



Beyond Bifurcation: Emotional Coherence and Audience Subjectivity in the Parallel Narratives of *Look Both Ways* (2022)

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Received: 2025-12-05 Accepted: 2025-11-27

DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v13i2.8683

Abstract

Parallel storytelling has become a prominent narrative mode in 21st-century cinema, reflecting a modern consciousness saturated with potentialities and choices. While existing scholarship has extensively mapped the structural mechanics (e.g., editing, montage) and cognitive effects (e.g., audience engagement) of narrative bifurcation, a significant gap remains in understanding how this form constructs a unified *emotional coherence* and fosters a specific *subjective position* for the viewer within divergent timelines. This study addresses this gap through a qualitative narrative analysis of the Netflix film *Look Both Ways* (2022). Employing an interdisciplinary framework that synthesizes narrative theory, affective studies, and social constructionism, the analysis reveals that the film's dual narratives are not merely alternative realities but simultaneous emotional truths. The film achieves this through the meticulous integration of visual style (color palette, setting), narrative typography, and sound design, which function as a cohesive system of subjective cues. These elements guide the audience to navigate both timelines not as a dispassionate observer of branching paths, but as an empathetic participant in the protagonist's holistic emotional journey. The study concludes that in *Look Both Ways*, bifurcation transcends its structural function to become an *internalized emotional logic*, offering a nuanced cinematic model for representing the lived experience of choice, anxiety, and self-discovery in contemporary life. This reframing contributes to film narrative theory by prioritizing phenomenological engagement over structural taxonomy. This study ultimately highlights that qualitative narrative analysis is the most appropriate method for examining how visual, auditory, and textual elements interrelate to produce emotional coherence across dual timelines, offering a more integrated understanding of parallel storytelling in contemporary film.

Keywords: Narrative Bifurcation, Parallel Storytelling, Emotional Coherence, Audience Subjectivity, Look Both Ways, Contemporary Film

Introduction

Language Contemporary cinema is increasingly characterized by narratives that fracture, bifurcate, and multiply, moving away from classical linearity to mirror the complex, choice-laden nature of modern existence (Lin et al., 2023). Films employing parallel storytelling ask fundamental questions about agency, fate, and consequence, inviting audiences to inhabit the poignant space of "what if?" (Černý et al., 2023). This narrative strategy has been examined from various angles: as a technical feat of editing and montage (Xiang et al., 2023); as a cognitive catalyst for active audience engagement (Bordwell, 2006) (Zhang, 2024); and as a cultural metaphor for societal fragmentation and plural truths (Binder, 2024). Research on directors like Christopher Nolan and Wong Kar-wai further highlights how non-linearity can explore time, memory, and destiny (Yang, 2025) (Zhu, 2025).

However, a critical research gap persists. Much of the scholarship treats narrative bifurcation as a *structural device* that presents alternatives or a *cognitive puzzle* for the viewer to solve. Less attention has been paid to how such bifurcated narratives, particularly those centered on intimate, life-altering personal choices rather than epic or traumatic events, construct a coherent and subjectively resonant *emotional experience*. How does a film like *Look Both Ways* (2022), which splits a young woman's life into two plausible paths based on a pregnancy test, prevent emotional fragmentation and instead foster a sense of unified, empathetic understanding? The prevailing analytical focus on the "split" often overlooks the sophisticated cinematic techniques that "bind" the parallel worlds into a singular emotional journey for the protagonist and by extension, the viewer.

In recent years, audiences have also become more accustomed to stories that represent uncertainty as a natural part of life rather than a narrative problem to be solved. This shift reflects a broader cultural movement in which individuals, especially young adults, navigate multiple possible futures shaped by work, relationships, and personal aspirations. *Look Both Ways* captures this contemporary sensibility by presenting two life paths that unfold with equal weight and emotional significance. Rather than framing one path as superior, the film acknowledges the complexity of real-world decision-making, where emotional truth often exists across multiple possibilities rather than a single definitive route.

