

# The Screen and the Concept of *Dispositif* – A Dialogue

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**DC-JM:** Among the theorists who try to define the screening situation as a *dispositif*, your propositions are particularly interesting and particularly precise. In this respect, we are primarily thinking of the following proposition where the factors relevant for defining the *dispositif* are very clearly distinguished, while this definition prefigures how these factors interact with one another:

In a somewhat simplified form, one could summarize the configuration that Baudry describes with the aid of the concept of *dispositif* as follows:

- a) a material technology producing conditions that help to shape
- b) a certain viewing position that is based upon unconscious desires to which corresponds
- c) an institutionalized film form implying a form of address trying to guarantee that this viewing position (often characterized as “voyeuristic”) functions in an optimal way.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, the screen can be examined from these three angles: technology, spectatorship, and institution. For this purpose, it seems that we need a specification of these factors, different from those defining the film, although obviously linked to it. Please, could you comment on that? To put it more broadly: what role does the screen play in the context of the *dispositif*?

**FK:** Leaving aside Baudry’s psychoanalytical reading of the screen (we come to that in a minute), it is firstly a central element of the *dispositif* of fictional cinema (but not exclusively, because this would also be true for documentaries, educational films, even home movies): the screen is what the audience looks at, in a sense, but they actually only look at it before the show starts (unless it is covered by a curtain, but in today’s movie theaters this has become rare). When the projection starts, the spectators no longer see the screen, but the images that are projected upon it. So the screen is, as it were, effaced by the still or moving images that appear on it, and when we see something that is part of the screen –

irregularities of the surface, stains – we consider this distracting or even disruptive.

So the screen is, on the one hand, a central element in the topology of the *dispositif*; on the other hand, it has to become invisible or “transparent,” because otherwise the *dispositif* and the mode of communication it implies – fictional, documentary, educational, etc. – cannot function properly. It is not by accident that certain avant-garde movements have tried to disrupt the *dispositif* by attacking the screen. And we know from Edwin S. Porter’s *UNCLE JOSH AT THE MOVING PICTURE SHOW* (1902) as well as from Jean-Luc Godard’s *LES CARABINIERS* (1963) that the confusion of the filmic image and reality results in the tearing down of the screen as a material object.

In a cinema, the audience is oriented towards the screen (at least ideally, individual spectators may turn their attention elsewhere, for instance to the person with whom they are – think of the Drifters singing about “kissing on the back row of the movies on a Saturday night”). Baudry describes the spectators as being “captivated,” hence his comparison with Plato’s allegory of the cave. But they are not captivated by the screen as such, but by what they see projected on it. In the end, it is the space of the diegesis they are looking at, so the screen participates in what Christian Metz describes as a structure of disavowal, and in that perspective we might say that the first thing that is disavowed is the material presence of the screen.

**DC-JM:** In a series of papers, you investigate the history of the word “*dispositif*.” There are two well-known sources: Michel Foucault and Jean-Louis Baudry.<sup>2</sup> Could you elaborate on how their approaches differ with regard to the theoretical account of the screen’s status?

**FK:** According to Baudry, the screen is primarily one of the three elements that belong to the space of projection, which itself is part of what he calls the basic cinematographic apparatus (*appareil de base*), the other two being the dark hall and the projector/light/filmstrip-entity. It is the site of projection and reflection, which, within Baudry’s Lacanian framework, functions as a “mirror-screen” of a “paradoxical nature,” as he says, because it does not reflect the reality of the screening situation, but of the images. In addition, Baudry uses the concept of the “dream screen,” which he borrows from Bertram Lewin, to further develop his psychoanalytic theory of cinema. So Baudry “frames” the screen on the one hand by referring to Plato’s allegory of the cave, and on the other hand by using psychoanalytic theory to lay bare what he sees as the ideological dimension inherent to the cinematic *dispositif*. The screen thus no longer is a material object – it is in fact ascribed the paradoxical materiality of a mirror that is not reflecting what is in front of it – but a theoretical construction.

To look at Michel Foucault's concept of the *dispositif* and using it for a theoretical account of the status of the cinematic screen is a rather challenging task, because this asks for something like a translation. Foucault introduces the concept of *dispositif* in his work on the history of sexuality, so he thinks about a problem of a quite different order and I wonder if one can isolate an element such as the screen in a Foucauldian analysis. One could think, however, that with regard to the construction of a specific subject position, Foucault might come to quite a similar result as Baudry, even though he would certainly not subscribe to Baudry's psychoanalytical explanations. But then – as I have tried to show elsewhere – we would take one historically specific, and to some extent also idealized form of spectatorship as a general rule. If, on the other hand, we take a historical perspective and look at the discursive construction of moviegoers in different periods, we can actually see that very often it is the unruliness of audiences that is seen as a central problem by reformers, pedagogues, and other figures of authority, as many studies have demonstrated. So from a Foucauldian perspective we could actually analyze how the idea, sometimes ideal, but also the figure (as a theoretical construction) of a disciplined spectator emerges, which for Baudry is simply a given. And it might be interesting to see whether the status of the screen in such a historical investigation changes.

