

Contextual frame theory and monitoring flashbacks

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Abstract

This article investigates how flashbacks are identified in prose fiction. According to Emmott's (1997) contextual frame theory (CFT), accompanying a flashback there is normally a frame switch in the narrative, from the story's NOW to its THEN. Accompanying this, a reader's processing mode also changes accordingly, from monitoring the current-time context to the story's past. This process seems to be in line with what psychologists call sequential processing which normally involves a switch of attention. But, as I would argue, sometimes it is possible for a stretch of text to depict concurrently the flashback and the story's present time, and it is therefore possible for readers to perform simultaneous parallel processing, distributing their attention to both contexts rather than focusing on one at a time. As an illustration, the article analyses two flashback examples from John le Carré's (2001) novel *The Constant Gardener*, one involving a clear frame shift whereas the other depicting two contexts concurrently. In the latter case, it could be argued that both contexts are the focus of readers' attention, but receive different levels of attention because one context is more saliently presented than the other in the narrative.

Key words: flashback; contextual frame theory; readers' processing; priming; unpriming; prominence; *The Constant Gardener*; flash effects; analepsis

1. Introduction

This article investigates flashbacks in prose fiction: how they are textually established and how we, as readers, recognise them during the reading. I begin by giving a brief explanation of what I mean by flashback and how it differs from *analepsis*, a term that is being widely used among literary critics and narratologists. As will become clear in my later discussion, *analepsis* is more of an umbrella term covering all types of temporal backshifts in narratives, regardless of how they are textually actualised, whereas flashback, a term originating from film-making and film studies, emphasises the ‘flash’ effects in the textual presentation of *analepses* (specification, detailedness and vividness). The flash effects can be most straightforwardly realised in films, such as through the use of a cut and the visual-audio presentation of a specific anterior context. Flashbacks can also be found in novels, where the flashiness is actualised through a detailed and dramatised depiction of a specific context.

Apart from textual presentation, this article also looks at readers’ cognitive processing when a flashback is introduced in the narrative. With regard to this, I concentrate on Emmott’s contextual frame theory (CFT), discussed thoroughly in her book *Narrative Comprehension* (1997). The theory explores what happens cognitively to a reader who tries to understand what is described in a narrative, and stresses the dynamic relationship between the cognitive aspect of a reader and what is written in the text. Because of this, CFT is particularly useful in accounting for how readers recognise a flashback based on textual cues and their prior knowledge of the text, and how they react cognitively during a contextual shift in the text.

The structure of this article is as follows. In Section 2, I will explain what I mean by flashback, and how it is different from the concept of *analepsis*. After discussing some key concepts in CFT, I will look at a flashback example from the novel *The Constant Gardener*. It is through the textual analysis that I hope to demonstrate the usefulness of the theory in studying flashbacks. Here, I also address some of the issues concerning the CFT framework, obtained from analysing a larger corpus of flashback examples. It is important to note that, these issues are not direct attacks on the theory. Instead, I hope to show how it can be built on to take into account more complex texts. To illustrate this, I will concentrate on an extract from the same novel in Section 4.

2. Flashbacks and analepses

To explain the term ‘flashback’, it is perhaps useful to begin with a dictionary definition. The Oxford English Dictionary¹ (OED online version, 1989) defines ‘flashback’ as:

a scene which is a return to a previous action in the film, a cut-back; hence, a revival of the memory of past events, as in a pictorial or written presentation.

This definition shows an emphasis on films, indicating that flashback, as a term to refer to the kind of rapid shift to a dramatised presentation of anterior events or memories, might have been adopted initially by filmmakers and film critics (cf. Bawden, 1976: 255; Hayward, 2000: 133). Meanwhile, the OED definition also mentions that, apart from films, flashbacks can also be found in written presentations, e.g. poems, novels and play scripts. Compared with the OED definition, introductory books on literary criticism and narratology seem to explain ‘flashback’ by relating less to its textual realisation, and more to the general notion of temporal backshift and its connection with Genette’s term ‘analepsis’ (to be discussed in 2.3). For example, Bridgeman (2007) notes that

[m]any narrative texts employ flashback (*analepsis*, in Genette’s terms) as a matter of course, in order to fill in the past history of protagonists while avoiding a lengthy introduction or in order to reveal new facts.

