

Reading Notes

From Apocalypse to Dialectic

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Inaugurating our new “Future of Reading” series, we are very happy to feature this piece from long-time collaborator and friend of The Hinternet, [D. Graham Burnett](#). The particular reading experience he has selected to describe, in the form of an auto-ethnography of reading, concerns an edited volume of academic papers — a very different reading experience, we may all agree, than one might have with, say, War and Peace, the book that featured most prominently in [our recent introduction to this series](#). Some on the Editorial Board were surprised to learn that anyone at all continues even to try to read such academic volumes, while others, who know our guest contributor better, noted that if anyone is still around to give it the old college try, it is surely D. Graham Burnett. So let’s find out just what it was like for this consummate 21st-century person of letters to make that attempt, and what further reflections the experience of it triggered in him. —The Editors

1.

There are books on everything. It never ceases to amaze me. And it amazes me even more as I grow more certain that the whole world of books is slowly passing away. This is hardly an original idea, I know. In fact, at this point the idea is so tired that everyone is sick of hearing it, and lots of people get pretty testy, and start explaining that the publishing industry keeps churning out lots of books, and people definitely buy them, and maybe the internet is actually making people read more, and all that stuff.

It’s possible. There are books on that debate too. Many of them. But I can see what I can see. And I see books, and the reading world that attended on them, basically passing away. Who has time to read a book? Not that many people *ever* had that time, or the formation that made immersion in a book feel possible or desirable. And under our intensifying conditions of labor precarity and economic injustice —coupled with

the proliferation of accessible digital flows of information and entertainment— fewer and fewer people can or will submit themselves to what a book wants of us.



There can be no doubt that we all spend a lot of time looking at little glowing screens. A lot more than we used to. We know this. Indeed, we laugh about it. Consider this classic *Onion* headline from a decade ago: “Report: 90% of Waking Hours Spent Staring at Glowing Rectangles”. The glowing screens are doing more than just keeping us up at night, as [Jonathan Crary would have it](#). I mean, they *are* doing that. But they are also changing, in a very deep way, what it feels like to read a book — what “reading a book” even means.

I find this fascinating. Historians have spent a lot of time thinking about the history of reading, and how it fits together with other things, like the history of politics and citizenship and selfhood and science. Persuasive arguments have been made that shifting habits of reading lie at the heart of new, large-scale social formations like “nationalism”. And there have been multiple efforts to claim that the rise of “print culture” in the long 16th century lies at the origin of everything from the Protestant Reformation to the scientific revolution. Living across the watershed of this most

recent and dramatic transformation of our textual lives cannot but raise hard questions about who we are and what is happening to us.

Yes, there is a literature here: [N. Katherine Hayles](#), [Adrian Johns](#), and many others. And there is also a host of creative activists working in this same space: the Slow Reading Club, the beautiful “attention activists” at the Strother School in Brooklyn, with their Situationist-style “[Sidewalk Studies](#)” (which combine short texts with street-level enacted and collective *practices*). Weighing what I know of all this, I incline more and more toward optimism, frankly, that what is coming is going to be weird and new and amazing. When a reporter from the *Atlantic* called me recently [in connection with [this article](#) —*eds.*] for a quote about the future of reading on college campuses, I cited Marshall Berman: “**We must move, must grow, from apocalypse to dialectic,**” and began talking about how exciting it is to contemplate what is going to happen as the textual tradition is translated, sublated, and sublimated into new forms and new habits. When the quote came back to me, the editor had cut the “dialectic” part, and left me saying that it was the apocalypse. So I asked to be taken out of the article, because the apocalypse thing is really only the start. After all, I have a class of undergrads who read Hayden White’s [Metahistory](#) (1973) every year. We approach it like an ultramarathon. We train. We drink high-fructose shot-glasses of electrolytes along the way. It’s weird and fun. And they do it — we do it. And whatever it amounts to, it has exactly nothing to do with what it would have been to read the book in 1975. Back then, on a college campus, people just read the book. Now we cannot but have the meta-experience: we *know* we are “reading a book”. And that turns out to be a *trip*.

2.

