

9

The Rise of the *Dispositif*

In 2003, the low-budget Danish film *The Five Obstructions* was an unlikely success in art house cinemas, around film festivals, and subsequently on DVD; it has become so popular in film study courses that an entire book (in English), compiled by Mette Hjort, was devoted to it in 2008. The film itself is simple yet novel, and paradoxically involving for what is, essentially, an exercise in conceptual art.

Lars von Trier approaches his friend and filmmaking mentor, Jørgen Leth, with a crazy idea: the older man must remake his own classic, experimental short *The Perfect Human* (1967) – von Trier's favourite film, we are informed – five times over, but each time with an 'obstruction' or condition that at once sets a challenge and creates difficulties: it has to be an animation, it must be shot in Cuba, each shot can be no longer than twelve frames, Leth must play the central role...and so on. Leth performs ably, failing only once (and is thus compelled to re-do that version). The final variation is a surprise move on von Trier's part: he unveils his remake of *The Perfect Human*, for which Leth must read a pre-scripted voice-over, and credit the finished work to himself.

Like *The Perfect Human* itself, *The Five Obstructions* is a film beyond genre: is it fiction, documentary, essay, experimental? Its charm is undeniable; gradually, under the surface and between the five remakes, in the cracks of the conversation and in the artistic decisions that each participant makes, we glimpse the details of the friendship between these two men. A cerebral game gives way to a 'perfectly human' dimension we did not expect from it at the start. Was that von Trier's aim all along: to set up a rule-bound structure (a method of which he is very fond) that, ultimately, lets in a different kind of light, ending up in unforeseen places? We may never know the answer to that one

but, incontrovertibly, *The Five Obstructions* is an emblem of the rise of a new kind of film – one that is based, at least in the first instance, on the logic of a *dispositif*.

Games and rules

What is a *dispositif*? To put it, at the outset, in the simplest terms, and in the manner most pertinent to an example such as *The Five Obstructions*: it is a game with rules, where the execution of the game's moves – the following of the rules – generates outcomes, results and sometimes surprises. These rules can be the structures or parameters of a film. It is useful to keep in mind that, in fields such as urban planning and in various branches of the social sciences (see Kessler, 2006a), *dispositif* is a term used to describe such mundane set-ups in the everyday world as the operation of traffic lights or the organisation of rites such as funerals (social *mise en scène*, again). In a more sinister and wide-reaching vein (including but also going far beyond works of art), the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has defined a *dispositif* as 'literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings' (Agamben, 2009, p. 14).

So, a *dispositif* is basically this: the arrangement of diverse elements in such a way as to trigger, guide and organise a set of actions. Michel Foucault stressed the *heterogeneity* of those elements – bits and pieces from all over the place – and thus grasped the logic of a *dispositif* as the 'nature of the connection that can exist between these heterogeneous elements' (Foucault, 1980, p. 194). Yet, as we will see – and as *The Five Obstructions* amply demonstrates – a *dispositif* is (or can be) much more than the application or illustration of a pre-set procedure (like obediently crossing the street); it may resemble a machine, but it can be an anarchic machine, a crazy machine.

Luc Moullet, a critic for *Cahiers* in the 1950s and a filmmaker since the 1960s, has emerged as a principal theorist of the *dispositif* in cinema – not surprisingly, when we consider that many of his droll comedies proceed by a rigorous principle of entropy (*The Comedy of Work*, 1987) or that his inspired feature documentary *Origins of a Meal* (1979) takes a single idea all the way to its conclusion: to trace the ingredients of a humble, dinner-time meal right back, down through the complex, multinational chain of food production, to their animal sources. If anyone can do justice to the anarchistic possibilities of a *dispositif*, it is him.

In a 2007 article titled 'Les dispositifs du cinéma contemporain', Moullet enumerates the strategies and tactics of the many films that are, in one way or another, intensively rule-bound. A *dispositif* film – to render Moullet's own idiomatic voice, I feel like translating that as *contraption* – operates like the literary conceits of Georges Perec and other members of the Oulipo group (see Mathews, 2003) who would (for instance) write an entire novel under the pre-set constraint of never using a particular letter of the alphabet. Thus, the 'disposition' (as the word is sometimes translated) usually announces its structure or system at the outset – in the opening scene, even in the work's title – and then must follow through with it, step by step, all the way to the bitter or blessed end.

Once regarded as an eccentric aberration in Peter Greenaway movies (such as *The Falls* [1980] and *Drowning by Numbers* [1988]), or avant-garde exemplars like Hollis Frampton's *Hapax Legomena* (1971–1972), such procedures are now at the centre of progressive world cinema. We need only look, among Asian films of the past two decades, at the work of Hong Sang-soo and Hou Hsiao-hsien, or canny East European directors such as Kira Muratova (*Eternal Homecoming*, 2012) and Corneliu Porumboiu (*When Evening Fall on Bucharest or Metabolism*, 2013). The *dispositif* strategies and structures used there include: numbered sections (and even numbered titles: *Five, Ten, Three Times, Three Stories*); intensive restrictions on camera angle and point-of-view; entire narrative structures built on a formal idea and its eventual, long-delayed pay-off – as in the final face-off of two, intense close-ups concluding the day-in, day-out, dispassionately recorded repetitions of Masahiro Kobayashi's *The Rebirth* (2007); films built up from parts, layers and sections, such as Todd Haynes' *I'm Not There* (2007) with its multiple Bob Dylans.

The place where *dispositifs* have really proliferated, of course, is online, using the often simple tools of digital media creation. Although this type of work is often associated with comedic diversion, a strikingly serious example gives a good indication of what can be achieved with a 'procedural' form. American political artist Natalie Bookchin's *Testament* series from 2009 collects and assembles clips from YouTube. In this series, *Laid Off* is an expertly chilling document of massive unemployment. It gathers – each on their own screen – the monologues of citizens who tell the tales of losing their job. Bookchin sequences these clips to form one vast, collective monologue – almost the 'voice of the people' on a particularly bad day – by grouping several together whenever the same or similar phrase pops up (such as 'looking for something better' or 'Now I've got more time for myself'). The multi-screen montage work is both

sequential (one screen lighting up after another) and simultaneous. But the only moment when *all* screens play simultaneously, in a communal cry mingling rage and despair, is when two little words, shared by all these YouTube videos, are uttered: namely, 'laid off'.

Rule dogma guys

Two snapshots of a changing, global film culture, from the beginning of 2010.

1. A negative review of Abbas Kiarostami's 2008 feature film *Shirin* (which I discuss below) in *Cahiers du cinéma* by Patrice Blouin – a perceptive critic who has been attentive, since the 1990s (in the pages of *Art Press* as well as *Cahiers*) to new media, post-TV forms like video games. Blouin recalls the way in which Kiarostami began the decade, in *Ten* (2002), with the 'audacious gesture' of attaching cameras to the left and right sides of a car and simply letting his cast members drive off to improvise their conversation, thus seeking precisely to 'do away with *mise en scène*' (Blouin, 2010, p. 74). And what replaces the traditional procedures of *mise en scène* – staging, dressing the décor and setting the lights, choreographing the camera, guiding and cueing the actors – in *Ten*? Precisely a *dispositif*, a fixed and systematic set-up or arrangement of elements (in this case: bodies, cameras, sight-lines, moving object, passing cityscape) that enables what Blouin describes as an 'automatic recording' (Blouin, 2010, p. 74).
2. Alongside all the 'best films of the year' lists run by cinema magazines the world over, in print or online, a new sort of poll has started to gain prominence: it is geared to 'moving image highlights', and draws upon not only theatrical or festival screenings but also, and increasingly, Internet platforms. I contributed to one such poll my delighted discovery of the website maintained by the group Pomplamoose, on which Nataly Dawn and Jack Conte unveil a VideoSong (as they term it) for each of their new musical recordings. Pomplamoose offers a disconcertingly light-hearted flipside to the gloomy vision Jean-Luc Godard concocted, 35 years previously, for *Numéro deux* (1975) – wherein the shut-in, working-class inhabitants of a high-rise apartment complex are viewed only ever on unglamorous video footage framed within domestic TV sets positioned in the darkness of the full 35 millimetre image. For Dawn and Conte, the 'total environment' apartment has become a DIY home-studio (we rarely see anything beyond it), and this studio seems more like a children's playground

