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Addressing "Captive Audience Positions" in Urban Space. From a Phenomenological to a Relational Conceptualization of Space in Urban Media Studies

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From a Phenomenological to a Relational Conceptualization of Space in Urban Media Studies

by Simone Tosoni

1. Introduction

In a ground-breaking 2004 research manifesto, urban geographer Stephen Graham urged new media scholars to leave behind "the dazzling lights" of the academic discourse on *cyberspace* and start a systematic effort to tackle the ways in which media are "adopted and shaped within the fine-grained practices of everyday urban life" [Graham 2004, 17]. For Graham, an inadequate conceptualization of *space* (*cyberspace* as a symbolic space distinct from *real life*) was hindering new media scholars in participating to the interdisciplinary debate about the "remediation of urban life," where they were expected to play a key role. In an increasingly technologically mediated urbanism, a systematic attention to media is indeed essential to properly address urban daily life.

Ten years later, Graham's plea has not remained unheard: the research program on media engagements in urban space is one of the liveliest within a subfield of research that could be labelled "urban media studies," aiming at addressing jointly media and cities. Urged by the diffusion of portable and outdoor media, by a rising interdisciplinary interest for mediated urbanism, and by the recent mobility turn in social sciences, media scholars have quickly updated their research agendas, now steadily including portable and outdoor media like smart phones and geo-locative applications [Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011], mp3 players [Bull 2008], e-readers [Goggin and Hamilton 2012], laptops and tablets [Yi-Fan 2013], portable videogame

consoles [Licoppe and Inada 2012], public display screens [Krajina 2014], together with technologies not yet marketed like *Google Glass* [Drakopoulou 2013]. At the same time, scholars have undertaken a systematic exploration of streets, squares, transportation systems and other public and semi-public urban contexts of media engagement.

However, this new phase cannot be directly attributed to the dismissal of the concept of *cyberspace*. To be fair with the discipline, by the time of Graham's manifesto, new media studies had already left behind those dazzling lights [Tosoni 2013], focusing on (new) media appropriation in everyday domestic life [Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002]. The work done in the 1990s on media domestication [for home computers see Haddon 2006a] had a leading role [Haddon 2007] in this turn. In particular, the replacement of the concept of "cyberspace" with a phenomenological conceptualization of space [Bakardjieva 2005; Ward 2006] had been an essential aspect of this convergence between new media studies and cultural audience studies. The recent interest for public and semi-public urban contexts should therefore rather be interpreted as the attempt to broaden the disciplinary attention outside the domestic space of the household where, notwithstanding some relevant exception [Lemish 1982; McCarthy 2001], it had been kept confined until a decade ago.

From a methodological perspective, this broadening of scope has not implied a break with the tradition of cultural audience studies: the phenomenological framework still represents a reference point for research on urban media engagement. My hypothesis is that, conversely, urban space challenges media scholars to reconsider how to conceive space. In particular, the phenomenological approach – as appropriated by urban media scholars – would fail to account for the manifold nature of the mutual shaping relationship between practices (media related or not) and space. My concerns in regard are both theoretical and political, since an adequate understanding of the complexity of this relationship is essential to grasp its power-related nature.

To make these points, I will proceed in three steps. I will start by clarifying how the conceptualization of space elaborated in the 1970s within phenomenological geography has been appropriated by current approaches to media engagement in urban space. To this end, I will "pursue" the key phenomenological "*traveling concept*" [Bal 2002] of *home* in the main phases of its interdisciplinary journeys: from human geography to cultural media studies (section 2.1.), and from there to current urban media studies (section 2.2.). In the third chapter, I will underline what I see as the main limitations of the phenomenological approach, illustrating my point with an example taken from an ongoing case study on *captive audience positions* in urban space: situations in which, during our urban routines, we are somehow forcedly put

in the position *to audience* a media spectacle. As stated by Seija Ridell and Frauke Zeller, in fact, captive audience positions provide interesting cases for

> studying the power-relatedness of urban audience activities […] [since] the intertwining of technological developments with powerful economic forces and related processes of commodification has intensified the performativity of presenter–audience relations. These relations are at the core of contemporary fluid, yet solidly structured, dynamics of urban spatial power [Ridell and Zeller 2013, 448].

