attendance at a society ball in New York, and "those dreams we dreamed."

All these breadcrumbs will be picked up in the flashbacks. When Wyn proffers the ring she returned to him, we expect to learn its earlier significance at some point. Even Wyn's sudden reappearance in Kitty's life foreshadows a similar moment when, five years before, he burst in on her and disrupted her budding romance with Mark. In addition, the emergence of Mirror Kitty



KLJN.3. The snow globe is the lead-in to Kitty's flashbacks.



KLJN.4. Waiting for Wyn, Kitty spies the news of his engagement through the distorting lens of a carafe.

prepares us for all the mirror reflections and optical distortions we'll see in the past-time scenes (figs. KLJN.3 and KLJN.4). Above all, we know before the flashbacks start that young Kitty's effort to make a life with Wyn in the flashback scenes will fail. This is the familiar hindsight bias created by starting near the climax of the story action.

The frame story sets up romantic drama's conventional choice between a solid, somewhat dull citizen and a dazzling but unreliable playboy. Before Wyn intrudes on Kitty in the opening, she helps Mark deliver a child in a tenement apartment. The image of Kitty holding the baby anticipates her ultimate alliance with Mark, a man devoted to children and one who can fulfill the deep-dense need she declares: to be a mother. For all her fiery independence, Kitty wants a home and a family, and those she can never have as Wyn's mistress.

It's this tension, I think, that explains the curious prologue added by the script. It's 1900, and expository intertitles on an image of an embroidery sampler tell us of changes in women's estate (fig. KLJN.5). In pantomime reminiscent of silent cinema, we see a woman gallantly given a seat on a crowded streetcar, serened by a swain with a ukulele, and, now married, preparing to have a child (fig. KLJN.6). These glimpses of feminine gentility are interrupted by a scene of suffragists proclaiming their rights. The message is plain: Now women must fight for a seat on a trolley, and men no longer line up to court them.

A working girl must struggle to find the right mate. She may



KLJN.5. Kitty's efforts at independence are given a historical backstory.



KLJN.6. In the wordless prologue, silent-cinema acting conventions satirize the idea of woman as object of worship.

be seduced (by Wyn) or casually dated (by Mark), but either way she is still likely to be taken for granted. Wyn counts on Kitty to wait around indefinitely. Mark, once Kitty agrees to marry him, assumes she'll help in his doctoring. Kitty makes the best choice she can, but the film's overall plot design suggests that some degree of unhappiness is the price of being a 1940s woman.

The pantomime prologue is cleverly knitted to the inner tale through the snow globe. As it opens each flashback, the snow veils the scene, and the globe's shape forms an iris around the action before opening out (fig. KLJN.7). This visual device, familiar from silent films, combines with the prologue's intertitles and wordless performances to invoke both another period and another mode of filmmaking. Reference to silent movies is a characteristic maneuver of 1940s Hollywood, and here it serves, like the flamboyant device of *Mirror Kitty*, to lighten what could have been a somber melodrama.

## WOMAN, WANTING IT ALL

*Kitty Foyle* was released in December 1940, and over the following months the flashback film became an emerging trend in American pictures. In September 1941, the same month *Citizen Kane* went into wide release, came *Lydia*, an unusual independent production. Its story and direction were by the major French director Julien

KLJN.7. The snow globe transitions evoke the image-fringed iris of old movies.



Duvivier, and the peerless Ben Hecht composed the screenplay. Coming fairly early in the trend, *Lydia* is one of the most formally and emotionally adventurous flashback pictures of the 1940s. Here the flashbacks present a melodrama more operatic and melancholy than what we find in *Kitty*, and the handling of emerging schemas is even freer.

Lydia Macmillan is a Boston dowager who has devoted herself to funding an orphanage. One evening she reunites with three old suitors: Michael the doctor, Bob the nightclub owner, and Frank, a blind concert pianist. A fourth beau, the seafaring Richard, has been invited to their meeting, but he's late. On a terrace high above the city, Lydia and the three men discuss their lives from 1897 to the present. Each man has loved her, but she has refused them all. Across nine flashbacks, we learn why.

