

The background of the cover is a complex architectural line drawing in white on a dark teal background. It features various geometric shapes, including circles, hexagons, and rectangles, interconnected by a network of lines. Some elements resemble floor plans, while others look like structural frameworks or abstract patterns.

Critiques and Alternatives to Capitalism

THE POLITICS OF CURIOSITY

ALTERNATIVES TO THE ATTENTION ECONOMY

Edited by
Enrico Campo and Yves Citton

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The Politics of Curiosity

Through a variety of studies in the emerging field of attentional studies, this book examines and seeks alternatives to the current attention economy. Bringing together the work of leading scholars of “critical attention studies” to reflect on issues such as technopolitics, sociopolitics, and the politics of distraction, it offers a new and multidisciplinary conceptualization of attention that emphasizes the connections between attention and curiosity, distraction, decoloniality, and care. Above all, *The Politics of Curiosity* asks us to consider the nature and ambivalence of the curious forms of politics that might be taking shape in the shadow of our current attention economy.

The “attention economy” has become a household name: we all know our attention is being harvested, commodified, and packaged to be sold to advertisers by capitalist platforms. We all complain about it; some of us dream of disconnection; others call to fight back. By focusing on attentional deficits, and by reducing attention to being focused, however, the common view may miss wider stakes, and more promising opportunities. This collective volume provides a new frame of analysis based on three displacements. Firstly, it relocates attentional issues within a triangulation that explores a continuum between attention, distraction, and curiosity. Secondly, it invites us to investigate into the mental infrastructures that socially condition our perceptions and understandings of the world. Thirdly, it points towards emancipatory politics of curiosity to provide alternatives to the attention economy. Contributions range from pedagogy to media theory, via digital studies, epistemology, sociology, political philosophy, literary history, aesthetics, film, and dance studies. They gather some of the leading scholars who shaped the study of attention, questioned the values of distraction, and explored the potentials of curiosity over the recent years. They extend across nine countries, four continents, and seven languages to provide a multicultural approach to these debates. Together, they help us understand how our current mental infrastructures have taken shape, under specific regimes of power and authority, in a world dominated by capital, colonialism, and patriarchy. But they also sketch what can be done to redeploy them around imperatives of respect and care – from a better awareness of our mental biases, online behaviours, and bodily movements, to our collective capacity to restructure classroom interactions, to launch alternative digital platforms, and to build democratic movements.

The first platform for discussion of the politics of attention and curiosity – and an essential point of reference for future debate – this book will appeal to scholars of sociology, politics, and psychology.

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15 On the Variety of Attentional Practices

D. Graham Burnett

You did **not** read an epigraph to this chapter.¹

Coming to Attention

Let's begin with what we might call a "scene of attention." Location: the D'Orsay museum in Paris. Date: sometime in the late 1990s. On stage: a few miscellaneous visitors (an ageing French philosopher with white hair, a Portuguese artist in an eccentric skirt, a defrocked catholic priest, a professional billiardist with a dramatic apartment in La Defense, a librarian from the Bibliothèque Nationale [she has spent her years in the reserve room of the old one, Rue Richelieu]) mill around an overripe canvas by G r me. There is a studied air of nonchalance. The philosopher takes off his glasses to peruse one corner of the rather lurid painting, down near the signature. The artist, who has a black tooth, lets her finger turn absent-mindedly in her hair as she stares up at the ceiling lights. There is an ambient quality in the moment, if also, in the specificity of the silence, a sense of imminence, of preparation. But for what? Do these people know each other?

I'll come back to that.

Getting Lost in the Matter

In the early 1950s, a small group of military medical researchers working in at the US Naval Base in Pensacola, Florida, embarked on the formal study of a much-rumoured (and very much dreaded) aspect of aviation safety: pilot "fascination," or what has sometimes subsequently been called the "moth-to-flame" phenomenon. A paradigmatic example of this frightening illusion/reverie is on offer in the following anonymous testimony by a naval aviator responding to a confidential questionnaire in the period:

I had an almost overwhelming feeling that something was *pulling* me toward the lead plane. . . . I had the feeling I could do nothing to prevent this. After a couple of hours of parade position, this feeling relaxed somewhat but instances of this sensation come every now and then, and then pass.

