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► **To cite this version:**

Claudia Serban. Is Surprise Necessarily Disappointing?. ed. Natalie Depraz and Agnès Celle. Surprise at the Intersection of Phenomenology and Linguistics, John Benjamins publishing, pp.171-180, 2019, 10.1075/ceb.11.09ser . hal-03830257

**HAL Id: hal-03830257**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03830257>**

Submitted on 26 Oct 2022

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## Is Surprise Necessarily Disappointing?

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In his 1963 essay on « The Concept of Reality and the Possibility of the Novel », Hans Blumenberg describes the vision of reality that we find in Husserl's phenomenology as follows:

“The concept of reality as an ‘open’ context asserts the aesthetic quality of the *novitas*, of the surprising, unfamiliar element, while the ‘guaranteed’ reality does not really permit the unfamiliar and novelty [...]. This transformation of the reality concept liberates that which is new from its dubious connotation; the *terra incognita*, the *mundus novus* become possible and act as a stimulation for human activity; to put it paradoxically: one can now expect surprise (*die Überraschung wird erwartbar*)”. (Blumenberg 2001: 52-53)

In Blumenberg's view, as one can see, Husserl's account of reality is particularly propitious to artistic (and especially literary and Romanesque) creation: once the openness of possibilities has been revealed, there is place for surprise. But how could *surprise* be *expected*? Doesn't this imply a plain contradiction? For surprise seems rather to be, precisely, an experience of the unexpected.

Moreover, Blumenberg's appreciation might appear to be somewhat surprising itself, insofar as the fact of undoubtedly attributing Husserl such an openness to novelty is rather problematic. Indeed, it would be difficult to speak, in a Husserlian perspective, of something like a “phenomenology of surprise” (Depraz 2010). Quite the contrary, within the framework of Husserl's comprehension of experience, what might appear to be the closest avatar of surprise is, unexpectedly, disappointment (*Enttäuschung*).

My goal will therefore be to elucidate and analyze the conditions of possibility and the descriptions of surprise from a phenomenological perspective in order to decide of the sense and legitimacy of an “expectation of surprise”. Firstly, I will show that the difficulty to inscribe surprise within experience otherwise than as an *Enttäuschung* comes from the fact that, in Husserl's view, the major feature of experience is concordance (*Einstimmigkeit*). Therefore, every event and every perception that does not correspond to the expectations prescribed by the concordance of experience

will be lived or perceived as a conflict (*Widerstreit*), as the negation of that what is expected. Furthermore, the fact that in the case of surprise, expectations are not fulfilled, but deceived or frustrated, seems to imply that any surprise is necessarily, in one way, disappointing. The unfolding of this complex reasoning will be the object of the second part of my inquiry. In a third moment, I will try to overcome this negative characterization of surprise without completely abandoning Husserl's method and description, by analyzing the specificity of the conflicts and discordances contained in experience, of which surprise seems to be an example. My intention will then be to show that conflict is as important and irreducible as concordance and that experience should rather be defined, in a more dynamic manner, as the intertwining of both. Consequently, the motivational link between the past and the future will need to be re-evaluated, in order to maintain a balance between the motivation of the past (expectation) and of the open possibilities of the future (free anticipation). Not only the position of surprise in time will then appear in a different light, but so will the intrinsic variety of its affective charge. Thus, a paradoxical expectation of surprise (like that stated by Blumenberg) becomes indeed conceivable.

#### 1. Dissonance against Harmony?

What does it mean, precisely, that concordance has to be held (as in Husserl's view) for the major feature of experience? Let us take into consideration, to start with, an example: listening to a piece of music. But not any piece of music: I would like to briefly examine what happens when one listens to the second movement of Haydn's 94<sup>th</sup> Symphony (created in 1792), when a sudden *fortissimo* chord interferes with the *piano* violins, and immediately afterwards, the music becomes quiet and peaceful again. It is this *fortissimo* that does not leave any trace and is not further repeated that justifies the nickname "Surprise" for this London symphony. And the German word for "surprise" might be here even more appropriated: *Überraschung* derives from the adjective *rasch*, which designates the *sudden* dimension of an event. In Haydn's symphony, but also according to a more general opinion, surprise is that what arrives suddenly – even though, perhaps, not (necessarily) unexpectedly. In the particular case of Baroque music, the sudden musical event (like the *fortissimo* chord in Haydn's symphony) illustrates, as the musicologist Gilles Cantagrel puts it, "the ornament that embellishes the melodic line": "Such as the volutes that fracture the orthogonal lines of an architectural edifice, these accidents trouble the linearity of the discourse in order to enrich it [...], they create a different movement in order to highlight the expressivity of dissonance, in order to suspend or accentuate the rhythmic flux, to draw attention, to provoke surprise" (Cantagrel 2008: 118). As this description marvelously suggests it, the condition for a genuine receptivity for surprise cannot be a mere lack of attention. Consequently, surprise has to respond to