The film's early flashbacks are initiated by Michael, who took Lydia to her first ball. She is an impulsive, willful girl, and after her first waltz she breathlessly decides that the football player Bob is the love of her life. Without telling her grandmother, who serves as her guardian, she runs off with Bob. The tardiness of a judge and Bob's drunken advances prevent their marriage, and she flees. Michael continues to court Lydia, and when he goes off to the Spanish-American War she promises to wait for him. A chance meeting with a blind boy impels her to start a school for blind children, and as it flourishes she becomes steadier and more mature. She hires Frank to teach music at the school, and he inevitably falls in love with her. When Michael returns from the war, both he and Frank are cast aside when Lydia becomes

captivated by the rough, ardent Richard—again, during a delirious waltz.

At this point in the evening, the three men stop reminiscing. They don't understand why Lydia refused them all, and they're puzzled by Richard, who has slipped in and out of their pasts like a ghost. Lydia, now admittedly "old and crusty," snaps, "You never knew me at all." Only Richard knew the real Lydia. That Lydia was born through his love.

Her recounted flashbacks take over, with her voice-over commentary exposing her feelings and occasionally blaming herself for them. Lydia sails off with Richard to a cottage in the family village Macmillansport. For a month they live in passionate abandon. Then one morning Richard leaves, explaining by letter that he has an attachment to another woman. He will break free, but it will take time. He urges Lydia to wait. She does. He never returns.

Back in Boston after Frank's triumphant premiere of a concerto he has dedicated to her, Lydia receives one last letter from Richard. She abandons Michael and Frank to meet him. Again he fails to turn up. Michael once more presses her to marry him, and she reluctantly accepts. But the death of her grandmother, followed by a lonely visit to the enchanted cottage, convinces her she can't accept humdrum love. "If I can't have all there is, I don't want less." She resigns herself to a life alone.

Now, courtesy of censorship, comes one of the most brutal denouements in 1940s cinema. Richard finally arrives at the gathering of the old friends. The film was planned to conclude with his reunion with Lydia, but the Breen Office objected that she had not suffered enough, given all the spectacular extramarital sex she enjoyed.<sup>3</sup> In the release version, Richard uncertainly comes forward and recognizes no one. The man who promised "Till I die, I'll want you every minute" stares vacantly at Lydia. He has forgotten her. Producer Alexander Korda declared that the Code-approved ending was better than the original, and we're likely to agree.<sup>4</sup>

A woman clinging to romantic illusions formed the center of Duvivier's prize-winning *Un carnet de bal* (1937). The recently widowed Christine comes upon her dance card from years gone by and decides to visit each of the men who flirted with her. One has become a priest, another a doctor, another a hairdresser.

What's striking is that the film, despite extensive voice-over, doesn't employ flashbacks, consisting instead of long conversations between Christine and the men. *Lydia* then seems a natural step in treating the yearning to recover a lost moment: instead of a present-time telling of the past, we get a full-fledged dramatization. Just as Christine devotes herself to the orphaned son of the admirer she truly loved, Lydia sets up a children's home. Yet Lydia seems more in the grip of heedless passion. After finding that Richard no longer remembers her, she insists in voice-over, "I'll love him always, just as tonight."

As in *Un carnet de bal*, episodes are devoted to each man's relation to the heroine, but *Lydia*'s screenplay weaves Richard throughout several flashbacks. By chance he sees her run out on Bob; he meets her and Michael at a cabaret and stands alongside Michael at the rail of their departing ship; and he catches up with her and Michael during a frantic sleigh ride. He brings into Lydia's life a heedless Byronic dash that can't be matched by Michael the sober scientist, Bob the bluff man of ordinary appetites, or the sensitive but introspective Frank.

During their idyll, while the wind tears at their cottage, Richard reads aloud to Lydia from Thomas Moore's 1817 romance *Lalla Rookh*. The book, a prime document of British Romanticism, tells of a princess whose heart is won by a poet; he turns out to be the prince she's pledged to marry. The passage celebrates her as his greatest delight in the world. Both prince and poet, Richard incarnates the otherworldly longing Lydia has harbored all her life. Significantly, *Lalla Rookh* is a tale with four embedded stories about thwarted or reunited lovers.<sup>5</sup>

If Lydia is to turn into the bitter old woman of 1941, if her romanticism is to be deflated, then it needs to be presented in all its power. That power is registered as synesthesia, the transposition of one sense mode into another, and it becomes a motif in the drama. Lydia finds her children's home when she realizes that blind Johnny has never seen red or blue. She tries to explain that red is like the blare of trumpets. Frank, the blind pianist who claims to imitate colors on the keyboard, imagines Lydia as a blue-eyed blonde.

