



CINEMA, AN ART MORE *PHOTOGRAPHIC* THAN *AUTOGRAPHIC*

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Abstract

It would be difficult to situate cinema, in the sense of *institutional cinema*, in a chart whose purpose would be to illustrate the various allographic and autographic aspects (in the sense Goodman and Genette use these terms) of different art forms. Cinema is a complex art in which, like in a rhizome, various expressive means, channels of transmission, systems of notation and modes of execution overlap. The task is even bigger with respect to the body of films known as early cinema, or rather *kine-attractography*. Early cinema is a hundred times more rhizome-like than institutional cinema, because it involves a number of “performative” gestures (live music or commentary, etc.) whose effect is to multiply the sites of creation or authorship. Kine-attractography involves both *allographic* recording (because it is purely instrumental) and the *autographic* performance of a given actor, even though anonymous, in an execution-screening complemented by equally *autographic* performances by live figures. Hence, the difficulty in identifying the underlying system joining the various instances *at work* in such situations. Just as photography rhymes with allography, cinema is a *photographic* art before it is an *autographic* one.

It is generally agreed upon that it would be difficult to situate *cinema* on a chart whose purpose would be to illustrate the various allographic and autographic aspects of different art forms, despite the numerous and repeated explanations of both Nelson Goodman¹ and Gérard Genette.²

The present discussion, like those of others before me, is an attempt to put my shoulder to the wheel in order to understand, in light of Genette’s adaptation of Goodman’s hypothesis, where cinema fits in this “bazaar,” which sometimes resembles the famous china shop, with cinema playing the role of the bull. Not because Goodman’s hypothesis, nor Genette’s adaptation of this hypothesis, do not hold under scrutiny, but probably because cinema, in the end, is perhaps not *an* art but rather *several* arts, part of what I would call an “artial” system. This has enormous consequences for our way of thinking about cinema within the arts system. Moreover, it is probably because of cinema’s rather peculiar place in this system that it has become the task of film scholars (thank you, François Jost!³ thank you, David Rodowick!⁴) to separate the wheat from the chaff, and show how some of the postulates of the “Goodmano-Genettian” system, if you will allow me the expression, pinch a little (and how the entire mechanism of the theory developed by



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Goodman and then Genette sometimes gets jammed up) when trying to apply them to cinema. This helps us to see the source of the possible aporia or limits of the allo-autographic dichotomy, and it also helps us to better understand cinema as an art, or rather as an “artial” system.

I am aware of the fact that this foray into the field may appear promising and that I may disappoint the reader, for I am capable here of delivering only prolegomena. I will knock on various doors, some of which I will not pass through, simply because they open onto questions too complex for me to attempt to resolve in a modest article such as this one.

I have been spurred on by the possibilities opened up by François Jost’s work on “Genetto-Goodmanian” theory, which Jost attempts somehow or other, but always brilliantly, to adjust to the reality of the cultural series “cinema” in his now nearly fifteen-year-old volume. Jost devotes a long chapter to what might be described as the “ontological” complexity of cinema that manifold art with numerous means of expression. To my knowledge, French-speaking authors in film studies have not taken up these questions since then, at least not in any meaningful way. In the English-language literature, a special place must be awarded to the hypotheses of David Rodowick, who devotes three short but inspired pages to Goodman’s two systems in his volume *The Virtual Life of Film*. Here Rodowick ably demonstrates all the problems cinema poses for the question at hand: “The clearest examples of autographic arts imply a unique author whose work is accomplished in a one-stage act. Two-stage arts require aesthetic grounding in a system of ideally inalterable notation. Film does not fully satisfy either criterion.”⁵

“Film does not fully satisfy either criterion.” it is *other*. Jost says the same thing: “How to define cinema? [...] A media mixture of multifarious expression, there can be no doubt it borrows from several systems.”⁶ Indeed cinema may not be *an* art, a *singular* art. It may be better to see it as a cluster, a combination. In any event, it is a “mixture” of expressive media: “it borrows from several systems.”

