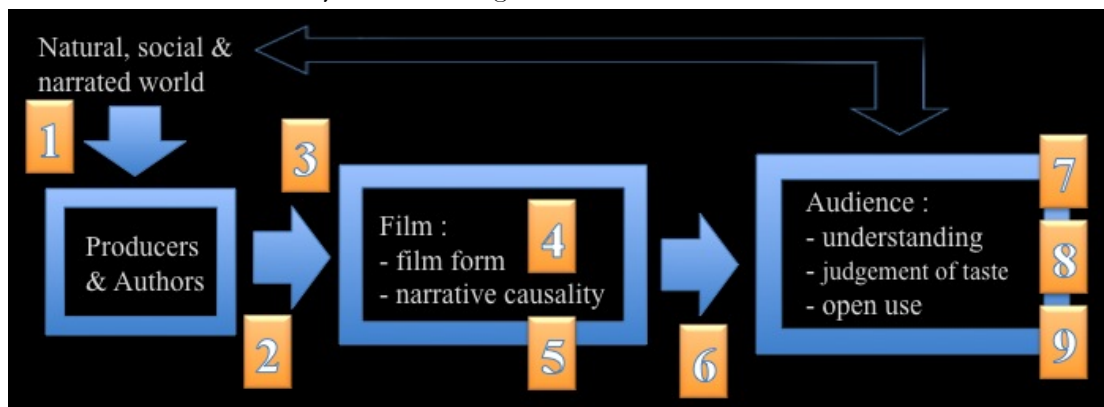


Film Theory and Causality: A (Brief) Survey

The lack of multidisciplinary in Film Studies may be explained in many ways : one of them is that the different branches disagree on the notion of causality. Apparently, scholars do not agree on the place of causality in the “chain of the film”; nor do they agree on the nature of this causality. The question is then to know whether they can communicate all the same, or are reduced to remaining in their own sphere.

1. The places of causality

Where is causality when looking at the “film chain”?



1. [Numbers refer to the picture above] The will to act is exposed to three forms of determinism:

- if you tend to be a universalist, you may see artistic creation as a naturalized fact (it is in man's nature to create things) ;
- if you tend to be a sociologist in the tradition of Bourdieu, you may see it as a socialized fact (artists create because of their very position in society) ;
- if you tend to be a culturalist in the tradition of Derrida, you may see it as a discourse effect (the film is a discourse built by another discourse).

You may choose only one of these forces, or two, or the 3 of them, like Bruno Latour. If so, you say that the film, like any other element in the world, is at the same time a real object, a social object and a narrated object¹.

2. Material conditions of film-making. These conditions form a structure which can serve the film-makers' intentions, or format them, or even stand in their way. These conditions may take on different forms:

- there may be power conflicts between the different corporate bodies (director, assistant, actors, technicians...)
- economic problems, accidents, bad weather...
- implicit and explicit rules, a canon, an artistic tradition – this is what is explored by genetic history, or the poetics of cinema as defined by Bordwell.

¹ *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*, rééd. 1997, p. 13-15. *We have never been modern*, 1993, Harvard University Press.

3. A place of causality particularly appreciated by essentialist approaches to cinema, which are interested in ontology : the origin of images and sounds. Do objects themselves leave their mark, as Bazin writes (revelationist tradition²)? Or is it the camera – which gives them shape? (constructivist tradition, as in the structural Marxist theories developed in the journal *CinEthique*)? What about computer-generated imagery? The very word hints at the fact that the cause in this case is a machine: “computer-generated” apparently means “generated by the computer itself”.

This place is also highly subjected to external causality – which comes from outside the chain of the film – as technical progress has a crucial importance in it (the technique used by CGI sometimes derives from the world of medical or military imagery).

4. Reflectionist theories – those which consider that the socio-historical context somehow “causes” the film in the sense that the latter reflects the former. Once you’re convinced that causality works this way, you may somehow do reverse-engineering, namely study a society by analyzing its films. Other film scholars, like Bordwell for instance, rather think that the form is caused from inside, by the beginning of the “chain of the film”. The socio-historical context also has a part to play, but in a more indirect way which does not make it possible to do reverse-engineering and deduce the context only from watching the film.

