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Mapping the multiple mind: Narrative structure in cinematic representations of dissociative identity disorder

Abstract:

In my latest work in progress, the screenplay for a feature film called *A Fine State*, I am writing a film biography of Fargo Deborah Whitman, an American visual artist who has ‘multiple personalities’ (the clinical term being Dissociative Identity Disorder, or DID). Her non-singularity of mind necessitates the writing of a script that is non-linear, non-traditional and mutable. Cinematic representations of abnormal female psychology have tended to be gothic, sensational, outright spectacular or of the ‘illness narrative’ genre. Those few mainstream Hollywood narratives that depict DID (*The Three Faces of Eve*, *Sybil*, *Identity*) centre on clinical treatment, which aims at the integration of the multiple personalities into one as the appropriate and desired ‘cure.’ In this paper I interrogate the classical Hollywood notion of a redemptive resolution that comes from ‘curing’ the ‘ill’ patient by integrating the multiple identities into one. To complement my own screenplay I use the example of a recent documentary about Fargo Deborah Whitman, Jessica Chandler’s *A Fine State This Is*. The documentary resists a traditional redemptive structure by offering a different kind of ‘cure.’ Fargo chooses to reject a singular self and chooses to remain multiple. I discuss the technical aspects of screenwriting such as structure, formal elements, stylistic approaches and characterisation in order to understand how the condition of multiple personality can help us to interrogate both our own states of mind and the creative process itself. I argue that cinematic representations of DID offer a writer exciting narrative strategies to be analysed and adapted in narratives of our own.

Biographical note:

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At the Los Angeles Film Festival in 2002, I saw the world premiere of Jessica Chandler's film *A Fine State This Is* (2003), a documentary about the artist Fargo Deborah Whitman. Born on the 4th July 1954, a direct descendant of Walt Whitman and Wells Fargo, Fargo is the All American girl. She is also a 'multiple', as in 'multiple personality' (the clinical term being Dissociative Identity Disorder, or DID¹) with many alternate personalities or alters. DID, or multiplicity is usually the result of prolonged childhood abuse, and is often coupled with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. Fargo believes that her own multiplicity is actually a sophisticated version of PTSD – not so much a disorder as a brilliant self-narrativising and mental construction that therapises – or makes well – her wounded mind and makes her life live-able². Fargo and her alters moved me deeply, I responded to them more than I had to earlier cinematic representations of multiples, films such as *The Three Faces of Eve* (Johnson, 1957) and *Sybil* (Petrie, 1976). This was not an instance of me privileging a contemporary narrative over an historical one. Fargo's is an amazing story and at the end of the screening I knew I wanted to transform it into a narrative feature. I was moved, yes, but I was also drawn to both the narrative possibilities and challenges of distilling a powerful story from such a complex personality and important artist. I approached her and she bravely agreed to embark on what has become a long journey. The process of adapting Fargo's life for the screen has taken seven years so far and is still in process. There have been months of interviews, travels to New York for me, visits to Perth for Fargo, three thirty-five page treatments and many rejected structural approaches.

Over the years I have spoken not only to Fargo but to many of her alters, particularly Genie (age 7) and the two Antons (ages 9 and 15) who are engaging, articulate and witty. Fargo, Genie, Anton, Deborah, Augusta, Wylie, Gibbon, Artemis, Freda, Timey (and all the other alters) have made it clear they do not want me write a 'worthy' screenplay. But at the same time they do want me to dramatise a multitude of issues – the nature of the mind, child abuse, self-esteem, gender, isolation and community, family, siblings, the sharing of dreams, sexuality, depression, suicide, creativity, the undervaluing of art and the artist and the lack of acceptance of people with mental illness. My key concern in adapting Fargo's story for the screen is, however, one of structure because multiplicity is itself a structuring of the personality: how do I structure a screenplay about a protagonist with a mental illness so that the resulting film is marketable, cinematically unique and (most importantly perhaps) a recuperation of existing representations of multiplicity? In this paper I shall review and analyse my own process in writing *A Fine State*, a screenplay of Fargo's life. I shall do this through a discussion of three related areas: genre conventions in representations of multiplicity, generic structures of screen biography and subversive approaches to mono-linear narrative structures.

