

HAVE YOU GOT A BAD CASE OF ... FLASHBACKITIS?

by Staton Rabin



Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca*, based on the play *Everybody Comes to Rick's*, written by Murray Burnett and Joan Alison, screenplay by Julius J. Epstein and Philip G. Epstein and Howard Koch

You know the feeling. You get to a point in your script at which the hero's dysfunctional childhood feeds into his current troubles. So you flash back to when he was a kid in 1968, at the exact moment when his father refused to take him to Disneyland®. Now, you are certain, the film audience will really understand what makes this guy tick. They'll understand the depths and origins of his suppressed anger and hurt. They'll understand why, ever since then, the sight of Mickey Mouse ears sends him into a homicidal rage. Right?

Well, maybe. But the truth is, whatever you gain in character backstory by using a flashback, you lose in story momentum. Most of the time, the trade-off isn't worth it.

Have flashbacks ever been used successfully? Yes, of course. In countless old movies, especially mysteries and detective thrillers. Notice the word "old." Flashbacks are now a cliché and are best avoided on that basis alone, as well as for many other reasons.

A few recent films have used flashbacks successfully, mostly when they constitute a clever and intriguing structural device. *Memento* features a man who loses his short-term memory after supposedly being struck on the head by his wife's killer, then tries to remember what happened so he can find her murderer. The film flashes back progressively earlier in time, eventually revealing the moment when his wife was killed. *Memento* was generally well-received by critics and audiences alike. But, in general, especially

if you are a developing screenwriter, you are far better off without flashbacks.

Recently, when I told one of my screenwriting students that I was allergic to flashbacks, he replied, "But, what about that flashback in a movie you acknowledge is great: *Casablanca*?"

My students can always be counted on to throw me a curve. In this case, I batted it right back at him. "That flashback was the worst thing in the movie," I said. Then I set out to prove it to him.

In *Casablanca*, Ilsa, the great lost love of Rick's life, walks into his gambling club—and back into his life. If the screenwriters didn't flash back to their romance in Paris, how could we possibly know they used to be lovers? After all, the writers didn't want to write on-the-nose dialogue which would tell us in an inane and literal-minded way the exact nature of Rick and Ilsa's past relationship. What alternative did they have but to use a flashback?

To answer that question, let's take a look at the scene from *Casablanca* in which Ilsa first arrives at Rick's club in Morocco and sees Sam, Rick's piano player and friend.

WHAT DOES THIS SCENE TELL THE AUDIENCE?

First, it tells us that Sam and Ilsa know each other. They greet each other by name even though no one has introduced them. Sam notes that he never expected to see her "again," which means they've met before

but probably haven't seen each other in a while. They apparently knew each other long enough for him to know what she means when she asks him to play "some of the old songs."

Might we mistakenly think that Sam and Ilsa used to be lovers? No. First of all, he calls her "Miss Ilsa," a sign of respectful distance. Second, he's African-American, and back when this movie was made (1942), an implied interracial affair between the black piano player and the Caucasian star of the movie would have been unlikely, to say the least. If we're still hazy about this, Ilsa asks Sam about Rick's whereabouts and spends a lot of time trying to extract this information from him. This implies she has more than a casual interest in Rick. Sam lies (badly) to try to keep Ilsa away from Rick. When Ilsa catches him in the lie, he begs her to keep away, saying she's "bad luck" for Rick.

A beautiful woman is rarely bad luck for a man unless she's had an intimate relationship with him. It seems unlikely that Sam is implying that Ilsa lost Rick's money in the stock market or caused him some other form of "bad luck." We already know from this movie's setup that Rick is a good guy but is strangely and mysteriously embittered towards women. Something changed him from being the kind of guy who fights for good causes (in the Spanish Civil War, for example), to an angry man who claims he sticks his neck out for no one. We want to know what changed him. When Ilsa walks

into his club, we immediately understand that she's the one who hurt him before. When Rick hears "As Time Goes By," he flies into a rage. Rick and Ilsa's love song makes the nature of their past relationship explicit. Ilsa is the source of his pain and bitterness. As we all know, the only people who can really hurt us are those we love or have loved.

If there are a few slow-witted people in the audience who still don't "get" that Rick and Ilsa were once lovers, the screenwriters have added some further indications in the action lines: Sam's look of "fear" when he sees Ilsa walk in, the fact that she's "not as self-possessed as she tries to appear," that "there is something behind this, some mystery," the close-ups on their faces.

