

Cinema, Contingencies, Metaphysics

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Abstract (E): What impact do contingencies have on protagonists in narrative film? Using examples from films by Eric Rohmer and Chantal Akerman, I consider this question from a metaphysical point of view in order to suggest how the perceived dichotomy between classical and modernist cinema is not as straightforward as it may at first appear.

Abstract (F): Quel est l'impact d'un événement contingent sur les personnages d'un film narratif ? A partir d'exemples tirés de films d'Eric Rohmer et de Chantal Akerman, je considère cette question d'un point de vue métaphysique pour suggérer que la dichotomie entre le cinéma classique et le cinéma moderne n'est pas aussi claire qu'il paraît au premier abord.

Keywords: contingencies in narrative cinema, analytic metaphysics, Rohmer, *Jeanne Dielman*

Article

*We had the experience but missed the meaning,
And approach to the meaning restores the experience
In a different form, beyond any meaning
We can assign to happiness.*

T.S. Eliot, *The Dry Salvages (Four Quartets)*

The role played by *chance* in fiction film has received a lot of attention. From a narratological perspective, a number of critics have argued that the function of chance differs in important and distinctive ways across classical and modernist traditions of cinematic narrative (see, e.g., Bordwell 1985, Kovács 2007) (1).

The conclusions drawn from such a comparative analysis are, of course, well-known. Chance plays almost no role at all in classical narration. The protagonists live in a world that seems planned from A to Z: nothing, or almost nothing, happens 'just like that', for no specific reason. Almost always a causal connection exists between successive events, and it is nearly impossible to point out an event that is not meaningful within the plot as a whole. Modernist cinema, on the other hand, shows stories evolving in an aleatory way, without much emphasis on causal connections. The events seem affected by *contingency* rather than being necessary. They might *not* have taken place, and the fact *that* they take place does not determine the lives of the (searching and wandering) protagonists in a powerful way. The modern universe shows indeterministic characteristics, whereas in the classical universe the protagonists' future follows only one determined path.

In this paper, however, I would like to suggest that the dichotomy between classical and modernist cinema cannot be so neatly defined. To illustrate this, I am going to consider the related problem concerning the role of contingencies in narrative film. Surprisingly, this problem has received little or no attention in cinema studies. Instead of investigating the narratological role of chance, I would like to think about some of the *metaphysical* implications of the way in which protagonists deal with contingencies. Their individual selves stand in a certain relation to reality, to the world that surrounds them. The protagonists are metaphysical subjects that do or do not structure the course of their lives according to a homogenous flow of meaning, which can be disturbed by external contingencies. In which case the question is: what kind of impact do these contingencies have on the protagonists' being? To put it metaphorically, it is a matter of the permeability and the flexibility of the boundary between the self and the world, and it does concern the way in which the self is able to project itself onto the world or, on the other hand, the way in which the world penetrates into the self. (2)

Let us start by considering the classical Hollywood cinema in more detail. In this paradigm the protagonists are not confronted with the necessity to position themselves with respect to contingencies that bring their inner life out of balance. The question simply does not arise, since the Hollywoodian universe is not affected by contingency. Furthermore, it is a meaningful universe, in which the diegetic subjects connect seamlessly with the meaning(s) that surround them. They recognise themselves perfectly well in reality, which is an externalisation of their minds, their thoughts and their feelings.

Ray Carney (1994) has contrasted this system with the cinema of John Cassavetes. He has analysed the *metaphorizing* and *subjectivizing tendencies* of classical Hollywood. Briefly summarized they amount to the following. The viewer is encouraged to make a move from the physical to the metaphysical, i.e., to the way in which the protagonists build a bridge between their selves and the diegetic world they inhabit. Worldly objects refer to imaginative significances, whereas external actions and events are indications of psychological and emotional states. Virtually nothing is simply itself – almost everything acquires a metaphorical connotation. Even the most banal object is ‘more’ than simply an object: it carries a meaning. The subjectivizing tendency, then, implies that this meaning is not aleatory but consistent with, and part and parcel of, the protagonists' ‘inner world’ of thoughts and feelings. Objects and events are outer signs of inner conditions. For example, a storm is a metaphorical externalisation of turmoil and other ‘stormy feelings’.