(Bridgeman, 2007: 57; original italics)

A similar definition is put forward by Fludernik (2009):

The most common of these [temporal distortion in general] is the flashback, also called analepsis, in which prior happenings are recounted, often as part of something the hero/heroine remembers.

(Fludernik, 2009: 34)

The issue arising from the above two quotes is that, narratologists and literary critics tend to treat flashback as a synonym of analepsis, whilst, as I would argue, the two concepts are quite different.

In his most influential work, *Narrative Discourse* (1980)², Gérard Genette introduces the term *analepsis* to describe ‘any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment’ (1980: 40). Indicated by the word ‘any’ in ‘any evocation’, Genette’s analepsis originally means backward temporality in

general, regardless of how this backward projection is realised in narrative texts³. Based on this, the term analepsis can be seen as relating to the suffix of the word ‘flashback’, referring to the idea of temporal backshift, whilst the prefix ‘flash-‘ can be seen as relevant to the textual realisation of this shift. By effectively merging the two concepts of analepsis and flashback, narratologists and literary critics have made a relatively dangerous gap which causes difficulty in the identification of flashback. This further leads to an analysis of flashbacks that is less analytically precise than is needed. The difference, mainly in textual depiction, between an analepsis and a flashback will become clearer in the following discussion.

In the case of analepsis, as long as its position in relation to the main story line constitutes a backward temporality, it can appear as a clause, or can depict an old habitual event with little dramatisation. Flashback, on the other hand, can be seen as a specific type of analepsis, one that is being presented directly and vividly in the text. A most straightforward flashback example can be found in film where a shot shows us the story’s ‘current-time’ situation, and then is cut to the next shot showing, for example, the protagonist’s childhood. The effects of flashiness are realised here by (a) the change of shot by a quick cut, (b) the vivid presentation of the story’s present and its past through both the audio and visual channels. This leads to a list of criteria that could help us identify flashbacks in narrative:

1. **Movement:** the flash effect normally results from a (sudden) change/changes in the narrative, in terms of time, space, or possible worlds (Ryan, 1991), such as a flashback triggered by a character imagining a different person in an earlier time-frame, and in a different location. As my later discussion will show, a flashback is not always signalled by indication of temporal shifts. Also, it is not identified based simply on textual indications, but on a combination of bottom-up and top-down processing.
2. **Degree of abruptness:** how rapidly a flashback is introduced in a narrative, whether it is presented immediately after a cut in films or after a section break in novels.
3. **Level of specification:** whether the new flashback context and its events are depicted specifically, or summarised as generalisation of some iterative past events.
4. **Degree of vividness/dramatisation:** whether the new spatio-temporal frame and its events are presented to the viewer/reader as if they are happening immediately, dramatically and in front of us.

The first factor, movement, is concerned mostly with *what* changes. It can also lead to other sub-categories of flash-presentation, such as flash-forwards (temporal forward-shifts to future contexts) and flash-sideways (shifts between simultaneous events or characters within the same general location while the story time remains unchanged (see Rong, 2011 for a detailed account of different types of flash-presentations). The latter three factors are concerned with the effects rendered by *how* these changes are presented textually. Rather than establishing a rigid framework, they operate on clines, contributing to different degrees of flashiness. This allows the concept of flashback to include a wide range of occurrences, from flashbacks with more flashiness to those with less. For example, a flashback depicted through an audio-visual presentation arguably results in more flash effects than, say, a flashback that is delivered only through the audio channel.

