


FILM  
CULTURE

IN TRANSITION



CINE-DISPOSITIVES  
ESSAYS IN  
EPISTEMOLOGY ACROSS MEDIA

EDITED BY

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Amsterdam  
University  
Press

# Cine-Dispositives

*Essays in Epistemology Across Media*

*Edited by François Albera and Maria Tortajada*

Amsterdam University Press

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# Questioning the Word “Dispositif”

Note on the Translation

*François Albera and Maria Tortajada (editors); Franck Le Gac (translator)*

Since the nineteenth century, the term “dispositif” has been used extensively in French, from the most trivial sense to the most theoretically sophisticated. Its function as a concept developed within what has been called “French theory” in the anglophone world – and more specifically within the work of Michel Foucault, where it appears next to that of “archeology” in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, before taking hold in *Discipline and Punish*. In film studies, the notion of “dispositif” was central to the theorizations referred to as “apparatus theory” that emerged in the 1970s.

In French, however, the term frequently designates a technical setup – the basis for a mechanical arrangement, a small appliance or the most complex machinery – while also pointing to any concrete or abstract system. It also shares its original meaning in the legal domain with the English “dispositive,” which, unlike its French counterpart, is rarely used. As for “dispositif” in its technical sense, in English it is translated as “appliance,” “device,” “setup,” “system” or, in some cases, “apparatus.” Finally, some of the theoretical senses of the term appear as “apparatus” in English, notably in the discourse of ideological film criticism in the 1970s and in some translations of Foucault. Still, some other translations of the philosopher’s work simply repeat the French “dispositif,” a choice fully justified by the specificity of the Foucauldian concept, which implies both a method for discursive analysis supported by an epistemological practice and a conception of processes involved in power.

The present collection of essays sets out to explore different uses of the term “dispositif,” starting from its polysemy in French, and aims to open the field to new forms of theorizations of viewing and listening dispositives by exploiting the rich potential of the notion. One particular aim is to move away from the historically circumscribed use of “dispositif” by apparatus theory – not to overshadow it, but rather, to revitalize the concept by opening it up to new approaches.

During the translation of most of the studies in this book into English, we met with several difficulties. The first is the complex history of the translation of the term “dispositif” in English, a translation wavering

between several formulations, forcing those who confront it to reposition themselves. A second obstacle was to take stock of the very different uses of the *notion* of “dispositif” in the two linguistic spaces that force francophone and anglophone scholars into starkly contrasting positions. In French, the *term* “dispositif” is polysemic and, in spite of available synonyms, it may be found in all kinds of writings in the most diverse fields, in scientific as well as common usage; in English, the *notion* invites specification, and assumes multiple guises (the *terms* “apparatus,” “device,” “appliance” or even the French “dispositif,” as we already pointed out). A last issue was that we were confronted with two strong theoretical uses of the term “dispositif,” already mentioned, which brought the risk of restricting notions that we wanted to make available for new reappropriations. This is the challenge that has been met by the contributors to the book, each of them in his or her own way, yet always with the historicity of the term in mind.

The question remains, then: how to translate the polysemy and the conceptual diversity of the French term “dispositif” in English? We abstained from systematic use of the French “dispositif,” convinced that the violence done to a language is justified only when the foreign term, in a neologism of sorts, refers to an extremely structured concept in its source language. Philosophy is familiar with this practice, which is justified where Foucault is concerned. On the other hand, “apparatus” appeared marked by its very dated use in apparatus theory; while it may have technical aspects, it is not as broad as the French term “dispositif” as *arrangement*.

We are therefore putting forward a radical proposal, playing on the connections between French and English, the history of the two languages, in which many words have common roots and sometimes even similar spellings. “Dispositif” and “dispositive” are cousins; brothers even, perhaps, in the sounds conveyed by language, in their etymology, as well as in their original legal definition. In our view, “dispositive,” once reappropriated, could account for the specificity of the French term, thanks to these origins and proximity.

