

## Original Research Article

## A Study on Event and Acinema in Lyotard's Thought\*

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## Abstract

**Problem statement:** In addition to providing a new definition free from traditional constraints, critical theory scholar Jean-François Lyotard specifies new components for postmodern works of art by characterizing modernism and postmodernism as two oppositions to realism. Furthermore, thanks to Kant's reflective judgment, Lyotard views event in a way that challenges the genres of the dominant discourse and results in the creation of a new discourse in a postmodern work of art; a discourse that requires a different way of perception than what was previously the case. In his writings on acinema, he views motion as the basic building block of cinema and believes that acinema eliminates all motions that are necessary for the creation of a filmic work. This study attempts to elucidate the new connections between event, acinema, and postmodern art in Lyotard's notions, and answer "How can the event, in Lyotard's opinion, be effective in the birth of postmodernism as two conceptions of ahistorical and acinema that contradict cinema?"

**Research objective:** This research, while formulating the relationship between the two concepts of event and acinema as two important components of artistic and cinematic critique according to Lyotard, aims to demonstrate how postmodernism manifests as a stylistic and broadly non-historical matter in cinema, and how Lyotard's acinema is realized.

**Research method:** This descriptive-analytical research conducted a desk study to collect data.

**Conclusion:** With the occurrence of the event paradigm in films, the genre inherent in each work becomes blurred, and new and unexpected genres emerge. As a result, the display of the impossible becomes possible, and acinema emerges in contrast to cinema. In this way, postmodernism is revealed not as a historical period, but rather in a stylistic form.

**Keywords :** *Postmodern Art, Lyotard, Event, Cinema, Acinema.*

## Introduction

The main focus of this study is understanding acinema through event in the thought of Jean-François Lyotard (1925-1998), one of the most

prominent philosophers and critical thinkers of the second half of the 20th century. In 1979, Lyotard wrote a book titled "The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge," which many consider to

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be a sacred text of postmodern thought (Lash, 2007, 121). In this book, after describing the transformation of the nature of knowledge, Lyotard examines the reasons behind this change and, in order to achieve this goal, he analyzes his general hypothesis through the use of terms such as metanarrative and grand narrative. Lyotard's approach to postmodern art is to liberate it from the captivity of metanarratives, while also removing the framework of aesthetic experience from its historical context, and instead relying on a unique and indeterminate event that allows for an artistic work to exist outside of any framework. In two important essays titled "Answering the Question: What is Postmodern?" and "Note on the Meaning of Post", he explores and explains the differences between modernism and postmodernism in art and literature. In the essay "Answering the Question: What is Postmodern?", Lyotard explains and examines three terms: realism, modernism, and postmodernism, while paying attention to their differences in terms of the nature of artistic representation. He does not view the evolution of these three styles in a conventional historical perspective, but rather as a simultaneous process. In other words, he considers the formation of realism, modernism, and postmodernism as a style of representation, regardless of their historical time and development.

"Lyotard contrasts modernism and postmodernism with realism and considers both of them to be potentially disruptive forms whose job is to show the existence of something that cannot be shown. Showing that there is something we can understand in what we can neither see nor show. What he means is that modern and postmodern works of art, instead of recreating what is immediately recognizable, disrupt the power of cognition by avoiding what a special and backward culture has removed from its usual communication facilities. In other words, these works are deliberately difficult and confusing and challenge the ways of showing and understanding" (Malpas, 2009B, 37).

On the other hand, by employing Kant's concept

of reflective judgments and distinguishing them from determinate judgments, Lyotard views the event as a notion that allows the artist to take on the dominant discourse and create new forms. An event is something that challenges and subverts established discursive genres, forcing all the factors that brought it into being to be rethought. In fact, the event is often seen as the starting point of any kind of postmodernism.

