

6.

Film Futures

In Jorge Luis Borges' short story "The Garden of Forking Paths," a character discovers that the sage Ts'ui Pen has devised a labyrinthine novel:

In all fictions, each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the work of the virtually-impossible-to-disentangle Ts'ui Pen, the character chooses—simultaneously—all of them. *He creates*, thereby, several futures, several times, which themselves proliferate and fork. In Ts'ui Pen's novel, *all* the outcomes in fact occur: each is the starting point for further bifurcations. Once in a while, the paths of that labyrinth converge: for example, you come to this house, but in one of the possible pasts you are my enemy, in another my friend.¹

Ts'ui Pen didn't shrink from the ultimate consequences of this:

He believed in an infinite series of times, a growing, dizzying web of divergent, convergent, and parallel times. That fabric of times that approach one another, fork, are snipped off, or are simply unknown for centuries, contains all possibilities. In most of those times, we do not exist; in some, you exist but I do not; in others, I do and you do not; in others still, we both do.²

Borges' conceit has its counterpart in quantum physics, which has played host to the idea of parallel universes—an infinite array of possible worlds, each as real as the one we apparently know.³

To this conception of time Gary Saul Morson objects, in his exacting and stimulating study *Narrative and Freedom*. Morson is concerned to show that most novels create a pattern of closed time and foregone choices, which in turn make a broader

moral or ideological position seem inevitable. Conventional techniques like foreshadowing and “backshadowing,” he suggests, build a grim determinism into a plot’s very architecture, denying temporal openness and the moral freedom that implies. Morson thus finds Borges’ parable quite disturbing. If all possibilities exist equally, when “nothing that could have taken place fails to take place,” then ethical action is rendered impossible. “Because all choices are made somewhere, the totality of good and evil in existence becomes a zero-sum game What difference does it make what I do, if I also do the opposite?”⁴ For Morson, the conception of alternative universes cannot ground a responsible conception of human action, let alone an adequate scheme of narrative time.

Yet Morson need not worry, I think. Although he finds many examples in Dostoevsky and Tolstoy of his preferred method of conjuring up alternative courses of action (he calls it “sideshadowing”), narratives derived from the forking-path conception don’t really approach Borges’ “growing, dizzying web.” In fiction, alternative futures seem pretty limited affairs. Folklore bequeaths us the two-doors problem (the lady or the tiger?) and the motif of the three paths leading to three fates. *A Christmas Carol* offers Scrooge merely a binary choice about his future, and in O. Henry’s 1903 short story “Roads of Destiny,” the poet-hero faces only three futures: to take the road on the left, to take the one on the right, or to return to town.

Recent cinema is becoming more experimental on several fronts, particularly in relation to complicated uses of time and point of view, and so we shouldn’t be surprised to find forking-path plots turning up more often on our screens. Like “Roads of Destiny,” they tend to proceed from a fixed point—the fork—and purportedly present mutually exclusive lines of action, leading to different futures. Consider Krzysztof Kieslowski’s *Blind Chance* (1981), which after a rather enigmatic prologue shows the medical student Witek racing for the train that will take him on his sabbatical from medical school. He leaps aboard just in time and is carried to a life as a Communist functionary. But when he reaches a crisis in that life, the film cuts back to the railroad station, and he is a young man again, once more racing for the train. Now he fails to catch it, stays at home, and is given a brand-new future. That future will be altered once more when the narration flashes back to his run along the platform and a new chain of events starts. A similar pattern is enacted in the Hong Kong film *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1* (1997) and Tom Tykwer’s *Run Lola Run* (1998). These films present their futures seriatim, returning to the switchpoint after each trajectory is finished. By contrast, Peter Howitt’s *Sliding Doors* (1998) presents its alternative plotlines in alternation, continually intercutting one future with the other.

None of these films hints at the radical possibilities opened up by Borges or the physicists. *Blind Chance* and *Run Lola Run* present only three alternative worlds, whereas *Sliding Doors* and *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1* offer the minimum of two. Just as important, all these plots hold the basic characters, situations, and locales quite constant across stories. In both trajectories of *Sliding Doors*, Helen must cope with losing her job and coming to terms with her partner, Jerry (who is having an affair with Lydia). *Too Many Ways to Be No.1* centers on Wong, a petty triad who’s offered a chance to work with a Mainland gang trying to smuggle automobiles into China. The

plotlines pivot around his decision: Grab the cars and flee? Or walk away from the deal? *Run Lola Run* concentrates on a crisis: Lola's boyfriend, Manni, has lost money belonging to the gang boss, Ronnie, and she must come up with 100,000 marks before noon, when Manni intends to rob a supermarket to make up the deficit. The plot traces various consequences of her efforts to get the money to save Manni.

In *Blind Chance*, the situation facing the protagonist offers somewhat more diffuse possibilities, but the action eventually revolves around how Witek will live after the death of his father. If he catches the train, he winds up becoming a functionary in the Communist government. If he misses the train, he either becomes an activist in an underground Catholic youth movement, or stays behind and returns to medical school, marrying a woman he met there. In *Blind Chance* the outcomes boil down to thematically grounded alternatives: In Poland of the late 1970s, every choice turns out to be political, even the apparently nonpolitical choice of being a doctor.

So instead of the infinite, radically diverse set of alternatives evoked by the parallel universes conception, we have a set narrow both in number and in core conditions. None of these plots confronts the ultimate and more disturbing alternative world demands: Lola is never shown as Manni's sister in a rival universe, Matt does not become Wong's enemy, Helen does not turn into her rival Lydia, and in no version does the protagonist fail to exist at all. We have something far simpler, rescuing the characters from Morson's zero-sum game but—and this is my major point—corresponding to a more cognitively manageable conception of what forking paths would be like in our own lives.