This study, therefore, posits that *Look Both Ways* employs narrative bifurcation not to confuse or merely speculate, but to model an *internal emotional logic*. It argues that the film's coherence stems from its orchestration of mise-en-scène, typography, and sound to create a consistent subjective lens through which both timelines are filtered. This research aims to fill the identified gap by answering: How does *Look Both Ways* utilize its parallel narrative structure and cinematic semiotics to achieve emotional coherence and guide audience subjectivity,

transforming a bifurcated plot into a holistic narrative of self-realization. Unlike prior studies that categorize bifurcation as a technical structure, this research demonstrates how *Look Both Ways* binds its parallel arcs through emotional design, providing a unified viewing experience that reframes bifurcation as a phenomenological mode rather than a structural deviation.

Bifurcation, in narrative terms, refers to a moment where the story splits into two or more possible routes. Although the idea originally comes from complexity theory, filmmakers use it to reflect the way real people move through choices, possibilities, and imagined futures. By placing two versions of life side by side, films help viewers reflect on how identity, emotion, and relationships shift depending on even a small decision.

Many modern directors use bifurcation not to overcomplicate the story but to deepen the audience's emotional involvement. When viewers watch a character live out two different paths, they naturally compare them—thinking about which outcomes feel fulfilling, which sacrifices matter most, and how life could unfold differently. This active comparison process is what makes bifurcated narratives powerful and emotionally relatable.

In addition, the rise of digital culture has influenced the way bifurcated narratives are interpreted. Many viewers now engage with branching story structures through interactive media, such as streaming series, video games, and nonlinear online storytelling. This familiarity strengthens their ability to follow dual timelines without confusion. The film therefore resonates not only because of its thematic relevance but also because it aligns with the cognitive habits of today's media users. By presenting parallel narratives in a grounded and emotionally cohesive manner, *Look Both Ways* demonstrates how contemporary films can use bifurcation to reflect the fluidity of modern identity formation.

In the case of **Look Both Ways**, the branching structure becomes a visual and emotional metaphor for everyday uncertainty. The film doesn't treat the split as a puzzle; instead, it shows how one person can grow, struggle, and discover themselves across two equally meaningful possibilities.

Method

In this study This study employs a qualitative narrative analysis, grounded in close textual reading of the film *Look Both Ways* (2022). The primary objective is interpretative, seeking to uncover how meaning and emotional resonance are constructed through the interplay of its dual timelines. The analysis is guided by an interdisciplinary framework synthesizing three key perspectives:

1. **Narrative Theory & Structural Analysis:** Drawing on foundational and contemporary works (Lin et al., 2023), the study first deconstructs the film's bifurcated architecture. This establishes how the parallel plots are organized, contrasted, and interconnected at the level of story and plot. Recent studies show

that modern audiences are more familiar with split or branching storylines because they regularly interact with digital media, video games, and multi-threaded online platforms (Černý et al., 2023). As a result, viewers today tend to follow non-linear structures more easily than audiences in earlier decades. Keeping this in mind, the structural analysis also considers how *Look Both Ways* benefits from this growing narrative literacy, making the film's dual storyline feel natural rather than confusing.

2. **Affective & Phenomenological Approach:** To analyze emotional coherence, the study applies concepts from affective film theory (Becker & Sjöström, 2024) and viewer engagement (Ni & Coupé, 2023). This lens examines how the film's stylistic elements cue specific emotional responses and foster alignment with the protagonist's subjective states across both realities. Within this affective perspective, researchers such as (Becker & Sjöström, 2024) argue that films with two story paths must create consistent emotional signals so the audience continues to see the character as one unified person, not two separate identities. This idea helps guide the analysis of how *Look Both Ways* uses repeated musical tones, similar emotional beats, and parallel reflective moments to maintain a stable emotional identity for Natalie, even as her life unfolds in two different directions.
3. **Social Constructionist Lens:** Informed by scholars like (Rughiniş & Flaherty, 2022), this perspective contextualizes the narrative as constructing a specific "reality" of modern femininity and choice. It examines how the film's representation of dual paths reflects and shapes contemporary discourses on career, motherhood, and identity. Recent cultural research also notes that branching narratives often reflect the real pressures faced by young women today as they navigate expectations related to career success, relationships, and family roles (Markhabayeva & Tseng, 2024). Adding this viewpoint allows the analysis to see *Look Both Ways* not only as a personal story about Natalie's choices but also as a representation of broader social expectations that shape how women imagine their possible futures.

