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Article abstract

In this essay I shall briefly summarize what it was about the original formulation of the cinematic apparatus that seemed crucial; what were subsequently perceived to be its shortcomings; how in my own media-archaeological approach I have tried to extend as well as to relativize/historicise the model of the apparatus/*dispositif*; and finally, what avenues I see for invigorating the theoretical challenges apparatus theory still poses, now in the context of viewing situations that either pastiche and inflate the original paradigm or completely bypass or ignore it.

What Is Left of the Cinematic Apparatus, or Why We Should Retain (and Return to) It

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The Paradoxical Productivity of Classical Texts and Obsolete Theories

Classic texts have to be read and re-read : they have to be put in dialogue with contemporary practices, and benefit from being re-assessed in a wider conceptual network. Two essays by Jean-Louis Baudry that originally appeared in French, but were subsequently – and to great effect – published in English are such classic texts. Both the idea of a ‘basic apparatus’ and of a corresponding psychic *dispositif* received intense theoretical elaborations in the 1970s thanks to the writings of Thierry Kuntzel, Christian Metz, Stephen Heath, and Daniel Dayan, among others¹. In the Anglo-Saxon world, ‘apparatus theory’ became also known as ‘Screen theory’, after the journal that promoted it most actively, or as ‘suture theory’, for its explanation of how the spectator identifies with or is bound into the cinematic process². Apparatus theory gave rise to often fierce ideological and philosophical polemics, especially in the US in the 1980s – notably in articles by Noël Carroll, David Bordwell and Richard Allen³.

On a more subdued and modest scale, the so-called “New Film History”, in the form of piecemeal revisionism, began to challenge the broader historical assumptions made by apparatus theory (which seemed to draw a straight chronological line from Plato’s parable of the cave to Renaissance perspective, and from Renaissance perspective to the Freud’s discovery of the unconscious). Especially the intense – and often empirically detailed – studies of early cinema and its complex emergence out of a rich and varied 19th century visual culture seemed

to qualify, if not to contradict, these apparently millennial continuities. Instead, another look at 19th century theories of optics and the different traditions of producing the illusion of movement prior to the 'cinema' not only revised key assumptions of apparatus theory : it also promised new genealogies of the cinema that bypassed the conceptual bottleneck, which the reliance on the photographic paradigm had created for the understanding of digital image-making and cinema-effects not dependent on projection.

Such a bi-focal perspective on the contradictory cultural mesh that was the cinema around 1900 and (once more became) around 2000 inspired my own turn from film history to media archaeology, which was intended to include the 'history of imagined futures in the past' and the 'rewriting of the past in light of the future'. Even when refraining from identifying this future with the 'digital turn' as such, it seems evident that the inclusion of, for instance, sound and telephony or the extension of the corpus to scientific and non-fictional films significantly enlarges our understanding of 'what is cinema', both from a contemporary and a historical perspective. Likewise, the special attention that media archaeology can give to how the cinema has affected the perception of time and the experience of place and space during the period we still call 'modernity' will help redefine the cinematic apparatus/*dispositif* without being either reductive or over-inclusive.

In short : rather than dismissing apparatus theory by pointing out that it relied on theories and borrowed from authorities that had become discredited in their own fields, such as Saussurean linguistics, Lacanian psychoanalysis and Althusserian Marxism, one should remember its immense fertility and productivity, precisely because it seemed like such an impressive synthesis of impossibly divergent intellectual paradigms. A quick reminder of what were the major conceptual moves that made up the cinematic apparatus : the enforcement of the laws of Renaissance perspective; the Cartesian mind-body split; the fixed geometrical arrangement of the three main elements : screen, projector, spectator; and finally, the metaphoric association of this arrangement with Freud's (or Lacan's) concept of mis-recognition, a founding moment of psychic identity, and philosophical analogy with Plato's parable of the cave, a founding moment of Western idealism.

