# Toward a Poetics of Multiversion Narratives

## Brian Richardson

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I'll begin with a definition : a multiversion narrative is one in which, unknown to the characters, many of the same key scenes, events, and settings are repeated and varied. These repetitions are ontologically distinct, occurring at the same time and usually the same place as the first version. A paradigmatic example of this kind of work would be Tom Tykwer's *Lola rennt* (*Run Lola Run*), which begins with the dilemma : Lola's boyfriend, Manni, has lost a bag containing 100,000 Deutsche Marks that he was to deliver to a drug dealer. They must obtain the money in the next twenty minutes or her boyfriend will be killed. Lola starts to run. The film then provides three different versions of the same basic story, though in each case a slight alteration in a minor event, the dodging of a hostile dog in a stairway, produces a radically different final scenario. In the first, Lola can't get the money, she runs to be with her boyfriend who is trying to rob a supermarket, and she is unintentionally shot dead by the police. In the next version, she robs a bank, gets the money to her boyfriend, but he is then accidently hit by an ambulance and dies. In the last variation, Lola wins the money at roulette and her boyfriend recovers the money he had lost ; he pays the drug dealer and the couple then walks happily off into the future.

Part of the basic trajectory of such works has been explained by Alain Robbe-Grillet, one of its most cunning practitioners : in a traditional narrative, "what follows phenomenon A is a phenomenon B, the consequence of the first," while in a *nouveau roman* like *La Jalousie*, "what happens is entirely different. Instead of having to deal with a series of scenes which are connected by causal links, one has the impression that the same scene is constantly repeating itself, but with variations ; that is, scene A is not followed by scene B but by scene A', a possible variation of scene A." (Robbe-Grillet, 1977, p. 5 ; see Sherzer, 1986).[1]

We observe that some multiversion narratives have a single, self-contained story that is repeated and varied *in toto* (*Lola*), while others repeat and vary numerous scenes (*La Jalousie*) ; still others limit the repetition to a single varied scene (the ending of Malcolm Bradbury's *Composition*). We can differentiate the multiversion narrative from the multilinear narrative, which it is a subset of. A multilinear narrative may have few or no significant repetitions of variants, as in Jenny

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[1]  This technique has been analyzed by Dina Sherzer, who calls these kinds of progression "serial constructs" (1986, p. 13-36).

Erpenbeck's *Aller Tage abend* (*The End of Days*), in which the protagonist dies five times ; the first four times, a slight change occurs and the death is denarrated and no longer happens. Instead, the protagonist lives for another twenty years or so until the next catastrophe arrives. All multiversion narratives are multilinear, since they offer alternative possible sequences, but not all multilinear narratives are multiversion narratives. Often, we find a mix of both types, as in Robert Coover's "The Babysitter" or Kate Atkinson's *Life after Life*.

In my account of multiversion narratives I do not include works in which characters consciously realize they are in a time loop and keep returning to the same scene, as in Phillip K. Dick's "A Little Something for Us Tempunauts," Harold Ramis' film, *Groundhog Day*, or the television show, *Russian Doll*. These are ontologically different, I argue. The characters realize that they are in some kind of inexplicable situation based on unknown physical laws or some sort of supernatural effect ; for them, time keeps moving forward. As Dick's protagonist Addison Doug explains, "We're in a closed time loop, he thought, we keep going through this again and again, trying to solve the reentry problem, each time imagining it's the first time, the only time . . . and never succeeding. Which attempt is this ? Maybe the millionth ; we have sat here a million times, raking the same facts over and over again and getting nowhere." (Dick, 1992, p. 260 ; see Richardson, 2024) A multiversion narrative, by contrast, does not allow itself to be naturalized (or perhaps we should say supernaturalized) so easily ; the characters always experience each version for the first time. Multiversion narratives instead embody logical contradictions that cannot exist in reality. In our world, you either died on April 14 or you did not. You cannot have died and also not died on that day. As Jan Alber notes in this context, such impossibilities "violate the principle of noncontradiction by representing mutually exclusive story versions or event sequences so that time is fragmented into multiple (logically incompatible) itineraries" (Alber, 2016, p. 172 ; see Ensslin and Bell, 2021, p. 20-22).[2]

