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Loop Narratives and Eternalism in David Lowery's *A Ghost Story* (2017)

Abstract: *A Ghost Story*, written and directed by David Lowery (2017), stands out in the current cinematic landscape due to its use of an innovative narrative structure and an unusual point of view. The film follows the story of a ghost who haunts the house where he lived while he was human, observing the passage of time and the changes occurring around it. The ghost becomes trapped in a temporal drift in which he is forced to watch the same type of events over and over, being unable to move on to another level of existence. Dramaturgically, this loop structure is intended to highlight the human difficulty of overcoming loss and moving forward.

I intend to demonstrate that the unique articulation between a point of view free from the temporal contingencies that regulate human experience and a fragmented, anachronistic, and paradoxical narrative organization that breaks the barriers of causality and linearity of conventional narratives suggests a contemporary approach to the conception of time which comes close to Eternalism. Adapting Matthias Brüttsch's taxonomy for this subject, I position David Lowery's film alongside other loop narratives and explore how the use of such a structure in this case differs from other similar narratives. I delve upon the loop narrative function as defined by Sabine Schenk in *Future Narratives* (2013), where she advocates for a broader cultural change in the conceptualization of time.

Keywords: Time loop, Eternalism, Modular Narratives, Future Narratives, *A Ghost Story*.

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Introduction

Over the past century, we have witnessed a proliferation of theories that offered new perspectives on the conception of time. Based on discoveries and advances in the field of physics,

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innovative theories emerged: Einstein's theory of special relativity demonstrates the interconnectivity between the dimensions of space and time and questions the objectivity of the temporal flow; the theory of many worlds, an interpretation of quantum mechanics, postulates the existence of multiple parallel universes; and the theory of the universal block, or Eternalism, supports the simultaneous coexistence of the past, present, and future. These revolutionary theories challenge the intuitive and conventional model of a linear, unidirectional flow of time, in which only the present exists, while the access to the past and future is categorically refuted.

Not surprisingly, these new conceptions of time went beyond the bounds of science, expanding into the realm of the arts, and were adopted in literature and, inevitably, with revisions, in cinema. New narrative devices that replicate such effects were developed, seeking to question the stability of the objective and causal conception of time with which events were traditionally presented. Thus, complex narrative types emerged exploring new nonlinear patterns and unusual temporal and spatial structures—such as parallel, interconnected, arborescent and loop—or suggesting several levels of reality. Allan Cameron calls them Modular Narratives and claims they are “extensions of a modern and postmodern discourse that continues to rethink the human experience of time in relation to science, technology and to social and industrial organization” (Cameron 2).

In this context, *loop* narratives offer a radical experience in the conception of time. Destabilizing temporal coordinates, they highlight the relationship between story and time, together with their fragmented and repetitive nature. Thus, the viewers are led to experience different temporalities, to think about the disruption of causality and the possible existence of different simultaneous events, which calls into question conventional notions about the nature of reality and time. Films like *Groundhog Day* (1993, Harold Ramis), *Source Code* (2011, Duncan Jones), and *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014, Doug Liman) demonstrate how experiments with narrative structures that use temporal modulations were able to infiltrate popular culture, acting upon the landscape of contemporary mainstream cinema. This points to what Allan Cameron posits as “a widespread cultural shift in the conceptualization of time” having to do with the rise of the database phenomenon (Cameron 2). The structure of these films uses a branched pattern, offering the protagonists the possibility of revisiting a certain temporal period and exploring different alternatives of existence stemming from one or more key points that affect their development or outcome. Sabine Schenk conceives of this pattern as a subclass of narratives that she calls Future Narratives, FNs, i.e., a model that allows “to narrate the future or, in other words, to trace the many different not yet actualized paths that have not yet been updated on the time map” (Schenk 13). Such narratives contain and preserve the main characteristics of the concept of future at a structural level, presenting it as open, indefinite, and multiple, which seems compatible with an exploration of the nature of time from the perspective of many coexistent worlds. The dissemination and diversity of

artworks that adopted a loop structure suggests the normalization and integration of this temporal conception in a broader cultural frame.

However, the same cannot be said for the concept of the universal block, or Eternalism, since it is difficult to find a narrative structure that allows for the exploration and replication of its features. The unusual structure of *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017) seems to be an exception, appearing as an attempt to explore a temporality that perceives reality as being immutable and an eternal block of four dimensions in which not only past, present, and future coexist simultaneously, but also any point in time can be accessed spatially. *A Ghost Story* is a film of a captivating minimalism that succeeds in moving viewers emotionally. Its protagonist, a ghost covered by a white bedsheet, is a figure both childish and fascinating who enables us to perceive a flow of time built on a plane of existence outside the contingencies and limitations that regulate human experience.

