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Lost in translation? On the diverging responses to the question concerning technology

The Impact of Technological Innovations on the Historiography and Theory of Cinema, La Cinémathèque québécoise, Montreal (1-6 November 2011)

Every academic conference should aim to be site-specific. By this I mean that it should take place at the intersection of different traditions and lines of thought relevant to the specific topic. Could there be a more appropriate place for a discussion of The Impact of Technological Innovations on the Historiography and Theory of Cinema than Francophone Montreal? A powerhouse of film studies with four important universities (Université de Montréal, Concordia, McGill, Université de Québec), it is a city where French thought concerning technology and cinema meets the Anglo-American tradition. In many ways it is a meeting between strangers and indeed, these two traditions of thinking rarely found common ground in the huge Montreal event. Rather, the differences between two historical discourses were continually highlighted. The concepts used in the discussions and their famous un-translatability, as in the key case of 'dispositif' as well as the mode and the tools used for the presentations ('our writing tools take part in our thinking', Nietzsche observed about the typewriter), reflected an irreducible distance between the continents. The merit of the site-specificity of Montreal was exactly to showcase these abiding differences in the history of film theory.

This six-day conference (hereafter abbreviated Impact) was an important moment for film theory. As the second conference of the Permanent Seminar on the History of Film Theories which was initiated as part of the Film Forum conference in Udine in the spring of 2008, its intellectual breadth of more than 80 invited speakers guarantees that its date and place will remain mnemo-technically significant in film studies in the future. The most influential scholars in the field were assembled and made this a meeting across generations, nations, theoretical orientations, and language. However, this was not a new Brighton of 1978. This conference that has so often been credited as the start of the new historiography of cinema, particularly regarding the revaluation of early films (though such a 'beginning' is in contrast to the methodological principles of this historiography), introduced new materials to be examined and set into motion a powerful reorientation in film studies. Even if many of the key scholars in the movement 'initiated' in Brighton also contributed strongly to the Montreal event (André Gaudreault of Université de Montréal was the organiser together with Martin Lefebvre of Concordia University), Impact grapples with the past in a different way. Part of the historical focus of the event was devoted to the so-called 'apparatus theory' revisited 40 years later, including how it may be of use for addressing contemporary screening contexts.

The roundtables highlighted the separate worlds of French and American theoretical reflection on this issue. Each roundtable was organised twice – not as tragedy and then as farce, as Marx remarked on historical events, but once in English and again in French. Still, the double takes on each topic are not only a matter of multiple versions (as it was in the early sound film era) but a mirroring of distinctive theoretical worlds. In the case of the key topic for the roundtables – the function and value of a technological history of cinema – they amply illustrate that the Anglo-American and French strands of theory speak different languages in more senses than the obvious one. For instance, the whole implication of the shift from the 'appareil' in the title of Jean-Louis Baudry's influential 'Effets idéolologiques produit par l'appareil de base' (1970) to the 'dispositif' five years later ('Le dispositif: approches métapsychologiques de l'impression de la réalité' [1975]) is lost in English translation when it persists in referring to the 'apparatus' in both cases. Translation also mars the reception of Foucault's and Deleuze's writings on the 'dispositif' and, as demonstrated by the recent English translation of Giorgio Agamben's book as What Is an Apparatus? (2009), this persists to be a problem. It is only proper then that part of the inquiry of the roundtables would be how to translate the un-translatable: 'Is 'disposition' valid?'

Apparatus theory came about partly as a reaction to phenomenological film theory in vogue in the 1950s and 1960s. Of course, much of Baudry's and Metz's work maintains a focus on the individual experience of the spectator and the place assigned to her in film projection. There are several points of continuity between Bazin (a recurrent frame of reference for many presentations of the conference) and Metz. Still, the apparatus debates brought about the notion that film is not a neutral tool for expressing ideas and feelings but that its technology shapes and positions subjectivity. If film technology forms and determines its spectator subjects, a focus on the apparatus as well as its setting was warranted. As indicated by Geneviève Sellier of Université de Bordaux and as is well known, apparatus theory was gender blind to a large extent until Laura Mulvey's canonical essay was published.