(Clark et al. 1953, 433)

Military officials did not like the idea that a pilot could find himself effectively “hypnotized” by an aspect of his visual field – and particularly unsettling was the notion that such a point of optical hyper-fixation could function as an unsettling “lure” or exert some weird psycho-gravitational pull. This sort of *attentional suck-hole* phenomenon would very definitely be bad for the operator of any kind of heavy machinery, especially one moving at a high rate of speed. But military air-men confronted a unique peril: their key point of maximum concentration was, under combat conditions, the *target* of a gunnery-run. And if that focus became “fascinating” (in this distorting sense), everything immediately tipped into an uncanny vortex: as the tracer-slugs arced to their destination, the dive-bombing gunner-pilot would find himself *attentionally entranced to their vector*, and hence run the risk of a *fatal convergence with the conflagration of his own creation*. What could be a more perverse apotheosis of “dead-on aim”?

I’ll come back to that.

A New Age of Curiosity

In an anonymous interview with *Le Monde* in 1980, Michel Foucault (he later saw the piece published under his own name) waxed critico-poetic about the history of curiosity:

Curiosity is a new vice that has been stigmatized in turn by Christianity, by philosophy, and even by a certain conception of science. Curiosity, futility. The word, however, pleases me. To me it suggests something altogether different: it evokes “concern”; it evokes the care one takes for what exists and could exist; a readiness to find strange and singular what surrounds us; a certain relentlessness to break up our familiarities and to regard otherwise the same things; a fervor to grasp what is happening and what passes; a casualness in regard to the traditional hierarchies of the important and the essential.
(Foucault 1988, 328)

After that remarkable elision of curiosity and “care,” this “masked philosopher” (the evasive moniker under which the original interview was published, and the title by which the piece itself subsequently came to be known) allowed himself to dream of a curiosity newly *unbound*, and perhaps capable of providing an ethical framework for the modern subject:

I dream of a new age of curiosity. We have the technical means for it; the desire is there; the things to be known are infinite; the people who can employ themselves at this task exist. Why do we suffer? From too little: from channels that are too narrow, skimpy, quasi-monopolistic, insufficient. There is no point in adopting a protectionist attitude, to prevent “bad” information from invading and suffocating the “good.” Rather, we must multiply the paths and the possibilities of coming and goings.

(Foucault 1988, 328)²

Foucault's call did not go entirely unanswered. Indeed, his invocation of the renewed political, ethical, and emancipatory possibilities inherent in "curiosity" formed a key mythos in the founding of *Cabinet*, a quarterly journal of art and culture that originated in the early 2000s (where I have served as an editor going back some 15 years). It is a testimony to our commitment along these lines that we celebrated our first decade with a collaborative volume entitled *Curiosity and Method* (Najafi 2012), which emerged out of an eponymous symposium at Princeton in 2011 – an event centred on Foucault's formulation.³

One of the contributors to that conference (and the book), Barbara Benedict, was an authority on the matter. Her inspiring *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry* (2001) had usefully historicized the very process (referenced by Foucault) across which the irreducibly personalistic dimensions of curiosity came to be understood as essentially at odds with the emerging programme of post-Cartesian knowledge production. True curiosity might reflect "care," and it might feel good. But it was basically silly. Impotent. An evasion. The dream of a new age of curiosity would thus require, we knew, a different topology of "importance," and a levelling of the hierarchies of received value. We published essays on disposable coffee cup lids. We were trying!

