The Flashback Files

An Analysis of the Treatment of Time

as a Storytelling Element in Modern Cinema

by Jen Whiting

You've been changed by it. Dramatically. You've felt its force and it has molded you. It has moved mountains and created oceans. It has allowed relationships to form, lovers to connect and chasms to form. It is invisible, yet always present. It is harsh and unforgiving. It stands still. "It" is Time. As a writer, time is an element of the stories you tell. Stories advance according to compelling timeframes. Characters grow and develop over time. Plots unfold. You get the picture.

As a screenwriter, you have at your command Story Time–the order in which the plot unfolds through the passage of time (toward the future) and through flashback (reverting to the past). You have the power to write backwards and show what happened before. You have the power to fast-forward back to the present, or even through to the distant future. These treatments of time occur in your screenplay on the backdrop of the Running Time of the movie. The confluence of Story Time and Running Time creates a complex fabric on which your characters change and your action develops. These two planes of time co-mingle in a way that can be powerfully compelling, or dastardly confusing.

To better understand how these two planes of time–Story Time and Running Time–can compel your story (or damn it to failure), an analysis of the treatment of time as a story-telling element will provide a platform from which to use the element of time to your script's advantage. Let's dig in.

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This project started because I felt I didn't write flashback well. I didn't have a handle on the components that were necessary to keep the story intact as time moved from the present to the past. In an attempt to learn how other writers handled this complexity in storytelling, I began watching movies and analyzing the points in the script at which time changed direction.

Specifically, when the story began, I deemed that moment in time The Starting Point of Now. The next moment would inevitably be a movement into the future, advancing positively beyond The Starting Point of Now.

In movies that use flashback as an element of story structure, there is a moment in the Running Time of the movie when time changes direction, changing from a forward progression of time to a point in time that is in the past. I deemed this The Flashback Point. From the Flashback Point, time again began traveling toward the future we had just left. Some movies repeat this sequence; some don't.

I began to play with these data (The Starting Point of Now, time moving into the future, The Flashback Point, and then what happens with time after that) and found that I could represent these changes in the treatment of time on a simple line graph. I watched *Crash* (2004, written by Paul Haggis) and graphed the treatment of time. Let's look at an example of a time signature of a movie; here's the time signature for *Crash:*
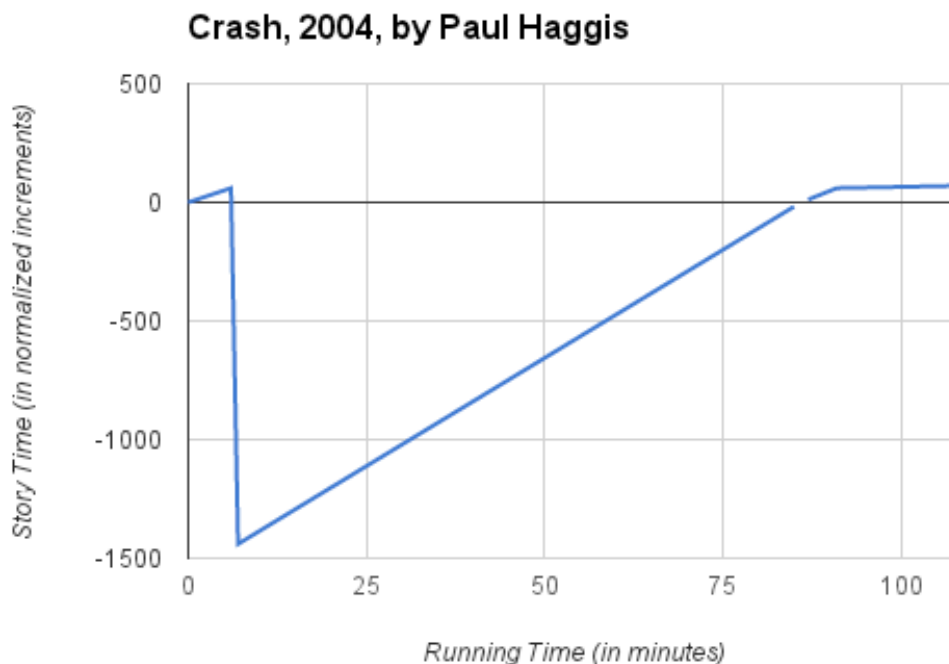
The time signature graph for Crash illustrates how the X-Y graph works. The movie starts at the Starting Point of Now, the zero value on the Y-axis (story time) and the zero minute on the X-axis (running time). The story advances into the future for seven minutes then a flashback

draws the plot back in time. By normalizing the story time increments (the plot advanced approximately ninety minutes into the future then flashed-back an entire day, so these elements are normalized to indicate appropriate time ratios). Next, the story begins traveling through time back to the Starting Point, crosses that line, then crosses the Flashback Point and finishes a few moments after the Flashback Point.