Far from representing a failure of nerve on the part of filmmakers, I think that the strategy of narrow alternatives offers clues to the way forking-path narratives actually work and work upon us. Narratives are built upon not philosophy or physics but folk psychology, the ordinary processes we use to make sense of the world. Often, particularly in media like film, perceptual skills that we've developed to give us reliable information about the world are deployed no less commandingly in following stories. These skills sometimes fail the most stringent deductive tests, as experiments in everyday rationality suggest.⁵ Yet the shortcuts, stereotypes, faulty inferences, and erroneous conclusions to which we are prone play a central role in narrative comprehension. In following a plot we reason from a single case, judge on first impressions, and expect, against all probability, that the rescuer will arrive on time because we want it that way. Granted, this is partly a matter of convention, built up over decades of filmmaking; but the conventions depend partly upon the propensities of folk psychology. Film characters are usually stereotypes, but we rely on stereotypes—not necessarily harmful ones—to get through our lives. We expect crossing guards to like kids and politicians to evade hard questions. These stereotypes are confirmed at rates greater than chance in everyday life, so no wonder that they turn up in movies.

Because we bring folk psychology to bear on narratives all the time, why should tales of parallel worlds be any different? We spin counterfactuals in everyday life. If I had left the parking lot a minute or two later, I wouldn't have had the fender-bender that became such a nuisance to me for the next month. This sort of homely reflection on short-term outcomes, in which only small things change from version to version,

seems the basis of *Sliding Doors*, *Too Many Ways*, and *Run Lola Run*. Occasionally, of course, we also meditate on our life course. Here, for instance, is Brian Eno explaining how he found his career:

As a result of going into a subway station and meeting Andy [Mackay], I joined Roxy Music, and as a result of that I have a career in music I wouldn't have had otherwise. If I'd walked ten yards further on the platform or missed that train or been in the next carriage, I probably would have been an art teacher now.⁶

It's this sort of speculation that seems to be captured in *Blind Chance*, and even if the cast may change more drastically than in short-term imaginings, we remain the hero of our imagined future.

Likewise, at any moment we can easily imagine 2 or 3 alternative chains of events, as Eno does, but not 20 or 60, let alone an infinite number. It may be relevant that outstanding examples of forking-path tales in literature conform to similar constraints. *A Christmas Carol* and "Roads of Destiny" display the same limitations—a very, very few options and no deep ontological differences between the futures displayed. Storytellers' well-entrenched strategies for manipulating time, space, causality, point of view, and all the rest reflect what is perceptually and cognitively manageable for their audiences, and the multiple worlds invoked by Borges and modern science don't fit that condition. Add to this the canons and conventions of the film medium as well, and these may work to limit the proliferation of forking paths. In cinema, powerful storytelling traditions reshape such uncommonsensual ideas into something far more familiar. This tendency has the additional payoff of setting to rest Morson's worries about a nihilistic reduction of an action's ethical dimensions; by opening up only two or three forking paths, these plots make certain choices and consequences—about politics, crime, and love—more important than others.

My main purpose in what follows is to chart some key conventions on which four forking-path films rely. This will let us see how the exfoliating tendrils of Borges' potential futures have been trimmed back to cognitive manageable dimensions, by means of strategies characteristic of certain traditions of cinematic storytelling. I hope to show that these forking-path movies, calling forth folk psychological inferences and designed for quick comprehension, have stretched and enriched some narrative norms without subverting or demolishing them. Indeed, part of the pleasure of these films stems from their reintroduction of viewer-friendly devices in the context of what might seem to be ontologically or epistemically radical possibilities.⁷

Rules of the Game

Here are seven conventions of forking-path tales.

1. Forking paths are linear.

In principle, as Borges' Ts'ui Pen indicates, any instant at all could initiate a new future. As Kieślowski remarks, "Every day we're always faced with a choice which could end our entire life, yet of which we're completely unaware. We don't ever really know

where our fate lies.”⁸ In *Blind Chance* and our other films, however, narrative patterning obligingly highlights a single crucial incident and traces out its inevitable implications. *Each* moment isn’t pregnant with numerous futures. Instead, one event becomes far more consequential than others, and those consequences will follow strictly from it. Such linearity helps make these plots intelligible, yielding two or three stories that illustrate, literally, alternative but integral courses of events—something fairly easy to imagine in our own lives and to follow on the screen. “Of course the number of parallel universes is really huge,” remarks a physicist. “I like to say that some physicists are comfortable with little huge numbers but not with big huge numbers.”⁹ As film viewers, we like the number of parallel universes to be *really* little.

Moreover, in our films, each path, after it diverges, adheres to a strict line of cause and effect. There is usually no later branching after the first fork, none of what Borges calls “further bifurcation.” After missing or catching her train, Helen in *Sliding Doors* doesn’t divide again, and although Wong in *Too Many Ways* and Witek in *Blind Chance* must make further choices along each path, the plot doesn’t split into more proliferating consequences. The narratives assume that one moment of choice or chance determines all that follows.

Still, forking-path plots offer some wiggle room. Although causality becomes strict once certain processes are put into motion, they can be set in motion by felicities of *timing*. One lesson of such films is that split-seconds matter. If Witek’s hand had clutched the train car’s handrail at just the right moment, if Wong had decided to pay his share of the dinner bill and walk out of the massage parlor, if Lola had not been slowed down by this or that passerby, if Helen’s path had not been blocked by a little girl . . . things would be very different. Again, the films pivot around a folk psychological “if only”: We are back with Eno on the tube platform, when *Music for Airports* owes everything to a momentary encounter with Andy Mackay.