than a prison or a hell. Their VideoSongs adhere to two exact rules of self-determined construction: 'What you see is what you hear (no lip-syncing for instruments or voice). 2. If you hear it, at some point you see it (no hidden sounds)' (TheBestArts, 2014). This *dispositif* (in this case, there is no better word for it) generates amusing gags: whenever Nataly overdubs herself singing (as she frequently does), we instantly jump to multiple split-screens – in order to maintain the integrity of the game's rules. 'I'm a rule dogma kind of guy', remarks Conte (Dag, 2009) – doubtless alluding to the famous, rule-based Dogme manifesto of von Trier and his compatriots in Denmark (see Kelly, 2001). Fixed digital cameras, set positions, restrictions on place and action: who could have guessed, in the days of *Numéro deux*, Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) or even Kiarostami's combative *Ten* that a *dispositif* could be this much fun? Four years on from my initial discovery of their work, Pomplamoose unveiled online a new audiovisual work based on their song 'Like a Million' – a 'projection-mapped video' which ingeniously incorporates 'foam-block sets, a makeshift Green Screen, and a leaf blower as a wind machine' (Riley-Adams, 2014) – which rivals Skolimowski's *Walkover* in its multiplication of spaces, actions and perspectives that fracture the continuity of what is, in fact, a single take.

Time takes a cigarette

Among the most spectacular audiovisual *dispositifs* I have had the privilege of standing in a large room and experiencing is Chantal Akerman's *Women from Antwerp in November* (2008) – a major work on par, in terms of artistic achievement, with any of her greatest films. It is a multi-screen piece that can be laid out in variable ways according to the space, but here is how I saw it at the Camden Arts Centre in UK in the year it was produced. On one wall, a multiplicity of images, for 20 minutes: all women, every one of them caught in those pregnant, in-between moments so beloved of Akerman's cinema – smoking, waiting, perhaps parting from or greeting a companion. Each is a little screen-window with the exact, characteristic *mise en scène* of this director: a static frame, painterly composition and colour, and performances of pose and gesture that are minimal yet evoke, tantalisingly, entire potential narratives of love, loss, identity, conflict, cohabitation, solitude...

On the facing wall, only one, very large image, in black and white. A woman takes a cigarette from an ashtray, smokes it, butts it out. A slow fade-in at the start and fade-out at the end – and looped, as are all

the images in this installation. In this room in which there is no other interior or exterior mode of lighting, the wall-size image itself serves as the mechanism which gives and extinguishes light for the spectators who make their way, tentatively, in the space. The acute feeling for the viewer, as the level of illumination in the room waxes and wanes, is of being physically absorbed, taken completely into the action of smoking itself: *Time Smoking a Picture*, to recall the title of a William Hogarth print from circa 1761 that was recycled by former film theorist Thierry Kuntzel for his 1980 work of video art – 'simple gestures and images (a figure smoking a cigarette, a frame within a frame) unfold in time as elusive manifestations of reality and representation, transformed by barely perceptible variations of shifting colour and passages of light' (Electronic Arts Intermix, 2014). That description also serves Akerman's work well.

Women from Antwerp in November is close to Akerman's many feature length and short films – and yet also distant. Silence reigns; this time, there is no flood of sensuous classical or pop music as we so often hear in the sonic spaces of her cinema. The narrative frame that she commonly uses (sometimes reluctantly) has largely disappeared in that giant puff of cigarette smoke. The temporal looping creates a new kind of variegated spectacle, going in and out of different, only partly synchronised phases – you never quite see the same concatenation of screens, at the same level of brightness, in the same way. And, meanwhile, you have to decide what to look at and when, between the two walls. The mechanical aspect of the digital projection – but also the variations in individual spectator experience this allows – are what make it a gallery *dispositif* rather than a conventionally projected movie.

Akerman is only one in a wave of filmmakers – Harun Farocki, Agnès Varda, Pedro Costa, Víctor Erice, Tsai are others – who have seemingly 'migrated' to the art gallery scene and the generous funding opportunities it provides, just as more narratively inclined filmmakers have gravitated to television, in recent years. In truth, most of these artists would prefer to keep alternating between big-screen cinema and digital installations, whenever possible. But there is no doubt that this infusion of adventurous filmmakers into the art world has helped both to expand what we think cinema is, and to enliven the sphere of new media art which, traditionally, has had too little contact with its imposing, audiovisual neighbour (see Balsom, 2013; Bruno, 2007; Fowler, 2012).

Within 25 years, we have witnessed a move from the simplistic techno-rhetoric of 'every spectator can interactively remake the movies they watch' (but would my or your imaginary version of *Touch of Evil* really

be any better than the one Orson Welles first proposed?) to directors themselves 'disassembling' their films and reworking them in 'machinic' configurations – such as Akerman did when she turned *D'Est* (1993) into the multi-screen installation *From the East: Bordering on Fiction* (1995), or Farocki did when he compiled his collected audiovisual documents about diverse modes of building (from hand-made mud bricks to wholly automated construction sites) as both a feature film (*In Comparison*, 2009) and a two-screen installation (*Comparison via a Third*, 2007). Varda is merrily philosophical in her acceptance of this ongoing mutation in her audiovisual practice: as she stated in 2010, 'My installations use films and, one might say, my recent film, *The Beaches of Agnès* [2008], is a kind of installation' (O'Neill-Butler, 2009).

It is commonplace, in many contemporary discussions of the 'art and film' relationship – sometimes cast as a fractious, antagonistic relationship, at other times as a mutual love-in – to recall what divides the cinema as a 'black box' from the gallery as a 'white cube'. Light is (as Akerman cannily grasped) one of the key issues here: how can filmic images survive in brightly lit spaces – and must mini-black boxes always be constructed for the express purpose of their proper projection? In the Pompidou Centre's inaugural 'film as art' exhibition of 2006, *Le mouvement d'images*, American artist Nan Goldin created a striking 'cinema effect' for her contribution by having her still photographs projected in looped slides within a completely black, curtained-off box – complete with a song-list musical accompaniment audible only inside this space.

Sound is, indeed, another of the main, contentious issues: how to deal with the 'bleeding' of sound between zones or booths in a gallery, from one work to another: is each one cancelled, or will only the strongest survive? Headphones dangling from the wall at each image-monitor has usually proven a weak solution; although Varda herself gave this option an ingenious tweak for her *The Widows of Noirmoutier* (2004), where each headphone set attached to each of the 14 chairs arranged in the space gave sonic access to only one of the many digital images playing simultaneously on the wall ahead, each a three or four minute portrait of a widow telling their story, and the pattern of these surrounding a central, 35 millimetre image of all the women on a beach, moving around a table – necessitating much musical-chair shuffling on the part of spectators keen to catch the entire experience! Or – as Varda also pre-planned – 'If you don't put on the headphones or sit down, then the 14 videos just appear to be silent and you don't hear anything but the ocean and a violin from the central film' (O'Neill-Butler, 2009).