By contrast, the accumulating historical evidence of how the cinema emerged tended to suggest more haphazard, but also more experimental, exploratory and pragmatic processes at work that eventually led to the cinema as we know it. Even if one granted that the cinema was 'invented' several times and in different places almost simultaneously, there was little in this history confirming the determinism underpinning Baudry's ideological critique of the cinema's illusionism. Instead, the tight geometrical arrangement typical for cinema projection, which was said to be responsible for film becoming a predominantly narra-

tive medium, which in turn predicated the 'subject-positioning' of the spectator, seemed more a challenging theoretical construct than a satisfying historical explanation, since so much evidence pointed in the opposite direction.

Given these different – and in many ways counter-intuitive, and indeed, as it would turn out, historically contingent – enabling conditions of cinema thus formulated, it is in retrospect really surprising that apparatus theory was adopted so rapidly and so enthusiastically. In other words – one question that is historically interesting is what was the nature of the demand that was so spectacularly met with apparatus theory, why was it so symptomatically necessary? Or more simply put : what was the question to which it seemed to supply the answer?

The paradox becomes perhaps deeper and even more interesting in light of two additional factors. First of all, the apparatus was widely espoused *in theory* at the precisely the point in time when the fixed viewing conditions and spectator position it stipulated for the cinema-effect (also called the reality-effect, or the subject-effect) to occur were rapidly becoming obsolete and minoritarian *in practice*, as more and more often films were being watched no longer in cinemas projected on a big screen, but on television, or at home on a video-recorder. In other words, a *dispositif*, i.e. a specific spatio-temporal arrangement of heterogeneous elements, threatened and embattled in practice, became – as if to compensate – ever more essentialized in theory. Again and somewhat polemically, it seemed that 'apparatus theory' confirmed the old adage or jibe that theory is often the funeral of a practice.

What Baudry elaborated, especially in his second article on '*le dispositif*', beyond the idea that the optical principles on which the cinema (both the camera and the projector) were built favoured the central perspective of Renaissance painting, was the alignment of this technical apparatus – camera-eye, projector-beam, auditorium space, spectator-eye and screen – with the psychic apparatus as described by Freud, and later elaborated by Lacan, in such a way that it was no longer a mere metaphor (film was like a dream), but that the alignment elided, suppressed and made invisible the differences between the functioning of the cinematic apparatus and the psychic *dispositif*, with all manner of far-reaching and at first sight non-cinematic implications or consequences. For instance, Baudry derived not only a major ideological charge against the cinema (that it was idealist and bourgeois), but also an argument about how to break its spell, how to make the differences at once more telling, perceptible and cognitively apprehensible – referring back to *Man With the Movie Camera* as the paradigmatic avant-garde effort to render the apparatus visible in the production of sense, and in the reproduction of the reality-effect or illusionism.

More Constructive Critiques : Feminist Film Theory and the Avant-Garde

Baudry's apparatus theory was itself fixed, fixated even. Some claimed that he had misunderstood Francastel's theory of perspective (itself a response to Panofsky's famous essay on "Perspective as Symbolic Form"); others maintained – as Gilles Deleuze would also argue in the 1980s – that cinema is movement before it is fixed frame (1983 : 83). Among art historians, Hubert Damisch became one of the critics of the genealogy that directly linked the *camera obscura/lanterna magica* to Renaissance perspective and Renaissance perspective to cinema (1994), as did Jonathan Crary in his *Techniques of the Observer*, wherein he proposed a rather different genealogy of vision and visibility in the 19th century, documenting the importance of vision as bodily sensation in popular culture as well as science by referring to Goethe and Helmholtz rather than Cartesian and Newtonian optics (1992).

Indeed, it was dissatisfaction with Baudry's sweeping analogies, with its indictment of Western idealism, determined by its dominant technologies of vision, that gave rise to two extremely productive strands in film studies in the 1980s and beyond. One arose around feminist film theory, while the other was to invigorate the avant-garde and forge an important alliance between New York independent filmmakers, video artists and Early Cinema scholars.