This article aims to reflect on how David Lowery's film uses an innovative loop narrative structure and to focus on the nature of its temporal flow. I wish to position this film alongside other cinematic works and explore how it differs from them. This is supported by an analysis of the film's structure and of the temporal development of the action, using diagrams to help explain the pattern in question. By adapting an already existing theoretical framework, Mathias Brüttsch's notable taxonomy on the subject, I aim to propose a typology that encompasses this case study and others like it.

Loop Narratives: Some Theoretical Considerations

Mathias Brüttsch defines loop narratives as a “narration [that] constructs a fictional world in which a certain period of time occurs more than once, allowing one or several characters to experience specific events in more than one way” (Brüttsch 85). Therefore, the definition identifies two essential points for a loop narrative: a) a structure that shows the *repetition* of a certain period of time; and b) a structure that presents specific events in different ways or *variations*. As Brüttsch himself states, this definition allows for an interpretation that broadens the scope of loop narratives, covering and mixing terms such as “forking-path narratives,” “multi-draft,” and “story lines about multiple personalities”.¹ Excluded are narratives in which the repetitive character is the result of imagination or “multi-perspective

1 Mathias Brüttsch has chosen to use the term “loop film” as an umbrella term, acknowledging that his “broad understanding of the term contrasts with the more restricted use preferred by most scholars to date” (Brüttsch 85). My approach is assumedly more restricted. However, this is not intended to question the validity of Brüttsch's choice, nor the consistency of his definition of loop narrative as presented.

story lines” considering that repetition and variation belong to the level of narration and not to the events of the story. It is based on this understanding that Brüttsch identifies several variables and patterns which enable him to list four types of loop structures: 1) Temporarily Stuck on a (Lousy) Day; 2) A Glimpse at Sisyphus; 3) A Display of Alternative Versions; and 4) Try to Change (Your) Destiny!

Despite its extreme relevance and specificity, Brüttsch’s definition and typology are debatable when applied to Lowery’s film. Firstly, the definition establishes the necessary existence of *variations*, which I do not consider—as I intend to demonstrate later—an essential requirement of all types of loop narratives. Secondly, it places the forking-path narratives and the temporal loops side by side, mainly because they achieve the sense of openness necessary to be included in the FNs, Future Narratives. However, these narrative types belong to two different ontological strata, and one of them modifies, or even eliminates, the possibility of experiencing a time loop. In loop narratives, the repetition of events is experienced by one character (or, in rare cases, more than one) who retains consciousness and memories of other possible worlds that have since been erased. The experience of temporal repetition is focalized through this character (we may call it an intradiegetic experience of the time loop). In contrast, in forking-path narratives it is the film viewer who experiences the time loop (extradiegetic experience), as each version of the character is not aware of the other worlds; only the viewer is aware of the existence of several possible paths. The two narrative techniques have structural similarities but their effect upon film viewers is quite different. Only in loop narratives is it possible—through the internal focalization of the character who experiences the events—to have the impression of being in a repetitive cycle. The fictional character’s awareness of a repetitive temporal flow enables viewers to experience this flow as well, although the temporal repetition exists strictly in the enunciation.² In forking-path narratives, on the other hand, this mechanism leads us to follow several versions, all of them unaware of the others’ existence, i.e., the diegetic repetition. The inexistence of internal focalization keeps the viewers at an emotional distance. Consequently, the film viewers are on two different levels in the relation to time.

Therefore, for the purposes of this article, I consider as loop narratives only those that allow the viewers to experience the effects of a repetitive temporal flow. I discard forking-path narratives, because in them the repetition does not have the function of building a universe with a different temporality, but rather a completely different universe. Thus, I will not take into consideration here Mathias Brüttsch’s third narrative category, A Display of Alternative Versions. Moreover, although I closely follow Brüttsch’s taxonomy, I choose not to respect the author’s own typological order. Since his categories 1 and 4 have considerable

2 Strangely, Mathias Brüttsch discards from his typology narratives in which repetition and variation are akin to multi-perspectives but retains forking path narratives whose repetition of events is clearly the result of extradiegetic enunciation.

structural similarities and are variations of the same model of possible worlds, it seems fitting to compare them directly, for a better understanding of their relationship according to my own practical application of it in the case study of *A Ghost Story*.

According to Mathias Brüttsch, the category of Temporality Stuck on a (Lousy) Day (Fig. 1) refers to structures that present a character or “agent” caught in a time loop a considerable number of times but retaining an awareness of these loops. His or her inner growth is a requirement to break the cycle. Two examples of this type of structure are the previously mentioned *Groundhog Day* and *Live, Die, Repeat: Edge of Tomorrow*. This structure, therefore, focuses on the idea of trial and error, exposing the character’s possibility of going through several paths, by leaping back in time, and updating said paths until the correct one is achieved. The similarity between this structure and the mechanics implemented in narrative video games is evident, due to the mutual influence that exists between the two media, but mainly because they both develop narrative structures that derive from the application of the Many Worlds Theory. This theory is based on quantum mechanics in that the quantum system allows for a superposition of states in which different outcomes are possible with associated probabilities. Yet, instead of the superposition ‘collapsing’ to a specific state, all possible outcomes occur on separate possible courses of action. This interpretation suggests that instead of a linear and deterministic timeline, all possible outcomes coexist in a broad and branched structure.

