Listening, temporalities and epistemology: A hermeneutical perspective on mediated civic engagement

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Abstract:

This paper explores the literature on audience and citizenship with the aim of catching sight of some latent and subterranean trends where embryonic and potential developments of the field may reside. By putting together three research routes within the most recent literature, respectively focused on listening, temporality and epistemology, the analysis shows how their juxtaposition illuminates an overlooked political dimension of reception that has to do with the pure interpretative endeavour which in itself contains some of the elements that nurture the experience of public connection. This enriched understanding of reception as a site for civic agency is made possible by a cross-fertilization between hermeneutical philosophy (Ricoeur, 1991; Alejandro, 1993) and media research. Drawing upon Ricoeur's notion of second-order reference as a possible world that is disclosed *in front* of the text, the paper demonstrates how the performative power exerted by media in convening and constituting publics derives and at the same time overcomes the content boundaries of the text, being rooted in the interpretative tasks of our human condition.

Keywords: civic agency, interpretation, decoding task, listening, temporal experience, hermeneutics, Ricoeur

Introduction

This paper explores the literature on audience and citizenship with the aim of catching sight of some latent and subterranean trends where embryonic and potential developments of the field can reside. The task is particularly risky because it requires us to move carefully within conceptual fields that are more populated by hints and clues than by codified and widely accepted categories. However challenging it appears, it is worth pursuing anyhow

insofar as it can disclose new understandings of the role played by media text in the production of civic agency. Three themes of media reception will be put under focus: the notion of listening as a peculiar quality of receptivity, the production of temporal experiences and the negotiation of epistemology. It will be shown how the ways in which these issues have been thematized by some specific strands of recent literature implicitly unveil a cluster of reception dynamics where the political as ontological dimension of the subject is shaped and experienced. It will be argued that, notwithstanding the heterogeneity in theoretical tools and knowledge purposes, the three set of contributions share a common exploratory direction towards an overlooked political dimension that is implied by the relationship between people and media. This political dimension does not coincide with participatory opportunities neither with a resistant or subversive appropriation of the meanings that are inscribed in media texts. It has rather to do with the mere interpretative endeavour that substantiates media reception processes and which in itself contains some of the elements that nurture the experience of public connection.

Citizenship as interpretative task

The itinerary of this article takes its departure at the outside of media research, from the theoretical proposal formulated by Alejandro (1993) to see citizenship as an interpretative task, more specifically as 'a dimension where the interpretative tasks of our human condition are unfolded' (p. 39). Drawing on Gadamer's hermeneutics, Alejandro considers understanding and interpretation as the fundamental elements defining the human condition. If refracted through a hermeneutic perspective, citizenship appears not as a juridical definition nor as a collection of good civic attitudes; it is rather conceived as a part of the broader question of being 'an important element of the human condition', and a social construction that involves a dimension of connectedness and distance (p. 39). The reason why Alejandro resorts hermeneutics to understand citizenship is rooted in the need to make room for diversity and conflicts, giving recognition to the diverse and even conflicting understandings of individuality, community and public identity that co-exist in the public sphere. From Gadamer's hermeneutics, Alejandro takes the idea that we are interpretative beings born into a tradition and that our understanding corresponds to the placing of ourselves within a process of tradition, in which past and present are constantly fused (Gadamer, 1985). Moreover, he brings the assumption that man's relation to the world is fundamentally and essentially linguistic, and that language is the record of our finitude as well as embodiment of history and tradition. It leads to the conclusion that, when we analyse a text or a past event, we cannot erase our historical perspective and the principles or values that define our identity and nurture our moral character (Alejandro, 1993, p. 36). Our interpretation doesn't consist in recovering a hidden meaning, which is there simply waiting to be grasped; it is rather a construction of new meanings aimed at achieving a fusion of horizons between our historical and moral standpoint and the one inscribed into the text. Gadamer's conceptions thus orient us towards seeing citizenship as 'a terrain in which individuals interpret the past, recognize "the universal linguistic

character" of their relationship to the world, re-examine their traditions' (Ivi, p. 36). Even more clearly, Alejandro states that citizenship is both a hermeneutic horizon, namely a worldview nurtured by traditions, institutions, symbols, rites and myths, and a textual reality addressed to a plurality of readers. Being expressed through a web of sentences, or through actions carried out by individuals or groups (whether this be strikes or painting), citizenship is a text that is open to a plurality of meanings and discloses itself to a plurality of readers, 'namely the citizens, whereby they cease to be the predicate to be the subjects that reflect and act upon the possibility of constructing a common life' (Ivi, p. 37).

