



University of Dresden
Institute of Slavic Studies
Department of Slavic Literatures and Cultures

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The Struggle for Attention in the Public Sphere

A Perspective of Critical Phenomenology

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Attention does not deserve to be treated merely as one phenomenon among others;
it is a key phenomenon which discloses experience in a unique fashion.

Bernhard Waldenfels, Phenomenology of the Alien (2011)

Recently, the economics of attention in the public sphere has attracted more and more research interests. Some influential theories of this field in the last decades include: phenomenology of attention and recognition (Bernhard Waldenfels, Axel Honneth); theories of civil disobedience (Hannah Arendt, John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas); social phenomenology of the public sphere (Michael Warner, Sophie Loidolt) etc. Rawls and Habermas claim that any democratic state should allow and not repress acts of civil disobedience: an act of civil disobedience, publicly performed, attracts public attention to an unnoticed injustice legitimized by authorities. The German phenomenologist Axel Honneth regards attention as an instrument of making someone visible in the public space or deliberately not noticing him/her and in such a way rendering the person as socially nonexistent. The American cultural and literary theorist, Michael Warner, suggests understanding the public sphere(s) as a phenomenon created by an act of attention: the call „Look!“, „Listen!“, „Read!“, „Perceive!“ addressed to the public creates this very public.

As Bernhard Waldenfels formulates it while describing the economy and politics of attention in the contemporary world: “The economic [of attention] plays an elemental and inevitable role. The selection inherent in all attention, this simultaneity of *turning-toward* and *turning-away*, turns attention into a rare good which has by now also entered into the vortex of globalization. There are many providers who compete in the currently gigantic market of attention. Take, for example, the commercials which seek after attention in so many ways, using desirable images, erotic allusions, and intentional semantic leaps. The art of advertisement consists in setting a trap for our gaze (...) This is part and parcel of the gentle, furtive violence of economy. The political makes itself apparent because all attention takes place in a social space and can thus be more or less available for direction.

There has always been a field of influence open to political or religious rhetoric, and for a long time it has defined the playing field of the intentional work of “public relations” and the ever-present mediality. The politics of news reports is just one example. Every newspaper and every TV program decides randomly what is important and what should be filtered out, what becomes an object of speech and gaze and what does not. This filtering is not always as obvious as in the case of the news reports on the last Iraq war, which were indeed part of the warfare. The fact that intentionally wrong news was created, the so-called dirty tricks or diversionary measures, is not as important. The power is in the choice as such.

The political and the economic are also ingredients of attention. No fair redistribution of resources and no mutually consensual regulation can eliminate inevitable conflicts. Resistance is only to be expected from attention itself, in the shape of *attention sauvage*, an attention which preserves the moments of the an-economic and the anarchical and allows for a surplus of the given attention”¹.

In our Summer school we understand the **public sphere** as a public space (or spaces) where socially, culturally and politically meaningful events and processes take place. But what makes them „meaningful“? And what makes them „public“? In order to produce a meaningful event or an action, do we need attract the attention of the public to this event or action? Why do we consider some events as meaningful and leave others aside as insignificant? How is attention distributed and redistributed in the public sphere and what instances are responsible for that? In what cases do we become hostages of the economics of attention and how does paying attention to some things and not paying it to others form our identity?

We can imagine modern human history as a permanent struggle for attention in the public sphere. The struggle could take place in order for one group to gain more power or more influence, or, on the contrary, in order to restore social or political injustice and to attract attention to an unfairly marginalized group. If attention is a means of making something or someone visible in the public sphere and, thus, existing, isn't the articulation of attention also a means to undermine hegemonies, to redistribute power in a society in a fairer way?

The **aim** of our Summer School is to analyze the functions and goals of articulating attention in the public sphere. We regard the **public sphere** (or spheres) not as a neutral, homogeneous, and stable space(s), but as a fluid, complex, and heterogeneous disposition of production, support, and redistribution of public attention.

We regard **attention** (economy of its articulation)

- as a means to produce a publicly meaningful event or phenomenon
- as a means of constituting publics and the public spheres
- as a stake in the struggle for power or recognition.

¹ *Bernhard Waldenfels*. Phenomenology of the Alien (chapter “Thresholds of Attention”). Northwestern University Press, 2011. P. 68-69.

The **questions** we would like to discuss are:

- How our perception of things in the public sphere depends on the logic of (re)distribution of public attention?
- How (re)articulation of attention constitutes and reconstitutes social and political order?
- How limits of the public sphere change depending on the (re)distribution of public attention?
- How media form „actual“ and „essential“ agenda through articulation of public attention?
- How new media-technologies condition the way we are becoming more attentive to some things and less attentive to others?

Why critical phenomenology? We decided to use a relatively new approach called *critical phenomenology* as a key methodology of the School. Critical phenomenology productively combines critical political theory and classical phenomenology. Classical phenomenology inquiries into the essence of phenomena of lived experienced, implying that the world does not exist apart from our consciousnesses. Critical political theory inquiries into the social and political structures of hegemonies. According to one of the adepts of this approach, „critical phenomenology is a normatively engaged project, that delves into social structures and norms that are seen as unjust, oppressive, exclusive“². Understanding of the way the public attention is by default articulated in a cultural context lets us make visible and, thus, undermine hegemonial structures based on the way the attention was articulated.

„Many critical phenomenologists are deeply inspired by literary, artistic and biographical sources“, hence critical phenomenology “engages in reciprocal methodological and conceptual exchange“ with other disciplines³. In this School we show how cultural practices of articulation of attention (media projects, art performances, literary communities etc.) can be analyzed through the lens of critical phenomenology.

Geographically, we will focus on the experiences of the post-soviet countries (*Ukraine, Belarus, Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan and others*) to see how local marginalized groups claim for public attention and visibility; how public attention becomes a stake in political campaigns in the societies oscillating between democracy and authoritarianism; how grassroots initiatives

² *Marieke Borren*. Opening address „People on Streets. Critical Phenomenologies of Embodied Resistance“, Conference, May 12 -14, 2022, Universität Paderborn, Germany.

³ *Ibid.*

create new publics in order to democratize their political landscapes. Our **empirical interest** in these regions embraces phenomena within three conditional thematic clusters:

- 1) Struggle for attention by media and authorities as a way to gain power (monopolization of public attention by media; electorate campaigns; articulation/manipulation of public opinion; cultural logic of commercial advertising etc.)
- 2) Attracting public attention as a means to restore social and political justice (struggle of marginalized groups for public visibility/political representation and recognition; acts of civil disobedience, civil protests etc.)
- 3) Creating publics and spontaneous public sphere(s) through articulation of auditory attention (street performances and participatory street art; creating literary publics around meaningful texts of culture etc.)

The **lecturers** of the School will be one of the most influential German phenomenologists Bernhard Waldenfels, a critical phenomenologist Marieke Borren and experts in East European and Central Asian regional case-studies of the modern public spheres. The program of the School will appear in early April, it consists of lectures, seminars, workshops and discussions and includes visits to the legendary museums of Dresden and a unique natural reserve in Saxon Switzerland.

We invite **participants** who are PhD students and postdocs from the field of social and political philosophy/critical phenomenology as well as from art-, cultural-, public history-, literary-, and media studies.

The School takes place at the University of Dresden, Institute of Slavic studies from **23-29 July, 2023**. Travel and accommodation costs can be covered by the University of Dresden.

Please, send us a CV and a brief (not more than two pages) description of how the School relates to your research interests till the **1st of May 2023**: Tatiana.Vaizer@tu-dresden.de