



YVES CITTON

THE ECOLOGY OF
ATTENTION

depending on the moment and our mood, alternate between very deep absorption in a book and looking at it from a great distance in the context of the landscape that it forms with other cultural objects. Valuing only the deep immersion cultivated by our good old books, as opposed to the superficial navigation brought on by the internet is like being made to choose between drinking and eating. No doubt you could live only on soup, or get all of your liquids from watermelons, but is this really how to get our contemporaries and our descendants back to the literary table?

Nicholas Carr's well informed and subtle book is better served by its English title (*The Shallows*) than by the sensational question (taken from a polemical article) that serves as a title to the French translation [*Is the Internet Making Us Stupid?*]. Far from advocating a return to the Middle Ages, the author reflects on a general tendency towards shallowness brought on by the different 'distraction machines' that we are surrounded by in our digital environment. The real – and excellent – question he asks is not about knowing whether the internet is making us stupid, but about whether we will be able to *adjust our environment so as to protect profound experiences*. His reflection brings us, therefore, to the heart of what must be thought of as an attention *ecology*. In this heart we will rediscover what he characterizes as 'a literary brain', but extended to a whole range – at once very broad and very specific – of experiences, that may be broadly qualified as 'aesthetic'.

Aesthetic Laboratories

Reflecting on attention poses an apparently unsolvable problem, whose knot paralyzes our most essential socio-political debates. Our epoch often complains – and rightly so – that it is weighed down by evaluation procedures that have become simultaneously invasive, so time-consuming as to be paralysing, and disfiguring, since they are destined to ruin what they are trying to account for. A classic argument of the defenders of the humanities consists in highlighting the extent to which their disciplines are doomed from the start, from the moment we purport to subject them to a numerical logic when by 'essence' they are situated in the incalculable. Despite its hypocrisies – the same teachers serving as apologists for the incalculable hardly hesitate to give their students a numerical mark – the argument indicates a problem that is actually extremely important, the problem of VALORIZING EVALUATION, which attention ecology helps

us to identify (as we have been doing since chapter three): *if giving your attention to something helps you to recognize in it a value that will justify the attention you will give it later, then all of our evaluation procedures are affected by a fundamental flaw, since they actively contribute to produce the value they claim only to measure objectively.*

As we have already had the opportunity to see, this fundamental flaw that grounds an auto-referential circle is nevertheless only the flip side of a virtue. The force [*virtus*] of human attention consists precisely in its ability to discover new ‘values’: among the ‘millions of external things that are present to our senses’, it identifies certain objects or phenomena that deserve to be noticed for the contribution they might make to our wellbeing. We are often, therefore, right to reject existing evaluations, since their procedures conceal processes of valorization that they reproduce and impose occultly. But, most importantly, this rejection should lead us to question our modes of valorization – the most general, and clearly hegemonic even if it has not yet colonized every sphere of our social life, being CAPITALISTIC VALORIZATION, *which measures the value of a good or activity based only on its capacity for maximizing the profits of an investor.* Behind the rejection of the rating of universities in the Shanghai rankings, and behind the rejection of certain redundancies, or the occupation of public parks from Madrid to New York and Istanbul, we see the rise of one same awareness – still confused in certain milieux, but undergoing accelerated clarification – of the profoundly harmful character of this hegemony.

As a reflection on the processes of valorization, attention ecology comes, therefore, to play a central role in denouncing the illusions and deceptions which, through certain modes of evaluation, seriously and tragically distort the values that we bestow (or that we should bestow) on external things. But what the particular case of the literary attention valorized by Nicholas Carr brings home is the role played by our aesthetic experiences in general as VALORIZATION LABORATORIES: in line with Jacques Rancière’s characterization of a ‘reconfiguration of the distribution of the sensible’,²¹ *the immersion in an aesthetic experience leads to the valorization of previously unexpected sensations and feelings, and/or to the modification of associated valorizations.*

As he seeks to summarize the ‘ecology of literary studies’, taking the reading of poetry as a privileged example, Jean-Marie Schaeffer gives a very good analysis of the central role played by attention in our aesthetic experiences:

The aesthetic relation is a human conduct whose central stake is (linguistic, perceptive, etc.) attention itself, in its deployment: the success or failure of an aesthetic experience is not decided by the characteristics of the (real or represented) object, but by the satisfactory or unsatisfactory quality of the attentional process that we invest in that object. [. . .] The default dynamic of the act of verbal comprehension is founded on a principle of economy: it is a matter of understanding as quickly as possible while expending the least attentional energy. [. . .] In the framework of the aesthetic relation, on the other hand, it is attention itself, and so in this case reading as act, which is the aim of the conduct, and it no longer follows the principle of economy, but on the contrary maximizes the attentional investment.²²

An ‘ecological’ approach emerges from our aesthetic laboratories because they constitute a place where the laws of the (cognitive) economy are suspended: to approach these situations in terms of an ‘attention economy’ is, therefore, to risk crushing their specific character. Jean-Marie Schaeffer shows more precisely that the attentional style called forth by poetry in particular, but by aesthetic experiences more generally too, is based on a ‘delay in categorization’:

The drawing out of the treatment of the linguistic signal due to the maximizing of attentional investment, does not produce only an attentional overloading, but also a delay in categorization, which is to say, a delay in the activity of hermeneutic synthesis (we accept that we will not understand ‘straight away’). And this delayed categorization is always experienced as a dissonance, since it thwarts the principle of economy that seeks cognitive consonance. The capacity an individual has to give their sustained attention to the sonorous materiality of a text is, therefore, proportional to their capacity to tolerate situations of delayed categorization.²³

The term ‘laboratory’ proves particularly apt here as it brings together three kinds of attitude which we tend to think of as incompatible with each other, but which are in fact typical of the artistic sphere – from the installations of avant-garde galleries to big-budget films, passing by rock concerts and hip-hop dances. Even if their methods are not ‘scientific’ in the usual meaning of the term, our aesthetic experiences relate to an attitude of (collective) *experimentation* which corresponds closely with how we imagine the laboratory: a space that is temporarily isolated from the daily world becomes a place of investigation, where we test certain limits of what can be done, perceived, felt, discovered, thought or justified. To be more precise, artistic modernity has taught us to make our encounter with the work the occasion for an ‘experience’ (of cognitive dissonance): even if there is

no attempt to quantitatively measure its effects, this encounter has the value of a ‘test’ through which we may appreciate what an artist can do and a spectator experience.

Our aesthetic experiences also relate to the laboratory in the etymological sense of the term, in that they are the place of a *labour*. On the side of the ‘creator’ – which, along with Étienne Souriau, we would do well to think of as an ‘instigator’²⁴ – even the art of improvisation or the found object, which establish an important role for serendipity, are largely based on a sedimentation of the efforts necessary to bring about interesting encounters or discoveries. The participation of the reader, the listener or the spectator, are also a kind of ‘labour’ in that all our aesthetic experiences constitute, each in its own way, a certain challenge brought to our attention capabilities (a challenge to our tolerance for classification delay): we are invited to labour on ourselves to raise our sensitivity, our sentiments, and our understanding to the level of the programme that the work offers us. In their research and labour aspect, these aesthetic laboratories that might be books, theatres or cinemas, are certainly places for the verification and reprocessing of values: they set up a double experiment which is undergone in parallel by the work (will it ‘hold up’, bringing something that will sustain the attention we are to give it?) and the receiver (will they be able to enjoy and take advantage of the opportunity that is presented to them?). The experiment is only conclusive if the work and the attention it solicits are both successful in demonstrating their value – independently and yet jointly.

Finally, from the moment that our aesthetic experiences come to be situated beyond and before the principle of economy – in the suspense of a classification delay where the urgency of action briefly gives way to the unknown of contemplation – a third kind of attitude necessary to the constitution of the aesthetic laboratory reveals itself as intimately connected with that inactive activity that is *prayer* (if we are willing to read ‘lab-oratory’ as the place of a labour orientated towards oration). By highlighting the ‘meditative’ dimension of deep reading or literature, by having it emerge from the medieval religious tradition, by giving it the function of ‘satisfying the spirit’ and ‘renewing its contents’, Nicholas Carr already indicated how our aesthetic experiences are always related to ‘oration’ (from which they doubtless originate historically). Risking the trial of the work – which you instigate as an artist or expose yourself to as a spectator – always involves praying that the improbable and aleatory encounter will take place. We go to a show or open a book animated by the hope that we will momentarily connect with something that is bigger than us – on

the occasion of a properly mystical communion, capable of initiating us into a higher form of existence.