Motifs of color mingle with those of music, and above all the



KLJN.8. *Lydia* (1941). Frank's concerto evokes both the sea and lovers' passion.

sea, an elemental symbol of Romantic art. Grandmother Macmillan's sense of the sea is pragmatic and worldly. She claims her ailments come from all the seawater she's swallowed. When Lydia gets engaged to Michael, the old lady pronounces him a fit captain to guide the family. But Lydia understands the sea differently. It is an elemental counterpart to her emotional and sexual energy. That sea is in Frank's playing, which summons up currents and tempests. Above all, the sea is Richard's home. The orgasmic sequence of the couple's stormy arrival at the cottage, with waves pounding their sailboat, dramatizes their passionate unity. Listening to Frank's concerto after Richard has abandoned her, all Lydia can imagine is the oceanic feeling that locks her in Richard's furious embrace (fig. KLJN.8).

In the course of this emotionally saturated tale, Duvivier freely reworks the schemas of flashback narrative. Instead of solves linking present and past, he supplies abrupt cuts, accompanied by snatches of slightly discordant music. The conventions of voice-over get treated with equal freshness: the men's present-time voices merely lead into the episodes, but Lydia accompanies her flashbacks with desperate, almost incessant explanation and commentary. Thanks to the achievements of sound cutting in the late 1930s, the sound track can snap instantly between dialogue in the past and old Lydia's bitter comments in the present, miked slightly closer, as if she were watching the scene along with us.

LYDIA TO RICHARD: I'm so idiotically happy I can't think.

LYDIA IN THE PRESENT: Oh, that tittering, giggling little fool.

LYDIA TO RICHARD: This must be different from what life usually is, don't you think?

...

RICHARD TO LYDIA: I've read books in a bunk with the lights out.

LYDIA IN THE PRESENT: *Oh, that stupid, stupid girl.*

RICHARD TO LYDIA, READING: Oh the delight now in this very hour. . . .

The interjections puncture Lydia's dream of love with the voice of disenchanting age. The musical score similarly turns on a dime, slipping sudden bits of melody into pauses in the conversation between Lydia and Grandmother.<sup>6</sup> The old lady's lines suggest that Richard will turn out to be "a scoundrel and a dog," while bursts of tunes from the dazzling ball express Lydia's undying love. Soon enough Grandmother will be proved right.

Lydia's voice seems to take charge of the narrative when she recounts how she "sinned" with Richard. But is she a reliable narrator? The screenplay and Duivivier's direction raise a few doubts. At the beginning of the evening with her old beaux, she recalls her first ball as a splendid affair, with a full orchestra playing in a vast mirrored space. She and Michael enter in dreamy slow motion. (This is a common mark of subjectivity in today's flashbacks but was rare at the time; it indicates Duivivier's affiliation with the silent *avant-garde*.) She asks if Michael recalls the hundreds of musicians and squadrons of bowing Prince Charmings. "I never forgot that ball." Cut back to the terrace, with Michael saying: "It was actually . . ." Cut to their arrival replayed in normal motion, as a disappointed Lydia stares at a drab ballroom with only a few musicians. As if to mock her, the sound track replays her earlier voice-over describing the space, the performers, and the rest. Her memory has inflated an ordinary social dance into the apotheosis of sophistication.<sup>7</sup>

Is her idyll with Richard exaggerated too? The cottage is a strange building, supported by voluptuous wooden women that served as ships' figureheads (fig. KLJN.9). In returning to the Macmillans' hometown, Lydia revisits the family past so often invoked by her grandmother. The old woman's praise of the manly



KLJN.9. The female figureheads turn the lovers' remote cottage into a version of a ship at sea.

men of her day finds an echo in Richard. Richard is the Macmillan lineage brought back to life.

