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JOURNALISM, REPRESENTATION AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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Beyond space and place. The challenge of urban space to urban media studies

Simone Tosoni

Abstract

Within Urban Media Studies, current research on media practices in urban space is by and large informed by a phenomenological conceptualization of space directly derived from traditional audience studies of the 1990s. This conceptualization has as its linchpin the distinction between *space* as abstract location, and *place* as space endowed with symbolic meanings and affections through practices of *place-making*. This approach has the merit of going beyond deterministic hypotheses of media-related *placelessness* and clarifying how specific media-related practices can contribute to fostering people's attachment to places and to endowing them with symbolic meanings. Yet, as shown through a discussion of an original case study on "*captive audience positions*" (situations in which we are somehow forcedly put in the position "*to audience*" a media spectacle), this conceptualization seems less adequate to addressing the relationship mutually shaping space and practices enacted in urban space, whether media-related or not. These limitations could be overcome by extending the phenomenological conceptualization of space into a fully fledged relational one.

Keywords: Media-related practices, audience studies, ethnographic approach, relational space, phenomenological space

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1. Urban media studies and media practices in urban space

In the last years, an ever-growing disciplinary interest for urban communication and for mediated urbanism has given birth to a new and specialized area of research within media studies: a subfield that can be labeled as “*Urban media studies*”. One of the most lively and promising research programs in the field focuses specifically on media practices, aiming to clarify how they are enacted in urban space, and how they contribute to shaping the fabric of urban daily life (Graham, 2004). Launched in continuity with the audience studies’ ethnographic approach to media consumption, this line of inquiry aims to extend the disciplinary attention outside the household where, notwithstanding relevant exceptions (e.g. Lemish, 1982; McCharty, 2001), it had been confined until ten years ago. The relatively recent transformations of our media environment have in fact finally drawn scholars’ attention to the fact that domestic media usage represents just a part of our interaction with media, rushing them to update their research agendas. In a few years, the literature dedicated to urban contexts of media usage (e.g. transportation systems, transit places or squares), as well as to the engagement with mobile and outdoor media has quickly grown in size.

Yet, so far, this research effort has not been backed up by an adequate critical consideration of the methodological framework inherited by the tradition of audience studies. Methodological essays remain in fact sporadic, while empirical research on media practices is by and large characterized by the attempt to “*stretch*” the audience studies methodological framework to the new research context. The key concept of “*space*” that will be focused on in this discussion makes no exception: when dealing with urban space, current approaches tend to read its relationship with media-related practices through methodological lenses that are directly derived from the ones that had been conceived for the private and circumscribed space of the household. In particular, they generally (although often implicitly) assume as their lynchpin the same distinction between *space* (as abstract location) and *place* (as a location endowed of symbolic meanings and affections) that the audience studies’ ethnographic tradition had derived from the Phenomenological Geography of the 1970s (Seamon, 1979; Tuan, 1977; Relph, 1976). Our hypothesis is conversely that, when interrogated from the standpoint of its relationship with practices, media related or not, urban space poses theoretical challenges that elude the grasp of a phenomenological conceptualization of space, and call media scholars to methodological rethinking.

To make these points, we will proceed in three steps: the next section will address the heritage of phenomenological geography for the conceptualization of (domestic) space as elaborated in the ‘90s within audience studies, and will propose a quick overview of Urban Media Studies to show how this concep-

tualization still characterizes current approaches to media practices in urban space. The following section will point out some limitations of this approach by discussing two different examples taken from an original and ongoing case study on “*captive audience positions*” in urban space: situations in which, during our urban practices and routines, we are somehow forcedly put in the position “*to audience*” a media spectacle. The final section will clarify how those limitations could be circumvented by extending the phenomenological conceptualization of space into a fully relational one.