The Gaze of the Third Bird

It is perhaps in tribute to this oratory dimension inherent in the experimentations of our aesthetic laboratories that an international collective – whose precise origins and real extent remain quite mysterious – gets together intermittently at various places around the world to develop attentional exercises under the auspices of the enigmatic Order of the Third Bird. Its members have assigned themselves the double and complementary mission of actively cultivating their attentional capabilities while nourishing through their active contemplation a work that they think suffers from a lack of attention. Their rituals consist in gathering in front of a painting that has been buried for decades in the deep recesses of a museum, or placing themselves in front of an architectural eccentricity that hurried passers-by neglect in the daily rush, or, again, assembling around a found object that bears witness to a lost practice or defies explanation. So, acting as ‘attention attendants’, they generously dedicate different forms of precisely assigned sustained attention to this human production, over time periods that may vary from thirty minutes to twenty-four hours. We may speak here of ATTENTIONAL PERFORMANCE in that, far from being considered a phenomenon coming after the fact that remains external to works that supposedly exist autonomously, here the reception of the work is rooted in *the production of a joint co-presential attention to the work, an attention which is itself raised to the level of artistic activity.*

Over the years, the members have developed a broad (and still incomplete) range of precise and ritualized rules which enable them to establish a certain JOINT ATTENTIONAL PROTOCOL for each individual performance: in this way, they play with the fact that *our aesthetic attention is structured by temporalities, phases, attitudes, focusing and distancing modes which can be the subject of shared exercises.* Five or six members may decide to stand in a line in front of a painting for two hours, dividing this period into four previously differentiated phases.

These exercises are of course rooted in joint attention, firstly because it is the progressive and synchronized convergence of their looking that makes up the substance of the attentional performance, and, secondly, because these practices do not fail to have an effect

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on people who were not part of the ritual to begin with. When they take place in the exhibition rooms of a museum, and not in its storage area, visitors cannot fail to be struck by the alignment of surprisingly still and perfectly silent Birds. The intensity and the ritualized nature of their sustained attention powerfully attracts the attention of passers-by who, in turn, look at the work with a curiosity that is quite exceptional in the contemporary museum context, where busloads of tourists are discharged only to bow before half a dozen seminal works (also in a very ritualized manner) while passing very quickly over the rest of the collection. Even if this is probably not their primary ambition, the members of The Order of the Third Bird illustrate the possibility of an ATTENTIONAL ACTIVISM in which one *makes a conspicuous demonstration of one's joint attention so as to draw collective attention to an unjustly ignored object.*

We still need to understand better, however, the way in which the laboratories of the Third Bird constitute a properly attentional 'practice' or 'labour'. Did not a whole swathe of twentieth-century aesthetico-political thought make the 'activity' of looking into the very opposite of activity, practice and (productive or revolutionary) labour? Mark Hansen's 'new philosophy for new media' might help

The Order of the Third Bird is currently engaged in a silent practice of Sustained Attention to Made Things. You are welcome to stand with members of the Order and join in giving your generous attention to the work.



The ORDER of the THIRD BIRD

For inquiries & information, the Order may be contacted through thirdbird.org or at orderofthethirdbird@gmail.com.