After all that, do we really need to flashback to Rick and Ilsa's love affair in Paris when the Nazis march into the city interrupting their romantic idyll, and she gushes fearfully/passionately: "Was that cannon fire or is it my heart pounding?"

The affair we imagine between them is not only perfectly clear based upon the way they react when they bump into each other again in *Casablanca*, but it is also more romantic in our imagination than anything we see on the screen could ever be. Showing us in a flashback what they were like together during their blissful Paris affair actually diminishes the impact of it. As it happens, craggy, middle-aged Humphrey Bogart and fresh-faced Ingrid Bergman look like a rather odd combination in a clinch.

Make no mistake: *Casablanca* is a great movie. But that flashback is unnecessary and the only weak moment in an otherwise beautifully written film.

THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF FLASHBACKS

If you don't know how to write exposition or backstory without resorting to flashbacks, I hate to break it to you, you're not much of a screenwriter. At least not yet. Flashbacks are a crutch, the first resort of screenwriters who don't know how to get across essential background information about their characters in a more clever and subtle way. Almost without exception, any backstory you want your audience to know—character flaws, childhood traumas, past behavior, etc.—can be presented in dialogue and action, without flashbacks. Is it easy to convey backstory without resorting to flashbacks? No. That's why good screenwriters are paid so much

money. Flashbacks are an easy way out and almost never work.

Despite my caveats, I'm sure many of you will use flashbacks in your screenplays. So you should be familiar with the various types of flashbacks and how they work.

NARRATED FLASHBACKS

Flashbacks can be used with or without voiceover narration. Some films are narrated in intermittent voiceover that comments periodically on the action we see in flashback on the screen—whether that action took place in the narrator's life minutes, hours or years ago. In other movies, we hear narration only at the beginning and end of the film. It's used to frame or bookend a story that is told entirely in one long, continuous flashback.

Sometimes, narrated films shift backwards and forwards in time, alternating between scenes from the past and present.

It goes almost without saying that if a film is narrated by a character in the movie and not merely the disembodied voice of an "all-knowing," omniscient person, that character must have been present for all the events he describes and still be alive "to tell the tale." What we are seeing onscreen is supposedly his memory of what happened, so he must have been a witness to what he describes. This is one of many reasons why *American Beauty*, which is narrated by a dead man from beyond the grave, is not my cup of tea. But, admittedly, most critics and film audiences were not bothered by this storytelling device.

THE "UNRELIABLE NARRATOR"

A well-accepted "rule" for writing mystery fiction is that the narrator must never lie to the reader—which suggests that the narrator of a mystery film shouldn't lie to the audience, either. Your narrator can, of course, lie to other characters in your film—just not to the audience, unless they sense he is lying to them or he is contradicted by what we see on the screen. Don't cheat your audience by showing them something on the screen that is supposed to be true, and then later tell them that it isn't, simply because doing so makes your writing job easier.

But this rule is often broken, and sometimes to good effect. In *Memento*, the narrator is "unreliable" due to a memory disorder. He gives us unintentionally misleading information (seen in flashbacks) as he struggles to remember his wife's murder



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and find her killer. At the end of the movie, we (and he) discover the most horrifying missing piece of the puzzle: His memory loss is selective, and he—and not some mysterious “John G.”—was his wife’s killer. In retrospect, those misleading flashbacks dance recklessly on the border of being a “cheat” for the audience, but don’t quite cross it. And in *The Usual Suspects*, the narrator is outright lying to us, and we don’t learn this until the end of the movie because the flashbacks echo his lies.

If you’re a purist like me, you may decide that it’s “cheating” for flashbacks to give us misinformation. After all, even prevaricating film characters know what really happened. Flashbacks, which are supposed to depict what’s in a character’s memory bank, should show his actual recollection of events: the subjective truth. Even if the character is lying to us, the flashbacks shouldn’t. But, what if a character’s memory of events is highly subjective, self-deluding or flawed? No problem; that’s the case in real life, too. But we should still be seeing events in flashback as characters actually remember them, even if their memories are imperfect or are colored by wishful thinking.