Or perhaps not completely. Richard is often described as a ghost; he has an uncanny way of turning up, or of simply vanishing from a scene. Frank says, "You have been in love with a phantom." At the finale, the phantom returns and claims never to have known the woman who has loved him for forty years. I'm not suggesting that Lydia's month with Richard was a dream or hallucination, but the film plays with the possibility that her excitable imagination has inflated a casual affair.

The staid men in Lydia's life wonder why she refused them. For us the question is what turns the exuberant girl of the first flashback into the tart old woman we see. The answers lie partly in her simply growing up and using her money for a good cause. But she doesn't settle into maturity; the rebellious girl who wanted to wear her gown off her shoulders never surrenders. It takes Richard to reveal the real Lydia. At the end, after a puzzled Richard has denied knowing her, Lydia tells Michael she's like all women, never to be captured in a single man's imagination.

None of you loved me really. Bob loved a little idiot. Frank loved a girl with blue eyes and golden hair. You, my dear, you loved an angel. Richard, Richard loved only Richard. . . . There was no real Lydia, Michael. There were dozens of them.

In its closing moments, *Lydia* lays claim to the "prismatic" flashback method that Herman Mankiewicz had hoped to install in *Citizen Kane*.

But, as with Charles Foster Kane, we see not so much facets of a single character as phases of character change. Surely the flashbacks sharpen our appreciation of the vicissitudes of a person's life. Yet this plotting doesn't suggest a fully complex personality—fluctuating, unpredictable, torn by deep uncertainties. What kicks in are the familiar tactics of Hollywood characterization. The primacy effect reliably establishes underlying traits: Lydia remains the willful romantic she was at the start. Single causes trigger the events that cascade in linear fashion. She notices a blind boy, then founds a school. She kisses Richard, and they immediately run off. Hindsight bias presents character change as predestined. And women face a constrained set of narrative options: dull respectability or forbidden love. Kitty Foyle abandons heady passion for comfortable affection, while Lydia accepts solitude and lives with a memory, perhaps exaggerated, of transcendent love.

#### WOMAN'S MASKS: CALCULATING

The Hollywood storytelling aesthetic, consolidated for the sound cinema in the 1930s, dedicated to reliable first impressions and stable character traits, is not easy to dislodge. Does *The Affairs of Susan* (1945) dislodge it? So it might seem. The film provides a romantic-comedy version of Lydia's suggestion that a woman is always protean, never fully adequate to men's perceptions of her.

In the frame story, the government bureaucrat Richard Aiken is about to marry the stage star Susan Darell. But he gets nervous when he sees her collection of photos, each one a portrait of a different man in her life. He gets even more nervous at her party that night. Each of three men describes a different Susan. To Mike, the lumber tycoon from the West, she is a frivolous socialite who loves dancing. The intellectual Bill tells Richard she's austere and concerned only with ideas. And Roger, her producer and former husband, says that Susan loves to fight and is completely unpredictable.

Richard is confused. He assembles the men for a bachelor party, and in three long flashbacks they recount their affairs with her.

In Roger's account, Susan is a simple country girl who doesn't

understand why the postman wants to kiss her. Roger taps that purity and idealism by casting her as Joan of Arc. The role makes her a star, but her naïveté becomes a problem. Her frank comments alienate Roger's theatrical associates, who survive on flattery and lies. She costs him so many potential patrons that he divorces her. The Susan Roger knows is too simple to survive in show business.

Good-hearted Mike has another version. His Susan is bubbling and flirtatious, and she coaxes Mike into backing Roger's new show. Roger fumes. What ensues is the familiar triangle of *The Awful Truth* (1937) and similar romantic comedies, with the divorced couple expressing their love through constant quarreling while the straight man looks on uncomprehending. Through misunderstandings involving a gift brooch, Mike catches Susan in Roger's apartment and stalks out, but not before clobbering his rival.

To simple Susan and wily Susan, Bill adds deep Susan. An arrogant egghead, Bill tells of meeting her when she's reading on a park bench. He tries to seduce her by becoming her guru. He seems to be succeeding, as we see when Susan summons Mike and Roger to her apartment. In schoolteacher's garb and horn-rimmed glasses, she all but orders them to adapt for the stage. Bill's new best seller, a pretentious jeremiad on the state of the world. But her affair with Bill ends when she realizes that, good contrarian that he is, he doesn't believe in marriage.