The focal point of this study is the contrast between the event and the notion of acinema in Lyotard's thought. He began writing about cinema in the early 1970s, and one of his earliest works on art was an essay called "The Acinema", which was first published in 1973. The essay begins with the famous phrase, "Cinema is a writing of movement. It is a form of writing based on movement at different levels, including the cinematic image, the movements of actors and other mobile objects, the use of lighting, color, framing, and lenses in a film scene, as well as the cuts and editing used in the final product" (Yazdanjoo, 2004, 182). Although Lyotard begins with defining movement for cinema, he considers the acinema as devoid of all movements that are dependent on producing an artwork. With this description, these concepts have been formulated in a concentrated study to explain the relationships between them, as well as to examine the impact of these concepts on each other.

## Research Objectives

Philosophical formulations in film studies, particularly Lyotard's ideas in this field, have received less attention in Iran, even though Iranian cinema is known as an experiential cinema. Therefore, understanding the intellectual origins of various experimental cinemas is crucial for artists to produce works, and is considered a necessity. This study takes a step towards understanding this path by exploring the relationship between the event and the acinema in Lyotard's thought.

## Research Questions

This essay is structured based on Lyotard's definition of postmodernism, his notion of the event, and the relationship between this notion and what he calls

the acinema. The main question is how the concept of the event, according to Lyotard, can contribute to the emergence of postmodernism, as a general non-historical concept, and acinema in relation to the cinema?

## Research Background

Acinema is a relatively new concept in film studies, and in this area, Sadeghipour (2019) in his article titled "Film Philosophy from the Perspective of Jean-François Lyotard", has referred to four of Lyotard's articles on cinema, including his theory of Eisenstein's montage, which discusses the concept of acinema writing. Sarsangi and Soleimanzadeh (2018) have also focused on the principle of movement deprivation as the main component of acinema in Lyotard's thought in two of Sohrab Shahid-Saless's movies, in their article titled "Sohrab Shahid-Saless and acinema in Iran: A Case Study of a Simple Event and Still Life Movies". They have concluded that "Shahid Saless, by emphasizing the realistic processing of the cultural-nationalistic lifeworld, confronting the imported thought resulting from a vulnerable economy, and relying on the movement grounded in the stillness of Iranian-Islamic mysticism, has created a new form of acinema in Iran" (Sarsangi & Soleimanzadeh, 2018, 29). In the context of the event, one can also refer to Rashvand's (2011) master's thesis, titled "Investigating Jean-François Lyotard's Ideas in the Field of Visual Arts", in which, while focusing on Lyotard's ideas in the field of visual arts, it is concluded that "Lyotard is a defender of avant-garde art, and the art that he favors is one that has the ability to disrupt established discursive genres" (Rashvand, 2011, 73). As the results of these studies show, the event and its relationship with the acinema have not received much attention from researchers.

## Theoretical Foundations

### • Postmodern artwork according to Lyotard

Lyotard believes that every postmodern artist or writer is, in a sense, a philosopher and that the text

they write or the work of art they create is not guided by pre-established rules and principles. It is not possible to judge them based on familiar concepts in the text or the work of art according to positive law. "The rules and principles in question are the very things that the work of art is searching for. Therefore, the artist and writer, without rules, work to formulate rules for what will be done" (Lyotard, 2002, 198). In fact, postmodern art, from Lyotard's point of view, seeks to open new paths in the expression of form and content in order to provide the possibility of experiencing new boundaries. From Jean-François Lyotard's perspective, postmodernism is not forgetting or breaking away from modernism. He says, "Postmodernism is not a new method in artistic creation, critical and theoretical discourse, and scientific experience, nor does it open up a new way in artistic, philosophical, and cultural realms. Rather, it is a marginalization of modernism and a form of re-reading texts and distinguishing individual and social realities outside the text. Accordingly, it is not considered the negation or criticism of modernism. Postmodern art is the same as modern art, but where it has reached its highest point" (Ahmadi, 2014, 476-477). So, it can be said that "in the works of postmodern artists, uniform conventions and narrative coherence are challenged, and hence the reader's assumptions are no longer effective. Postmodern art seeks to explore new forms and shapes to show that there are invisible things that cannot be demonstrated" (Lyotard, 2002, 191). Based on this, Lyotard's aesthetic approach describes the work of art as an experience that first questions the legitimacy of discourse and pre-established rules, and then, by shifting and transforming the positions of the author and the audience, provides the ground for the collapse of established genres and the dissolution of linguistic regimes.

