

Flashbacks in Faithless* and a Postscript on Harry, He's Here to Help

(*this will make more sense if you've read the section on flashbacks in my book *Scriptwriting Updated*)

Hi all

Just a quick note on *Faithless* and its clever way of avoiding 'talking heads' in flashback.

Faithless is an Ingmar Bergman film that looks at the disastrous consequences of an affair, using flashback. The story in the present is told in the form of interviews between the woman (Marianne) and man (David) and an elderly man whom we are told is a writer-director, in other words, a Bergman figure. While it looks rather different from a film like *The Usual Suspects*, or *Citizen Kane*, because it has less scenario in the present, like them, it uses the 'interview' model and is case history flashback, in which human are shown to be unknowable, sinister, unpredictable and more than the sum total of what can be expected from their past. Another recent (ish) non-English language example is the French film *A Pornographic Affair*

This form is in contrast to 'Flashback as Thwarted Dream', like *Shine*, or *The Remains of the Day*, in which flashbacks demonstrate the opposite, namely, that the damaged individual is really a good person damaged as the direct result of the past.

In both you have an enigmatic outsider who appears at a moment of trauma or anguish and whose past we'll find out about - and a questioner. And you could describe both as 'detective stories of the human heart'.

Flashback is structured as concentric circles interconnected at cliffhangers in the stories of the past and the present (and sometimes future). The big problem with flashback (well, one of the problems, but a perennial one) is that you have to maintain a powerful story in the present, even if it's only in a rudimentary form. If you don't have a story, however vestigial, in the present, you end up with the movie *Nixon*, where there is no story in the present at all (as I recall), just Anthony Hopkins talking to himself. The result, despite Hopkins' powerful performance, is a film so slow as to be almost unwatchable.

But creating a powerful story in the present this can be really hard if you have an inherently static situation (as in *Faithless*) where your characters are just sitting there talking. *The Usual Suspects* solves the problem by having a murder mystery being solved in the present in addition to the interview. But *Faithless* has just the interview.

The interesting point for writers about *Faithless* is that Bergman solves that problem of potential talking heads by creating a tension over whether the Writer-Director is inventing the whole story, or it's his own past, or both. You also feel that the relationship between Marianne (the adulterous woman) and the Writer Director character is always on the edge of moving into something more intense and dangerous - love, anger whatever.

So that's really handy to know - get a subtext of mystery, sexual tension and/or danger going on between interrogator and enigmatic outsider, and you can get away with the story in the present being vestigial and static.

Faithless is also a bit different in that Case History flashback usually specialises in an ironic twist right at the end that is witnessed by the audience but not by the protagonist investigator. Hence, in *The Usual Suspects* the Customs officer never knows that Verbal Kent is really Kaiser Sozay, and in *Citizen Kane* only the audience and not the journalists find out what Rosebud was. It's a way of putting a sting in the tail when the audience thinks they know the ending. In *Faithless*, the interrogator isn't left out of any ironic twist. But there are a couple of stings in the tail. There's the revelation of Markus's longterm mistress, also his sick need to get his daughter to suicide with him. There's also the question left in the air at the end about whether Marianne drowned. So the audience does get its surprises. Very important I think, since by definition, we've known from the start what happens in the end.

So again, another useful pointer - maybe we can get away without the ironic twist as long as there are surprises and mysteries between the interrogator and the enigmatic outsider

I have to say that I found the start of *Faithless* a bit too slow. Possibly the English speaking audience needs to get the story going faster. And I think you would have to be very careful if you chose such a static story in the present. In lesser hands than Bergman's I think the Director –Actor character(who has little to do much of the time but look deepy concerned) could have become almost comic. Difficult stuff.

Incidentally, check out the French film *Harry, He's Here to Help*. Contains an excellent, chilling mentor antagonist.