Another of the contributors to *Curiosity and Method*? The distinguished historian of science Lorraine Daston, whose powerful 1998 study *Wonders and the Order of Nature* (co-authored with Katherine Park) had provided a key armature through Benedict's argument, and raised the stakes of any inquiry into the history of curiosity in those years. For Daston and Park, "curiosity," as it emerged in the 18th century, was a kind of scaly residuum left behind in the alembic from which the intoxicating ether of "wonder" had been gradually cooked out. What the category of the "wondrous" had permitted was a coordination of objects and sensibility, an epistemic *affect*, that would not survive modernity. The unseemliness of the *curioso*, therefore, was that such persons appeared not to have received the memo: the world did not care about us! Hence the essential pathos of those so inflamed by unrequited *cura*. Only an extravagantly gratuitous and *enchanted* kind of care – meticulous, idiosyncratic, fully inhabited – could remix subjects and objects, and perhaps undo the epistemic exile effected by technoscience. Fond hope!

"Cura," of course, lies at the etymological core of the concept of "curation." And one might go so far as to argue that this early-21st century, Foucault-inspired turn into the rehabilitation of a liberatory, social, world-making curiosity reached its high watermark in a *curatorial* project: in June 2013 the 55th Venice Biennial opened, under the banner of "Il Palazzo Enciclopedico." Curated by Massimiliano Gioni, and coordinated by a spooling fascination with *fascination* (hoarding, iterative absorption, schizo-affective systematics, synesthetic mania), it was an exhibition that seemed to long for the shared world conjurable from a conjunction of countless marginal monomaniacs, all converging *on the spectrum* – an anagoge of wide-eyed collation.⁴

Critical response was mixed. The mood was, I think, shifting. The humanistic-romantic eccentricity of such visions was harder and harder to square with an

emerging politics of neoliberal crisis, global inequity, environmental catastrophe, and digital enclosure.

It is worth noting that Lorraine Daston turned, across those very years, to a set of historical studies on “attention.” She discerned, correctly, that human attentiveness emerged as a special preoccupation in the new economy of curiosity born in the early modern period.⁵ In a world of whirling particulars, the language of attention became a new way to articulate an Archimedean *point de repère* – the locus of whatever might replace the classical subject. Jonathan Crary had of course made a similar observation in his *Suspensions of Perception* (1999). But by 2013 he had sharpened this insight into his scorching jeremiad against the commodification of “bare life” in its most elemental cognitive and sensory functions, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*,

I’ll come back to that.

The Problem With Aiming

Sam Weber’s *Targets of Opportunity: On the Militarization of Thinking* (2005) circles the long zombie-life of a dead metaphor that links intentionality and shooting, thought and targets. Socrates himself (in the “Lesser Hippias”) makes the point, if in a rather roundabout way, asking Hippias who is the better marksman, he who misses his target voluntarily, or he who misses despite his best efforts. The *upshot* (note the archery pun – look it up . . .) is that the best minds miss when they want to. It is a lesson of considerable relevance to contemporary survival in the mind-fracking ecology of our online environments, where “looking away” has become a form of intimate resistance. (But bracket that.)

What interested Weber was the slippage he discerned in the philosophical tradition (which he identified as running from the scholastics straight through to Husserlian phenomenology) that wants to entail thinking and aiming:

If consciousness is understood as consciousness “of an object,” the manner in which it negotiates the distance that separates it from its object is often compared to an archer taking aim at an object: in short, to “targeting.” With the following difference: the root of *intention* is *tension*, related both to “tending” and to “holding”; this emphasizes the effort required to overcome distance in achieving one’s aims or ends.

(Weber 2005, viii)

And yet, this important sense of effort is belied by the weird way that the term “target” functions both as the noun/*telos* and as the verb/process. The whole semantic field of the term “target,” as it came to be used in the warcraft of “smart bombs” (i.e., “target of opportunity”), seems custom-configured to elide the actual activity of thought, and possibly that of sensation as well. The “tension” of in-tention, like that of at-tention, must *be maintained*. Or else, well . . ., or else there is no thinking.

Those military investigators preoccupied with the hypnotic phenomenon of “pilot fascination” during the Cold War were ahead of Weber on this. Here is another account from the 1950s, in which a young fighter-pilot describes a near-run with exactly this dive-bomb rapture:

On a strafing hop out over the gulf. The target was a smoke bomb and normal strafing procedures were employed. On this particular run, I noticed that my fire was extremely accurate and tried to be aware of all the factors which made the run a good one. Such things as my air speed, changing lead, dive angle, et cetera, were among the things I wanted to check. . . . Noting all these factors, and continuing in the run, with no visual reference to anything but open water and a smoke bomb, I pressed the run to a dangerously low altitude, recovering . . . close to the water.

