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NEW MEDIA, ART-SCIENCE AND CONTEMPORARY ART: TOWARDS A HYBRID DISCOURSE?

Apparatus, Instrument, Apparel: an Essay of Definitions

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Abstract

An essay of definitions, this article attempts very briefly to problematize the terminology employed to discuss or critique media art works. It examines three terms: *apparatus*, *instrument*, and introduces the notion of *apparel*. This article also attempts a hybrid discourse by navigating through the definitions of these concepts by way of music and science theories.

Keywords

apparatus, instrument, apparel

Dispositivo, instrumento, aparato: un ensayo de definiciones

Resumen

En el presente artículo se intenta, mediante el ensayo de una serie de definiciones, exponer muy brevemente la problemática que suscita la terminología empleada en los procesos de debate o crítica de las obras de arte de los medios. Por otro lado, se examinan tres términos: dispositivo, instrumento y se introduce la noción de aparato. Asimismo, en el artículo se intenta formular un discurso híbrido navegando por las definiciones de estos conceptos a través de la música y de las teorías científicas.

Palabras clave

dispositivo, instrumento, aparato

Introduction

This text stems from research about instrumental playing in audiovisual art. About playing images and sounds with instruments. In that context, outside of the domain of music, I had to define what I mean by an instrument, and in doing so I had to distinguish it from other terms such as apparatus. Looking into what is an instrument, I looked at how instruments are defined in science and in music, two domains where the word is of common use. My aim here is rather modest; it is to give a few hints at definitions, hoping that some discussions might arise out of these.

Apparatus

In French the term *dispositif* is often encountered in contemporary art discourse. In English, it is translated as “apparatus” and is probably less in use outside cinema criticism; one would see “device” as a common term that shares with the French *dispositif* a vagueness as to what it is precisely. Devices are often part of and confused with installations as the former generally designates any assortment of electronic or digital equipment intervening in the space or in the relation of the spectator with the image and with their self-image, to transform the experiencing subject and the space of the work.

Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben questions the concept of apparatus used by Foucault, who never really defined it. All apparatuses have to do with the construction of the subject and their position relating to a concrete and particular situation: “Apparatuses must produce their subject”, he writes (Agamben, 2009).

The aim of French cinema theoretician, Jean-Louis Baudry, writing in the wake of the political upheaval in France in May 1968, was to decode the filmic technical apparatus in terms of an ideological configuration, meant for replacing the comprehension of reality (human, material, cultural and economic) by virtues of misrecognition, suspension of disbelief and the impression of reality. Baudry defines the cinematographic apparatus as “support and instrument of ideology [which constitutes] the ‘subject’ by the illusory delimitation of a central position” (Rosen, 1986, p. 295). By contrast, for Anne-Marie Duguet, French theoretician and art critic writing in the late 1980s, when the apparatus took the form of video installations using electronic devices, it activates a radical displacement of the experience of the work. The work becomes a “relational system” (*système relationnel*), as she calls it, which returns the spectator to their own perceptive activity. The electronic apparatus, she writes, allows artists greater liberty in the arrangement of elements in the work, playing on the

malleability in capturing, producing, reproducing, disseminating, and perceiving images and sounds, for reflecting on spectatorship within the work (Duguet, 1988, p. 223). The apparatus is therefore a device or set of devices aiming at decentering or displacing the spectator, at dislodging them from the position of stillness and centeredness that cinema seemed to impose. The apparatus is thus concerned with spectatorship and the positioning of an imaginary subject.

Instrument

But this terminology (*dispositif/apparatus*) is insufficient and unsatisfactory. Even the term *interactive* has become outmoded and insufficient to describe or talk about some types of new media works. These terms lack the subtlety required to address the specific features of audiovisual and new media performances or installations.

Tools and *instruments* are often thought of as being the same or interchangeable terms. Both tools and instruments are conceived as body extensions, and as exteriorizations of (a movement towards) the power of humans to anticipate and imagine. French philosopher Gilbert Simondon (Simondon, 1958)¹ defines the tool as a technical object extending or gearing up the body to accomplish a gesture, and the instrument as a technical object that enables the body to extend and adapt in order to obtain a better perception (Simondon, 1958, p. 114). While instruments can be seen as “extensions” of the body, or as enhancements of human perception, according to American philosopher Don Ihde, there exist two orders of relations for instruments: a relation where we experience the world through technology and “a second group of relations [that] does not extend or enhance sensory-bodily capacities but, rather, linguistic and interpretive capacities”. In addition to the more transparent first order referred to as “experienced-through” (microscope/telescope), there is a second order of relations composed of degrees of opacity where the technology is a “quasi-other”, a relation through which the world is perceived as “experienced-with” technology (a computer or spectrographic imagery for instance). This second order is called a “hermeneutic relation” (Ihde, 1991, p. 75). It requires a more or less sophisticated hermeneutic knowledge as to how to use the instrument, and read and interpret its results. Instruments are therefore embedded in the fact that they are always in use and in situation, intertwined within the context and the situation in which they occur and oriented by the intentionality of human embodiment.