The hermeneutical approach to citizenship proposed by Alejandro is thus a sensitizing perspective that not only shows how textual interpretation represents an essential and constitutive component of citizenship, it also more radically introduces citizenship as a dimension of the decoding task to which we are all committed as human beings. While this argument has philosophical implications that go beyond the disciplinary pertinence of this article, what matters for our line of reasoning is that Alejandro's assumption theoretically allows us to consider citizenship as a dimension that is potentially implied in every act of reception and interpretation, in every fusion of horizons between the reader and the texts or event she is trying to understand. If we decide to accept this principle, it's doesn't matter whether the content is explicitly political or has been intentionally constructed to transform a group of spectators into a public with a will to act; what counts instead is the hermeneutical endeavor *per se* as a site where potentialities for civic agency reside, and a reader has the possibility to 'cease to be the predicate, to be the subject that reflects and acts upon the possibility of a common life' (Alejandro, 1995, p.37).

The three themes that will be described in the next paragraph have been identified in the light of this theoretical assumption. They have been recognised as enabling an analytical gaze where civic agency has been understood not as a participatory involvement, nor as anti-hegemonic resistance to the text, but instead as an actualized dimension of interpretation. All three point to a dynamics of reception that overcome the content boundaries of the text, but nevertheless draw upon it to gain awareness of differences and otherness, to produce temporal experience and to negotiate epistemological frames.

Listening

Recent reflections around the notion of listening (O'Donnell, Lloyd, Dreher, 2009; Macnamara, 2013) offer a research route into the political dimension of reception. With the aim of counteracting a widespread emphasis on the democratic potential of self-expression, this approach resorts the practice of listening as unavoidable corollary of speaking and voice. As The Listening Project's[1] researchers explain, taking listening as a departure point means to move the analysis of mediated communication from a *politics of expression* to a *politics of impression*, where mediated communication is examined as a relational space of recognition and refusal, of connection and contestation (O'Donnell, Lloyd, Dreher, 2009). Within this perspective, not only are overlooked issues such as silence, misinterpretation and dissonance brought to the forefront, but even questions of difference, conflict and

inequality come to be differently illuminated. A source of inspiration for this new emphasis on listening has been the landmark text, *The Dissonance of Democracy: Listening, Conflict and Citizenship*, by Bickford (1996), in which it is noted how conflicts and inequalities affect not only who gets to speak, but also particularly who gets attention and who gets listened to. According to Husband (2009), listening is different from understanding. Listening is the necessary antecedent of understanding, 'it is an act of attention, a willingness to focus on the *others*, to heed both their presence and their communication'; understanding, on the other hand, 'is an act of empathetic comprehension, a willing searching after the other's intention and message' (p. 441). However, the possibility of understanding is affected by the kind of orientation we bring to listening, by the creative openness we are able to put into play when dealing with differences. Summarising listening literature in relation to both interpersonal and public communication, Macnamara proposes understanding listening as an activity that involves a 'substantive level of human cognitive engagement with the expressed views of another or others involving attention, recognition, interpretation to try to discover meaning, ideally leading to understanding' (2013, p. 163). Listening is a purposeful, responsible and courageous act because 'the possibility of absurdity, and chaos and not-hearing is as real as the possibility of meaning' (Brickford, 1996, p. 169, quoted in O'Donnell, Lloyd, Dreher, 2009, p. 433-434). The possibility of failure not only makes room for an ethical inquiry into listening (Gehrke, 2009) but also leads us to question the cultural forms, the material as well as the symbolic protocols, conventions and interfaces that frame contemporary performances of listening. As Couldry underlines the reciprocal and embodied nature of listening (2006), so Brickford (1996, p. 144) explains the mutual intertwining of speech and listening as both corporeal and cultural. This is an aspect that is taken on in Crawford (2009) where she explores how social media platforms are changing the configuration of the ideal listening subject, affording new ways of focusing or defocusing attention. Making reference to Twitter, she identifies three main modes of listening: reciprocal listening, background listening, and delegated listening. Besides supporting a reframing of lurking as a form of networked engagement, the concept of listening is used by Crawford to pinpoint the new disciplines of attention through which we now connect with others, and account for our own subjectivity on social media. In her opinion, 'social media powerfully invoke an efficient listening subject' (p. 526) while creating a gap between the technical possibility of a continuous online presence and the schedules, desires and bodies of concrete users. According to the leading exponent of digital storytelling, Joe Lambert, founder of the Center for Digital Storytelling at Berkeley[2], the faculty for listening others' stores is expanded in a digital storytelling context, where the normal one-way practices of consuming mass media are replaced by story-catching mechanisms that allow mutual recognition (Lambert, 2007). Couldry et al. (2013) argue that digital storytelling can be conducive to mutual recognition (Honneth, 2007) insofar as it allows us to listen to other people as active narrators of their individual lives and of the issues they share with others.

