

HIS490

THE ATTENTION ECONOMY: Historical Perspectives

D. Graham Burnett

Wednesdays, 1:30-4:20

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Attention lies at the nexus of perception and action, aesthetics and ethics, wealth and power. Whose eyes (and minds) are where? And for how long? These are central questions driving the evolution of “surveillance capitalism” (not to mention social life itself). New technologies, and new practices, are reshaping our understanding of the attentional subject -- with consequences for learning, politics, and collective existence. This course will take up these problems, delving the history of changing ideas about attention in the modern period.

Week 1: INTRODUCTORY SESSION (no reading)

Week 2: WHERE ARE WE?

James Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). Read all.

Week 3: HISTORICIZING THE ATTENTIONAL SUBJECT

Lorraine Daston, “Attention and the Values of Nature in the Enlightenment,” in *The Moral Authority of Nature*, edited by Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 100-126.

William James, “Attention,” Chapter XI of Volume I of his *Principles of Psychology* of 1890. We will use the “Standard Edition” published by Harvard University Press in 1981, pp. 380-433.

Théodule Armand Ribot, “The Morbid States of Attention” and “Conclusion,” from his *The Psychology of Attention*, originally published in 1889 (we will use the English translation of 1890), pp. 78-121.

Week 4: MODERNITY AND THE PROBLEM OF ATTENTION (DISTRACTION?)

Jonathan Crary, “Introduction” and Chapter 1, “Modernity and the Problem of Attention,” from his *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 1-79.

Michael Hagner, “Towards a History of Attention in Culture and Science,” *Modern Language Notes* 118 (2003), pp. 670-687.

L.G. Birch, “A Study of Certain Methods of Distracting the Attention: Distraction by Odors,” *The American Journal of Psychology* 9, no. 1 (October, 1897), pp. 45-55.

Siegfried Kracauer, “On Berlin’s Picture Palaces” (originally published in German in 1926), translated by Thomas Y. Levin in *New German Critique*, 40 (Winter, 1987), pp. 91-96.

Week 5: BUYING AND SELLING MINDTIME I (1900-1960)

- Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get inside Our Heads* (New York: Knopf, 2016). Read pages 1-150.
- Howard K. Nixon, *An Investigation of Attention to Advertisements* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1926). Excerpt TBD.
- Arthur Nielsen, "Two Years of Commercial Operation of the Audimeter and the Nielsen Radio Index," *Journal of Marketing* 9, no. 3 (January, 1945), pp. 239-255.

Week 6: ART IN THE AGE OF TARGETING (interlude)

- Richard A. Lanham, "Economists of Attention," Chapter 2 of his *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 42-78.
- David A. Mindel, "Taming the Beasts of the Machine Age," Chapter 3 of his *Between Human and Machine: Feedback, Control, and Computing before Cybernetics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), pp. 69-104.
- Zabet Patterson, "From the Gun Controller to the Mandala: The Cybernetic Cinema of John and James Whitney," *Grey Room* 36 (Summer 2009), pp. 36-57.

AND TO WATCH:

Training film for the MK 57 Gun Director (ca. 1949):

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_HUZSk8c2c)

James Whitney, *Lapis* (1963-1966):

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzaniaKxMr2g>)

Also Consider: This series on fire control computers:

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8aH-M3PzM0)

Week 7: BUYING AND SELLING MINDTIME II (1960 to the present)

- Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get inside Our Heads* (New York: Knopf, 2016). Read pages 151-344.
- Thomas H. Davenport and John C. Beck, *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2001), pp. 1-33 (Chapters 2 and 3).

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F A L L B R E A K

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Week 8: MEDIATION, SPECTACLE, AND THE TOPOLOGY OF SOCIAL LIFE

- Yves Citton, *The Ecology of Attention* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017 [the first edition was in French, published in 2014]). We will read Part I ("Collective Attention"), together with Chapter 7 ("Reflexive Attention"), and the Conclusion.

AND TO "WATCH":

Guy Debord's film version of *Society of the Spectacle*:

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IoUIHBSiVAY>)

Weeks 9 & 10: MACHINES OF SWEET SOLICITATION

NB: there will be no class meeting on Wednesday, 14 November. I will be in São Paulo, Brazil, running a 4-day symposium on "Attentional Practices" as part of the São Paulo Biennial (a contemporary art event), and I received permission to be away for several days; I am hoping to be able to engage you all in this project somehow (Still trying to figure out how! Will depend on what happens over our weeks of work together). Here is how we will handle this hiatus from a class perspective: what follows below is a two-week reading assignment for Week 10; we will make up the actual class time in reading period, hopefully with a field trip to NYC.

Natasha Dow Schüll, *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). Read all.

AND TO WATCH:

Adam Curtis's *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace*, episodes 1, 2, and 3:
(<https://vimeo.com/groups/96331/videos/80799353>)

Week 11: OUR DIVERSIONS (AND THE MARKET)

James G. Webster, *The Marketplace of Attention: How Audiences Take Shape in a Digital Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014). We will read Chapters 1 and 7.

David M. Levy, *Mindful Tech: How to Bring Balance to Our Digital Lives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016). We will read Chapters 1 and 2.

Adam Gazzaley and Larry D. Rosen, "The Impact of Constantly Shifting our Attention" and "Modifying Behavior," Chapters 7 and 11 of their *The Distracted Mind: Ancient Brains in a Distracted World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), pp. 123-141 and 213-238.

Alfie Brown, "Unproductive Enjoyment: A Culture of Distraction," Chapter 2 of his *Enjoying It: Candy Crush and Capitalism* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2015), pp. 26-38.

Vilém Flusser, "Our Diversions," reprinted in his *Post-History* (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2013), pp. 107-114. NB: the original lecture version of this essay dates to the late 1970s.

Week 12: SLEEP: THE FINAL FRONTIER

Jonathan Crary, *24/7* (New York: Verso, 2013). Read all.