

Machinic Attention and Its Adversaries: A Manifesto

The Friends of Attention coalition

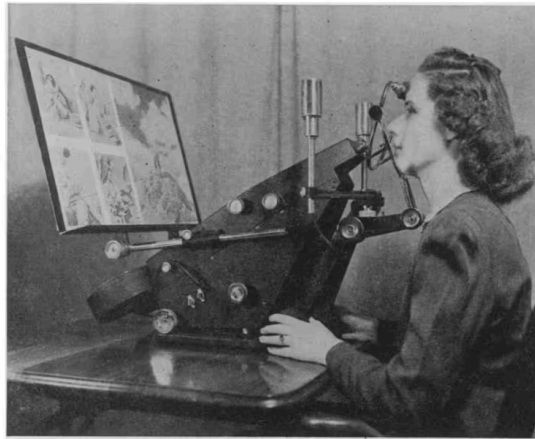


FIG. 1. A PORTABLE MONOFILM EYE MOVEMENT CAMERA

From Herman F. Brandt, "An Evaluation of the Attensity of Isolation by Means of Ocular Photography," *American Journal of Psychology* 55, no. 2 (April 1942).

Attention matters. We fret about our "attention spans" and worry that we are on a slide into the goldfish-brain of infinite attentional micro-loops: "Hey, nice view! ... Hey, nice view!" as we swim from one end of the bowl to the other. All day.

Or, actually, it isn't a bowl. If it were, at least we'd get some exercise. It's a *screen*, and we are swiping on it ("Nice view! ... Nice view!")—and so is our kid, and our mom, and our friend, and all our coworkers. And we *know* something isn't right. But what can be done?

We are an international coalition of artists, activists, writers, and other humans who literally organize around attention—our own attention, and the attention of people we love—as a matter of urgent existential (and "political") concern. What do we have in our sights? The so-called "attention economy": the technologically advanced and financially lucrative industry that undergirds today's Big Tech titans and keeps all of us tapping and swiping away at our devices for hours on end. This heedless, novel, *extractive* operation, which we have described as "human fracking," is bad for people, for politics, and the planet.¹ We have felt its effects. We know you have too.

To push back against the harms of human fracking, we need to know what it is we're trying to protect. We need to know, in other words, what we are talking about when we talk about "attention." Yet the terms of this conversation have been framed by the very same powers that produced the soul-fracking beast we're up against.

What is needed is a radical reconceptualization of what, exactly, attention *is*—and how it can make us free again. That means *forgetting what you think you know about attention*. Because everything you think you know about attention is wrong.

Step one involves a total reframing of the problem. Step two calls for an authentic and collective revolution (yes, again, only a revolution can save us).

Step One: Escape From the Lie

How did we come to live in the fracklands? Over the past century or so, a vast range of human faculties and experiences has been effectively *collapsed* into a single, narrow, cybernetic (i.e., machine-engaged), quantifiable, and ultimately always-already-instrumentalized *thing*—yet this thing we call "attention," and worry about as "attention," has as little to do with the true *cosmos* of human attention as a sex-ed class has to do with human love. Which is to say, not nothing. But not that much either.

This hyper-narrow way of thinking about “attention,” which arose in the experimental psychology laboratories of the long twentieth century, has come to shape the way pretty much all of us think about (and use) our human capacities for sensation and cognition. To put it bluntly, human attention was sliced and diced in those laboratories, en route to being *priced* in the marketplace of the attention economy. The device in your pocket—or possibly the device you’re using to read this—is an extraordinary testament to the success of this experimental tradition.

It is a deep and important fact that the vast majority of the research done on “human attention” in the twentieth century was tightly tied to very practical problems concerning the stimulus-and-response capacities of human subjects sitting in front of *machines*. The primary funders of such work—the military-industrial complex across WWII and the Cold War—were immensely concerned with human beings as reliable components of big, expensive, intricate, electro-mechanical systems. They were interested in shooting down enemy airplanes and monitoring radar screens. For these purposes, what is relevant about “human attention” is the way its parameters establish the limits and characteristics of human-machine integration.

The science of attention in the twentieth century was a “cybernetic” science, centered on understanding how long humans could stare at screens and dials, how reliably they would click and swipe, how consistently they could track and trigger amidst a complicated array of signals. The study of human “vigilance,” and the emergence of a quantitative analysis of human attention in information-management terms, all took shape in a set of subdisciplines known as “human factors research.” Which is to say, research into the way humans were a “factor” in power plants, giant factories, and, above all, the defense industry.

In practice, these experiments were pretty simple. Scientists in white lab coats got grants to study whether a person could stay focused on a dot if you also asked them to listen for a bell at the same time. And then they got other grants to study how long it took you to press a button after seeing a flash if you had only gotten two hours of sleep in the last two days. Later they got even *bigger* grants, to see if you could keep track of different instructions being streamed into your ears—some on one side, some on the other. And how long could you identify a *bogey at three o’clock* while this was happening? Did a *fifty milligram tablet of amphetamine* help at all? Indeed it did.