**DC-JM:** Several key issues that we find in Baudry's texts deserve special attention. They lead to different hypotheses. One hypothesis would be to consider the screen merely as an element of what he calls the *appareil de base*, i.e., one of the technological elements necessary to produce and watch a film. Another hypothesis would be to consider the screen as the element that guarantees the specificity of the *dispositif* and the viewing situation. And lastly, within the configuration Baudry describes, the screen could be considered to belong to both the *appareil de base* as well as to the *dispositif*. In these three cases, are we talking about the same kind or concept of the screen?

**FK:** In Baudry's text, to begin with, we could indeed say that the *dispositif* is one element of the basic apparatus, and so the screen necessarily belongs to both. So I am not quite sure where you see the difference between the screen being merely an element of the *appareil de base* and the screen belonging in addition also to the *dispositif*. What one could say, however, is that in the first case, the focus is rather on the way the screen as the site of the presentation of the filmic image to an audience relates to the technologies of image production, and in particular to the production of the impression of reality that is seen by Baudry as the central ideological task of the basic apparatus. In the other case, the screen is seen with respect to its role in the triangle it forms together with the projector/filmstrip-unit and the spectator. So, from this point of view there is a difference in focus and in status of the screen, as in the one case it is regarded as one technological

element of the basic apparatus, not fundamentally different from the microphone, the camera, the editing table, etc., while in the other case it is functioning within a specific relationship linking elements that do not belong to the same order of phenomena.

The question, whether the screen can guarantee the specificity of the *dispositif* is a very interesting one, because it can be linked to an ongoing discussion about “the end of cinema” to which a number of important film theorists such as Dudley Andrew, Jacques Aumont, Raymond Bellour, Francesco Casetti, André Gaudreault, Philippe Marion, David Rodowick, and others have contributed over the past few years. Interestingly, their main point of departure is the vanishing celluloid, the filmstrip being replaced by a Digital Cinema Package (DCP), something that in the meantime has become more or less a fact. And maybe there will be other technical solutions in the future that will grant producers and distributors even more control (because obviously, this process is mainly driven by economic interests). What we can quite safely say, however, is that it does not seem to matter much for the general moviegoing public. There are of course all the new screens that have come to challenge the cinema screen – from the so-called “home cinema” installation to the laptop, the tablet, and the mobile phone (and maybe here we should actually rather talk of a display). Interestingly, neither English nor French make a lexical difference between the cinema screen and the TV screen (in French you sometimes say *grand écran* vs. *petit écran*, but it is still the same word). In German (or Dutch), however, there are two different lexemes, *Leinwand* (*doek* in Dutch) for the cinema screen and *Bildschirm* (*beeldscherm* in Dutch), which is closer to screen and *écran*, but specifies that it serves to present all kinds of images; from TV screen to mobile phone display images. The word *Leinwand* is used also for what in English is called “canvas” and in French *toile*, so it covers a semantic field ranging from painting to all types of projected images (you simply cannot project an image onto a *Bildschirm* – in German this would not make sense at all). So, here we face a rather interesting problem, when we talk about specificity: in English and French the support on which we see a painting is radically different from the one on which we see still and moving projected images or electronic images; whereas, in German the painted and the projected image belong to the same side and are seen as different from the ones we watch on TV or on our computer. But what does this tell us about *dispositifs*? And what about specificity? I do not think that there is an easy answer to this. But what we could say is that the articulation of the semantic field in German draws a line between the projected image and the image appearing on a “light-emitting device” (to borrow this expression from my colleague Nanna Verhoeff), while in English or French this frontier seems not to exist lexically, but I suppose, when you ask your question you refer exclusively to cinema (which of course is the kind of screen that Baudry talks about). So, in German I can say that without a *Leinwand* I may no longer have a cinema *dispositif*, but rather some kind of public

viewing of moving images on a *Bildschirm*, some kind of giant public TV, going in a way back to the *Fernsehstuben* of the 1930s. So in that sense, for a speaker of German the *Leinwand* may indeed guarantee the specificity of the cinematic *dispositif*. I wonder, whether in English or French uttering the phrase “the screen guarantees the specificity of the *dispositif*” would not in the end seem somehow strange, because one either implies the cinema screen, or all kinds of screens and displays, and without the first there could not be a projected image, and in the second case the question would be, what then could replace the screen as the locus where the moving images appear. But this indeed already leads into your next question.