What is the extent and what are the limits of the versions that a text may contain ? Curiously, this has been the subject of dispute. David Bordwell, in "Film Futures," his study of "forking path" films that present multiple possible outcomes following from the "base" narrative situation, argues that "at any moment we can easily imagine two or three alternative chains of events […], but not twenty or sixty, 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 O. Henry's 'Roads of Destiny' display the same limitations—a very, very few options and no deep ontological differences between the futures displayed" ; (Bordwell, 2002, p. 91) this position is supported by Marie-Laure Ryan (2006, p. 668). But the general idea that

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[2]  Some narratives, of course, do both, such as Atkinson's novel.

multiversion narratives do not work well with a large number of possibilities is problematized by two of the other examples he cites, including Alan Ayckbourn's play, *Intimate Exchanges*, which has eight forkings and sixteen possible endings. We can also observe characters in a novel doing exactly what Bordwell suggests is not possible : discussing a novel set in Africa, two personages in *La Jalousie* deplore the coincidences of its plot and "construisent alors un autre déroulement probable à partir d'une nouvelle hypothèse, 'si ça n'était pas arrivé.' D'autres bifurcations possibles se présentent, en cours de route, qui conduisent toutes à des fins différentes. Les variantes sont très nombreuses ; les variantes des variantes encore plus. Ils semblent même les multiplier à plaisir [...] sans doute un peu grisés par cette prolifération" (Robbe-Grillet, 1957, p. 83).[3] This of course is what Robbe-Grillet does himself throughout this novel. Taking on Bordwell's claim directly, Kay Young explains "we know we have the capacity to imagine many alternative 'what if' scenarios—life demands it—which is similar cognitive work to generating alternative futures in film. And yet Bordwell's analysis of what forking-path films have actually done, in their telling of just a few alternatives, would seem to deny that possibility" (Young, 2002, p. 115). One may push further. Concerning Robert Coover's "The Babysitter," Hilary Dannenberg points out "the story's distortion of temporal sequentiality is so great that the reader is rendered incapable of even identifying the points of bifurcation" (Dannenberg, 2008, p. 216). Such virtually limitless possibilities are clearly worthy of Borges' fictional author Ts'ui Pên in "El Jardin de senderos que se bifurcan," a possibility denied by Bordwell (p. 88-91) and others.[4]

We may now outline some of the patterns that these multiversion narratives trace. Jean Ricardou has pointed out that in *La Jalousie*, the repeated descriptions of the centipede, the animal noises, the car trouble, and other events form a trajectory of increasing intensity until, in the final segments, they are diminished or absent. The shifting intensity of these descriptions thus reproduces the conventional structure of slowly rising action leading to a climax and then rapidly returning to a form of stasis, a common pattern in a traditional narrative that produces a restoration of harmony at the end. Many other works have comparable, ultimately comic conclusions and virtually all produce a sense of definitive closure, as if to partially balance the wild disruptions of the possible elsewhere in the narrative. This is true of works that end with a kind of tragic farce, as the film *Blind Chance* does ; Malcolm Bradbury's "Composition" offers three possible endings, each one definitive in its own way. "The Babysitter" offers two very different but equally complete endings :

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[3]   They "construct a different possible outcome from a new supposition, 'if it weren't for that.' Other possibilities are offered, during the course of the book, which lead to different endings. The variations are extremely numerous ; the variations of these, still more so. They seem to enjoy multiplying these choices, [...] probably a little intoxicated by this proliferation" 75).