In his essay "Answering the Question: What is Postmodern?", Lyotard focuses on the differences between three terms: realism, modernism, and postmodernism, based on the nature of artistic representation. According to Lyotard, realism can

be considered as the ordinary, conventional, and everyday style of a culture in which the image and representation of the world have a clear meaning and its interpretation is easily accessible to the audience. The goal of realism is to create coherence and unity in individual perception and recognition, and it can be summarized as “keeping minds safe from doubt and indecision” (Lyotard, 2005, 19). Lyotard means that in realism, the main goal is to depict the world according to the conventions that “the reader or viewer is already familiar with...in a way that they can be understood quickly and without any difficulty” (Malpas, 2009A, 46).

Lyotard then goes on to examine modernism and postmodernism, and in doing so, he sees the audience's perception of reality as doubtful. He believes that in modernism and postmodernism, the authority, authenticity, and perception of the represented or main reference of it are challenged because these two - modernism and postmodernism - are in search of “showing or displaying what is unshowable, and they want to show something that is understandable but unrepresentable” (Lyotard, 2005, 28). In other words, modernism and postmodernism are after presenting and displaying something that is inherently unrepresentable, and they seek new ways to do so.

Lyotard also examines the differences between modernism and postmodernism in relation to realism, while referring to the evolution and transformation of artistic and literary styles. As Yazdanjoo correctly points out, for Lyotard, postmodernism is a rewriting of modernism, a rewriting that has been active within modernism from the beginning and still continues today. The prefix “post” (derivative) is part of what comes “after”, and beforehand, in the womb of the assumed historical cause, (modernism) takes its place (Yazdanjoo, 2018, 263).

Finally, in his essay “Answering the Question: What is Postmodern?”, Lyotard emphasizes the ability of postmodern art and literature to challenge established beliefs about representation and reality. This is the most important result of his ideas for

further research. The postmodern artist creates works without adhering to pre-established rules, and what they create becomes the rule in the future; in other words, postmodern artworks take on the form of an event and cannot be judged or criticized by pre-established laws. Therefore, in postmodern art criticism, what is important is to expect the unexpected. Postmodern art is devoid of any stability and certainty and is always in pursuit of creating collapse and rupture in past discourse systems.

#### • Event

Event or occurrence has had a prominent presence in the theories of other contemporary philosophers, and Lyotard has also addressed it. However, in order to familiarize ourselves with what Lyotard refers to as an event, it is necessary to explore the roots of this concept in his thought. For Lyotard, the concept of an event begins with understanding the difference between reflective judgments and determinative judgments in Kant's philosophy. The difference between determinative and reflective judgments arises from the various ways in which the relationship between concepts and experiences is manifested in humans. By explaining determinative and reflective judgments in Kant's philosophy, Lyotard argues that “Reflective judgements provide a model for postmodern philosophy. Philosophical discourse follows a basic rule, which is to be in search of its rule” (Lyotard, 1988, 394). But how? Malpas explains the issue by stating that a determinative judgment, which we are mostly involved with, occurs when we introduce a new experience into our existing conceptual structure. That is, determinative judgments are often related to cognitive processes. In other words, knowledge of something is the result of our ability to create connections between partial experiences of it and concepts we already have. Unlike determinative judgments, reflective judgments arise when something new, different, or monumental appears and we strive to obtain an understanding of its essence or meaning. A specific experience occurs and we are forced to find a way to place it within

the framework of concepts. This may apply to a modern work of art that disrupts our expectations. In fact, according to Kant and Lyotard's argument, this issue can occur in all aesthetic experiences (Malpas, 2009A, 149). In simple terms, a determinative judgment is the result of the audience's inference from comparing the work of art to their existing mental possessions, while a reflective judgment is a new and independent judgment that lacks previous specific criteria in the audience's mind.