Some may see in our proposition another form of violence, consisting in the redynamization of a word within the same language, a word that in itself perhaps “spoke” very little. Still, this is a common method in all living practices of language, one that is not only legitimate but also necessary in a theoretical or historical project. We wanted to see the polysemic theater of the French use of the term play out in the English versions of the studies presented here. With the issue of translation, the volume travels the passage between the two languages: what does it mean to theorize in French and in English? Or to work through concepts in their historical value across languages? Our answer is partial yet pragmatic. It was not



enough to underscore the French origin of the word "dispositif": the plurality of notions tied to the term in English also had to be taken into account. English synonyms for "dispositifs" have thus been added to the English term "dispositive" when specification was imperative. In short, with this dual choice, we sought to keep explicit the tension between two aims whose contradiction is only apparent: an emancipation from the historical uses of the French term and the development of new uses and methods with regard to these historical uses.

In our view, this liminal choice, on the edge of two languages, presents yet another advantage. Freeing the translation of "dispositif" from its historical uses, "dispositive" accounts for the very diverse work of the authors within their own practices. They cooperated at every stage, beyond even the translation of texts, since Charles Musser and Thomas Elsaesser agreed to subject the original versions of their articles to the global project of the book's translation, ensuring its overall coherence.

From a practical standpoint, and by way of recapitulation, we proceeded as follows.

In keeping with the distinctions we wished to maintain or establish between the different notions linked to "dispositifs," the French *dispositif* has been kept in English but italicized when referring to the Foucauldian notion, itself distinct from the psychoanalytical apparatus of 1960s and 1970s film theory. Still, in many of Foucault's texts involving the notion, the English translation is "apparatus," as some quotations in several chapters make clear. We opted to preserve the integrity of these quotations, even though their choice of terminology was at odds with ours. Conversely, even though the word "apparatus" is frequently used in English in the sense of a machine, a set of equipment designed for a particular function – especially in the context of early cinema – we preferred "device" or "appliance" in these cases, for the sake of clarity.

Because the other concern of the editors was to preserve the polysemy of the French word "dispositif" while clearly signaling a shift away from apparatus theory in film studies, we have accordingly used the English term "dispositive," whose legal meaning in English overlaps with one definition of the French "dispositif." In this volume, "dispositive" refers to simple or complex mechanical arrangements, that is, as a synonym for "appliance" or "device" in that sense; and to a spatial organization of elements, mechanical or not, producing a specific position for an observer, user or spectator. This concerns technical arrangements, scientific experiments and scenic setups (exhibitions in museums or galleries, scenic arrangements in the theater or scenic situations in literature, to name but a few).

“Dispositive” was also used to translate the editors’ own, more recent development and specification of the notion. Finally, in passages of the text where the authors transition from one inception of the term to another (which occasionally corresponds to a change in the English word used as an equivalent), the French “dispositif” appears as such, between quotation marks. For further information, see “The Dispositive Does Not Exist!”

The translations that are not referenced in the English edition are the translator’s own.

# Foreword

*François Albera and Maria Tortajada*

The purpose of the present volume is to (re-)examine the question of viewing and listening dispositives, from the emergence of the notion in the field of film studies in the late 1960s to the more limited – technical and descriptive – use that followed, as well as the parallel elaboration on the term by Michel Foucault, on a completely different scale, in *Discipline and Punish*, up to more recent developments in literature and art. The book also aims to confront approaches and perspectives in the very different context that is ours today: the generalization of new technologies, the digital era and the appearance of new theoretical developments around these phenomena, new models of knowledge generally situated in the field of media (we are thinking of Jonathan Crary, Friedrich Kittler and Lev Manovich, among others). The emergence of the notion of “dispositif” in film studies was tied to a model of cinema and film corresponding to the “classical” period of the medium, previously examined with different tools by Christian Metz and the various semiological trends. Theoreticians of the “dispositif” intended to move beyond these approaches by focusing on spectators and their place in the cinematic event. Starting in 1978, however, the historiographic turn in film studies towards early cinema brought a starkly different model of cinema and film to the fore, challenging an important part of the historical and theoretical legacy that had dominated the study of cinema for decades. The context of new technologies has shifted the boundaries and spaces of “cinema” yet again. The (ongoing) research on “early cinema” has probably done much to prepare researchers for the current situation, which, as has often been stated, shares a number of characteristics with that of the beginnings of cinema (heterogeneity, intermediality, attraction, incompleteness, variability in reception, and so forth).