I’ve been interested enough in all of this over the last decades that for years now I’ve maintained an irregular series of auto-ethnographic “field notes” on the changing experience of reading. What follows is an extract from some of that material. These entries are not especially current (and I’ve made no attempt to update them — so, for instance, Yuk Hui now *very much* has a Wikipedia entry), but I think they still reflect something of what the world of bookishness feels like these days. If nothing else, they are, perhaps, a proleptic primary source for some future historian of our revolutionary era.

What follows, then, will be a brief report of what happened when I lay down one afternoon to immerse myself in a relatively recent scholarly volume on digital life and

human experience: [*Affect and Social Media: Emotion, Mediation, Anxiety and Contagion*](#), edited by Tony D. Sampson, Stephen Maddison and Darren Ellis (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018). This is a book, it should be noted, about how we are being transformed by the experience of life online.

3:00 pm: Lie down on couch, immediately after drinking espresso; open book. Look at a few of the pictures: snapshots from the conference that generated the volume — a little unusual for such a book; casual; sort of nice. Start reading Introduction. Opening sentence of introduction references “notorious” 2014 research paper in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* by scientists at Facebook and Cornell, with the title “Experimental Evidence of Massive-Scale Emotional Contagion through Social Networks”. I vaguely remember this. But not really. Grab phone and look it up. Find it online. Read opener. See link at head of article by editor of the *Proceedings* explaining—in the wake of the controversy about the experiment, in which Facebook tweaked the feeds of over half a million users in order to manipulate their moods, and monitored their mood swings to document the downstream effects of the manipulation—that while it was true that the experimental protocol had not been vetted by the usual university-based ethics boards, the editors had decided that the work fell outside that requirement because the research was primarily done in the private sector, which is regulated by different rules of consent. Click on another link and learn that Facebook claimed their user agreement spelled out that *users could be used for scientific experiments*. Follow up on that link to learn that, in fact, Facebook added that rider to their user agreement *after* the experiment had run. Oops. Feel some measure of shock. *But should maybe feel more?*

3:07 pm: Go back to book, complete first paragraph of Intro and note italicized notion of “affective capitalism”. Am not sure I have seen this before. Sounds plausible. Consult footnote for reference. It cites an article in an online journal called *Ephemera*, which I have never heard of. I look it up. Seems like mostly Scandinavian academics, many of whom are linked to organizational behavior programs or business schools. Interesting. They seem funky. They did a release party in Copenhagen’s “Royal Museum of Plaster Casts” on the occasion of their recent issue on “Ghostly Matters in Organization”. Nice.

3:09 pm: Back to book. Read on, and find discussion of a 2015 conference on “Affect Theory” at Millersville University of Pennsylvania. Ponder for a moment what that would have been like. Google “Millersville University” on my phone. Am offered, by

Google, a drop-down frequently-asked-question: “Is Millersville a party school?” I imagine the hotel rooms in Millersville where affect theorists from all corners of the globe came to rest after their journeys. Check map: Conestoga River. Notice proximity to Maryland border. It occurs to me that this is the notorious Mason-Dixon Line. I have just been rereading the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, and as a result it is impossible for me to look at a map of the US without thinking of the invisible historical geography that determined so much suffering and aspiration for so long. I can see the historical scar between freedom and the dehumanization of African-Americans as I look at Millersville. In the lower left-hand corner of the map, I see the town “New Freedom” — right on the border. Could it be named for the underground railroad? I Google around. Apparently not. It was a stop for runaway slaves, because all of York County, Pennsylvania, was a key region for the network of fugitive slave supporters, despite the region having become a hotbed for the Klan in the 20th century — this I remember. But the town seems to have been named after a German family called something like “Frey”. Onomastics. Overdetermination. I think, fleetingly, of Don DeLillo’s great early novel *The Names* (1982), which is about a renegade cult of philologists who seem to pursue sinister plots whenever the names of a person and a place conciliate in some charged way. Pull out of this reverie to ask: “Am I having a feeling? Is what is happening to me right now an example of what interests affect theorists?” This leads to some fleeting thoughts about the rise of “Affect Theory” within academe in recent years. Note for non-specialists: “affect theory” refers to efforts by scholars in various disciplines — history, literature, anthropology, etc. — to draw attention to the importance of “feelings”; *but that’s not all...*