It is clear that Lyotard prefers reflective judgments over determinative judgments and finds innovation and freedom in reflective judgments. In his essay, "The Sublime and the Avant Garde" (1984), while examining the sublime matter, Lyotard introduces a new term called event or occurrence. The event is one of the most important terms that Lyotard uses in this essay. It refers to the moment or situation or something that happens in an unexpected way or even something that should happen but does not take shape, "something that we cannot regularize is that something happens. In simpler terms, it just occurs, not a major event in the media sense, nor even a small event. It's just an event". According to Lyotard, the event is elusive and inexpressible and breaks down any representational framework. The event is not an object or a situation, but rather a pause, at least in space/time (Lyotard, 1991, 90).

According to Bill Readings, one of the interpreters of Lyotard's thought, an event is defined as follows: "An event, in the real sense of the word, is something that happens, such that after it, nothing will ever be the same as before. The event breaks down any pre-existing framework of reference within which it might be represented or understood." The eventness of an event, which means the fundamental unity of its happening, that "something is happening," is different from the concept of "what is happening" (Malpas, 2009A, 137-138). With this definition, it should be noted that "the close relationship between a work of art and an event has other important ramifications, since an 'event' is something that is real and unexpected, sudden and

unusual, and unpredictable. An event has all the impact that life, an object, or a color can create. The significant infiltration of gestures and movements in contemporary photography, in film, in painting and sculpture, and in real life situations where these gestures are represented as signs, are all important in our contemporary world" (Duvignaud, 2013, 164-165).

"With this description, it must be said that the postmodern artwork is not an artwork that takes shape according to the rules of a predetermined discourse genre. On the contrary, it emerges in search of new ways to express the new rules of representation. [Understanding of postmodern artwork requires attention to Kant's reflective judgments]. The postmodern artwork appears as an event that breaks down and challenges the previously established rules of artistic representation, and as a result, has the ability to create new discourse genres and new horizons for knowledge and politics. This idea of event in Lyotard's aesthetics is of great importance" (Malpas, 2009A, 123).

In Readings' view, the event is associated with the present moment or the "now," and in being an event, the fundamental strangeness and uniqueness of the primary occurrence is rooted in it. It happens as something distinct from what happened or occurs before it, leaving us without a criterion and requiring an indeterminate judgment (Readings, 2006). According to Lyotard, in examining an event, one should not first focus on its essence or meaning, as the event does not belong to the realm of feeling or reality. Rather, one should focus on what has happened. In other words, one cannot speak of prior knowledge of the event because it is indeterminate. The event acts as an antidote to generalization and is "an experience of immediacy that is always open and indeterminate" (Pooke & Newall, 2008, 180).

According to what has been mentioned, the characteristics of the event from Lyotard's perspective can be identified as features such as its strangeness and uniqueness, its detachment from previous and conventional matters, its indeterminacy,



and its aggression towards determinate matters. The result of combining postmodernism and the event in Lyotard's view is that the postmodern artwork is not an artwork that takes shape according to the rules of a predetermined discourse genre. On the contrary, this work emerges in search of new ways to express new rules for representing what is not representable. These ways are characterized by the event. The postmodern artwork appears as an event that breaks down and challenges the previously established rules of artistic representation, and as a result, has the ability to create new discourse genres and new horizons for issues raised in art. It can demolish what has been known as a rule in the past and has been recorded and fixed in the audience's mind, in favor of a new rule. In simpler terms, Lyotard's perspective on postmodern art and the event can be seen as a fundamental change in content through the representation of the unrepresentable and the dissolution of established forms through the recognition of the event.