Above all, there is the fact of the ubiquitous distraction of the modern spectator in the generally ambulant, take-it-or-leave-it, whimsical setting of an art gallery. Cinema depends, as many have argued, on the locked-in, sat-down position of its average (or ideal) viewer – in place for the start of the film, and (hopefully) still there at the end. The fixed duration and linear unfolding of a film matters, and this is precisely what the situation of the gallery cannot guarantee – that is, unless it completely overturns the normal protocols of art exhibition.

This debate – if it can be considered such – is precisely what Raymond Bellour gives the title of 'la querelle des dispositifs' ('quarrel of the *dispositifs*'), which is also the title of his 2012 book. It is Cinema versus the Audiovisual all over again, except that now it is no longer so much the video or TV image which gets cast as the enemy, but the LCD monitor in a gallery or, more dramatically, the tiny, mobile, digital telephone screen onto which people stream all manner of images – including feature films. But is there a way to resolve this dispute which would give something new to both cinema and art, rather than subtracting from their supposed, respective 'essences'?

Let me be perfectly clear here: I do not believe that the cinema, as we have known it, is dead or dying; or that the medium of film has deserted projection halls once and for all in order to be completely absorbed (happily or sadly, according to your temperament) into galleries, museums and digital archives (including your humble laptop computer). My contention is at once more modest and more inclusive: that the contemporary workings of *dispositifs* can offer us a new entrée into rethinking the field of film aesthetics, in a way that *mise en scène*, on its own, has not always invited or encouraged – especially whenever we doggedly hold on to its purest and most classical definition.

The concept of *dispositif*, leading or prompting this type of thought process, will not enjoy an eternal reign; like every term (*mise en scène* included) it will likely have its glory day, and then merge into a larger background – lying dormant, ready for its comeback at another time. But, beyond the fickle winds and tides of intellectual and cultural fashion, it is this larger background – the enduring questions of the aesthetics of audiovisual media (including, but not limited to, cinema) – that I hope to penetrate here by exploring the ways and means of *dispositifs*.

You and me and rain on the roof

The *dispositif* movement (if we can call it that) has, as one of its figure-heads, the great Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami – especially in the more

overtly experimental years of his career between *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999) and *Certified Copy* (2010), when he pursued projects diversified across several media, sometimes in gallery settings (see Martin, 2010). Three examples will give the flavour of his researches.

In one of the video-letters he contributed to the landmark exhibition *Correspondences: Erice-Kiarostami* (2006–2007), Kiarostami offers a lengthy series of digital images – landscape and urban views – filmed through a rain-spattered car window. Each one is slightly animated with a small, digital, zoom-in reframing – but this shows or reveals nothing not immediately visible or evident. The final image in the series announces itself as final precisely by having the windshield wipers suddenly erase the rain drops and cancel the *dispositif*. Kiarostami is fond of car-generated *dispositifs*, as in the system of framings, entries, exits, scene dramaturgy and cuts generated by the two-camera set-up on the front seats in *Ten*.

Shirin (which was disparaged by Blouin in *Cahiers*) offers another bold *dispositif*. A lush, Persian historical-mythological epic begins, and we see its start and end credits – but, for its entire unfolding, we only hear this imaginary film off-screen, while we gaze at the faces of many spectators who react to it in diverse ways (some of them highly emotional). All these viewers are women, and all (except for Juliette Binoche) well-known Iranian actresses. No matter – this is, indeed, part of the work's beguiling charm – that the women are not really sitting all together in a movie theatre (each was set up, separately, in Kiarostami's house), and that their reactions are triggered neither by watching nor even hearing the off-screen film-within-the-film named *Shirin*! Kiarostami's *dispositifs* like to declare their artifice, their generation from assorted types of permutation – combinations tried out until a final form is settled upon.

A final example from Kiarostami is comparatively little known, and for that reason worth describing and recommending here (it can be found on YouTube): his eight and a half minute video *No* (2011), made for French television as part of a series on 'women's hair' (!). For the first six and half minutes of the piece, a very young girl is interviewed (in Italian) by an off-screen casting manager. The entire story of the film for which she is auditioning (more than a little reminiscent of F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'Bernice Bobs Her Hair') is recounted to her, culminating in the action of the girl having her hair cut dramatically short by an envious or malicious companion – which would have to happen in reality in order for the film to work.

With a growing tension, the girl thinks, becomes increasingly silent, resists, makes alternative suggestions; the adult interviewer keeps

enticing her with the lure of being in a film, becoming famous... and then pressing her with the key question, 'Are you OK with us cutting off your hair?' Terminating this hilariously gruelling exchange (Kiarostami's much grimmer *Homework* [1989], also featuring children, comes to mind), the girl delivers her final, resolute 'no'. Then the video jumps into a montage, as music begins (for the first time) on the soundtrack: eight more girls, presumably having been through exactly the same interview process, are all seen thinking, then firmly shaking their head and mouthing 'no'. Few montage sequences in cinema are as enthralling and moving as this! The piece concludes with a girl (not one of those we have seen) swimming in a pool, her luxuriant, long hair streaming in the water.

As is typical of many Kiarostami works, one is left wondering: was there ever, in fact, a project to shoot (and hence cast) this narrative, or was it simply a pretext to capture the children's interviews? (Apichatpong played a similar trick with his 'making of' documentation of a film project that did not actually exist – no film was even in the camera – for his video *Worldly Desires* [2004].) If so, did Kiarostami foresee the wholesale refusal he would receive? In other words, when exactly was the idea for structuring the film around the word (and idea) of 'no' born? The answer, ultimately, matters little: whether grasped by chance during the process or manoeuvred at the outset, Kiarostami has structured a splendid, miniature *dispositif*.

A thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble

Some may be confused by my constant use of the term *dispositif* to signal, primarily, the setting-up and playing of games. Does not this word, in the annals of film theory, usually come freighted with associations of Plato's Cave, illustrated with images of the seemingly robotic, passive spectators dazzled out of their minds by a 3D blockbuster – the kind of viewing mob we glimpse, with its collective eyes shut, at the beginning of Leos Carax's *Holy Motors* (2012)? Does not *dispositif* translate as *apparat* – thus cueing the well-worn theory of the 'cinematic apparatus'?

In fact, the word-idea *dispositif* feeds into contemporary arts commentary from at least five different sources – sometimes with overlaps, sometimes with confusions. But all these sources help to feed the usefulness of the concept: the theory of *dispositif* is itself a *dispositif*!

There are five main lines of *dispositif* inquiry feeding into our present moment. First, a return (for instance in Kessler, 2006b) to the meaning of the term in the foundational film theory texts of Jean-Louis Baudry

(1978) where it has a wider, more diverse sense than is often realised – partly due to a problem of its linguistic translation, as we shall see. Second, and perhaps most prevalently today, a political-cultural deployment of the term that originated with Michel Foucault (1980), taken in a particular direction by Gilles Deleuze (1992), then revived and expanded by Giorgio Agamben in his short 2006 book *What is an Apparatus?* (2009). Third is Vilém Flusser's suggestive, shorthand use of the term, especially in the sole major essay that he wrote (in 1979) on cinema, 'On Film Production and Consumption' (Flusser, 2006). Fourth, Jean-François Lyotard's enthusiastic and extensive deployment of the term to describe all manner of phenomena in his 1970s socio-philosophical theory of the 'libidinal economy' (1993). Lastly, there is a use of the term that has crept in from art criticism, especially in relation to installation art (indeed, *installation* could be another workable translation of *dispositif*) since the pioneering work of Anne-Marie Duguet (1988) – and this, in turn, has nurtured recent film criticism addressing the film/art interchange.