The agent in a time loop does not only imagine different possible outcomes to a situation but in fact experiences them (again, either directly or indirectly). Each time the agent enters a possible world, it turns into actuality. The agent then actualizes several possible worlds, one at a time. (Lahdenperä 151)

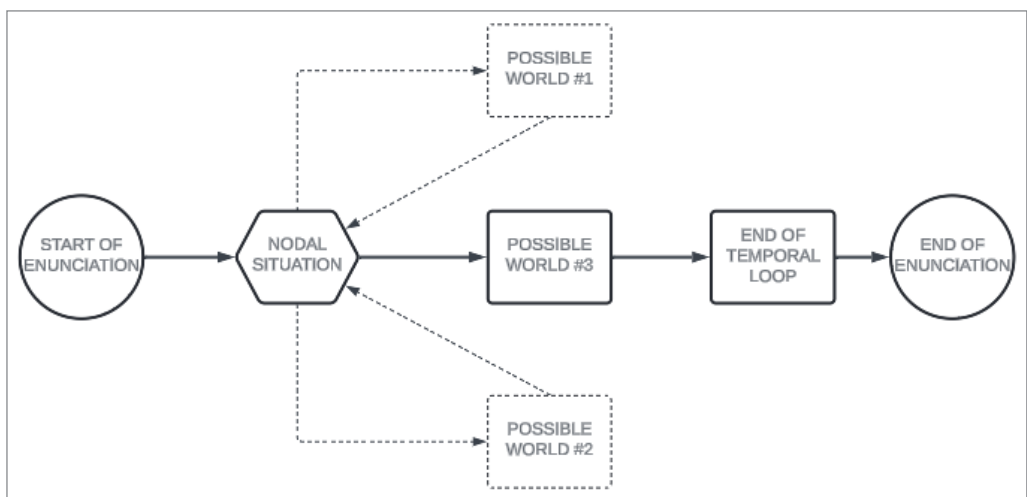


Figure 1. Mathias Brüttsch's Stuck in a (Lousy) Day category (my diagram)

To illustrate this phenomenon, we may refer to Christoph Bode and Rainer Dietrich's future narrative structure in which "[the] minimal unit is at least one situation that allows for more than one continuation" (Bode and Dietrich). The authors call these units "nodal situations" or "nodes for short."³ Thus, we have a narrative that, at a given moment, contains a nodal situation that serves as a point for a branching and the exploration of various possibilities that derive from it. In this narrative category, a character returns to the nodal situation to explore other possibilities while retaining awareness of the occurred events.

In this case we have a timeline that branches into three possible worlds through a nodal situation. Although not mentioned by Brüttsch, a determining characteristic of this typology is the absence of impact that agents have on the fabric of reality and time outside of the cycle. They neither intend, nor are able, to impact or redesign the past and future outside the loop, they only intend to escape it. The consistency of time and reality is not contested or subject to aporias. Each cycle is parallel and self-exclusive, subject to "erasing" as soon as a new one is created. This feature which requires respecting the consistency of a main timeline, contrasts clearly with Brüttsch's *Try to Change Your Destiny!* category (Fig. 2).

This second typology refers to structures that present a character who finds a supernatural, scientific, or indeterminate vehicle to access the past, and uses it to correct or prevent some past event. *Déjà vu* (2006, Tony Scott) and *Source Code* (2011, Duncan Jones) are two examples. Seung-hoon Jeong comments that there is a desire for *pre-catastrophe prevention*, especially after 9/11, and that these films aim to "exploit time travel by rewinding time to prevent tragic events that have already happened. Instead of post-catastrophic redemption, what occurs is a pre-catastrophic prevention as an imaginary solution to real contradictions." (Jeong 66). As in the previous category, there are nodal situations and branching paths towards possible worlds.

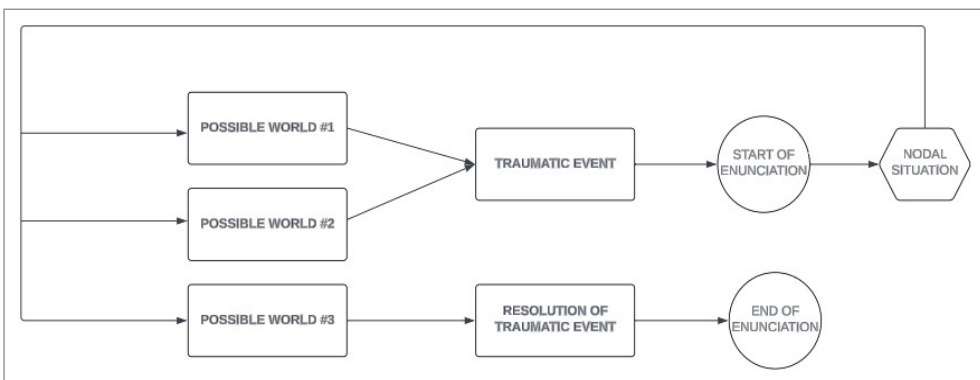


Figure 2. Mathias Brüttsch's *Try to Change (Your) Destiny!* category (my diagram)