It is important to observe that these metaphorizing and subjectivizing tendencies act *a priori*. Whenever the protagonist encounters a significant object or event, (s)he is seized with the desire to try and ‘translate’ it, in order for it to be assimilated. The connection between the self and the world is immediate, unconditional and effortless. The subjects recognise themselves

perfectly in reality, they sort of coincide with it. To put it differently: they have a constitutive relationship to reality; they *are* reality in a deep, metaphysical sense.

The opposite paradigm concerns a resolutely modern, meaningless and disenchanted universe, that of neorealism, Michelangelo Antonioni, Jean-Marie Straub or Abbas Kiarostami. The world consists only of contingencies. Nature has no *telos*, it does not tend towards an aim as in Aristotle's philosophy, to which classical narration is indebted. The protagonists may try to understand themselves by describing their life, including their interaction with the world, in terms of a homogeneous flow of meaning, but such attempts are doomed to fail. Despair and existential angst replace the Hollywoodian self-evident way in which the protagonists recognise themselves in reality. Painfully constructed 'semantic anchors' are temporary: they resist only until the next contingency gives rise to a breach. The schism between the self and the world is absolute and irreparable.

Films belonging to this paradigm often show panoramic landscapes, in which the protagonists (filmed from a large distance) are only a tiny element – not a gear wheel in a grand mechanism directed by an omniscient God, but a little piece of dust, a living creature affected by contingencies in an impersonal universe grasped by aimless forces.

We could say, however, that some films occupy a position in between the two previous paradigms. In the cinema of Eric Rohmer, and especially in the cycle *Contes des quatre saisons* (*Conte de printemps*, 1990; *Conte d'hiver*, 1992; *Conte d'été*, 1996; *Conte d'automne*, 1998) (3) and in films such as *Le Rayon vert* (*The Green Ray*, 1986) or *Le Genou de Claire* (*Claire's Knee*, 1970), the protagonists spend quite a lot of time conversing with each other, to try and integrate contingent events into the life story that they tell themselves. Here the emphasis lies on 'telling'. Something happens, and the main characters try to 'do something with it'. Everything *has* to have a meaning, they elude themselves into believing, and the aim of their conversations is to help each other finding out these respective meanings and to validate these insights. However, contrary to the Hollywoodian system, meaning is not obvious; it has to be construed in an attempt to close the breach between the self and the world. The *a posteriori* interpretations, however, are pure fictions: a highly personal way of dealing with the world, devoid of any objective guarantee. It is as if an inner semantic system opens up to make room for a new element. In this way, contingencies are integrated, but the integration is temporary and relative, until a new contingent event arrives and the urge to interpret rises again.

The Rohmerian universe is, however, generous. Many of Rohmer's films end with an ultimate moment of chance (a *deus ex machina* of sorts), which allows the protagonists to anchor the fragile house of cards that they have built (or rather have constructed through their talk) around their lives – as if, suddenly, the cards turn into bricks after all.

Several examples come to mind. During the very last seconds of *Le Rayon vert* the protagonist Delphine actually gets to see the green ray, a meteorological phenomenon whose appearance has been connoted throughout the film with the possibility of having direct access to other people's feelings. Not long before this moment of epiphany she met a man, who seems to care about her, and she is wondering if he is or is not the 'man of her life'. Delphine hesitates and feels that only the green ray can reassure her in this respect. Indeed, the chatting with female friends, the interpreting, the wondering and pondering she has spent so much time and mental effort on ultimately lead to one single need or wish, the green ray... and this wish is actually granted (isn't Rohmerian life beautiful?). Whether the appearance helps her and brings emotional relief remains an open question, as the film ends seconds later.