The discussion of the case study intends to point out the blind spots of the phenomenological conceptualization, highlighting in which sense the complexity of the relationship between spatial performances and space eludes a phenomenological conceptualization. In the final section, I will draw on a re-reading of the case study, on my previous works and on similar proposals recently advanced within the field to sketch a post-phenomenological and relational take on space. Conceiving space as continuously constituted by a complex interaction between material, symbolic and performative elements, in fact, the relational perspective circumvents the distinction between space and place altogether with the one between context (space) and content (practices), allowing a better grasp on the "solidly structured, dynamics of urban spatial power" and on the political nature of the spatial negotiations occurring in a (urban public) space conceived as "forcedly shared."

2. Pursuing "Home"

2.1. *Pursuing "Home" I: the Phenomenological Approach from Human Geography to Cultural Audience Studies*

The distinction between space and place represents the linchpin of the conceptualization of space of current approaches to urban media engagements [Wilken and Goggin 2013]. This distinction derives from phenomenological geography of the 1970s [Relph 1976; Tuan 1977; Seamon 1979; Buttimer 1980], through the mediation of cultural audience studies of the 1990s. As resumed by Tim Cresswell

> [for phenomenological] geographers […] place was far more than location, and philosophically distinct from space. Place denoted a centre of meaning and field of care […] somewhere we were experientially invested in and could develop attachments to [Cresswell 2011, 236-237].

In this perspective, places are made out of space through practices of *place-making*, that endow it with symbolic meanings and affective attachments. In this process, dwelling and habituation play a central role:

When space feels thoroughly familiar to us, it has become place [Tuan 1977, 73].

Consequently, human geographers devoted a peculiar attention to *home* as the place where attachment deriving from daily routines are more intense. As Yi-Fu Tuan glosses quoting Freya Stark:

> This surely is the meaning of home – a place where every day is multiplied by all the days before it [*ibidem*, 73].

Concomitantly, the household had turned into the main context of investigation for cultural audience studies [Moores 1993] and in the early 1990s the phenomenological concept of *home* became the main "traveling concept" [Bal 2002] between the disciplines. The domestication approach [Silverstone 1994] – one of the most prominent research program within cultural audience studies – embedded it into an articulated methodological framework to address 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 […] as home, family and household [Silverstone 1994, 25].

With the concept of *home* the approach inherited the conceptual constellation with which it resonated (*place-making, attribution of meanings, attachment, habituation*), and the distinction between space and place:

> underlying any discussion of the home is a prior distinction. It is the distinction between place and space [*ibidem*, 27].

Home is the house as it is experienced, endowed with the symbolic meanings and affective attachments that derive from *habituation* and the formation of an "*habit field*" [Tuan 1974] through "physical presence, familiarity, ritual, possession, control and restoration" [Silverstone 1994, 28].

Dismissing any deterministic hypothesis of *placeness* generated by media that variously resurfaced in the formulations of human geographers, audience scholars clarified how media play an essential role in the practices that make an house into that place called home. These practices of place-making are in fact the same everyday domestic routines that shape media appropriation and usage, on which the domestication approach mainly focused. As resumed by David Morley

> these technologies themselves do not simply have effects on the home, but have rather to be analyzed in terms of how they come to be embedded within pre-existing domestic routines [Morley 2000, 86].

Communication technologies reveal a "double life,"

having the simultaneous capacity to articulate together that which is separate […] but, by the same token, to transgress the […] boundary which protects the privacy and solidarity of the home from the flux and threat of the outside world [*ibidem*, 87].

Scholars in the field have devoted an increasing attention to the liminal nature of communication technologies as interfaces between the private and the public domains, focusing on the media-related practices enacted to negotiate the symbolic borders of *home*. The borders of domestic space can in fact be made porous to the outside world [Ward 2006], when

what happens outside the home has a bearing upon the organization of domestic time and space and involve commitments which shape the place and use of ICTs in the home, as well as their acquisition and regulation [Haddon 2006b, 113].

Complementarily, Maria Bakardjieva has underlined how "home as a phenomenological experience" [2006, 66] can extend beyond the "doorstep [of] the *private* space of the household" whose borders with the world are nowadays "ceaselessly cracking and shifting" [*ibidem*]. To address these dynamics, she has advanced a proposal of methodological update that will be very influential for current urban media studies. In first instance, she reformulates the phenomenological concept of *home* in terms of agency and interpersonal relationships:

Home [...] is not necessarily a real-estate unit, but a feeling of safety, trust, freedom and control over one's own affairs […] Home is the container of interpersonal relationships that are supportive of my identity project [*ibidem*, 68].