Sometimes one of these films does open up a new fork, but it tends to do so retrospectively, by looping back to another moment of choice from a later point. Even then, it will presuppose yet another linear trajectory stemming from *that* moment.¹⁰ *Sliding Doors* concludes by showing the upshot of one story, in which Helen survives a fall downstairs, breaks off with Jerry, and leaves the hospital just when James does. At this very late point, the film starts to reenact a moment in the film’s setup; that is, it marks a switchpoint *earlier* than the one that launched the film’s alternative futures. The result is a neat closure device I’ll discuss later. By contrast, *Too Many Ways to Be Number One* creates a new choice point in order to generate a somewhat open ending. Initially the paths fork when Wong, invited to meet with the Mainland triads, is asked to pay the bill for a meal and entertainment at a bathhouse. In the first version, he doesn’t pay and robs the Mainland gang, leading his pals on a frantic race out of Hong Kong and over the border. In the second version, he does pay, avoids a fight, and moves to Taiwan. The epilogue returns us to the initial situation of the fortune-teller in the epilogue, and again Wong’s friend Bo invites him to dinner and the bathhouse, but now Wong’s reaction implies that he may not accept the offer. In effect, the epilogue suggests that a new choice point has been opened: Instead of *not paying* and *paying*, there’s *going to the meeting* (with the grim outcomes we’ve seen)



Figure 6.1 *Run Lola Run* (1998): Lola brushes against a protesting woman as she races along.

and *not going*. Staying in Hong Kong and avoiding Bo's scheme altogether becomes a third option for Wong, one that fits into a broader theme suggesting that Hong Kong's future lies neither with the Mainland nor with Taiwan.

The chief exception to my claims about causal linearity and timing in these tales comes in the interpolated flashforward passages in *Run Lola Run*. These present very quick montages of stills, prefaced by a title ("And Then . . ."), which trace out the futures of secondary characters. Most of these also adhere to a linear chain of cause and effect, but in one instance, their relation to the plot's main causal momentum is complicated. In each trajectory, running Lola bumps, or nearly bumps, the same woman on the street (Figure 6.1), and the film provides a flash montage of the woman's future. In each story she, like Lola, has a different future. But why should the timing of Lola's passing create such varying futures for the nameless woman? Bumping or not bumping hardly seems sufficient to launch radically different outcomes for this woman's life. Tykwer's insert works well as a mockery of the "butterfly effect," but I suspect that audiences would have difficulty understanding an entire film based around divergent futures that don't spring from a web of causally connected conditions.

2. The fork is signposted.

Tykwer's "And Then . . ." titles can stand as an emblem of the explicitness with which forking paths must be marked. Within the story world, characters may comment upon their divergent futures. During *Blind Chance*'s second tale, Witek remarks to the priest, "Imagine! If a month ago I hadn't missed a train, I wouldn't be here with you now." In *Sliding Doors*, Helen explains that her mugging delayed her return home: "If I had just caught that bloody train it'd never have happened"—to which Jerry, relieved that he wasn't caught philandering, replies dismissively, "If only this and what if that . . ." These are if only and "what if" plots.

To reinforce such bald announcements, each film's narration sets up a pattern that clearly indicates the branching points—a kind of highlighted "reset" button, usually emphasizing matters of timing. *Blind Chance* uses a freeze frame, a reprise of the same musical accompaniment, and the return of nearly identical footage of Witek pelting through the station. *Sliding Doors* employs a rewind mechanism; Helen fails to catch the train, but her movements are then reversed so that she strides backward



Figure 6.2 Wong's wristwatch: the opening shot of *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1* (1997).



Figure 6.3 *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1*: Wong's cracked watch crystal after his death in his first future.



Figure 6.4 *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1*: The wristwatch now on the street as Wong thrashes Bo, launching his second future.

up the stairs and, after another pause, comes down and does manage to hurry on board. *Run Lola Run* replays the fall of Lola's bright red phone receiver and her racing through her mother's room, down the stairs, and out into the street. In addition, before each new future Tykwer provides a slow, red-tinted scene of Lola and Manni in bed brooding on their love.

The motif of timing is also made evident in the branching point of *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1*. A close-up of Wong's wristwatch (Figure 6.2) opens the film and leads directly to his session with the palm reader (played silent). Wong goes out to the street, where his pal Bo begins to urge him to attend the meeting. At the end of the first story, as Wong and his gang lie dead, we see his watch on the ground, its crystal shattered (Figure 6.3). Then we cut back to the watch—this time not at the palm reader's but placed on the street, as Wong is revealed once more scuffling with his pal (Figure 6.4). The epilogue will be built around a return to the watch at the palmist's, as we first saw it, but this time with the soundtrack giving us full information about the forking-path predictions. The close-up of the watch becomes a singularized device marking a return to points at which the stories relaunch.

3. Forking paths intersect sooner or later.

When we think about forking paths in ordinary life, we tend not to populate our scenarios with utterly different casts of characters. When I imagine what would have happened if I hadn't come in to work today, I don't conjure up a new wife and a fresh set of friends and neighbors. Along similar lines, forking-path tales tend to present

small worlds in which our protagonists remeet the same people. In both trajectories of *Sliding Doors*, four characters (Helen; her partner, Jerry; Jerry's lover, Lydia; and James, Helen's potential new partner) carry the burden of the action, and secondary characters recur as well. *Run Lola Run* works with the same ensemble in all three lines: Lola, Manni, her mother, her father, her father's mistress, her father's business associate, and the security guard at the bank.

In *Blind Chance* and *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1*, there is less overlap of characters across alternative futures, but these films do include some recurring figures: The dean of Witek's medical school appears in all three stories, and his aunt recurs in two; and in *Too Many Ways*, Wong's partner Matt is a constant presence. Yet both these films find other ways to weave in characters we've already met. In *Too Many Ways*, the hero's partners in crime are killed in the first story, set on the Chinese Mainland. In the second story, centering on Wong and his partner Matt as they try to make money as hitmen in Taiwan, the partners reappear as the men who committed a crime for which Matt and Wong are blamed.