3:10 pm: Have clear insight about the nature of the book in my hands: it is an effort to create a “field” at the intersection of “media studies” and “affect theory”. Should have understood that immediately. But it took me ten minutes. Still, just seeing that causes a bunch of stuff to fall into place for me. This is how academic life works. People jostle to create fields and subfields, promoting their community of researchers, and the questions they share. This is not a bad thing. But it can get a little formulaic or tiresome if you live in the world of people who do this, if you yourself have participated in doing it. Such work is often driven by a slightly skewed ratio of perfectly understandable, non-evil careerism to “actually interesting stuff”. I now know what this book “is” in a way that slightly reduces my open sense of what it might actually contain.

3:11 pm: A profound sense of inevitability settles over me. Affect theory is very of-the-moment; media studies also. Like hot stars on a movie set, they must hook up. Is there a *subject* here? Grumpiness makes a run at me. I fight it off, but skim ahead a bit.

3:12 pm: In skimming ahead, my eye lands on a sentence that reads: “As Jeremy Gilbert has said, ‘to think affect is to think the social, and nothing is more important right now.’” This sentence curdles my grumpiness into acute, foaming despair. Its combination of portentousness, vacuity, and cite-your-friends incest makes me want to do myself low-level bodily harm. I feel trapped in a dark system from which there is no escape, and in which I am an active agent. My sense of hopelessness has less to do with Gilbert (don’t know him), his claim (probably right), or even the editor-authors of this introduction (decent folks, I have no doubt), than with the whole idea that I am part of a socio-cognitive system that generates nearly infinite amounts of this sort of material in a relentless, spiraling cycle. The actual structure of the sentence is totally pre-formed. It exists iteratively in every edited volume of academic papers produced in the last twenty years. I long for death.

3:13 pm: That is hyperbole. I must not write that. I must not say that. I think of a guy I know who said something like that in an annoying phone call with a medical insurance company or something, and was put on hold for ten minutes. Then his doorbell rang, and there were cops there, and a team of paramedics. He ended up under observation in a psych ward. Oh, and the medical insurance company did not cover the ambulance *that they had called*, on his behalf. He was fine. Angry, for sure. And out another two thousand bucks. But fine. Key lesson: no jokes about self-harm. I regain my composure, and acknowledge that my little irruption of bad attitude is just a little irruption of bad attitude. Remind myself:

1. I care about human beings, their inner lives and emotional valences;
2. I further care deeply about the way that increasing amounts of time in digital media environments is transforming our ways of thinking and feeling;
3. *This is a book about exactly these issues, by actual experts.*
4. Thus, I must push on, and not despair. There will be good things in here. *I believe!*
(*help me, Lord, in my unbelief...*)

3:14 pm: Fortified, I persevere. In doing so, I notice an allusion to scholar Susanna Paasonen’s “study of affect and online pornography”. Recognize that if there is any

place where “affect” is at stake in digital universe, pornography would be it. Check footnote.

3:15 pm: In the footnotes, I discover a number of references to work in this area. In fact, one of the editors of the volume itself seems to be something of a rising star in the media-theory-of-pornography subfield. I Google him, and Paasonen too. She’s from Finland. The volume editor teaches Cultural Studies at the University of East London. Whew. His bio lists contributions to various unsettling academic books, including the (gratuitously?) hype-titled, [Hard to Swallow: Hard-Core Pornography on Screen](#) (2012) and [Transgression 2.0](#) (2012). On the one hand, I 100% believe that serious thinking about the explosion of online pornography is desperately needed, and that the topic is supremely important for any grasp of what digital, visual, and networked life is, and what it is doing to us. On the other hand, I cannot quite imagine how one commits oneself to a life of work in porn-studies. One would have to watch, it seems to me, quite a bit of pornography in the process. And while there can definitely be an appeal, under certain conditions, to looking at pornographic images, the idea of doing so in a sustained way, as a *professional activity*, is really hard for me to wrap my head around. I realize I am struggling with a basic feeling that one would need to be somewhat messed up to want to do that. To be able to do that. But I am embarrassed by this feeling-thought. After all, that is my bourgeois-complacent-reactionary self talking. I know this. Must broaden perspective. Important problem: pornography. Issues: *complex*. Gender, power, fantasy, desire, exploitation, cinema, transgression, etc. At stake: self and relation to others; society itself. Obviously merits study! No question. Also, though: how does one go about it? What does one’s research day look like? What is a conference of porn-studies scholars like? I read the MIT Press website catalog entry on Paasonen’s book, [Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography](#) (2011), but only after briefly getting lost in an online glimpse of the existence of one Mr. Heikki Paasonen, a Finnish television personality who hosted the 2007 Eurovision Song Contest, who sucks up a lot of bandwidth in “Paasonen” searches. The description of *Carnal Resonance* includes the following: “Countering theorizations of pornography as emotionless, affectless, detached, and cold, Paasonen addresses experiences of porn largely through the notion of affect as gut reactions, intensities of experience, bodily sensations, resonances, and ambiguous feelings.” I suppose. Yes. It is work I am sure we need. I feel weird about it, though. Which seems to be the point.

