

HIS 288

ATTENTION AND MODERNITY:

Mind, Media, and the Senses, 1500-2050

D. Graham Burnett

Mondays & Wednesdays, 11:00 am - 12:20 pm

SYLLABUS

The last two decades have seen the rise of an extraordinary new *attention economy* – a pervasive, technologically mediated "fracking" of human beings for the money-value of their eyeballs. This dramatic commodification of human attention is transforming social relations, political life, and the experience of personhood. Our course (anchored in the history of science, but reaching into theology, media theory, psychology, and philosophy) stretches back from the current predicament, to examine a deep genealogy of this most intimate feature of human being. What *is* attention? And how can a richer understanding of these matters change the world?

We will pursue our theme on two simultaneous "tracks," running in parallel (though cross-circuits are expected). One line across the semester will be a series of sequential readings (from both primary and secondary sources) focused on a more-or-less "canonical" history of the problem of human attention since the classical period. Our aim? An exploration of the epistemic, ontological, ethical, technical, and sociological dimensions of sensory/cognitive attention, with a non-exclusive emphasis on the European and Anglo-American traditions. On the second "track," and in conjunction with our core historiographical trajectory, we will weekly, generally on Wednesdays, concern ourselves with a set of specific (often contemporary and sometimes experimental) ways of activating and/or engaging human attentional capacities and experiences. It is to be hoped that these practical case-studies will resonate with our efforts to understand the shifting historical status of "attensity," and assist us in thinking about what lies ahead.

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Class 1: INTRODUCTORY SESSION (no pre-meeting assignment)

Class 2: Attention, Will, and Doing Nothing

James Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), Chapters 1-5.

Simone Weil, "Attention and Will," from *Gravity and Grace* (Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 1997 [1952]).

Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (New York: Melville House, 2019), pp. 3-9.

Class 3: Mind, Memory, Monasticism (the Medieval period)

- James Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), Chapters 6-9.
- Jamie Kreiner, *The Wandering Mind: What Medieval Monks Tell us about Distraction* (New York: Liverlight, 2023), Introduction, Chapters 5 & 6, Conclusion.
- John Cassian, an excerpt from *Collationes* (ca. 420CE), taken from Kreiner's new translation, *How to Focus: A Monastic Guide for an Age of Distraction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024), pp. 125-171 (odd; i.e., English only).
- Augustine of Hippo, an excerpt from *The Confessions* (ca. 400CE), taken from the Loeb edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), pp. 245-255 (odd; i.e., English only).

Class 4: Awareness, Silence, Creation

- Diego D'Angelo, "A Phenomenology of Creative Attention: Merleau-Ponty and Philosophy of Mind," *Phänomenologische Forschungen* 2 (2018), pp. 99-116.
- REVIEW: Set of contemporary "Attention Exercises" in the packet, by Rob Walker, Menka Sanghvi, Paul Greenberg, etc.
- WATCH: *Into Great Silence* (2005), directed by Philip Gröning; circa 160 mins.

Class 5: Imagination, Self, Inner Work (16th ce.)

- James Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), Chapters 10-13.
- David Marno, "Attention and Indifference in Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises," from *A Companion to Ignatius of Loyola: Life, Writings, Spirituality, Influence*, edited by Robert Aleksander Maryks (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 232-247.
- Moshe Sluhovsky, "Loyola's Spiritual Exercises and the Modern Self," from *A Companion to Ignatius of Loyola: Life, Writings, Spirituality, Influence*, edited by Robert Aleksander Maryks (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 216-231.
- Ignatius of Loyola, an excerpt from *The Spiritual Exercises* (1535), taken from the Mottola translation (New York: Image Books/Doubleday, 1989), pp. 47-49, 54-56.

Class 6: Attentionalism and the Non-Self

- Jonardon Ganeri, "Attention and Action", Chapter 1 of his *Attention, Not Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 9-36.
- Robert Irwin, in conversation with Lawrence Weschler, an excerpt from Chapter 24 of *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 267-274, and plates 33 & 34.

<p>First project-piece DRAFT MATERIAL due (Bring to class six, ready to show/discuss): material toward your "Coppola Exercise"; an attention map/tour</p>
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Class 7: Epistemic Attention & the Cartesian Subject (17th ce.)

- Johannes Wankhammer, "Attention, the New Science, and the Disembodied Mind," Chapter 1 of his *Creatures of Attention* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2024), pp. 39-91.
- Matthew L. Jones, "Descartes's Geometry as Spiritual Exercise," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001), pp. 40-71.
- Aarien Baillet, an excerpt from *The Life of Monsieur Des Cartes* (London: Stimpson, 1693 [1691]), pp. 30-36.