Dispositif or apparatus? When film students imbibe second-hand, summary accounts of apparatus theory, they are often learning (badly) to conflate two quite different though necessarily overlapping terms in Baudry's essays of the 1970s – both of which came indiscriminately translated as apparatus. On the one hand, Baudry posed the *appareil de base*, the basic cinematic apparatus which consists of the tools and machines of camera, projector, celluloid, photographic registration, and the like. The *dispositif*, on the other hand, is instantly and necessarily more of a social machine, a set-up, arrangement or disposition of elements that add up to the cinema-going experience: body in a chair, dark room, light from the projector hitting a screen. When Bellour speaks of the quarrel of *dispositifs*, he means it in just this sense: the classical situation of film viewing, in a darkened auditorium and for a fixed amount of time (actual celluloid projection is optional, in his account), versus the highly variable situation of watching it on a computer, a mobile phone, in a gallery or on a public screen in a civic square.

Baudry posed the movement between his two terms in the following way: where the basic cinematic apparatus already implies the fact of projection, the *dispositif* definitively adds in the spectator, and everything that comes with the spectator's experience of a film (Baudry, 1978). Since the era of Baudry's texts, to counter this rather abstract category of ideal or Platonic spectatorship, successive commentators have gradually added all the economic, architectural and social conditions in and around the movie theatre (single-screen or, more usually

today, multiplex): its proximity to or inclusion within a shopping centre, for instance. However, where Flusser evoked a dark nightmare of social determinism, Lyotard (1993) stressed the energetic, indeed libidinal dynamics of any given *dispositif*, from the human body itself to what he dubs the 'representational chambers' (Lyotard, 1993, p. 3, translation amended) of theatre, cinema and television.

The influence of art criticism on film analysis is significant, because it helps us negotiate a fruitful passage between the vast social ensembles of state control that Foucault, Flusser and Agamben conjure, and the specific audiovisual works that also internally construct a system of relations between thoroughly heterogeneous elements. Erika Balsom, for instance, mixes Baudry with Foucault in order to discern, in the 16 millimetre projection-exhibitions of Tacita Dean, a 'new and different conception of medium specificity' created from the conjuncture of the 'economic and ideological determinations of the space of the gallery work in tandem with the material attributes of analogue film' (Balsom, 2009, p. 416; see also Balsom, 2013).

The cinematic *dispositif* today is no longer apprehended in the abstract or ideal terms elaborated by Baudry in the 1970s – it is not a matter of some grand 'cinema machine' before or beyond the forms and contents of any specific film. In this sense, the field of film studies has moved somewhat away from pure theory, and closer to specific acts of critical analysis. Once again, however, it not a question of rejecting one thing (film theory) and replacing it with another (film criticism). As we bring these ideas to bear on particular works, it helps to bear in mind a mobile, dual-level concept of what *dispositif* means.

Every medium or art form (whether novel, theatre or art gallery/museum) possesses its own *dispositif*, in the sense of the essential or usual conditions under which it is experienced. What theorists once defined as the basic set-up of the cinematic experience is neither eternally immutable nor all-determining, but it does offer what we can call (after Kant and Eisenstein) a *Grundproblem* with which every film must work, whether it chooses to or is even aware of it. Thus, each medium has its own broad *dispositif* – arising from a mixture of aesthetic properties and social-historical conditions – and each particular work can create its own rules of the game, its own *dispositif*. Bellour's discussion of artworks in *La Querelle des dispositifs* frequently moves between these two levels of the term's meaning.

Foucault's elaboration of the term, although not addressed to the nature of properties of aesthetic works, is suggestive and helpful. According to him, in each *dispositif* there is both a *functional overdetermination*

(each element in the heterogeneous ensemble 'enters into resonance or contradiction' [Foucault, 1980, p. 195] with the others, leading to constant and dynamic alteration) and a *strategic elaboration* – a need to recognise, deal with and then take further the unexpected, unforeseen effects and affects produced by the essentially experimental, see-what-happens workings of any *dispositif*. This is, as Lyotard stresses, the *positif* aspect of a *dispositif*.

Body and brain

In 1999, Kent Jones wrote a book in the British Film Institute Modern Classics series on Robert Bresson's *L'argent* (1983). His salutary aim was to offer an alternative approach to the many studies of this director that paint him (often with his own happy complicity, as his published notes and interviews [1997, 2013] attest) as a control freak, a rigid formalist enforcing his own, strict procedures, someone obsessed with his own theory of what cinema should be... By contrast, Jones evokes Bresson as an artist devoted to capturing *sensations*, often of an elusive, atmospheric sort: he responded to what was before him – in the environment, in an actor's particular presence – and made an intuitive, largely spontaneous decision as to how to frame it, for how long, at what rhythm, and so on. Jones stresses Bresson's background and training as a painter (which he shares with Pialat, Assayas, Skolimowski, Stallone...) and the type of aesthetic 'impressionism' (in a broad sense) this must have instilled in him.

This revisionist account of Bresson is refreshing. However, rather than counter the formalist version of Bresson, I would prefer to push it further – into the land of the *dispositif*. One sometimes encounters a resistance among film critics to seeing the matter in this way – as if a stress on the conceptual side erases the 'human element' in artistic creation. But that does not have to be the inevitable result of such analysis. Jones' commentary on Bresson extends the collective sensibility first explored in the book *Movie Mutations* (Rosenbaum and Martin, 2003) which began as a chain letter correspondence, initiated by Jonathan Rosenbaum in the mid-1990s, between a group of like-minded critics around the world, Jones and myself included. There we conjure a 'cinema of the body' and related sensations as a net to catch some of our film heroes, from Bresson, Barnet and Maurice Pialat to Abel Ferrara, Grandrieux and Philippe Garrel.

But the sharp, 'outsider' response which concluded this exchange, from Raymond Bellour, pulled me up short. In relation to Jean Eustache

and Chantal Akerman (both of whom we had also drawn into our magic circle of body/sensation artists), Bellour curtly remarks that we had managed to 'never choose the *dispositif* films' or the 'more discursive films' of these filmmakers (such as *Une sale histoire* [1977] or *Les photos d'Alix* [1980] for the former and *Histoires d'Amérique* [1989] for the latter), preferring instead to highlight only the 'most physical' among their works.

In doing so, it is as if we had also grabbed Gilles Deleuze's invaluable meditation (in his *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 1989) on cinema of the body and cinema of the brain – and unfussily amputated the brainy part. Celebrating a cinema of the body and the senses had led us, in Bellour's view, to exclude or 'subordinate' what was, approximately, 'a cinema of speech, of discourse, of critical intent, dissociation, thought, the *dispositif*' (Bellour, 2003, p. 30). He was right: while we were groping for a frenetic *mise en scène* of the body in action such as we loved in Cassavetes or Pialat, we were ignoring the no less important *mise en scène* of recitation and theatricality, and the type of elaborate conceptual schemas it had given rise to in Resnais, Moretti, Fassbinder, Rivette, de Oliveira or Hans-Jürgen Syberberg.

The case of Akerman is revealing. Personally, I have always found her films deeply involving and affecting; as a critic, I have sometimes wanted to dissolve them (particularly *Toute une nuit* [1982] or *Nuit et jour* [1991]) into a lyrical, rapturous memory, a 'cinema of poetry' in the weak, impressionistic sense – a phenomenological mode of reception, as Hodsdon (1992) put it – that then resists hard, analytical formulation. To actually encounter Akerman and hear how she describes her artistic process was, at least for me, something of a shock: she has the soul of a poet, certainly, but some pure, rhapsodic cinema of the body or the senses is the last thing she explicitly champions.

