Attention and Distraction
in Modern German Literature,
Thought, and Culture
Attention and Distraction in Modern German Literature, Thought, and Culture

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This project started out as a study of attention in early twentieth-century German literature and thought. Since these beginnings it has, to use Franz Kafka’s formulation, ‘turned underneath my hands’,¹ as its remit has expanded in temporal, conceptual, and disciplinary terms. The result is a book which is hard to categorize. Its centre of gravity still lies in modernism, but alongside literature and thought, it also explores photography, film, and music. My narrative focuses on German culture while also stressing the transnational nature of this debate. And it soon became apparent that a discussion of attention in modernism required a substantial historical preamble, one which charts the roots of this debate in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The earlier stages of this story, which are mapped out in the first two chapters, are centred on psychology, a field where attention was explored first tentatively and then with increasing experimental rigour. Psychology, as we will see, was in some sense a German invention; and while it soon emerged as one of the master discourses of the time, it did not exist in isolation, but was inflected by other currents, such as philosophy and physiology. In its turn, psychology had a profound impact on modern culture, its conceptions of the self, and its everyday practices.

Finally, another major departure from the original project involved promoting distraction from a supporting role as attention’s disruptive adversary to that of an equal counterpart. While attention remained a prominent reference point, modern culture was seen by many through the lens of distraction, Zerstreuung, a term evoking not only mental but also sensory and social fragmentation. For many commentators, the rise of distraction spelled the end of contemplative attention; and while not all embraced this shift, many thinkers, writers, and artists engaged with this dynamic constructively, seeking ways to incorporate it into their way of working, and reflecting it in their resulting works.

Accordingly, this study is based on three interconnected premises. First, that attention is intrinsically restless, unpredictable, and uncontrollable, and that, as uncontrollable, it constitutes a standing challenge to or for any modern, self-present, rational selfhood. Second, that this challenge, despite being an anthropological constant, gains a particular urgency in the age of social and technological

modernization. In modern economies, labour is extensively and intensively divided, and this approach has knock-on effects for most areas of life. Increasingly, the model of the stable, autonomous, and self-aware subject becomes obsolete and unsustainable, triggering anxious debates and extensive, state-sponsored measures intended to minimize or reverse the perceived decline of attention. Such measures were, however, of limited benefit and often strayed into authoritarian and disciplinary terrain. At the same time, the modern(ist) crisis of attention also has a productive effect, as it prompts artists, writers, and thinkers to conceive of attention in more fluid, dialectical terms, as a faculty which is not closed off but closely linked to distraction in unexpected and often fruitful ways.

For the individuals discussed in this book, to engage with attention always involves a degree of self-reflection. This dynamic also applies to this book. Its rather baggy shape is the result of an evolving thought process that gradually brought new fields and questions into focus, taking me far beyond my initially defined corpus to pursue other routes of enquiry. In particular, it became clear that thought, literature, and other media could not be treated in isolation but had to be understood within a much wider context, against a backdrop of intense activity around attention in experimental psychology, in medicine and psychiatry, and in everyday life, specifically in the domains of work and consumption.

The promotion of distraction to the status of attention’s equal counterpart was prompted in part by changes in my own personal and professional situation, where distraction, rather than attention or indeed contemplation, has often seemed the predominant state. This book bears the more or less visible traces of countless disruptions and diversions; but it also enacts the project’s broader conclusions: that attention is inherently limited; that depth of focus is incompatible with comprehensive coverage; and that every act of focalization involves ignoring countless other routes of enquiry. Hopefully, the provisional and open-ended form of this study will spark further enquiry. In historical terms, then, the project extends beyond modernism into the years of fascism and exile and finally into the post-war years, with a concluding chapter trying to pinpoint some of the resonances of earlier discourses about attention in literature since the 1960s.

While writing this book, I have greatly benefited from countless conversations with colleagues, friends, and students in Oxford any beyond. I’d like to single out Eric Clarke, Ben Morgan, and Daniel Weidner, who have read parts of this manuscript and have provided invaluable feedback. I am indebted to Christina Striewski for sharing her Magisterarbeit on Benjamin and attention with me and to Benno Wagner, who has kindly made his Habilitationsschrift on Kafka available to me. Detlev von Graeve has offered valuable information about the 1929 ‘Gesunde Nerven’ exhibition in Berlin, while Michael Schwarz at the Theodor W. Adorno Archiv at the Akademie der Künste Berlin has pointed me to material relating to Adorno’s radio broadcasts. This project was completed during periods of sabbatical leave funded by the Zvi Meitar/Vice Chancellor of Oxford University
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To Joe, Maxi, and Clara, and to my parents, with love
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KA Helmar Lerski, Köpfe des Alltags: Unbekannte Menschen gesehen von Helmar Lerski (Berlin: Reckendorf, 1931)


KAG Immanuel Kant, Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1983)

KK Reinhard Gerling, Die Kunst der Konzentration: Ein Kursus in Unterrichtsbriefen für Geistesarbeiter, Studierende, Beamte, Kaufleute, für Zerstreute, Nervöse, Gedächtnisschwache (Prien: Anthropos, no date [1920])

MPS Georg Friedrich Meier, Philosophische Sittenlehre: Anderer Theil (Halle: Hemmerde, 1754)


RP Theodor König, Reklame-Psychologie: Ihr gegenwärtiger Stand—ihre praktische Bedeutung (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1924)