In literary criticism, the term ‘flashback’ is sometimes treated as associating only with films while analepsis is with written narrative. Chatman claims that:

[t]he terms ‘flashback’ and ‘flashforward’ should probably be limited to the specifically cinematic medium...in the cinema, ‘flashback’ means a narrative passage ‘goes back’ but specifically visually, as a scene, in its own autonomy, that is, introduced by some overt mark of transition like a cut or a dissolve. It is not correct to refer to traditional summary passages as ‘flashbacks’. Flashbacks and -forwards are only media-specific instances of the larger classes of analepsis and prolepsis.

(Chatman, 1978: 64)

Similar to Chatman’s characterisation, Herman (2009: 181) considers analepses as novelistic equivalences of flashbacks in film. Although flashback, as a terminology, probably originates from the filmmaking industry (Cuddon, 1998: 321), I would suggest that it seems more appropriate to treat flashback as a sub-set of analepsis, i.e. a dramatised relation of analepsis. It is obvious that the three aspects contributing to the flash effects – abruptness, specification and dramatisation – can be actualised in not only films but also novels, and other written texts such as poems and dramatic scripts.

It is worth mentioning, however, that whereas the visual-audio presentation of film and drama performance can achieve the flash effects in a direct, auditory and visual manner, a novel will have to use its sentences to induce the relevant flash effect in the reader’s perception of the fictional world, thus involving them in extra inferential cognitive work.

Because of this subtle difference in the perceiver's cognition, I will focus on Emmott's contextual frame theory in the next section, and apply it to my analysis of flashbacks in novels, and addresses the issues such as how readers or viewers mentally construct a fictional context based on the textual presentation, and how they cognitively react when the narrative switches to depict a flashback context.

3. Contextual frame theory

Contextual frame theory (henceforth, CFT) is introduced by Emmott in a series of publications (1994:142-57; 1995, 1997, 1998). Based on empirical studies in psychology and artificial science, the theory provides an account of the way in which readers form a mental picture of a particular fictional context during the reading (context building), and how they respond cognitively to contextual changes indicated in the text (context monitoring). Flashback, as a major type of contextual change, receives some discussion in Emmott's book (1997). Here, she looks at some clear examples of flashback and concentrates on how our understanding of a particular character changes because of a flashback presenting some earlier events involving the same character (see, for example, 1997: 180-6; 191-4).

Below, I first outline the key concepts in CFT before focusing on two in particular: priming and binding. I then concentrate on contextual shifts through which flashbacks occur. Here, I consider the relationship between (i) how the narrative presents a flashback and (ii) how readers respond to the textual presentation in their process of identifying the flashback. Next, I discuss some of the issues of CFT that I have obtained from analysing my flashback examples. It is necessary to note that, although Emmott's work focuses mainly on novels, and hence might not be straightforwardly transferable to films, it can be argued that our processing of films involves the kind of the basic cognitive tasks mentioned in CFT.

3.1 Contextual frame: constructing fictional contexts

For Emmott, the notion of *context* includes not just the physical location portrayed in the story, but also 'details of the participants present in that location and any other salient information about the context' (1997: 114). She (1997: 103) suggests that, whenever a text describes an event happening in the fictional world a reader must usually know the following:

- (a) Which characters are present in the physical environment?
- (b) Where is the action located?
- (c) What is the approximate time of the action?

According to CFT, these categories of information are retrieved directly from the text itself and also from inferences made from the text. In order to mentally build a context, readers need to group ‘particular characters in a particular place at a particular time’, and constantly track for any contextual changes. Emmott calls this process *contextual monitoring* (1997: 106). She then adds that:

Context building and monitoring requires the reader to supplement each sentence of a narrative with knowledge derived from earlier in the text and stored within the mind whilst substantial stretches of text are read.

(Emmott, 1997: 107)

The above quotation mentions the role of readers’ co-textual knowledge in their narrative processing, but this co-textual knowledge is not about any type of information that is previously mentioned in the narrative. It includes (i) salient details about specific situations and events that have been recently mentioned in the text (i.e. the ‘episodic’ information), and (ii) the ‘non-episodic’ information that is not directly related to specific situations but is ‘true beyond the immediate context, such as a character’s appearance, age or a restaurant’s location (Emmott, 1997: 121-2).