I can thus only endorse the work of my predecessors Jost and Rodowick. In the case of the latter, I would plead for cinema’s artistic specificity – and no clause in the “Genetto-Goodmanian” theory truly foresaw the specific nature of this little terror of the arts called cinema. I would also point out the fundamental multiplicity of this veritable “artial system” – the one and the same cinema.⁷

Cinema is a complex art, and in this sense it is more complex – perhaps it would be better to say “more composite” – than texts (I will not say literature), because like in a rhizome, various expressive means, channels of transmission, systems of notation and modes of execution overlap. As they said back in the 1970s and 1980s, cinematic *polyphony* contrasts with literary, or more precisely textual *monody*.⁸ To return to Christian Metz, we find five expressive means (moving images, textual elements, speech, sounds and music) and in the other only one: written language. Cinema thus gave rise to a veritable polyphony of information, whose parameters are:

- The constant presence of what we might call “situational gain;”⁹
- The “depth” of the sign (Barthes);
- The co-occurrence of multiple signs.

Cinema invites the viewer to decode five kinds of signs, certain of which are composite signs, formed out of a multitude (or swarm) of signs; cinema is something of a composite art. *Cinema*, I said. Perhaps I should say, to adopt the expression I recently proposed to describe the medium’s

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institutional existence (beginning around 1912-14), *institutional cinema*,¹⁰ which I contrast with *kine-attractography* (a term better suited to discussion of the issues raised by “early cinema” than this latter expression itself).

Kine-attractography, in addition, is more complex than cinema (institutional cinema) and obliges us to engage in real hair splitting when it comes time to account for its place on the auto-allo-graphy table. Simply (a euphemism ...) because kine-attractography multiplied at will the various agents of “creation” or authorship, but also because, it is generally agreed, it was not even an art. To paraphrase Goodman in the hands of Genette, we might wonder when art begins,¹¹ or more specifically, when there is *film art*. This is a truly programmatic question and in recent years I have carried out thorough research into the matter.

If film art did not exist at the time kine-attractography was dominant, we might wonder whether it is appropriate to apply the “Goodman-Genettian” typology to it (something I will not do here). In our discussions on film, Genette himself, unfortunately, is not much help, because his work does not really take cinema into account – as if this “multimedia monster” (the expression is Genette’s)¹² horrified and terrified him. Go figure!

To date, I have based my thinking on at least two postulates:

1. Institutional cinema is a composite art in which various means of expression, transmission channels, systems of notation and modes of execution overlap as in a rhizome.
2. Kine-attractography was not an art, but at the same time was something more complex and composite than institutional cinema, thereby multiplying the levels of expression, transmission, notation and execution.

What this means is that it is one thing to determine the allo- or auto- aspect of what we call the literary monody, and another, a *completely different other*, to categorise cinema’s informational polyphony. Rather than being monodic, cinema is a polyphonic braiding of multiple monodies. A braiding of monodies, or to use another expression with which I have described a similar phenomenon, a meshing of media – an *intermedial meshing*. This is what Rodowick has in mind when he speaks of the “difficult hybridity of film.”¹³

What does stating that kine-attractography was more complex and composite than institutional cinema mean? For the past few years, I have been attempting to demonstrate that it is better to see so-called early cinema not as representing the *early* stages of the new cultural practice that was to become cinema, but rather from the perspective of other practices, to which, in a sense, the kinematograph camera attached itself in order to do differently *what was already being done* within the practices in question, even before the introduction of this new device.¹⁴ What the first *kinematographers* did was “simply” (euphemisms, there’s nothing like them!) to use a new device, the kinematograph, within *already established cultural series*: photography, the magic lantern, the magic sketch, etc.

According to this hypothesis, we should not view so-called early cinema as the legitimate representative of cinema’s *early period*, because the moving pictures of the first years of the 20th century were not yet truly cinema at all. We would thus benefit greatly from studying a particular moving picture or a particular “kine-attractography” practice, as an extension of the *magic sketch*, the *fairy play* or the *magic lantern* cultural series, etc.