3:21 pm: Go back to book. Introduction emphasizes that there are many different theoretical postures within affect theory, and lists a few examples, including, “Aristotle’s *entelechy*; Stoic *propatheia*, Spinoza’s *conatus*, Freud’s *Affekt*, Whitehead’s ‘prehension’, and Bergson’s ‘virtuality’, to name but a few”. The proofreader in me is immediately concerned about the way Bergson’s term is given in English, despite its originally being *French*, while the other foreign-language terms are given in their native forms. I pause to think through defenses of this presentation. Relatively quickly, I satisfy myself that the other terms have come to be, to some extent, “terms of art” in their untranslated forms — so it makes sense. Sort of. I have actually read a whole edited volume on affect theory, and I do intellectual history. So I *basically* know, pretty much, what is being referenced in this list. But the truth is, I am a little hazy on Whitehead. And the “*propatheia*” thing I am not sure I totally get. Reach for phone. Start looking stuff up. And this is pretty interesting. I wend my way, in a section of a volume that pops up on Google Books, to an ancient story about how some Stoic philosophers, caught in a massive storm while taking a boat trip, go all wobbly and pale. Needled, later, by a fellow passenger about how they didn’t seem all that “Stoic” when they were looking death in the mouth, they come up with a theory that there are “feelings you have even when you don’t really have ‘feelings’ in a conventional sense (because you are a good Stoic, and basically impervious to garden-variety emotional vicissitudes)” — and this is *propatheia* in a nutshell. Feelings you cannot really control, even if you are an all-pro feeling-controller. Interesting. Spend some time on the Wikipedia page for Whitehead. Get a strong feeling of *déjà vu*. Whew. What a nut. No amount of work I do on his stuff gets it to yield for me. But people I respect are into it. Must be me. Slight feeling of hopelessness.

3:29 pm: No more messing around. Time to start reading this book. I am done with the Intro. First essay: a “Whiteheadian” analysis of people’s use of emoticons. As above, I am a little iffy on the Whitehead. Is the present author slightly faking his command of *Process and Reality*? Hmmm. That’s probably just me being preemptively defensive. Which is another way of saying “going on the offensive”. There is an expression in rowing: “sit the boat.” It means, basically, “balance your ass and oar(s) in such a way as to cause the boat to stop rocking back and forth unsteadily” — a nicely balanced boat with nicely balanced rowers is a precondition of making any brisk forward progress. This applies to reading. I need to “sit the boat” here. Let the guy explain how Whiteheadian concepts of “prehension” can shed light on emoticons...

3:31 pm: In Whitehead's process philosophy "prehensions" are defined as the way reality *happens*: "actual entities involve each other by reason of the prehensions of each other," he explains early on in a very large and difficult book. This makes "prehensions" seem like "feelings" or maybe "perceptions". But it is weirder than that, because you do not have to be a living being to have a prehension. Whitehead wants the term to apply to the way objects interact as well. So it's complicated.