Traits of this “past” cinema resurfaced and could then be reconstructed in light of the present (experimental cinema, then new media), in a sort of “backward movement of the true.” At the same time, processes of re-mediation, technological transfers or the translation of models from one media to another (that of sound with respect to the image, for instance, or, more recently, of the computer with regard to the editing table and new modes of sharing) are remapping the field of study.

Within these diverse frameworks and environments, is an approach in terms of “dispositifs” still relevant and effective? Does the obsolescence of the original apparatus theory point to the need to move beyond any

apprehension of the cinema in these terms? In other words, is the notion still elastic enough to remain pertinent in relation to its object(s), or should we consider that it is linked to an epistemic situation, a historical state of viewing and listening machines?

These questions provided some of the rationale for the international conference organized at the Université de Lausanne, “Dispositifs de vision et d’audition: épistémologie et bilan.” Locally, the event took place within the logic of a general line of research and teaching in the university’s department of Film History and Aesthetics, with a possible prospective program sketched out as early as 2002 with “L’Épistémè 1900,” delivered at the seventh Domitor conference (“Cinéma des premiers temps: technologies et dispositifs”).<sup>1</sup> It is within this area, gradually developed and enriched, that a number of projects were undertaken in the department, materializing in three collective publications.<sup>2</sup>

At an international level, two conferences had preceded the one on viewing and listening dispositives: the first in Louvain-la-Neuve in April 1998 (“Dispositifs et médiations des savoirs,” co-organized by the Université Paris 8 - St-Denis - Vincennes, the FNRS in Belgium, the CNRS in France and the European Commission), and the second in Marne-la-Vallée in October 2006 (“Les Dispositifs,” with the ENS Louis Lumière, the Université de Marne-la-Vallée and the LISAA).<sup>3</sup> Both showed the success enjoyed by

1 The contribution appears in *Le Cinéma, nouvelle technologie du XXe siècle/The Cinema, A New Technology for the 20th Century*, André Gaudreault, Catherine Russell and Pierre Veronneau, eds. (Lausanne: Payot, 2004). Other interventions at the conference, which epitomized a “return” to a functional, descriptive sense of “dispositifs” and to some degree a refusal to problematize the notion, were published in *Cinema & Cie* 3 (2003), “Les technologies de représentation et le discours sur le dispositif cinématographique des premiers temps,” and in *CiNéMAS* 14.1 (2003), “Dispositif(s) du cinéma (des premiers temps).”

2 In order of publication: *Cinema Beyond Film. Media Epistemology in the Modern Era*, François Albera and Maria Tortajada, eds. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), with contributions from the editors as well as Alain Boillat, Laurent Guido and Olivier Lugon; *La Télévision, du téléphoscope à YouTube. Pour une archéologie de l’audiovision*, Mireille Berton and Ann-Katrin Weber, eds. (Lausanne: Antipodes, 2009), with contributions from the editors, François Albera, Stefan Andriopoulos, Christina Bartz, Alain Boillat, Gilles Delavaud, Laurent Guido, Kurd Lasswitz, Lynn Spiegel, Maria Tortajada, William Uricchio, Siegfried Zielinski and others; *Between Still and Moving Images*, Laurent Guido and Olivier Lugon, eds. (Herts, U.K.: John Libbey, 2012), with contributions from the editors as well as François Albera, Alain Boillat, Mireille Berton, Christa Blümlinger, Wolfgang Brückle, Myriam Chermette, Clément Chéroux, Michel Frizot, Tom Gunning, Maria Tortajada, Valérie Vignaux and others.

3 The Louvain conference resulted in a publication in the periodical *Hermès*. See *Hermès* 25, “Le dispositif entre usage et concept” (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1999). Contributions from the Marne-la-Vallée conference appeared in issue 4 of *Cahier Louis-Lumière* (2007), titled “Les dispositifs.”

the notion, which for some had become a “meta-concept,” while for others the “dispositif” had supplanted “structure” or was close to the Deleuzian rhizome.<sup>4</sup> A philosopher also asked the radical question of what a “dispositif” was.<sup>5</sup>

The confrontation between the researchers attending the conference, who came from different disciplines and “schools of thought,” gave rise to exchanges that proved fruitful and convinced us of the renewed vitality and fertility of a theory of “dispositifs.” Most of the papers presented at the conference have been rewritten to form the substance of this book. A few later contributions have been added; they were part of a cycle of lectures around the issue of “dispositifs,” which started in 2011. Open to international scholars, the cycle was also connected to the doctoral school and to ProDoc programs financed by the FNS.