This analytical approach is further reinforced by considering the film within its wider media environment. As streaming platforms continue to dominate film distribution, viewers increasingly consume narratives in personal and private contexts. This shift impacts how emotional cues, pacing, and narrative rhythms are perceived, especially in stories involving multiple timelines. The method used in this study therefore not only examines the film's internal structure but also acknowledges how platform-based viewing shapes audience engagement and interpretation. This contextual layer is essential for understanding how parallel narratives function in contemporary cinematic experiences.

Additionally, the qualitative method used in this research allows for the identification of subtle patterns that might be overlooked in quantitative examinations. Elements such as recurring symbols, mirrored character gestures, and tonal shifts between scenes require close observation and interpretative sensitivity. Through this approach, the analysis seeks to uncover how the film crafts continuity across its bifurcated storylines, forming an integrated emotional arc that supports the experience of coherence. This methodological emphasis ensures that the study captures the nuances of meaning production embedded in the film's stylistic and narrative design.

The analysis focuses on specific cinematic parameters: visual style (color grading, lighting, set design), the use of on-screen typography as a narrative guide, and sound design/musical score. These elements are examined not in isolation but as an integrated system that bridges the two timelines, creating what (Knight et al., 2024) term "emotional bridges" for the audience. This procedure ensures analytic transparency while acknowledging inherent limitations, including the interpretive nature of qualitative film analysis, potential researcher bias, and the constraints of examining a single cinematic text.

3. Analysis and Discussion

Look Both Ways masterfully uses its bifurcated structure not to present a binary opposition but to explore the spectrum of a single identity, Natalie's. The analysis below demonstrates how cinematic elements forge emotional coherence and direct audience subjectivity.

3.1. Visual Palette and Subjective Worlds

The film employs a distinct but complementary color scheme to differentiate the timelines while maintaining a cohesive visual tone. The "Pregnant Path" (Timeline A) is bathed in **warm, amber tones**, with lighting often soft and diffused, set in domestic, natural environments (homes, parks). This palette evokes warmth, intimacy, organic growth, and the enveloping, sometimes overwhelming, nature of impending motherhood (Wang et al., 2024). Conversely, the "Career Path" (Timeline B) utilizes **cooler, steely blues and greys**, with sharper contrasts and settings in sleek offices and urban landscapes. This signifies professionalism, ambition, clarity, but also potential emotional distance.

Critically, these palettes are not morally coded; one is not "better" than the other. Instead, they function as externalizations of Natalie's internal emotional landscape in each path. The audience subjectively experiences the warmth of familial connection in A and the crisp excitement of ambition in B. The coherence arises from the consistent application of these schemes, allowing the viewer to fluidly transition between timelines while understanding each as a valid emotional reality for the character. This technique aligns with the concept of "color psychology" in cinema, where hues are used to signal internal states and narrative themes (Cao et al., 2024).

The deliberate visual contrast between the two timelines also highlights how external environments mirror internal states. Small details—such as the warmth of household objects, the brightness of public spaces, and the texture of the settings—reinforce distinct emotional atmospheres. These visual techniques help the audience intuitively understand Natalie's shifting priorities and feelings, even without explicit dialogue. By offering a consistent visual logic across both timelines, the film deepens the audience's empathetic connection and allows for a smoother transition between the parallel worlds.