These two types of information are kept in the mental store of readers, or in what Emmott (1997: 121) calls a *contextual frame*, or simply a *frame*. This store of information is assumed to be held in readers’ memory for at least a while so they do not need to be reminded of it in every sentence. Emmott explains elsewhere (1994: 158) that a contextual frame works together with contextual monitoring, enabling readers not only to construct a frame by ‘situating’ characters in a specific temporal-spatial context, but also to track constantly whether any changes happen to the current frame. To illustrate this, let us consider an extract from the beginning of *The English Patient* (Ondaatje, 1992). Sentences are numbered for ease of reference.

She stands up in the garden where she has been working and looks into the distance (1). She has sensed a shift in the weather (2). There is another gust of wind, a buckle of noise in the air, and the tall cypresses sway (3). She turns and moves

uphill towards the house, climbing over a low wall, feeling the first drops of rain on her bare arms (4).

(Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, p. 3)

With the explicit mention of character ('she'), place ('the garden') and time (the present tense) in sentence (1), readers can already establish a contextual frame concerning what is happening in the story's current time. This context is being kept in the reader's memory, so that, even when (3) makes no mention of any character, they are able to interpret (i) the word 'another' as presupposing an earlier gust of wind felt by the woman, and (ii) the description of the weather as being presented from her perspective: what she feels ('gust of wind'), hears ('a buckle of noise') and sees ('the tall cypresses sway').

Sentence (3) serves also as an example of what Emmott (1997: 240) calls *covert continuity*: our store of information, or the frame depicted in the above extract, allows us to continue monitoring the context in relation to the same character, even when she is *textually covert* as not being mentioned explicitly in a particular sentence (Emmott, 1997: 124). When readers reach sentence (3), their contextual frame about the woman in the garden needs to be updated, because the current location ('the gardener') is changed according to the woman's movement the change of location (moves uphill towards the house). Sentence (3) would be what Emmott (Emmott, 1997: 154) calls a *progressive frame switch* (as opposed to *instantiate frame switch*) resulting from the character gradually moving away from the current location, and/or moving towards a different location. The concept of frame switch will be discussed in the section below.

3.2 Frame switch: movement to flashback

Once readers frame a context, they need to constantly monitor the frame for any changes of character, place and/or time. When a contextual frame is replaced by a new one in the text, Emmott calls it a *frame switch* (Emmott, 1997: 147). Accompanying a flashback there is a frame switch, from the story's current-time frame to its past. A memory flashback can arguably be considered as what results from (i) a switch from the external story world, or the textual actual world in terms of Ryan's (1991) possible worlds theory, to the character's internal world. For ease of discussion, I include this latter type of inward switch as one type of frame switch.

For an illustration of frame switch, I now examine an flashback example from the novel *The Constant Gardener* (Le Carré, 2001). The following extract also serves as an illustration of flashback, as opposed to Genette's analepsis. The context here is that, in Kenya, the British High Commissioner's personal secretary Mike Mildren receives a phone call saying that Tessa Quayle, wife of the British Foreign Serviceman Justin Quayle, has been murdered. Mildren immediately reports this news to the Head of Chancery, Sandy Woodrow, who secretly loves Tessa. As for the annotation, I segment the extract into two parts, [A] and [B], based on the difference in spatio-temporal domain in which the events take place. Since both scenarios consist of conversations, the turns are further numbered.

