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# Statistic intersubjectivity: A phenomenology of television audiences

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## 1. Introduction

In the following I will first sketch out a *phenomenological* interpretation of Walter Benjamin's reflections on film-viewership, which he considers to be symptomatic for contemporary perception in general, by focusing especially on the implicit *theory of intersubjectivity* that underpins them. On these grounds I will try to provide an account of the differences in collective experience between film and television-viewing. Since I am a philosopher working mostly within the confines of Husserl's phenomenology my aim in this is primarily a *philosophical* one: I want to use phenomenology to better grasp Benjamin and Benjamin to better grasp television spectatorship, finally to come to some relevant consequences for a phenomenological theory of intersubjectivity.

First I will briefly address two possible objections to such an endeavour. One might ask: What do Benjamin's claims regarding film and perception have to do with phenomenology? Of course Benjamin was no phenomenologist, but his close relation to phenomenology was often addressed in literature. Thus Peter Fenves argued that Benjamin's entire later philosophy is an elaborate response to certain problems in Husserl's phenomenology.[1] Without going so far there are several aspects which make a phenomenological reading of certain motifs in the *Artwork* essay highly plausible. It is doubtless that phenomenology played an important part for the young Benjamin. In a curriculum vitae written at the end of the 1920s Benjamin

places his entire philosophical formation under the sign of three thinkers – Plato, Kant, and Husserl[2] – whereas the years he spent as a student of the phenomenologist Moritz Geiger in Munich left a lasting impression on him.[3] This influence can be traced throughout the terminology of Benjamin's early essays, including explicit phenomenological analyses of shame or visual perception, discussions of technical matters like the relation between eidetic intuition and concept, or comments on methodological papers by lesser known phenomenologists like Jean Hering or Paul Linke.

This undeniable early preoccupation with phenomenology was often traced up to the introduction of Benjamin's first major work, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, which develops a theory of the relationship between the idea of Tragic Drama and the concrete works of the Baroque period that is remarkably reminiscent of Geiger's conception of phenomenological aesthetics; the task of the latter was that of outlining the idea of a specific art form (Geiger's example: tragedy) in relation to its concrete historical instantiations.[4] Instead, if one considers the conception of *history* underlying Benjamin's later thinking which develops out of these early reflections in explicit contrast to the sharp distinction in phenomenology between the invariant idea and its empirical instantiations,[5] and if one takes into account Benjamin's specific treatment of *perception*, which aims precisely for its historic variables in contrast to a phenomenology of perception aiming for its invariable structure,[6] then it is certainly not absurd to read Benjamin's thesis interpreting film as presently 'the most important object of [a] theory of perception',[7] at least in an implicit tension to phenomenology.

Benjamin's aforementioned thesis has already been at the centre of a long-lasting debate over the past few decades: the so-called 'history of vision' debate. The basic assumption which triggered it was that the invention of modern mass media and particularly cinema engendered radical modifications of human vision.[8] Since the proponents of this assumption referred heavily to the authority of early cultural philosophers like Benjamin and Simmel the former's theory of the historic mutability of perception has become a central piece in this debate. Instead, while this perspective has been highly influential in film studies since the late 1980s it is now challenged ever more often by scholars that retort to cognitive science and evolutionary psychology claiming that perception is biologically determined and therefore culturally immutable. In response my claim is that this entire debate is reductive of Benjamin's position, and there are at least three reasons to support this.

When considering Benjamin in relation to the history of vision debate it is, first of all, important to note that this debate had a relevant precursor in another debate carried out shortly before 1900, and which Benjamin was aware of.[9] This debate was first triggered by W.E. Gladstone, who noted that Homer's writings lacked a term for the colour blue; thus he claimed colour perception itself was perhaps historically conditioned. The idea was rapidly picked up by both philologists and evolutionist psychologists who began writing extensively about differences in the colour sense of various primitive peoples. Among the participants in this debate we also find Lazarus Geiger, a relative of Moritz Geiger, whom Benjamin quoted on several instances; also one of Husserl's closer fellows in the Brentano school: Anton Marty, who brought from the perspective of descriptive psychology one of the most striking arguments against the 'historicity of colour vision'. Benjamin's own rather reserved stance toward this debate – which shows in both his critical references to some of the supporters of the aforementioned thesis and in his appreciation for Marty's book, *Die Frage nach der geschichtlichen Entwicklung des Farbensinns*, containing his powerful refutation of the evolutionary thesis[10] – should be instructive for his precise position in the *Artwork* essay as well.