3 See Sabine Schenks' diagram of the nodal situations in *Running and Clicking* (17).

However, the distinctive feature of this category is the eventual disruption of the temporal fabric outside the loop, creating a potential for aporias and what Brian Richardson calls a contradictory temporality, “in which incompatible and irreconcilable versions of the story are set forth” (Richardson 48). By enabling a revisitation of the past to change an event, the chain of causality and the consistency of the present and future in all timelines is called into question. For example, a character who wants to go back in time to prevent his wife’s death, upon achieving this goal explodes the desire and need that took him back in time. Without that desire he will not go back to save her. To escape this paradoxical cycle, it is necessary that the present that took him back in time remains as the past in a new timeline, creating not a version of a possible world but the continuation of a world in another possible world. Thus, in this case the possible world versions are neither parallel nor self-exclusive. They need each other’s existence. In the following diagram, we can see that in this category the beginning of the enunciation corresponds to a present marked by an event in the past, and when trying to change this event, we have two alternatives: a) the event cannot be changed and the character returns to the starting point, or b) the event is changed by creating a new timeline with a new present and future but requiring the existence of that traumatic event in one of the pasts. The result is a situation in which two incompatible versions coexist; the paradox is avoided through the creation of a new timeline.

With applications that are rarer than the two previously mentioned ones, Brüttsch’s category A Glimpse at Sisyphus features protagonists who discover that they are trapped in a circular and infinite causal loop in which the story returns to a starting point, further allowing for the duplication of characters (Fig. 3).

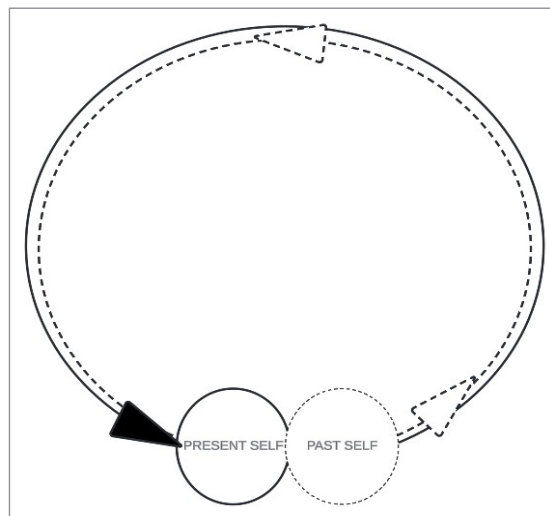


Figure 3. Mathias Brüttsch's infinite circular structure (my diagram)

Only the protagonists are aware of the repetition, and they only discover it at the end of the enunciation upon being confronted with the repetition of an event or with the existence of a second “me.” Two examples of this model are the film *Triangle* (2009, Christopher Smith) and the episode “The Witness” of the television series *Love, Death & Robots* (2019, created by Tim Milner, episode directed by Gabriele Pennacchioli and Alberto Mielgo).

The diagram above illustrates the circular character of the narrative in which, at the end, the protagonist returns to the events at the beginning of the film’s enunciation. Thus, we have a closed temporal unit which contains the entire enunciation. In contrast to the previous categories, there are no nodal situations or ramifications; there is only a continuous, unidirectional, and circular timeline where past, present and future are superimposed on one another, and where the entry point of the enunciation corresponds at the same time to the chronological past and future. This category is subdivided into two different subtypes: with and without the existence of duplications. When there are no duplications, the beginning and ending of the enunciation correspond to the exact same point without any overlap and the loop is suggested by some visual marker, creating in the film viewers’ mind a projection of the future based on what they have just watched. When there is a duplication of the protagonist, the film does not branch into two versions of possible worlds, but rather the same version is seen, at different times (the protagonist of the film in the present finds himself at a point in the future time cycle). Thus, this category appears to be modeled on a very different conception of the Many Worlds Theory.

In this case, instead of the branching into several possible worlds, we find a conception of time closed onto itself, eternal and immutable, which calls upon the Theory of the Universal Block, or Eternalism. It is, therefore, essential to examine the concept of Eternalism and its possible implications in an eventual timeless and deterministic model of reality, as well as its consequences from an existential perspective. Only by exploring the nature of time in this way, may one assess if Eternalism can be translated into a narrative structure that preserves and evokes its main characteristics, and if so, realize how it differs from Schenk’s and Bode’s Future Narratives.