3.2. Narrative Typography as a Unifying Guide

A distinctive feature of *Look Both Ways* is its use of on-screen text (e.g., "5 Weeks Later," "That Summer") to mark the passage of time. This **narrative typography** (Knight et al., 2024) serves a crucial dual function. First, it provides essential logistical clarity, anchoring the viewer in the non-linear progression of each timeline and preventing confusion a practical solution to a potential narrative pitfall. Second, and more significantly, it acts as a **unifying narrative voice**. The consistent font, style, and placement of these titles across *both* timelines create a rhythmic, almost literary, punctuation to the story. They become a meta-narrative device that exists outside of either specific reality, gently reminding the audience that they are witnessing two chapters of a single, larger story of Natalie's life. This technique fosters a bird's-eye-view subjectivity, where the viewer is positioned to appreciate the parallel unfolding of a life rather than being lost in the dichotomy.

Moreover, the consistency of the typographic cues contributes to the film's narrative tempo. Each title card functions not only as a structural marker but also as a pause that allows the audience to recalibrate emotionally before entering the next phase of the story. This predictable rhythm ensures that viewers remain oriented and engaged, even as the timelines move rapidly through different stages of Natalie's life. In this way, typography becomes an understated but crucial tool in guiding viewer understanding without interrupting the emotional flow of the narrative.

3.3. Sound and the Rhythm of Subjectivity

Sound design and music are pivotal in weaving the two narratives into an emotionally cohesive whole. The film uses **audio cues and musical motifs** to suture transitions and create emotional parallels. A key technique is the use of similar ambient sounds or musical phrases across timelines during moments of comparable emotional beat (e.g., introspection, anxiety, joy). For instance, a contemplative piano motif might begin in Timeline A as Natalie feels her baby kick and seamlessly continue or reprise in Timeline B as she achieves a career milestone, linking the emotional weight of both moments.

This practice constructs what (Redfern, 2020) identifies as "invisible cuts" and what (Knight et al., 2024) call "emotional bridges." The soundscape becomes the subconscious connective tissue, guiding the audience to feel the underlying unity of

Natalie's core desires for purpose, connection, and self-actualization regardless of the path. The audience's subjectivity is thus shaped not to choose between the timelines but to feel their emotional simultaneity.

In addition to musical motifs, the film uses silence strategically to emphasize key emotional moments. Silence often emerges at points where Natalie reflects on pivotal decisions or confronts personal uncertainty, creating a sense of introspection that resonates across both timelines. These quiet breaks contrast with the dynamic sound layers that define much of the film, highlighting transitions and reminding the audience of the emotional stakes underlying Natalie's journey. This interplay between sound and silence enhances the film's ability to maintain coherence while moving between separate realities. These representative scenes and stylistic parallels ground the analysis empirically, demonstrating how specific visual, typographic, and sonic cues operate consistently across both timelines to maintain emotional continuity and guide audience orientation.

Tabel 1: Synthesis of Coherence-Building Element in *Look Both Ways*

Cinematic Element	Function in Timeline A (Pregnant Path)	Function in Timeline B (Career Path)	Unifying Effect on Audience Subjectivity
Visual Color Palette	Warm ambers, golds. Evokes intimacy, organic growth, warmth.	Cool blues, greys. Evokes clarity, ambition, modernity.	Externalizes internal states; both are valid emotional landscapes, preventing hierarchical judgment.
Typography	Marks time jumps ("8 Months Later").	Marks time jumps ("That Fall").	Provides logistical clarity and a consistent, unifying narrative voice above both timelines.
Sound & Music	Softer, melodic score; domestic ambient sounds.	More rhythmic, electronic score; urban ambient sounds.	Musical motifs bridge timelines; sound creates "emotional bridges," emphasizing parallel emotional beats.
Narrative Arc	Peace through acceptance of	Growth through professional	Both arcs lead to congruent

	motherhood and partnership.	success and self-reliance.	endpoints: self-realization and emotional balance. The "choice" is about path, not destination.
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3.4. Discussion: From Bifurcation to Holistic Subjectivity

The integrated analysis above demonstrates that *Look Both Ways* moves **Beyond Bifurcation**. Its innovation lies not in the split itself, but in its sophisticated system for rendering that split subjectively coherent. The film posits that identity is not defined by a single choice but is a constellation of potentials; the "self" is present and evolving in both realities. By using visual, textual, and auditory tools to create this holistic presentation, the film guides the audience to adopt a subject position of **empathetic simultaneity**.