3:32 pm: Whitehead is complicated. But the article basically isn't. The author did interviews with sixteen people about their emoticon use. Then he "analyzed" the "results". This leads to some solid observations, e.g.: "Emoticons can be thought of as qualifying and fixing affect." This seems right. And while kind of obvious, certainly the sort of observation one would hope to find in a book on social media and affect. But the sentence has a second half, which reads: "or what we refer to as an actual occasion, consisting of multiple prehensions". I cannot really say how much that adds to the first part of the sentence. I understand the former. I do not understand the latter. Though I do know that an "actual occasion" is a specific technical thing in Whitehead, and it has something to do with the way an object is subject to historical change. Speaking from my own experience, I have taken, over the last years, to a hybrid emoji practice: I will text someone, in brackets, a phrase like "[shrug emoji]" or "[emoji of nameless ennui]". These messages are supposed to be funny. And as the complexity of the feelings represented in words increases, they become, implicitly, wry comments on the way emoji-communications "qualify and fix affect". I am going to write an email to the author of this article, and propose that he do an article on "implicit-emoji practice".

3:34:30 pm: [snarky emoji of academic rat-race]. My kid calls this habit of mine "dad-internet", in parallel with the notion of the "dad-joke". This strongly suggests that it is not funny to a younger person. Indeed, that it may be perceived as actively pathetic. I wonder why.

3:35 pm: But only for a moment. Upshot of first article seems to be that emoticons were developed to enhance the emotional expressiveness of our online communication, but they in fact canalize and simplify emotional expression. This could be bad, but people seem to like it, and take strategic advantage of the *reduction* effected by emoticon-communication since it permits various forms of withdrawal, manipulation, and "disambiguation". Plausible. Basically right. OK. Onward!

3:40 pm: Second article looks at a mental-health website where people can share stories and communicate with each other. The article focuses on the use of “trigger warnings” in the posts. The conclusion is that trigger warnings mark posts that are “laden with affective content”, and that such posts can be read as sites where “we come to know our bodies through the process of giving meaning to digital information”. A “trigger warning” implicates the body and mind of the reader, and implies a possibly quite intimate, even traumatic link to the experience of the person who wrote the text, and in this sense trigger warnings are part of a negotiation of powerful affective relations among members of an online community. That feels true. “Following Bergson,” the author writes, “this acknowledges the way that we know the body from within via the process of affection.” Not absolutely clear how much work the Bergson is doing, but the central claim —trigger warnings are key nodes in the affective landscape of social media— is obviously correct. Even interesting.

3:45 pm: I feel impatient nevertheless. Is lying here and reading this book “life”? Sort of. I guess. But also not. Is it my “job”? *Mezzo-mezzo*. I want a coffee. But I just had one. That’s the addiction speaking.

3:46 pm: Third chapter looks at “individuation” in online spaces. The term is borrowed from a French theorist most active in the 1960s, Gilbert Simondon, who focused on the relationship between technology and being. There has been something of a vogue for Simondon in the last decade or so in English, and I have tried a bit of his stuff. He was centrally concerned to correct what he saw as a distorting preoccupation with the “subject” as an “entity” — a concern (with the “self” or “personhood”) that tended to deemphasize the continuous, ongoing, dynamic *process* of interaction-in-all-directions that is what is really going on at every moment. “Beings” emerge out of those dynamic interactions, and are maintained in them. Rather than positing the beings, and seeing what happens when they interact, what happens if one starts with the interactions, and sees what emerges? To be sure, lots of philosophers and theorists have made some version of this move, but Simondon’s take, which focused on relations with machines, has proven generative, and he has been taken up by Gilles Deleuze, Bruno Latour, Bernard Stiegler, and others. The basic problem —how we take shape as individuals, and as socially-coherent groups; how those processes unfold in dynamic relations with machines— *could not be more important*. I am rolling up my sleeves on this one.

3:47 pm: Piece kicks off by examining public service announcements in the UK about flu vaccination. These use the catchphrase “flu can mean the end of the line”. Author examines whether “lines” are a good way to think about “life”. Discussion follows on the respective value of theoretical language of the “meshwork”, preferred by anthropologist and theorist Tim Ingold, as against the language of the “assemblage”, preferred by theorists who follow a line that runs through Deleuze.