14. Notice outlining the Order of the Third Bird's practice of sustained attention

us to enlarge upon what was so well outlined by Jacques Rancière in his now famous essay on the *Emancipated Spectator*:

Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting, [. . .] when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions. The spectator also acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place.²⁵

How can we explain this ‘action’ peculiar to the way of looking practised and trained by the Birds during their attentional performances? In the framework of a debate with the ‘technological determinism’ with which Friedrich Kittler’s²⁶ thinking of the media is often charged, Mark Hansen highlights the role played by our bodies in the treatment of images, taking up the problematic of ‘embodiment’ we have already encountered with Richard Shusterman and Katherine Hayles. Where many digital theoreticians reason in terms of information, he emphasizes that this information only has meaning as a function of the labour carried out by an attentive body. Observing, selecting, comparing, interpreting – to pick up Jacques Rancière’s terms – all relate inextricably to both *filtering* and *creation*. Images are never simply ‘received’, as though they had already been fixed in themselves for an eternity by a transmitter or a technology: they only make sense – a sense which is always a little different – in the reprocessing operations carried out by an (always differently) attentive receiver. It is the reflexive (slowed down and intensified) protocols developing these communal operations and lifting them to a higher power that constitute the Bird’s ceremonies.

[R]ather than selecting preexistent *images*, the body now operates by filtering *information* directly and, through this process, *creating* images. Correlated with the advent of digitization, then, the body undergoes a certain empowerment, since it deploys its own constitutive singularity (affection and memory) not to filter a universe of preconstituted images, but actually to *enframe* something (digital information) that is originally formless. Moreover, this “originary” act of enframing information must be seen as the source of all technical frames (even if these appear to be primary), to the extent that these are designed to make information perceivable by the body, that is, to transform it into the form of the image.²⁷

As they line up several pairs of eyes in front of a neglected work, the *low tech* exercises practised by the Birds constitute a laboratory in which the processes that in reality ‘shape’ all of the images that affect us can be

observed and experienced with great subtlety. As we have been repeating since the beginning of this book, attention functions as a selection operator. However, as Mark Hansen helps us to clarify, attention does not select between preformed images, but amongst information which is only constituted into images through this operation – an operation that transforms information into signification, thanks to a labour of the frame (enframing, deframing, reframing).

Ancestral practices of attentional exercises – coming from multiple traditions of ‘spiritual exercises’ – become central to a new set of concerns with digitalization. It is often repeated, and rightly so, that the digital image (made up of pixels on our screens) differs ontologically from the analogue image (exemplified by photographs produced through the gelatin-silver process) in that the second imposes on the receiver a block of characteristics that have been materially fixed, while the first allows anyone to independently adjust its different parameters (size, framing, colour intensity, even the internal composition with Photoshop).²⁸ Far from leading inexorably towards an extreme alienation of our way of looking, the DESTABILIZATION OF THE IMAGE permitted by our digital devices *only exteriorizes the active and creative labour of reframing which has always been constitutive of the peculiar function of human attention*. So, Mark Hansen suggests that the ‘digital image’ characteristic of our epoch should be defined as the process carried out by the attentive body through which information is transformed into signification: ‘the image can no longer be restricted to the level of surface appearance, but must be extended to encompass the entire process by which information is made perceivable through embodied experience.’²⁹

We can determine better now what is at stake in the attentional protocols developed by the Order of the Third Bird. By giving a neglected work several hours of sustained attention, structured in several phases with each operating a particular attentional reframing, the members work towards a RE-STABILIZATION OF THE IMAGE – something that has become indispensable in the context of our digital cultures: in an environment in which everything undergoes endless reframing according to heterogeneous, often contradictory and always rushed, demands, the look of the Third Bird is positioned such that it can *experiment in a reflective way with the processes by which information is stabilized into a meaningful image*. The members do not only work as attention attendants for the forgotten works to which their ceremonies are dedicated, but also as auxiliary nurses for our attention itself, which is chronically lacking in stability in our universe of digital images.

So, aesthetic laboratories come into focus as places for the exercise and testing of a labour, at once mysteriously initiatory and perfectly common, through which our attention puts pieces of information together to constitute them as perceptions, images and meanings. These laboratories are well suited for making our attention reflect on the objects to which it gives itself over, and on the valorizations in which it participates. It will therefore necessarily be of central interest for an attention ecology. ‘The arts’ are often presented as ‘secondary’ realities of our social life, ‘luxury’ ‘diversions’ that we sacrifice (regretfully, but in the front line) to the merciless gods of austerity – so that we can save the essential (read: ‘the economy’) as we wait for the crisis to pass and the end of the tunnel. The artistic practices and cultural apparatuses in place to disseminate their mystical pleasures to the population must on the contrary be thought of as being at the very heart of our social life: it is through their intercession that the processes of valorization – on which not only the totality of our economic activities but the very constitution of our lives depend – are renewed, altered, adapted and revolutionized.