[Part A] Mildren replied [to Woodrow]. 'A four-track, property of the Oasis Lodge, Turkana, had been found abandoned on the east side of the lake. [...] One dead white female, death unexplained, one headless African, identified as Noah the driver, married with four children. [...] The woman in her mid-to-late 20s, dark-haired, one gold ring, on the third finger of left hand. One gold necklace on the car floor.' **(A.1)**

[Part B] *That necklace you're wearing*, Woodrow heard himself saying in mock challenge as they danced. **(B.1)**

My grandmother gave it to my mother on her wedding day, she answered. *I wear it with everything, even if it's out of sight.* **(B.2)**

Even in bed? **(B.3)**

Depends. **(B.4)**

[Part A] 'Who found them?' Woodrow asked. **(A.2)**

(John le Carré, *The Constant Gardener*, 2001:13-14; original italics)

The extract begins by depicting a specific contextual frame in which Mildren is telling Woodrow about the news he received earlier: Tessa was killed in a car accident. The speech delivered by Mildren is presented in turn (A.1) in the form of direct speech (henceforth, DS) (see, for example, Leech & Short, 2007: 255-8; Short, 1996: 288-95). It contains a detailed description of the victim's personal features given to Mildren by the local Kenyan police, and related by him to Sandy Woodrow in the story's current time. Schematically, we expect to have Woodrow's response in the next turn, continuing the discussion of Tessa's murder, but this does not occur until turn (A.2) at the end of the extract. In between, we have four turns, (B.1)-(B.4), and this is where the frame switch to a flashback occurs, signalled through a series of internal deviations.

First of all, the novelist chooses to italicise the presentation of the speech strings in turns (B.1)-(B.4). This graphological deviation offers us the most direct signal of a change, although at this point we cannot be sure without other information what exactly has changed. Further, it is unlikely schematically that Mildren would be wearing a necklace or that Woodrow would ask Mildren about his necklace. Hence, Woodrow’s speech in (B.1), together with the rest of section [B], breaks the Gricean (1975) maxim of relation, not on the character-character level, but on the level of the narrator-to-narratee (i.e. reader) that acts as an intra-dialogic indication from which the reader can make inferences concerning temporal and spatial shifts. We can infer that the character Woodrow in section [B] is no longer the same Woodrow, with Mildren, in the story’s current time, but rather the one with a different interlocutor, mostly likely Tessa, in a different spatio-temporal location (for discussion of different time-related versions of the same character, see Emmott’s [1997: 182] notion of ‘enactor’). This interpretation is further reinforced by ‘as they danced’ in the following reporting clause in (B.1). Overall, the following list of linguistic and non-linguistic indications help us to identify a frame switch in [B], to a moment when Tessa was still alive, together with a change in character, location and action.

	The story’s NOW [A]	The story’s THEN [B]
Graphological feature	Non-italicised letters	The reported clauses in the speech presentations are italicised
Characters	Mildren; Woodrow	Woodrow; Tessa (inferred based on the co-text and the context)
Location	Woodrow’s office at British High Commission, Kenya	A party in an unidentified location (inferred from ‘as they danced’)
Action	Conversation between Mildren and Woodrow	Conversation between Tessa and Woodrow while they danced

Figure 1 Changes in relation to the flashback in *The Constant Gardener*

Now that the frame switch has been established, I will focus on the textual features contributing to the effects of dramatization which characterise [B] more as a flashback than an analepsis in Genette’s terms. In the above extract, the flash effects are achieved specifically by means of (i) the graphological change from [A] to [B] (already mentioned above); (ii) an *in medias res* effect produced by definite references to people and objects which have not been introduced in the prior text and context, and (iii) (free) direct speech presentation [henceforth, (F)DS].

The *in medias res* effect is achieved in turn (B.1) by a series of linguistic cues, including the present tense, the second-person pronoun ‘you’ and the deictic expression ‘that’ in ‘that necklace you’re wearing’, as well as ‘they’ in ‘as they danced’. On its first mention, the noun ‘necklace’ is modified by ‘that’, and there is also no clear reference to Woodrow’s addressee. In their discussion of prose fiction, Leech and Short (2007: 143) suggest that the *in medias res* technique normally ‘heightens the element of mystery or suspense which is an important ingredient in all story-telling’. In terms of effect, it also gives the impression that we are *immediately* placed in the middle of an activity between Woodrow and another person, presumably Tessa, at a different time and place from the current story time and place.