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The kinematograph was a novelty and the first people to use the device, whether to make moving pictures or to exhibit them, were already working in a cultural series outside cinema, albeit in a relatively similar field. According to this hypothesis, what the first *kinematographers* did was to use a new device, the kinematograph *within cultural series* in which they were already working or, if they were neophytes, by taking as their model the *modus operandi* of a dominant cultural series of the period. In this way, among the first film showmen we find, for example, itinerant projectionists going from place to place showing still images with their magic lantern.

Moreover, the kinematograph was seen at the time as a device strictly for *reproduction*, and kinematographers' work consisted in recording a series of attractions and capturing a variety of performances. Some of these "performances" *appeared* natural, such as *Train Entering a Station* (*L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de la Ciotat*, Lumière, 1897) and *Card Game* (*Partie d'écarté*, Lumière, 1896). Other performances, such as *Waterer and Watered* (*Arroseur et arrosé*, Lumière, 1895), were scripted to varying degrees, while others yet were in a sense pre-constrained, pre-fabricated, coming directly from another cultural series and transferred into the world of kinematography in the form of what Philippe Marion and I have called "attractional packages,"¹⁵ Edison's famous *Sadow* (1894) for example.

Kine-attractography was an *allographic* recording (because it was purely instrumental) of an *autographic* performance by a particular actor (who could nevertheless be anonymous). Here lies the difficulty of identifying the underlying system uniting the various agents *at work* in such cases. Everything depends on what one looks at. It is true that, like photography, cinema is in some respects a manifold autographic art, because of a very simple principle tied up with the reproducibility of the work. As Genette describes,

*Because it typically involves two stages of developing and printing, the art of photography in its standard state [...] may serve as a paradigm for the multiple autographic regime as defined by Goodman, who says that "the autographic arts are those that are singular [only] in the earliest stage:" a photographic negative is singular, the prints taken on paper are, if one desires, multiple.*¹⁶

One might also argue, as Jost does, that cinema's photographic aspect places it from the outset onto the side of allography, particularly during the early cinema period: "the recorded 'picture' was seen as identical to what it reproduced regardless of who took it."¹⁷ Still following Jost, we might go even further, placing himself on the side of Genette at the expense of Goodman, he argues the following:

*If we believe, with [Genette], that the allographic system is less ontological than it is a matter of cultural convention and use, and that allographic works do not exist in the absence of allographic art, we must conclude that film is received primarily as an allographic work (even though this hypothesis is contrary in letter to Goodman, who sees autography as preceding allography).*¹⁸

Just as photography, at least in its strictly technical dimension, is closer to *allography*, cinema is a *photographic* and thus *allographic* art before it is an *autographic* one. As for cinema as a whole, and in particular kine-attractography, to which the label "art" is denied, we could say that

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it derived from the cultural series *photography*, and is thus an *allographic* series before it is an *autographic* one. It became fully autographic over the course of the 1910s when films came to be signed and the *film director* gradually replaced the *kinematographer*.

An allographic series, without a doubt, but one which carried with it undeniably autographic elements such as the various performances of its agents, at any level – if indeed, as Jost remarks,¹⁹ these were part of a “given intention”. This series became fully autographic only when the leading function of the film director’s “signature” was recognised.

What’s more, kine-attractography was also the site of another kind of at least two other indisputably autographic elements: the “vagaries of the screening” or the well and truly “signed” aspect of any public screening; and the “variations in the film” or the immeasurable lability of the text of what were known at the time as “moving pictures.”²⁰

The *allographic* recording of an actor’s *autographic* performance requires, for its transmission to be possible, the *screening of a film*. This screening may be the site of expressive acts capable of belonging to one or the other system: allography or autography. In fact, we could say that from the perspective of the execution/screening, film has gone from a maximum degree of autography (in the kine-attractography paradigm) to an equally maximum degree of autography (in the institutional cinema paradigm). Indeed, the kine-attractography system’s many *in vivo* agents (exhibitors, projectionists, musicians, barkers and lecturers) deliver an execution-screening, which is just as *autographic* as the performances of the animated figures originally recorded on film. Conversely, institutional cinema discarded lecturers and barkers, and eventually musicians, so “the exhibitor [could become] a mere executant of a pre-conceived show, already set down on and engraved on the film.”²¹