Leaving the Laboratory

To those who would doubt – not without reason – that the fate of capitalism, of carbon-based industry or the production of microprocessors is at stake in the processes of valorization cobbled together in the ultra-minority laboratories that are art galleries, independent cinemas or free-jazz concerts, we should give two provisional responses, which only apparently contradict each other.

Firstly, we do not only observe the aesthetic experiences we are speaking of here in traditional places of ‘high culture’, in the elitist hangouts of the avant-garde and in cultural arenas where the public are invited into an ‘ascetic’ participation (which is demanding, difficult and therefore rare) – but also, in more or less diluted form, in the mainstream cultural offering which draws millions of spectators into its multiplex cinemas and in front of its small screens. Rare are the television series or Bollywood films that do not contain a fleeting moment of aesthetic adjournment – in the recess of an unforeseen twist in the plot, a suddenly inspired dialogue, a musical treasure or an unexpected edit. As standardized and mind-numbing as they may seem, the products of the cultural industries also distribute traces of past aesthetic experiences among the most extensive of audiences – whose forms may have a sense of *déjà-vu* for *aficionados*, but whose

effects on less informed spectators are, for all that, no less real. So we must take into account processes of DIFFUSION BY DILUTION: *what dilutes the radicalism of aesthetic experiences allows them progressively to infiltrate the broadest strata of the population, and in this way generalize the reprocessing of values taking place in a concentrated and narrow way in ascetic experiences.*

Before we even get to the moments of aesthetic experimentation that exit the laboratory to infiltrate the products of commercial culture, Steven Johnson has sought to show that the development of American television series over the last fifty years has tended to provide viewers with ever more complex mental exercises. If he is to be believed, we should look beyond the explicit *content* of (violent, stereotypical, ‘immoral’) entertainment productions, to try to measure the kinds of *intellectual operations* that they ask of their receivers when they attempt to follow the narrative or character developments. The mass media should be analysed as providing ‘a kind of cognitive workout, not a series of life lessons’. We then realize that ‘the most debased forms of mass diversion – video games and violent television dramas and juvenile sitcoms – turn out to be nutritional after all’.³⁰ Following very popular series like *Seinfeld*, *ER* or *The West Wing* demands much more complex mental operations than was the case in the 1960s.

For decades, we’ve worked under the assumption that mass culture follows a steadily declining path toward lowest-common-denominator standards, presumably because the “masses” want dumb, simple pleasures and big media companies want to give the masses what they want. But in fact, the exact opposite is happening: the culture is getting more intellectually demanding, not less.³¹

Despite some weaknesses in Steven Johnson’s demonstration, his intuition should be taken seriously. Of course, the ostensible values on display in mainstream entertainment provide plenty of ammunition for the most acerbic critics of the cultural industries. But, in this sphere, what we see is probably less important than the way in which our attention is mobilized to make sense of what is to be seen. And, from this point of view, it is not unreasonable to hope that the slow but progressive infiltration of aesthetic experiences into mass cultural products will bring with it an increase in the complexity of the cognitive procedures induced in the spectators. Following a fiction requires a multi-dimensional attentional labour,³² and we would certainly be wrong to exclude mass entertainment from the laboratories where our valorizations to come are continually being reprocessed.