#### • Acinema

In "Philosophy and Painting in the Era of Their Experimentation: Contribution to an Idea of Postmodernity", Lyotard attempts to devise a different approach to contemplating art, criticizing the philosophers' tendency to align artistic works with a universal system. In this article, Lyotard also expresses his views on cinema and film philosophy. According to Lyotard, "cinema should provide a tool for thought by utilizing motion, movement, as a means of expression. Cinema is a recording of motion and writing, accompanied by movement" (Tahir, 2009, 223). He places emphasis on motion, regarding it as the raw material of cinema. As a result of his main idea, Lyotard believes that if we understand cinema as writing with motion and balanced display of motion, we can consider two categories of motion - excessive motion and excessive stillness, which are an example of unbalanced motion - as acinematic because they negate the rule of the image or the rule of visual identification (Lyotard, 1986, 352). The movements

that Lyotard focuses on occur on every level, from the movement of objects and people within the frame, to the movement of the camera lens during focus and the movement of the frame during camera movement. The editing, along with the connection of the images between them, creates motion, and as a result, "the film records itself as a whole, a spatial-temporal combination of narrative, motion, and movement" (Tahir, 2009, 223).

Lyotard, who coined the term "acinema," discusses his views on the nature of this term in his article and attempts to initially define his perspective on cinema, so that he would be able to make his readers understand what acinema means based on it. According to him, filmmaking is confronting a multitude of possible choices among images and movements, and selecting some while excluding others. This logic of selection to keep or eliminate images and movements, in Lyotard's interpretation, is in contrast between cinema (commercial cinema) and acinema (avant-garde or experimental cinema); this contrast results from how each of them deals with the concept of movement and the associated economies. According to Lyotard, "the correct and precise application of movement in cinema is the very component that shapes the nature of this medium. However, the function of an avant-garde artwork is not to rely on established conventions and rules to make itself relevant and justifiable. In his view, in an avant-garde cinema, movement will not be employed in a realistic and objectivist manner because this realism itself means the suppression of the actual order of movements" (Yazdanjoo, 2004, 182). The expansion of this issue is such that "in commercial cinema, the economy of repetition dominates, and movements are displayed in the form of images that are all, without exception, in the service of establishing the identity of the film, and this identity and, to put it figuratively, this whole, are in the service of one goal, namely, the narrative of the film" (Sadeghipour, 2019, 124). So, cinematic movements, in general, follow the rule of productivity, i.e., the repetition and

reproduction of a unit (Yazdanjoo, 2004, 188). However, if cinema intends to achieve the ultimate goal of motionlessness, which Lyotard refers to as acinema, it must pay the price for it. Because this motionlessness, which is not just a simple stillness in a film image but rather the disruption of rules based on a movement that leads to the stabilization of the viewer's thought and their power of judgment, is similar to what Lyotard has presented in his definition of realism.

At the point of motionlessness that is stabilized in the minds of the film audience, an anti-cinematic moment occurs, a moment that there is no sign of past movements, but something different happens based on this anti-movement, and what happens may be said to mean that the meaning of an event has already been understood, became aware of, and taken place in one or more discourse genres. On the other hand, something happens that requires acceptance of the event itself. "A reaction that predetermined lines do not point in that direction and also questions the discourse genres that cannot properly place it within their intellectual frameworks. In this form of reaction, the event resists representation (the event is unrepresentable in itself) and challenges the established modes of representation that seek to suppress its wonder. This distinction between "something" and "what" is the basis of Lyotard's philosophy of the event" (Malpas, 2009A, 140). From Lyotard's perspective, the various ways of motionlessness are events that challenge and attack the commercial or narrative genres that are familiar to the audience and constitute the identity of the film, one after another. It is in this way that it assumes a film in the established framework based on reference to memory and what is considered false realism in its opinion, as "cinema" and the strain of only pleasure as "acinema". In this definition, the removal of movements will also be in favor of displaying other movements that take on a completely productive form. "Film direction is shaped by these removals. For example, the director and cinematographer, by removing interfering light,