Back in the present, Richard thanks the men for their accounts. He announces that he and Susan are about to fly out to Pasadena to be married under the eye of his mother (a sure sign that Richard will not get the girl). Roger, Mike, and Bill rush to her apartment, and they all propose to her. She turns down all of them except Roger, who has apologized contritely for divorcing her: "I didn't work hard enough at being married."

Three Susans? Not really. As in *Lydia*, the heroine retains the traits we see in her first flashback, when Roger meets the simple country girl in plaid shirt and blue jeans. What we are seeing aren't the facets of a complex character but the social masks she has learned to assume.<sup>8</sup> Susan learns from her marriage to Roger that she must play different roles. She comes back from Reno as



glamorous man bait and entices Mike through pure calculation. Similarly, her turn to intellectual pursuits is another way to secure a stage show for Roger, but mostly a ploy to make him jealous of Bill.

It's important, therefore, that Susan is a professional actress; a shopgirl or a dance-hall girl might not have carried her ruses off so well. At one point she can exploit metaknowledge. While she's dancing with Roger, he accuses her of pretending to be frivolous in order to seduce Mike, but she replies, "Maybe I was pretending when I was that simple little country girl. Did you ever think of that?" Early on she seems to be supremely malleable, a Galatea for Roger's Pygmalion. The climax reveals that this actress has learned the game better than the men.

By then it's clear that Susan has loved Roger all along. Her role-playing, including her apparently imminent marriage to Richard, is a scheme to bring Roger back. At the finale, when Roger confronts her in her bedroom, he learns that she counted on his reformation. The suitcase she has packed, supposedly for her honeymoon with Richard, contains her plaid shirt and blue jeans.

If this is such a conventional romantic comedy, what does the flashback structure add? For one thing, it sharpens the sense of Susan's multiple roles by segregating them, one role per flashback. For another, the structure allots some space to characterizing the men, so that the film can puncture male vanity in familiar romantic comedy fashion. The opening frame leaves a comically enticing breadcrumb trail as well. Confined closely to Richard's range of knowledge, we meet his three rivals in framed photographs that come to life as each man warns that Susan will deceive him. Under questioning Susan confesses she was married before, perhaps twice: as far as Bill is concerned, she says, "I did . . . and I didn't." We'll learn what that equivocation means. Mike tells of Susan's love of dancing; later we'll learn that she induced him to go beyond the stiff waltz he favored.

Most subtly, the flashback design conceals Susan's scheme. In *The Awful Truth*, the narration shifts between the divorced couple, so that we're aware of each partner's efforts to make the other jealous. But we're never privy to Susan's machinations. We must

infer them from her successes (bamboozling Mike) and mistakes (thinking Roger sent her a brooch that Mike had bought for her). Observing her solely from the men's side, we can grasp the totality of her scheme only at the very end, when in another echo of her first days with Roger, she regrets not kissing the postman.

The film's structure also exploits the customary leakiness of a cinematic flashback. Kitty Foyle's and Lydia Macmillan's flashbacks are restricted almost wholly to what the character could have seen, heard, or known about. In fact, part of their power derives from our not knowing what their men are up to offscreen. But as we've seen, cinema isn't confined to single perspectives to the degree that literary narration is. Accordingly, in *The Affairs of Susan*, Roger's initial flashback is tightly confined to what he knows, but both Mike's and Bill's go beyond their ken. These deviations serve mainly to develop the continuing battle between Susan and Roger. Only we witness their quarrels and truces, culminating in their eventual reunion.

The result is something we'll observe in other narrative designs. In the story world, Roger, Mike, and Bill are more or less equal competitors for Susan's heart. But the plot structure and the narration favor Roger. His flashback is the first and the longest; we're sometimes attached to him in scenes during the other men's flashbacks; and he's played by the biggest male star in the picture, George Brent. (Sixth-billed Richard Abel, who plays the fiancé Richard, is doomed from the credits onward.) Roger is first among equals, a principle we'll encounter in multiple-protagonist plots as well.