Finally, the (F)DS presentation in prose fiction is often believed to have the most vivid speech presentation effect of all the speech presentation modes as a character’s speech is delivered without narratorial mediation and with few indicators of narratorial presence (Leech & Short, 2007: 258). There are no quotation marks and only the first of the four turns has a reporting signal. Arguably, (F)DS in prose fiction can create a similar impression to that presented in films and dramatic performances – we visualise the speaker (visual information) while hearing directly what s/he is saying (auditory information).

3.3 Priming and binding

In the above extract, together with the frame switch to the flashback, there is also a change in our cognitive processing: readers switch the focus of their attention to the new frame, and place the original one in the background of their mind, although it still remains in their episodic memory bank. During the reading of part [A], our focus of attention is with Mildren and Woodrow at the story’s current time. We are monitoring the information provided by Mildren, actively making inferences concerning the female victim (since her name is not made explicit). When our reading moves to part [B], our attention is drawn to the flashback frame as a result of the frame switch and the vivid textual presentation of the flashback context. In effect, we start to monitor actively the new frame. This process, ‘by which one particular contextual frame becomes the main focus of attention for the reader’, is what Emmott calls *priming* (1997: 123). For Emmott, a primed frame is established by readers reading the part of the narrative that describes this specific frame. So in the previous extract, the flashback frame becomes primed when our reading moves from (A.1) to (B.1).

Also, Emmott treats the primed frame as the one that receives the ‘main focus of attention’, suggesting that there are other contextual frames which might draw a small amount of our attention and stay at the background of our mind. And these backgrounded frames are what Emmott (1997: 123) calls *bound* – they are not in the focus of our attention, but remain in our short-term memory and can be retrieved anytime during the reading. When we prime a flashback frame, what happens is that we actively monitor this frame, trying to understand what is happening in this particular scene. Meanwhile, the binding of the story’s NOW, that we are still aware of the fact that Mildren mentions a gold necklace, invites us to interpret the flashback in [B] as a presentation of Woodrow’s memory. As indicated by the lexical repetition of the word ‘necklace’, it is very likely that Mildren’s mention of the necklace triggers Woodrow’s specific memory.

Emmott (1997: 123) goes on to explain that, a primed frame is the frame that is depicted in a stretch of text that we are reading at a particular moment, and this primed frame becomes *unprimed* when it is no longer enacted in the text for the reader to monitor (1997: 123). This explanation implies at least two assumptions that are problematic. The first is the assumption that a stretch of text only depicts one context at a time. According to Emmott (1997: 123), ‘since any one sentence of a narrative will normally only follow events in one context, the reader processing that sentence will concentrate on the action occurring in that particular place’. While this is true in some cases, in other circumstances it is possible for a stretch of text to depict more than one context. We will see an example of this kind in the next section.

What is also problematic is the assumption about readers’ ability to monitor only one context at a time. The issue here is to some degree relevant to the first assumption mentioned above. According to Emmott (1997: 147), when the text mentions a new frame after a switch, ‘the reader ceases to directly monitor one frame and starts monitoring another frame’. But this is not really the case when we read an extract depicting more than one fictional context. I will return to this with an example in Section 4.

Even in situations where there is only one context being presented, the idea of mono-priming is still problematic because it seems to assume that reading is a one-way linear processing activity, by which the reader does not turn the pages of a novel back or forward, and blurs the distinction between (i) the context that is currently depicted in the text, and (ii) the context that currently receives most of a reader’s attention. Whereas the first element is text-based and is rather stable (what contexts are mentioned on what pages), the second is

more of a personal experience and can vary according to individuals in different circumstances. Burke (2011: 2), for example, notes that memory and cognition interact with emotion during the reading. When a reader finds a certain context emotionally provocative, it is likely that this particular context might still be in or come to the forefront of the reader's mind several pages after its textual depiction (and hence be primed in Emmott's terms). In the previous *Constant Gardener* example, the current-time frame may not become unprimed immediately when we move on to read Woodrow's speech in (B.2). It is arguable that readers are still aware clearly of Mildren speaking, a cognitive element that leads them to interpret the conversation in the flashback as what Woodrow remembers as a result of Mildren mentioning the gold necklace.