**DC-JM:** One of our concerns is to ascertain whether in the effects produced by the *dispositif* of the screening situation, the screen plays a significant role. In the same vein, we wonder to what extent the evolutions of the nature, form, quality, or size of the screen transform the positioning of the spectator and the way of functioning of the *dispositif*.

**FK:** Firstly, one might say that the screen has stayed the most permanent element in the cinematic *dispositif* as described by Baudry. The modes of moviegoing have changed enormously, and the technology of projection as well, from hand-cranked projectors to today’s digital ones. But, of course, the screen has also changed over time, with regard to its format, obviously, but it has also changed its shape, from flat to curved, for instance. These changes, however, were always linked to and resulted from changes concerning the format of the image that was to be projected on it, and in this respect there have also been many ideas that have never been put into practice on a more than experimental scale. I am thinking, of course, of Eisenstein’s ideas concerning the “dynamic square” as a reaction to the first attempts to promote widescreen formats in the early 1930s.

When we look at the arguments for the new widescreen formats that were introduced on a much more massive scale in the 1950s – which often demanded quite important financial investments and architectural transformations of the movie theaters – then the most prominent one, as always, is “realism” (mobilized today once more by directors such as Peter Jackson and James Cameron to promote 3D and High Frame Rate technology). In this line of argument, the widescreen image was said to correspond much better to human vision than the academy ratio, and the new screen technology was to provide a much more immersive experience. You may know Roland Barthes’s short text on *Cinemascope* published in 1954,<sup>3</sup> in which he describes his first encounter with a wide-screen projection that apparently produced exactly that effect for him.

However, if cinema is to provide this immersive experience, then the wide-screen format cannot be the final stage, nor can 3D for that matter. As early as 1944, René Barjavel published his book *Cinéma total: Essai sur les formes futures du*

*cinéma*,<sup>4</sup> which projected into the future the teleological movements towards a complete reproduction of reality (an idea that also André Bazin evoked around that time). This future form of cinema, according to Barjavel, would need neither the filmstrip, nor the projector, nor the screen. The images would be immaterial, be transmitted through waves and would materialize without a screen. In Kathryn Bigelow's science fiction film *STRANGE DAYS* (1995), moving images are transmitted directly into the brain of the viewer with the help of a device called SQUID. And if we think about current experiments with head-mounted devices transporting us into a virtual environment, it is very difficult to predict whether the screen (in every sense of the word) will be part of the media experience of future generations.

**DC-JM:** Besides Baudry's proposition, you introduce your own perspective, which you call "historical pragmatics." From this alternate perspective, you consider looking at the *dispositif* as a theoretical approach that differs from the meta-psychology of the spectator, in order not to evade it, but to take into account some different forms of *dispositifs* throughout media history. This proposition is partly inspired by the theory of the cinema of attractions. You quote Tom Gunning who opposed early cinema, which he characterizes as "exhibitionist," to the later voyeuristic narrative cinema. Considering "the recurring look at the camera by the actor" as an emblematic aspect of the former, he concludes: "This action, which is later perceived as spoiling the realistic illusion of the cinema, is here undertaken with brio, establishing contact with the audience."<sup>5</sup>

The conclusion you draw from that is that there is a radical difference between the *dispositif* of the cinema of attractions and that of the classical narrative cinema, "at least regarding the positioning of the spectator and the mode of address inherent to the filmic form," and you suggest that this is the case "even if the material *dispositif* may seem very close to the one Baudry discusses."<sup>6</sup>

The screen is a part of this material *dispositif*. We could argue that there is a history of this material aspect, a history of theater and screen. But, beyond this question, is it possible to consider that the relationship to screens and the modes of spectatorship were transformed by the transition from the stage of the cinema of attractions to the one of classical narrative cinema?

**FK:** This is a complex question, and a quite difficult one to answer, because it includes an opposition of two historical stages, which in themselves are quite heterogeneous. To begin with, the kind of spectatorship described by Baudry is a historically and culturally very specific one, as Christian Metz already explained in his essay on "The Fiction Film and Its Spectator."<sup>7</sup> It rather functions like an ideal-typical description of spectatorship. Similarly, we might say that also in the early period quite a variety of spectator positions were possible, depending on the institutional context of the projection. To borrow Roger Odin's term: early

film projection could take place in a wide range of communicative spaces, so postulating just one form of spectatorship for the period would be rather reductive. This is why, in the perspective of a historical pragmatics, I try to avoid as much as possible to ontologize the *dispositif*. The questions I want to ask are not whether this or that configuration actually is a *dispositif*. I am more interested in seeing what happens when I look at it as a *dispositif*.