What both debates essentially share is, secondly, that they similarly tend to reduce perception to its sheer physiological aspect by asking whether the human sense organs are as such prone to historical mutation. On the contrary the main point of reading Benjamin in view of his phenomenological influences is to counter such a simplified account of perception. Indeed in Benjamin's best known passage on this issue in the *Artwork* essay[11] the question does not concern just the mere sensory impression as it does for Simmel, who actually speaks of differences in organ sensitivity, but rather in a phrasing that anticipates Merleau-Ponty's considerations of its intersubjective 'organisation'.

Thirdly, the history of vision debate obviously reduces Benjamin's theory to just one of its aspects and thus misses out on the broader scope of his conception. One can distinguish two main foci of interest in Benjamin's attempts to historicise perception. One of them is indeed the question of technology, bringing about intense shocks, discontinuities, and an overabundance of stimuli that determine perception to become predominantly tactile and reflex-based instead of optical and contemplative. However, this is merely the first aspect of Benjamin's account, as his thesis also refers to another central aspect: the historic transformations of perception engen-

dered by ‘the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life’,[12] that is a certain change in *social* experience. While the history of vision debate only touches upon the former aspect my considerations will focus especially on the latter.

## 2. Perception and statistics

The main passage in the *Artwork* essay that stresses how the question of the ‘masses’ historically impacts on *perception* reads:

[t]o pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose ‘sense for the similarity between things’ has increased to such a degree that it can now extract it by means of reproduction even from objects which are unique. Thus is manifested in the field of perception what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing importance of statistics. The adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope, as much for thinking as for perception. [13]

Obviously this dense passage concerns one of Benjamin’s most controversial concepts: aura. While I will avoid going into lengthy discussions with regard to the precise meaning of this term[14] I will just focus on Benjamin’s claim that as a consequence of its contemporary decay *our perception no longer grasps its objects as unique and individual entities*.

For sure this disconcerting claim is initially considered by Benjamin only with regard to artworks insofar as their massive technical reproduction leads to a devaluation of the authentic original work of art. Nevertheless he explicitly states that ‘[t]his process is symptomatic; its significance extends far beyond the realm of art’. [15] Precisely, it applies to the entire sphere of human perception. Put in such general terms Benjamin’s thesis of course stands in a striking contrast to a long lasting philosophical tradition opposing perception (as knowledge of the individual) to concept or judgement (as knowledge of the general). A subtler version of this conception can be found in Husserl’s phenomenology as well. Thus Husserl does not contrast perception only with concepts or judgements but also with phantasy, which he claims is also unable to provide with actual individual objects. This is due to the fact that the sensory qualities we grasp in phantasies are not proper individual determinations at all but just fluctuating ‘forms of variability’, as he terms them.[16] Thus, if perception alone can deliver objects with proper individual determinations this is because it alone grasps these objects in

their full spatial and temporal determination – that is, in their actual *hic et nunc*.

While Benjamin was probably unaware of these reflections in Husserl in his view the individual uniqueness of perceptual objects (which is implied when speaking of their ‘aura’[17]) similarly depends on their concrete spatial and temporal determination – their *hic et nunc*. Thus in Benjamin’s view the technical reproduction of objects by means of photography and their industrial production have led to a situation wherein objects are no longer actually perceived individually but primarily grasped *en masse*. This claim could refer to the fact that perception is today predominantly directed toward collective objects or phenomena like amassments of cars, conglomerations of buildings, or crowds of people, while Benjamin’s thesis would concordantly concern the specificities of a perception adapted to grasping such realities. Also, it could be understood in the sense that our perceptual objects – which are at core industrially produced mass commodities – are today intrinsically apprehended as uniform representatives of bulks of similar objects, while in this case contemporary perception would be set foremost on grasping stereotyped and standardised objects. In fact these two acceptations are not at all alternative interpretations but rather complementary aspects of Benjamin’s thesis. This becomes clear when considering two crucial points in his considerations: the impact of photographic reproduction on perception; Benjamin’s reference to *statistics*.