The plot shrewdly varies the order of the men's ranking, always to Roger's advantage. Lydia's parlor photos show Roger, then Bill, then Mike, so the primacy effect favors Roger. When their images speak, it's in the reverse of that order, so that Roger gets to deliver the topper "Sucker!" In the party, we first see Mike, then Bill, and finally Roger, who makes a big entrance. The flashbacks favor Roger, who supplies the exposition; Bill doesn't even make an appearance in the other men's episodes. At the apartment, Richard, Mike, and Bill pile in to propose. Roger is set apart again, revealed waiting in her bedroom, as she knew he would be.

*The Affairs of Susan* transposes the promise of a prismatic flashback into a comic key. If it lacks both the tough-tender atmosphere of *Kitty Foyle* and the tempestuous energy of *Lydia*, it shows how adaptable the device was. *Kitty* gives us recalled chunks of the past in a crisis-driven frame, and *Lydia* gives us shared memories recounted in tranquility. Both these patterns became common in the 1940s. So too did *Susan*'s template, the use of symmetrical flashbacks that may converge on a single character or diverge, as when *Letter to Three Wives* (1948) presents parallel protagonists.

### WOMAN'S MASKS: COMPULSIVE

Our sampling of the shapes of the gynocentric flashback can usefully wrap up by considering one of the most flagrantly engineered of them all. Nancy is ten, and her mother works as a servant for a wealthy family. The daughter of the house, Karen, is Nancy's best friend. Karen gets a diamond locket for her birthday, but she gives it to Nancy. Karen's mother, distressed, takes it back from the girl. Later the locket goes missing, and Karen's mother forces Nancy to confess that she stole it. Although the locket simply went astray by accident, Nancy and her mother are dismissed from the household.

This childhood trauma triggers the story action of *The Locket* (1946). It might serve as the beginning of a plot about a girl who becomes a pert and lively lady who is also a liar, thief, and killer. The film would almost certainly have to be told from her viewpoint, and it would be a study of a femme fatale in extremis. But *The Locket* doesn't attach us to Nancy's perspective, and it isn't told chronologically.

Given those choices, it might have been rendered as the memory of her psychiatrist, as is Arch Oboler's *Bewitched* (1945), a study of a murderous schizophrenic. But *The Locket* goes further—two steps further, in fact. Nancy's childhood episode is embedded in a flashback, which is in turn embedded in another flashback. The stories are nested like Russian dolls. The result is that the earliest story event, the crisis of Karen's missing locket, is the ultimate secret, the source of what teases us in other lay-

ers. Like *Passage to Marseille* (1945), *The Locket* (1946) turns on a puzzle of character: Is the beautiful and charming Nancy exactly as she seems? We find out when we witness a childhood trauma located in the center of the plot's geometry.

We start on the wedding day of John Willis. While Nancy, his dazzling bride-to-be, beguiles the guests, John is called to his study to meet Dr. Blair, a psychiatrist. Dr. Blair has come to warn John: Nancy is "hopelessly twisted." He explains that he and Nancy were once married. In flashback we see a young artist, Norman Clyde, visiting Blair's office. Norman tells him that Nancy could be charged with murder, and that she must act to save the life of a man about to be executed.

Norman's explanation opens his own flashback showing Nancy's romance with him. She calls the attention of her boss, Mr. Bonner, to Norman's paintings, but after the couple attend a party at the Bonner home, Norman finds that Nancy has stolen a guest's bracelet. She explains her childhood trauma, and that's when we get the innermost flashback.

The plot now backs its way out of that. When Nancy finishes explaining, we return to Norman's studio. He suggests to her that stealing the locket was revenge on Karen's mother. Nancy swears she'll never steal again, and Norman anonymously mails the bracelet back to its owner. Later, at another party at the Bonners', Norman hears a gunshot. He finds Nancy running down the corridor while a maid discovers Bonner's body. Later Nancy denies killing her boss, and Norman agrees to conceal what he saw. But he's tormented because Bonner's valet is now the suspect. Claiming Norman is too suspicious of her, Nancy breaks off their affair.