a certain expectation, even by deceiving it; and what is then deceived (as the example of Haydn's symphony shows it) is, more precisely, the spontaneous faith in resemblance, the expectation of the similar, of the homogenous.

This example borrowed to the history of music describes perfectly, in my opinion, Husserl's account of experience as defined by concordance, such as it is presented, for instance, in the 1925 lecture *Phenomenological Psychology*: "In our experience, all the occasional and minor discordances eventually vanish into the harmony of concordance" (Husserl 1962: 60). According to this claim, surprise is not to be understood as an irremediable fracture within experience: as Haydn's symphony shows it, far from being destroyed by the irruption of discordance, the unity and continuity of experience can always be restored. This is why, for Husserl, concordance (*Einstimmigkeit*) is the distinctive feature of experience; as he puts it a bit further, "the extension of our concept of experience coincides with that of the concordant synthesis which grants its unity and therefore makes it precisely concordant" (Husserl 1962: 95). But this does not mean, on the other hand, that experience is *nothing but* concordance, or *always* concordant, insofar as "quite often and, on a larger scale, almost always, concordant experience does not remain concordant for a long time" (Husserl 1962: 124). This is what one of Husserl's favorite examples alternatively suggests: when a mannequin or a wax statue that I have previously taken for human persons are being perceived as what they truly are, this means that, at some point, there was a fracture, a shift in my perceptive experience; and still, illusion or discordance remains here simply local and temporary, insofar as it is essentially corrigible: it can always be neutralized and dissolved into a "higher harmony (*Die Widerstreite im Einzelnen heben sich in einer höheren Harmonie auf*)" (Husserl 1962: 119).

It is this manner of reintegrating discordance within the continuity of concordant experience that I wanted to hint at by evoking the function of ornament in Baroque music: the Baroque is fond of dissonance without questioning the reign of melody; therefore, there is always a higher harmony in the background of the musical accident, and it is this harmony that gives dissonance a meaning and a position. Reciprocally, the accident, the ornament – the surprise – has mainly the function to enrich, to highlight the reigning harmony, exactly like an exception is called to confirm the rule. What is at stake with this recuperation of what is novel and unusual can also be expressed in terms of continuity: "An experience is such only if it is without fractures (*ungebrochen*)" (Husserl 1962: 96, footnote 1). Insofar as experience rimes with continuity and concordance, surprise cannot have a legitimate place and a structuring role within it. It is true that there is no experience without any fractures, without any inner crises. But insofar as concordance is dominant, "no surprises" seems to be the very *motto* of experience in Husserl's perspective.

It is, indeed, this negative status of surprise, regarded solely as discontinuity and discordance, which explains its inevitable comprehension as disappointment (*Enttäuschung*). As long as surprise is regarded only as discordance, its effect can be described as a “fracture of certainty (*Bruch der Gewissheit*)” (Husserl 1962: 125) or a “fracture of familiarity (*Bruch der Bekanntheit*)” (Husserl 2006: 250). But this fracture is never as radical as one might think: novelty remains, for Husserl, a “modification of that which was already (*Umwandlung dessen, was schon ist*)” (Husserl 2006: 239). This double and ambiguous characterization relies upon two different models of temporality: if speaking of fracture or irruption (*Einbruch*) contributes to highlight the crucial place and function of the *present* that constantly renews itself, the more moderate term of modification places the gravity center of time in the *past*. It is what Husserl implicitly does while affirming, again in his 1925 lecture: “The infinite experience of the past world prescribes the resembling style of the future world. [...] According to the sense of experience, one can only prefigure (*vorzeichnen*) the undetermined world to be by following the general style of the past world” (Husserl 1962: 70, footnote 1). As one can see, the considerable weight of the past goes together with the promotion of resemblance as a premise for continuity: from this point of view, what will be has to resemble that which already is. Thus, regarding novelty as a modification implies to presuppose, within experience, a motivation through resemblance. And this is precisely what concordance requires: a motivational link between the present and the past, a unity and coherence grounded on motivation. Furthermore, this motivational link will decide of the meaning and weight of any expectation that one might have regarding the future: “The coming of the future (*Eintreten des Künftigen*) is expected thanks to its resemblance (*Ähnlichkeit*) to the past” (Husserl 1966: 187).