In a well-known footnote of his *Artwork* essay Benjamin claims that photography is particularly well-suited for capturing masses: ‘[m]ass movements are usually discerned more clearly by a camera than by the naked eye.’[18] Instead photography also has a more far-reaching role in adapting perception to mass society. This is hinted at when stating that our ‘sense for the similarities between things’ has today increased to such a degree that we can ‘by means of reproduction’ extract it ‘even from unique objects’.[19] What this elliptic phrase means is that photographic reproductions fundamentally alter our experience of their original objects as well insofar as – with the massive proliferation of their reproductions – the objects themselves come to lose their unicity, being de-singularised or serialised in turn. Following Benjamin this can easily be shown in the case of artworks where the originals are themselves diminished by the multiplication of their reproductions on posters, albums, t-shirts, bags or mugs, such that they cease impressing as individual, unique objects here and now, becoming themselves just further instantiations of a reproducible cliché.

However, this process is not restricted to the sphere of art alone as is clearly shown by the similar case of touristic attractions. Thus, we could say photography in Benjamin's view effectively modifies our perceivable world as such by simultaneously multiplying *and* standardising its objects.

The same two complementary aspects of multiplicity and standardisation also come to the fore in Benjamin's brief reflection on statistics: '[t]hus is manifested in the field of perception what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing significance of statistics.' [20] What exactly does statistics refer to here? In Benjamin's writings one can often find positive references to statistical research. In an article from the late 1920s he considers contemporary Russian literature to be more significant for statistical inquiry than for aesthetics, [21] while in another essay he states the importance of a statistic research concerning the flow of capitals in the editorial market. [22] A theoretically more relevant reflection can be found in a small article from 1927:

[a]s is well known, there is an entire category of facts, that only receive meaning and relief if they are not considered in isolation. These are precisely the facts that statistics has to deal with. The fact that Mr. X took his life precisely in March can be quite irrelevant in the perspective of his individual fate, instead it becomes immensely interesting, when one finds out that the yearly graphics of suicide have their maximum value in that specific month. [23]

For sure, this understanding of statistics as a tool meant for grasping so-called mass-phenomena was in line with the use of the term in early sociological works by authors such as Wilhelm Lexis, whom Benjamin explicitly refers to on another occasion. [24] Just like in Benjamin's aforementioned considerations, Lexis' most influential work, *Zur Theorie der Massenerscheinungen in der menschlichen Gesellschaft* (1877), sees it as the task of statistics 'to determine the actions and passions of the individuals in their manifold groupings, which can't be grasped in their individual elements, but produce specific mass-phenomena that can be inquired in a scientific manner'. [25] Thus the decisive feature of statistics resides in that in contrast to history 'it doesn't consider events under their individual aspect, but only registers them as part of a mass, as unities added up in a sum total' [26] – in brief, as representative samples.

Obviously Benjamin's aforementioned example also echoes Durkheim's ground-breaking work *Le suicide* (1897), a study which famously made the attempt to interpret suicides as a 'social fact' – Durkheim's term for 'mass phenomena' – by statistically analysing suicide rates. Applied to Benjamin's

reflection in the *Artwork* essay this would basically mean that the specific theoretical perspective on mass-phenomena that is developed in statistic inquiry begins to inform contemporary perception as well, insofar as the latter tends to no longer refer exclusively, as was self-understood traditionally, to individual objects determined according to their unique *hic et nunc* but rather to mass-phenomena – that is, to standardised objects which perception only registers as ‘unities of a sum total’ even if they were given just as singular instances.[27]