before or after filming, must make the film image recognizable to our eyes. The image should depict an object or a set of objects as a substitute for a situation that will then appear real. The image is thus a representational one that can be recognizable, as it sends itself to the eye's memory, to established references or fixed identifications, which are known and stabilized references. These references provide a uniform scale for measuring returning movements and their returns. These references form a pattern or set of patterns that link them together and create a cyclical form. Therefore, any interruption, vibration, delay, damage, or disturbance can occur, but such cases do not act as real deviations or pointless changes; ultimately, these cases will be nothing but beneficial detours. It is precisely through the return to identification points that the cinematic form, as a suitable movement institution, is established in the direction of organizing the cyclical structure of capital" (Yazdanjoo, 2004, 189).

According to Lyotard, commercial cinema structures the rhythm of its images in a way that creates the illusion of reality; when we see images that are revealed on the screen at a certain speed, we believe that we are watching reality or a faithful reproduction of it. Acinema becomes apparent when this rhythm is violated in two extreme cases: when the movements slow down to a virtual stop or become very slow or very fast. In fact, acinema is a negation of the rule of the image or the rule of perceptibility of the image (Lyotard, 1986, 352). However, Lyotard believes that this type of motion may only occur in certain scenes of a film, so acinema, apart from its independent nature, can also be defined within the framework of cinema. According to Lyotard, cinema is a stable and endless tool for experiencing new effects that have never been seen or heard before. Cinema creates its own reference and audience (Woodward, 2014, 145). This view explicitly supports what was stated in the definition of the event.

## Research Methodology

In this article, first, by describing the established

definitions in the field of postmodernism, an investigation is made into the propositions and theories governing Lyotard's views on postmodern art, cinema, and acinema. Then, the connection between the research issue and the general propositions is analyzed and concluded. The characteristic of this descriptive-analytical research, which its information has been collected through library method, is that the researcher has no intervention in the situation, position, and role of variables, but rather focuses on describing, explaining, and discovering new relationships between them.

## Discussion

As we mentioned, according to Lyotard, a postmodern artwork is not something that conforms to the predetermined rules of a discourse genre. Instead, it searches for new modes of expression and creates new rules. These rules may not only create a new identity in the artwork but also shock the audience who are familiar with past identities and rules governing them. These rules aim to demonstrate the display of the undisplayable. Here, Lyotard redefines the two alternatives of modernism and postmodernism by historically passing through realism. He puts realism, with its clear and established identity, in front of the existence and display of the undisplayable and offers a formulation for a postmodern artwork that abandons the historical matter and explicitly states that an artwork must pursue the display of the undisplayable. The era of realism and providing a predetermined visual representation of the world has lost its effectiveness. On the other hand, Lyotard brings up the concept of an event, a moment when everything that the audience had previously believed to be true is invalidated, and one must understand the artwork through a fresh approach. This moment challenges the established past and its rules and has the ability to create new discourse genres. "Indeterminacy" and "breaking away from traditional rules" are the most important features of an event that have a logical

connection with Lyotard's formulation of modernism and postmodernism, in a way that the display of the undisplayable as the goal of a postmodern artwork can only be achieved through indeterminacy and breaking away from previous beliefs.