Blind Chance contains a prologue covering some early events in the hero's life, and this serves to create familiarity further along. A pal from Witek's boyhood reappears in the second story, and in the third story, while Witek is standing on the train platform, the plot reintroduces another medical student, a woman who has been highlighted in the prologue as his lover. She has come to see him off—though she's not been shown in any of the replays of his race through the station—and in the third story they end up marrying. Finally, the three stories in *Blind Chance* are linked by certain pervasive social conditions. In each future, Witek is involved directly or indirectly with the unofficial student movement and their underground publications. In his Communist career, he turns a blind eye to the movement; in his Catholic career, he is an activist within it, helping print the leaflets; and during his medical career, he must replace his mentor, who is fired because his son is involved with the movement. Recurring characters and background conditions render widely divergent futures more cognitively coherent.

4. Forking-path tales are unified by traditional cohesion devices.

By *cohesion devices*, I mean formal tactics that link passages at the local level—from scene to scene or from one group of scenes to another. The classical narrative cinema of Hollywood and the narrational strategies characteristic of art cinema have developed many such tactics to aid the viewer's comprehension. We find them in the forking-path tales as well, usually serving to tighten up linear cause and effect.

Two primary cohesion devices of mainstream cinema are *appointments* and *deadlines*, and our forking-path movies provide these aplenty. *Run Lola Run* is built around a looming deadline: If Lola doesn't meet Manni by noon, he'll try to rob a supermarket to get 100,000 marks. *Sliding Doors* is structured around a cascade of appointments: in one line of action, the appointments necessary to find Helen a new job; and in the other, the dates she makes with James, the man who attracts her after she leaves Jerry. In *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1*, each of Wong's alternative futures



Figure 6.5 *Blind Chance* (1981): Witek screams in the first shot.



Figure 6.6 *Blind Chance*: The second shot: Casualties in the hospital.

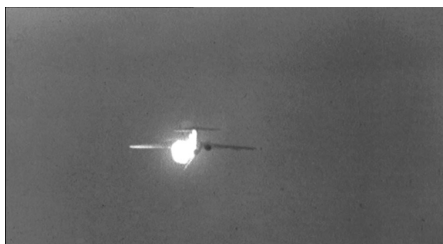


Figure 6.7 *Blind Chance*: The last shot, linking to the first (Figure 6.5).

hinges on appointments (with the Mainland and Taiwanese gangs) and deadlines (chiefly, in the second plotline, the one pushing Matt to kill rival triad bosses).

As we might expect, our “art movie” *Blind Chance* is somewhat looser at this level, relying more on the sheer successiveness of events and leaving appointments and deadlines offscreen. In the second story, for instance, Witek’s childhood friend Daniel appears at a meeting of the underground students’ organization, along with his sister Vera. Witek’s subsequent romance with Vera is shown in brief scenes of them meeting on the street, or spending time together in his apartment. These scenes, like Vera’s departures by train, aren’t set up by explicit appointments, though such arrangements must have been made. Indeed, when the couple split up, it’s because of *not* making an appointment (Witek is told she’s gone to Lodz, but actually she’s waited outside his apartment for hours before finally leaving). As I suggested in the previous essay, this loosening of causal and temporal bonds is characteristic of much ambitious filmmaking in Europe after World War II.

Yet in *Blind Chance*, cohesion operates from another angle. The film opens with an enigmatic prologue showing Witek sitting in a train or airplane seat, facing us and starting to scream (Figure 6.5). The credits unroll over his howl. After the credits, we see an enigmatic image of a hospital emergency room, with a woman’s leg in the foreground and a bloody corpse hauled away in the background (Figure 6.6). Only at the end of the film will these images make sense: In the final story, Witek is aboard a plane to Paris and it explodes in midair; this is the last image of the film, over which the final credits appear (Figure 6.7). Now we can place the opening shot of his shriek—presumably, his last moments—and we can understand that it is apparently

his body that is dragged through the emergency room. The film curls around on itself, back to front.

Whether the cohesion devices are indebted to norms of classical filmmaking or art cinema practices, they call upon skills we already possess, notably our ability to bind sequences together in the most plausible way in terms of time, space, and causality.

5. Forking paths will often run parallel.

One consequence of sticking to a core situation, the same locales, and the same cast of characters is that certain components emerge as vivid *variants* of one another. Thus, in *Blind Chance* we're inclined to contrast the three women with whom Witek gets involved: the politically committed Chyushka, the more ethereal Vera, and the practical, somewhat anxious Olga. After the death of his father, Witek finds a replacement figure in each future—the veteran Communist Werner, the sympathetic priest, and his medical school dean. Similarly, Lola seems to have the power to restore life: to herself at the end of the first trajectory, to Manni at the end of the second, and to the security guard Schuster, whom she revives in the ambulance at the close of the third tale. *Sliding Doors* brings out parallels even more sharply by intercutting its alternative futures rather than presenting them seriatim. In one scene, Helen is ministered to by her friend Anna before she showers; in the following one, Jerry ministers to her cut head before she takes a shower. The cleverest moments in this organization come when the two futures converge on the same locale, so that in one scene, the bereft Helen drinks woozily at a bar while at a nearby table the happily ignorant Helen dines with the boyfriend who's cheating on her.

Two Many Ways to Be No. 1 handles parallels in a joking manner characteristic of the whole film. The second, longer story takes Wong and Matt to Taiwan, where Matt lets it be known that he's a contract killer. They fall in with an enormous, hirsute triad boss named Blackie White, who hires Matt to wipe out his twin brother, Whitey Black. Matt already has accepted a job from an unknown boss, who turns out to be Whitey, asking him to shoot Blackie. The entire confusion comes to smash at a party where the two brothers sit side by side in complementary outfits and Matt bursts in to earn his money, but is unsure which gang boss to terminate. The symmetrical staging makes the alternatives comically explicit (Figure 6.8). *Too Many Ways* can be taken as a send-up of forking-path stories generally, and this hyperexplicit parallel parodies a central convention of the form.

Most narratives contain parallel situations, characters, or actions, though the parallels are not always very salient. Sharply profiled parallelisms, as we know from *Intolerance* (1916) and *The Three Ages* (1923), are a long-running cinematic tradition and have become fairly easy to follow. Forking-path plots can bring parallelisms to our notice quite vividly, thereby calling forth well-practiced habits of sense making. On the whole, parallels are easy to spot in these films, which hold many elements constant in each variant.