(Clark et al. 1953, 432)

Listening to accounts like this, the specialists in aviation medicine and psychology who undertook a key 1953 study actually defined “fascination” as a form of extreme “target fixation” (Clark et al. 1953, 438). Interestingly, in doing so, they left a notable ambiguity as to what sense of “target” was meant: the experimental-physiology sense (“target” as the cue or presented percept in an experimental scenario)? Or the military sense (“target” as the *thing one is bent to destroy*)? It was as if the specific phenomenology of fighter-pilot military aviation – which involved simultaneous *targeting* and *piloting* – could produce a distinctive (and pathological) cross-contamination: the “target” could become the “destination.” The authors of the study referred to a “magnetic attraction to a target,” and reported pilots who explained that they had experienced episodes in which they “would feel drawn to the target and could do nothing about it” (Clark et al. 1953, 433). They were relaxing into their focus, collapsing into their objects, becoming one with their intention. There is a phrase that is relevant: “*Temporary metempsychosis may occur, but must not become permanent.*”

I’ll come back to that.

Soft Eyes, Grasshopper

Reading these post-war aviation-fascination studies, one cannot help but sense that the research program in question was ever-so-lightly haunted by the memories of Japanese *kamikaze* aviators in the closing phase of the naval battles in the Pacific theatre. The subject is never mentioned, but US Navy pilots feeling inexorably drawn to lock-in collision flightpaths with their dive-bomb targets in the early 1950s can hardly have been contemplated without some penumbral awareness of the nearly 4000 fatal flights by the suicide squadrons of the rising sun: missions that resulted in the loss of over 7000 US service personnel. In these papers on fascination as a problem in military aviation, one senses a more oblique fascination with autotelic immolation. Sometimes scientific research proceeds by means of what might be thought of as progressive, sequential, and collective *parapraxis*.

Much of the earliest work on fascination in aviation had in fact been done by a young PhD in psychology who had served in the Navy during that war, and had served as a pilot instructor. William Edgar Vinacke (1917–1991) was an Ohio-born student of the mind whose Columbia doctoral dissertation, completed in 1942, dealt with threshold problems of visual perception, and the laboratory study of optical illusions.⁶ It is apparent that he carried that work across to his Naval service, as he authored several military research reports assembled in the mid-1940s under what was known as “Project X-148,” a series of experiments and data-gathering initiatives sponsored by the US Naval Air Station and aimed at understanding the psychological and psycho-sensory dimensions of aviation.⁷ Vinacke’s contributions included studies of aviator “vertigo” and a general survey of optical disorientations characteristic of high-speed flight, “Illusions experienced by aircraft pilots while flying.”⁸ His first publication specifically on fascination unfolded in the context of Project X-148.⁹ After the war, however, Vinacke himself moved on to other topics (he became interested in social dynamics in small group settings, and ended up doing research on racial stereotyping, becoming a progressive activist in his later years).

But Vinacke’s early fascination research was taken up by one of the leading aviation physiologists of the era, Ashton Graybiel (1902–1995), a cardiologist who had become, before the war, a noted US expert in the electrical monitoring of the heart. Graybiel had spent seven years (1936–1943) working with the Harvard Fatigue Laboratory, and he would go on to become a major figure in post-war “extreme-state physiology,” working extensively with NASA on the body-toll of weightlessness and the new medical challenges of manned spaceflight. Graybiel directed the Aviation Medicine programme at the Naval Air Station in Pensacola (later the “Naval Aerospace Medical Institute”) for 25 years, starting in 1945 – essentially the entirety of the post-war/cold-war/space-race era.