3:48 pm: I start to flip forward, feeling that this kind of thing is useless. Discover a paragraph on Simondon, but it isn’t really clear how he is going to be used. Point seems to be that the author prefers the language of “meshwork”, and that the author thinks we would do better not to think of ourselves as having an “online presence” that is separate from our “non-online presence”, because now those are all tangled up. If this is what the author is saying, it is a good point. But I am not 100% sure this is what he is saying. And if he is saying this in a manner that is so foxed by jargon as to be indecipherable, there are reasons to feel life may be too short to spend more time on his essay. What about Simondon, anyway?

3:49 pm: Am I a philistine? Ponder this for a moment. Then reach for my phone. If this guy isn’t going to say anything about Simondon, I will just read some stuff about Simondon on my own. Google Simondon. Land on Wikipedia entry. Get asked for a contribution. Feel bad. Wikipedia is like the only goddamn thing in the universe that actually seems to be trying to enact radically democratic knowledge-production on a truly non-capitalist basis. I don’t know much about how the whole thing got going, or exactly how it works — but I do have a durable sense that *these are my people*. When they ask me for money, I send it.

3:50 pm: I use Amazon Pay to convey \$15 to the Wikimedia Foundation. Am impressed by the way Amazon Pay gives me the option to choose the credit card I want to use for the transaction. Transaction is perfectly smooth, and very fast. Feel disgust for Amazon, but grudging awe at the way those fuckers actually make things work. Yesterday, walking home in my neighborhood in upper Manhattan, I passed a guy doing a delivery to one of the large apartment buildings in the neighborhood. He was alone. An older white guy with a haggard appearance: the ashy complexion of a hard-scrabble chain-smoker; tendrils of unkempt grey hair, slightly greasy; tattered Walmart wardrobe; the posture of someone managing several debilitating workplace injuries. He was pulling a small cascade of Amazon boxes out of the back of a beat-to-shit tan Toyota Corolla from, I would guess, 1993. *I fundamentally do not understand how it is that*

this guy, working from his own car and obviously living on the absolute cusp of economic survival, has “replaced” the US postal service and UPS and whatever other company might once have paid an actual employee a living wage to make deliveries. But I can see that this has happened. I witness people like this doing Amazon deliveries more and more: two Hispanic guys in a van; a mother and a daughter in the family hatchback. Why are these people wrestling with carloads of boxes? Why do they seem like they are also living out of their cars? The answer is basic enough: it is cheaper to pay “casual” workers like these *almost nothing* on an “independent contractor” basis than it is to pay an employee, (with benefits, and the various protections that come with an actual job. These dispossessed workers increase corporate flexibility, decrease financial and legal obligations, and increase the bottom line. And whatever shenanigans have made this new form of manifestly exploitative labor possible, it cannot be denied that we have all been implicated in it: few of us can resist cheap products, cheaply and quickly delivered. Amazon. What to do?

3:51 pm: Get through to the Wikipedia entry on Simondon, and skim it. At the bottom, I notice a list of names of folks who have been, it is asserted, “influenced” by Simondon’s work. Most of the names I recognize. But there are a few I do not, including one “Yuk Hui” that catches my eye. Why does it catch my eye? I do not know. Who is Yuk Hui?

3:53 pm: Yuk Hui’s name in the list is a link, but it pops over to a stub. No Wikipedia entry on him (or her?) — as yet. I Google “Yuk Hui”.

3:54 pm: Looks super interesting. Philosopher who works on problems of the digital environment. Did a book entitled *On the Existence of Digital Objects*, which I have never seen, but should probably check out. I notice that his Twitter account is @digital_objects, and that he seems to be based mostly in Hong Kong. I poke open his Twitter.

3:55 pm: Twitter discourse. Self-presentation in the internet age. Peruse. Notice that he has posted a little promo tweet about his having a piece in the summer issue of *The Brooklyn Rail* on technology and mysticism. Sounds cool. He gives a shout-out to the editor who commissioned the piece, Olivier Berggruen.

3:56 pm: Who is Olivier Berggruen? I *know* this, but I have forgotten...