Secondly, however, this dynamic by which values are constantly adjusted through their diffusion in mainstream cultural industries is based on the protection of privileged spaces of aesthetic experimentation. An attention ecology must, therefore, understand and actively defend the environmental conditions necessary for these artistic practices and aesthetic experiences to develop, sheltered from the pressure of profitability that tightly limits what can come through commercial channels. Aesthetic laboratories should be understood as VACUOLES which allow for *the temporary suspension of the demands of communicational attention, so as to be able to concentrate full attention on a privileged cultural object over an extended period.*

You can easily tell today that you are entering a vacuole of this kind when you are reminded to turn off your mobile phone. Reading rooms,³³ classrooms, cinemas,³⁴ concert halls, dance theatres and theatres³⁵ are without doubt, along with churches, the last sacred spaces where the attentional vampirism of communication still respects the superior values of a certain mystical communion – which would be sacrilegiously disturbed by a mobile phone ringing. Like the circle drawn on the ground in which the shaman can receive divine inspiration, like the laboratory we can only enter wearing a white coat and gloves, the white cube of the art gallery and the black box of cinematic projection or theatrical performance constitute paratopic spaces that establish attentional ecosystems ruled by their own laws, invested with magical properties and opening onto a perspective of elevation whose closest anthropomorphic equivalent is mystical initiation.

A strategy that is diametrically opposed to the constitution of aestheticizing vacuoles may nonetheless contribute to the sharpening and heightening of our reflexive attention. With a few accomplices gathered around the publisher *Questions Théoriques*, the poet and theoretician Christophe Hanna has for nearly two decades been developing a demonstration that he speaks of in terms of ‘direct action poetry’ and a thinking of ‘apparatuses’. Instead of seeking to suspend communicational pressures and withdrawing into a vacuole that is protected in its temporary isolation, he advocates forms of APPARATUS-BASED INTERVENTION which aim to *take a position in communication flows in an attempt to short-circuit them from the inside.* Like advertising or political storytelling, direct action poetry seeks to insert spin, buzz, memes or viruses into the normal avenues by which information and art circulate. So, under the pseudonym La Rédaction, Christophe Hanna publishes ‘poetic documents’ on the decapitation of hostages by Abou Moussab al-Zarqaoui, on a short-lived reality TV star, or on the memory traces left by a hostage situation at a nursery school

in Neuilly in 1993, which gave the then mayor, Nicolas Sarkozy, the opportunity to appear as a man of providence.³⁶ In every case, it is a question of making direct contact with our mediatized attention – the work dedicated to the Neuilly news item appeared right in the middle of the 2012 presidential campaign.

More than ‘works’ to be contemplated in mystical stasis, we are here dealing with ‘apparatuses’ that exit the laboratory in an attempt to occupy the most important field of our social conflicts: the mediasphere. Not, however, to discreetly infiltrate mainstream culture, as was suggested by the work of Steven Johnson, but to introduce elements productive of blockages, crashes and sudden bifurcations. Of course, this joins in a long tradition of modern art seeking to escape the ghettos of the museums and theatre stages to directly invade the social space as it reorders ‘situations’ there. Apparatus-based interventions are, however, explicitly rooted in a ‘reflected’ attention in the optical sense of the term, which involves grasping immediacy rather than a reflexive step back: our collective attention looks at itself in the mirror, without being able to separate itself from its own image, even if it knows that what it is contemplating is a distortion of the truth. We find the symmetrical twin of this in recent work by the Russian artist Arseniy Zhilyaev, who pretends to expound and venerate the works of Valdimir Putin, elevating him to the status of the greatest performance artist of our time, since the Russian President is able to ‘produce an event’, ‘cause disruptions’ and ‘impact the real’ thanks to the performerly and performative staging of his public persona.³⁷

It is probably not La Rédaction’s apparatus-based intervention that caused Nicolas Sarkozy’s defeat in the 2012 presidential election. It is certainly, however, on the basis of his staged performances, and their prominence in the global and Russian mediasphere, that Valadimir Putin has been able to get himself re-elected to the Kremlin so often. Christophe Hanna’s and Arseniy Zhilyaev’s work share the same paradoxical gesture of attentional adhesion resulting in rejection through over-proximity: through both we are made aware of a staged fiction while at the same time immediately grasping a reality in the making. That towards which our reflexive attention tends (*ad-tendere*) belongs to what narratology calls a *metalepsis*, by which it refers to the collapse of two narrative levels that are imagined to be distinct and impermeable – like when the fictional character Don Quixote meets the real-life character of his author Cervantes.³⁸ In order to better understand this kind of metaleptic short-circuit, we will need to specify the structure on which the reflexive attention implemented in our aesthetic experiences is based.