Rather, I received from Akerman the impression of someone who, in approaching or formulating a film she is soon to make, is at pains, above all, to establish its formal parameters, in the widest possible sense of this term, and at every stage of production: rhythm, colour scheme, point-of-view, time structure, choice of music, casting decisions; as well as larger, ethical parameters such as what to show or not (sex? violence?), and how to convey these events within the narrative. Her *dispositif* side, in short. Which in no way contradicts the emotion that any of us can eventually feel when faced with her work.

Bresson's artistic 'signature' is his *dispositif*, the sum of guiding rules and procedures he invented (however flexibly) for himself to follow. Indeed, many 'art cinema' auteur signatures – belonging to Akerman,

Ozu, Angelopoulos, Hou or Haneke, to take only a few classic examples – resemble conceptual *dispositifs*, even though auteurism, with its Romantic attachment to a creed of unfettered creativity, has long fought shy of apprehending this intuition. Cinematic *dispositifs* are often generated (Perec-style) from exclusions – refusals to play by this or that convention deemed corrupt or ossified by the filmmaker – and these, to devotees, constitute the immediately recognisable stylistic traits of many a modern director: the adherence to direct sound recording in Straub and Huillet, the de-dramatisation of performance in Pedro Costa, the absence of typical soundtrack scores in Tsai, the eschewal of shot/reverse shot and consequent frontality in Akerman, the resolutely fixed camera in the Iranian master Sohrab Shahid-Saless ...

But a *dispositif* is not a mechanistic or rigid formal system; it is more like an aesthetic guide-track that is open to as much alteration, surprise or artful contradiction as the filmmaker who sets it in motion decrees. Gilberto Perez's careful analysis (1998) of the visual *dispositif* in Straub and Huillet, for example, conclusively demonstrates that everything which happens (dramatically, sensually and intellectually) in their films occurs as a result of establishing, and subtly varying, their characteristic system of shot/counter shot and eyeline relations – not in excess of or beside that system. At another extreme, Godard is, at once, both pro- and anti-*dispositif*, and often, cheekily, within the same film: *Masculin féminin* (1965), for instance, announces 'fifteen precise facts' in its subtitle – and then proceeds to deliberately scramble the numbering, forget the conceit, and alter the structure mid-flight.

Furthermore, a *dispositif* system is not necessarily tied strictly or exclusively to the familiar, unchanging style of an auteur: some directors (such as Rohmer, João César Monteiro or even Francis Ford Coppola) change their *dispositifs*, slightly or radically, from film to film. The workings of a *dispositif* can be specific to an individual work, such as, for instance, Alain Cavalier's *Libera me* (1993), a minimalist evocation of events and figures in the French Resistance that is conveyed solely in close-ups of faces and objects, with no 'environment' or explicit narrative line.

What would it mean to approach a beloved auteur's *mise en scène* style through the lens of a *dispositif* procedure? What different insight would it bring? The Spanish critic Cristina Álvarez López shows the value and force of this method in her discussion (2013) of Jean-Pierre Melville's debut feature, *Le silence de la mer* (1949) – sometimes described (much to Melville's chagrin) as a Bressonian film, even though its particular brand of rigorous minimalism predated Bresson's own adoption of that mode.

This story of a German soldier, von Ebrennac (Howard Vernon), occupying the house of a French man (Jean-Marie Robain) and his niece (Nicole Stéphane) is, as Álvarez López points out, 'entirely built on the clash between the monologues of one character and the silence of the other two' – a device which constitutes an 'inflexible general pattern' and thus a *dispositif*. Although at first glance naturalistic, the essential *mise en scène* of the situation is 'extremely stylised and artificial', playing on visible light sources (fireplace, lamps) that create a kind of 'Chinese shadow theatre', and making the most of the sonic space comprising an almost-constant score (by Edgar Bischoff), a diegetic piano performance, the sound effect of a ticking clock and the voice-over narration from the Uncle that departs from and brackets the overall *dispositif*.

The film's situation gives rise, through the rigour of its treatment, to its central, dramatic questions: 'Who really holds the power here? The one who wields the word, or those who hide in silence? The one who expresses their thoughts, or those who withhold them?' (Álvarez López, 2013). The subtle modulation within the *mise en scène* prompts the growing awareness, in us, of these reversibilities and ambiguities. It becomes – even within the highly constricted, circumscribed space of a single room – a drama of intervals:

While two of the characters scarcely move from their respective seats throughout the film, the third figure never rests in his attempt to make the space his own. Constantly moving from one side of the salon to another, exploring this home that does not belong to him and engaging in an ever more intimate relationship with the objects that fill it, von Ebrennac executes a subtle, friendly *invasion* that takes the form of a growing *occupation* of the sonic and physical environment. Finally, it hardly matters whether the other two figures remain in their spots: the relations of proximity and distance are constantly modified by the third party and, with each of his movements, the intervals between all three characters are completely reconfigured. (Álvarez López, 2013)

Melville's *mise en scène* is not only expressive – if in a deliberately austere fashion – of the dramatic situation of the characters. His disposition in space of speaking and listening bodies inevitably sparks associations in the viewer's mind (whatever the director's conscious intentions were at the time) with later films – such as *A Dangerous Method* or Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966): we once again have the outline, suitably varied and transformed, of the social *mise en scène* of a psychoanalytic session

(Álvarez López, 2013). This is the true theatre into which Melville's shut-in chamber drama takes us – but, as a manifestation of the discursive 'Word Theatre' that Pasolini (2007, p. 137) dreamt of, it is also a 'cultural ritual' of *mise en scène* which opens out onto the traumatic 'outside' of a wider, collective history.

The time-space continuum – revisited

What has all this movement between art events, YouTube and experimental cinema to do with *mise en scène*, really? Recall Robin Wood's 1961 description of what *mise en scène*, to him, was ultimately all about: 'the organisation of time and space' (qtd in Gibbs, 2002, p. 57). He intended that definition within a classical framework, implicitly evoking the dramaturgical unities of time and space as well as, explicitly, the plastic possibilities of expression afforded by cinema's manipulation of these attributes. The idea of the *dispositif* presents, for our time, another strong means of organising time and space, image and sound, movement and gesture – but along completely different and, in fact, more expansive lines.

Take a historic moment in cinema history. What happened, what changed in the single year between Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt* in 1963 and Vincente Minnelli's *Two Weeks in Another Town* in 1962 – two films concerned with so many of the same narrative issues (international co-production filmmaking) and thematic tropes (games of power and desire that lead to tragic ends)? The gulf between the two films seems, from a certain angle, vast. Implicated in this shift is the evident crossover between classical and modernist cinema, between Hollywood narrative and European art cinema; but that is not all. There is a deeper aesthetic question involved, which goes to the heart of how we conceptualise *mise en scène* at work in one and in the other – and, indeed, in cinema as a medium throughout its entire history.

A crucial point of difference is pinpointed by Bellour in the course of his effort to both critique and extend the notion of *mise en scène*, whose traditional preserve he describes as 'essentially a mode of elaboration of the relations of bodies and shots, in the shot and between the shots, and thus in space and in time, understood as the space and time of the fiction' (Bellour, 2000a, p. 110). But to restrict the action of *mise en scène* to the space-time of the fictional world is already a false move. Bellour (2000a, p. 112) puts the matter succinctly: in the critical history of the term *mise en scène*, too much attention has been paid to the *scène* – the scene as theatrically defined, in line with the term's origin, as a *unity of*

space, time and action – and not enough to the *mise*, to the fundamental process of putting in place, the organising of elements. For him, *mise en scène* as traditionally conceived is, ultimately, only one of the available 'modes of organising images' – and sounds, too – in cinema (Bellour, 2003, p. 29).