But this is a *synchronic* conception of form while the most heated discussions about the cause of film forms are often *diachronic*. It is interesting to know why forms change throughout the history of cinema. First, there are those who support the autonomy of the chain of cinema. The most romantic of them think that the change comes from individuals, especially artists. Others think that it somehow occurs “on its own”. This is what Saussure infers with his model of a “structure which structures itself on its own”, as Bourdieu writes. Hegel also evokes this idea with what he calls the *Selbstbewegung*, namely the immanent propensity to transform oneself. The same type of causal explanation could be found even earlier in the late 19th century with Adolf Göller’s *Formersmüdung* (the exhaustion of the form: when a style becomes too familiar, it gives birth to a new one). The same idea of autonomy is expressed again in Colin Martindale’s concept of « *the clockwork muse* »³, namely the idea that forms transform themselves in a cyclical way.

There are also scholars like Bourdieu who reject the idea of the autonomy of the chain and suggest external causes. To them, forms do not change on their own, but according to the rhythm of agents’ fights within the field of art. They struggle to try and improve or maintain their position.

5. Stories organized by causality. Propp’s structural narratology and Christian Metz’ semiology have largely explored this type of causality. So has moral philosophy, which has taken its illustrations from films in the last few years. Films themselves may discourse on causality. They more or less validate its existence:

- some film narratives are entirely organized by causality, following the “theory of dominoes”, from the primary cause to the end result (*The Ten Commandments*);

² Malcolm Turvey, *Doubling Vision : Film and the revelationist tradition*, 2008, Oxford University Press.

³ *The Predictability of Artistic Change*, 1990.

- some narratives are partially organized by causality; in a standard western, for instance, we know why colonists shoot at Indians (to defend themselves), but never why Indians shoot at them first.

- some narratives show chains of events without displaying any causality link. This often occurs in modern cinema. Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman*, for example, shows us a heroine who kills a man after 3 hours, but the film itself never explains why. This provokes various causal interpretations in spectators. For instance, the film director explains that her heroine becomes a murderer because loneliness made her mad; but the standard feminist explanation consists in stating that Jeanne kills this man because she is fed up with being dominated by the stronger sex.

- last but not least, some narratives attack the very notion of causality, saying it may not exist or may no longer exist, as in *No Country for Old Men*. In this film, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell doesn't understand either why things happen this way, or why there are "children walking the streets of our Texas towns with green hair and bones in their noses." Things occur, take place, and that's all – there's nothing to be explained.

6. The machines can be found at the other end of the chain, namely in a place subjected to technical progress as well. For instance, the discovery of laser technology was a necessary condition for the invention of the DVD. Noël Carroll's very causalist reading, technological determinism⁴, can be found here. You can spot it in Benjamin, Adorno, MacLuhan and also classical cinephilia. The film is supposed to cause effects and even different readings according to whether it is broadcast in a theatre, on TV, on a laptop, etc.

7. Understanding (Metz' research programme: "Understanding the way the film is understood"). Understanding is undoubtedly "caused" by filmic signs. The problem is to know whether there is not anything else than these signs.

As before, some stances advocate the autonomy of the chain of cinema. For these autonomist stances, understanding is the result of all that has already been studied in places n° 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6. The most famous of these stances are: the Shannon–Weaver model of communication, Hitchcock's claim to control the gaze and the attention, and, more generally, all the "theories of reception control", when reception is rather seen as a reaction caused.

Conversely, some stances refuse the autonomy of the chain of cinema – for instance Janet Staiger with her "Perverse Spectator"⁵.

In between, mixed stances can be found. They show that understanding is both caused by filmic signs and something else. This something else may be the "code" in Christian Metz' semiology. In Art history, it may be the *Kunstwollen*⁶, which shows us what a period feels like seeing, or somehow "can see." But some more internalist conceptions support the idea that this way of thinking is created by the work itself: this idea may be found under different guises in Bergson, Chloviski, Proust, Merleau-Ponty, etc. – the idea that the cause of a new way of looking at the world may be found in some works of art.