### 3. Collective perception

Significantly, the passage on statistics from the *Artwork* essay concludes by speaking of both ‘the alignment of reality with the masses’ and that of ‘the masses with reality’[28] – and this is indeed the main point here. The process described in Benjamin’s essay does not concern only the *object* of perception and how it is perceived – that is, its essential multiplication and standardisation – but also a parallel transformation on its subjective side, while most accounts of the passage only note the former.[29] Thus, if the massive reproduction of objects affects the very nature of these objects, such that they are no longer perceived in their individual occurrence *hic et nunc* but just as samples of mass-phenomena in view of their sheer commonality, a corresponding evolution also takes place on the subjective side of perception. This means to say that perception is today no longer experienced primarily as an act of the individual, i.e. as a unique and exclusive encounter between an individual subject and an individual object in a determined *hic et nunc*, but rather as a mere segment within a process of collective perception – in other words, as a standardised mass-phenomenon.

To be sure, Benjamin’s reflections on perception in his *Artwork* essay often strike the reader with their constant reference to ‘collective perception’ instead of just perception *tout court*. [30] In his view the standard example for this is the perception of architectural edifices. Insofar as buildings essentially tower into the public sphere due to their size and placement they are never perceived exclusively by one individual alone, but they are always simultaneously visible for an entire community, involving an intersubjective stream of perceptions to which every individual act only partakes. Following such observations Benjamin notes that this particular mode of collective perception, which is traditionally associated with the reception of



architecture, begins at present to also affect the reception of other art forms that were traditionally apperceived by the individual alone. This happened in his view in the case of painting with the incessant over-crowding of museums, and it was also a fundamental characteristic of cinema or other fleeting art forms from around the turn of the century. However, while Benjamin considers these transformations to also be symptomatic for perception in general his philosophical claim can again be understood in a twofold manner: in the narrower sense that perception is today no longer predominantly performed in solitude, but most often in the simultaneous presence of others, within the collective; and in the broader sense that perception has today acquired a certain collective scope which defines it even when there is in fact no one else simultaneously present. This latter aspect would be visible precisely in the aforementioned case of mass-articles (which Benjamin conceives as intrinsically de-singularised and stereotyped objects) since our experience of such objects is, as we might say, itself de-singularised such that the subject intrinsically apprehends his own acts of experience as not being singular and unique at all but just as adding up to a mass of similar experiences – that is, to statistics.

For sure this latter acceptance of Benjamin's theory has remarkable correspondences with some of the phenomenological accounts of the relation between perception and intersubjectivity from around the same period. Traces of such a perspective can already be found in Husserl's own considerations. For although perception is generally viewed by him as an act of consciousness performed by the individual subject his later writings consider intersubjectivity to also permeate our acts of perception through and through, such that Husserl can even explicitly write in the late 1920s: 'I see, I hear, I experience not only with my own senses, but also with that of the others.'<sup>[31]</sup> Such statements become central in post-Husserlian phenomenology, most notably first in Scheler and Heidegger. Thus as early as 1913 Scheler assumes a primary indifference between the lived experiences of the I and those of the others, speaking of a *primordial* 'immersion' of the individual in the sphere of an indistinct communal life from which the individual subject only subsequently emerges.<sup>[32]</sup> Similar reflections can be found in Heidegger's analysis of 'being with one another', as he terms intersubjective experience in *Being and Time* (1927), while this particular aspect comes to fore most blatantly in his discussion of the '*subservience*' of the individual subject (termed as *Dasein*) to the others:

*Dasein* stands in subservience to the others. It itself is not; the others have taken its being away from it. The everyday possibilities of being of Da-sein are at the disposal of the whims of the others. These others are not definite others. On the contrary, any other can represent them. What is decisive is only the inconspicuous domination by others that Da-sein as being-with has already taken over unawares. One belongs to the others oneself, and entrenches their power. 'The others,' whom one designates as such in order to cover over one's own essential belonging to them, are those who are there initially and for the most part in everyday being-with-one-another. [33]