To think of narrative cinema, in a foundational gesture, as a matter of more-or-less theatrical scenes – however transformed by the work of the camera and editing – is already a big limitation; yet it is one which much *mise en scène* criticism in the classical mode happily assumes. With this assumption of the centrality of the scene comes the entire baggage of classicism in the arts: continuity, base-line verisimilitude, the ensemble effect in acting performance, narrative articulation, the necessity for smoothness and fluidity, legibility and formal balance... Everything that, for V. F. Perkins in 1963, was necessarily involved in the artistic ideal he defined as 'a correspondence between event and presentation' (Cameron, 1972, p. 21).

In Bellour's critical system, the scene, as conventionally defined, is only one possible thing that can be 'set' or fixed into place (which is one way of translating *mise en scène*). He posits many kinds of *mise* processes that occur in cinema: *mise en page* (the graphic design of the screen rectangle), *mise en phrase* (the insertion of language, spoken or written), *mise en place* (the 'mapping' of a place or location), *mise en image* (making an image appear), *mise en plan* (the marking of a shot as an identifiable unit) and, supremely for him, *mise en pli*, which refers to the complex process of folding multiple levels or elements. We can easily conjure, for example, Godard's montage epic *Histoire(s) du cinéma* as a work that gleefully pulls all these techniques into its overall form; Bellour offers the more surprising example of a single shot from a scene in Resnais' hyper-theatrical *Mélo* (1986).

This highly charged moment involves Pierre (Pierre Arditi) reading aloud to his best friend Marcel (André Dussolier) the suicide note from his wife, Romaine (Sabine Azéma); the intrigue of the situation derives from Pierre's suspicion that Marcel was her secret lover. The fact that the film here passes into the mode of 'text recitation' marks the first significant 'crease' in the sonic space of an otherwise naturalistically staged scene. During the reading, moreover, Resnais makes an extremely unusual stylistic decision: his camera moves down and passes slowly along the floor between the two men, completely blurs the image, and drastically dims the lighting until a human figure (Marcel's) is once again visible at the end of the vocal parenthesis. 'Unmotivated' according to any classical logic, the work of style here is, however, not bereft of

feeling: following Resnais' many experiments along these lines during his career, pure abstraction is layered into the representation in order to catch, carry and heighten the scene's already intense emotion. *Mise en scène* has been 'defigured at the heart of the shot', for the conventional way that the interval between these two characters would have been conveyed, either through shot/reverse shot or spatial distance, has been 'literally folded onto itself, plunged into the opacity of a black hole' (Bellour, 2000a, p. 122–23).

What was *Contempt* clearly doing that *Two Weeks in Another Town* was not – at least if we agree to subsume the Minnelli film within the bounds of classical *mise en scène*? (See McElhaney, 2006, for a more nuanced view of this designation.) As my earlier analysis of a scene from *Contempt* endeavoured to show, what Godard presents is no longer a singular, coherent scene but something far more fractured, multiple and (in Bellour's terminology) internally folded – constructed from many, often conflicting layers. In a sense, what Bellour and some other contemporary theorists are doing marks a return to the theories of Sergei Eisenstein (1959) and, decades after him, Marie-Claire Ropars (1985): the fundamental notion that what comprises cinema are diverse elements, and then the intervals or 'spacings' between those elements, hence a set or system of articulations. But where both Eisenstein (at least for part of his life) and Ropars leaned toward a dynamic theory of montage as the principal operator of these spacings, downplaying the contribution of staging, camera work and so forth, today we are hailing distance of what Noël Burch (1973) first called for in the 1960s: a fully *dialectical* grasp of the interrelated workings of montage (in whatever way we define that term) and *mise en scène* (ditto).

Here is where the poststructuralist legacy in film studies can return to help us. For the great German critic Frieda Grafe, all cinema – no matter how seemingly neutral or classical – was involved in a fractious drama of disparate, separate levels: 'Only the calculated mingling of formative elements originating in various media, each with its own relative autonomy, generates the tension that gives the film life' (Grafe, 1996, p. 56). And she was, on this occasion, speaking not of any conceptual art installation by Farocki or Shirin Neshat, but rather of Joseph L. Mankiewicz's charming supernatural romance made at the height of Hollywood's classical glory, *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (1947)! But, even there, she detects the fine, differential interplay between a text adapted from a novel, bodily configurations that belong to theatre, vocal work derived from radio, images borrowed from the history of painting...

For my part, the *dispositif* notion has helped me to arrive at a similar conclusion about the viability of a new kind of *mise en scène* analysis that is possible in film criticism today – as well as being everywhere evident in contemporary cinema itself, in all its forms. Christa Blümlinger (2010) defines a *dispositif* as the 'spatial or symbolic disposition of gazes characterising a medium'; 'gaze' here can refer to every kind of look, orientation and perspective – looks wielded by fictional characters, by the work's makers, by spectators – and this is a matter not only of eyes being directed, but also ears. Not to mention minds. This definition is useful for my purpose here, for what theories of film style or form – most broadly, of film aesthetics – need to be about, in this day and age, is precisely the *modes of organising the multiple elements of audiovision*. The resources of classical *mise en scène* can certainly be a *piece* of what gets played on and arranged in a *dispositif* – and this is indeed, frequently the case, as in the film installations of Varda (such as *Le Triptyque de Noirmoutier*, 2005), which include carefully staged fragments of narrative, circumscribed in particular spaces such as a cabin, within their arrangement of multiple screens. But such *mise en scène* is only now a layer, screen or element – no more or less important, potentially, than any other.

Am I able to project the idea of the *dispositif*, and everything it has raised, back into the single-screen medium of cinema, thus illuminating it in a new way? And thereby integrating it, in our overall analyses of culture, into a total context of audiovisual media? Three principal, methodological benefits immediately flow from this approach:

1. We liberate style analysis from the theatrical unit of the scene and consider other sorts of layered structures, such as the sequence knitted from several, nominal scenes; *mise en scène* and editing are no longer opposed as the great stylistic, either-or options in cinema.
2. We leave behind the Romantic notion of cinematic creation as something that happens solely (or primarily) during shooting on the set, and investigate the structuring of audiovision at all levels of production, from initial script concept and pre-production decisions, all the way through filming and post-production processes, and then finally on to situations of reception.
3. We take cinema as fundamentally, and in every instance, a matter of multimedia or (as theorists have recently proposed) 'intermedia' (see Grishakova and Ryan, 2010). Not so much in the sense of a successful or desired artistic 'fusion' of inputs and influences (the old song of cinema heralding the 'integration of all the other arts'), but rather in

the dynamic, conflictual way that Foucault (1980) evoked the social *dispositif* as a vast, complex machine in a constant state of agitation or friction created by the rubbing together of its eclectic parts. This also means that we can more easily and readily 'network' films, and their aesthetic forms, in relation to the whole audiovisual field of television, digital media, gallery art and the rest. Not to dissolve cinema into an indifferent mass or flow of images and sounds – heaven forbid – but precisely to sharpen our sense of its contribution as an audiovisual art of the 20th and 21st centuries.