More radically (and this is the key point), Bakardjieva proposes its disentanglement from the concept of *household*, understood both as a *social unit* and a *physical space*, to

allow […] for the dynamic of a constantly changing relationship between exterior and interior to be adequately considered [*ibidem*, 69].

On one hand, in fact,

the definition of the individual household as a self-regulating moral economy [has become] less convincing [*ibidem*, 67]
while the physical house [has become] in actuality only a node in a much larger network of significant others [*ibidem*, 66].

On the other hand, while acknowledging the relevance of the materiality of the household (as *physical space*), Bakardjieva downplays it to the resources that sustain these larger networks:

the materiality of the home, certainly, remains important as much as it provides the resources that user agency can mobilize and draw upon [,] the technologies under consideration here being one prominent example [*ibidem*, 69].

Surprisingly, this downplay of materiality is proposed by the author notwithstanding the attention devoted in her previous empirical work [Bakardjieva 2005] to different forms of domestic spatial patterning that *stage* [Jensen 2013], organize and negotiate Internet usage with other activities.

A different take on materiality characterizes instead the work of Shaun Moores [Moores 2012], that ideally complements Bakardjieva's extension of the concept of *home* beyond the household. Moores leads back *home* to practices of *dwelling*, and draws on contemporary non-representational geography [Thrift 2007; Anderson and Harrison 2010] and on the work of the anthropologist Tim Ingold [2000] to underline how the endowment of symbolic meanings is only one part of place-making. As contemplated by phenomenological geographers, *habit fields* and attachments are, in fact, also formed at the pre-conscious level of *affects* and *bodily habituation*. Feelings of at-homeness depend to a large extent by the bodily memory we develop pre-reflexively through dwelling and repeated interactions with the materiality of our environment (for Moores, also of media interfaces), inside or outside the household. Thanks to this enriched concept of *place-making*, Moores can reintegrate the relevance of materiality in a phenomenological approach revamped to address forms of dwelling "in a world of flux" [Moores 2012, 69]. In this regard, the author provocatively underlines how attachment can be developed even to an airport: that is, to one of those *non lieux* [Augé 1992] that, in a space of flows, are supposed to replace "meaningful" places. Moores indeed takes his distance both from the hypothesis of *media-related placelessness* of the early formulations of the second-generation medium theory [Meyrowitz 1985], and from those accounts of the network society [Castells 1996] that postulate an inherent opposition between *places* and the new space of flows. While stressing the urgency to "sociologise phenomenological analysis" to consider the "historically and culturally specific conditions, including the social divisions, within which [...] relationships of familiarity are formed" [Moores 2012, 60], for Moores *place* remains "an experiential accomplishment" [*Ibidem*, 104], and the role of media in this accomplishment can be adequately addressed through a revamped phenomenological framework.

2.2. *Pursuing "Home" II: the Phenomenological Conceptualization of Space in Urban Media Studies*

As Wilken and Goggin observe:

[much of the] scholarship on [...] mobile media [...] addresses – though perhaps more implicitly than explicitly or systematically – issues pertaining to place and place experience [2012, 13].

An overview of current "issues pertaining to place" highlights the methodological debts of urban media scholars with the studies of the household. Once again, scholars dismiss those assumptions that conceive

media technologies as *disembedding* because of the ways in which they variously *remove* their users from the immediate environment [Sutherland 2012, 158].

If within "net localities" [Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011] "the borders between physical and the virtual" have melted creating *hybrid spaces*, then scholars have to address outdoor media engagement as an essential part of place-making practices:

urban spaces serve as platforms for place-making, even as the methods of inhabiting those spaces are expanding to include networked connectivity [Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2012, 89].

This revamping of the phenomenological approach is illustrated by three of the main current lines of inquiry, addressing respectively: the experience of urban space in a condition of constant connectivity, portable media and the social nature of urban space, and the relationship between media practices and place-making.

The first line of inquiry resonates with Bakardjieva's stress on the nexus between at-homeness and interpersonal relationships, and aims to clarify how communicative interconnection across locations does not jeopardize place-making practices, but is an integral part of them. Didem Özkul focuses on

the act of sharing […] locational information […] either explicitly as in *Foursquare* or *Facebook* checkins, or implicitly as in taking photos and sharing them [Özkul 2013].