To briefly summarize the feminist intervention : the psychoanalytic ramifications of apparatus theory led to a critique of Baudry's critique. Writers as intellectually diverse and distinct as Jacqueline Rose, Constance Penley, Laura Mulvey, Teresa de Lauretis, Mary Ann Doane and Joan Copjec all tended to agree that this new 'materialism' of the cinema amounted to the fetishization of its apparatusive basis, of the technology and the physical properties of the film strip, at the expense of the cultural, discursive effects, among which the division of labour between male and female spectators was perhaps the most egregious. Whether they critiqued mainstream cinema or promoted avant-garde practices, both structuralist-materialist filmmakers and apparatus theorists had put together a kind of 'bachelor-machine' (Penley), a material prosthesis, whose aim it was – even in its critical deconstruction of idealism – to disavow sexual difference and thus to avoid the threat of castration (2000 : 456-473). For feminists, the materialism claimed for the *dispositif* was itself a cover-up, a disavowal of an even more fundamental lack, an absence, which the invocation of the apparatus (especially in its radical form as practiced by the avant-garde, with its obsession over material traces – dust-particles, scratches, sprocket holes, over-exposure – on the film stock) was designed to disguise, or to compensate. Against the priority of the apparatus, put forward in order to ward off the anxiety-machine of sexual difference, feminist theorists used apparatus theory to re-think the psychic dimension of the cinema as having as its primary function the task of 'stabilizing'

the male subject and thus working on behalf of patriarchy (Rose 1992 : 199-213; Copjec 1982).

These interventions both challenged and invigorated those (indeed mainly male) filmmakers and film historians who belonged to a generation that turned away from grand theory toward the archives for alternative genealogies that would legitimate current practice by offering alternative histories. A key figure here was Noël Burch, who played an important mediating role between the originally Paris-based writers on apparatus theory, its adoption by the London film circles around *Screen*, and the New York avant-garde, where filmmakers like Ken Jacobs (*Tom Tom the Piper's Son*), Hollis Frampton, Ernie Gehr and Burch himself (*Corrections Please*) were also interested in deconstructing classical narrative cinema by pointing to the different practices of early cinema. They too challenged the notion that Renaissance perspective and Aristotelian narrative were the only precedents and necessary preconditions for the cinema to develop as an art. The revival of interest in the films of the Lumière Brothers, starting in the 1970s and peaking in the 1990s, with essays by Marshall Deutelbaum (1979), Dai Vaughn (1981), Tom Gunning and many others⁴, as well as films by Malcolm Le Grice (*After Lumière*, 1974) and Harun Farocki (*Workers Leaving the Factory*, 1996), capped this historical revisionism and gave it a media-archaeological dimension, with a strongly theoretical bent towards contemporary issues in visual culture, rather than merely an antiquarian revival to coincide with the cinema's centenary. Notably the opposition 'realism' vs. 'illusionism' was being deconstructed by the introduction of the term 'attraction', which in turn revived the debate around the apparatus, now with the digital media explicitly in mind (see Strauven 2006).

One of the key points, for instance, made by Gunning in *The Aesthetics of Astonishment* was that the Lumière films appeared to their first audiences more 'magical' than Méliès, thus questioning the divide 'documentary equals Lumière, fantasy equals Méliès' – a doxa that Jean-Luc Godard had already turned on its head in *La Chinoise* (1968)⁵. In my own contribution to the Lumière debate, I suggested that there might be a 'missing link', a 'dog that did not bark': namely the Lumières' extensive experience – as photographers and as entrepreneurs – with stereoscopy, reminding us of its vast proliferation, both for private viewing and public display. Without factoring in this particular parallax way of seeing, whose illusionism is not so much optical as it is cognitive, crucial elements of the Lumière mise-en-scène, such as their often horizontal division of the screen or their many symmetries, could not be fully understood. As with other aspects of 19th century visual culture, such as panoramas and dioramas, linear accounts were also missing possible links between pre-cinema and today's 3D displays in architecture, design, as well as in popular entertainment applications (Wedel 2007 : 483-498).

My own media-archaeological ‘deconstruction’ of apparatus theory took a slightly different route : for instance, I tried to make a case for Freud – a notorious technophobe – as a ‘media theorist’, by once more looking – in line with a number of other writers, including Jacques Derrida and Thierry Kuntzel – at his famous essay on the ‘Mystic Writing Pad’ (Elsaesser 2009 : 100-113). I argued that Freud’s own theory of memory made a clear distinction between the perceptual part of the psychic apparatus (the ‘optical-acoustic part’ of consciousness if you like) and the storage and processing part (the recording and encoding apparatus, which Baudry had ignored or conflated) and that his ‘discovery’ of the unconscious, of repression, and the rhetoric of dream-work, might come to be seen as a hypothesis that ‘fills the gap’ which the discrepancy between the two systems left open and exposed. In short, I tried to understand the Freudian *Wunderblock* as giving us a potential model for comprehending an element of the cinematic apparatus that is not entirely dependent on the visible, nor to the ‘geometry of representation’ of Renaissance painting, but points instead to inscription, trace and even towards ‘data-management’ (using both narrative and non-linear ‘programmes’)⁶.