In this spirit, I conclude the chapter with two analyses of rich, complex and (for me) very emotionally involving objects: the first is an installation by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Emerald* (2007); the second is a feature film by Miguel Gomes, *Our Beloved Month of August* (2008). I consider them both exemplary of what cinema has come to today, after all the material mutations of the audiovisual aesthetics of *mise en scène* – and what it can still become, up ahead.

Hope floats

Everything floats in the audiovisual work (film, video, installation) of Thai artist Apichatpong Weerasethakul. In his installation *Emerald*, as exhibited at the Adelaide International art festival in 2010, pieces of a possible narrative arise from the interplay of the *mise en place* of a hotel setting, the separate soundtrack of an overheard conversation, plus a visual-overlay effect in the photographed, manipulated image. The elements – a digitally projected image rests on a wall as part of a constructed room with an architectural light fixture – are disconnected from each other (recall this director's fondness for two-part narrative constructions in his feature films, frequently poised at the end to begin all over again), but rarely in a stark or incomprehensible manner. Rather, everything is left to gently *resonate* at a serene distance; we make as much plot out of it – or not – as we wish. The game can always be replayed, and turn out differently.

Or, floating as spectators, here distracted and there involved in the gallery space, we form a more strictly poetic diagram from among the particles of matter and sensation, place and time. Emotion gently rushes in to conjure the fleeting sensations of, not a full-blown story, but this or that well-known moment or situation (like in Akerman's *Women from Antwerp in November*): the spark of desire, the pang of loss, the luxuriousness of recall. Nothing truly, irrevocably *happens* on either the

image-track or soundtrack, but everything that could have happened or will one day happen rises up in the gaps between the words and the objects, the ambient sounds and the colours, the dazzling light and the humble architecture. Apichatpong's art is nothing but these interstices, these corridors, these communicating vessels between plateaux or between worlds.

Are there people at the centre of Apichatpong's poetics? Not always; not necessarily. In *Emerald* we hear a conversation – its status in relation to the images remains unplaced, ambiguous – and observe a series of what appear to be empty hotel bedrooms – with, at moments, the superimposition of a ghostly male figure. Abandoned love? Sweet smell of desire? The possibilities proliferate and swarm in our minds largely because of the *découpage*: image follows image, now one part of one room, then another part of the same or another room. Finally, the camera begins to move stealthily and ominously, like in a suspense thriller – a suspense thriller crossed, in this case, with the famous ending of Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'eclisse* (1962), because there are no people in the image, no actors or characters left, only places, objects, traces with which we might (or might not) associate them.

It is a very formal kind of suspense (comparable to Tsai's films), the type of eerie effect Apichatpong frequently achieves when he moves his camera in on some initially banal-looking window or air vent (as in his feature *Syndromes and a Century*, 2006). *Emerald*, like a number of Apichatpong's short video and gallery pieces, goes further still in this direction. There may well be progressions, ellipses, shot/reverse shot or call-and-answer structures haunting the very deliberate progression of its images. But the human story has been, at this visual level, *eclipsed*, even erased.

Something else, however, insists: these floating particles, the feathers or dust or something more alien, growing in mass and multiplying in colour as image follows image, shadowing, step by step, the unfolding logic of that *découpage* of shots (Figure 9.1). Then, as the digital manipulation increases (it sneaks up on you), something impersonal takes over: some force, movement or intensity that is scarcely human at all. We are surely going somewhere in space and time; but who or what is performing this imaginary travelling? Even the prowling camera movements gradually lose their human agency, their anthropomorphism: some bionic eye takes over, and finally the world itself – which is an ever-strange interface between nature and culture in Apichatpong – turns, stirs, curiously explores itself. The navel-gazing of the cosmos itself, at the secret heart of things. And yet – in a disarming paradox so characteristic of



Figure 9.1 *Emerald* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2007)

this artist – the cosmic spectacle could not possibly exist without every nut and bolt of technology required and happily fiddled with, out in the open for us to delight in.

Music videos have their cascading streams of glitter; mainstream and arthouse films have their poignant, falling rain. In every case, something fascinating threatens to pull us out of the narrative, out of the fictive world: some delirium of endless singularity, every droplet of rain, every grain of sand ... This is the type of beguiling audiovisual phenomenon to which Apichatpong is drawn, and which he artfully recreates, magnifies, distends: the crackle of each leaf underfoot, or of each audio signal over a radio, every breath emanating from and every molecule circulating within a tiger's face (these examples come from his 2004 feature, *Tropical Malady*).

Splits, refractions, singularities, multiplicities: Apichatpong takes every opportunity offered by production or commission circumstances to further scatter – and thus, paradoxically, further intensify – the elements of his poetic universe. The lighting fixture in the centre of the *dispositif* that is *Emerald* both concentrates the colour-band evident on the screen, and disperses it into another space, the real space of the viewing situation. We are stardust, we are golden ... but we are also the most commonplace stuff around: particles, dust, endlessly forming, deforming and reforming, appearing and disappearing. That, ultimately, is the drama of *Emerald*.

Apichatpong lets the quarrel of *dispositifs* pass him by. Not for him the typical, cultural angst of fearing that nothing goes together anymore, that everything once solid has melted into air. That is the Gothic nightmare of fragmentation, sensory overload, an excess of meaninglessness, loss of tradition – an echo of which we often hear in the passionate defences of old-fashioned cinema and its familiar *mise en scène* in the face of all those computers and mobile phones. In Apichatpong's work, on the contrary, nothing is so grim, and everything is so much sweeter. We come to groove with the sensation of each piece, each story, each creature, each medium ceaselessly separating from its neighbour. Something floats here; it is hope.

Soft machine

Orchestrating a slippage between the registers of documentary and fiction has been a recurring game in sophisticated cinema since at least the 1960s. But few films play this game with such beguiling skill as Portuguese director Miguel Gomes' second feature, *Our Beloved Month of August* (2008). Gomes is unique in the way that, in his work (such as his later *Tabu*, 2012), he deploys a self-conscious, multi-layered irony worthy of conceptual art – yet never loses sight of the plaintive emotions of his characters or the textures of their everyday lives.

Beloved Month includes, across its leisurely two-and-a-half hours, an entire 'behind the scenes' or 'making of' backstory: how Gomes and his crew, hanging out in Arganil during the holiday season, faced with an ambitious fictional script that was impossible to shoot, began documenting local people, customs ... But gradually, fiction creeps in, as the movie begins to dramatise the intense exchanges between young Tânia (Sónia Bandeira), her father Domingos (Joaquim Carvalho), and her cousin Helder (Fábio Oliveira) – all three being members of the touring band Estrelas do Alva. Gomes offers (among other things) an essay about traditions in popular music: at the start, we may groan at the cliché-ridden pop standards, with their dreadful ideological values, that these 'estrelas' serve up – but, by the end, it is impossible not to be moved by the human passions and problems these songs crystallise.

This subtle transformation of our emotional response has much to do with how Gomes plays with layers, modes and media. 'You must have some discipline first', Gomes has stated in the course of an interview that has the very *dispositivist* title of 'The Rules of the Game' – 'even if it is a product of the silliest rules' (Peranson, 2008). Like Jack Conte of Pompalmoose, Gomes is a 'rule dogma kind of guy'. The behind-the-scenes

'making of' story I have just outlined – and which is incorporated in the film itself – becomes fishier as the scenes proceed. Is this story true, or just too good to be true? (Gomes frankly declares that the film is full of 'big lies'; see Peranson, 2008.) We can never tell, very precisely, where the fiction ended and the reality began in this process, or even which of them came first (as in Kiarostami's *No*). Certainly, everything to do with the 'making of' (and, naturally, this film-within-the-film is also called *Our Beloved Month of August*) seems perfectly artificial, as in the amusing confrontations between the director (Gomes himself) and his irritated producer (Luís Urbano).