This way of "keeping in touch with people who matter to us" reveals – and contributes to shape – our attachment to places and their "individual meanings" [*Ibidem*]. Notably, place-making would go on also once we have left a place, as it happens reviewing the pictures shared, when we are

recollecting memories in relation to places, […] renew[ing] the[ir] meaning and the feeling they evoke, which strengthen our attachment [Özkul 2015, 109].

Lee Humphreys focuses instead on

the process by which […] the public realm, where people had previously encountered strangers, starts to feel more familiar due to the social exchanges through [location-based social networks] [Humphreys and Liao 2013]

like *Foursquare* or *Dodgeball* [Humphreys 2010]. With Lyn Lofland [1998], Humphreys distinguishes

three kinds of urban social space: public, parochial and private. Public spaces are territories characterized by strangers, while private spaces are territories characterized by intimates and personal networks. [Parochial space] […] is somewhere between the public and private spaces [Humphreys 2010, 768].

Mobile social networks would sustain and extend beyond the "physical routes" of urban routines the formation of "*person–to–person parochial relationship",* like

quasi–primary relationships, which are transitory social encounters between strangers […] [and] *intimate–secondary* [*relationships*] which are longer lasting relationships among strangers than quasi–primary (*e.g. frequent* riders of a commuter bus) [Humphreys and Liao 2013].

This would lead to the *parochialization of urban space*, which can eventually concern also non-places like an "airport or bank or post office." Yet, Humphreys warns that this process

can lead to homophilous tendencies rather than extending and bridging social circles [Humphreys 2010, 776].

A risk that different authors [Crawford 2008; de Souza e Silva and Frith 2010; Farman 2012] attribute to the possibility of filtering specific typologies of users granted by several location-based social networks. In this regard, Humphreys notably points out how

the parochial realm is unique because […] is highly contextual. A café in someone's neighborhood may feel parochial and familiar to one person, but another person may experience it as a very public realm [Humphreys and Liao 2013].

This focus on individual perceptions and the attempt to avoid the simplistic private/public space dichotomy also characterize the line of inquiry on mobile media and the social nature of urban space. Scholars have progressively refused the hypothesis of an ongoing privatization of public space related to the diffusion of portable media, advanced for example in the early works on the *Sony Walkman* by Michael Bull [2000]. The possibility of privatizing the experience of urban space through media "cocoons" is not dismissed, but acknowledged as just one of different ways

to use media as "interfaces" with public space [de Souza e Silva and Frith 2012]. Together with *cocooning,* Itō, Okabe and Anderson [2009] enumerate other forms of place-making – like *camping* (the temporary appropriation of a portion of space) and *footprinting* (the individualization of the relationship with commercial establishments) – that do not involve only media devices, but also other portable material artifacts (like keys). While some of these practices shield people from urban space, others – often performed with the same artifacts – are used instead to connect with it. On the same line, Hampton and Gupta describe how *Wi-Fi* can support different practices of place-making and different perceptions of place: while the practices of *"true mobile users"* promote *"public privatism,"* a different typology of 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).

De Souza e Silva and Frith draw on similar considerations to rethink the public/private dichotomy itself: addressing Bull's analysis of *Walkman* usage, they point out that

> if we think of the public as the site of heterogeneity and co-existence rather than just a site of actual co-present interaction, then the public is not negated by Walkman use. Rather, Walkman use becomes part of the fabric of public spaces, and indeed an interface that helps users manage their interactions with the public [de Souza e Silva and Frith 2012, 69].

Rather than agents of privatization, mobile media would represent

> physical intestation[s] of the constantly negotiated understandings of how public and private are related [*ibidem*, 52].

Moreover, the authors move beyond a purely phenomenological understanding of place when they notice how, whatever its "shifting meaning," what make urban space public "is a collection of minor social contracts" [Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011, 90] that must be "implicitly sign[ed]" [de Souza e Silva and Frith 2012, 73]. Media-related practices may grant a sense of "privateness" or familiarity with public space, but they still occur

> in public, in a place full of strangers, unpredictability, and anonymity [*ibidem*, 68].

Finally, a third area of inquiry addresses the relationship between the symbolic and performative aspects of urban media related practices and place-making. From a symbolic point of view, Raz Schwartz draws on Place Attachment Theory [Low

and Altman 1992] to point out how *Foursquare* activities like checking in, obtaining majorships and rewards like virtual badges

> align with earlier identified practices of place naming, ownership and celebratory events [Schwartz 2015, 97]

and can thus encourage

> users to create personal attachment to a specific venue [*ibidem*].