Following such reflections Heidegger significantly relates these ontological descriptions to precisely the sort of phenomena of the contemporary public sphere of mass society that Benjamin also addresses:

[i]n utilizing public transportation, in the use of information services such as the newspaper, every other is like the next. This being-with-one-another dissolves one's own Da-sein completely into the kind of being of 'the others' in such a way that the others, as distinguishable and explicit, disappear more and more. [34]

In this context Heidegger even admits to a certain historical variability of his account of intersubjectivity by explicitly saying that 'the extent to which [the] dominance [of the others] becomes penetrating and explicit may change historically'. [35]

These parallels show that Benjamin's theory of collective perception has obvious affinities with the phenomenological reflections on intersubjectivity developed around the same time insofar as they both tend to counter a traditional representation of perception – which self-evidently regards it as an encounter between a singular, individual subject and a singular, individual object in a determined here and now – by showing that such an account no longer accurately describes a historical situation in which the percipient is first and foremost a *co-percipient* of objects that are themselves correspondingly only *co-present*, while the act of perception is itself determined first and foremost by its affiliation to an anonymous social flux of similar perceptions, that is by overarching mass-phenomena of intersubjectivity. What is particular to Benjamin's account and is only marginally touched upon by the aforementioned phenomenologists is the fact that Benjamin explicitly and systematically considers the *media* as one of the most remarkable illustrations of precisely this theory of collective experience, as in his well-known claim that 'individual reactions are predetermined by the mass audience response they are about to produce, and this is nowhere more pronounced than in the film'. [36]

Of course this passage only refers to film and it only concerns the narrower form of collective experience understood as an experience in the simultaneous presence of others. However, it is important to note that while Benjamin indeed only considers film explicitly, in the 1940s his reflections were already applied to radio spectatorship by Adorno in his little known essay 'Radio Physiognomics', which gives a much more favourable reading of Benjamin's theses than both his earlier letters to Benjamin or Horkheimer and his later essays. Following Benjamin's considerations on how technical reproduction alters the 'here and now' of the work of art Adorno briefly tackles the specific experience of radio listeners under the term of 'radio ubiquity',<sup>[37]</sup> noting the differences between the experience of music on the radio and the experience in a live concert. Instead, while Adorno himself only considers the spatial aspect of this difference one could just as well envision the equally striking difference in 'collective awareness' between the two, while such an endeavour would for sure lead to a broader acceptance of what this ubiquity implies. The latter is what I intend to explore with regard to television-spectatorship by drawing from Benjamin's thoughts on the confluence between statistics and perception.

#### 4. Television

To this extent I will first depart from what has been for long one of the most frequent common-places when comparing television to cinema: the contrast between the solitary, isolated viewing experience of the television-spectator and the collective reception in the cinema hall. This point is already touched upon in the earliest theoretical discussions of television in the 1950s by authors like André Bazin or Günther Anders. Indeed, both Bazin and Anders start out from the discrepancy between television's characteristic as a mass medium and the fact that it is perceived solely by individual spectators isolated from one another. Thus, Anders writes, opposing television to cinema:

[t]he situation that is taken for granted in the motion picture theater – the consumption of the mass product by a mass of people – was thus done away with. Needless to say, this did not mean a slowing-up of mass production [...]. [But] that collective consumption became superfluous through the mass production of receiving sets. The Smiths consumed the mass products *en famille* or even singly [...]. The mass-produced hermit came into being as a new human type [...]. [38]

In a similar vein Bazin characterises the experience of television by referring to two aspects: the psychology of TV, which he relates to the fundamental simultaneity between the subjective act of viewing and the objective program viewed in the paradigmatic situation of live transmissions;[39] and the sociology of television, which he relates to the fact that television is normally received by a viewer isolated from the bulk of other viewers in the intimate environment of his family at home.[40] Just like Anders, Bazin considers these two aspects as fundamental differences in relation to cinema, which actually appears to him in comparison as a much more collective experience than he himself would have admitted in his earlier writings.[41]

In the following, by drawing from both Benjamin and Husserl, I will try to counter this common-place opposition between cinema and television-spectatorship through an alternate description of the specific intersubjective relation which pertains to the experience of television as well, despite its being quite different from the simultaneous collective viewing experience in the cinema hall. To this extent I will focus on five short points.