[4]   Technically, Stephen Albert's claim in the story that Ts'ui Pen's book selects all possible futures is an exaggeration ; the book is not infinite, but only virtually so, with tens or hundreds of thousands of possible sequences.

there is an utterly ordinary conclusion of an uneventful evening as the family returns home and the babysitter prepares to leave, and another scene where a neighbor, watching the late night news, tells Mrs. Tucker, "your children are murdered, your husband gone, [there's] a corpse in your bathtub, and your house is wrecked" (Coover, 1970, p. 239). She stays with the neighbor, and they decide to watch the late-night movie together. Any pretense of a verisimilar representation of plausible actions is exploded.[5]

The assumed causal laws of the fictional world are regularly tested and transformed by these kinds of fiction. We frequently see the oversized role of chance or luck, as minuscule changes wreak enormous, in fact mortal, consequences—sort of a personal version of the butterfly effect (*Blind Chance*, *Lola rennt*). The narrator of *Aller Tage abend*, after identifying all the conditions that had to be met for her protagonist to have committed suicide, concludes : "there was an entire world of reasons why her life had now reached its end, just as there was an entire world of reasons why she could and should remain alive" (Erpenbeck, [2012] 2014, p. 114). Correlative questions of free will and determinism are also often implied or invoked. At times, this can result in collisions, as the patterns within the repeated events turn out to be too artificially similar. In O. Henry's "Roads of Destiny," the protagonist, David Mignot, an aspiring poet, after taking the left branch of a literally forking path, is soon shot to death by a marquis in a duel. After the story resets and Mignot takes the right fork, he becomes involved in a palace coup attempt and is shot to death by one of the conspirators, who is using the marquis' pistol. In the third version, he takes neither fork, but returns the way he came. After some months pass, he learns that his poetic attempts are failures, his marriage is in ruins, and he buys a gun from a local merchant who lets him have it for a fraction of its real worth since it was recently dumped by a conspirator in a failed coup attempt. It is indeed the marquis' pistol, and the protagonist uses it to shoot himself. Here, laws of probability are violated to produce a salient connection among the versions via a wildly unlikely set of coincidences in divergent times and places. O. Henry's overly insistent deployment of ironic repetition results in an unnatural scenario : even as each narrative strand is more or less plausible, the fact that each version produces the same result—instant death from the identical pistol—defies the canon of probability governing the real world.

This opposition draws attention to the interplay of probability and impossibility in multiversion narratives : each forking path may be entirely plausible in itself, but the totality of the versions is necessarily impossible since the past cannot be changed. Coover's "The Babysitter" plays on both sides of this divide : the work is an internally

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[5]   We also note that Bordwell's observation that each narrative version moves forward in time is largely refuted by the examples by Robbe-Grillet and Coover.

contradictory narrative that nevertheless includes a number of different progressions, most of which, in isolation, are reasonably plausible, though as the narrative continues, implausible sequences increase, such as the butter-aided attempts to help Mrs. Tucker get back into her girdle and of course the final family disaster.

Bordwell observes that "makers of forking-path plots seem unable to resist contaminating one by another" (p. 98). He points out that Lola seems somehow to learn from the previously presented possible futures ; he also finds this transgression of narrative levels in the films *Sliding Doors* and *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1* (p. 98-99). We also see it in Atkinson's *Life after Life* : the first iteration of the death of the infant Ursula Todd is negated in the next chapter by a new version in which the doctor arrives with a pair of scissors to snip the umbilical cord that is choking the baby ; in the penultimate version of this scene, hundreds of pages later, the mother is alone but has somehow "remembered" to have such a pair of scissors handy and this time saves her daughter herself (see Richardson, 2019, p. 76). These examples point to a new kind of lateral metalepsis, which travels across different versions of the same story. These ontological violations are a wonderful unnatural device, since the self presented later cannot know the events that occurred (or will occur) in another version of her life. Bordwell notes that "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" (p. 99). I strongly disagree with this suggestion, which attempts to naturalize and thereby domesticate the metaleptic nature of this scene by finding some possible way it could have occurred. It is instead a shift from a realistic presentation to a clearly fabricated, antimimetic one.