Graybiel and his colleagues were persuaded of the seriousness of the fascination problem, in that their survey of aviation trainees and instructors revealed that no fewer than 92% of advanced students (and 88% of novices) acknowledged that they had “experienced it in one form or another.” For advanced students, the most frequent situations that brought on episodes were indeed “bombing and rocket runs.” These somewhat shocking discoveries meant that what certainly seemed, on the face of things, to be a distinctly *abnormal* (and potentially very dangerous) hypertrophy of attention had to be reclassified as, in fact, quite common. As Graybiel and his co-authors put it, “the written reports indicate that fascination occurs in all types of flight and should be considered to be a normal phenomenon.” The best that could be said was that its frequency and adverse impacts could presumably be “reduced by the use of proper procedures” (Clark et al. 1953, 440).

At the heart of fascination, as these aviation physiologists understood it, was an extravagant kind of hyper-attention. Fascination was the result of an *extreme fixity of the attentional focus*, what the authors called “excessive concentration.” In the key kind of fascination event, the “field of attention becomes so greatly restricted that important stimulus variables are *not perceived* at the time, therefore, the subject does not respond appropriately” (Clark et al. 1953, 431).¹⁰ When queried, a

number of the flight instructors expressed their view that junior airmen caught up in fascination events were, in effect, paralysed by their own inability to stop staring at one thing. They alleged that the core problem was that fascinated pilots “made inappropriate movements or failed to respond because they encountered a great deal of difficulty in *shifting their attention* from one thing to another in the flight situation” (Clark et al. 1953, 437, emphasis added). And the core remedy seemed to involve teaching young aviators how to maintain a lively scanning circuit in their attentiveness. The authors put it this way in their conclusions and recommendations:

Wherever possible, additional emphasis should be placed on teaching the student to *shift his attention* from one significant thing to another in his visual and auditory fields. This procedure appears to be the single most helpful technique to reduce fascination and warrants stress by all instructors early in the syllabus.

(Clark et al. 1953, 439, emphasis added)

In these *protocols of defensive attention-shifting*, pilots were being taught a version of what would come to be called “soft eyes”: the pulled-back visuality of even-seeing, of a smearing and decentering of focus.

I’ll come back to that.

How the Birds See

Ding! The chime! As foretold, a little bell rang, and the incongruous gaggle of standers-by gently swung into a silent formation: a semicircular phalanx before the Gérôme painting, at a comfortable distance, all looking on intently. And I was among them, checking left and right, to ensure I was in step with the unfamiliar choreography.

So began my first experience of one of the “attentional ‘Actions’” of the so-called *Avis Tertia*, or “Order of the Third Bird.” For about half an hour, the six of us mostly held our positions, more or less alert, all senses on the *qui vive* – looking a bit, I am sure, like a pack of well-trained pointers on set, waiting for movement in the brush. A few passers-by took notice of the slight strangeness of the scene, but passed on without remarking, and even when the chime returned to mark each of the four “phases” of our contemplative exercise in what devotees of the *Avis Tertia* call “practical aesthesis,” nobody intervened. At the final bell, we dispersed, exactly as I had been told we would, and I found my way to a bench in the atrium to take some notes on what it had been like to attend to the painting for 28 minutes across the attentional “score” I had been taught earlier that afternoon. Later, we would regather, the six of us, for what they called (in English) “Colloquy” – the talking-out of what our collective attention had effected. I had been warned that the full effect of radical, durational, “Birdish” attention to an object, under the ritualized conditions of such an Action, could be dizzying. My original invitation to join

the practice had included a slightly troubling valediction: “*Temporary metempsychosis may occur, but must not become permanent.*”

My metempsychotic dalliance was, on that first go, fleeting at best. But seductive, to be sure. There is much to say about my quirky and somewhat stilted introduction to the clubbish-comical society of aesthete-misfits I came, thereby, to know as “the Birds.” And much to say about the Birds themselves. They claimed the name of their fugitive camaraderie hailed from a forgotten Plinian tale in which three birds respond differently to the same expertly painted rendering of a boy carrying grapes: one flew off (frightened by the realistic boy), one pecked at the fruit (drawn by the realistic meal), but the mythic *third bird* simply landed and stood still, looking on intently. The Bird of pure attention, as it were. The Bird of the *Third Critique*, suspended in some vibratory flux between sensation and understanding. The Bird who neither spooled into the object (fascinated), nor veered off in an aleatory diversion, but rather simply *stood by* – curious, attentive.