Figure 6.8 Flamboyantly symmetrical staging in *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1*.

6. All paths are not equal; the last one taken, or completed, presupposes the others.

A narrative, in Meir Sternberg's formulation, amounts to telling in time, and as a time-bound process, it calls upon a range of human psychological propensities.¹¹ What comes earlier shapes our expectations about what follows. What comes later modifies our understanding of what went before; retrospection is often as important as prospection.

Forking-path films thus tend to treat replays of earlier events elliptically. When action leading up to a fork is presented a second or third time, the later version tends to be more laconic. Witek's three runs for his train are rendered in ever-briefer versions (88 seconds, 67 seconds, and 59 seconds). Similarly, the first stretch of *Too Many Ways* shows Wong meeting Bo, going to a café with his pals to propose dealing with the Mainlanders, and then meeting the Mainlanders at the bathhouse, where the fight over the bill ensues. After the massacre on the Mainland, the narration jumps back to the meeting with Bo, and the following café session is rendered in 42 seconds, as opposed to the 2 minutes it took in the first version. Because we know what happened there already, the scene can be presented more pointedly the second time around, even though it is, in *that* trajectory, still happening for the first time.

More importantly, forking-path narratives tend to treat information that we learn in one world as a background condition for what is shown later in another. Sometimes this pattern is fairly tacit, yielding the sense that alternatives are being exhausted one by one. The types of choices offered to Witek in *Blind Chance* have this cumulative quality: What if I took the path of least resistance and joined the Communist Party? What if I summoned up more strength and opposed the party? Because each of these choices fails, it seems, only through an apolitical stance can one maintain one's decency, and that option is enacted in the third alternative. Alternatively, the earlier narrative can explicitly contribute certain conditions to this one. In O. Henry's "Roads of Destiny," the first story introduces the choleric Marquis; the second story elaborates on his plot to overthrow the king. The third variant can therefore be much more laconic in telling us whose pistol was responsible for the hero's suicide. Similarly, in the second tale shown in *Too Many Ways*, when Wong is reunited with his pals in Taiwan, the deaths of Bo and another gang member are reported at just enough length to indicate that the men met the same fates as they did in the first story.

Makers of forking-path plots seem tempted to contaminate each story line a little. At one moment in *Sliding Doors*, the heroine has an inkling of what is happening in the parallel story. Walking along the river with her friend Anna, Helen seems to anticipate what's happening at the same moment in the other story, in which her counterpart cheers on a crew team: "Fairly weird. I knew there'd be a boat race going on in purple and white shirts." Shortly, I'll show how the film's resolution depends on this kind of crosstalk between futures.

Most surprisingly of all, sometimes a film suggests that prior stories have taught the protagonist a lesson that can be applied to this one—thereby flouting any sense that parallel worlds are sealed off from one another. One critic has noted that Witek in *Blind Chance* seems to become more reflective from future to future, as if he were cautiously exploring his "trilemma."¹² The first story of *Too Many Ways* presents Wong as comically inept at nearly everything he tries; in the second story he is more self-possessed, whereas Matt is the one who fouls things up. It's as if dying through bungling in the first plotline has made Wong wiser. And if the epilogue of *Too Many Ways* does suggest that Wong is considering not meeting the gang tonight, that hesitation might depend partly on his intuiting, through means we cannot divine, what happened in his first and second futures.

The clearest example of this tactic comes in *Run Lola Run*. Lola not only seems to push the reset button at the start of each trajectory, but also learns to control the chance that ruined her previous futures. During the lead-in, when Manni phones to beg for help, Lola screams in frustration, and her screech explodes bottles sitting on her TV monitor. In the first story, when Lola's father asks her to explain why she needs the money, the pressure of time and anxiety triggers another scream, this time bursting the glass on a clock face. But in the third alternative future, Lola tries to win money at a casino, where she bets on a spin of a roulette wheel. She calculatedly emits another scream, and this one not only breaks glass but also guides the ball into the winning slot. It's as if she has learned to tame what was initially a sheer expression of desperation, turning it to her purposes.

Due to the exigencies of telling in time, we might say, it's difficult for parallel futures to receive equal weighting. The future shown first supplies some preconditions for later ones, always for the audience and sometimes for the character. Psychologically, the primacy effect treats the first future as a benchmark setting down the conditions that will be repeated, varied, omitted, or negated in subsequent versions. Moreover, given the fact that the hero or heroine is a constant presence in all these futures, our entrenched expectations about character change—modification of personality, or growing knowledge—alert us to any cue that, contrary to the laws of nature, the protagonist may register and even learn from her or his alternative fates. This may be a vestige of the supernatural and time travel versions of the parallel universes tale. Scrooge retains psychological continuity in visiting different futures, and he's become fully aware of all his options.

7. All paths are not equal; the last one taken, or completed, is the least hypothetical one.

If something like a primacy effect establishes the first future as a benchmark, the “recency effect” privileges the *final* future we see. Endings are weightier than most other points in the narrative, and forking-path tales tend to make the early stories preconditions for the last one. So these plots suggest that the last future is the final draft, the one that “really” happened; or at least it reduces the others to fainter possibilities. If the protagonist seems to have learned from the events shown earlier, the ending may gain still more prominence as the truest, most satisfying one. This suggests another reply to Morson’s worries about forking-path plots. In principle, multiple futures make all choices equiprobable and thus morally equal; but narrative unfolds in time. By weighting certain futures through all the resources of order, delay, point-of-view switches, and the like, the plot’s design makes some options more significant than others, both structurally and morally.