From this brief review of the literature, the notion of listening emerges as able to elucidate a peculiar quality of reception by virtue of which the reader is projected into the

intersubjective space of otherness, with the responsibility and the risk of refusal or recognition, of involvement or indifference. As the case of storytelling clearly shows, actualized listening takes reception beyond itself, incorporating the single act of paying attention into a 'continuation' (Bickford, 1996) of reciprocity and mutual exchanges. At the same time, because of its embodied and cultural nature, listening is a quality of reception that involves both the text and its context, therefore becoming deeply affected by the technologies of communication and their disciplinary imperatives of uninterrupted attentiveness.

Temporal experience

The second route introduces reception as a site where the politics of temporal experience takes shape. Here the path is traced by Keightley (2013) who argues that the temporal experience created through media reception opens a space of confrontation between the meanings shaped by the 'power of constructing and representing time in media content' (p. 65) and the active time-reconciliation that is carried out by the experiencing subject and is limited or enhanced by her resources, competences and structural positioning. Drawing on Hassan (2007) and Leccardi (2007), Keightley introduces the subjective temporal experiences as sites where people encounter and negotiate the acceleration and immediacy that are brought about by contemporary media technologies (Castells, 2000). She finds in the domestication approach (Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992) a theoretical and empirical anchoring to explain how the temporal affordances of media technologies are actively re-negotiated and reproduced by the social temporalities of everyday life. However, the exclusive focus on practices doesn't allow to account for the imaginative and symbolic dimension that is a central component of both temporal experience (Munn, 1992) and media experience as a double engagement with the media as objects and symbolic texts (Silverstone, 1994). Keightley posits that what is missing in the available literature on the topic is an understanding of how the interrelation between routines of use, communicative structures and textual content – the 'triple articulation' indicated by Hartmann (2006) – is involved in the production and experience of mediated time. The solution derives from Bergson's notion of the 'zone of intermediacy' (Bergson, 1944) according to which temporal meaning is produced in a liminal condition where different temporal durations interact. Consequently, the conditions for mediated temporal experiences derive from the interpenetration between the multiple but distinct temporal logics that are brought by media respectively as objects, as communicative forms and as texts. For the line of reasoning opened by hermeneutics' perspective on citizenship, it's relevant to underline that the temporal meanings potentially offered by the juncture of different durations remains indeterminate until realized by the experiencing subjects; it's up to them and to their reception activity to resolve temporal indeterminacy, actively reconciling the time represented in the texts with the temporal logic of the medium and the contextual social times. It is this shift towards the role of the experiencing subject that opens up a 'political dimension in the reception analysis of mediated time' (p.65) wherein issues of power and

agency are thematised. Negotiations of time that happen during media reception have a political meaning not only because their variable strengths reflect the unequal distribution of resources and competences among the experiencing subjects, but also because time is currently becoming the site of a radical repoliticization of social life where the acceleration induced by information-based capitalism (Hassan, 2010) is challenged by the resistant slowness of participatory democratic organization (Kaun, 2015) or by the non-reified time that characterizes some forms of online activism (Leccardi, 2007). The research route proposed by Keightley can indeed be recognized as a case in point for hermeneutical citizenship. In her arguments, it's clear that people receive from media the preconditions for experiencing temporal differences, but it's only through their socially situated acts of reception that a temporal experience is produced and a potentiality for civic agency is materialized.