Norman's flashback now ended, he begs Dr. Blair to induce Nancy to confess and save the valet, who's to be executed tonight. Nancy, all innocence, denies killing Bonner. The next day, with the valet now executed, Norman flings himself through Blair's office window and falls to his death. Shaken, Dr. Blair returns to England, where he and Nancy take up the war effort. When a bomb is dropped on their street, Blair searches the rubble of the house and finds jewels that have gone missing from the collection of an acquaintance. Blair's discovery triggers his nervous breakdown, and Nancy leaves England.

We are back in the outermost frame, John's wedding. He remains skeptical of Blair's story. Nancy smilingly admits knowing Blair. But she says he was only her psychoanalyst and points out that he was recently released from an asylum. Having renewed John's trust, she goes to meet his mother, who is revealed to be the mother of Karen, John's sister and Nancy's playmate of long ago.

We now understand that Nancy is vengefully marrying into the family that had cast her out as a child. Karen has died years before. Now her mother fastens Karen's locket around Nancy's neck. Trying to brazen out the ceremony, Nancy is assailed by memories of her childhood and her crimes—a fourth, fragmentary flashback passage summing up the others. She becomes dizzy, screams, and faints. As she's numbly taken to a sanatorium, John decides to go with her, adhering to Blair's last bit of advice: "Lockets are only symbols. It's love she needed—and love she needs now." Maybe she isn't as hopelessly twisted as he had initially said, or as the plot itself seems to be.

*Beyond Glory* saved its revelation of trauma for the climax, but *The Locket* doesn't do that. Nor does the crucial scene come near the center of the running time, as the plot's Chinese-boxes geometry might suggest. The childhood scene arrives at the pivotal twenty-five-minute mark, after Nancy confesses to Norman that she stole the bracelet at the Bonners' party. Once the mystery of her behavior is solved, the plot emphasizes the aftershocks of Nancy's childhood. We no longer have a probe into personality but a scenario promoting suspense. As the evidence piles up against her in each episode, the question becomes: How will she outwit her man this time?

This maneuver is especially salient in the film's last third, when Blair suspects that Nancy has stolen jewelry from Lord Wyndham's collection. He tries to peek into her purse, but when she finally shakes out its contents, the missing locket isn't there. He is relieved, though his suspicions continue to prey on his mind. We have to wait too, but when Blair finds the necklace in the apartment wreckage, we're hardly surprised.

Throughout the men's stories, the film drops a few hints that Nancy isn't what she seems. At one point the camera lingers on her after Blair has left her in their London apartment. As she

closes the blackout curtains, she crouches and glances sidewise in the classic posture of guilt (fig. KLJN.10). Earlier, when she starts to tell Norman about Mrs. Willis's abuse of her, she turns from him and glances at the camera, as if asking us to believe her (fig. KLJN.11).

Just as provocative is the linking of Nancy with Cassandra, the suffering madwoman of Greek mythology who was ignored by those she tried to warn. Cassandra had the gift of prophecy, but that quality seems denied to Nancy. The prophetess we meet in the movie is a horoscope reader at the wedding, and her predictions are banal and contradictory. More telling is that the film's Cassandra is seen in Norman's painting, and her eyes are filmed over, blank and presumably blind. This image is counterposed to the portrait Norman later paints of Bonner's wife (figs. KLJN.12 and KLJN.13).

Mrs. Bonner is confined to a wheelchair, but on the canvas she is presented as majestically erect and possessed of a penetrating glance. The blind Cassandra seems scarily oblivious to her madness, while this painted mother figure seems all-seeing. It's no great reach to consider her a variant of Karen's mother, who tormented the young Nancy and who comes back at the end as another, less serene incarnation of Norman's second painting (fig. KLJN.14).

In sum, the prophetic powers of the heroine's mythological counterpart are claimed by the film's overall narration. It makes sure that details planted in the childhood episode (the locket, the painting, a music-playing cigarette box, the mean mother) come back with relentless force at the end. In *The Locket*, the breadcrumb trail is laid in the core flashback rather than in the framing situations leading up to it.