The Concept of Eternalism

To better understand the concept of Eternalism, it is necessary to contextualize it within the ongoing debate in the fields of ontology and philosophy of time that oppose a static model of reality to a dynamic one. This debate is deeply rooted in classical philosophy and manifests in the opposition between a dynamic and fluid perspective of reality, defended by Heraclitus, and the idea of an eternal and unchanging reality, proposed by Parmenides.

Steven Savitt masterfully captures this divergence. According to him, in the Heraclitian model: “Transience is basic, and the present is primary. Those things which exist now do not abide. They slip into the past and non-existence, devoured by time, as all experience attests.” (Savitt, n.p.). In contrast, Savitt states that for Parmenides: “Permanence is basic. No things come to be or, slipping into the past, cease to be. Past, present, and future are distinctions not marked in the static Is. Time and becoming are at best secondary, at worst illusory, as our understanding of the world confirms.” (Savitt, n.p.).

The two conflicting ideas about the nature and structure of reality have influenced several philosophical currents over the centuries, being in turn reshaped and evolving into the contemporary concepts of Presentism—which privileges the present as the only true reality—and Eternalism—which holds that all points in time (past, present, and future) are equally real and exist simultaneously. More recently, an intermediate proposal has emerged, the concept of the Universal Growing Block, which suggests that the past and present are real, while the future does not exist and is added as it grows.⁴

For Kristie Miller, “presentism, eternalism, and growing-blockism are, in part, theories about what *exists*” (Miller 345, emphasis in the original). For Miller, understanding such theories depends on how one interprets the word “exists.” In a *restricted quantification* of the term, what “exists” is limited to a specific domain. For example, the statement “there is no beer” does not deny the existence of beer elsewhere. *Unrestricted quantification*, on the other hand, refers to an existence without limitations. The statement “There is no Santa Claus” means he does not exist anywhere, at all. Both statements can be considered true, but the former is only so if we relativize it to a specific domain. However, the statement “there are no dinosaurs” is to be true, if considered in a specific domain only and in a certain period. Otherwise, there is theoretical disagreement. Presentists will tend to think the statement is true because they only consider the present, while Eternalists will think it is false because they consider the object of the remark to exist at some point, understanding reality as unrestricted.

Eternalism, thus, subscribes to a static model of reality, in which events that exist (in an unrestricted sense) do not change, and denies the existence of the “now” and of a direction into which the present is moving. As Miller puts it:

One way to think about this is to picture an eternalist world as being one in which all events, past, present and future, are located in a four-dimensional block of spacetime. Events on the block are ordered by being earlier than, later than, or simultaneous with, one another [...]. Those relations are unchanging. (Miller 346)

⁴ For the purposes of this article, I focus solely on the opposition between Presentism and Eternalism.

This static and unchanging Eternalist perspective finds support in J.M.E. McTaggart who, in his essay “The unreality of Time” (1908), calls it the B-series of temporality.

Positions in time, as time appears to us *prima facie*, are distinguished in two ways. Each position is Earlier than some and Later than some of the other positions [...]. In the second place, each position is either Past, Present, or Future. The distinctions of the former class are permanent, while those of the latter are not. (McTaggart 458)

In the B-series events are ordered according to fixed temporal relations such as “before” or “after,” but this cannot explain change, which is essential to time. The B-series, therefore, cannot support the reality of time on its own; for that the A-series series is required, since it orders events according to their state as past, present, or future and associates temporal characteristics with them. However, McTaggart argues that the A-series is intrinsically contradictory. For an event to be real in the A-series, it must possess all the properties of being past, present, and future, but because these properties are mutually exclusive, an event cannot simultaneously be past, present, and future. Therefore, the A-series is incoherent. “The distinctions of past, present and future are essential to time, and that, if the distinctions are never true of reality, then no reality is in time” (McTaggart 458). Ultimately, he concludes that “time cannot exist, and that, therefore, it does not exist.” (Cid 1, my translation).

This challenge to the natural intuition that time is real, and that the perception of its passage is merely the result of a need, inseparable from our human condition to establish a pattern and order in the flow of time, also found support in the field of physics. The development of Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity (1905) changed the perception of the time interval between two points in space-time, which were made dependent of a coordinate system. The *relativity of simultaneity* is a peculiar feature of this theory, where each inertial reference identifies different sets of points as simultaneous with the origin, due to the constancy of the speed of light and the Principle of Relativity, which states that all references are equivalent for the laws of physics. In this theoretical context, it is therefore not possible to distinguish the actual present from the many possible presents because of the relativity of simultaneity.