André Bazin emerged from this conference as one of the key thinkers on the technology of cinema. This applies both to his role as an 'idealist' target for critique by the writers of the apparatus debates and to the role of his writings for conceptualising current changes in cinema, such as the development of motion capture and 3D techniques. Christian Metz received less attention than was due, as noted by Professor Philippe Dubois of Paris 3 in one of the roundtables, because Metz was not an active part of the Cinéthique/Cahiers debates that centered on Jean-Patrick Lebel (present in person in Montreal), Jean-Louis Comolli (present in a video interview), and Jean-Louis Baudry. Just as in France, the Anglo-American reception of the dispositif debates is more dependent on a Lacanian-Althusserian idea than on Foucault's work.

In the history of the theory of the technology of cinema, Jean Epstein is a central thinker who, in spite of a paper by Éric Thouvenel of Université de Rennes 2 and occasional references by others, still receives far too little attention in a conference on this topic. There is a substantial anthology of English translations of his writings together with critical essays that was recently published by the book series affiliated with the Permanent Seminar on the History of Film Theories, which may help to amend this shortcoming.1 Epstein's theory was in many ways contrary to apparatus theory, in the sense that he emphasised the revolutionary epistemological dimensions of the apparatus and not its ideological limitations. He also devoted very little attention to the position of the empirical spectator in this dispositif, only emphasising that the technology was 'another' perception, intelligence, and philosophy than the human one. Still, he theorised the individualising properties of the medium – sometimes as an alternative to the Freudian talking cure – in a way not very distant from Gilbert Simondon's techno-social perspective. Just as Epstein was almost completely absent from the apparatus debates in France 40 years ago, his writings remained peripheral in the discussions in Montreal.

If we are not at the end of cinema but rather witnessing its proliferation into omnipresence, with the moving image increasingly shaping our life environments, this demands a radical rethinking, even a reinvention, of 'apparatus' theory. This omnipresence does not equal a post-medium condition (Rosalind Krauss) but rather a situation that requires a rethinking not only of an historically specific 'dispositif' but also radical shifts and breaks between technologies, media ecologies, and networks. Film studies must reconceptualise the relationship between the analog and the digital, between the still and the moving image, and between different screen technologies.

Where would one find a possible theoretical framework for thinking through such a complex media set-up and history? The 'apparatus' theory of 40 years ago is perhaps not the best candidate for such a huge task, as its media scope was already rather reductive when it was first formulated. The art historian and theorist Hubert Damish and others have pointed out, for instance, that the perspective is not just one bourgeois view of the world framed by the individual subject (as it was often cast by apparatus theory) but rather a historically changing set of techniques. Interestingly, the apparatus theory was established after television became a medium in every home in affluent parts of the world. While the presence of television may have liberated cinema from certain functions, such as news reports, it also produced the theorisation of a technology based primarily on fiction and identification. 'Apparatus' debates focused little on the media networks of which cinema was a part and therefore, perhaps Apparatus theory is not the sharpest tool for thinking a pluralistic model of media.

Several contributions in the conference would point towards the theories of individuation and collectivity in technology by the French theorist Gilbert Simondon,

a contemporary of Baudry, Metz, and Comolli. Following the attention his work has attracted in recent decades from philosophers as different as Gilles Deleuze and Bernard Stiegler, it is a reasonable position in which to start re-inventing a theory of the dispositif from outside cinema studies. Simondon's distinction between invention and innovation may provide a useful tool for understanding the differences between, for instance, color and sound techniques as well as changes of a more revolutionary kind. Some of these issues were approached in the contributions of Benoit Turquety and Maria Tortajada (both at the Université de Lausanne) as well as by Jean-Pierre Esquenazi of Lyon and may provide the means to rethink the cinema dispositif from outside the established cinema debates.