Or consider the female protagonist of *Conte d'hiver* whose absent-mindedness while jotting down her home address has a tragic consequence. She makes a mistake, and thus her summer love is unable to inform her about *his* home address. And therefore she is unable to tell him that she is expecting his child. She then raises her daughter by herself, with some help from her mother. There are other men in her life, but deep down she exclusively loves the father of her daughter, and she clings to the hope that, one day, their paths will cross again. That this indeed happens, a few years later, is a kind of miracle that cannot but silence sceptics who might question the epistemic or metaphysical relevance of the endless interpretative talking that precedes the happy end. Such an outcome confers retroactively the necessity of a causal chain upon a succession of mere contingencies.

Sometimes it turns out to be impossible to bring the 'aleatory things of life' into harmonic correspondence with the self. This is the tragic bottom line of *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, 1975). For over three hours the film shows in static, frontal sequence shots how a housewife, who also prostitutes herself at home to provide an additional financial support for herself and her son, schedules her days in a strict or even compulsive way. During the first part of the film, the viewer gradually comes to realise that nearly every single action in Jeanne's life is planned: at what time she gets up in the morning, at what time her son leaves the apartment to go to school, which food she prepares and serves on each specific evening of the week, which client joins her on which afternoon, at what time she brings the potatoes to the boil in order for them to be ready by the time the client leaves, and so on. And as long as the inevitable contingencies that Jeanne encounters are such that *by sheer coincidence* they correspond perfectly with her inner structure, there is no problem. Then the (artificial, imposed) order is not perturbed, there is no rift, no imbalance.

In the second part of the film, however, things gradually start to go wrong. The alarm clock breaks down, as a consequence of which Jeanne's relation to time becomes blurred (where objective information about time has been crucial to turn her daily schedule into a success): a

client stays longer than usual and thus the potatoes spend too much time boiling (and turning them into mashed potatoes is not an option for Jeanne, as mashed potatoes are not part of the day's menu), she arrives later than usual in the cafe where she has the habit of drinking a coffee and she is perturbed by the fact that her usual chair (!) is taken by another customer while the waitress who usually serves her has already gone home... Step by step a silent disarray infiltrates Jeanne's facial expressions, gestures and acts. An unstable inner system breaks down little by little. These events, which one might expect to have only a limited impact on a person, penetrate so deep into her self that an implosion seems unavoidable.

During the last minutes of the film, the viewer witnesses Jeanne's inner destruction. For the first time, images of the bedroom are shown while there is a client present. Which contingency happens next is unclear, but during this encounter of two bodies something happens – the final drip that makes the bucket overflow. All of a sudden Jeanne grabs a pair of scissors, which, incidentally, she had used and then left in the bedroom moments before the client arrived, and she stabs the man with a resolute gesture. Whether Jeanne would not have destroyed not only the life of another person but in a certain way also her own life had there not been a pair of scissors lying around next to her is beside the point. The protagonist is profoundly unable to reconcile a contingent external shock with her inner being, and she then confers a (lethal) meaning to a contingent object, via the metaphor PAIR OF SCISSORS IS MURDER WEAPON.

The fact that the murder takes only a few seconds out of more than two hundred minutes of screen time, and that the film shows this event as a *fait divers*, without any kind of dramatic anticipation under the form of (Hollywoodian) expressive close-ups, accelerated editing or melodramatic film music, can be interpreted as a characteristic of the indifference of a universe that some may want to describe as cruel or cynical, but that happens to be the universe in which humans (have to) live. As large and uncontainable our need for meaning may be, there is *absolutely no* guarantee of a connection, of a correspondence between the self and the world, between the inner and the outer. Or as the French poet Francis Ponge put it (in *Méthodes*, 1961): *Hommes, animaux à parole, nous sommes les otages du monde muet. Ce monde muet est notre seule patrie.* (4)