Iain Sutherland draws on David Seamon's idea of *place ballet*,

> a set of gestures and movements which sustain a particular task or aim [Seamon 1974, 54]

to address place-making with a take that puts its

> emphasis on embodied practice but does not foreclose the possibility that place-making can be variously technologically enabled [Sutherland 2012, 158].

In line with Shaun Moores, Sutherland clarifies how

> mobile technologies may become enfolded into pre-conscious regimes of interaction becoming part and parcel of a bodily perceptual apparatus through which place is experienced [*ibidem*, 169].

Notably, this brings the author to criticize the persisting influence of the concept of *home* in current urban media studies:

> phenomenological geography is often marked by an attempt to define an often elusive and usually reductive essence of *being in place*, which valorizes *existential insideness* and *at-homeness* [*ibidem*, 159],

while conversely

> orientation to [a] new place [can be] driven not by an attempt to achieve an inwardly focused and static familiarity […], but by […] open and expansive impulses, [related to] connection, inspiration, anonymity [*Ibidem*, 159].

A similar attention to performativity characterizes the work of Zlatan Krajina [2014] on public screens. In one of the most systematic studies on the topic, the author illustrates how *new* screens can represent a rupture of the habitual perception of urban space, jeopardizing the sense of ontological security that derives from familiarity. Yet, the habituation that develops from reiterated encounters allows people to negotiate the presence of the screens, involving them in their daily urban routines (e.g. as sources of light, or orientation points). Krajina describes this process with a "recursive domestication" model, articulated in three progressive phases:

> Encountering the screen as unexpected object involves passer-by in *taming* the screen (working out how it works), at which point the screen is *primarily domesticated* […]. The screen is *secondarily domesticated* when passers-by start developing skills concerning what they can do with the screen […]. In *tertiary domestication* encounters with screens and images have become expected [Krajina 2013, 201].

At the end of the process, the screen becomes somehow "invisible" to the habituated urbanite. Significantly, the author describe how these "skills of resistance" [*Ibidem*, 101] to advertisement screens can be perfected even by "captive audiences" like the travelers on the London Underground system.

As I have attempted to show, current urban media studies' take on space retrace all the key points of the phenomenological approach as articulated within the domestication approach, "though perhaps more implicitly than explicitly or systematically."

3. Captive Audience Positions

3.1. *Blind Spots of the Phenomenological Conceptualization: Captive Audience Positions in Urban Space*

The claims we can advance about our research objects depend on the methodological concepts we adopt to address them: concepts highlight some aspects of what we observe as relevant, and inevitably leave others in the background. A phenomenological conceptualization sensitizes scholars to address urban contexts of media engagement as *places* (perceived spaces), bracketing space as a mere "platform for place-making practices." The main methodological focus is centered on the processes that endow locations with symbolic meanings, assumed as similar to the ones that characterized *home* (familiarity, security) or rethought to better account for the heterogeneity of urban experience (anonymity, openness to difference and improvisation). Current attempts to reintroduce materiality in the picture do not overtake, but further articulate this dichotomy between space and place: bodily habituation is acknowledged as an essential part of place experience. Therefore, while conceiving the relationship between urban practices and place as a relationship of co-constitution, the phenomenological approach downplays its complexity under at least three points of view.

First of all, practices do not simply define how a place is *experienced*, but contribute to model space altogether. While making places out of spaces, practices leave traces, encumber space, wear it out or contribute to renew it. They continuously reshape its materiality, aspect and patterning through time. One of the most evocative

examples in this sense are *desire lines*, the trails traced by repeated passages on deformable ground. As urban designers have long acknowledged, *desire lines* play in turn a relevant role in modeling practices like walking:

> walkers are […] able to change their environment […] which in turn influences their further movement and their behavior. In particular, changes produced by some walkers can influence other walkers. […] This nonlinear feedback can […] lead to the self-organization of large-scale spatial structures [Helbing *et al.* 2001, 376-377].

In second instance, urban space is not simply *experienced* as a place by subjects engaged in place-making practices, but it also contributes to discipline the practices it hosts. While actual practices can never be fully pre-determined [De Certeau 1980], the urban environment is conceived and designed to host, support and regulate some preferred activities: this is what the sociologist Ole Jensen [2013] calls the "staging from above" of (mobility) performances. On the same token, urban space is conceived to discourage unwanted activities, with cases of "hostile architecture" [Tosoni and Tarantino 2013] and "unpleasant design" [Savičić and Savić 2013] being just the most evident examples. In this sense, the sporadic nature of the interdisciplinary dialogue between media scholars and urban designers seems both a cause and a consequence of the persistence of the phenomenological conceptualization of space at the core of urban media studies.