I’ve already suggested how, at the close of *Too Many Ways*, Wong might be said to have assimilated what happens in his other futures, but the sense of “getting the future right” is much more evident at the end of *Run Lola Run*. Manni has recovered the stolen cash and returned it to Ronnie, whereas Lola has won big at the casino and now has 100,000 marks for both of them. In a classic happy ending, they walk off together. Manni asks, “What’s in the bag?” and Lola smiles. The upbeat coda plays off against the grim consequences of the previous two futures (Lola shot and Manni run down) and renders them lesser options. A carefree ending is more in keeping with the ludic tone established from the start, when the bank guard Schuster introduced the action to come as a vast game. Tykwer goes even farther, seeing the last future as a consequence of the other two:

At the end, the viewers must have the impression that Lola has done everything that we’ve just seen (and not just one part, a third of it). She has lived it all—she has died for this man, he has died, and everything that was destined to happen has happened. She has all that behind her, and at the end, she’s rewarded.¹³

I think this corresponds with the intuitions of many viewers that Lola has somehow lived through, and learned from, all the futures we’ve witnessed.

Blind Chance privileges its third future by the swallowing-the-tail strategy I’ve already mentioned. The film’s final shot of the plane exploding links neatly to the prologue, showing Witek starting to scream in a plane seat, which also explains the second shot of casualties in an emergency room. That gory image, moreover, is glimpsed again in the beginning of the second story; in retrospect, we can see it as adding more weight to the death-by-air outcome. Just as important, the ending is given saliency by the fact that in the other two lines of action, Witek has planned to take the plane to Paris but for one reason or another doesn’t do so. In only the third story does he catch his flight, and only the midair explosion shown in the final tale explains the images that open the film.

Sliding Doors offers a fresh, equally ingenious way to weight the last plotline. Recall that in one plotline, Helen misses her train, arrives home late, and so for a long time remains unaware that Jerry is conducting an affair with Lydia. In the course of this path, Helen picks up day jobs as a waitress and food courier to support Jerry while he purportedly writes his novel. This line of action highlights the love triangle of Jerry–Helen–Lydia, making James virtually absent, and it adheres fairly closely to those conventions of deceit, superior knowledge, and abrupt emotional turns (including Helen’s eventual discovery of Jerry’s affair) that are characteristic of film melodrama. In the alternative plotline, Helen catches her train, meets James, and discovers Jerry’s infidelity. As a result, she leaves Jerry, gains confidence, falls in love with James, and sets up her own public relations firm. This pathway highlights the love triangle of Jerry–Helen–James. Lydia plays a secondary role, and thanks to James’ stream of patter and a generally lighter tone, this line sketches out a typical romantic comedy. And because of the parallel worlds conceit, the melodrama plot and the romantic comedy plot are intercut.

Both futures climax in Helen’s being taken to the hospital near death (through a fall downstairs and through being hit by a truck). In one plotline, she dies; in the other, she lives. Remarkably, however, she *dies* in the *romantic-comedy* plot, and she *lives* in the *melodrama* plot. So the problem is, How to end the film? If we conclude with Helen’s death, this would arbitrarily chop off the romance and punish someone who has not wronged anybody. As in *Lola*, there is a presumption in favor of a happy ending, preferably one in which Helen is united with James. But in the plotline in which Helen survives, she doesn’t even know who James is! How to arrange a consummatory ending?

Early in *Sliding Doors*, before Helen’s paths forked on the tube platform, James runs into her in an elevator, when she drops her earring and he picks it up. At the start of the romantic comedy plotline, Helen meets him again on the tube, but she’s so distraught from having been fired that she can’t accept his cheerful flirtation. Later in the romantic comedy plot, it’s established that James’ mother is ill and must be taken to the hospital. So at the end of the melodrama plot, after breaking up with Jerry, Helen is discharged from the hospital. She enters an elevator; James, leaving his ill mother, steps into the same elevator car. Again, Helen drops her earring; again, he picks it up. Like *Blind Chance*, *Sliding Doors* lets its epilogue fold back on its prologue, but instead of dooming the protagonist it allows the romantic comedy plot to restart. And this time it starts properly: Helen is already wised up to Jerry’s unfaithfulness and can appreciate James. Helen also gets another disquieting glimpse of her parallel life, for she is able to answer James’ question with the tag *he* has used throughout the romantic comedy line of action (“Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition”).

Here again, the last future we encounter is privileged by its absorption of the lessons learned in an earlier one. Instead of calling these *forking-path plots*, we might better describe them as *multiple-draft narratives*, with the last version presenting itself as the fullest, most satisfying revision. Once more, this conforms to our propensity to weight the last ending, to treat it as the culmination of what went before it . . . even if what went before couldn’t *really* have come before.

Some Sources

As in any study of genre conventions, mine has had to slight major differences among the films. The techno rush of *Run Lola Run* sharply contrasts with the sober, philosophical pacing of *Blind Chance*. Moreover, I haven't gone on to examine other forking-path films, such as Iwai Shunji's *Fireworks, Should We See It From the Side or the Bottom?* (*Uchiage hanabi, shita kara Miruka? Yoko cara miruka?* 1993) and Ventura Pons' *To Die (or Not)* (*Morir [o no]*; 2000). By the turn of the millennium, the conventions of such films seem so well-known that new movies can play off them. The plot may initially set out two parallel futures but then concentrate on just one, bringing the other one onstage at intervals (*Me Myself I* [1999], and *The Family Man* [2000]). Or the plot may add one or two more switchpoints. Cesc Gay and Daniel Gimelberg's *Hotel Room* (1999) starts by showing two different occupants taking the same room in alternative futures. Within one of those futures, the plot branches out to two possibilities of further action, before moving back to a very early moment in the film and opening a new fork there as a finale.