How did Bernard Stiegler put it? In *Prendre Soin*? “*Faire attention, c’est essentiellement attendre.*” Perhaps the “Third Bird” had a sense of that – that *attention* is, at its heart, a matter of *waiting*. But waiting on what? For Stiegler what attention waits on is “the infinitude of the object, in which attention envisages itself mirrored as infinite being” (Stiegler 2008, 174).¹¹ Yes. Perhaps something like that. Not a durational infinitude, mind you (though it can take some time to descry), but rather an infinitude like that of a *mise en abyme*, in which the long skein of ubiquitous entanglement comes to the surface, in a reflection that is simultaneously a self-portrait and world-picture.

How did Wallace Stevens put it?

*Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.*

I *won't* come back to that.

When Experience Becomes Form

At the heart of the practice of the Order of the Third Bird is the generative notion of radical human attention as a shared medium. Within the *Epoche* of a given “Practice,” a kind of collective winnowing of attention occurs: much as the Action itself is “infra-performative,” the form of attention given is “infra-functional”; it is steered clear of the primary channels of utility, and permitted to *spool*. The “music” of the occasion is a function of the “score” or “protocol,” shared by the group.

This core idea – of an attentional “score,” of structured protocols of conjoint attentional choreography – has proven intensely generative. The origins of such practices are manifestly diverse: formal disciplines of prayer, contemplation, and meditation from multiple traditions all share a variety of structured armatures for the direction of mental and sensory experience; written music itself (and associated

techniques for the inscription of dance) provides its own model for the “keeping together in time,” a model that characterizes certain heightened forms of collective somatosensory experience; much more recently, conceptual artists, and especially the loose community that came to be called Fluxus, elaborated “score”-like instructional pieces that range from the twee to the deadly earnest.¹² The range of contemporary artists working in relation to this idiom is significant: one thinks of Marcos Luytens’s hypnotic shows, or Myriam Lefkowitz’s meditative walks, or the durational practices of the American artist Jonathan Van Dyke. And of course there is a Grande Dame of such performative immersions (who, like many greats polarizes the field): Marina Abramovic.

Having been tipped into the abyss of attentional practices by my glancing encounter with the Parisian devotees of the *Avis Tertia* in the late 1990s (or was it the early aughts?), I found myself newly obsessed with the myth and the history of such “protocols” of sustained attention. Respecting the privacy of the Birds (who ostracize anyone who speaks of their doings), I fell in, as compensation, with a cohort of gamesome scholars, who have maintained a long-standing “Birdwatch” – an archive-based project of studious and ludic *historicizing* of the Order and its adjacencies. This undertaking, which operates under the moniker of the so-called “Esthetical Society for Transcendental and Applied Realization (now incorporating the Society of Esthetic Realizers)” or ESTAR(SER), has issued in many publications, lecture-performances, interventions, and installations over the years, the latest of which is the thumping *In Search of the Third Bird: Exemplary Essays from the Proceedings of ESTAR(SER), 2001–2021*, a book I co-edited with long-standing collaborators Justin E.H. Smith and Catherine Hansen (Burnett, Hansen, and Smith 2021).¹³ This project, like all of the work of ESTAR(SER), sifts history for the fleeting evidence of “Birdish” practices of sustained attention – and along the way constructs a mythic lineage for the “protocol” as a secular mechanism for the catalytic flowering of collective human care.