Next, I watched *The Next Three Days* (2010, by Paul Haggis) and graphed its time signature. Here is the time signature for *The Next Three Days:*
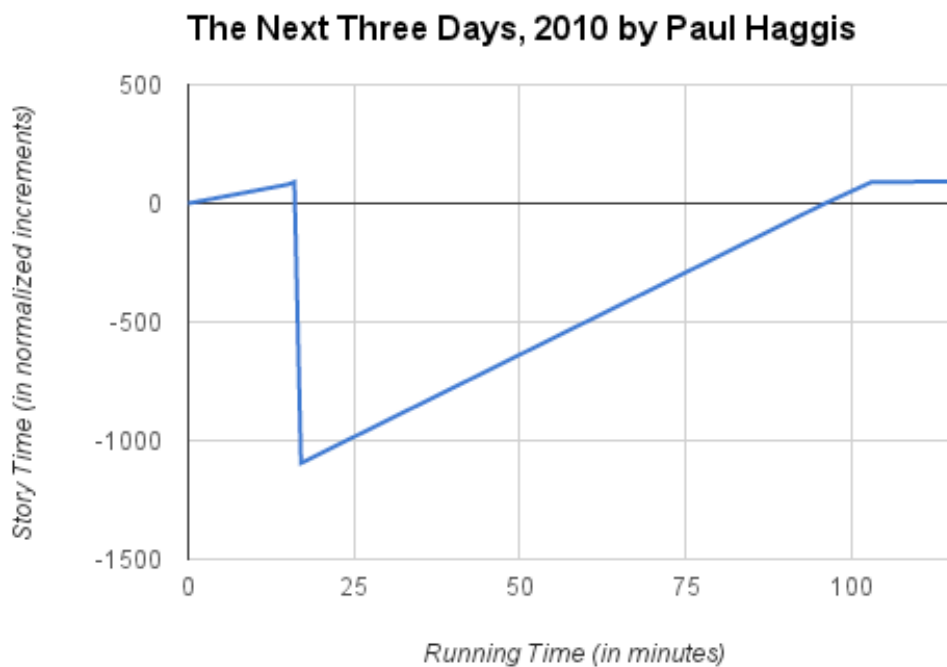
By accident, I had picked two films by the same screenwriter (Paul Haggis). When I compared their time signatures, a pattern immediately emerged: Haggis employs nearly identical time signatures in these two movies. I began to wonder what would happen if I graphed other films.

And so it began; each night I'd watch a new movie and graph its time signature. These graphs began to reveal a time signature of the movies that was surprising similar. Here's the time signature for *Michael Clayton* (2007, written by Tony Gilroy):