These examples point toward another transformation that occurs in almost all multiversion narratives : the move from a verisimilar representation, such as the vivid realism for much of *Lola rennt*, to an explicitly antimimetic poetics. This in turn alters the kind of engagement an audience has with the work, moving away from identification to a stance that is more critically distanced and nonimmersive. The audience's focus shifts from the perspective of the character (what will she do next ?) to that of the creator (what version will we see next ?) as the story of the adventure gives way to the adventure of the story. This was vividly demonstrated to me during a screening of *Lola* for my graduate class. All but one student began watching from the beginning, but a tardy individual arrived just as the second version of the story had begun. At its end, as Manni is killed accidentally, the student felt considerable empathy for the character while the rest of the class all laughed out loud. She felt they were morally reprehensible until she realized the context for their emotional disengagement. As the events of the last version of the story played

on the screen, she started laughing, too. We can postulate that the implied audience of the first section differs considerably from that of the full work, and the same is true of their corresponding implied authors—the first tragic, the last highly ironic.

These fictions can raise intriguing characterological issues as well, as they show how essentially the same character can behave in antithetical ways when placed in different situations. Here we may suggest that a relatively stable characterization helps provide a ground or frame for the wildly unstable events around them. It also invites speculation concerning what personality changes are too extreme to be realistically acceptable. At the end of "Composition," three possible conclusions are offered : the protagonist, confronted by blackmailing students with an incriminating photo of him, 1) accedes to their demands and saves his job in a cowardly fashion ; 2) he corrects the letter's grammar and defies his blackmailers ; and 3) throws up his position and plans to run off with one of the undergraduates and live for love. None of these choices is an obvious one, and none is entirely implausible—this takes place in the sixties, after all.

Robert Coover, as usual, offers the greatest range of possible character transformations. The character of Jack is quite constant throughout the text : despite his confused desire, he generally remains passive, indecisive, timid, naïve, and easily swayed, though in one version he does allow himself to be goaded by Mark into potentially criminal behavior (Coover, 1970, p. 219). Mr. Tucker is repressed, vulgar, selfish, rude, and capable, at least in his imagination, of slipping home to seduce, blackmail, or even violate the babysitter. The babysitter is an especially interesting figure ; she is presented as being utterly proper and business-like, refusing to allow Jack to visit ; somewhat indulgent and appreciating his company ; fearful of unknown presences ; and eager to have sex with Jack and Mark, whom she taunts for their coyness. She is alternately frustrated by, indifferent to, intrigued by, and violently angry with the children she is taking care of. We may wonder whether all these actions can be plausibly predicated of a single realistic character ; for many teenagers, the answer may be yes. But Coover asks whether these transformations could occur in the course of a few hours. In this case, the answer is not quite so clear. Mrs. Tucker undergoes the greatest and most preposterous transformation, as she goes from being an insecure housewife to allowing others to use butter to help her get her girdle back on to being the figure, noted above, who is indifferent to the deaths of her children and the other catastrophes at the end of the story.

The most insidious characterization is that of Mark, who is utterly calculating and predatory, and whose latent violence is dependent solely on his circumstances, whether he invites himself along to make out with Jack's girlfriend, or goes on to rape her, or cover up killing her, or insisting that the children who witnessed the

death must also be killed. He is completely amoral, and there is no point at which we can say convincingly that Mark would not commit any of those actions : all seem horrifically plausible, given the appropriate circumstances. I can't help thinking that the story, written at the same year as the American mass rape and massacre of Vietnamese civilians at My Lai in 1968 and published the year the massacre was revealed, shows the easy transformation of an ordinary American boy into a young man who could commit atrocities in Southeast Asia.[6] The American culture of sexual repression and cultural violence makes such a change not only probable, but inevitable, the work suggests.

Aesthetic issues can also present themselves prominently in these works. Too much repetition, insufficiently varied repetition, or dubiously motivated repetition will be felt to be tiresome : Lola only gets to run for so many scenes once the film has gotten underway. A mixture of variation and repetition, especially when connected to larger issues of the work, is usually the most aesthetically satisfying. The heterogenous repetition of otherwise trivial or adventitious elements can be especially enjoyable. We see this in the scenes involving the large piece of glass being carried by workers across the road and the racing ambulance that has to slow down to avoid smashing it in *Lola rennt*. In the first version, this is successfully accomplished ; in the second, in accordance with this version's slightly speeded up timeframe, the glass is shattered ; in the final sequence, the ambulance brakes in time to avoid a collision in accordance with the comic turn the film is taking. The changing representations of the killing of the centipede in *La Jalousie* can similarly produce a distinctive aesthetic pleasure for those who appreciate the play of repetition and variation. At the same time, the aesthetic effect can be vitiated if the disparate versions are forced together too artificially, as we saw in the case of "Roads of Destiny."