3:57 pm: Right. German art historian and curator. Skim his Wikipedia page. Personal section says he lives in NYC, but has “additional homes in Paris and Gstaad”. I think of Gstaad as a plutocratic joke more than an actual place. But it all makes sense: Olivier’s page mentions that he is the brother of the “billionaire and philanthropist Nicolas Berggruen”.

3:58 pm: Click.

3:58:30 pm: Nicolas Berggruen. Right. *Launching major new art and culture initiative in LA. Bought priceless hilltop next to the Getty.* “Berggruen Institute” webpage lists, as associates of one sort or another, many luminaries from diverse fields. Nicolas Berggruen Wikipedia page gives quick synopsis of his trajectory to such a distinguished mission. “Personal” section is brief, and consists, in main part, of a single sentence that reads: “Berggruen has two children, who were born from one egg-donor and two surrogates.” Hmmm. There is a footnote on this sentence that leads to a reference: an article in the *LA Times* from 2016 entitled “On His Santa Monica Mountaintop, a Billionaire Envisions Lofty Thoughts on Politics and Culture.”

3:59 pm: Click.

4:00 pm: The article offers a glimpse into that true otherworld of the hyper-plutocrat, in its autoparodic 21st-century Euro-Silicon-Valley form. Health. Wealth. The super-elites, taking meetings in palm-sheltered tuck-aways not far from the pool on the terrace of a luxury hotel. *But with a twist:* two bio-engineered children being cared for just out of view by an extensive staff.

Alarm goes off on my phone: my reading hour is up.

How the hell did I get here? What was I doing again? What was I reading? What path took me from what interested me —the “issue of reading and selfhood in the digital age”— to the image of a fearfully handsome German hedge-fund billionaire and his parthenogenetic experiments in biological and cultural eugenics?

3.

Something like this feeling of *surfacing* (familiar, I am sure, to readers of *The Hinternet*) wants itself to be *surfaced*, and slowly rotated, I think, as we keep working together to try to understand the dynamics of attention in our moment. As we keep working,

together, to try to understand what it is to give ourselves to text in the frictionless world of glass screens and increasingly prosthetic intellects.

Thesis five of the [Twelve Theses on Attention](#) (2023), reads as follows:

An attentional path is the trace left by a free mind. To submit to the attentional path of another, to retrace it, is a form of attention. Retracing the attentional path of a free mind is one of the keenest pleasures we can take in each other and in the world.

This seems true to me, and it speaks to something real about the relationship between a reader and a text. But the new world of access to the manifold makes us wayward in new ways — we are newly equipped to depart from the paths laid down in the lineation of a paragraph. And yet, such departures, too, can be a form of attention. And even a form of reading, of course. Early theorists of hypertext made much of this, and some of them reached back across a deeper history of texts and counter-texts that linked reading to the experience of the meander. Paul North’s brilliant study, [The Problem of Distraction](#) (2011) actually goes so far as to suggest that the purest attention lies precisely in an aporetic condition: the mind or senses exactly **not** found at their given address.

This raises an interesting problem as we think about “[Attention Activism](#)”, and forms of resistance to “[human fracking](#)” (i.e., the ongoing epistemic and existential violence wrought by the commodification of human attention in our screen-lives). After all, we tend to think of the “attention economy” as an insidiously novel and successful program by which our attentional capacities are being financialized. It is the buying and selling of our eyeballs. But what if what is happening is deeper and stranger? What if our most profound capacity to turn (imaginatively, conceptually) from what is before us is being trained to bend back, again and again, to what is forever in our hands — which is to say, to the screen? To put this another way, if thought itself, and attention in its deepest and purest form, are, in the end, a kind of *departure*, then the true peril of our new reading life may be that all our departures are, in effect, virtual. They go in all directions, these departures, but always to the same place. By these lights, the attention economy does not merely commodify the bait-and-click responses of our reflex arc; it is worming its way into the very obverse of all that, too — worming its way into the intimacy of a mind that meanders away.

If any of this is right, then those moments when we “surface” from the screen take on a potentially new power and importance. As they may mark the moments when we are reminded of how fundamentally we are to ourselves when we leave our objects behind. They may mark the moments that thought can glimpse itself being trapped in what it thought was freedom.

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