Epistemology

The third theme that allows us to thematize the political dimension of media reception is that of 'I-pistemology'. The term has been coined by van Zoonen (2012) to describe a contemporary cultural process in which people have come to distrust the official knowledge, and to rely on the truth coming from the self, personal experiences and feelings. While the phenomenon has been widely acknowledged (and stigmatized) in some of its typical manifestations, as so-called narcissism (Lasch, 1979), emotivism (MacIntyre, 1981) or the *first person media* (Dovey, 2000), van Zoonen makes an original contribution in showing its articulation with different kind of media and politics. The 'I' of I-pistemology stands not only for the subject but also for the Internet, which is seen as a great facilitator of the monologic practices of assertions and denials of personal truths. Moreover, she detects a deep connection between this kind of epistemology and specific political cultures. Right-wing populisms, with their evocation of ordinary people as the only source of legitimization, are one of the most fertile backgrounds for personalized processes of knowledge assessment and authentication. However, mutual synergies are found also with the progressive politics of feminist, civil rights and gay movements which have strenuously battled to get the personal experiences of discriminated minorities recognized as valid sources of politics. It's the connection between a specific orientation to knowledge and a specific orientation to politics that offers relevant clues to our reasoning about hermeneutical citizenship. If we agree with van Zoonen in understanding this connection not as a mere historical co-occurrence but rather as an interplay between two phenomena that are mutually reinforcing, we can rightly ask what are the reasons and the processes that substantiate it. Does it happen just because the political cultures we are speaking about – populism and identity politics – have explicitly politicized the issues of knowledge and subjectivity? Or can we suppose a deeper correlation between the orientation people have towards texts and the orientation they have towards public issues, a correlation that is simply put under the lens by I-pistemology? The issue had been tackled by Sonia Livingstone (1999) in a contribution that was aimed at understanding 'how may viewers come to know about the

world (including their place in it)' (p. 92) from media representations conveyed through talk shows. Extending an argument previously emerged within a text-reader analysis of talk shows (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994), she argues that the construction of epistemological claims and of a particular kind of knowledge within the genre of talks show, and by extension other genres, is achieved by managing the various discursive positions available to the participants (expert and lay), by establishing what it is legitimate for each to say, and how much credibility should be attributed to their utterances. The way in which viewers proved to respond to the implicit invitation of the genre was a matter not only of interpretation of content, but also of identity, 'involving the positioning of oneself in relation to perceived others, including those on television' (p.93). More than a clash of knowledges, the interaction between text and viewer is revealed to be an active negotiation of the appropriate ways of knowing and of the systems of social roles and social relations that were implied by the genres and their claimed discursive positioning. Coherently with the hermeneutics' notion of understanding, Livingstone's contribution has demonstrated that the reception of a text constitutes in itself an opportunity to mobilize, confirm or renegotiate not so much our pre-existing knowledge, as instead the political as ontological dimension in the form of systems of truth and relations to generalized others. Therefore, the interdependence between epistemology and political cultures detected by van Zoonen can be plausibly understood as one of the corollaries of the political dimension implied in the hermeneutic endeavour, more than as an exclusive feature of specific ideologies.