The owl of Minerva was, after all, a Bird. And she flew at dusk. The untimely, bibliophilic, Borgesian circuits of ESTAR(SER), though they are forever looking *backwards*, always do so with a strong sense of the fierce winds currently blowing us into a very uncertain future. It has been the collaborative enterprise of this collective to create circumstances in which a “makerly” orientation to human attention can flourish. And while some of this has been achieved in solidly art-world occasions (Manifesta 11, in Zurich; the Kochi Biennial in 2016; MoMA PS1’s “Sunday Sessions” in 2014, etc.), we also undertook a series of more explicitly *pedagogical* initiatives, perhaps best exemplified by a multi-month programme at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, entitled “When Experience Becomes Form.” Unfolding across the spring of 2014, this project (like a subsequent residency at the Reina Sofia in Madrid) involved working directly with museum docents and educators. In a series of participatory workshops on “The Grammar of Protocols,” participants were encouraged to produce their own attentional scores, individually and in groups, and to experiment with the format in their tours and museum facilitation. Emphasizing the inherent value of shared time, and linking obliquely with

an adjacent “slow art” movement (a project with its own “Birdish” links), we found our energies moving towards public engagement.

Having looked on with the sharp gaze of a Bird’s eye, we began to soften our view; to realize there was much to be seen – and much to be done.

Attention and Friendship

It is the comic set-piece of Ionesco’s *La Cantatrice Chauve* that Mr. and Mrs. Martin enter, respectfully, into a parley across which it is gradually revealed to both of them that they are, in fact, husband and wife – a fact that bourgeois propriety, a distinctly *English* dissociative stultification, and a surrealist skewer appears to have kept from them both (or at least removed from their immediately accessible awareness). Instead, their nature becomes a matter of *discovery*. At each stage of their reciprocating revelations (that they both hail from Manchester; that they both arrived in Paris on the same train; that they have, in fact, *a child of the same name*, etc.), their interest is further piqued, and they repeatedly return to their refrain: “Comme c’est curieux! Comme c’est bizarre!” They are *getting to know each other*, in a pantomime of the infinite mirror of sustained attention.

It seems like a joke. But it may be a *protocol*. They may be working their way back – to the world, to themselves, and to each other. Think of the consciousness-raising workshops of the 1970s: a weekend *tête à tête* with another searcher, asking (and answering) the simple question all day long, day after day: “Who are you?” Surrealism, yes. But therapy? Yes, also.

Comme c’est curieux!

It was a convocation of such tactics, ranging from the daft to the dramatic, that convened in November 2018, in Brazil, at the “Practices of Attention” symposium organized as part of the 33rd São Paulo Biennial (which placed “attention” at the centre of its programme). Representatives from ESTAR(SER) were there, doing a performance lecture (it involved making optical orbits out from and back to an object of attention – a woozy eye-dance of centripetal focus), and so, too, were a host of artists and writers with related interests in formal protocols of mindfulness, sensation, and bodily discipline. Rumours abounded that a considerable number of the Birds had found their way to the pavilion as well.

But it was a complex moment. The gathering happened to fall just days after the election of Jair Bolsonaro, and the mood around the biennial was angry – even desperate. Was this the moment to stand silently in front of paintings? Or to lie on our backs on tatami mats and experiment with the somatic realizations of skilled Feldenkrais practitioner? Artists from Turkey, Hungary, Poland, and, of course, the United States too (still freshly enthralled to the Trump administration) all felt sharp solidarity with the local sense of electoral calamity. The matter of attention seemed crucial, but it seemed urgent in a key – a *political* key – none of us was exactly singing.

A group of us – several dozen, in fact – resolved there and then to pivot. And pivot we did. We raised some money, and gathered for the first of what is now five years of annual summer-schools on “The politics of attention.” The group that convened out of this work took on a new name, “The Friends of Attention” (invoking the pioneering pacifist activism of the Quakers), and we turned our focus to coalition-building, to “Attention Activism,” and to the codification of a consciousness-raising curriculum that aims explicitly at pushing back against the commodification of human attention. Our “Attention Labs” have now reached hundreds of youths and adults in the United States and elsewhere, and our manifesto-like book (and film), *The Twelve Theses on Attention* (2022) has reached thousands. We are currently finalizing a new publication, *A Handbook for the Attention Liberation Movements*, a guerrilla-guide for those who would jail-break from the trigger-networks of surveillance capitalism.