The Apparatus Reframed : “Media Interaction” in Place of “Geometry of Representation”

One way of continuing to think productively of the possible lines of research from apparatus theory to the mystic writing pad, as an alternative, and more “technological” theory of the ‘unconscious’ (compared to the archaeological model of Freud or the linguistic model of Lacan) would be to identify the constitutive parts of the classic ‘*dispositif*’, but now in their separate (historical) developments, rather than focusing on their tight interdependence. Foucault’s and Baudry’s definition of the ‘*dispositif*’ – ‘an arrangement of disparate parts forming together a coherent and ideologically powerful ensemble’, and ‘a heterogeneous ensemble of material and discursive practices whose configuration is historically specific’ – builds the methodological bridge to today’s discussions of media ‘transfer’ and media ‘change’, considered in the context of what I have termed a *Medienverbund* (a tactical alliance of media practices). This alliance refers not to a transfer of – or change into – the properties of a particular (or singular) technology, be it photographic, video or digital; nor to a separation into distinct, and historically successive modes of production, be they hand-crafted, mechanical, electronic, useful though these distinctions are in specific contexts (Elsaesser 2008); nor would it speculate on “media convergence versus divergence”, a topic so often associated with digital media today.

One useful way to describe such a broader field of media interaction, seen once more from the point of the spectator or user, would be to say that a *dispositif* of sound and vision is predicated on three elements that work together without being tethered together : that it has a

spatial extension (a site), that it involves a temporal register (extension in time), and that it implies a subjective dimension (form of address) as historically variable but conceptually indispensable givens. Again, put differently, a *dispositif* is a *dispositif* when it entails a medium (a material support, most often a combination of technologies), an image (a representation, including a sound representation), and a spectator (capable of being solicited, subjectified [via mis-cognition or disavowal, if one works within the psychoanalytic paradigm] ‘addressed’ [via interpellation or ‘negotiation’] or affectively and cognitively engaged [if one holds to a version of cognitivism]).

This redefinition of the *dispositif* is close to the definition given by Hans Belting, who, from the perspective of a post-art-history, argues for ‘a new approach to iconology’ as part of his image-anthropology : “[whereas] W.J.T. Mitchell [uses] the terms *image*, *text*, *ideology*’ [...] I also use a triad, in which [...] ‘image’ remains but now is framed by the terms ‘medium’ and ‘body’.” Belting goes on to explain that *images* can only be understood if one takes account of other, non-iconic determinants, and that *medium* needs to be understood “in the sense of the agent by which images are transmitted, while *body* means either the performing or the perceiving body on which images depend no less than on their respective media” (Belting 2005 : 302).

These new attempts at definitions across the humanities underline the variable nature of what is to be understood by ‘image’, ‘medium’ or by ‘the moving image’ today. What film studies can contribute are conceptual precisions and historical clarifications : for instance, in Belting’s definition, the term ‘framed’ seems to me a problematic metaphor in two respects; it brings back the picture-frame and thus ‘the picture’, as opposed to the image, and secondly, it is a static-geometrical term, when what is required is more likely a term that can encompass processual, time-based phenomena that are in flux. Similarly, *dispositif* seems to imply a fixed assemblage rather than a dynamic process. On the other hand, Belting’s definition of the body as both ‘performing’ and ‘perceiving’ is helpful, in that it is clearly in line with major trends in film studies, where ‘agency’ is now applied to characters within the fiction, as well as to spectators/viewers/users, and also to objects and machines⁷.