Michael Clayton, 2007 by Tony Gilroy
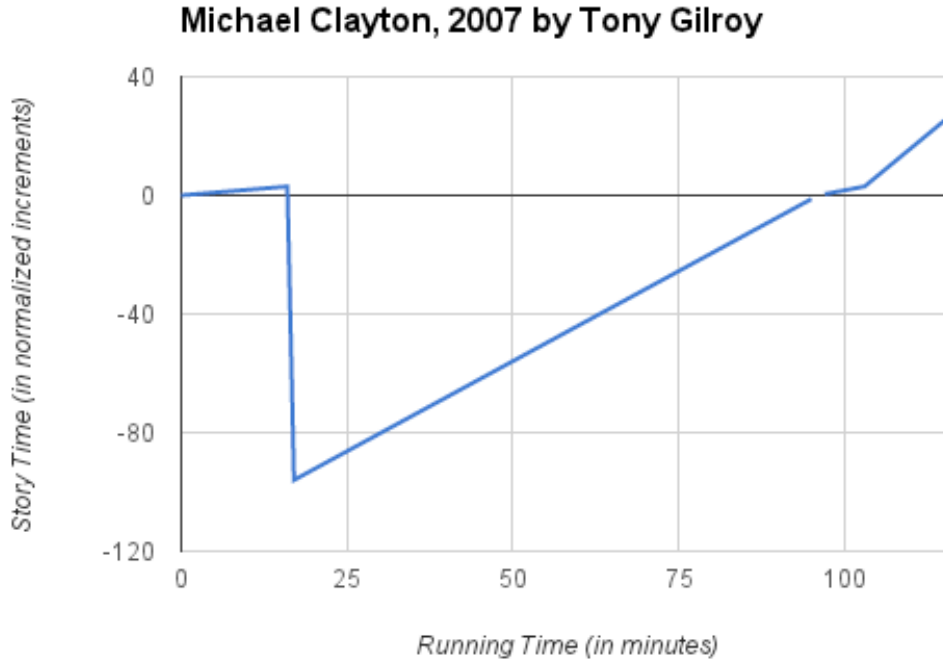
Again, the graph shows a brief introduction of the story moving into the future followed by a deep flashback that begins the storytelling again from some significant point in the past. The bulk of the movie is set in the past, moving through time to get back to–and cross–the Starting Point and then the Flashback Point, with the film eventually ending a brief time beyond where the story was suspended when the flashback occurred.

This method of storytelling in the past for the majority of a film's running time, with a set-up and a wrap-up above the Starting Point on the graph is distinct, and more than merely the use of flashback. It is a form of story, a structure that I saw emerging on the graphs each night.

As I watched more movies with an eye toward time signatures, another pattern of flashback began to emerge. Yes, flashback was used as the story form itself, as in the Haggis and Gilroy films mentioned above. Flashback was also used to depict and explain character background, as in *Admission* (2013, written by Karen Croner). This form of flashback typically happens in Act Two, and is used in place of exposition to explain events that have happened in a character's past that are contributing to the troubles he is facing. Indeed, this supports Robert

McKee's explanation of traditional flashback as "another form of exposition."[1] Here's the time signature of *Admission:*

Admission, 2013 by Karen Croner
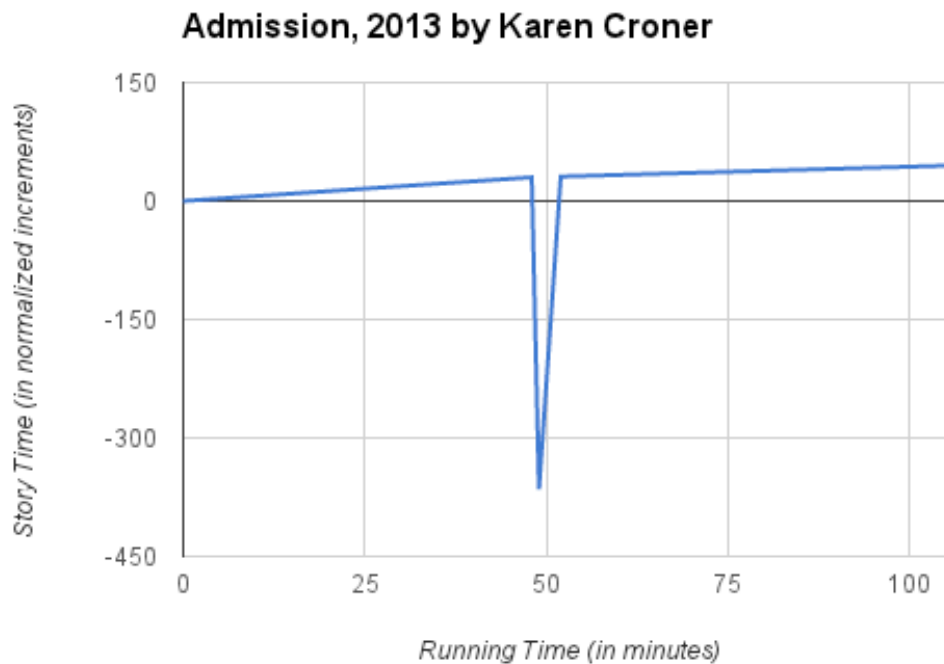
Notice how the flashback is used in Act Two. It explains the presence of the protagonist's son, from a previous chapter of her life. In *The King's Speech* (2010, written by David Seidler) flashback again references the protagonist in an earlier chapter of his life, as he is being formed by his father. Here's the time signature for *The King's Speech:*

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[1] Story, Robert McKee. pg 341.1997. Regan Books.