The second parameter, variations in the film, refers to an unstoppable historical phenomenon: the farther back in time one goes, from 1905 to 1902 and then to 1898, the lesser the likelihood that the films shown in the various venues of the time – the same month, the same week or even the same day – will be “carbon copies” of each other. Because, during the kine-attractography period, the person with the last word on the make-up of the film, its assemblage and juxtaposition with other films, was the person showing the film: this could be an exhibitor or a projectionist, and in some cases an exhibitor-projectionist. What is true of the film is even truer of the screening itself, which was always subject to *local* variations in live accompaniment, wholly dependent on a *local* agent.

A film’s variance, moreover, transcends the shift from kine-attractography to institutional cinema, just as it transcends the advent to talking films. For the film to reach viewers and be screened for them, cinema alone requires that a *copy of the film* must first have been made, placing cinema on the side of allography once again. Indeed copies are everywhere in film. What we watch in a movie theatre when we “consume” a film is a copy. Only very rarely do we watch an “original” negative or positive print. What’s more, very few of us see the same copy of a film, because each movie theatre has its *own* print.

Even today, every print of a film is liable to variance, however minute. The likelihood of this was much greater at the time of kine-attractography, before institutional laws governing film practices were in place. During the kine-attractography era an incalculable number of factors contributed to the multiplication of variants,²² as shown in the following table (fig. 1), which I conceived for an article written in 2004:²³

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Agents involved in making and exhibiting moving pictures:		
1. ab ovo	:	the initiator who conceives the film
2. in vivo	:	the operator who creates the film <i>[or the film director (in certain cases)]</i>
3. in vitro	:	the manufacturer who assembles the film
4. in texto	:	the manufacturer who sells the film
5. in situ	:	the exhibitor who mounts the program
6. in fine	:	the exhibitor who shows the film

Fig. 1 – Factors in the increase in the number of versions.

As this table shows, the exhibitor must also be seen as a factor in the multiplication of variants: as the owner of the films, he used them as he saw fit. Figure 2, which also dates from 2004 and employs Charles Peirce's distinction between type and token, gives a sense of the extent of this phenomenon. Genette employs this same distinction, using the terms type and occurrence, although at the time of adopting these concepts in my work in 2004 he did not influence me.

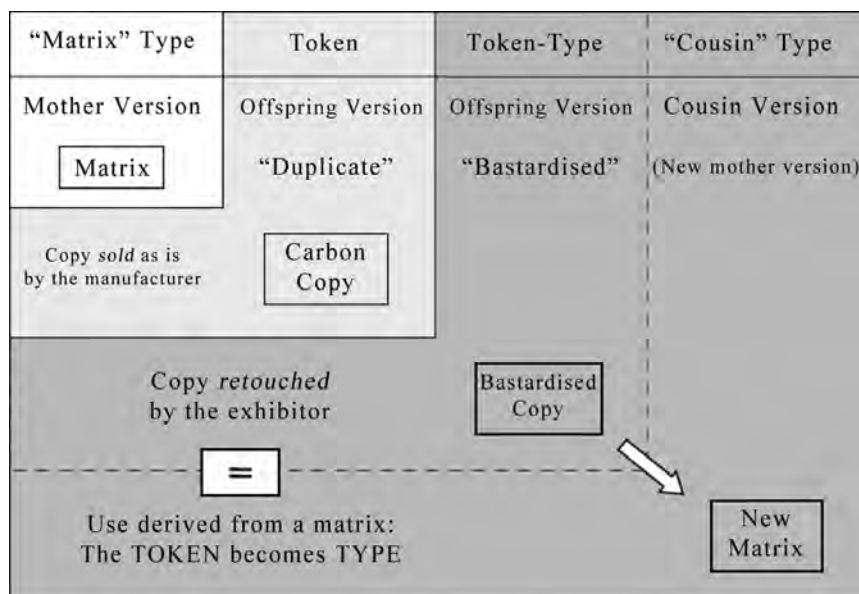


Fig. 2 – Types and tokens: variations from one copy of a film to another.