In psychological studies, the ability to pay attention to more than one situation is often discussed under the term 'cocktail party phenomenon' (see, for example, Cherry, 1953). What this term suggests is that you can keep your attention on only one conversation, but at the same time pick up bits and pieces from other conversations in which, for example, your name is mentioned. The ability to pay attention to more than one event at the same time is relevant to the psychological concept of *simultaneous parallel processing* (Greene & Hicks, 1984: 39-42). Allport (1980), for example, points out that our capacity to process two or more tasks at once, mostly by employing separate perceptual modalities without affecting the other modality system. Because of this, one could argue that in films, it is possible to have parallel priming, through the visual and the audio presentations respectively. Further, we can make the distinction between 'visual priming/binding' and 'aural priming/binding', depending on what medium the film narrative is delivered. As for flashbacks, it is common to find situations in films where a character relates, through the voice-over narration, an earlier scenario in his/her life, while the visuals show this specific remembered scene. The visuals in this case would constitute a *visual flashback*. The opposite situation – where 'we might see a character onscreen in the present but hear another character's voice from an earlier scene' – would result in an *audio flashback* (see, for example, Bordwell & Thompson, 2001: 312; Chatman, 1978: 64). In both cases, the viewer could effectively monitor the flashback context as well as the 'current-time' context which is constantly primed, either by the voice-over or through the visual presentation.

Far from being an empirical study, my discussion so far depends mainly on abstract argumentation and is thus not meant as concrete evidence nor should it be read as such. The hypotheses being put forward here demand psychological testing, something which is beyond

the scope of the present study. Let us now look at an example from le Carré's *The Constant Gardener* (2001) which illustrates the type of 'parallel priming' I have been describing.

4. Parallel priming exemplified

The extract here presents the scene when Sandy Woodrow is at Tessa's house after her death, recalling an earlier conversation he and Tessa had in the same location. Sentences are numbered for ease of reference.

He [Sandy] reached the middle of the room and stopped, arrested by the power of memory (1). This is where I stood and lectured her, the contessa's daughter, from beside this pretty inlaid table that she said her mother had loved, while I clutched the back of this flimsy satinwood chair and pontificated like a Victorian father (2). Tessa standing over there in front of the window, and the sunlight cutting straight through her cotton dress (3). Did she know that I was talking to a naked silhouette? (4) That just to look at her was to see my dream of her come true, my girl on the beach, my stranger on a train? (5)

'I thought the best thing I could do was call by,' he begins sternly. (6)

'Now why did you think that, Sandy?' she asks. (7)

(John le Carré, *The Constant Gardener*, pp 50-51)

The phrase 'arrested by...memory' in sentence (1) signals a perceptual shift from the external fictional world to Woodrow's internal world. This latter domain is further elaborated through Woodrow's free direct thought presentation (FDT) in sentences (2)-(5), as indicated by the change of tense and pronoun. What is further embedded in this FDT is Woodrow's memory flashback of an anterior scene when he had a conversation with Tessa in the same location. The deictic field (Galbraith, 1995: 46) in this remembered scene is further specified by the proximal *deixis en phantasma*⁴ in Bühler's (1990: 145) terms, e.g. 'This is where...'; 'this...chair', and the referential expressions to the location (e.g. 'over there in front of the window'; 'the back of this...chair').

All else being equal, readers, when processing sentences (2) and (3), can well prime two frames concurrently: the anterior frame including Woodrow and Tessa, and the story's current-time frame, with Woodrow alone in the room. There is an overlap of deictic fields in the two contextual frames: the locations are the same (including the same furniture), and

although at different times, the viewpoint from which this location is presented is that of the same character standing at the same spot. Arguably, these factors work to keep our attention on the original current-time frame to some extent while at the same time directing it to the earlier one with Woodrow talking to Tessa. This in turn allows us to infer that the memory is not random but being triggered by Woodrow revisiting the original site. The second reason for simultaneous priming in this case is because the flashback is introduced as what is embedded in Woodrow's thoughts. Strictly speaking, there is no frame switch from the story's present to its past, but rather a discursal shift from the external story world to Woodrow's mental space which then 'contains' a time switch.