8. Judgement of taste. Once again we have to separate theoretical points of view according to the degree of autonomy they give the chain of cinema. When the chain is regarded as autonomous, the alternative is as follows: either you say the

⁴ *Philosophy of mass art*, p. 148.

⁵ *Perverse Spectators: the Practices of Film Reception*, 2000.

⁶ Alois Riegl 1893.

judgement of taste is caused by the film (or by the author or the “hand” of the author in “auteur cinophilia”). This is called objectivist conception. Or, conversely, you think that the judgement of taste is caused by the spectator’s good will or fantasy. This is the hypersubjectivist conception. But when you refuse the autonomy of the chain, as in deterministic sociology, you think that taste is rather determined by your position in the social field.

You may situate yourself in between, by saying that the judgement of taste is produced by the encounter between subject and object. This is the way followed by the less deterministic sociology of Bernard Lahire, « *sociology at the level of the individual* »⁷.

9. End. The film may cause in its turn effects on the world as some “uses of the film” have observable consequences. The latter may be highly visible and directly linked to the cinematographic “situation”, in the sense Erving Goffman gives this term. They may be riots, protests or, on the contrary, the cult generated by the film or a “social phenomenon”, as the media say, when a film draws whole crowds.

Or else the real effects of the film on the world may be less visible and not directly linked to the situation. When I worked on the fandom of *Star Wars*, I realized that Lucas’ films had sometimes influenced the professional life of their spectators. The latter were no longer spectators but rather end-users. In the same vein there is, of course, the construction of the genre, which is – among other things – the result of a repetition of *representations* – among which filmic ones. This repetition will eventually become performative – namely it will end up having real consequences. Long before Judith Butler, Marcel Mauss had understood this when he noted that his nurses at the hospital in New York walked exactly like cinema stars. Then he had come back to Paris and seen that young women in the streets walked in exactly the same way. That was back in 1934⁸.

Still in the same vein, there are Marxist readings, like Adorno’s: the film *causes* social rest. In this light, the entertainment industry is the condition for the survival of the capitalist system as it works towards naturalizing class inequalities. Rousseau already suggested this type of causality in 1758: poor people are pushed into attending spectacles by their very poverty, as without the sense of escape provided by these spectacles, they would not be able to bear their hard lives⁹.

We have now presented all the different places where causality could be studied, and we have already noted the great differences between disciplines, not to mention the different opinions expressed within the same discipline. These differences may be grouped according to the epistemological attitude each discipline has towards causality.

2. Epistemological attitude towards causality

Neither all disciplines nor all scholars of the same discipline have the same approach to causality.

⁷ « From the habitus to an individual heritage of dispositions. Towards a sociology at the level of the individual », *Poetics, Journal of Empirical Research on Culture, the Media and the Arts*, vol. 31, n° 5-6, october 2003, p. 329-355.

⁸ *Les techniques du corps*.

⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *Lettre à M. D’Alembert sur son article Genève* (1758), Garnier-Flammarion, Paris 1967.

A classical epistemological tool : a three-part paradigm, each part designed by a German verb (as now associated with the nineteenth-century works of J.G. Droysen and Wilhelm Dilthey): *Beschreiben* (to describe) *Erklären* (to explain), and *Verstehen* (to understand).

It is possible to classify these three attitudes according to the amount of causality involved.

The first one, *Beschreiben*, supposes a lack of involvement – causality does not play any role. You only show how phenomena follow one another, without taking any stand. *Beschreiben* consists in reaching for an objective account which “could ideally be accepted by any subject, because it does not draw on any assumptions, prejudices, or values of particular subjects.”¹⁰ The main tools of scholars here are counting and measurement, and their chief means of presenting results is the *list*. The main trap is *reductionism*, since the object has to be defined (if not constructed) before the description starts. *Beschreiben* can be found in: film analysis (especially as practiced in high school or in technical courses), reception studies, genetic history (how the film was made, focusing on dates, work sheets, number of takes, etc.), genetic economy (budget details)... Beside lists or enumerations, results can appear as narratives, or “thick descriptions” à la Clifford Geertz.