Discussion: the world *in front* of the text

In the three research themes, hermeneutical endeavour has emerged as a potential site of civic agency insofar as it provides readers with the opportunity to become aware of, to reproduce or to renegotiate their relationship with *otherness*, their subjective experience of the time structured by politics or economics, their personal parameters of truth, knowledge and credibility. This possibility has proved to be anchored in the offerings and constraints of the text, but its full actualization only comes from the agency of the interpreting subject who actively experiences reception as a way of placing herself 'within a process of tradition' (Alejandro, 1993). Without abandoning the research field of critical hermeneutics, it's in Ricoeur (1991) that we can find a unifying theoretical perspective for the hints coming from the three research routes. For Ricoeur, texts, as fixed communication patterns and unlike utterances or speech acts, acquire a semantic autonomy from both the intentions of producers and the reception of their primary receivers (p. 17). The 'mediation' realized through their fixation erases the primary reference – which is the showing and the display of the situational context that is shared by interlocutors – and allows the emergence of a '"second-order" reference' (p. 175), otherwise called 'the "thing" of the text' (p. 131), which coincides with text's claims to grasp reality and to propose a world that can be inhabited by people. Here the term 'world' (*welt* in German) should be understood in opposition to the concept of 'situation' (*umwelt* in German) (p. 149). While the latter is the primary reference that dialogue makes to the manipulable reality, the 'world' is constituted by all the second-

order references of the texts we have read and interpreted, and has to do with the symbolic dimension of our being in the world and the different possibilities of inhabiting it: 'to understand is at the same time to light up our own situation or, if you will, to interpolate among the predicates of our situation all the significations that make a Welt of our Umwelt' (p. 149). What is relevant is that this second-order reference is not behind the text as a hidden intention of the author, but it is *in front* of the text and takes place only when the text goes beyond itself and starts to inhabit the life-world of the reader. As the contribution by Livingstone (1999) clearly demonstrates, people were not negotiating content in itself – reception was not a 'clash of knowledges (what the text "tells us" versus what the viewer knows from elsewhere)'(p. 92) –, they were rather negotiating the world proposed by the text, its peculiar order of legitimate discursive positions and of relations between generalized others.

Without the ambition of indicating the three themes of listening, temporalities and epistemology as heralds of potentially valuable developments of the field, this paper has been limited to putting together three research routes through the most recent literature, which have no explicit mutual intersections, and to show how their juxtaposition illuminates an overlooked political dimension of reception. To do this, the journey pursued has had to move between different disciplines and different knowledge approaches to reality. The philosophical approach of hermeneutics has been used, firstly, as a sensitizing perspective to capture what was submerged in some heterogeneous thematic foci; then it has been resorted to as a unifying perspective that has framed the three themes as different expressions of the same process. The cross-fertilization between hermeneutical philosophy and media research has allowed us, firstly, to achieve an enriched knowledge of reception as a potential site for civic agency. What has been achieved is, on the one side, a confirmation of the performative power of media, in that they don't simply slot into the pre-existent civic cultures of audiences but, more decisively, convene and constitute publics providing them with an opportunity for civic agency. On the other hand, Ricoeur's notion of the second-order reference as taking shape *in front of the text*, has clarified that this link between media and citizenship does not derive from media texts 'inculcat[ing] dispositions to action for their publics' (Chouliaraki, 2008, p. 213); it is rather rooted in the 'interpretative tasks of our human condition' (Alejandro, 1993) which find in each available text the opportunity to refract the material situation of everyday life through a symbolic world of values and meanings. At the same time, the three research contributions on listening, temporality and epistemology have allowed us to specify the theoretical claims of hermeneutics. More specifically, what has clearly emerged from the brief reviews is that the materialization of civic agency is subject to specific conditions of possibility that have become clearer in the researches on listening and temporalities, but that can be extended to the theme of epistemology as well. When reframed from a hermeneutic perspective, each of the explored research themes brings with it new research questions that mainly concern the relationship between what can be thought simplistically as the 'contexts' of media texts – media platforms, articulations of platforms and communicative forms, media

genres – and the symbolic worlds that are disclosed through their reception. Without being exhaustive, a provisional list of the new issues that are thus raised includes questions about which modes of listening are associated with the diverse kinds of otherness that we encounter through media, about what disjunctures between temporalities of the platforms, the representational forms and the texts are still able to trigger temporal experience, and about the ways in which new epistemologies are negotiated in multimedia consumption where multiple truths conflict. All these issues point at those contextual conditions of media consumption which can constrain or enhance the hermeneutic endeavor, and which are surely worthy of being further detailed.

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Notes:

[1] http://www.uq.edu.au/crn/projects/literacies-listening.html.

[2] http://www.storycenter.org/.