This example shows that it is not always the case that one sentence concentrates only on the events of one particular context. It also shows that, even with two contexts primed concurrently, there is arguably a difference in the degree of perceptual salience related to these contexts. Although in a slightly different conjunction of two contexts (real vs. fictional), McIntyre (2006: 115-6) offers a way to describe how this degree of salience might affect readers' attention distribution. By relating priming to the *degree* of prominence, he suggests that in some situations where readers find it hard to concentrate, such as reading a novel on a noisy train, the fictional world would appear to be primed, but 'with a lower degree of prominence than in a situation more ideal for reading' (2006: 115-6). In the above *Constant Gardener* example, one can argue that the flashback frame (Woodrow talking to Tessa in her house) is primed with a lower degree of prominence than the current-time frame because the flashback is presented as Woodrow's memory which is 'filtered' through his viewpoint at the story's NOW.

However, from sentences (2)-(3) to (6)-(7), there is an increase in the dramatisation effect of the flashback presentation, as a result of (i) the explicit personal references to both characters, (ii) the use of present tense, and (iii) the DS presentation of the conversation. This results in an increase in the prominence of the flashback frame, which could be interpreted as Woodrow's deepening involvement in his memory, a cognitive change which is also signalled by the double-line space. This hypothesis, that we might experience memories in a way similar to how readers experience a fictive context during reading, offers a way to interpret character-initiated flashes by applying the notion of priming. They are presented in a way that seems to indicate the process in which the characters gradually immerse into their memories or reveries.

5. Conclusions

In this paper I have suggested that a distinction should always be made between flashback and analepsis, based on how the backshift temporality is realised textually. Through my discussion of the flashback examples, I have shown that a detailed stylistic analysis is useful in describing and interpreting the linguistic and non-linguistic details that reveal the flashiness features in the text, and the contextual knowledge that helps us to recognise the flashbacks. My discussion has also shown that a flashback is not simply identified based on textual indications, but involves a more complex processing mode involving the interaction between readers' cognitive work and the textual presentation. Through discussing Emmott's contextual frame theory, I have shown that a flashback can be presented as what immediately follows the story's NOW, through an immediate frame switch, or can appear together with the story's NOW so that both frames become primed in a certain written text, or in a film sequence (respectively through visual and audio channels). This type of textual presentation results in a change of how prominently the flashback frame is primed. The change of prominence becomes a powerful tool for novelists or filmmakers to establish the kind of dynamic cognitive process in which a character becomes gradually immersed in his/her remembering, imagining or dreaming.

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Notes

1. See 'flashback' *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed 03 April 2011:
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/71139?rskey=7t8Eqd&result=3&isAdvanced=false#eid>
2. The English version used in this paper is the American edition (1980) translated by Lewin, J. E.
3. In my discussion, I follow Bal (1997: 5-6) and use the term 'narrative text' or 'text' to refer to the textual realisation of the *sjuzhet*, ranging from poems to dramatic scripts, and from novels to films. Additionally, I use 'film text' as a collective term, referring to the

words the characters say, what happens visually on the screen and in the audio channel, and so on, though none of these elements are text in its literary sense since they are not what are written.

4. *Deixis en phantasma* is used to refer to deixis used by the speaker to describe events or states of affairs that are absent from the current actual speaking context (Bühler, 1990: 145), such as ‘that’ in ‘I remembered my pen was on that table.’ Through the use of *deixis en phantasma*, the speaker could make the invisible ‘visible’ for the hearer by specifying the hypothetical contexts based on the actual current contexts. This dramatised effect of *deixis en phantasma* makes it particularly useful for the study of those memory flashbacks and hypothetical flashes depicting contexts that do not exist in the actual story context.

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