In short, in the Eternalist conception, time is seen as just another dimension and the direction of time, or temporal becoming, does not exist, and “future and past events at a place, on this view, are no more or less real than distant events at a time. The now like the here is a function of one’s perspective, one’s position in the spacetime” (Savitt, n.p.). This static and eternal view of the nature of time has significant implications. The first, as already mentioned, is the denial of a temporal flow, considering that all parts exist simultaneously and there is no privileged distinction in terms of existence. The second is a timeless conception of the world, where instead of a linear dimension in which events occur sequentially, the

world exists as a timeless whole. Finally, this entails a deterministic approach which considers that all events are already determined and there is no room for free will or the possibility of different futures. The basic idea of determinism according to Butterfield is that “[...] there is only one physically possible world” (quoted in Marques 45, my translation).

This model is in absolute contrast to the theory of many worlds and denies the possibility of an open and indefinite future. If we consider that the idea of an open future is characterized by the existence of agency and the ability to intervene in the development of the future, the absence of this possibility takes us back to the concept of fatalism, where freedom of choice is absent because the future is already predetermined. As pointed out by Francesco Orilia, an eternalist perspective, therefore, presupposes the eternal presence of sorrow and the inability to escape it.

Nevertheless, the loving consideration of all positive aspects of our lives and of the world surrounding us, might, indeed should, be overwhelmed by an appropriately dismayed consideration of past sorrow, in particular sorrow of gigantic magnitude, which we know has infected this world. (Orilia 250)

If a looped narrative structure that reflects the idea of an open future suggests the theme of personal development, in which a protagonist is given the chance to choose and relive various possible futures and thereby grow, a looped narrative that evokes an eternalist conception of time refers to an existential anxiety based on the inability to escape past sorrows, since this is a permanent part of reality. It is this anxiety that is depicted in David Lowery's *A Ghost Story*.

A Ghost Story as Eternalist Loop

A Ghost Story is a unique and provocative film that uses an unusual loop structure. The story revolves around a young ghost (played by Casey Affleck)—portrayed according to the classical children's cliché of a white bedsheet and two black dots cut out as eyes—who is trapped in the house he went to live in with his girlfriend. After the car crash that soon after that robs him of his life, and the transformation into a more metaphysical creature, he returns to the house to be beside his girlfriend (played by Ronney Mara) in her period of mourning. In time, however, the girlfriend overcomes the pain and starts to rebuild her life, returning to work and starting new relationships. One day she decides to go away for good, leaving the ghost behind trapped in the house. Without a chance to escape, the ghost is forced to witness the successive generations of families that inhabit the house over the years until the building is demolished and replaced by a skyscraper. With no apparent way to break this cycle, the ghost tries to escape this plane of existence by committing metaphysical

suicide as he jumps from the top of the building. Instead of disappearing, however, he goes back in time to the moment when the foundations of the house were laid. We see a family of settlers beginning to demarcate the space for the house they plan to build, but soon they are massacred by a group of Indians. The ghost remains motionless, observing the passage of time and the decomposition of the dead bodies around him, until he returns to the same point at the beginning of the film when he first entered the house with his girlfriend. He then proceeds to relive the same moments with her (which we had already witnessed), this time observing himself as a ghost until he finally manages to free himself and ascend to another plane of existence.

The film is, therefore, based on an infinite causal loop structure that renders time as a Möbius strip where cause and effect are reordered but without a defined orientation, without a beginning or an ending. The apparently circular structure, the absence of nodal situations, the duplication and overlap of past, present, and future seem to approximate *A Ghost Story* of Brüttsch's category of A Glimpse at Sisyphus, and to distance it from the branching structures of the other two categories endorsed in this article. However, the film contains some specific features that deny such an immediate perception. Indeed, the existence of several ontological levels within the fictional universe; the internal focalization corresponding to the ghost's experience; and the way found by the character to get out of the loop without breaking it altogether (resorting to a human emotional practice and not an otherworldly objective one) all require a more detailed analysis. It is fair to say that David Lowery's *A Ghost Story* is like no other loop narrative, containing aspects of several structural categories but maintaining its own dramaturgical integrity without simply replicating a video game mechanics, or any other narrative dynamics for that matter.

A diagram is useful to help understand the complexity of the looping device in what is, apparently, a minimalist film with relatively few actions and a calm rhythm used to convey poignant emotion(s). I do not intend to go over all the scenes or events here, but rather to demonstrate the film's architecture in general. I selected only a few events with the goal of showing the progression in the timeline. My diagram (Fig. 4) is divided into two sections working in tandem: a horizontal line and a vertical one, each corresponding to some sort of temporal evolution. The horizontal line represents the story timeline, with the events organized according to the chronological order in which they take place in the diegetic world. Thus, in this line the first event represented corresponds to Time 4, the foundation of the house, the most distant point in the story's past. The subsequent events follow the chronological order of the diegetic world up to the point that marks the beginning of the film (i.e., the beginning of the enunciation). It is also worth highlighting that the film contains several ellipses, identified by the longer extension of the arrows in between the events.