2. “Other places like home”:

Space and media ethnography out of the household

In empirical research, the concepts we adopt deeply inform the phenomena we observe, highlighting some of their aspects as relevant, and leaving others in the background as (explicitly or implicitly) negligible for our investigation. The ethnographic tradition within audience studies relies on a conceptualization of “*context of media usage*” multilayered and accurately articulated. This conceptualization has been developed and progressively refined to address people’s engagement with media by and large in domestic contexts (Moores, 1993). In one of its most refined and influential elaborations, Silverstone (1994) indicates three distinct, yet interrelated dimensions of domesticity: “[...] *domesticity is at once a phenomenological, a socio-cultural and an economic reality. These dimensions of domesticity can be addressed through various differently focused conceptualisations [...]. I will identify these different dimensions of our domesticity as home, family and household*” (Silverstone, 1994: 25). While concerns regarding the “spatial geography of the home” (the physical position of media devices in the house) are by no means ignored (Morley, 2000), the heart of this take on space is to be found in its conceptualization of the phenomenological dimension of domesticity: in domesticity as ‘home’. As clearly stated by Roger Silverstone:

[U]nderlying any discussion of the home is a prior distinction. It is the distinction between place and space [...]. That distinction is an expression of an experiential difference between those areas of the world, large or small, for which we have no feeling and those for which we do. Places are human spaces, the focus of experience and intention, memories and desires. They are not abstractions. (Silverstone, 1994: 27)

From this phenomenological perspective, places (and homes) are never ‘given’ once for all. They are the result of a continuous process of *place-making* that consists of the attribution of symbolic meanings and of the formation of affective attachments:

“Home [...] is a manifestation of an investment of meaning in space. It is a claim we make about a place. It is constructed through social relations which are both internal and external and constantly shifting in their power and significance” (ibidem: 28).

Silverstone warns against any form of romanticism, reminding us how home can be *“positively or negatively experienced”* depending on contingent situations or on the power unbalance of domestic relations. Whatever its connotations, home depends anyhow on the formation of a *“habit field”* (Tuan, 1974; Moores, 2012) that transforms it in a space of habituation through *“physical presence, familiarity, ritual, possession, control and restoration”* (Silverstone, 1994: 28): home is made through the daily practices and routines that are performed within the domestic domain. Media practices play a relevant role in this process, being a constitutive part of domestic routines (Morley, 2000): the attempt to account for the relationship of mutual shaping between domestic (and place-making) routines and media related practices represents the main research objective of the ethnography of media consumption. Thanks to this refined methodological framework, audience studies could distance itself from the early formulations of medium theory (Meyrowitz, 1985) – as well as from phenomenological geography itself – and its deterministic hypothesis of a loss of sense of place related to media diffusion, and address the relationship between media practices and place as an ambivalent relationship of mutual shaping (Morley, 2000).

Shaun Moores (2006; 2012) has recently advanced several proposals for a vigorous update of this methodological framework, advocating at the same time its extension outside the household to account for media usage in mobility and, complementarily, for the construction of *“habit fields”* in the interaction with media devices and mediated environments. Drawing on contemporary non-representational theories in human geography (Thrift, 2007; Anderson and Harrison, 2010) and on social anthropology (Ingold, 2000), Moores points out how the endowment of a *“cognitive”* symbolic meaning describes only a limited part of our engagement with places (and media). The analysis of place-making practices should consequently include all those forms of *“habitation”* that involve body memory and *“pre-cognitive”* forms of affects. Again a key relevance is acknowledged to repetition and routinized practices, even if this time a specific attention is dedicated to bodily movements in mediated and not mediated environments. While stressing the urgency to *“sociologise phenomenological analysis”* to adequately consider the *“historically and culturally specific conditions, including the social divisions, within which [...] relationships of familiarity are formed”* (Moores, 2012: 60), Moores confirms the centrality of the phenomenological take on space for ethnographic approaches to media usage beyond the boundaries of the household.