The second attitude, *Erklären* conversely implies that you show causality links. It is widely used in hard sciences as it allows us to deduce laws and thus anticipate. In film studies, *Erklären* consists in founding external cause-effect laws governing forms of the film and reactions to it. The main tool of the scholars here is the determinist interpretation, and their main way to present results is an *arrow* connecting two elements influencing each other in some ways. The main trap is the belief in predictability, which rarely occurs, because “once some factors are isolated, all that can be said is that if certain events occur, they could not have occurred as they did without these factors.”¹¹ *Erklären* can be found in Marxist studies, sociology of the field, cognitive-evolutionary film studies, history of film techniques, some streams in gender and cultural studies using the idea of performativity or the “reflectionist” link between people and representations...

The third and last epistemological attitude, *Verstehen*, may be placed in between the two others as far as the use of causality is concerned. Instead of finding what caused the facts observed, you try and find the reasons behind them. Indeed, many of these facts are caused by human agents. The problem is that we are never too sure of the reasons why they act. They are not always too sure themselves either. The scholar who aims at understanding these reasons is thus often reduced to suggesting interpretations. The latter often have a classificatory purpose, and the main way to present the results is *taxonomy*. A double danger awaits the scholar here:

- first danger: the less the adequacy of the interpretative model of the world is *verifiable* (in the meaning Karl Popper gives this word), the less the scholar’s activity gets closer to pseudo-sciences (like astrology) or fiction. That is what Noël Carroll

¹⁰ *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Oxford 2001, p. 10785.

¹¹ Thomas M. Seebom, *Hermeneutics: method and methodology*, Dordrecht, Kluwer Academics Publisher, 2004, p. 77

underlines when he speaks of the “contriving interpretations of individual films, albeit in arcane ‘theoretically’ derived jargon;”¹²

- second danger: in human sciences, the problem lies in the fact that “the observer is part of the observation”, as Marcel Mauss would say.¹³ This means that the scholar’s interventions might modify the world (even if they are reduced to publishing results). One might even go as far as to say that there is an inverted causality link: instead of the state of the world being the cause of an interpretation, the interpretation itself causes changes in the world. This occurred in France, for instance, with the publication of Bourdieu’s *Distinction*¹⁴ in 1979. Saying that tastes were linked to one’s social position was very badly received by a certain number of people, who *consequently* started to modify their behaviour, just to try and prove they were not “acted” by their social position. This gradually led to the phenomenon of cultural omivory.

These differences between opinions and disciplines do not necessarily preclude multidisciplinary. I’m aware that sometimes, within the field of film studies, there is the famous “incommensurability of paradigms.” I also know that Thomas Kühn states that “it is impossible to construct an impartial language that can be used to perform a neutral comparison between conflicting paradigms, because the very terms used are integral to the respective paradigms.”¹⁵ Yet I think that the causality issue might be an interesting starting point to see whether, instead of ignoring one another, the different disciplines could combine – or simply compete with one another, as Noël Carroll wishes. Besides, there is a tool to fight against the “incommensurability of paradigms”: it is included in the Actor-Network Theory defined by Callon and Latour – namely translation. Translation is what allows us to get around the trap of the “impartial language” that is impossible to find. In this perspective, throughout this paper, I have just tried to translate the notion of causality.

To quote this essay : L. Jullier « Film theory and causality : a (brief) survey », speech given at Arthemis International Conference “On the History and Epistemology of Moving Image Studies”, Concordia University, June 2010.

¹² Noël Carroll, « Prospects for Film Theory : a personal assessment », *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, David Bordwell & Noël Carroll eds, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996, p. 39.

¹³ Cf. Levi-Strauss, Preface to *Sociologie et Anthropologie*, p. XXVII.

¹⁴ *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, 1984, Harvard University Press.

¹⁵ *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn, 1962.