The studies included here have been divided into three parts: Programs, Issues and Histories. The first part presents two types of programmatic projects related to two institutions of higher education that collaborate with each other while maintaining their distinctive characteristics: the department of Film History and Aesthetics at the Université de Lausanne (François Albera and Maria Tortajada, “The Dispositive Does Not Exist!”) and the department of Visual Studies at the University of Amsterdam (Thomas Elsaesser, “Between Knowing and Believing: The Cinematic Dispositive after Cinema”).

The second part questions the notion of the dispositive by confronting it with one or several objects: spectacles in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Patrick Désile), the stereopticon (Charles Musser), the praxinoscope-theater (André Gaudreault); the theoretical corpus of a thinker such as Bergson (Elie During) and a scientist like Marey (Maria Tortajada); or its own theoretical elaboration (Omar Hachemi) and the relation it establishes between two fields, for instance with the “dispositive effect” in film narrative (Philippe Ortel).

The third part brings together studies that start from a concrete technical object or set of objects, such as the crank in different viewing or listening machines (Benoît Turquety) or the dispositives of early serpentine dance films (Laurent Guido); from imaginary objects, telephony as imagined by Robida (Alain Boillat) and Raymond Roussel’s machines as seen through

4 Bernard Vouilloux, “Critique des dispositifs,” *Critique* 718 (March 2007).

5 Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?* (Stanford: Stanford U. P., 2009). More recently, the word has been used in the context of a restrictive definition of cinema: Raymond Bellour, *La Querelle des dispositifs. Cinéma - installations, expositions* (Paris: POL, 2012).

the prism of Foucault's analyses (Christophe Wall-Romana); and from an institutional ensemble ranging from amateur cinema in the 1920s (François Albera) to television (Gilles Delavaud) and reality television in French-speaking Switzerland (Charlotte Bouchez), to installations in the space of the museum (Viva Paci).

The generalization of new technologies has changed the boundaries and spaces of 'cinema' yet again. Processes of re-mediation, transfers of technology, modelization across media, new ways of sharing, and mutual territories draw a new map against which any 'dispositive-based' approach has to measure up.

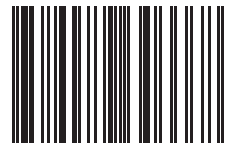
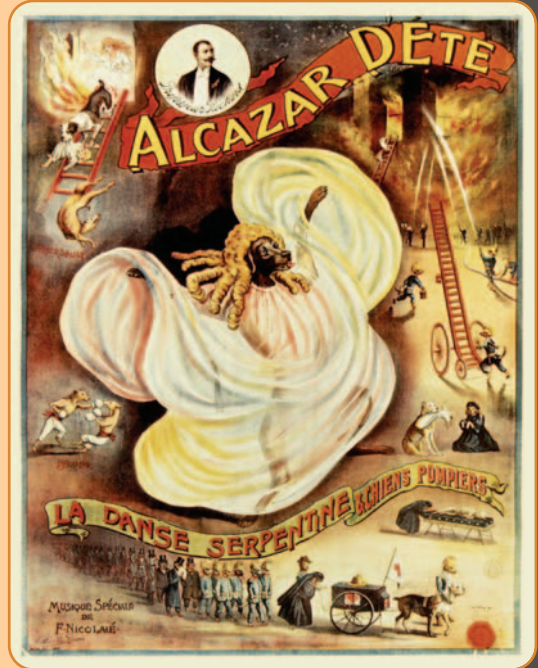
*Cine-Dispositives* takes stock of viewing and listening dispositives – from the emergence of the notion in film studies in the late 1960s under the term 'apparatus' to the more technical and descriptive use that followed. The volume also covers Michel Foucault's own wide-ranging use of the notion and its eventual migration to literature and art.

Bringing together authors from the US, Canada, the Netherlands, France, and Switzerland, *Cine-Dispositives* ambitions to confront points of view and shed new light on the enduring usefulness of the term through documented perspectives on viewing and listening dispositives. The collection combines general developments, a set of historical investigations, and case studies.

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