Genre conventions in representations of multiplicity

In the articulation of any artistic endeavour there is a set of cultural practices that impose on an artwork an entire epistemic or moral framework (Altieri, 1996). The cultural practices regarding multiplicity derive from the epistemic and moral

framework that is embodied in the clinic and has changed little since Charcot and Janet's work on hysteria in the late 19th century (Bentall, 2004; Foucault, 2006). In their book *Images of Madness* (1985) Michael Fleming and Roger Manvell provide both a clinical and cultural history of multiplicity. Fleming and Manvell's reading of Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) gives a chilling insight into the dominant cultural assumptions about multiplicity:

From ideal citizen to mad killer, multiple personality transformation became a genre unto itself ... The public fascination with multiple personality is so strong that it is for many people the principal explanation for madness. (Fleming and Manvell 1985: p 63)

What is even more chilling perhaps, is the endurance of these characterisations of multiples as criminals, perhaps because they offer opportunities to deliver the plot twist required by thrillers and psychological dramas. In the thriller *Identity* (Mangold, 2003), multiplicity is deployed both as characterisation and as a framing device. In the film, John Cusack plays a man, Ed, who is holed up in a motel on a rainy night with a group of strangers. These strangers are mysteriously killed off one after the other. In a parallel story that happens on the same rainy night, a recaptured serial killer is being transported across town in an armoured car. In the film's climax the serial killer is revealed to be a multiple who is killing off all his alters who are the guests in the motel. Ed is revealed to be the 'gatekeeper' alter of the serial killer, the one who prevents him from killing; Ed does not want to be 'killed' along with the other alters! The audience thinks it is watching a 'real' world peopled by 'real' characters but the world is actually inside a character's head. This conceit, where the world of the film is in a murderous protagonist's mind, has been used in films from *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* (Wiene, 1919) to *Mulholland Drive* (Lynch, 2001), but in the case of *Identity* the conceit is literally true. The same can be said for another recent film about a non-linear mind (though not a DID mind): Ron Howard's biopic of the mathematician John Nash.

A Beautiful Mind (Howard, 2001) uses a simple mono-linear structure coupled with an adroit structural manoeuvre. John Nash's schizophrenic voices appear at first to be real people, but they are eventually revealed to be products of his own mind, aspects of himself that he ultimately chooses to repress and banish. In this way Nash's voices are depicted less like disembodied schizophrenic voices and much more like a multiple's alters - they appear to be living, breathing characters in 'co-consciousness' with Nash. This is quite a different depiction of schizophrenia to the very recent film *The Soloist* (Wright, 2009) where the voices heard by Nathaniel are depicted in repetitive, layered audio sound scapes of ideas, thoughts and sentences that relentlessly 'pursue' him. Even though schizophrenia is not DID, the idea of Nash banishing his alters to effect a healing transformation deeply disturbed Fargo. Fargo does not wish to 'kill her babies' Genie and Anton. For her, it would be like killing a real child or sibling or friend. However, it is interesting that her 'perpetrating' alters, alters that lead her to suicide attempts, abuse, perfectionism, and other forms of self-harm have themselves disappeared over the years. This chronology of events would lend itself to an 'illness narrative' (Rimoth-Kenan, 2002) structure as used in films such as *The Three Faces of Eve* and *Sybil*, which focus entirely on the diagnosis,

treatment and ‘cure’ of integrating the personalities into a single, ‘normal’ personality. Unlike these traditional illness narratives, where the ‘host’ integrates their alters, Fargo and I wish to present a ‘wellness narrative’ a film which is a different and arguably recuperative model of DID people living with their alters, a film where the ‘host’ does not choose to integrate but makes themselves ‘well’ in other ways.

Generic structures of screen biography

The core concern of the screenplay can be articulated in the following question: in what manner can I narrate Fargo developing ways to live with her multiplicity, as an artist, as a lesbian, as a woman, and as an art therapist? It could be assumed that the most effective narration of that story would focus on characterisation, but as numerous experts tell us, characterisation is so strongly linked to structure (Cowgill, 1999; Horton, 1998) that structure must be the dominant consideration. My primary question then, is what structure do I use to tell this story and what will be its elements? Will there be a composite of real and imagined worlds, past and present chronologies? Which parts of the *fabula* (or entire life story) make it to the *syuzhet* (or plot), and in which order and for what duration? David Bordwell says in *Narration in The Fiction Film*:

at the level of the whole, the *fabula* duration is assumed to be greater than the *syuzhet* duration, and the *syuzhet* duration is assumed to be greater than the projection time ... at the level of various parts, however, the situation changes. Stylistic factors intervene decisively ... in sum, the nature of the part shapes the spectator’s construction of story duration. (Bordwell 1985: p.81)