Class 8: Vision, Elision, and Optical Knowledge

- Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," Chapter 1 of *Vision and Visuality*, edited by Hal Foster (Seattle & New York: Dia Art Foundation, 1988), pp. 3-20.
- WATCH: Hito Steyerl, *How Not to be Seen: A F**king Didactic Educational .MOV File*, (2013); circa 14 mins.
<https://www.artforum.com/video/hito-steyerl-how-not-to-be-seen-a-fucking-didactic-educational-mov-file-2013-165845/>

<p>First project-piece ACTUALLY due (Bring to class eight, ready to turn in): "Coppola Exercise"; an attention map/tour</p>
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Class 9: Observation, Conjunction, Sensibility (18th ce.)

- Margaret Koehler, "History and Theory of Attention in the Eighteenth Century," Chapter 1 of her *Poetry of Attention in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave, 2012), pp. 15-60.
- 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.
- Patrick Singy, "Huber's Eyes: The Art of Scientific Observation Before the Emergence of Positivism." *Representations* 95, no. 1 (2006), pp. 54-75.
- James H. Johnson, "Tears and the New Attentiveness," Chapter 3 of his *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 53-70.
- Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, short excerpt from Chapter 2 of his *Logic* (1780), taken from the English translation by Joseph Neef (Philadelphia: NP, 1809), pp. 12-15.

Class 10: Aesthetic Experience, Sublime Encounter

- Gabriel Trop, "Aesthetic Askesis: Aesthetics as a Technology of the Self in the Philosophy of Alexander Baumgarten," *Das achtzehnte Jahrhundert* 37, no. 1 (Summer 2013), pp. 56-73.
- WATCH: MoMA introduction to the exhibition "Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present" (2009); circa 3 mins:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2GD5PBK_Bto&t=16s
- WATCH: Marina Abramović's own brief introduction to the central performance of that exhibition; circa 2 mins:
<https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/243/3133>
- REVIEW: The semi-famous Tumblr account "Marina Abramović Made Me Cry":
<https://marinaabramovicmademecry.tumblr.com/>

Class 11: Modernity, Meridians, & Archimedean Dreams (19th ce.)

Caroline Duttlinger, "Virtue, Reflex, Pathology: Attention from the Enlightenment to the Late Nineteenth Century," Chapter 1 of her *Attention and Distraction in Modern German Literature, Thought, and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 15-45.

Jonathan Crary, "Modernity and the Problem of Attention," Chapter 1 of his *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 11-79.

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.

<p>Second project-piece DRAFT MATERIAL due (Bring to class eleven, ready to show/discuss): material toward your "AI Conversation" exercise.</p>
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Class 12: Sensation, Vertigo, Distraction

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.

WATCH: *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929), Directed by Dziga Vertov, Mikhail Kaufman (photography), and Elizaveta Svilova (assistant editor); circa 70 mins.

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Class 13: Psychology and Attensity (1880-1920ff)

Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get inside Our Heads* (New York: Knopf, 2016), Introduction, and Chapters 1-8.

William James, "Attention," Chapter 11 of Volume I of his *Principles of Psychology* (1890). We will use the "Standard Edition" published by Harvard University Press in 1981, pp. 380-433.

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.

<p>Second project-piece ACTUALLY due (Bring to class thirteen, ready to turn in): "AI Conversation" exercise.</p>
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Class 14: Eye-Tracking, Surveillance, Capitalism

D. Graham Burnett, "Fracking Eyeballs," *Asterisk* 4, "Measurement" (October 2023), pp. 100-111.

WATCH: Robbie Cooper's *Immersion* (2008); circa 3 mins:

<https://www.nytimes.com/video/magazine/1194833565213/immersion.html>

WATCH: Fahd Yazin's "neurocinematic" analysis of "The Epic Split" (2013); circa 2 mins:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vN3MtfVorGo>

Class 15: Soft Eyes and the Science of the Psyche (1910-1950)

Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get inside Our Heads* (New York: Knopf, 2016), Chapters 9-16.

Carl Seashore, "Attention," Chapter 8 of his *Elementary Experiments in Psychology* (New York: Holt, 1908), pp. 158-171. I have also included, in the packet, the brief "Preface" and "Introduction" to this volume (pp. iii-xi), for context.

Theodor Reik, "Free-Floating Attention" and "The Courage Not to Understand," Chapters 16 and 44 of his *Listening with the Third Ear: The Inner Experience of a Psychoanalyst* (New York: FSG, 1948), pp. 157-172, and 503-512. I have also included, in the packet, an excerpt from his "Introduction" (pp. vii-x), for context.