Finally, the phenomenological focus on place formation through place-making practices overlooks how any kind of practice, media related or not, opens at the same time new possibilities for other practices, force them to a coordination, or rule them out in a conflictive way. A Starbucks hotspot may, for example, trigger a gathering of free users in front of the venue, which can in turn obstruct pedestrian circulation, while providing occasions for parochial encounters for other people. From this perspective, urban practices always have a *political* nature, since urban space is *public* not only in the sense of being *publicly accessible*, but also of being *forcedly shared* by different social actors. Dealing with domestic space, Morley referred to the tensions which rose in an household

> from the placing of the husband's computer equipment in [the joint living space of the] lounge [Morley 2000, 92]

to underline how

> the various members of a household […] have competing and contradictory priorities for the use of essentially scarce resources such as money, time and space [*ibidem*, 92].

Surprisingly, such an acute awareness of the political relevance of these spatial negotiations between different practices seems to have been lost in current urban studies addressing public and semi-public spaces. The rethinking of the public nature of urban space "as a collection of minor social contracts" proposed by de Souza e Silva, Gordon and Frith seems to represent one of the few exceptions to the political blindness of the current conceptualization of public space. Yet, the "contract" metaphor risks downplaying the processual (and potentially confrontational) nature of spatial negotiations between different practices.

Without a conceptualization of space that encompasses these aspects it seems quite problematic to "sociologise" the phenomenological approach to clarify how the relationship between practices and space, and between practices in space, reflects, reinforces and contributes to reproduce power asymmetries between social actors. More than representing a form of "resistance," "habituation" to space can actually contribute to the naturalization of unbalanced power relationships. To better illustrate these points, and to advance a proposal for a post–phenomenological take on space, I will draw on a case study on captive audience positions in urban space. I define *captive audience positions* those situations in which we are somehow forcedly put in the position "to audience" a media spectacle, with *position* referring both to a social role and a physical disposition in space. By choosing the term *captive audience positions* instead of the more common *captive audiences* I aim to underline how no audience is ever fully *captive*, since the act of audiencing can always be tactically eluded [Krajina 2014]. Moreover, the reference to a physical disposition makes my definition more restrictive (and more apt to make my methodological point), excluding all the other possible strategies employed to "capture" urbanites' attention [Müller and Krüger 2007].

The examples I am discussing are taken from an ethnographic observation of a segment of the routine of the over 100,000 commuters transiting each day through the medium-sized Cadorna Station in Milan, serving the Northern area of the Lombardy region. The segment goes from the arrival by train to the moment in which commuters exit the station, and it has been observed in different hours and days of the week from May to September 2014. In particular, the main captive audience position I am addressing is shown in Picture 1.

Fɪɢ. 1. Cadorna Station (Milan): Captive audience position
Source: Own photograph

The screen in the upper part of the picture is one of the 68 screens that furnish the station since 2009, with 60 of them displaying synchronized loops of advertisement, and the others showing railway service announcements. All these screens are active from 6.30 a.m. to 11 p.m. and are managed by the office *Comunicazioni e Relazioni Esterne* of FNM S.P.A.,[1] which controls the program schedule of the over 450 screens in all the 120 stations of this railway system. What distinguishes the screen in the picture from the many others in the station is its position in space: with other three, it is located above the uninterrupted line of turnstiles that since 2007 separates the platforms from the hall of the station, as shown in Picture 2 (taken before the appearance of the electronic screens). Every day, travelers are arranged in a physical position apt to audience these electronic screens, and kept there for a duration that varies from twenty seconds to almost three minutes, depending on the time of the day: an impressive amount of time for a transition point.

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[1] The author thanks the Office for all the support in this research.

FIG. 2. Turnstiles
Source: Downloaded from deladelmur.blogspot.com

To describe how this captive audience position works, a meticulous description of this segment of the commuters' routine is needed. Picture 3, shot from inside the carriage as the door opens, already documents a captive audience position: the yellow billboard immediately welcomes commuters, who have assumed the position to face it frontally while waiting to get out.