In relation to biopics in general and my screenplay in particular, Bordwell’s phrase, ‘the nature of the part’, refers to many methodological concerns, not just the spatiotemporal issue but the entire meta-narrative of character, antagonist, context, object of conflict, setting, pacing, theme, style and tone. But before these wider concerns are addressed a simpler question is – what is the span of the story and what ellipses will be used? Do I select a short chronology as in the film *The Young Victoria* (Vallée, 2009) about Queen Victoria or a long, elided one as in *Mongol* (Bodrov, 2007) about Genghis Khan? What balance do I strike between Fargo’s personal and public story? Do I isolate a personal sub-story, as in the films *Immortal Beloved* (Rose, 1994) and *Shadowlands* (Attenborough, 1993) which tell love stories central to the life of two public figures: Beethoven and C.S. Lewis respectively? What kind of chronology do I employ? Do I use a totally backwards chronology like *Memento* (Nolan, 2000) or a singular forwards successive chronology, perhaps interspersed with flashbacks of one or two key events as in *Walk The Line* (Mangold, 2008)? Linda Cowgill (1999, p.152) suggests in *Secrets of Screenplay Structure* that a framing story can be useful ‘to create continuity in the plot by focussing on a specific action (or) to illuminate different aspects of the story.’ Even a secondary character’s framing story in the present can allow us to flashback to the main character’s past. For example, Salieri’s story is the framing present-time story in Mozart’s biography *Amadeus*

(Forman, 1984). In it, a singular static present-time chronology is interspersed with a singular forwards narrative.

A more complex structure would be a singular forwards successive chronology interspersed with multiple forwards parallel narratives. Would each of the parallel narratives 'belong' to the protagonist or would there be shared protagonists? *Immortal Beloved* is framed or 'anchored' by an overarching or unifying narrative - the search for the 'Immortal Beloved' by Beethoven's executor, but there are three possible beloveds. What if the anchoring timeframe is interspersed with multiple flashbacks of no forwards momentum? What if there appears to be no anchoring timeframe? *La Vie en Rose* (Dahan, 2007) exemplifies such a structure, where the connections from one time frame to another are governed not by a temporal system but a thematic or character-based linkage. I call this a *petit déjeuner de chien* structure, or 'dog's breakfast', not just because it is 'all over the place' but because it feels more creative and even subversive. I find this approach not only more exciting, but more suited to Fargo's inherent strengths of character – she is creative, and she is multiple. Genie calls people who are not multiple 'mono-minds' so perhaps what a film about Fargo needs is a non mono-linear narrative, full of multiple chronologies and tonal variations, with a twist as effective as *A Beautiful Mind*.

Subversive approaches to mono-linear narrative structures

During the course of my writing, I developed and then rejected several structures before arriving at the current one. My first idea was to use Fargo's beautiful Brooklyn Brownstone townhouse (where she has lived for thirty years) as a mind-metaphor, the literal container of the alters. In this script, the apartments would be inhabited by people with whom Fargo has ongoing relationships and at some point in the film they would be revealed as her alters. I readily leapt at this idea because I think architectural structure is analogous with narrative structure. A script can be seen as a blueprint through which a reader visualises space and time, a moveable feast of walls and floors and ceilings and fittings whose design and manipulation can become both a film's content and structure. Serendipitously, this is a concept closely related to Fargo's earlier form of artwork, the film sculptures, a series of seven large artworks that use film loops projected onto various screens placed within and around found or constructed objects, and through which a viewer can walk, that is, they are akin to architectural form. Fargo's film sculptures are about how thoughts, words and actions are essentially a representation of the mind. The sculptures can be read as direct representations of Fargo's mind and as such they seem a natural choice as the framework for the film.