## 2. Protention versus unexpectedness?

How could it then be possible to expect a surprise? How can surprise find its place in our experience? The alternative seems to be clear: either that which is expected resembles to that which has already been, or surprise arrives beyond and against any expectation. This alternative is eloquently expressed by Husserl in his *Bernau Manuscripts on Time-Consciousness (1917-1918)* in terms of a gradual grasp (*Griff*, in French, “*prise*”, radix of “*surprise*”): “The grasp of novelty, and consequently that of the original present [...], designates the climax of a firm grasp (*ein Kulminationspunkt in der Festigkeit des Griffs*). The newly grasped is fulfillment (*Das Neuerfasste ist Erfüllung*)” (Husserl 2001: 4). There is, as one can see, a clear correspondence between the appearing of novelty and the irruption of the original present: Husserl places himself here within the first temporal model mentioned above. On the other hand, the irruption of novelty is not passively

undertaken, but actively taken into possession, insofar as novelty is also fulfillment: fulfillment of an intention (*Meinung*) that is oriented towards the future and can consequently be understood (in spite of all reluctances) as similar to a kind of expectation. It is what Husserl calls *protention*, and its consideration unveils a third temporal model, where the present is no longer to be conceived only as an instantaneous, fulgurating irruption of novelty or as a mere modification of the past, but has to be reshaped following “the form of protentional fulfillment” (Husserl 2001: 14)<sup>1</sup> – otherwise said, as that which responds by nature to a certain expectation, to an intention oriented towards the future.

Nevertheless, this new temporal model seems to involve in spite of everything a limit case, according to which the present, the “now” can also “occur (*aufreten*) without any protention”; that is, “the event can occur [...] without any specific expectation” (Husserl 2001: 11). Of course, the absence of a *specific* expectation does not necessarily imply the absence of *any* expectation. This particular case of novelty is named here “event”, and it might be quite tempting to conceive surprise precisely as an event (as, for instance, Dastur 2004), as something that occurs without any apparent cause and/or reason, like a comet or a lightning in the sky. But such an understanding of surprise would once again imply taking into account only the present moment, the one-dimensional point of the “now”, and would tend to implicitly close or tighten the open horizon of the expectations of the future. The point of view of the punctual event could indeed, against all expectations, remain a static one: for how can one reinsert the event within the tissue of experience, if the event is precisely that which is supposed to irremediably tear it apart? Shouldn’t we conceive surprise instead precisely as immersed within this tissue and within the horizon of expectations that constitutes its fabric, in order to fully acknowledge the temporal dynamics of experience?

### 3. Fulfillment or disappointment?

And yet, it is precisely when attempting to understand surprise in a dynamic and relational manner, by inscribing it within a horizon of expectations, that the most important difficulty will be encountered: within this framework that allows giving a certain consistency and meaning to the paradoxical *expectation of surprise*, it is rather the *unfulfilled* and not the fulfilled expectation that will give us the key figure of surprise, which will therefore be ineluctably understood as *disappointment* (*Enttäuschung*). The analysis of a basic example can give a hint of the reasons this vision of things is grounded on: I was expecting to see Mildred, but I meet Olivia instead. The

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<sup>1</sup> See also Husserl 2001: 185: “the more or less prefigured (*vorgezeichnet*) horizon of the future is generated by the constant and yet discreet protention according to the laws prescribing the emergency of expectation”.

surprise of meeting Olivia is here simultaneously disappointment of not having met Mildred. But things can get more complicated: the surprise of meeting Olivia could be clouded by the even greater surprise of meeting also Adriana. There can indeed be different options for valuing a very same event, depending equally on the context and on previous events of the past. But for what reasons should surprise necessarily imply a part of disappointment?