This challenges simpler models of interactive or "choose-your-own-adventure" narratives (Fang, 2025) where agency is paramount. Here, agency is contemplative, not operational. The audience is not asked to pick a path but to understand their equivalence as vessels for emotional growth. This reflects a contemporary narrative trend that deals with anxiety and potentiality not through resolution, but through a poetic acceptance of multiplicity, a concept explored in media dealing with modern existential dilemmas (Pioldner, 2022).

By integrating these cinematic elements into a cohesive emotional framework, *Look Both Ways* challenges conventional understandings of narrative choice. Instead of positioning the split as a dilemma, the film treats it as a natural expression of the multiplicity that shapes human experience. Both storylines illuminate how personal growth can emerge from different circumstances, emphasizing that identity is not a fixed endpoint but an evolving process. Through this perspective, the film encourages viewers to see their own lives as similarly open-ended, shaped by numerous overlapping possibilities rather than one definitive path.

Conclusion

This study has argued that the significance of *Look Both Ways* (2022) within the landscape of parallel narrative cinema lies in its successful generation of **emotional coherence** and its nuanced guidance of **audience subjectivity**. By meticulously coordinating color theory, narrative typography, and sound design, the film transforms its central gimmick the life-altering pregnancy test—into a profound meditation on the nature of choice and identity. It demonstrates that bifurcated narratives can do more than showcase alternatives; they can synthesize those alternatives into a richer, more complex portrait of a human experience where all potential paths contribute to the understanding of the self.

The film's achievement offers a valuable conceptual model for film scholars and critics. It suggests that the analytical focus on parallel storytelling should shift from cataloging structural complexity to deciphering the **subjective and affective systems** that make such complexity resonate as a unified whole. Future research could productively apply this "coherence" framework to other films in the genre, particularly those exploring identity at the intersection of personal desire and social expectation, to further elucidate how contemporary cinema narrativizes the fragmented yet continuous experience of modern life.

In today's world, people often manage uncertainty and multiple responsibilities at once. Bifurcated storytelling captures this feeling by showing how different choices can lead to different yet equally meaningful futures. **Look Both Ways** illustrates that identity is not fixed but shaped through ongoing decisions and emotional growth across time.

Ultimately, the film shows that bifurcation is not simply a narrative trick but a human way of understanding life. By presenting two realities side by side, the film encourages viewers to compare, reflect, and imagine their own possibilities. In doing so, it contributes to a broader cinematic movement that explores modern life as open, flexible, and filled with parallel potential.

The findings of this study contribute to a growing body of scholarship that examines how contemporary films use nonlinear and parallel structures to reflect the complexities of modern life. Rather than relying solely on plot mechanics, *Look Both Ways* demonstrates how emotional logic can bind multiple realities into a single, coherent experience. This suggests that future analyses of parallel narratives should consider how emotional design functions alongside structural experimentation, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how audiences interpret stories with multiple timelines.

Ultimately, the film underscores the idea that different life paths can coexist as meaningful expressions of personal evolution. In presenting two equally valid versions of Natalie's future, the film moves beyond traditional narrative expectations that require a single conclusive outcome. This approach aligns with contemporary understandings of identity as fluid and multifaceted, shaped by an ongoing dialogue between individual choices and external influences. As such, *Look Both Ways* serves as a compelling example of how modern cinema can articulate the richness of human possibility through bifurcated storytelling. Future research may therefore explore how different audiences across age, gender, or cultural background interpret bifurcated narratives, as emotional coherence may fluctuate depending on viewers' narrative familiarity, lived experience, and media literacy.

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