1. The precise form of intersubjectivity involved in the experience of television can be deduced from the onset by analysing the specific act of communication involved in its traditionally most specific type of program: the live transmission. Picking up a distinction made by Husserl in the 1930s between spoken language understood as a direct form of communication and written language understood as a mere virtual form of communication that lacks direct address, the case of television would overlap with neither of the two.[42] To be more precise, in the case of television we are dealing with an act of communication that takes place between a speaker that addresses his entire viewership in public broadcast without being able to perceive it in any way, and a viewer who perceives the speaker secluded in his private environment without being able to address him in turn. Instead what is truly remarkable here is not just the fact that this form of communication is strikingly unilateral on both sides of emission and reception but that it brings about therewith a form of collective awareness established in absence of those with whom it is shared. It is in brief a form of collective awareness – ‘we, the viewers’ – that is constituted on the side of the receptor solely in rebound from the plural address and public broadcast on the side of the emitter.[43]

2. What we are dealing with here is for sure something like a ‘co-presentation’ in the precise sense given to this term in Husserl’s phenomenology. Husserl himself most often uses this term to note that when perceiving an object, say a table, we only see it from one side while our perception also includes some vague anticipation of its other side. In other words: while its front side is actually present to us in perception its back side is also somehow presumed as co-present with it, such that our concrete perception is always made up of both moments of presentation and co-presentation. In variation to such examples in the case of television we are not dealing with an act of perception that simply anticipates a hidden aspect of its given object on grounds of its aspect in sight but instead we are given an apparent object, while we presume a plurality of co-present subjects or receptors to that object. Of course this presumption is to a certain degree itself more common than it might appear since basically all objects of our everyday experience have so to say an index of social exposure which refers them to their place in the experience of others. One could for instance consider fame or notoriety as eminent examples of this phenomenon, and Benjamin himself explicitly draws on such aspects on several occasions. However, what is truly novel and remarkable in the case of television is the fact that here this index no longer constitutes a latent sediment of the object’s intersubjective history but instead becomes the sign of a full-fledged present social situation wherein my gaze is aimed at the same content simultaneously with countless other gazes.
3. Obviously this presumption is, to follow Husserl’s terminology a bit further, only an ‘empty intention’. In other words: it is an intention whose reference lacks any concrete intuitive determination insofar as the co-present other spectators are not given to us in any way when watching television. Of course we could easily envision these spectators according to Husserl’s account by a simple act of imagination, as we can for sure at will imagine other people simultaneously sitting in their homes watching the same program. However, from a phenomenological perspective such a phantasy illustration remains but the poorest possible concretisation of said pre-

sumption not only when compared to the direct experience of situations when despite their mutual isolation television viewers do arrive at manifesting themselves expressively in a manner that makes them perceivable for other viewers – for instance at football games, when one can hear supporters cheering from across the street – but especially in contrast to experiences that bring to the foreground precisely this implicit form of collective consciousness in absence of the collective. A striking example of this latter can be found already in Bazin’s reflections on television when discussing the case of a speaker that commits a slip-up in a live show on camera.[44] According to Bazin this is a situation which an actor could easily surpass in the theatre on grounds of the mutual complicity he attains with his audience but which in the case of live television becomes unbearable, as the actor’s sensation of performing virtually in front of millions excludes any direct contact with them. Of course Bazin himself conceives his example only in the perspective of the actor who implicitly feels the millions of gazes aimed at him in the moment of his slip-up, but one could regard it just as well in the perspective of the viewer who is for sure, just like Bazin himself, embarrassed for the actor with the explicit awareness of watching him alongside millions of others. It is this very same social tinge of our gaze that also becomes patent each time we watch a close acquaintance appear on television. For if we are normally used to experience television stars and celebrities in this mode of televisual collective awareness, such that we do not even notice it any longer, this mode of consciousness becomes explicitly striking in relation to people that we are truly accustomed to apperceive only in private.