By characterizing surprise as an unfulfilled expectation and thus in terms of disappointment, we implicitly reiterate the distinction between fulfilled and unfulfilled intentions that Husserl elaborates in his *Logical Investigations* (1900-1901), and according to which disappointment (*Enttäuschung*, also translated as “frustration”)<sup>2</sup> is the opposite of fulfillment (*Erfüllung*). This implies, when it comes to expectations, that they can be either fulfilled or frustrated – *tertium non datur*. But if this is the alternative, why shouldn’t then surprise be grasped rather as fulfillment? Husserl states that an expectation is always an expectation of something – that is, a specific expectation. To put it more rigorously, “every expectation is ‘induction’ ” (Hua 1962: 137). Thus, expectation seems to be by nature an anticipation which foresees that which will be and thus exposes itself to disappointment or frustration, insofar as nothing ever really fulfills (all) our expectations. Understood as an induction, expectations are in a way always frustrated and never *really* fulfilled. But couldn’t an expectation be without judgment, without specific anticipations, without any forecast? Such seem to be, for instance, the expectations that we have when looking through the window, at home or in a train: we expect to see something, but not necessarily a child riding a bicycle or three horses. We simply expect to see something, but not something in particular. It is only when there is no fringe of indetermination left in an expectation that the alternative between fulfillment and disappointment is so strict. For highly determined expectations are often the symptom of a constant rationalization of what occurs, of a desire to constantly “hold” reality in one’s hands (this is what the notion of grasp, *Griff* in German, previously suggested), in one’s control, as if weakening the grasp or “letting it go” would mean accepting to be torn apart. It is why an impassibility to surprise can result from a trauma, as a strategy for preventing further trauma – and this proves precisely that the “excessively surprising” can destroy the “possibility of surprise” (Romano 2007: 544).

If Husserl only conceives surprise under the negative figure of deception, it is insofar as he does not see expectation as intrinsically oriented towards fulfillment; quite the contrary, the “capacity for disappointment” is an “essential moment of expectation”:

“Expectations can only be fulfilled by perceptions. According to their essence, they can also be, in any circumstances, frustrated (*enttäuscht*). Perception always brings something new (*bringt ein*



*Neues*): it is its very essence. It is also true that the past consciousness can give it a prefiguration (*Vorzeichnung*): in this case that which is new occurs in conformity with something that is already known, that is already constituted for me as past. [...] But obviously it is perception that firstly decides if that is the case, and novelty can defy any expectation". (Husserl 1966: 211)

Husserl seems to suggest here that novelty – or the emergency of surprise – necessarily frustrates or defies any expectation. And yet, this description contains a quite visible ambiguity: on one hand, every perception seems to fulfill an intention or an expectation; but on the other hand, disappointment and frustration are equally a possibility for perception. The missing link between these two alternatives is, significantly, prefiguration (*Vorzeichnung*). *Stricto sensu*, prefiguration is required in order to speak of fulfillment. And still, the creative force of perception is most often stronger than prefiguration: that is why perception can be held for a production of novelty. Therefore, on a general scale, there is always fulfillment, no matter what: even when we speak of disappointment, all we really have before us is an *alternative fulfillment*<sup>3</sup>. In this perspective, being open to surprise is simply being open to alternatives – that is, precisely, to *open possibilities*. I will have the opportunity to stress this point in my conclusion.

But first, let us deepen and explore more thoroughly the opposition between fulfillment and disappointment. Announced for the first time in the *Logical Investigations*, this distinction is further elaborated by Husserl almost thirty years later, in *Experience and Judgment* (paragraph 21). Disappointment is defined here as “that which occurs instead of the fulfillment of expectative intentions” (Husserl 1972: 94): otherwise said, it is a frustrated expectation; and yet, from another point of view, it can also be considered as a deviant (or discordant) fulfillment. Nevertheless, this discordance is grasped by Husserl only negatively, as a conflict: in this perspective, disappointment expresses the very conflict of expectation and fulfillment, according to the typical scenario: I am expecting something and yet something else occurs. The example provided by Husserl in order to illustrate this point is particularly remarkable for its affective neutrality: it is that of a billiard ball that is first perceived as being red and turns out to be “not red but green”, “not round but grumpy” (Husserl 1972: 94). What is here the source of the conflict? Precisely, “the ‘suppression’ of an anticipative intention, or expectation, by a new impression” (I expect to see a red surface and I see a green one), and “speaking of disappointment is just another way to put it” (Husserl 1972: 97). This is indeed an emblematic case of discordance: the continuity of perception is broken, and even if the fracture is not irremediable (for the concordance of experience is not forever lost), Husserl will not hesitate to extrapolate this fracture and project it on consciousness itself: confronted to discordance,

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Ruud Welten prefers to speak of a “discordant fulfillment”. See Welten 2011 : p. 146.