FIG. 3. A billboard facing travelers leaving the carriages
Source: Own photograph

The contact with the billboard, however, lasts just the time to turn left and head out of the station, as shown in Picture 4. Commuters arrive in waves with each new train, and the turnout is particularly intense in the morning rush hours (7 to 9). The platforms are filled by an increasing flow of people, as the passengers step out of the carriages and walk to the exit. Finally, people from all platforms converge to the wider space where the line of turnstiles is located, and they head toward its center (Picture 5).

FIG. 4. Heading out of the station
Source: Own photograph

F<small>IG</small>. 5. Toward the exit
Source: Own photograph

The electronic turnstiles are technological devices that can operate in many different ways. In Cadorna station, they grant passage only in one direction, with the central turnstiles enabling outbound flows, and the lateral ones enabling inbound flows, as indicated by worn out signs on the floor (Picture 6): an example of what Ole Jensen refers to as *mobile geosemiotics* [Jensen 2013, 63]. Furthermore, from 2012 turnstiles have been configured to grant passage only after ticket validation, in order to avoid free riding and to reduce the number of ticket inspectors on the trains. Turnstiles are also used to monitor the number of people passing through, providing a quantitative measure of the audience of the electronic screens, and contributing insofar to define the economic value of the advertisement's time slots. Validating a ticket takes time: the ticket must be taken out, oriented in the proper position and inserted in the turnstiles. Not surprisingly, people bottle up in front of the barrier, forming a chaotic line that moves forward rhythmically (Picture 7), following the beat of the turnstiles opening and closing. People are slowed down and kept facing the screens by the bodies of all the other travelers involved in the same activity: once they cross the barrier, they are freed from the captive audience position, but

only to encounter the bigger screens located on the other side (Picture 8). Here, bodies are less constrained in their movements, but the soundscape of the station suddenly changes. While the screens near the platforms are barely audible due to environmental dispersion, in the hall their sound is amplified by the "resonating chamber effect" created by the roof.

FIG. 6. Mobile geosemiotics
Source: Own photograph

FIG. 7. Waiting to validate tickets
Source: Own photograph

Fɪɢ. 8. Through the hall, out of the station
Source: Own photograph

The relationship between practices, media and space I have just described eludes a phenomenological approach. The phenomenological approach would in fact drive the researcher to clarify how this place is experienced, and the role played by habituation in this situation. Indeed, to an observer the whole sequence seems to be firmly inscribed in the bodily memory of commuters, who usually pay only a distracted glances to the screen (when asked by the researcher, only 4 out of 100 people were able to remember the content shown in the screens they just walked past). A newcomer would probably need to negotiate each of the described activities instead, and would probably pay more attention to the screens. Yet, and this is the key point, both the habituated commuter and the newcomer would be captured by this space: the phenomenological concept of "place" sensitizes the researcher in a relevant but incomplete way to describe the situation at hand. What is at play is in fact a very complex interplay of heterogeneous elements that can be accounted only through a more elaborated conceptualization of space.

3.2. *Addressing Captive Audience Positions: Toward a Relational Conceptualization of Space*

In order to account for the functioning of the captive audience position we need to enrich our methodological "sensitivity:" we have to pay attention, in the first instance, to the spatial patterning and architecture of the station, with its narrow platforms and the larger space where people gather. The position of the screens in space is just as relevant. It has been carefully studied to intercept people in motion, but it also depends on infrastructural constrains (mainly related to wiring): while the billboard faces commuters frontally, the electronic screen is in a higher position, more apt to intercept the line of sight of people in a queue. The technical features of the screen must also be considered: its glare-free surface, its contrast and luminosity make it clearly visible from a distance, any time of the day. Equally relevant is the presence of another technological device (the turnstile) that, creating a bottleneck, triggers the formation of the chaotic line.

However, focusing on these material artefacts and their spatial patterning is not enough, since what really keeps people in front of the screen are the moving bodies of all the other travelers, involved altogether in a very complex *place ballet*. People's activities in space are actually an integral part of the captive audience position, which, in a sense, uses people to capture people. Under a methodological point of view, this implies a deconstruction of any preconceived distinction between the media device and its physical context and, even more crucially, between the capturing space and the practices it aims to capture. This last point has two main implications. First, it imposes to bring time and rhythm analysis [Lefebvre 2004] back in the picture, since the capturing space does not "work" uninterruptedly but in waves with each train coming in. Seconds, it requires an attention to the bodily performances enacted in space and, consequently, to multisensoriality, even if the relevance of sound emerges only in the second part of the example.