As we mentioned in the issue of acinema, Lyotard starts by defining cinema as a registration of movement and writing accompanied by gestures, and then targets the main foundation of commercial cinema. In his view, commercial cinema is governed by the economy of repetition, and its identity is recognizable to the audience. The narrative is based on a presupposed realism, and its governing rules are immediately recognizable. The director's elimination or display of movements is only based on familiar rules for the audience and with the aim of gaining economic benefit and displaying a seemingly realistic world. Lyotard discusses eliminating movement in acinema by emphasizing the selection of different movements in cinema that are done in favor of presenting the world more realistically. He believes that by denying or exaggerating movements in different forms, a kind of cinema emerges that he calls acinema. Acinema is essentially a cinema that is against predetermined rules because, as we mentioned, it distances itself from familiar and indicative movements of cinema and is based on moments that carry a denial or exaggeration of movement in various forms. Therefore, the elimination or denial of movement in any technical form in the film, which distances us from a form of realism and creates a display of the unknown, is the concept of an event. Now it becomes clear that the rules of realism, which are familiar to the audience, are similar to the conventional cinema, which, under the influx of events, in which the negation or excess of movement carries with it a kind of looseness and indeterminacy of the filmic rule, is one of the examples of the event, turning the cinema into acinema, which is the same as displaying the undisplayable. With a look at everything that has been said, [Fig. 1](#) represents the relationship between Lyotard's concept of event and



acinema, as well as the display of the undisplayable and, in general, postmodernism as a non-historical and merely stylistic matter.

## Conclusion

Based on what has been said, Lyotard defines two alternatives for realism, modernism and postmodernism, while presenting a new definition and abandoning historical frameworks. He lists the components of a postmodern artwork and, on the other hand, with the help of Kant's reflective judgments, defines the concept of an event, and in discussions related to cinema, formulates the concept of acinema

based on a denial or exaggeration of movement as the raw material. By putting these three concepts together and in response to the question of how the concept of event can be effective in the emergence of postmodernism as a non-historical and non-cinematic concept against cinema, based on the characteristics of the event's indeterminacy and detachment from previous established matters, alongside the definition of cinema based on movement and the elimination of normal movements in favor of the dissolution of established genres, a new event-based genre emerges that realizes the display of the undisplayable and manifests as a stylistic form of postmodernism.

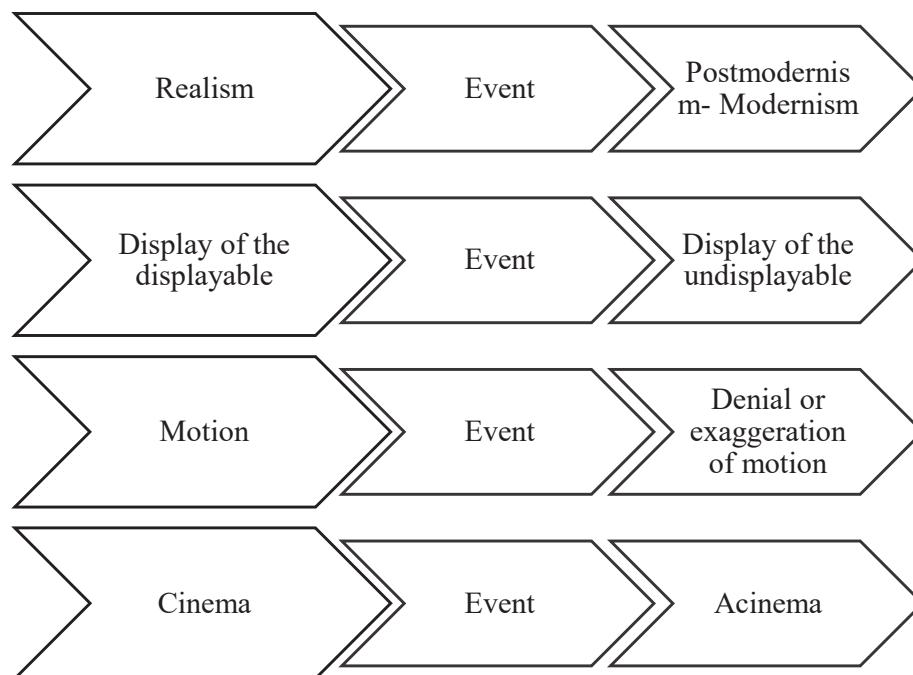


Fig. 1. The relationship between the idea of the event according to Lyotard and acinema and the representation of the unrepresentable. Source: Authors.

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