“univocal consciousness explodes into a plurivocal one” (Husserl 1972: 102). One should indeed consider, according to Husserl, that the unity of the subject rigorously depends on the concordance of experience, and that the exposure to discordance (and to surprise) would eventually threaten to fracture the subject itself.

But why should every fracture and crisis be synonymous with chaos and dissolution? If – as Kant states in the *Critique of pure reason* (a passage of 1781 the version Transcendental Deduction that Husserl most probably recalls) while envisaging the chaos (*Gewühl*) of sensations that would occur if cinnabar would constantly change color, shape and consistency – the omnipresence of surprise might ruin the unity and coherence of experience, the total lack of surprises could unexpectedly have the same effect. By stating this, I am implicitly adapting a reasoning that Husserl himself deploys in order to show that the harmony of experience is not to be understood as monotony: “if life was a monotonous existence, resembling a sound that is homogeneous and without any differences, no recollection would be possible. That is very significant” (Husserl 1966: 424). Between monotony and dissonance, the median way of harmony, that I have already evoked while considering Baroque music, requires acknowledging (while giving a more radical status and a constitutive position to discordance) that only rupture is really binding. Experience is a tissue of fractures in its positive structure, and not only from the negative point of view of privation. That is why Husserl can assert that “it is only where that which is given in experience is not uniform that an awakening (*Weckung*) can take place” (Husserl 1966: 425) – that is, the awakening of consciousness itself as vigilant and open to that which occurs to it requires it to be open and receptive to surprises. And reciprocally, a lack of exposure to surprise will be the symptom of a deficient or deferred awakening of consciousness.

I arrive now to my conclusion, where I will face once again my initial questions: first of all, why should surprise be understood as disappointment? And what is the meaning of an expectation of surprise? In order to answer the first question, it is required to overcome the dominant affective neutrality of Husserl’s descriptions of experience situations (neutrality that is naturally prescribed by the cognitive orientation of his analysis) and to take into account the “affective dynamism” (Husserl 1972: 366) that intrinsically rules experience. The ambiguity and indecision between fulfillment and disappointment dissipate only when the enlightening prism of affectivity and desire is adopted. In this new light, a very same event or encounter will manifest itself as fulfillment or disappointment according to its affective burden. If a friend invites me to see a theater play, I will perceive this as a pleasant surprise; but if the play is mediocre, my surprise will change into a disappointment. Similarly, I can be pleasantly surprised while receiving a gift and disappointed after having opened it. This transformation of surprise into disappointment can also be read as

indicating that desire always exceeds that which is given to us. This is why surprise and disappointment go together without being identical.

The deficiency of the Husserlian analyses that have guided me here comes from conceiving surprise exclusively within the negative horizon of conflict, while neglecting its positive strength and impact in constituting experience. A compensation of this inconvenience can be obtained by taking into account Husserl's fruitful distinction between the "modalities resulting from conflict and those of open particularization" (Husserl 1972: 108). It will then appear that, besides the conflicts and discordances that lead to disappointment (to frustrated or unfulfilled expectations), experience also consists of a horizon of "open possibilities" (Husserl 1972: 108) which, precisely, create room for the emergency of surprise. Open possibility is indeed to be defined as the possibility that escapes motivation, anticipation or specific expectation. Therefore, the expectation of surprise consists in considering and acknowledging such open – because wider than motivation and anticipation – possibilities of experience. Surprise does not exceed *any* expectation, insofar as our experience always has a certain affective color and always delineates itself on the background of open possibilities. From this point of view, surprise does not necessarily result from a lack of attention (as Heidegger suggests in *Being and Time*, § 69 a) ) by taking the univocal shape of the unexpected, and it does not accomplish the plain contradiction of intentionality<sup>4</sup>. *Tertium datur*, and experience is precisely the product of this (inclusive) logic of the third.

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As suggested in Marion 1997: 370: "Surprise [...] contradicts intentionality".

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