It’s possible to show events on the screen from one character’s perspective and have them look entirely different when shown from another’s. The great Japanese film *Rashomon* shows one rape and murder from four different witnesses’ perspectives, with vastly differing results.

It is also legitimate to show a film audience part of a scene but leave some crucial piece of visual information off-frame, or end the scene early and then later reveal the missing pieces to the puzzle via flashbacks. For example, we might assume who the murderer is but not be able to see his face because he is in the shadows or off-frame. Later, we might find out our assumptions were wrong and that we have been legitimately fooled by the filmmakers. “Fooled” is not the same as being cheated, and audiences know the difference.

What does this mean for you as a screenwriter? It means that when it comes to flashbacks and narration, sins of omission are okay—but not sins of commission. You can mislead your audience by strategically leaving out information and then revealing it later in flashback. You can even cleverly misdirect their attention (by, for example, making them suspect “the butler did it” when it was actually the friendly and cooperative garden-

er). The narrator can lie to other characters in the film—and maybe even to us. But you probably shouldn’t have both the narrator AND the camera (flashbacks) intentionally “lie” to the audience. You may disagree with me, and many good screenwriters do. But here’s an example of a film that, in my view, handles this issue well.

Laura, the classic detective movie, is narrated by Waldo Lydecker (Clifton Webb), the erudite and jealous man who knew Laura and who ultimately turns out to be the murderer. His memory of events and his self-serving perspective on his Svengali relationship with Laura are subtly contrasted with the “reality flashback” we see unfolding onscreen as he describes for the detective (Dana Andrews) the history of his relationship with her. But the movie doesn’t cheat us; and though we are led at various times to suspect many innocent characters of murder, as in all good mysteries, we are led there legitimately.

Lydecker dies in the end and narrates the film from beyond the grave. Does it bother me that a dead man narrated the film as it did for *American Beauty*? No. *Laura* is a far better film than *American Beauty*. Sometimes, rules are made to be broken. But it’s important to know what the rules are even if you decide to break them.

In *Laura*, it’s clear we are getting Lydecker’s skewed perspective on events rather than the actual truth. But everything we see onscreen happened just the way it appears. In narrated movies, the pictures we see in flashback must always be honest or at least an honest portrayal of the narrator’s perspective. The true narrator of a film is the camera, though often the camera is subjective as when a character is drugged and the visuals turn woozy or we view the action through the eyes of one of the characters. The raw information the camera reports to us must be true or at least what the narrator truly believes.

In some movies, we actually see the narrator at the start of the movie, and in others we don’t see the narrator until we meet the character (presumably in a younger incarnation since he is speaking of the near or distant past) later in the movie. The great film *To Kill A Mockingbird* is narrated by the film’s little girl, Scout, from the vantage point of adulthood. We never actually see Scout as an adult but understand that she is the narrator looking back on a formative experience in her own childhood.

The Hitchcock movie *Rebecca* starts with the spooky image of forbidding iron gates to a creepy mansion, and the first words we hear are the narrator (Joan Fontaine) saying, “Last night, I dreamt I went to Manderley, again ...” Soon after, she appears in the movie as her (slightly) younger and much more innocent self.

BOOKENDS

In many narrated films, we meet the narrator at the beginning and end of the movie. The entire story is told in flashback, book-ended by this framing device. For example, in the first scene we might meet Gramps who is telling his little grandson about what happened to him back in the Good Old Days. Then we flash back to Gramps as a gangly, optimistic youth wearing a James Dean motorcycle jacket and wrestling (future) Grandma in the back of his convertible at the drive-in. Then at the end, we return to old Gramps, who says something like, “So, sonny boy, that’s the end of my story. And that’s the way it was back when I was a young whippersnapper like you ...”

Of course, this is a corny way to write a movie. But if you’re going to use flashbacks in your film, it’s usually better (except in certain types of thrillers) to use the bookend device and tell the story in proper chronology from beginning to end rather than lurching back and forth through time. Just remember that in any film framed by bookends, the material that frames it must have its own story. There must be a conflict in that portion of your movie and a beginning, middle and end to resolve it, just as in your main story.