Musical instruments also are rooted in human embodiment. Ethnomusicologist André Schaeffner sees the origin of musical instruments in human societies in what unites “language and singing,

1. I quote from the 1989 French edition. Even though Simondon’s book was first published in French more than 50 years ago, there is still no full English translation of it. You can find online part one of the book in English translation: <<http://accursedshare.blogspot.com/2007/11/gilbert-simondon-on-mode-of-existence.html>>. There is useful information about him on Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilbert_Simondon. All quotes from this book are my translation.

dance and instruments” – the human body (Schaeffner, 1994). The human body’s first impetus is to make noise and to shape instruments to respond and correspond to its postural and gestural capacities. Schaeffner also reminds us of music’s relationships with the rhythms of work, with toys and games (Schaeffner, 1994, p. 108), and with magic (Schaeffner, 1994, p. 117). According to him, one of the most significant aspects of music is its perpetual power to limit tonal sources through the use of a few privileged materials, fixing their sonic contour or timber to specific degrees of intensity, and through harmonic and rhythmic conventions that establish tonal scales and measures of time. This reduction power of music is similar to the magnification/reduction structure in scientific instruments that Don Ihde noticed (Ihde, 1979, p. 74). Both are intentional limitations, but for different aims: in music it is for the production of sounds as music acceptable to a particular culture; in science it is aimed at producing knowledge by eliminating irrelevant data and amplifying others in a given experimental situation.

Ihde noted also the similarity between electronic and digital instruments in music and those in art and science (Ihde, 2007, p. 22): He noticed in musical instruments what he called their *multi-stability* in reference to how their use is transformed by the context just as scientific instruments are built in reference to a context of use and observation (telescope-astronomy). This multi-stability of instruments means they are open machines. They are in a dialogic loop with the performer (in music) or the observer (in science). Instruments, by nature, are not immersive. There must be a triangulation between the instrumentalist, the instrument, and a visible or an audible result, whether in science or music.

Apparel

Jean-Louis Déotte introduced the notion of *appareil* (Déotte, 2001) which unfortunately is at times difficult to distinguish from the idea of *episteme* as we find it in Foucault. Déotte has had many followers, particularly in the study of photography and dance (eg, Fabbri, 2005). I want to translate here *appareil* as “apparel”.

Interestingly, the English verb “to apparel” is derived from the Middle English *appareillen*, from the Middle French *apareillier*, to prepare. Dance theoretician Véronique Fabbri sees the distinction between *apparel* and *instrument* lying in the relations of apparel with material (*matériau*):

[...] the instrument, the tool, the machine have the common function of transforming a material, of submitting it to a form. The apparel on the contrary arranges the material and renders it available for transformation or for being set in motion (*mis en oeuvre*). (Fabbri, 2005, p. 95)

The distinction we find here is poorly expressed and confused, using the terms *instrument*, *tool* and *machine* without sufficiently

defining them, and they are seemingly grouped together in opposition to the apparel. But let us retain here that the apparel seems to be what makes materials useable, conform to a “project”, says Fabbri. In electronic music, writes Fabbri, electronic audio systems and devices, which constitute the apparel of the studio, make it possible for the sound (audio signals) to be a material at the composer’s disposal (Fabbri, 2005).

While instruments are not immersive, always maintaining or requiring the triangulation of the player, the instrument and the audible or visible results, the apparel of the studio can be immersive and environmental, somehow abolishing the distinction of the viewer/art object through participative/immersive modes of spectatorship. In this vein, one can use, as does Fabbri, the notion borrowed from Benjamin of the *reception in distraction*, the form of reception Benjamin sees as our relation to architecture, rather through habits and in a tactile and kinetic fashion than through distant contemplation and visual apprehension (Benjamin, 1991). Thus a distinctive mark of the instrument is its active and singular implementation of imagination and anticipation in performance within the apparel of the studio. Following Simondon (1958), I would also add that we must distinguish form and information; forms are what machines are made of, they are known already; information is the new and unknown and only human or living entities can interpret information. Instrumental playing forms and informs sonic and visual materials.

The apparel can also be what adorns the body of the player/dancer/spectator: data suit, harness, head-mounted display, and the like. The body is here appareled; it is immersed in data feedback loops. This situation abolishes distinctions between the body and the data world; it favours tactile apprehension over distant visual or aural perception. In considering virtual reality and augmented reality, the notion of a *body-appareled* has to be distinct from the *body-playing-instrument*, from instrumental playing, even though they might use similar technologies.

To conclude, if terminology alone does not explain the apparent great divide between new media arts and contemporary art, it is certainly part of the equation. So I hope that by refining some of the concepts we can produce more accurate and productive discourses about new media. Art historians and critics are rarely well trained in science and technology and often do not know how to speak about new media works. A hybrid discourse is necessary as well as multidisciplinary explorations and research; in that endeavour we would only be following the lead of many contemporary artists.

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