In current research on media practices within urban media studies, this same phenomenological conceptualization of space drives researchers to investigate how mobile and outdoor media are appropriated, “domesticated” (Hartmann, 2013) and embedded in those urban daily practices that make urban places familiar, endowing them of symbolic meanings and affections. In particular, great efforts have been devoted to clarifying how practices of portable and geolocative media usage change our experience of urban space. For Adriana De Souza e Silva they would merge “*the borders between physical and the virtual*”, creating hybrid spaces (De Souza e Silva, 2004; 2006) and “*net localities*” (Gordon and De Souza e Silva 2011) that would lead people to “*perceive urban spaces in a different way*” (De Souza e Silva, 2004: 22). For Itō, Okabe and Anderson (2010) media would multiply the ways in which people appropriate public and semipublic places: ways that may include the creation of private media “*cocoons*”. The perception of the public nature of urban space is a central concern for many studies in the field. In this regard, Hampton and Gupta (2008) clarify how different practices of wi-fi usage have different consequences on the perception of the public or semi-public nature of the places where they are enacted: while the practices of “*true mobile*” users would promote “*public privatism*”, users that they significantly label “*placemakers*” “*embrace [...] the wireless internet precisely for its ability to connect to the activities afforded by public space*” (Hampton and Gupta, 2008: 844). Complementarily, Lee Humphreys (Humphreys, 2010; Humphreys and Liao, 2013) interprets the redefinition of urban spaces in terms of “*parochialization*”, “*the process by which [...] the public realm, where people had previously encountered strangers, starts to feel more familiar due to the social exchanges through the network*”. Similarly, Didem Özkul (2013) explores locational information sharing practices clarifying how they reflect (and sustain) place attachments and attribution of individual meanings. As a last example, in one of the more systematic studies on the topic, Zlatan Krajina (2014) describes how the deployment of public display screens can disrupt the habitual perception of urban space, but also how people involve – or escape – the interaction with screens in their daily urban routines, finally including their presence in “*the taken for granted*” of their daily urban experience. Repetition and routinization in fact play a key role in the author’s “*recursive domestication*” model, which describes how people “*tame*” urban screens, developing specific forms of resistance through habituation to their presence: the same process of “*habitation*” that makes a place familiar or, more properly, that makes a place out of space.

3. (Stress) Testing the phenomenological approach: Captive audience positions in urban space

The phenomenological conceptualization of space drives researchers to address the relationship between urban space and media from the standpoint of the practices in which they are involved, and to focus primarily on experience, perceptions, affections and habituation. In contrast with the deterministic hypothesis of “*media-generated placelessness*”, this approach has the merit of clarifying how media related practices can foster people’s attachment to places and contribute to their attribution of symbolic meanings to specific localities. Yet, it seems less adequate to a full understanding of the mutual shaping relationship between space (and in particular urban space) and practices, media-related or not. On the one hand, in fact, practices do not simply “*affect*” the way space is “*experienced*” (at a cognitive or pre-cognitive level): they leave traces in space, they occupy and encumber it, they wear it out or they renew it. They continuously shape and reshape its materiality and structure through time. Moreover, practices contribute to define the conditions for other practices enacted in the same place: they open new possibilities for other practices, they force them to a coordination, or they rule them out in a conflictive way. From this point of view, urban space is “*public*” not only in the sense of being *publicly accessible*, but also of being *forcedly shared* by different social actors. On the other hand, urban space is conceived and designed to organize practices, to host some activities instead of others, to rule out unwanted behavior, with cases of “*hostile architecture*” (Tosoni and Tarantino, 2013) or of “*unpleasant design*” (Savičić and Savić, 2013) being just the most evident and controversial examples.

Media play an increasingly relevant role in this relationship (Tarantino and Tosoni, 2013), urging Urban Media Studies to a systematic rethinking of their methodological frameworks. The nature of the relationship of mutual shaping between space and practices, and the role media play in it are in fact of primary relevance both under a theoretical and political point of view: in fact, while actual practices can never be fully pre-determined (De Certeau, 1980), this relationship reflects, reinforces and contributes to reproduce power asymmetries between social actors. And it does this, notwithstanding any form of “*habituation*” to space, that may in fact contribute to the naturalization of unbalanced power relationships.