Such an enlarged but also refocused conceptualization – potentially making room for cinema and video, as well as digital media within a common framework – brings me to my last general point : the debate about the *dispositif* seems to take for granted that the cinema-effect is above all a matter of epistemology, on the assumption that the cinema can be a reliable source of knowledge about the world. Any theory of cinema is by definition ‘epistemological’ when it asks “how we know what we know” in the cinema, or in the words of Christian Metz (and Roger Odin), “the object of film theory is to understand how film is

understood” (Metz 1971 : 56). But could it be that some of the difficulties not only of apparatus theory in the 1980s and of film theory at its present juncture when faced with the digital image are due in part to an exclusive, and often enough insufficiently reflected, assumption of the cinema as primarily a matter of epistemology? We tend to expect the cinema to be related to knowledge as truth, which is to say, concerned with evidence and ocular verification, though mainly in the negative mode : much of film theory (and most notably ‘apparatus theory’) critiques films for failing to live up to this presumption : the very term ‘illusion’ requires a faith in ‘realism’ as its foil, as does the charge that films provide mere ‘effects of the real’.

Feminist theory equates scopophilia with epistemophilia, attacking both, while in the discourse of social constructivism and cultural studies, the cinema’s epistemic pretensions are no less firmly and no less negatively implied (when speaking about mis-representations, stereotyping, etc.). A tendency towards cinephobia, in other words, seems to underpin the epistemic position, largely ignoring any possible aesthetic value that ‘mere appearance’ or the so-called ‘illusion of presence’ might have, not to mention the even greater challenge which comes from having to acknowledge that images – of whatever kind – have their own reality status or ontology, and may have to be negotiated across “trust” and “belief” as much as “truth” and “evidence”.

On the other hand, if one prefers to retain the materialist, indeed technological bias of apparatus theory and expand Baudry in the direction of Friedrich Kittler’s notion that the psyche is just the name we give to the software which runs our culturally determined technology of communication and apperception then the presumed “shortcomings” of apparatus theory might be its most promising assets. Mindful of the phrase that “technology is the name for stuff that doesn’t yet work”, one should remember that our media technologies tend to be culturally most productive, when *their disruptive and failure-prone dimensions* are taken into consideration in addition to their performativity. Borrowing from systems-theory, one can argue with Niklas Luhmann that an ‘irritant’ (*Störfaktor*) usually also acts as a stabilizing or energizing element in a given system (Luhmann 1990). Hence the attention that a cultural history of technology also pays to dystopias, anxieties, moments of shock, disaster or panic, as valid indicators of social and media change : a way of thinking inherited, of course, from Walter Benjamin and his shock theory of media technology.

Indeed, it might not be too fanciful to think of the classic viewing situation of cinema as just such an “irritant” : we may have become more mobile, more distracted, more isolated in many if not most of our viewing- and screening practices, but the classic cinema theatre is by no means gone, however much other viewing contexts have accumulated around it or however many people seem have substituted

TV sets, monitors, touch-screens or game consoles. On the contrary, going to the cinema today has all the magic, patina and glamour that attaches itself to “obsolescence” – another form of productive “failure”, but one that the culture has learned to valorise, located as it is between the warm bath of nostalgia and a brisker and more bracing sense of formerly hidden utopian potential that is once more becoming palpably present after taken-for-granted use had dulled our senses. Among art historians and installation artists who have taken up the cinematic heritage, this is indeed what is taking place, as for instance, “projection” and the “black box” (darkened auditorium) are once more appreciated as a special and privileged aesthetic experience : note a recent exhibition and book, characteristically called “Beyond Cinema : The Art of Projection” (Jäger, Knapstein & Hüsck 2006).

Other art historians have suggested that it is time to re-read Plato’s parable of the cave in a more philosophically sophisticated manner. Dominique Paini has identified more than the one static configuration we tend to picture when imagining the prisoners shackled to their seats in the cave. He sees Plato propose a trajectory, with different phases and stages which, according to Païni, change the way we can think of projection, a term whose semantics require much more careful elaboration, so that its technical meaning as well as metaphoric uses allow us to uncouple the process thus named from referring merely to the light cone of the projected image (2004 : 23-48). Such revisionism on the body of theory that is the apparatus may usher in a new practice, or give a practice that seems stubbornly resistant a new relevance. I am thinking, for instance, of the commitment and contract in time and space required by the viewer of the films of Bela Tarr, whose four to six to eight hour works almost reinvent the movie theatre experience, because they make us re-live the cinema as the total absorption by darkness and intense immersion in a world we simultaneously share and are radically excluded from. Tarr’s is *cinema after film*, even if it is also *cinema on film*.