A specific scene is emblematic in this regard. A local girl (Andreia Santos) comes to visit the members of the film crew, who are in the process of playing a game of quoits. The girl (in a long shot/long take of four and half minutes) goes from one person to another, seeking to know who to ask in order to be an actor in the film; she goes from the sound man to the production manager to, finally, the director – but this social ritual is already a comedy, almost Tati-like, since all these people are actually standing very close to each other. Eventually, the girl strikes a deal with Gomes: if she scores a good throw in the quoits game, she is in the film. That cues a dramatic cut: the girl throwing, everybody around her intently watching, the sound of her gesture signalling an off-screen outcome we do not see. But we know the result, intuitively: she will be in the film they are making (indeed, she will be the heroine's 'best friend' figure, Lena). It is like a game of Snap: the trap or lure of the fiction suddenly seizes the unfolding fragment of documentary reality – even if that reality was completely scripted and staged to begin with.

It does not much matter, ultimately, how the film came about, how natural or contrived it may be. What matters is its game of pieces, levels or 'panels', each with their own particular mode of *mise en scène*, as in a gallery *dispositif* – but reassembled (as it were) into a linear, unfolding feature film, where everything that is cinematic depends on the inventive art of *transitions* ('editing puts things together', as Gomes has said, with deceptive simplicity). Here is a case where a director has taken the notion of folds, intervals and spacings right into the heart of his filmic construction. *Beloved Month* is always moving us along, jumbling us up, spacing us out in simple but ingenious ways, through the de-phasing and superimposition of image and sound. A person tells a story about their life, and about the music that is bound up in it; but usually, once we hear that music, the film switches to some other scene, and the music continues to play over it for quite a long time (the radio station scene, early on, provides the matrixial model for this circuit-switching).

It takes a very long time – about 75 minutes – for the fiction, as such, to kick in.

Meanwhile, unforced rhymes and echoes between the various large pieces or panels proliferate: the shadows of two teenagers goofing around in the headlights of a car are answered by the similar shadows of two filmmakers posing at dusk; the real night sky is answered by the artificial one in Tânia's bedroom. All this lays the groundwork for an elaborate gag (worthy of Frank Tashlin) during the final credits, when Gomes confronts his sound man (Vasco Pimentel) for always recording (as in Godard's *Sauve qui peut*) a musical soundtrack that cannot be directly heard *in situ*. The soundtrack, Vasco enthusiastically explains, 'registers the things I want. I may want things and they come to me, not to you. Because I'm different to you. Man, things get recorded and filmed with wills, memories, desires and all that'. This is the documentary of a fantasy... and right on cue, as the members of the crew argue on and on, faint music appears in the air of this surreal, sonic space. 'This is getting strangely out of proportion', comments Gomes, before he disappears off screen.

At the end of its fiction, before this cap-off gag, *Our Beloved Month of August* builds to a climactic moment of cinema: after the love story has reached its point of dramatic crisis, we see Tânia from the back, next to her father, as Helder gets on a bus, leaving her life forever. Then she turns, and is crying; but, almost as soon as we have registered the pathos of this, her tears turn into mad, uncontrollable laughter. This is not only a triumph of mood mixture, a profound emotional switch worthy of Jean Renoir; as the laughter continues, it is not only this woman who transforms – from character back to actor – but the fiction itself which dissolves.

What is innovative, even revelatory, about *Beloved Month*? The Czech-born philosopher Vilém Flusser (1999) once mused on the difference between a screen wall and a solid wall – for him, the handy key (like so many mundane, everyday phenomena, of the kind that Gomes also alights upon) to understand our civilisation and its discontents. The solid wall marks, for Flusser, a neurotic society – a society of houses and thus dark secrets, of properties and possessions. And of folly, too, because the wall will always be razed, in the final instance, by the typhoon, flood or earthquake. But where the solid wall gathers and locks people in, the screen wall – incarnated in history variously by the tent, the kite or the boating sail – is 'a place where people assemble and disperse, a calming of the wind' (Flusser, 1999, p. 57). It is the site for the 'assembly of experience'; it is woven, and thus a *network*.

It is only a small step for Flusser to move from the physical, material kind of screen to the immaterial kind: the screen that receives projected images or holds digital images. From the Persian carpet to the Renaissance oil painting, from cinema to new media art, images (and thus memories) are stored within the surface of this woven wall. A wall that reflects movement, but itself increasingly moves within the everyday world: when, as a small child, I once dreamed of taking a cinema screen (complete with a movie still playing loudly and brightly upon it), folding it up and putting in my pocket so I could go for a stroll, I had no idea it was a vision of the future, the mundane laptop computer or mobile phone.

For a long time, cinema has seemed inextricably wed to the solid walls of halls, multiplexes, cinematheques and now hi-tech home theatres; to dark rooms and their privatised secrets, to pre-programmed assemblies and public events. *Our Beloved Month of August*, in its own, remarkable vision of an 'expanded cinema' – a cinema of multiple panels interacting in the fixed space and time of projection – frees the viewers' minds and lets their emotions roam: through documentary and fiction, through music and travelogue, through drama and comedy, through the plaintive directness of eternal pop culture and the Baroque convolutions of modernism and postmodernism. Of course, it is literally not a museum installation, not a new media piece. It is an old-fashioned film that unfolds in a linear fashion, and takes spectators (if they are receptive) on the passionate journey that many, lesser movies promise to deliver; but it also manages to enlarge that journey from within, multiplying the entry-points that we can take into it.

Moreover, *Our Beloved Month of August* matches its form to its subject in a poetically just way. In this film about music and family (as well as about itself), what liberates is not the wall that gives things an illusory fixity and identity, but the fluctuating experience that happens when people 'assemble and disperse' (as they literally do, dancing, in a long-held early image) – and when the wind is mobilised, both calmed and unleashed, by the 'soft machine', the *dispositif* that is cinema.

Epilogue: Five Minutes and Fifteen Seconds with Ritwik Ghatak

Looking back over the thoroughgoing revolution in film style ushered in by films including Resnais' *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) and Antonioni's *L'avventura* (1960), Raymond Bellour reflects that, 'under the pressure of modern cinema', what he calls *mise en pli* or the process of folding 'more or less absorbs and dissolves, in its metamorphoses, the steady forms of *mise en scène*' (2009, p. 146). Yet not only is the triumph of such modernism in cinema never total – it is also not entirely new. The more crucial truth, as Bellour recognises, is that, 'since its beginnings in the era of early cinema and right through its deployment by classical cinema', *mise en scène* has, in fact, always been – if we can look at it with fresh eyes – something multiple and heterogeneous, open to every kind of fluctuation and fold. And films are not (as the poststructuralists sometimes thought) passively 'subject' to these forces; rather, they work with and shape them. What is expressive in cinema, finally, comes not just from the complexity of drama or character, but equally, or even more so, from the emotional, dynamic power of abstraction, from the materiality of the total, sensory *event* which a film is.

If this is so, then what I have analysed in an installation by Apichatpong or a film by Miguel Gomes should also be able to be found elsewhere, long before – and well outside – the certified canons of modern or postmodern cinema. To conclude this book, I choose a masterpiece that, at the time of its production and release, was thought of by few people within India (except, no doubt, its maker), and almost nobody outside it, as being part of the project of revolutionary modernism: *The Golden Line* (1965) by the Bengali director Ritwik Ghatak (1925–1976). Yet, in this extraordinary melodrama (a narrative tradition he claimed as his 'birthright' and which he saw