The first inference to be drawn is that the timeline of the story (that David Bordwell calls the *fabula*, after the Russian formalist theorists) does not correspond to the timeline

of the plot (the *syuzhet*). In complex nonlinear narratives this is not surprising. Indeed, the beginning and ending of the plot in *A Ghost Story* correspond to events that occur in the middle of the chronological timeline. Moreover, there is an overlap of events in the film's middle section, and it is obvious that the plot contains several temporal leaps into the future and, at the end of the cycle, into the past. So, there is an apparent circular time loop. However, unlike the examples of the circular structural category whose progression is unidirectional—the abstract nature of the temporal environment causing them to exist in a limbo without cultural references to an era—in *A Ghost Story* the timeline explicitly indicates a definite cultural and historical past. Seeing the foundation of the house by the settlers, the film viewers have the immediate perception that the ghost has returned to their own shared past. Thus, there is a linear chronological line, beginning in the mid-1800s and going up to the near future. Therefore, this architecture simultaneously suggests circular and linear time.

Furthermore, by introducing other timelines associated with various levels of reality, the film *A Ghost Story* challenges all human conceptions about the nature of time, enhancing its overall temporal complexity. The four levels of reality narrated, or suggested, are represented in the diagram by the vertical line, and include:

- Level I: Physical world, corresponding to a diegetic world based on the film viewers' reality⁵
- Level II: World of the 'first' ghost.
- Level III: World of the 'second' ghost.
- Level IV: Plane to which the ghost ascends metaphysically (something which is not portrayed, but nevertheless suggested in the narrative).

The arrows in bold represent the timelines of the worlds that are hierarchically superior. When the enunciation (plot) follows the first ghost, he already exists in a level above the physical one. In this diegetic world he can see and interfere with the hierarchical world below, while the reverse is impossible. The same applies to the 'second' ghost, who can see the 'first' one; but the 'first' is unable to see the 'second'. Moreover, the events of higher levels prevail over those of the levels below. When the protagonist dies as a human and the film starts to follow the ghost, his timeline takes precedence; the same happens when the viewers (and the film) go up to the level of the 'second' ghost. This predominance of hierarchically superior timelines occurs because of the internal focalization. When the viewers occupy the upper level, they follow the ghost's point of view, and the entire perception of temporal flow is conveyed from his internal perspective. Interestingly,

5 A diegetic world that is grounded in the same tangible reality experienced by the audience in everyday life, rather than a fictional or fantastical one.

the higher the level, the more elliptical and fragmented the temporal flow. The ghost's personal time may correspond to only a few minutes at his level, but it may translate into years or even centuries at a lower level. Brian Richardson's concept of differential temporality—in which timelines with different rhythms are superimposed on each other, creating an intertwining where they begin to mix and contaminate—applies here (50). In a montage sequence, at a certain point in the film, there is a close-up shot of the ghost watching his girlfriend walking out the door three times in a row but wearing different clothes each time, suggesting two intertwined timelines with different rhythms. At the level of the ghost the timeline roughly corresponds to one minute, while at the level of the girlfriend it corresponds to a minimum of three days. Space and timelines are intertwined and condensed into one, making it impossible to distinguish one from the other through the editing alone. This idea is crystallized in a shot in which the image reveals the second ghost watching the first one, who, in turn, watches his girlfriend. The shot condenses three timelines and three levels of reality in one single place (Fig. 5).



Figure 5. Three levels of reality and timelines condensed into one space *A Ghost Story* (reproduction)

The dotted blue arrows in the diagram of figure 4 denote the ghost's ascensional path in between levels and the resultant jump to the past. On the third level, there is a dotted blue arrow that leads to a fourth level of existence. This design containing several levels of reality is extremely innovative and offers an ingenious solution for the protagonist to exit the time loop without letting the causal circularity collapse. His exit occurs not by escaping the time loop, but by ascending to other levels. This creates a spiraling structure in which time reproduces itself eternally (Fig. 6).

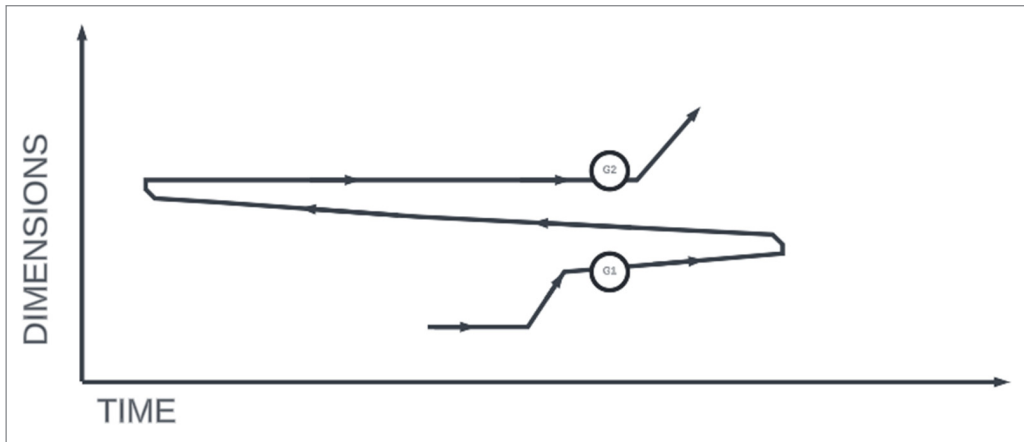


Figure 6. Overlapped time: When Ghost 2 ends his journey Ghost 1 already exists.