Class 16: Attentive Reading (Discipline, Legibility, Desire)

Earl A. Taylor, "Special Techniques in Teaching," Chapter 6 of his *Controlled Reading: A Correlation of Diagnostic, Teaching, and Corrective Techniques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), pp. 142-157. I have also included, in the packet, an excerpt from his "Introduction" (pp. v-vii), for context.

Caleb Smith, "Disciplines of Attention in a Secular Age," *Critical Inquiry* 45, no. 4 (2019), pp. 884-909.

WATCH: Adam Curtis's *Happiness Machines* (2002), episode 1 of his "Century of the Self" series; circa 55 mins: ¹

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DnPg0R1M04&t=2s>

Class 17: Tracking, Triggering, Vigilance (1920-1960)

Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get inside Our Heads* (New York: Knopf, 2016), Chapters 17-Epilogue.

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.

N.H. Mackworth, "The Breakdown of Vigilance during Prolonged Visual Search," *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 1, no.1 (1948): pp. 6-21.

WATCH: Training film for MK 57 Gun Director (ca. 1949; 10 mins):

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

WATCH: This film on fire control computers (ca. 1953; 6 mins):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8aH-M3PzM0>

¹ PLEASE NOTE: This film includes historical imagery depicting dead bodies and violence. If you have any concerns; please be in touch.

Class 18: Loops, Tingles, Psychedelic Cycles

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.

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

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

REVIEW: ASMR of spirograph in use (2016); and take a little time to skim through the comments, too:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdE5vIG92B8>

Third project-piece due

(Bring to class eighteen, ready to turn in):
your response to the "Coppola Exercise"
you received

Class 19: Vigils, Trance, Absorption (1960s-1970s)

Natasha Dow Schüll, *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), Introduction through Chapter 3.

Arthur J. Deikman, "Experimental Meditation," *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 136 (1963), pp. 329-43.

Class 20: Open Duration ("However Long It Takes" – 1970s-2025)

Georges Perec, excerpt from *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* (Cambridge, MA: Wakefield, 2010 [1975]), pp. 3-17.

WATCH: *Hale County This Morning, This Evening* (2018), directed by RaMell Ross; circa 75 mins.

Class 21: Dark Patterns and Human Fracking (2000-2025)

Natasha Dow Schüll, *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), Chapter 4 through Chapter 8.

Andrew Solomon, "Doom Scrolling," *The New Yorker* (7 October 2024), pp. 26-37.²

REVIEW: The online research 'zine by Stephanie Nguyen and Jasmine McNealy, *I, Obscura: Identifying Deceptive Design Patterns in the Wild* (Los Angeles and Stanford: UCLA Center for Critical Internet Studies and Stanford Digital Civil Society Lab, 2021):

<https://pacscenter.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/I-Obscura-Zine.pdf>

Class 22: Disorder, Addiction, Boredom, Conspiracy

Manoush Zomorodi, "The Case for Boredom" and "What We Talk about When We Talk about Boredom," which are the Introduction and Chapter 1 of her *Bored and Brilliant* (New York: Picador, 2017), pp. 1-29.

WATCH: *Hypernormalization* (2016), directed by Adam Curtis; circa 155 mins.³

² PLEASE NOTE: This essay discusses teen suicide; take care of yourself and others.

³ See footnote 1 above; this film, too, has some intense stuff in it. Be advised.

Class 23: Attention Activism and the Politics of Resistance

Natasha Dow Schüll, *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), Chapter 9 through Conclusion.

Natasha Dow Schüll, "Wearable Attention: Course Correction for Wandering Minds," Chapter 9 of *Scenes of Attention: Essays on Mind, Time, and the Senses*, edited by D. Graham Burnett and Justin E. H. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), pp. 187-211.

REVIEW: The definition of "Attention Activism" given by the "Strother School of Radical Attention" (and peruse the website for a sense of the project):

<https://www.schoolofattention.org/attention-activism>

Class 24: The Future of Non-Inhumanity (2025-?)

Gunter Bombaerts, Tom Hannes, et al., "From an Attention Economy to an Ecology of Attending: A Manifesto," *ArXiv* abs/2410.17421 (2024), not paginated.

The Friends of Attention, *Twelve Theses on Attention* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022). The text of the theses, which have been reproduced a number of times in various formats, will be available in the packet. You may also wish to consider some of the translations:

<https://www.friendsofattention.net/documents/12theses>

OPTIONAL WATCH: The film version of the *Twelve Theses on Attention* (2020); circa 20 mins:

<https://vimeo.com/430174203/b359a94409>

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A CONCLUDING PAPER due in Reading Period (Details to come).