Another place to turn for such a re-orientation could be the German version of media archeology. While Gilbert Simondon's work was repeatedly referred to, the work of Friedrich Kittler was rarely invoked and when he was mentioned, it was in less than approving words. Will Straw of McGill University saw no value and function of 'apparatus' theory for 'post-Kittlerian' studies. Also, one of the roundtables was introduced with warnings about the technological determinist dangers of Kittler's work. Kittler's own writings on cinema (in *Optical Media* for instance) are sometimes inexact. For example, he makes reference to the afterimage as the psychological condition for filmic movement, a misapprehension shared with specialist theorists of cinema technology like André Bazin and Jean-Louis Comolli. Nevertheless, for a way to think media shifts and interrelations independently from signification, 'content', and user practices, German media archeology has provided important perspectives that deserve a much wider discussion than what was showcased during this week in Montreal.

If we ask about the legacy of 'apparatus' theory it is worth looking outside film theory itself. The establishment of media studies (*Medienwissenschaft*) in Germany has inherited a lot of concepts from the film theory of the 1970s and 1980s. For instance, Kittler's tripartition of media in the inscription systems of 1900 is largely indebted to apparatus theory. Kittler sees his model of Gramophone, Film, Typewriter prepared in film theory's division between the imaginary and the symbolic, leaving sound to be assigned to the Real. Kittler is of course less preoccupied with the overt ideological functions of the apparatus and thus, also the signification of the image. Still, the importance of apparatus theory for the development of media archeology is considerable. In turn, media archeology may today provide exactly the incitement needed from outside of cinema studies to rethink apparatus theory beyond the 'signifier', focusing not on representation and content but on a historically contextualised technology. Thomas Elsaesser of the University of Amsterdam has also suggested this in his work, as well as in the roundtable discussions in Montreal.

Bernard Stiegler addressed cinema as mnemotechnics in his keynote lecture, also evoking the theories of Simondon. Stiegler's phenomenology is important for

addressing issues of the moving image in general but offers surprisingly little to distinguish between the analog and the digital, or between the cinema dispositif and individual reception of time-based media. If the temporal object (Husserl) is complemented with a tertiary dimension of retention with technical media this does not help us to think critically about the relationship between the cinema dispositif and other platforms of the moving image. Identical repetition of the medium is the central element of this reconfiguration of memory and consciousness and these are most likely to take place in the cinema, as they are less subject to individual choices, pauses, and interruptions. Still, the coincidence between the mind and the time-flow seems to reach its peak in the digital age, according to Stiegler, leading to the 'industrialization of consciousness'. The merits of this approach, to think through the proliferation of platforms of the moving image in the continuity of cinema, may also be a shortcoming – by not addressing shifts and differences. This is exactly the key question for rethinking theories of the dispositif today: being attentive to the continuities of the moving image while refraining from reducing these to a general convergence of media into general life environments.

Impact provided a hospitable forum for rethinking the role of technology for writing the history of cinema as well as for addressing the multi-platform existence of moving images today. 'Apparatus theory' was discussed without passing judgment on the theoretical achievements of the debates (as was often the case with the sterile attacks on the so-called SLAB theorists performed by almost every cognitivist text in the 1990s) but rather in order to ask what one can retain in order to rethink the role of technology in the moving image today. Towards this, an archeology of the concept of the 'dispositif', as it is currently being excavated in projects by Frank Kessler of Utrecht University and Maria Tortajada, is important. In asking these questions film theory must also be more prepared to engage in the philosophy of technology going on outside of cinema studies; the attention devoted to Gilbert Simondon by some contributors are examples of attempts to do so. Still, the relative absence of references to theorists of the concept of the dispositif like Gilles Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben, or even Michel Foucault himself, is surprising. Nevertheless, Montreal 2011 was a memorable site in which to begin to investigate the specificity of technological change as it relates to film history and theory.

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Notes

1 Keller and Paul 2012: http://dare.uva.nl/document/361589.