PLOT-REVELATORY FLASHBACKS

Plot-revelatory scenes or images of past events are the type of storytelling device that most of us mean when we refer to flashbacks. Many suspense and detective movies (film noir, etc.) gradually reveal essential information in flashback. We may learn in bits and pieces who killed the murder victim and how they committed the crime by flashing back to the killer’s modus operandi. We may learn about the detective’s emotional hang-ups through flashbacks. He might gather all the suspects in the room and in flashback give his version of how the crime was committed. Or, instead, we might see the weary, beaten-up private eye stumble into a room, and when a friend asks him, “Harry! What happened to you?” he replies, “Well, it all started

when I met this dame. She was bad; she was dangerous. She came into my office begging for help and sporting more curves than a scenic railway.” Then we flash back to what happened to him and return to the detective periodically and then again as he finishes up his story at the end of the movie.

Some thrillers or mysteries reveal or suggest backstory in fragments or flashes. Tantalizing images can flash by in a blink, their meaning only becoming apparent later in the story. The 1994 Atom Egoyan film *Exotica*, while not in the strictest sense a mystery, contains many mysterious elements. It uses an occasional flashed image to indicate that the film’s protagonist is troubled by something mysterious in his past. The image is of a woman and a young girl who look happy together, so it’s puzzling at first why this image is so traumatic for him. It becomes apparent only as the film progresses that this memory is of his own wife and daughter, both of whom died tragically.

ALTERNATE SCENARIOS

This type of flashback represents the possibly unreliable or biased memory of one or more of your characters. A scene may be rewound to its beginning and play out over and over again in different form or from different characters’ perspectives. As you probably know, how events play out in life or in movies is in the eye of the beholder; and people’s memories are imperfect, often colored by guilt, wishful thinking, deception or denial. *Rashomon* is a classic example of a film that flashes back on several possible alternate scenarios as four characters each give their own version of events when recapping a rape and murder they witnessed.

This device can also be used effectively in comedies such as *He Said, She Said*, which replays the same events from a male and female perspective.

In some films, such as *It’s A Wonderful Life* or *Sliding Doors*, we see an alternate or parallel reality from the main character’s perspective—stemming from a single, random event or choice that radically changes the course of all the characters’ lives. These alternate realities are not flashbacks since they don’t recount actual past events, but they serve a similar function.

REDUNDANT VOICEOVER

Flashbacks and voiceover often go together like ham and eggs. The important thing to know is that voiceover should never merely

repeat the visual information we receive on the screen. It should complement it, not duplicate it. Narration and visuals should work in counterpoint to one another.

If a character in your script says in the narration, “Then I walked into my office and found my secretary, Ms. Hossenfeiffer, lying dead in a pool of blood on the floor,” don’t simply show us exactly what your character describes. That would be redundant. Instead, tell us something we don’t know. Perhaps talk about pleasant things in the narration so that the image will shock us. Talk about something only tangentially related. Philosophize. Or show your character is in denial or outright lying. His mood may even be in direct contrast to the negative force of the image. Do anything you want but, above all, make sure your narrator is a fascinating talker.

FLASHFORWARDS?

Self-evident. Often integrated with flashbacks. Can also be used for humorous effect (e.g., happy bridegroom, flash forward to unhappy husband).

OOPS

More often than not, when I read screenplays that contain flashbacks, I get the feeling that the writer reached a certain point in

creating his story, realized that he “forgot” to give us some necessary backstory, and said to himself, “Oops. Well, I can always pick this up in a flashback.” This is not good screenwriting. Don’t let this happen to you. When writing your script, flashbacks should be your last resort, not your first. Flashbacks can sometimes enhance the quality of a film. But for modern screenwriting, it is an old, “tired” device. I’ve hardly ever read an aspiring screenwriter’s script that used flashbacks properly—to enhance or pace the story. Instead, too often they are a misguided attempt to make up for the writer’s deficiencies or a clumsy but convenient way to provide exposition or backstory. Cure yourself of flashbackitis. It will make you a better screenwriter. (i)

STATON RABIN is a screenwriter and veteran script analyst for screenwriters, major agencies, film studios and *scr(i)pt* magazine. Her novel *Betsy And The Emperor* is in development as a film with Al Pacino attached to star. Ms. Rabin teaches screenwriting at Hudson Valley Writers’ Center in Sleepy Hollow, NY, is a frequent guest speaker at Mark DeGasperi’s NYU classes for screenwriters, and has just finished writing a new book: *Don’t Write What You Know (And Other Radical Lessons for Screenwriters)*.



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