International Lexicon of Aesthetics

Device

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It. *Dispositivo*; Fr. *Dispositif*; Germ. *Das Dispositif/Die Vorrichtung/Das Gerät*; Span. *Dispositivo*. The notion of device has acquired a particular theoretical relevance since the 1970s, in a range of disciplines including human sciences, epistemology, anthropology, aesthetics and film theory. Two traditions have explored and developed this notion: the first one, which has offered an epistemological version of this concept, can be traced back to some well-known texts of Michel Foucault written during the 1970s (Foucault 1975; 1977). This version has found a new and fecund articulation in the work of philosophers like Gilles Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben (Deleuze 1986; 1989; Agamben 2006; 2014). The second tradition, inaugurated by two essays on film theory written by Jean-Louis Baudry in the 1970s (Baudry 1975), had a specific development in the fields of media and film theory, bringing about the definition of "cinematographic device" and starting a "*querelle*" that has animated the debate in the last twenty years, above all in France and Italy (Albera, Tortajada 2011; Bellour 2012; Casetti 2015). Devices, in particular in the terms adopted in the thinking of Foucault, Deleuze and Agamben, can be defined as networks, skeins or machines that combine heterogeneous elements, structuring and organising them within a common field.

Elaboration of the Concept

Both Deleuze and Foucault underline the historicity of devices, as a historic *a priori* that defines the conditions of visibility of images, as well as the conditions of enunciability of discourses. In Foucault's reflection of the 1970s, "device" is an operative term applied above all to technologies of execution and application of a certain connection, historically connoted, between knowledge and power. However, it was especially the subsequent elaboration of the concept in Agamben and Deleuze that amplified the use and the fields of application of the term, although it was also influenced by Foucault's work.

Agamben, for example, while maintaining Foucault's genealogical method originally deriving from Nietzsche, developed a definition of "ontological device" (Agamben 2006; 2014), which shifts the debate

from the plane of reflection on the ontological connection between knowledge and power to the history of Western metaphysics as onto-theology. This conception of device promotes a precise political agenda: to defuse the power of the ontological device through counter-devices, or rather by gestures of "profanation". This oscillation shows the polysemy and scope of the concept, already highlighted by the Anglo-Saxon translators of the term from the French language, who accompany "*device*" (in the technological sense) with "*dispositive*" (the situational dimension that determines the experience of one or more objects, for example the cinema hall as a cinematographic device) and finally, according to a more general and abstract interpretation, with "*apparatus*", as acutely observes Eugeni (2017: 13; 37-38).

Gilles Deleuze rethinks and reshapes Foucault's term in a 1988 conference, his last public appearance. This work traces the perimeter of a possible "device philosophy" (Deleuze 1989: 21). According to Deleuze, the first two types of devices identified by Foucault are the "regimes of light and the regimes of enunciation", "the curves of visibility and the curves of enunciation", the "machines to let see and let speak" (Deleuze 1989: 13-14), inseparable from a historical and culturally conditioned dimension. Devices act then as a historical *a priori* able to determine the subjects and objects of the visible and the enunciable, to divide things and words and to govern them within great historical formations. In this sense, devices, no matter whether the "optical machines" such as the Renaissance linear perspective and camera obscura or the French or Bolshevik revolutions, can be considered as new regimes of enunciation, within which new forms of discursive utterances are produced.

According to Deleuze, the third type of Foucaultian device corresponds to the lines of force and refers to the specific combination of knowledge and power that becomes manifest in each historical formation. It is in the fourth type, concerning the lines of subjectivation, that Deleuze's interpretation (and later on also Agamben's one) recognizes a turning point and even a crisis in Foucault's late thinking: an openness towards those technologies of the self which are made available by the reflexive folding of the lines of force of the device back on itself. The subject emerges from the reflexive folding of the device, and is therefore its very product according to Foucault and Deleuze. Accordingly, it is possible to this fourth type to subtract the self from established relations of force and codified knowledge, drawing lines of escape, discontinuity, cracking or fracture inside the device, and open up to new possible future devices, drawing lines of sedimentation or stratification and lines of actualization or creativity.

Another philosopher, Jean-François Lyotard, placed the notion of device at the heart of the contemporary debate on aesthetics and the arts. In the context of a general critique of representation, and through a heterodox and personal revival of some aspects of Marx's and Freud's thought, Lyotard, in some texts like *Des dispositifs pulsionels* (1973) and *Economie Libidinale* (1974), observed in various manifestations of contemporary art the possibility of a direct expression, without representative screens, of a free, libidinal or pulsional energy, referable both to Freud's *libido* and to Marx's work-force concept, thus articulating the term "device" in an aesthetic sense. The flow of *libido* energy can be subordinated and organized within hierarchical and codified systems, the devices of the representation of capitalism, which block its free expansive force, or vice versa, channelled and regulated, inscribed in libidinal devices (in fact, counter-

devices) which allow the forces to circulate freely, in a play of pulsional dynamics the work of art makes manifest in a visible form.