Finally : if we are to appreciate the place of cinema in the digital environment today – as just such an irritant, stabilizing force and counter-practice – amidst the expanded field of the media interaction typical of the episteme 2000 (and retrospectively proving the case of the episteme 1900 as well), then some of the constitutive parts of the classic *dispositif* take us out of our comfort zone as film scholars and oblige us to engage with the functional equivalents of ‘cinema’ across a range of media technologies and practices. I undertook something along these lines in another media-archaeological speculation, involving what I called the “s/m configurations” of the expanded apparatus, namely its deployment in surveillance and the *military*, science and medicine, sensing and *monitoring*, storage and *memory*, as well as (with a nod to Gilles Deleuze) the *sensory-motor* schema that ties our body and nerves to the apparatus (Elsaesser 2008 : 226-240). All these

historically persistent but now so much more prominent (practical as well as profitable) uses of the cinematograph – outside of the theatrical situation, and yet within the *dispositifs* that bind us as spectators and users to the performativity and agency of moving images – have to be factored into any consideration of the cinematic apparatus, proving its continued pertinence and relevance for the 21st century.

Notes

1. Representative collections in English are Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath (eds.), *The Cinematic Apparatus* (1980) and Philip Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology : A Film Theory Reader* (1986).
2. Best known is Daniel Dayan's paraphrase "The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema" (1974 : 22-31). It has been attacked by William Rothman, in "Against "The System of the Suture"" (1975 : 45-50), among others, and polemically defended by Slavoj Žižek, in *The Fright of Real Tears : Krzysztof Kieslowski Between Theory and Post-Theory* (2001 : 13-69).
3. For a useful summary of the debates, see Richard Allen, *Projecting Illusion : Film Spectatorship and the Impression of Reality* (1997).
4. Marshall Deutelbaum, "Structural Patterning in the Lumière Films" (1979 : 30-31); Dai Vaughan, "Let There Be Lumière" (1981 : 126-27); Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment. Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator" (1989 : 31-45); Thomas Elsaesser, "Louis Lumière – the Cinema's First Virtualist?" (1995 : 45-62).
5. In *La Chinoise* (1968), Guillaume (Jean-Pierre Léaud) lectures his comrades on the fact that the Lumière brothers were not the first documentarians. They were (implicitly citing Henri Langlois) the last impressionists, whereas Georges Méliès did not invent fictional cinema, but rather the weekly news.
6. In the 1970s, Thierry Kuntzel tried to align the mystic writing pad with the cinematic apparatus, but did so within a primarily 'optical' frame of reference. Thierry Kuntzel, "A Note upon the Filmic Apparatus" (1976 : 266-271).
7. Discussions around 'agency' tend to show the influence of Bruno Latour and Actor-Network Theory.

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Abstract

In this essay I shall briefly summarize what it was about the original formulation of the cinematic apparatus that seemed crucial; what were subsequently perceived to be its shortcomings; how in my own media-archaeological approach I have tried to extend as well as to relativize/historicise the model of the apparatus/*dispositif*; and finally, what avenues I see for invigorating the theoretical challenges apparatus theory still poses, now in the context of viewing situations that either pastiche and inflate the original paradigm or completely bypass or ignore it.

Résumé

Dans cet article, je rappelle brièvement ce qui, à propos de la formulation d'origine du dispositif cinématographique, nous paraissait si crucial. Je me tourne ensuite vers

ce qui fut perçu comme ses défauts. Troisièmement, j'évoque comment, dans mon approche 'média-archéologique' j'ai cherché à relativiser et à historiciser la notion de dispositif. En dernier lieu, enfin, j'expose les avenues qui permettront de relever les défis théoriques que la théorie du dispositif posent aujourd'hui encore face à des situations de spectature qui tantôt pastichent, tantôt caricaturent le paradigme initial, ou encore le contournent et l'ignorent.

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