4. It is of course true that we do not have any immediate knowledge of the amplitude and structure of this collective. However, we can nowadays hardly imagine how television or radio must have really felt like before the introduction of audience measurement techniques when the only possible way of estimating the reception of a show was indeed just word of mouth or fan mail, while correspondingly the spectator had no other way of knowing his co-spectators than subsequent casual conversations or eventually direct phone calls. In comparison it is certain that statistic audience

measurements, which were explored already in the 1940s have changed this situation to the core,[45] not only by offering broadcasters a means to measure the success of their productions and a criterion for shaping and commercially exploiting their programs but also – once this aspect has penetrated public consciousness – by giving the viewer himself a more determined impression of the range and nature of the audience to which he partakes as viewer. To this extent the viewer of course does not have to study the results of those statistic measurements as they permeate his naïve experience as well, for instance by a more or less determined awareness of the popularity of different shows, channels, time slots, and the like.[46] Thus statistics are nowadays not just a piece of abstract information but a determinant factor of concrete viewer experience as well. Note that I have herewith returned to Benjamin's conception of what I would term 'statistic awareness', which comes to bear here not just on perception as such but on the field of intersubjective experiences and relations in general. To this extent it is of course certain that developments in new media nowadays again seem to completely shift the way in which our collective awareness in relation to the media is shaped – on the one hand by adding live view-counts to internet broadcasts which allow the viewer to have a precise impression of the extent of his co-viewers in real time, and on the other hand by allowing him via social media applications to engage in concrete communication with those anonymous co-viewers.

5. In his introduction to his collective volume on *Audiences*, Ian Christie distinguishes three main concepts of audience in the history of cinema. First he discusses the 'imagined audience [...] often credited with preferences and responses, which are mere hypotheses or projections of the author's assumptions and prejudices'.[47] Second, Christie speaks of the 'economic or statistical audience, recorded in terms of admissions or box-office receipts, which has become the dominant concept of audience for the film industry'.[48] Third, he refers to the '[concrete] individual spectator in terms of psychology, anthropology or sociology'.[49] Now if one were to replace the 'individual spectator' in this last phrase with a 'collective spectator' one could easily rephrase this latter part of Christie's classification

by similarly distinguishing between the collective audience as assembled concretely in a specific cinema hall at a certain projection – which is precisely what Benjamin had in mind when speaking of ‘simultaneous collective spectatorship’ – and the statistical sum total of viewers for that film. This distinction would of course be trivial in regard to cinema where the two types of audience are obviously separated by the sheer presence of the spectators at the place and time of a single projection. However, in the case of television its delineation becomes much more problematic since here, one might say, the most abstract notion of audience in Christie’s classification – the statistical audience – itself becomes a concrete new form of lived collective awareness.

## Conclusion

My reflections started from a brief remark in Walter Benjamin’s *Artwork* essay, according to which the contemporary transformations of perception are analogous to the rise of statics in theoretical thinking. By interpreting this remark I tried to show that it involves both a fundamental mutation of our experience and of our social relationships, the consideration of which proves helpful for understanding the nature of television audiences. In conclusion I would like to mention two further significant implications of this perspective.

It is obvious that the phenomenon pointed out – the permeation of our concrete experience by elements of statistical thinking – is far broader than suggested above. It suffices to think of the internet which is itself a gigantic complex of ‘mass-phenomena’ in which we permanently orient ourselves with the implicit aid of statistical instruments like hashtags, buzzfeeds, or aggregators, while our aforementioned reflections may prove useful for tackling such issues as well.[50] There is also a significant methodological implication attached to this. For if Husserl himself already saw statistical analysis condescendingly in opposition to a phenomenology of the social, considering that the former can only perform mediated deductions with regard to factual regularities,[51] whereas the latter grounds on a direct experience of social phenomena it is clear that the emergence of hybrid forms of statistic sociality also demand a thorough rethinking of the relationship between phenomenology and statistics.