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We may conclude by speculating on the functions and purposes of multiversion narratives. They are quite numerous. At one level, they respond to a basic question that lies behind much fiction : what if ? We wonder what would have happened if we had not married our spouse, failed to get a job, or simply missed a train. In multiversion fiction, we are typically presented with a more specific set of hypothetical narrative transformations, dramatically different possible sequences. Such fiction can also provide an innovative way of depicting the repetitive nature of daily life in certain largely unchanging settings, as Robbe-Grillet so deftly

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[6]  Though the My Lai massacre was not known at the time of the writing of "The Babysitter," accounts of numerous other American atrocities were widely available at that time.

demonstrates, or it can mark the descent into ever deeper levels folly and violence, as Coover suggests. Thematically, we find these works dramatizing the interplay of chance, will, determinism, and probability, usually with a strong emphasis on the role of chance.

Such fiction also lends itself to demonstrating the ironies of existence, when getting our wish can turn out to destroy us. Ethically and politically, it can attempt to sway us to do or to resist certain acts. Christoph Bode identifies the origin of his interest in what he calls future narratives at a time when, reading a newspaper, he saw four different maps that depicted the earth at a time several years in the future depending on whether the global temperature rose one, two, three, or four degrees centigrade. This was a kind of multiple version scenario that was nonfictional and "of the highest practical importance : about the possible futures for intelligent life upon this planet" (Bode, 2013, p. 75).[7] At a philosophical/cosmological level, it can embody Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal recurrence or recent multiverse theory, as noted in Nicole Krause's *Forest Dark*.[8] And perhaps above all, we need to recognize its use as an original way of constructing fiction, one that produces a number of novel effects on the reader. Though several prominent examples like Robbe-Grillet's have been present since the 1950's, too few narratologists theorize multiversion narratives ; some are unable to accept contradictory scenarios for what they are. This is, surprisingly, also true of digital fictions. Astrid Ensslin and Alice Bell clarify that adopting a naturalizing interpretative strategy like that of Marie-Laure Ryan (2006) "that seeks to eradicate narrative contradictions will inevitably fail to accommodate contradictions in many hypertext fictions because they are meant to be noticed. While hypertext fictions do contain both story and discourse contradictions, what is often overlooked in brief citations or otherwise superficial engagements with many of these texts are the self-reflexive devices that are used alongside the main narrative contradictions and that draw attention to their unnatural status" (Ensslin and Bell, 2021, p. 36 ; see also p. 19-48).[9] By contrast, they affirm the position taken by practitioners like Adrian Miles who argues that those critics who encounter a hypertext's singularity often "punish the object because it doesn't give you the mastery and pleasures that you have taken as your right" and condemn the work "because it does not do what we think it is supposed to" (cited

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[7]  This point is valid even if it only imperfectly applies to contradictory works like *La Jalousie*, which are not *future* narratives but rather, in the words of Ursula Heise, "project into the narrative present and past an experience of time which is normally only available for the future" (Heise, 1997, p. 49).

[8]  It is important not to anachronistically apply this concept to a text composed before it was articulated or to misapply it to cases where it is not relevant. This is a new way to naturalize the contradictions that needs to be resisted—the contradictions are usually there precisely because they defy any naturalistic recuperation.

[9]  For them, the major flaw in Ryan's schema is that she seems unable to imagine the possibility of an insistently contradictory fiction that cannot be naturalized by one means or another. In her earlier work she did account for just this possibility (Ryan, 1991, p. 38).

p. 35). To conclude, multiversion narratives are among the most antimimetic of narrative forms. As they develop, they grow increasingly antimimetic. Their contradictory plotting is usually balanced by fixed characterizations, traditional general trajectories, and strong types of closure. Typically narrated in the past tense, they violate our sense of the "pastness" of the past by suggesting that it is as malleable as the future. They certainly deserve our attention, and they deserve it on their own terms.

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