Is all this “attention”? Let’s be clear: these stimulus-response behaviors certainly can be *treated* as attention. And you can measure them very precisely. Plus, you can *track* them. Indeed, much of the early work in this area centered on making “eye-tracking” systems, which, long before lasers and computers, could be used to monitor the ocular focus of an experimental subject. Were the plot-diagrams of visual trajectories that could be drawn with such systems “attention maps”? Absolutely. And, moreover, they could be used to figure out the “attention value” of magazine ads at different sizes in different positions on the page.² Indeed, as early as the 1930s, it was actual *magazine companies* who were funding such research, so that they could more precisely monetize their readers. A very “beta” build of the early attention economy.

But here’s the point: When we fret, now, about our “attention span,” we are doing so *in terms given to us by this research tradition*. The very idea of an “attention span” in a durational sense was an exact outgrowth of such studies. In fact, earlier in the twentieth century the notion of an “attention span” referred not to duration, but to the actual visual field in which a stimulus might appear—it was spatial.

But is any of this—any of this “track and trigger” integration with control-room interfaces—the “attention” we should be fighting to take back from the frackers?

It would be a hollow victory. Since that kind of attention was literally defined as the capacity to “select for a task,” it was pre-stressed for the cybernetic instrumentalization of the human. Reclaiming it would simply equip us to select for other (machinic) tasks.

But the fullness of truly human attention is so much more than that! It is enough to take a stroll outside to confirm it.

Are we saying that modern attention science is wrong? Useless? Some kind of conspiracy? No, no, and no! Rephrase the question: Are we saying that if a bunch of Buddhist monks in Nepal had been given, in 1940, the entire research budget of the US military to do scientific research on “attention” for forty years, we would have a very different “science” of human attention? Yes.

How different could the study of “attention” look? Very different. Indeed, entire worlds of incredibly deep and serious work went into the study of human attention long before army aviators were strapped into devices to measure their reaction times (as they were gradually deoxygenated—to make it harder ...).

To take just one example: Augustine of Hippo, the fourth-century North African philosopher, who wrote a landmark work of autobiography, *The Confessions*, during the late Roman Empire. In chapter eleven of that work, Augustine digs into a searching reflection on the nature of time, and comes to argue that humans are effectively incapable of pure, true, focused attention *because they exist in time*. Forever splayed out across memories of the past, anticipations of the future, and the vicissitudes of each passing moment, humans can never genuinely gather themselves into the conditions of sensory and cognitive unity that would constitute a state of authentic “attention.” What did this mean? It meant that our distractibility was a mark of the Fall, and that our inability to give our full attention to anything was a direct result of those fateful events in the Garden of Eden.

The implication? The pursuit of moments of the best kind of attention humans can achieve—moments of authentic contemplation—was understood by Augustine (and many of those who followed him in Christendom) as nothing less than *redemptive*. The pursuit of attention was an effort to return to God, from whom we had come.

This is obviously a far cry from trying to shoot down an airplane or “gate the pip” on a radar screen.³ And it’s just one of countless ways of thinking about attention in properly capacious terms. Zen practitioners have a great deal to say about attention, almost none of which could be tested in a lab. Talmudic scholars too. Phenomenologists have their own approach to the subject. And so do contemporary artists like Jonathan VanDyke and Jenny Odell. These diverse and interwoven lines of inquiry remind us of the incredible range of ways human attention has been studied, pursued, and understood.

Step Two: Rise Up, Together!

We all know that we need to escape from the dehumanizing horrors of the frackosphere. And that escape is going to require *collective action*. It’s going to require authentic *solidarity*. What we need isn’t new meds, or a new screen-time app—what we need is an actual movement. Call it the “Attention Liberation Movement.” A movement at the scale of the *environmental movement*, back at its crucial rising across the 1960s, when a new and diverse coalition arose to say “No!” to the ruination of the external environment by greed and carelessness. Like those forefights, we say “No!” to the ruination of the *inner* environment by the forces they rejected a half-century before us.

What we need is a new and shared recognition that the attention economy rides on a super narrow and genuinely false concept of human attention. Across the twentieth century, and right down to today, the narrow conception of attention elaborated in laboratories (visual, vigilant, reflexive, cybernetic, quantified—and so useful to the advertising industry and the military) has gradually come to dominate every other part of our lives. Educators began to think of attention in these terms. Parents too. Forward-thinking designers also. And, of course, the computer programmers. And they shaped the architecture of the digital spaces where more and more people—from the mid-nineties through the aughts and right up to now—have spent more and more hours of every day. Now, when a person says they are trying to “pay better attention,” it is likely that they mean this kind of attention—the kind that measures their ability to stay with (mostly screen-based) tasks.