The King's Speech, 2010 by David Seidler
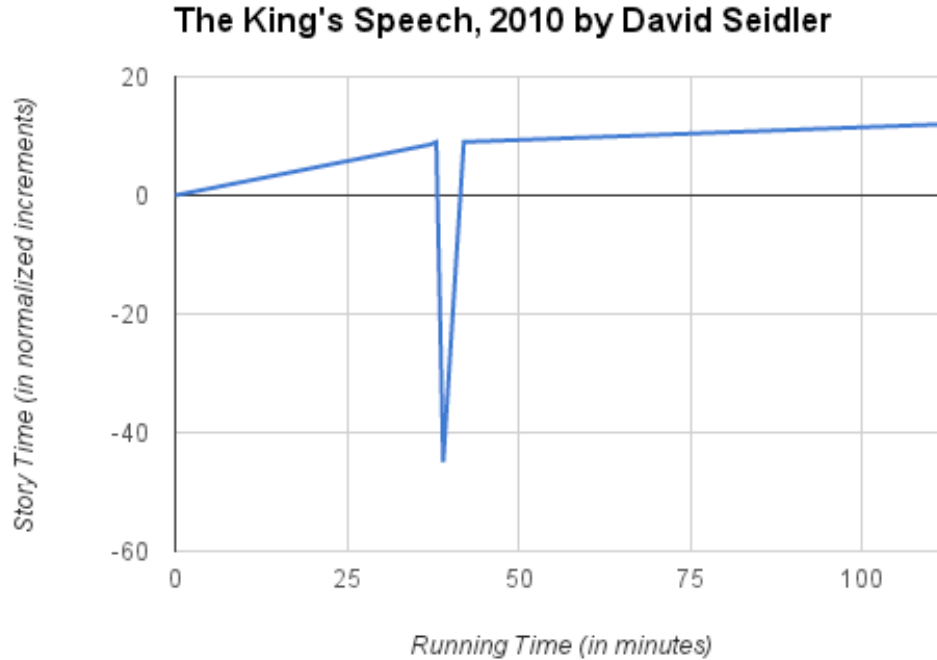
Employing the agency of time itself as a contributing element to the storytelling in a script is inevitable, regardless of the form of flashback your script employs, or if it uses flashback at all. Linear-time stories and non-linear-time stories offer the reader (and the viewer) two completely different experiences.

When a story is told strictly in linear time (the beginning of the story occurring before the end of the story and the progression of the plot following the linear progression of time), the audience is taken through the story *with* the characters. As the characters experience the action, so, too, does the audience. Indeed, in linear-time stories, the audience may often engage in that all-too-common occurrence of "guessing the ending" of the film. If the characters and their progress matches time itself, then neither the characters nor the audience have an advantage in knowing the outcome of the story. It could be said that this method of story-telling embeds the suspense in the *outcome* of the story rather than in the *journey* of the characters.

However, when a story employs a non-linear time progression, the audience has a different view of the characters and the story itself. If the treatment of time is similar to *Crash* or *Michael Clayton*, where a flashback occurs early in Act One and then begins the story again, from a previous point of the character's lives, and if the audience can assess that the storytelling

6

in the film will be explanatory in nature–that the story itself will be the journey of returning the protagonist to the Starting Point that opened the film, and perhaps beyond that point, to a point of resolution–then the audience is positioned to focus on the journey rather than the outcome. Placing the audience in this position offers them a distinctly different experience. At once, they are voyeur as well as author. Once they understand that the story is a journey back to the Starting Point, they are participants in the journey, as well as viewers. They know where the story will return to; they know the protagonist will eventually overcome some demon or challenge and be back to the person he was in the opening scene. This time signature of storytelling is becoming more common, and so audiences may even expect the story to advance beyond the Starting Point to a point of resolution. In this form of storytelling, the audience is engaged in the story's development because they know the character's eventual destination.