This film sculpture structure has both possibilities and problems. A chronological narrative might begin with Fargo (or Deborah as she was then) in college in Virginia, where she began early sculptural work, then move to her postgraduate years at Rutgers, where the film sculptures really began to take shape, then to New York and Brooklyn where she worked as a commercial artist while building most of the early film sculptures and then move to her triumph as the first woman artist to exhibit at the

Whitney in 1984. The last film sculpture was produced in 1993, just before the appearance or ‘birth’ of the child alters, when Genie was the first alter to actually speak to Fargo. So the obvious problem with this structure, is that the alters would not appear until the 100th minute of a 110 minute film – just in time to save her life, which is what they did – but unlike the cavalry you actually want to see the alters earlier in the film because the story is about *all* of Fargo and that includes the alters. To address this problem I identified two arcs to Fargo’s story - ‘before Genie speaks’ and ‘after Genie speaks’. The latter includes the narrative arc that ends with Fargo becoming qualified as an art therapist. I then dramatised these two arcs as parallel narratives, using a structure where the anchoring timeframe revolves around an art therapist called Deborah – Fargo’s main adult alter, almost a mother-figure – who runs her practice for children – the child alters – out of an office next to Fargo’s studio. This structure allows Fargo and most of the alters to be in the same physical space, it allows us to flash back to each of their pasts and can also afford, accommodate and embody the reveal that shows the audience these people are all aspects of the same person.

While this structure has not been discarded, the current structure returns to Fargo’s film sculptures, using the final sculpture Fargo made. Called *Mater/Mumma’s Shadow and What Used to be There* it was made in 1992-3, mostly during a prestigious Art Colony fellowship. It is a strongly maternal figuration, based around a blue dress with a ‘womb’ and images of eggs in the projected loops. In Fargo’s words this film sculpture is:

the beginnings of my ten-year journey uncovering the MPD and becoming my own mother of my babies. Struggle with my mother’s rejection, lots of things. This is for anyone to see their mother in - the hovering shadow of mother. This is the one I made on the yearlong travel through the art colonies, after having attended the first Incest meeting that kicked off the whole unravelling - the night before leaving I went to the meeting followed by dreams that night. ‘Mater/Mumma’ came from that. (Whitman 2004)

Those notes sent to me by Fargo contain many crucial story elements: the completion of the sculpture at an Art Colony, the recollection of the inciting traumatic incident, the moment that Fargo began to realise that she was multiple, the metaphoric and thematic power of the maternal. The completion of this sculpture was quickly followed by Genie speaking which is the obvious climactic moment of the film. Robert McKee suggests in *Story* (1999) that if one analyses the crisis and climax and resolution, interrogates the protagonist and antagonist, identifies what it is they are fighting over; then works back from that, one has a plot. With this formula in mind the film structure would look like this: the crisis is the incest meeting dream (and the memories that followed), the climax is when Genie speaks, the resolution is when Fargo goes into therapy. The problem is, however, that Genie speaking is the beginning of the ‘recovery’ story arc, so logically I should begin with that, tell the recovery arc that follows, and the ‘illness’ arc that precedes it – then two important decades are covered. To do this as a multi-linear and multi-chronologous structure is almost mandatory. This allows me to juggle the linearity, to re-form an overlong

singular chronological storyline and break it down into several shorter chronologies. These chronologies each drive to their own climax, namely Genie speaks, the completion of 'Mater/Mumma' and Fargo's masters degree, and therefore collectively deliver a multiple climax – as well as a *petit déjeuner de chien!*

The challenge for any film structure about Fargo is to not only contain her wonderful story but to also carry the themes of the film. Thematic concerns may not be what most engage and move an audience, but they are possibly the most important thing to a writer because they are the 'why' of 'why am I writing this?' In my case, the 'why' is because I believe that just as Fargo therapises her own wounded mind, a film about her can do the same for others. Kate Wright (2004, p.69) says in *Screenwriting is Storytelling*, theme is 'a group of ideas ... the life affirming concepts that support the struggle of the human condition.' The 'Mater/Mumma' structure could successfully marry structure and theme because it thematically links back to the maternal, mothering and creativity. Like the eggs and the womb in the sculpture, the maternal becomes a perfect container for the possibility of renewal and hope and a more positive representation of people with mental illness. This is what Fargo wants to invoke for all who see her story.

Endnotes

[1] DSM IV (1994: p 484-486) states that to have DID a patient must have "two or more distinct identities or personality states that recurrently take control of behaviour" ... and "reflects a failure to integrate various aspects of identity". Fargo does not regard her state as being a failure and believes her entire self, with its multiple parts, to be an integrated whole.

[2] Unlike earlier screen subjects Sybil and Chris Sizemore (the real 'Eve' in [The Three Faces of Eve](#)), Fargo has 'co-consciousness'. This means that the alters and Fargo are aware of each other, and there are no blackouts or amnesiac barriers between Fargo and the alters. However, this state is only quite recent - since 1993 - after decades of suffering caused by the voices of the alters being in Fargo's mind.

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