When the contemporary work of art functions as a pulsional device (for example in the 20th-century painting beginning after Cézanne or in the upturning of classic Hollywood cinema Lyotard calls "acinema"), the very task of aesthetics undergoes a radical transformation. As far as the work is considered as the effect of certain devices, the theory has to describe the variety and abundance of materials and means with which contemporary art operates, as well as the proliferation of its effects (not only aesthetic in the traditional sense, but also political, economic, physical), prolonging its energetic charge in the theoretical discourse. Fruition, in the acceptation of a contemplative interpretation of the hidden meaning of the work deposited in its visible signs, is replaced by a kind of play with the artwork, a prolongation and revival of its energy: this "economic" understanding of art and aesthetic experience allows the user to engage in the play of forces of the work, appreciating the potential for transformation and continuous movement of energy (Lyotard 1973; 1979). Therefore, and in accordance with the Deleuze and Guattari's contemporary analyses on the "desiring machines", it is the possible relationship between device and desire that is at the centre of Lyotard's reflection, rather than the constitutive nexus of power and device as in Foucault.

Reviving Lyotard's reflection on the "pulsional devices" and the genealogical line (Foucault-Deleuze-Agamben), Fulvio Carmagnola recently proposed a further *aesthetic* acceptation of device (Carmagnola 2015: 51-73). There is a strong discontinuity between the aesthetic device, acting as an economic machine of feeling and characterizing the contemporary aesthetic postmodern condition and modern aesthetics, dominated by the idea of free and disinterested contemplation, dating back to Kant. The contemporary aesthetic device operates as a new historical formation opened by the crisis of modernity.

Within this pervasive machine of contemporary feeling, which imposes the enjoyment of symbolic goods according to pre-constituted apparatuses, the question remains open around the space of play and liberation of the human subject, who is shaped and "enrolled" by devices. Agamben argues that the process of subjectivation imposed by the contemporary technological devices (just think to the overwhelming importance of smartphones and social media) by the late-capitalist system includes the effects of de-subjectivation or subjugation of man, which "do not give rise to the re-composition of a new subject", of a real subject (Agamben 2006: 31). Contrarywise, Carmagnola considers this threat as a possibility of meaning: since the gadget is the most obvious and banal form assumed by the aesthetic device in the contemporary imaginary, it is possible to trace the escape routes and the strategies of behaviour and construction of the self that Foucault and Deleuze had already identified in their mature reflection as a possibility of a real subjectivation, of a reconquering of the self, only in a direct confrontation with the technological devices. It is possible to work with devices like gadgets and commodities, according to Carmagnola, and identify some, albeit ambiguous, strategies of liberation for contemporary art and aesthetics.

With Baudry's seminal essays, influenced as much by the Marxian notion of ideology as by Freud's metaphor of the psyche as apparatus, the question of the device is inserted into the heart of film theory.

Baudry was the first one to outline the broad semantic articulation of the concept, suspended between the technological aspect of machine and the theoretical dimension of the apparatus that consists of elements that are combined and arranged in a regulated manner to produce certain automatic effects on the subject of the cinematic fruition. Between the technological dimension of the cinematographic *device* and the epistemological plane of the *apparatus*, the cinematic spectator's life experience is taken in the concrete situation of viewing a film (*dispositive*). We are confronted with three different levels of scale, from the general to the detailed, in which we can trace the action and the effectiveness of the cinematic device (Eugeni 2017: 36-41).

In the contemporary panorama, the question of the cinematographic device has given rise to a "*querelle des dispositifs*" between those theorists (Aumont 1990; Bellour 2012) who claimed the medial *film specifity*, according to which devices produce a unique situation and experience of clearly identified and culturally defined vision, and those (Albera, Tortajada 2011; Casetti 2015) who underlined the historical variability and the changeability of the ways in which the cinematic device and the filmic experience have been configured over the course of a century. For the latter, it is necessary to formulate a freer and more flexible, less rigid and deterministic concept of the device, able to account for the different forms of contemporary extension of cinema, from ambient video installations to tablets, from urban screens to *Expanded Cinema* – Casetti describes these experiences as device-*assemblage*.

In conclusion, the potentialities of the *device*, which is also at the centre of the research of *Visual culture studies* concerning *medium* and *gaze* (Cometa 2012; Pinotti, Somaini 2016), push to the recognition of its status as theoretical construction that is able to account for the complex network of relationships (of power and knowledge) existing between the current ambient and atmospheric media and the dynamic subjects who use and inhabit them.

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