## Author

Christian Ferencz-Flatz is a researcher in philosophy at the Institute for Research in the Humanities, University of Bucharest and a fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation at the Husserl Archive, University of Cologne. His research interests include phenomenology, critical theory, philosophy of history, film-phenomenology, and image theory. His most recent publications are the monographs *Sehen Als-ob. Ästhetik und Pragmatik in Husserls Bildlehre* (2016) and *Incursiuni fenomenologice în noul film românesc* (Phenomenological Forays into the New Romanian Cinema, 2015). He co-edited the issue *Studia Phaenomenologica XVI: Film and Phenomenology* with Julian Hanich (2016).

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## Notes

- [1] See especially Fenves 2011 and Steiner 2008.
- [2] GS 6, p. 218.
- [3] GS 6, p. 225.
- [4] Geiger 1925.
- [5] GS 5, p. 577.
- [6] GS 3, p. 523.
- [7] WuN 16, p. 196.
- [8] For a detailed overview see Nanay 2015 and Ligensa 2014.
- [9] Cf. Saunders 2007. Benjamin makes several critical references to authors involved in this debate.
- [10] Cf. Fenves 2011, p. 60.
- [11] WuN 16, p. 101: 'The way in which human perception is organized – the medium in which it takes shape – is conditioned not only by nature, but also by history.'
- [12] WuN 16, p. 102.
- [13] WuN 16, p. 103 f. English translation: p. 223 (translation partially modified, CFF).

- [14] Cf. for this Bratu Hansen 2012, pp. 104-131.
- [15] WuN 16, p. 213; English translation: p. 221.
- [16] Husserl 2005, p. 663.
- [17] Cf. WuN 16, p. 181.
- [18] WuN 16, p. 248, fn. English translation: p. 251.
- [19] WuN 16, p. 103. English translation: p. 223.
- [20] WuN 16, p. 104. English translation: p. 223.
- [21] GS 2, p. 747.
- [22] GS 2, p. 770.
- [23] GS 2, p. 754.
- [24] GS 5, p. 720.
- [25] Lexis 1877, p. 1.
- [26] Ibid.
- [27] A similar application of statistic epistemology to the field of sensory perception underpins Walter Ruttmann's theory of cross-section montage. Cf. Cowan 2013, pp. 55-98.
- [28] WuN 16, p. 104. English translation: p. 223.
- [29] Cf. Hocquenheim & Schérer 1984; Elo 2005; Bratu Hansen 2008.
- [30] Cf. WuN 16, p. 57.
- [31] Husserl 1973, p. 197.
- [32] Scheler 1974, pp. 29-47.
- [33] Heidegger 2010, p. 118 f.
- [34] Ibid., p. 119.
- [35] Ibid., p. 121.
- [36] WuN 16, p. 81. English translation: p. 234.
- [37] Adorno 2006, p. 88 f.
- [38] Anders 1956, p. 15.
- [39] For sure, the fact that liveness might have been, with brief exceptions, more a rhetorical feature than an actual technical characteristic of the medium does not make it less effective in determining its reception.
- [40] Bazin 2014, p. 113.
- [41] Cf. also Hanich 2017.
- [42] Husserl 1970, p. 356.
- [43] To be sure, this claim goes against a well-established belief according to which television essentially addresses its viewer as an individual and not as a multitude. This perspective was recently defended from a Heideggerian perspective by Paddy Scannell (cf. Scannell 2000, p. 5).
- [44] Bazin 2014, p. 83 f.
- [45] Cf. Beville 1988 and Ang 1991, and for a more critical perspective Meehan 1990.
- [46] Cf. Thiele 2006.

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[47] Christie 2012, p. 11.

[48] Christie 2012, p. 11.

[49] Ibid.

[50] For an analysis of some of the political implications of these evolutions see Märker & Wehner 2013.

[51] Husserl 1987, p. 18.