To conclude, let me summarise my point as follows. On the one hand, the cinematic paradigm labeled 'classical' is characterised by the – perhaps enchanting and desirable, some might say, but ultimately deceiving – fact that protagonists are hardly ever confronted with profoundly disturbing external contingencies, for the simple reason that the world corresponds to, and in a deep metaphysical sense *is*, their inner states. As already pointed out, Ray Carney's observations about classical Hollywood cinema are seminal in this respect, although his aim is to contrast this paradigm with the cinema of John Cassavetes, not with modern(ist) cinema in general, and his focus is not on the role of contingencies *per se*. On the other hand, the

modernist paradigm – or shall we label it after Spinoza? – does not offer such comfort, and it leaves the protagonists profoundly at odds with contingencies. Within modernist cinema (with which Rohmer and Akerman are rightfully associated), however, I have identified a handful of films – and these are the only relevant films that I am aware of – that ‘disturb’ their paradigm from within, and in opposite ways, as far as contingencies are concerned and with reference to the way these are dealt with in the classical paradigm.

In the films by Rohmer that I mentioned the protagonists internalise contingencies, but on a purely subjective basis. One would therefore expect objective, external reality to ‘get back’ at them, since (the perception is that) they have done little else than fooling themselves. But an ultimate contingency surprisingly brings back solid meaning into the universe. It confers the reassuring anchoring of the classical paradigm on private musings that, within the modern universe, are not supposed to have the slightest relevance as to the metaphysical connection between the self and the world.

Jeanne Dielman's fate is the opposite: during the first part of the film, she connects with reality, and it seems thus that she lives in a classical universe. But as soon as things start going wrong, and they do increasingly until the culminating point at the very end of the film, she is utterly lost and unable to connect. The previous connection was a matter of sheer luck, the external contingencies just happened to be such that she was able to integrate them, but not for structural (classical) reasons. What seemed classical, turned out to be modern after all, and profoundly so, devoid of the Rohmerian generosity.

Notes

1. The terms ‘classical’ and ‘modern(ist)’ have a complex (technological, aesthetic, stylistic, philosophical, etc.) history. The first two chapters of Kovács' study provide an interesting discussion of the various questions involved (see also Aumont 2007). As the reader is about to learn, I am interested in the narration, or to be more precise, in a certain kind of events (contingencies) and in the way these events affect the protagonists. In his seminal 1985 book, Bordwell studied narration in (classical versus modernist) cinema from a general point of view. Kovács engages with Bordwell's conclusions in the fourth chapter of his study. Here are the most important features that, according to Bordwell (and as listed by Kovács on page 61), characterize modernist narrative techniques as they diverge from the classical norm: “non-redundant plot structure; a story less motivated by genre rules, not so easily associated with a common genre; episodic structure; the elimination of deadlines as a temporal motivation of the plot; concentration on the character and the *condition humaine* rather than on the plot; extensive representation of different mental states, like dreams, memories, fantasy; self-consciousness in stylistic and narrative techniques; permanent gaps in narrative motivation and chronology; delayed and dispersed exposition; a subjective reality that relates to the story; a loosening of the chain of cause and effect in the plot; extensive use of chance as a motivation; a concern within

the plot for psychic reactions rather than action; frequent use of symbolic rather than realist linkage of images; radical manipulation of temporal order; increased ambiguity regarding the interpretation of the story; open-ended narratives ", etc. Which features are relevant to my argument will become clear as it develops. The philosophically inclined reader will be reminded of the distinction between the Ancient/Medieval teleological world view and Modern thought as articulated by Spinoza (see, e.g., De Dijn 1996).

2. The analytic philosopher Thomas Nagel devoted his book *The View From Nowhere* (1986) to the related philosophical problem of how to combine the perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of that same world, the person and his viewpoint included. According to Nagel, "the problem is how to accommodate, in a world that simply exists and has no perspectival center, any of the following things: (a) oneself; (b) one's point of view; (c) the point of view of other selves, similar and dissimilar; and (d) the objects of various types of judgment that seem to emanate from these perspectives." (p. 27)
3. *Tales of the Four Seasons* (*A Tale of Springtime*, 1990; *A Winter's Tale*, 1992; *A Tale of Summer*, 1996; *A Tale of Autumn*, 1998).
4. *We, mankind, creatures of speech, we are hostages of the mute world. This mute world is our only homeland.*

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