That being said, we could, in the light of what has been said above, signal at least one important difference in the function of the screen in both regimes, i.e., that of the cinema of attractions and that of classical narrative cinema. In the latter case, the screen is something like an interface allowing our access to a diegetic world that, in principle at least, is completely different from the spectator's world. We watch without being seen – hence the qualification of this positioning of the spectator as “voyeuristic” – and what happens in that world on, or rather beyond the screen, is inaccessible from the chair we are sitting in. When Michotte van den Berck discussed the so-called “impression of reality” in the 1950s,<sup>8</sup> he made the incommensurability of these two spaces a central aspect of this phenomenon. We are thus absorbed or immersed in the diegesis and ideally everything that surrounds us in the cinema fades away. And it is because there is no connection possible between these two worlds that the spectators can be absorbed in the film, a process later described by psycho-analytic film theories, and in particular by Christian Metz, in terms of identification.

The situation is different when we look at the cinema of attractions. You have already referred to the actors looking at the camera, thus establishing a connection with the spectators in the theater. The French film historian Georges Sadoul wrote about Georges Méliès that he simply reproduced the viewpoint of the “gentleman in the stalls.”<sup>9</sup> But if we look more closely at Méliès's films, we can see that this is not just a simple reproduction of the relation between the audience and an actor or performer on a stage. Addressing the camera and, in the screening situation, the audience, creates in fact quite a complex situation, because the spectators know that they are looking at the projected image of a performer, and yet this performer seems to address them. As I have argued in an article on this phenomenon of the “gentleman in the stalls,”<sup>10</sup> the incongruity of the image addressing the spectators could be seen as an attraction in its own right. So in this example, the screen is not the interface allowing our access to the diegetic world, but rather a surface on which appears a very ambivalent space; one that is inaccessible to the viewer and yet it seems possible to communicate with it, or at least people in this space seem to communicate with us. So in this respect we could actually say that viewers' relationship with the screen did change in the transition from the cinema of attractions to the cinema of narrative integration.

**DC-JM:** Considering the field of television, you collect some theories in which “interestingly, it seems that the term “*dispositif*” is used [...] mainly with regard to either production or the product, but does not, contrary to Baudry’s theory of the *dispositif*, address the specific viewing situation of television”;<sup>11</sup> in the same way, considering the field of media history, you remark that “for Hicethier the concept of *dispositif* with regard to television is by no means limited to the positioning of a viewer in front of a TV set, but includes all the other aspects – technological, social, cultural, economical, political, etc. – which shape and make possible a televisual communication process.”<sup>12</sup> What could be said about “the specific viewing situation of television” or “the positioning of a viewer in front of a TV set” that would integrate into the theory of screen and enrich it?

**FK:** Again, also with television we have more than one viewing situation and in any event we can note quite important historical changes. In the 1950s and 1960s, television mainly was a family viewing experience, and television historians have analyzed how the coming of television also modified the whole set-up of the living room, with the TV set becoming a focal point. With the multiplication of channels and the lower prices of TV sets, including portable ones, more and more households had more than one set and alongside family viewing, more compartmentalized forms of viewing appeared. There are of course many cultural and social differences in viewing habits, and the fact that the TV is switched on does not necessarily imply that someone is actually watching. Then there was the VCR, which allowed delayed viewing, so that audiences were no longer bound to the program schedule imposed by the networks. In today’s digital media environment, online services such as Netflix offer yet another viewing experience, with the possibility of “binge-watching” a whole season of a series, something that DVD box sets had also allowed. So, there is not one specific viewing position, and thus we need to carefully analyze the various configurations we want to study.

A second point we could make is related to what I said earlier about the difference between a projection screen and a light-emitting display. It is thanks to their mobility that we can witness today what Francesco Casetti has described as the “relocation” of cinema.<sup>13</sup> So the home-viewing situation has become part of the modes of consumption of film images. This *dispositif* clearly differs from the one described by Baudry, but interestingly also tries to emulate it as much as possible. In addition, the mobile screens that have become our constant companions open up the possibility for different viewing positions, which clearly are “not cinema,” but they do exist and as scholars we need to take them into account.

For me, this is the immense power of the concept of *dispositif*: it can help us better understand the wide range of possibilities we have today when we want to watch moving images, and a historical pragmatics can help us to frame these and to analyze them in view of the communicative processes they bring into play.