At the heart of all this work (join us!) are a variety of *practices of attention* – protocols for looking and listening, touching and smelling the world, together. They are simple. But there is no substitute for actually *doing* the curious, attentive work of *being in the world together*. It is a condition of possibility for each and every form of care.

And So . . .

William James wrote affectingly of voluntary attention as a kind of impossible dance. The live mind will leave each and every object behind within moments. Because the live mind is curious. For this reason it wanders. This, then, for James, is what actual intelligence consists in: a series of *departures*.

And so, rejecting the idea that this basic vitality should ever be corralled, James posited true attention as a kind of looping, spiralling, centripetal dynamism: from the object of attention, whatever it may be, the mind quickly leaps away; but it is the imaginative work of true attention to deflect that trajectory, by degrees, until it has been bent back, petal-like, to its point of departure. Attention is, by these lights, to say, again and again, “I’ll come back to that.”

And each time, to make it true.

Notes

- 1 “Mon Dieu! Comme c’est curieux!” was meant to be the epigraph of this chapter (as spoken by M. Martin’s character in Ionesco’s play, *La Cantatrice Chauve*, 1950). But a very curious legal technicality – perfectly tuned, indeed, to Ionesco’s theatre of the absurd – excludes epigraphs from the conventions of fair use. This explains why you did not read this epigraph.
- 2 The essay/interview has been reproduced and translated many times. Consider Gary Gutting (2005).
- 3 I organized that event, under the alias of a heteronym, Yara Flores, who has been for many years my own version of a philosophical mask.
- 4 *Cabinet* was responsible for the catalogue of the exhibition (to which I contributed), which indexes the shared sensibility.
- 5 The earliest of these, I believe, was her thoughtful essay Daston (2004).

- 6 Vinacke, “The discrimination of color and form at levels of illumination below conscious awareness,” PhD diss., Columbia University, 1942.
- 7 For a listing, see National Research Council Division of Medical Sciences (Committee on Aviation Medicine), *Bibliography on Aviation Medicine* (1946).
- 8 W. E. Vinacke, “Illusions experienced by aircraft pilots while flying.” Navy Department, US Naval Air Station, Pensacola, FL – Project X-148(9), May 31, 1946.
- 9 W. E. Vinacke, “‘Fascination’ in flight,” Navy Department, US Naval Air Station, Pensacola, FL – Project X-148(13), July 8, 1946.
- 10 Emphasis in the original. It is important to note that, in this article, the authors were interested in distinguishing “fascination” proper from the closely related aviation malady/specter known as “vertigo.” They settled on the idea that in a true fascination episode a pilot “fails to respond” despite the presence of perceptible and important cues to action (when the appropriate actions are indeed understood by the actor and within his capabilities). “Vertigo” was defined as any situation involving disorienting *misperceptions*. In vertigo, the airman “is fully aware of the stimulus and makes a reaction to it, however his reaction may be improper because of the illusory nature of the perception.” It is perhaps worth adding that this essay also includes an effort to create a kind of taxonomy of various specific “kinds” of fascination. Eight subtypes were noted, though the authors cautioned that these were “not always mutually exclusive.” In this treatment I have not attempted to elaborate this finer-grained analysis.
- 11 “Et ce à quoi l’attention s’attache en tout objet, ce que, en tant qu’attention, elle attend, étant entendu qu’elle est avant tout cette attente, même si elle l’oublie, c’est cette infinité de l’objet dans laquelle elle se projette elle-même en miroir comme étant in-infini.”
- 12 “Keeping together in time” is a reference to the book of that title (subtitled *Dance and Drill in Human History*) by the historian William H. McNeill (1997). On Fluxus and the score, see the excellent recent book by Natalie Herren (2020).
- 13 Other recent ESTAR(SER) projects include the exhibition “THE THIRD, MEANING” at the Frye Museum (Seattle), October 2022–October 2023, and the ongoing “Milcom Memorial Reading Room and Attention Library” at Mana Contemporary (Jersey City), itself a reprise of “Attention Libraries” installed earlier at the Santozium (Greece, 2012) and the Palais de Tokyo (France, 2014).

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