

The Limits of Cinematic Narration

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Understanding a narrative is traditionally regarded as grasping its causal unfolding (Todorov 1977; Trabasso et al. 1984; Bordwell 1985; Branigan 1992; Carroll 2001). A key difference between cinematic and literary narration is the lack of explicit causal expressions in filmic storytelling, which are ubiquitous in literature (Balázs 1924). Yet, viewers of films understand narratives in terms of causal connections just as much as readers do. How do they achieve this, and how does cinematic narrative construction support this process?

Causal thinking is an automatic cognitive process that requires little data or logic. The logical fallacy *post hoc ergo propter hoc* shapes our everyday understanding of events. Narration exploits this fallacy to structure meaning, as Barthes observed (Barthes, 1966). This effect is particularly strong in films, where even a simple juxtaposition of unrelated events can trigger causal inferences. Viewers attribute causality either through covariation—observing patterns of co-occurring events—or through beliefs about forces driving one event to cause another (Cheng, 1997). Personal experience, beliefs and cultural context determines which sequences appear obvious and which seem unlikely. By presenting event sequences with varying likelihoods, cinematic narratives guide automatic causal attribution, sometimes reinforced by verbal explanations. Viewer engagement in this process varies with cultural background, personality, and state of mind (Sweeton, 2010; Kovács & Papp-Zipernovszky, 2017).

Narrative construction can facilitate or hinder causal inference. A common strategy in film is alternating between causal and repetitive sequences (Kovács, 2007). Causal sequences present events with high probability, while repetitive sequences reinforce unlikely connections. This pattern prepares viewers for an event that would otherwise seem implausible (Kovács, 2024). Through this mechanism, cinematic narratives “teach” new causal rules, allowing even improbable sequences to be perceived as logical.

Is there a limit to our automatic causal processing of Narratives? In other words, what are the boundaries of a narrative film? Studies of puzzle films indicate that narrative coherence—despite ambiguity—depends on the strong identity of a recurring agent. (Kovács 2022) Empirical research suggests that as long as a recurrent human agent is on screen, viewers’ search for causal connections persists, even in confusing or chaotic narratives. Even in incoherent films, viewers instinctively seek causal explanations. I will briefly present the results of this research.

In conclusion, cinematic narratives do not require strong causal elements to be understood as causally connected. The presence of recurrent human agents ensures that viewers continue searching for causal explanations, while repetition of high-probability event sequences helps them construct new causal rules. This allows them to accept sequences that might otherwise seem illogical. The limit of a narrative in film is not defined by causal, temporal, or spatial coherence but by the presence or absence of a recurrent agent.

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