To confine my case just to cinema overlooks comparable experiments elsewhere in popular culture. For example, J. B. Priestley's play *Dangerous Corner* (1932) begins with upper-class idlers listening to a radio play at a cocktail party, then shutting it off. The drama builds to sordid revelations, and one partygoer dashes out to kill himself (just as in the radio play, at the moment they turned it off). The plot jumps back to the opening situation, but instead of turning off the radio, the idlers let it continue. On a bigger scale, Allen Drury's cycle of middlebrow Washington novels leads up to an assassination at the climax of *Preserve and Protect* (1968), but the novel refuses to specify which of two presidential candidates is killed. *Come Ninevah, Come Tyre* (1973) shows the liberal, Commie-loving candidate surviving and becoming president, but in the parallel sequel, *The Promise of Joy* (1975), the conservative candidate takes the oval office and trumps the Russkies. Alternative worlds plotting in mass media can get remarkably complicated. Luxuriant binary branching is on display in Alan Ayckbourn's eight-play cycle *Intimate Exchanges* (1982), from which Alain Resnais drew his duplex films *Smoking / No Smoking* (1993).¹⁴ An episode of the TV series *Malcolm in the Middle* gives two brothers parallel world adventures, sometimes running the plotlines simultaneously via split screen.¹⁵ Chris Ware's ornate multi-frame graphic novels sometimes harbor several branching paths, often within the design of a single page.

The neatness of most parallel world plots is thrown eerily out of kilter in Stephen King's duplex novels *Desperation* and *The Regulators* (both 1996). Characters from one tale reappear in the other with only partly recurring attributes (same name, but different body; or same name and body, but different personal histories and fates). Robert Anton Wilson pursues this track more methodically, even monomaniacally, in the 1979 novels making up the *Schrödinger's Cat* trilogy. The film that comes closest to this massively recombinant strategy seems to be Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Time of Love* (*Nobate Asheghi*; 1991), in which across three episodes four actors swap roles as husband, wife, lover, and onlooker, each episode yielding a different outcome. At an



Figure 6.9 Doc explains forking paths in *Back to the Future II* (1989)

extreme, the fiction can merely raise the possibility of parallel worlds, without providing a consistent frame or definitive fork leading to linear paths. I don't know of any cinematic examples, but a literary one that comes to mind is Robert Coover's short story "Quenby and Ola, Swede and Carl."¹⁶

We could also trace the strategy back through film history. The simplest option, it seems, was to follow *A Christmas Carol* and postulate a supernatural agency that provides the protagonist an extended vision of *one* alternative future. The most famous example on film is *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), but it had at least one predecessor in *Turn Back the Clock* (1933), in which a hero who'd like to relive his unhappy life is struck by a car and miraculously given another chance. Essentially the same device is revived in *Mr. Destiny* (1990) and Guido Manuli's short cartoon *+1-1* (1998). The strategy of presenting more than one parallel life course seems to be rarer, but in early instances it is handled through the device of rival prophecies. In *Eyes of Youth* (1919), a young woman consults a fortune-teller who offers her three futures, all with calamitous outcomes. The heroine resolves to avoid them all by picking a fourth option, marrying the man she loves. This particular plot was recycled at least twice in the silent era.¹⁷ (*Too Many Ways to Be No. 1* obliquely revives the fortune-telling device.) A comparable frame can be provided by fantasy, as in the alternative methods of homicide plotted by daydreamers in *Unfaithfully Yours* (1948) and *Murder, Czech Style* (1967), or the café speculations on tragic and comic plotting that frame *Melinda and Melinda* (2004). It's likely that the success of the *Back to the Future* movies (1985–1990) made filmmakers realize that this template could be updated through fantasy and science fiction conventions. The first installment of the trilogy is a straightforward time-travel plot in which readjusting the past changes the present, but *Back to the Future II* (1989) looks forward to the forking-path innovations of the 1990s. This installment shuttles Marty McFly and other characters back and forth between past and future, so that when Doc generously diagrams the various ways in which Marty's travels have upset the space-time continuum, we're invited to see the events' alternative outcomes as parallel worlds (Figure 6.9).¹⁸

Most of the early forking-path stories invoke supernatural, fantasy, or science fiction premises. Thanks to mysterious forces, characters visit pasts they didn't have or futures they haven't yet lived. But explicit acknowledgment that alternate worlds run alongside that of the present has evidently had to wait for recent years. In physics the

idea was implicit in Schrödinger's cat-in-the-box thought experiment, and it received an explicit working out in 1957, when Hugh Everett III posited what's come to be called the "many-worlds" interpretation of quantum mechanics.¹⁹ John Wyndham's 1961 short story "Random Quest" developed the idea in a science fiction framework; but it seems to have had few immediate successors.²⁰ I can only speculate on why the 1990s should see such a burst of parallel universe narratives in popular culture. Before we confidently claim that something in our postmodern society impels us toward them, though, I'd advise looking for more proximate causes. Audiences' familiarity with video games, recalled fairly explicitly in *Lola*, would seem to be a major impetus. Perhaps too the popularity of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* children's books prepared young people to find such plots intriguing. Then there's the broader urge toward narrative experiments of many sorts in contemporary film, both mainstream and off-Hollywood. Forking-path plots have emerged in a competitive marketplace, and nowadays films—especially "independent" movies—are encouraged to provide experimental novelty. Like films with temporal loops (e.g., *Donnie Darko*, 2001) and the network narratives I consider in the next essay, forking-path experiments are also video-friendly, encouraging consumers to watch the movie many times over to enjoy the meshing and divergence of parallel worlds.²¹

Whatever the proximate and remote causes, the concept of alternative futures will probably be adapted to the demands of audience comprehension, in particular narrative traditions—pruning the number of options to those few that can be held in mind, finding new uses for cohesion devices and repetition, and relying on schemas for causality and time and space. It seems likely as well that the more radically that the film evokes multiple times, the more constrained it must be on other fronts. *Smoking / No Smoking*, presenting two feature-length alternative futures, can permit itself no more than two characters, always male and female, per scene. *Groundhog Day* (1993) breaks with one of my conventions by proliferating a great many futures for its repellent protagonist. To compensate, it presents those futures as very short-term alternatives, and it multiplies redundancy by repeatedly signaling its forking point (the clock radio's wake-up song) and the parallel events in the iterated day.²²

If such a trade-off between innovation and norm seems to cramp the infinite vistas opened up by Borges, we shouldn't underestimate the extent to which stretching traditional narrative requires care. Stories are designed by human minds for human minds. Stories bear the traces of not only local conventions of sense making but also the constraints and biases of human perception and cognition. A film, although moving inexorably forward (we can't stop and go back), must manage several channels of information (image, speech, noise, and music). It must therefore work particularly hard to shape the spectator's attention, memory, and inference making at each instant. No wonder that moviemakers balance potentially confusing innovations like the multiple-draft structure with heightened appeal to those forms and formulas that viewers know very well. Artists are forever testing the limits of story comprehension, but those very limits, and the conventions that accommodate them, remain essential to our dynamic experience of narrative.