The use of explanatory-flashback, however, can be less inviting to the audience. Since the single (or multiple) dip in the story's time signature is used in place of exposition, it is often hardly noticed, as it neither changes time's progression or the direction of the story, it merely reveals a past occurrence in a character's life. As with exposition itself, explanatory-flashback leaves the audience with more information, and perhaps a deeper understanding of a character's fears or motivations, but it does not necessarily compel the audience to be active in the story. This is not to say that this form of flashback is unnecessary or unwarranted. Indeed, the mid-story flashback in Casablanca is pivotal to understanding Rick's character, and why he has such disdain for connecting with people. The loss of love revealed in the mid-script flashback explains why it is unlikely for him to help his ex-lover and her fiancé, but it doesn't present any alternative options for him except to overcome the pain and loss of that broken affair.

An exception to this is a script that utilizes flashback as a critical element of storytelling: Alvin Sargent's *Ordinary People*. This script uses eight flashback points, spread throughout the movie, with each set of flashback scenes lasting no more than a handful of seconds. The entire story relies upon the audience following the linear progression of time and understanding that the present-day story is actually only a reaction to the past. The flashback points are the true plot, and the story could nearly stand on the flashbacks alone. Although this flashback is explanatory

in nature, it acts as another character–one that holds the key to the family's development–and cannot be ignored.

Ordinary People, 1980, by Alvin Sargent
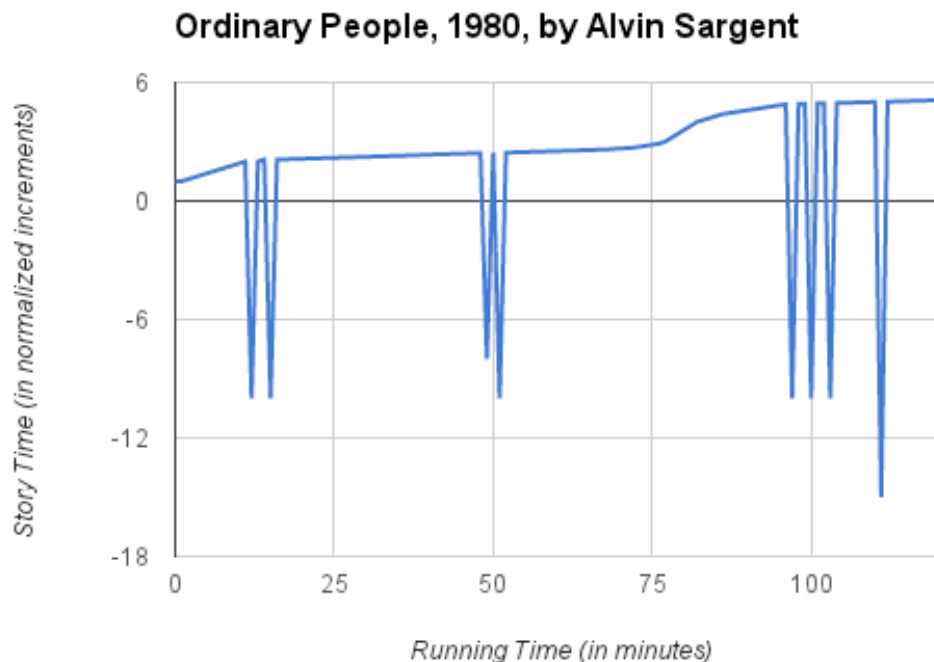
This recognition of the two distinct forms of flashback, one which is a referential, character-explaining scene that interrupts the story progression in place of exposition; the other form is a true alternate story structure that replaces the progression of the story in a linear-time telling. *Ordinary People*, however, uses flashback as a necessary agent in the script and, even though it is ten distinct flashback points, it could be viewed as a cousin of the form of flashback that brings the audience into the past and then returns them tot he starting point, deftly.

The movies that elect the non-linear, story-told-in-the-past model use time as a character itself. By starting in the "now" and progressing for six to eight minutes into the future, enough of the story is told to reveal the elements the audience should watch for as the plot unfolds. Flashing back in time brings the story to full form and then back to its starting point, and another character in the story is hinted at: one who knows the outcome of–though not the relationship between–the past and the present.

The treatment of time as a character-development element is more recognizable, but, like exposition, can be used too easily to expose story threads that have not been revealed through

dialogue. These two methods of using time to advance the plot or to advance characters are distinct and, in fact, data-driven. Recognizing the impact of flashback, and the forms of flashback available to the writer, can help one select the relationship he wants the audience to have with the characters, and with the script itself.