A comparison between two examples can better account for the methodological limitations of the phenomenological conceptualization of space. Both examples are taken from a case study on “*captive audience positions*” in urban space (situations in which we are somehow forcedly put in the position “*to audience*” a media spectacle), and describe a segment of the daily routines of

Picture 1: Cadorna Station (Milan) from the neighboring Square.



Picture 2: Captive Audience Positions within the station.



Picture 3: From the platform to the station's hall.



Picture 4: Toward the central turnstiles.



the over one hundred thousand travellers transiting each day through Cadorna Station in Milan, a medium-sized station serving the Northern area of the Lombardy region.

Picture n.1, shot by the author in June 2014, shows the station from the neighboring square. The red phone booth standing out at the square's center is a temporary installation, and is part of an advertising campaign. The strategy of this campaign can be easily addressed through a phenomenological methodological framework. It aims to capture people's attention through a "*rupture*" in their ordinary visual perception of the square, deploying in the urban space of Milan the clashing symbol of the urban space of a different city: London. While potentially efficient (at least until 'habituation'), this strategy does not attempt to catch people's attention through any "*discipline*" imposed to their bodies. Conversely, the strategy at play in picture n.2 consists exactly of arranging travellers' bodies in a physical position presumably apt to audience the electronic screen visible in the upper part of the picture. And this, for a duration that varies - depending on the time of the day - from twenty seconds to almost three minutes: an impressive amount of time for a transition point. The screen in the picture is just one of 68 synchronized screens that since 2011 furnish the station, displaying loops of advertising and news. Yet, only four of them are part of the captive audience position we are addressing. Those four screens are positioned above the uninterrupted line of turnstiles that since 2007 separates the platforms' area from the rest of the station. Turnstiles have been configured to grant passage only in one direction, with the central ones allowing passengers to exit the station, and the lateral ones allowing them to enter. Furthermore, since 2012 they have been configured to open only after a ticket validation, to reduce both free riding and ticket inspectors. At each train's arrival people walk down the platforms and converge to this hall to exit the station, with a turnout that is particularly intense from 7 to 9 for office hours. Validating a ticket is an operation that requires time: the ticket must be found and taken out, oriented in the proper position and inserted in the turnstiles.

People gather in the hall, forming a slow chaotic queue that heads at first toward its center (picture 3), and then moves to the central turnstiles granting the way out (picture 4). It's from this point on that people enter the captive audience position (picture 2). The four screens encountered from this point on are not very wide, and consequently what they show is not clearly visible from afar (picture 3). This would imply for the travelers walking out of the station a short time of potential exposure were they not slowed down and kept facing the screens for a longer time by the bodies of all the other commuters involved in the same routine. This crowd moves forward in a chaotic line following the rhythmic beat of the turnstiles opening and closing: it's only once they cross the barrier that people are freed from this captive audience position, but only to meet the other synchronized screens located on the other side. Here bod-

ies are less constrained in their movements, but the soundscape of the station suddenly changes. While in the hall the sound coming from the screens is not clearly audible due to environmental dispersion, here it is amplified by a sort of “resonating chamber effect” granted by the station roof.