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- 1 Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Systems*, Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis 1968.
- 2 Gérard Genette, *L'Œuvre de l'art. Immanence et transcendance*, Seuil, Paris 1994 (eng. ed. *The Work of Art. Immanence and Transcendence*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY 1997, p. 40).
- 3 François Jost, *Le Temps d'un regard. Du spectateur aux images*, Nuit blanche-Méridiens Klincksieck, Quebec City-Paris 1998.
- 4 D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2007.
- 5 *Idem*, p. 16.
- 6 François Jost, *Le Temps d'un regard*, cit., p. 152 (my translation).
- 7 An artial system which might practice the "interartiality" that Walter Moser espouses in his article *Interartialité: pour une archéologie de l'intermédialité*, in Marion Froger, Jürgen E. Müller (eds.), *Intermédialité et socialité: histoire et géographie d'un concept*, Nodus Publikationen, Münster 2007, pp. 69-92.
- 8 See in particular Roland Barthes, *Essais critiques*, Seuil, Paris 1964 (eng. ed. *Critical Essays*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1972). See also Christian Metz, *Essais sur la signification au cinéma*, Paris, Klincksieck, vol. 1, 1971 (eng. ed. *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1991).
- 9 I borrow this expression from François Baby, "Du littéraire au cinématographique: une problématique de l'adaptation," in *Etudes littéraires*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1980, pp. 11-41.
- 10 André Gaudreault, *Cinéma et attraction. Pour une nouvelle histoire du cinématographe*, CNRS, Paris 2008 (eng. ed. *Film and Attraction: From Kinematography to Cinema*, University of Illinois Press, Bloomington 2011).
- 11 For Genette, as we know, the question is: "When is there art?"
- 12 As reported by François Jost, *Le Temps d'un regard*, cit., p. 152.
- 13 D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, cit., p. 14.
- 14 See in particular André Gaudreault, *Film and Attraction*, cit.
- 15 See André Gaudreault, Philippe Marion, "The Mysterious Affair of Styles in the Age of Kine-Attractography," in *Early Popular Visual Culture*, vol. 8, no. 1, February 2010, pp. 17-30.
- 16 Gérard Genette, *The Work of Art. Immanence and Transcendence*, cit., p. 40.
- 17 François Jost, *Le Temps d'un regard*, cit., p. 133 (my translation).
- 18 *Idem*, p. 156 (my translation; emphasis in the original).
- 19 *Idem*, p. 144.
- 20 I borrow this formulation from Alain Boillat, who was obliged to cancel his participation in the conference ("L'Œuvre de l'art: La pensée esthétique de Gérard Genette," Université Rennes 2 Haute Bretagne, 25-27 November 2010) for which the present article was prepared and who was to have delivered a paper there entitled: "La transcendance de l'œuvre selon Genette et les phénomènes 'd'oralité' au cinéma: variance du film, mouvance de la séance." See also the conference proceedings: Joseph Delaplace, Pierre-Henry Frangne, Gilles Mouëllic (eds.), *La Pensée esthétique de Gérard Genette*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, Rennes 2012.
- 21 François Jost, *Le Temps d'un regard*, cit., p. 159 (my translation).
- 22 Here these "variants" are called "versions," a term we should perhaps reject or, at the very least, question, given that it implies the existence of a unique and authentic original, something that is incompatible with the ideas I have set out in the present article.
- 23 "Les versions multiples à l'époque du cinéma des premiers temps, LA SUITE," II MAGIS International Film Studies Spring School (Gradisca d'Isonzo, 19-28 March 2004). A paper prepared in collaboration with Pierre Chemartin (a doctoral candidate at the Université de Montréal). Unpublished.