Finally, symbolic meanings and representations also play an essential role, since this capturing strategy can be adopted only because of the specific interactional frames which 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. In sum, this captive audience position (this relationship between space and a segment of a routine) is produced by a complex interplay between material elements (spatial patterning, architectonic features, technological devices), practices (the choreography of the place ballet), and the interactional frames that are implied by the symbolic meanings of the station.

Such a complexity eludes the grasp of the phenomenological dichotomy opposing space and place. While rarely critically addressed in a systematic way, its limitations are being increasingly pointed out by several urban media scholars, in search for conceptualizations more apt to account for how space, place, and time are

co-constituted, folded together, situated, mobile, and multiple [Wilken 2008, 46].

As pointed out by Rowan Wilken,

it is productive to conceive of place in ways that account for the interactions that occur within, between, and across specific places [*ibidem, 46*].

That is: relationally. While all these attempts share a renewed attention for the performative aspects of urban (media related) practices, 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].

For example, Federica Timeto explores current non-representational theories in human geography to propose a

rearticulation of space and representation: the former comes to be seen as a heterogeneous domain of relations that require continuous engagement, and the latter becomes a situated practice that […] contributes to its construction and transduction from within [Timeto 2015, 9].

Richard Ek engages in a dialogue with the current ontological turn within Science and Technology Studies to assume a post-phenomenological perspective able to see "place as produced through action and interaction" [Ek 2012, 50], while Jensen [2013] draws on a re-reading of Erving Goffman to propose a fully-fledged analytical model to address the heterogeneous elements that stage mobility (and media related) practices.

In line with these proposals, the one advanced here aims to move beyond the space/place dichotomy by acknowledging the pivotal relevance of performativity. Its specificity consists in the attempt to fully assume, at a methodological level, the heterogeneous nature of (urban) space [Jones 2009] and the complexity of the mutual shaping relationship between space and practices [Tarantino and Tosoni 2013]. Space is conceived as emerging situationally, from a complex interaction between material, performative (all the practices enacted in a *forcedly shared* space) and symbolic elements. As clarified more in detail elsewhere [Tosoni and Tarantino 2013], the relationship between these elements can be conceived as a relationship of *translation,* as the

creation of a link that did not exist before and that to some degrees modifies the original two [Latour 1999, 179].

According to Latour,

the concept refers to all the displacements through other actors whose mediation is indispensable for an action to occur [...]. In place of a rigid opposition between context and content, chains of translation refer to the work through which actors modify, displace and translate their various and contradictory interests [*ibidem*, 311].

The implied methodological deconstruction of any preconceived distinction between object (the media device) and context, or between space and practices, encourages and enables researchers to move beyond the place/space dichotomy inherited by phenomenological geography.

4.   Conclusions

The relational perspective that I sketched addressing a captive audience position does not ignore the relevant spatial issues underlined by the phenomenological approach. Yet, it circumvents the *space/place* dichotomy to acknowledge the processual nature of *space* itself: from a relational perspective, *place-making* is just a part of a broader process of *space-making*. Stressing the relevance of the bodily performances, it calls media scholars to acknowledge the heterogeneous ontology of urban space, and to address media practices as fully participating to their situationally-enacted mutual shaping relationship. In this way, it foregrounds the political dimension of the spatial negotiations between different practices (media related or not) overlooked by the phenomenological approach. Finally, it underlines the urgency of reintroducing temporality in the analysis, and to focus on the rhythms of the activities performed in space.

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Addressing "Captive Audience Positions" in Urban Space

From a Phenomenological to a Relational Conceptualization of Space in Urban Media Studies

Abstract: Drawing on an example of "captive audience position" (situations in which we are somehow forcedly put in the position "to audience" a media spectacle), the paper addresses the methodological shortfalls of the phenomenological conceptualization of space by and large adopted by current Urban Media Studies to address media engagement in urban space. The space/place distinction, that represents the linchpin of the phenomenological approach, risks in fact to hinder scholars to account for the complex and multilayered relationship of mutual shaping between space and urban practices and routines, media-related or not. In particular, that distinction would underplay how practices reshape the materiality and structure of space though time; how space is in turn designed to host, promote and organize specific activities (and discourage others); and how, in a forcedly shared public space, each practice would open (or close) possibilities for other practices. As a way to circumvent these limitations, the proposal put forward is to extend the phenomenological conceptualization of space into a fully fledged relational one, that sees space as continuously constituted by a complex interaction between heterogeneous elements: material, symbolic and performative.

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