To conclude: An Alternative Taxonomy

As previously mentioned, two elements in Brüttsch's definition of loop narratives stand out: repetition and variation. However, the simple repetition of events does not seem enough to characterize loop narratives in a more restricted sense (which discards forking paths or multi-draft patterns), and a broader variation does not exist in all such categories. Therefore, I feel it is necessary to downplay variation and reinforce repetition to distinguish loop narratives from their forked counterparts. To achieve this, it is important to determine who experiences the repetition effect, whether the characters or the film viewers, and find a word that allows to distinguish between the two categories (loops and forks).

Therefore, I propose to adapt Brüttsch's definition for loop narratives as narrations that integrate within the narrative one or more characters who *perceive* a fictional world in which a certain period occurs, or is suggested to occur, more than once. This subtle change introduces the need for repetition to occur at the ontological level of the characters so that it offers the film viewers the possibility of experiencing a cyclical temporal flow through the internal focalization of the characters, as is the case in *A Ghost Story*. Furthermore, it does not require variation to be the key element of this type of structure, permitting the conception of a static and circular time, the most relevant feature in *A Ghost Story*. The change to the original definition, likewise, opens the possibility of events not being seen recurring, the repetition being merely suggested in the enunciation.

I propose a tentative taxonomy of loop narratives, such as I have approached them here, i.e., rejecting forks. Two main categories should be opposed from the start: open loop narratives, and closed loop narratives. The former category is made up of narratives

containing features to be found in Future Narratives, which is not the case in the latter category. Open loop narratives adopt a structure that preserves the essential characteristics of an indeterminate, open, and multiple future. These are cyclical narratives that make use of nodal situations to explore various possibilities of the same event and that refer to a model that replicates the effects of the Many Worlds Theory. This category subdivides into two other groups: a) open and linear loop narratives; b) open and paradoxical loop narratives. The former group fits Brüttsch's narrative category Temporarily Stuck in a (Lousy) Day, while the latter one corresponds to his category Try to Change (Your) Destiny! The main difference between them resides in the specific way they approach (non)linearity. In the open and linear narratives subcategory the regressive leaps in time do not endanger linear temporality, and the cycles appear as self-exclusive versions. In contrast, in the open and paradoxical loop narratives there is a disruption of causality and the tendency for aporias; the several versions are not self-exclusive, existing in the character's personal time.

The category of closed loop narratives stems from a model that replicates a conception of eternal and immutable time, where there are no nodal situations from which to access several versions. These films simply suggest an eternal cycle of repetitions. Within this category, it is possible to distinguish two groups of films: a) circular loop narratives; and b) spiral loop narratives. The former corresponds roughly to Brüttsch's category A Glimpse at Sisyphus that features unidirectional and circular closed structures, in which the end corresponds exactly to the beginning and from which it is impossible to escape. The latter corresponds to a model based on the structure of *A Ghost Story*. It preserves the infinite nature of circular narratives but incorporates in it the concept of various levels of reality, in a sort of spiraling movement that rotates eternally.⁶

These different categories and subgroups provide different conceptions about the nature of time and can be used to reflect upon diverse themes and genres. Open-ended linear narratives are likely to explore themes of acceptance and internal growth present in the coming-of-age films, while open-ended paradoxical narratives serve to explore traumatic issues and an eventual reconciliation with the past. Closed circular narratives explore the horror of not controlling one's destiny and of being trapped in a deterministic cycle without free will. In contrast, closed spiral narratives offer a metaphysical insight into the nature of reality, providing an escape to existential horrors. In *A Ghost Story*, for example,

6 It's important to state that the idea of spiral is used purely as a structural design within the narrative framework. This distinction is crucial as it emphasizes that while the narrative may unfold in a spiraling manner, with an open loop that progresses in levels, it does so within a model of a static and eternal block of time. Although the main characteristic of a spiral is that it winds around a center or pole and gradually recedes from or approaches it—which is appropriate to the different duration of each loop in *A Ghost Story*—this does not necessarily entail a closure.

this structure is used—in my opinion—to amplify the theme of mourning and the inability to deal with loss.

My tentative taxonomy aims at providing additional tools for the analysis and framing of existing works in the narrow field of loop narratives and new models for the development of films that aim to explore existential and metaphysical questions in an innovative way. Naturally, this new definition and reorganization of (sub)categories needs to be applied to a broader sample to confirm its suitability. This is just the beginning of such an adventure.

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