Chapter 6

After the first publication of this essay, I discovered Gerald Prince's lively essay, "The Disnarrated" in *Style* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 1–8. In studying those small-scale moments in literary narrative that play with what might have been, Prince's paper intersects with mine in intriguing ways.

1. Jorge Luis Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths," in his *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1999), 125.
2. *Ibid.*, 127.
3. Arguments for parallel worlds arise within several scientific domains—cosmology, quantum physics, mathematics, and logic. For an overview, see Max Tegmark, "Parallel Universes," *Scientific American* 288, no. 5 (May 2003): 41–51. The older standard source is Fred Alan Wolf, *Parallel Universes: The Search for Other Worlds* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988). See also Michael Shermer, *Science Friction: Where the Known Meets the Unknown* (New York: Holt, 2005), 40–42.
4. Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994), 232.

5. The classic studies on heuristics and rationality are collected in Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic, and Amos Tversky, eds., *Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). See also Richard Nisbett and Lee Ross, *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1980). A more recent account is Gerd Gigerenzer, *Adaptive Thinking: Rationality in the Real World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
6. Quoted in Mark Prendergast, *The Ambient Century: From Mahler to Moby—the Evolution of Sound in the Electronic Age* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), 118.
7. It seems that the Internet, which doesn't offer the predetermined trajectory that a film does, is far more hospitable to widely branching narrative futures. Katherine Hayles illustrates this point in "Reconfiguring Narrative in Electronic Environments" (paper presented at the Narrative at the Outer Limits conference, University of California, Santa Barbara, May 4, 2001). The book format offers its own intricacies, as the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series indicates. For a map of the possibilities in that series, see Demian Katz, "Analysis Essay," <http://www.ethblue.com/cyoa/essay.html>.
8. Quoted in Danusia Stok, ed., *Kieślowski on Kieślowski* (London: Faber, 1993), 113.
9. Bryce DeWitt, quoted in Tim Folger, "Quantum Shmantum," *Discover*, September 2001, 42.
10. A clear example can be found in the *Back to the Future* trilogy. In the first film, the switchpoint is established as the moment when Marty, having traveled back to 1955, pushes his future father out of the path of the car driven by Lorraine's father. As a result, George McFly doesn't win Lorraine's pity, they don't go to the prom together, they don't kiss and fall in love and marry . . . and Marty doesn't get born. Having disturbed the past, Marty must restage the kiss under new circumstances, along the way allowing his father to become more courageous and self-confident. But *Back to the Future II*, which presents an alternative future for Marty and his family, shifts the switchpoint to an earlier moment on the day of the prom, when the villain Biff receives an almanac from the future that will allow him to win any sports bet he lays down. This earlier moment becomes the crucial fork for that second film in the series—another aspect of the plot that Doc obligingly diagrams for us on a blackboard in his lab.
11. Meir Sternberg, "Telling in Time (I): Chronology and Narrative Theory," *Poetics Today* 11, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 901–48; Meir Sternberg, "Telling in Time (II): Chronology, Teleology, Narrativity," *Poetics Today* 13, no. 3 (Fall 1992): 463–541; and Meir Sternberg, "Telling in Time (III): Chronology, Estrangement, and Stories of Literary History," *Poetics Today* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 125–235.
12. Alain Masson, "Nécessité et variations," in *Krzysztof Kieślowski*, ed. Vincent Amiel (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1997), 57.
13. Tom Tykwer, *Cours, Lola, cours*, trans. Marie Ollivier (Paris: Fleuve noir, 1999), 134.
14. Perhaps Ayckbourn's work is a more general inspiration as well. His play *How the Other Half Loves* (1969) presents two locales separated in space and time "superimposed" on the same set. Here one table serves as two tables, one sofa as two sofas, and the like, while two sets of actors play out the different scenes simultaneously. This virtuosic premise seems to anticipate *Sliding Doors*' scene showing the two Helens in the same bar.
15. The *Malcolm* episode is "Bowling" (airdate April 1, 2001). Thanks to Jonathan Frome for pointing out this episode to me.

16. See Robert Coover, *Pricksongs and Descants: Fictions* (New York: Grove, 1969), 150–67. On the role of forking-path plots in contemporary literature, see Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987), 106–11.
17. There was an African American production, also called *Eyes of Youth* (1920), which may have been a film record of a performance of the 1917 play. A later version is *The Love of Sunya* (1927).
18. The opening monologue of *Slacker* (1991), delivered by the director himself, introduces the notion of parallel worlds, along with the butterfly effect, chaos theory, degrees of separation, and other pop science motifs. It's as if Richard Linklater is opening up a box of formal devices for the independent cinema to explore in the next 2 decades.
19. Michio Kaku, *Hyperspace: A Scientific Odyssey Through Parallel Universes, Time Warps, and the 10th Dimension* (New York: Anchor, 1995), 254–64.
20. "Random Quest" is included in John Wyndham, *Cover Her Face and Others* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1961), 131–73.
21. For more on the phenomenon of the replay movie and its relation to narrative experimentation and DVD consumption, see my *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 89–94.
22. On the patterns of redundancy in *Groundhog Day*, see Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Analyzing Classical Narrative Technique* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 100–101.