The lie we have been told is that this kind of attention is the only kind of attention. The truth is that there are so many more. Indeed, the worlds of human attention are innumerable—genuinely infinite, and full of infinite promise.

Showing that truth, living that truth—we have a name for it: Attention Activism.⁴ For starters:

Stop worrying so much about your “attention span.” Instead, take the time to turn to the much broader and various forms of attention at the center of things like community, care, curiosity, play, freedom, and love.

By doing this, together, we begin the crucial work of taking the world back from the human frackers—we begin the crucial work of making, together, a world for us and the things we love. Not a world in which we serve the machines—to enrich greedy tech overlords.

True human attention, in its true fullness, is an extraordinarily diverse and wide-ranging set of sensory and cognitive and affective states, practices, modes, and traditions. Time with a friend. Playing pickup soccer. Reading a book. Everything from rock climbing to gardening to child-rearing to (surprise!) *daydreaming* are all, ultimately, forms of attention. Besides air and nourishment, attention is the first thing that we seek when we come into this world. At its most intimate and innate, human attention is nothing less than the capacity to receive care and to give care, to be with that which calls to our hearts, wherever they lead.

Which is to say, the Attention Liberation Movement isn't here to tell you *what* to do with your attention. We are here to tell you that your attention *belongs to you*. That you have a right to enjoy whatever it can bring you. And that a crucial—and authentically revolutionary—form of care in our lifetimes is creating the conditions to help others enjoy their attention, and whatever rewards it can bring them, too. You want to do something loving for your kid, your dad, your friend? Don't buy them a new sweater; help them create conditions where they can enjoy, for a moment, the movement of their mind and senses ... after all, resisting the frackers is always easier together.

Does this mean no phones? Phones themselves aren't the problem. Were steam engines the problem in the satanic mills of the industrial revolution? No. The problem was—and is—greedy and brutalizing *exploitation*. And that is what lies at the heart of our “attention economy,” where trillions of dollars, vast teams of highly paid and trained engineers, super-intelligent AI, and sophisticated, military-grade technology are all deployed, continuously, to turn your actual human ability to care (i.e., your “attention”) into ... profit, for the pockets of your overlords. Who do not care what all this does to you, or to society, or to the planet.

When the environmental activists of the 1960s came together to call for a globe-spanning movement of collective solidarity, they gathered under a new banner: “Ecology Now!” Our flag echoes theirs. We believe that systemic injustices call for collective action. We aim to rally the widest possible coalition with our motto: Attensity Now!

What do we mean by dredging up this old term, “attensity”? It is, we think, a lovely old word which wants to be resurrected by those fighting the human frackers. The term was coined by a group of early twentieth-century psychologists (led by Edward Titchener) who studied human attention using “introspective” techniques. By attending to their own attention, these researchers reasoned, they could come to understand how it worked. This form of so-called structuralist psychological research quickly fell out of fashion. But the language of attensity lives on and has come to mean something like the active *experience* of attention itself.

Just as those early environmental activists bent an older scientific term to new meanings, and charged the word “ecology” with all the aspirations of a generation fighting for a new relationship with the natural world, we attention activists want to emblazon “attensity” over a new movement—one that sees the cultivation and protection of truly human attention as a generational fight against dehumanizing forces. Our movement, borne forward by emergent (as well as ancient) social formations, recognizes the full diversity of attentional experiences as a necessary condition for human flourishing. New technologies make possible new forms of exploitation. But new forms of exploitation make possible new forms of power. What do we see? A new kind of political power in the authentic and collective emancipation of human attention from the cybernetic exploiters.

Attensity Now! Because human attention is *born free*, and it is, now, *everywhere in chains*.

Notes

- 1 D. Graham Burnett, Alyssa Loh, and Peter Schmidt, “Powerful Forces Are Fracking Our Attention. We Can Fight Back.” *New York Times*, November 24, 2023 →.
- 2 D. Graham Burnett, “Fracking Eyeballs,” *Asterisk*, no. 4 (October 2023) →.
- 3 For “gate the pip” see →.
- 4 See →.

Category

Technology, Psychology
& Psychoanalysis

The Friends of Attention are a loose, informal network of creative collaborators, colleagues, and actual friends who share an interest in “ATTENTION”—the puzzles and promises of the focused mind and the directed senses. They are committed to ATTENTION ACTIVISM. The Friends emerged in

Subject

Militarization

the wake of the 2018 Sao Paulo Biennial, where many of them were involved in the “Practices of Attention” program that took place just a few days after the election of Jair Bolsonaro.

Responding to an expanding sense of crisis, eighteen artists, scholars, and activists gathered in the summer of 2019 at “The Politics of Attention: Art, Time, Technology, Action,” where the nucleus of the “Friends” took shape in collective reading, writing, and interventions. There is no “membership” in the Friends. There are friends.