But we shouldn't forget that the Cassandra of myth was repeatedly raped. If she's mad, men helped make her that way. The film is a study as much in male neurosis as in female frailties. Behind the swagger and insults, the artist Norman is insecure, and he ends his life spectacularly. Earlier he had told Nancy, "If I had to relive these past few weeks, I'd kill myself." As for Dr. Blair, on the strength of a single encounter he smugly diagnoses Norman as "a paranoiac with guilt fantasies." Yet he conveniently



KLJN.10. *The Locket* (1946): Nancy furtively closes the curtains against the London Blitz. Is she looking off toward the hiding place of Lord Wyndham's locket?



KLJN.11. Nancy starts to confess her trauma to Norman, but her glance brings us into the situation as well.



KLJN.12. Cassandra in upswept curls and a classical landscape, with Nancy.



KLJN.13. Mrs. Bonner strides across a modern landscape with matriarchal authority.



KLJN.14. Nancy's severe mother-in-law to be.

forgets the stolen bracelet during the English episode. He seizes on his wife's childhood loss of the locket, but he ignores the consequences it had in adulthood. After a few years with Nancy and the Blitz, he's the one who ends up in an asylum.

Unlike the stalwart heroes of *Passage to Marseille*, Nancy's men trace no steady character arc. In *The Locket*, the men's failure to understand Nancy, let alone heal her, is made explicit when she tells Blair about a film she's just seen. "I'm all goose pimples." "A melodrama?" he asks, invoking a term often applied to crime films and thrillers.

NANCY: Yes, it was ghastly. You ought to see it, Harry. It's about a schizophrenic who kills his wife and doesn't know it.

BLAIR, LAUGHING: I'm afraid that wouldn't be much of a treat for me.

NANCY: That's where you're wrong. You'd never guess how it turns out. Now it may not be sound psychologically, but the wife's father is the—

BLAIR: Darling, do you mind? You can tell me later.

Nancy's father, she told Norman, was a painter like him, but he failed and is already dead when we see her as a child. In the popularized Freudianism of the 1940s, perhaps Nancy lacks the firm guidance of a strong male; certainly her kind but ineffectual mother isn't much help to her. But then neither are these supposedly grown-up men—no more than most of the males populating *Kitty Foyle*, *Lydia*, and *The Affairs of Susan*.

During Nancy's hallucinatory march to the altar, music and dialogue and visual moments from earlier in the film run riot in her mind (fig. KLJN.15). This suits the inward bent of *The Locket* as a whole, which contains almost no outdoor scenes. We might be tempted to attribute this interiority to the old standbys, wartime trauma and postwar malaise. The subjective sequences could be put down to the resurgence of Expressionist style, purportedly under the influence of German directors and technicians who fled to Hollywood. But as we've seen, we needn't invoke such remote causes. *The Locket*, like dozens of other flashback films of its era, offers its own blend of traditional and



KLJN15. During her walk to the altar, in the carpet Nancy sees the terrifying mother of her childhood.

emerging schemas. The variety we find at work in any film has its most concrete causes in filmmakers' desire to offer something at once fresh and familiar.

The reverse-engineering principles I'm examining here don't give me elbow room to talk about other enticing aspects of these four movies. At the level of performance and star acting, for instance, we could study Ginger Rogers's deployment of mouth-twisting in her shopgirl mode. Merle Oberon, famous for playing the willful Cathy of *Wuthering Heights*, gives Lydia a mix of stubbornness and childish enthusiasm. She becomes a flibbertigibbet when she sees Richard off, as if it's the farewell scene she's always dreamed of enacting. (One has to wonder if Korda made the film as a gift to his wife, Oberon, as a smitten Selznick paid tribute to Jennifer Jones.) In *The Affairs of Susan*, Joan Fontaine's performance has to maintain both the mask and the real Susan behind it. Her star image of a timid, unspoiled woman, forged in *Rebecca* (1940), serves her well throughout, edging her masquerade of sophistication with awkward moments. And Laraine Day, barely a featured player, is ideal for making Nancy pure facade, the perky girl next door who denies all the forces seething inside her.

For our purposes, the films illustrate how the dynamics of Hollywood storytelling absorb cultural commonplaces. Like amnesia, the theme of woman's mystery serves as material for formal processing, and the flashback was a major new processing site of the 1940s.