In this second example, the phenomenological framework seems less apt to describe how this capturing space shapes the described segment of the commuters’ daily routines and their encounter with the screens. For sure, habituation remains relevant: probably a commuter wouldn’t look at the “*domesticated*” screen, while a traveler coming to Milan for the first time would pay it more attention. Yet, both of them would be captured in the same way by the captive audience position: the phenomenological sensitizing concept of “*place*” is sensitizing the researcher in an incomplete way. What is at play in this example is in fact a very complex interplay of heterogeneous elements that can be accounted for only through a more elaborated conceptualization of space. Attention must be paid, first of all, to the technical device, the screen, and its position in space: the screen is located in a position that is high enough to intercept the line of sight of people standing in line. The screen’s contrast and luminosity – enhanced by the protection from light granted by the station roof – and its non-glare surface makes it clearly visible at any hour of the day. As relevant as the screen’s size, technical features and position is the architectonic structure of its surrounding space (the wide hall where people can gather), and the presence of another technological device (the turnstile) that triggers the formation of a crowd and of a chaotic line. However, it’s not enough to focus on the materiality of space and of what it contains to account for the way this “*capturing space*” works, since what really keeps people in front of the screen for several minutes is the presence of the moving bodies of the other travelers, involved altogether in a very complex choreography. People’s activities in space are in fact an integral part of the captive audience position: in a sense, it uses people to capture people. From a methodological point of view, this implies a dismissal of any preconceived distinction between the media device and its physical context and, even more relevantly, between the capturing space and the practices (enacted in space) it aims to capture. Symbolic meanings and representations also play their role, since this capturing strategy can be adopted only because of the specific interactional frames that characterize the social situation at hand: waiting in line to validate a ticket is annoying, but in a station it feels more acceptable than being held immobile, or just even slowed down, by a screen displaying advertisements. Finally, the way this captive audience position operates cannot be understood without paying analytical attention to multisensoriality (even if in this example the relevance of sound emerges only once the barrier has been crossed), and to the choreographies and the rhythms (Lefebvre, 2004) of the bodies moving in space: in fact, this capturing space does not “*work*” continuously, but in waves, at each train’s arrival.

In sum, this captive audience position is produced by the complex interplay of the materiality and structure of station space (including what it ‘contains’, i.e. technological devices such as the turnstile), the activities therein performed, and the interactional frames that are implied by the symbolic meanings and social representations of the station. Such a complexity eludes the analytical grasp of a phenomenological perspective, and of its basic distinction between space and place.

4. Extending the phenomenological conceptualization of space into a fully- fledged relational one

Human geography and urban studies have since long reworked their conceptualizations of space, underlining how space, place, and time are “*co-constituted, folded together, situated, mobile, and multiple*” (Wilken, 2008: 46). As pointed out by Rowan Wilken (*ibidem*), “*it is productive to conceive of place in ways that account for the interactions that occur within, between, and across specific places*”, that is relationally. As observed by Jane Jacobs, “*relational thinking is [...] not a coherent or singular theoretical turn [but] [...] is interpreted and put into action in quite different ways*” (Jacobs, 2012: 412). In line with Lefebvre’s early insights (1991), and drawing on post-structuralism and STS approaches, one of the different and sometimes “*irreconcilable grammars of relationality at work in contemporary urban geography*” (Jacobs, 2012: 412) conceives space as emerging from a complex “*interaction*” between constitutive elements that are heterogeneous in nature (Jones, 2009). This elements can in fact be material, performative, and symbolic. This methodological approach seems better suited to account for the complexity of the relationship of mutual shaping between practices and space described in our “*stress-test*” case study. This relational perspective doesn’t dismiss, but extends, the phenomenological take on space. It circumvents the distinction between “*space*” and “*place*” to fully acknowledge the processual nature of “*space*” itself: from a relational perspective, “*place-making*” is just a part of a broader process of “*space-making*”. It calls media scholars to address media and media usage as fully participating in the relationship of mutual shaping between practices and space. Consequently, it stresses the relevance of bringing back in the analysis the overlooked relevance of bodily enactments of (media related) practices in space, as essential to taking on the methodological challenge represented by urban space.

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Biography

Simone Tosoni is Assistant Professor at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (Milan) and founding member of the ECREA’s Temporary Working Group ‘Media & the City’. His research interests concern media-related practices in urban space, and methods and methodology for Urban Media Studies. On these topics, he has recently edited the volume *Media and the City: Urbanism, Technology and Communication* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013, with Matteo Tarantino and Chiara Giaccardi), and the special issue of *First Monday* *Wave Bricks and Bits: Media & the Social Production of Urban Space* (with Matteo Tarantino).

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