ZP E. Zimmermann, Liste 33 über Psychotechnik (Leipzig: E. Zimmermann, 1923)

Sigmund Freud


xvi LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Franz Kafka


PA  *Der Proceß: Apparatband*


### Robert Musil

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Work</th>
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<tr>
<td>MGA</td>
<td>Robert Musil, Gesamtausgabe</td>
<td>ed. Walter Fanta, 12 vols (Salzburg/Vienna: Jung und Jung, 2016–)</td>
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### Walter Benjamin

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### Theodor W. Adorno

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Introduction

‘Every one knows what attention is’, declares William James in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890)—only to immediately turn his own attention to ‘the confused, dazed, scatter-brained state which in French is called *distraction*, and *Zerstreutheit* in German’ (*PP* 403–4). The alleged self-evidence of attention leads James to embark on a lengthy detour into the treacherous terrain of distraction, which he tries to map out in its cognitive and linguistic dimensions. James establishes distraction as the antithesis of attention; while the latter facilitates ‘clear and vivid’ perception (*PP* 403), the former is characterized by an absence of clarity, focus, and coherence. James here tries to separate the two mental states, but for many of his fellow psychologists things are less clear-cut. In *La Psychologie de l’attention* (*The Psychology of Attention*, 1888), Théodule-Armand Ribot describes attention as the exception rather than the norm, as a state which cannot endure for any length of time since it contradicts one of the fundamental laws of psychology: the dynamic, constantly changing nature of mental experience.¹ The German physicist and physician Hermann von Helmholtz concurs. Describing a self-experiment in which he tries to focus each eye on a separate image, he finds it impossible to control his focus for more than a few seconds:

Ein anhaltender Ruhezustand der Aufmerksamkeit ist ja auch unter anderen Verhältnissen kaum für einige Zeit zu unterhalten. Der natürliche ungezwungene Zustand unserer Aufmerksamkeit ist herumzuschweifen zu immer neuen Dingen, und so wie das Interesse eines Objectes erschöpft ist, so wie wir nichts Neues mehr daran wahrzunehmen wissen, so geht sie wider unseren Willen auf etwas anderes über.²

[An equilibrium of the attention, persistent for any length of time, is under no circumstances attainable. The natural tendency of attention when left to itself is to wander to ever new things; and so soon as the interest of its object is over, so soon as nothing new is to be noticed there, it passes, in spite of our will, to something else.³]

³ James cites Helmholtz’s study in *The Principles of Psychology*, thereby undermining his own earlier statement about the self-evident nature of attention. Helmholtz, he notes, has put ‘his sensorial attention to the severest tests, by using his eyes on objects which in common life are expressly...
Attention is not sustained but restless and unpredictable, uncontrollable in its hunger for new stimuli. As Helmholtz discovers, it cannot be governed by the will but is rooted in the body, and specifically in the eyes, whose restless movement follows its own dynamic. In Helmholtz’s description, the troubling features of attention come to the fore: its spatial and temporal limitations, and its ambivalent location somewhere between body and mind, both of which challenge the notion of the self as rational and autonomous. In describing his experience of split attention, of trying to focus on two images at once, Helmholtz ends up describing an experience which closely resembles what James defines as distraction. His experiment thus spells out what is also evident in James’s opening remarks: attention is inseparable from distraction both conceptually and in terms of how it is experienced by the individual.

Helmholtz’s report is important beyond his own discipline, for it resonates with the everyday experience of his contemporaries. Indeed, what psychologists in the latter half of the nineteenth century defined as a universal psychological principle was described, by sociologists and psychiatrists, historians and cultural commentators, as a historically and culturally specific phenomenon: the decline of attention as a hallmark of modernity. In an age of acceleration driven by technological progress, they argued, the mind was perpetually stimulated and dispersed—and in turn craved more stimulation. Psychologists sought to instil their findings with a sense of rigour by controlling the conditions of their (self-)experiments and shielding this experimental space from the contingencies of the outside world. But this turned out to be an impossible aspiration. As we will see, the outside world forcefully invaded the psychological laboratory, while the methods and theories developed in this space were in turn disseminated into modern everyday life—into the domains of work and entertainment, of leisure and creativity. This two-way dynamic, as it unfolds in the German-speaking context in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is the focus of this study.

**Mapping the Field**

William James includes the French and German terms for distraction to gesture towards the international nature of psychological research, but also to underline the subtle but important differences between these concepts. No one word, he suggests, can fully encapsulate the state in question, for each has a particular epistemology, particular resonances and blind spots. In a study written in English about German material such as this one, the issues of terminology and translation overlooked (PP 421). Here, James harks back to an eighteenth-century scholarly and moral ideal: that attention needs to be turned towards marginal, commonly overlooked aspects of the (natural) world.
are thorny but hugely illuminating, for they help to map out the debate about attention and distraction in all its nuances and internal contradictions.

Although I use attention and distraction as the English equivalents of Aufmerksamkeit and Zerstreuung, these respective terms have different roots and carry different connotations. The English ‘attention’, like its equivalents in the Romance languages, derives from the Latin attentio, which in the Middle Ages is often used synonymously with intentio, an epistemology which casts attention as a deliberate act of focusing the mind.⁴ As exemplified by the Old Testament hendiadys audi et attende (listen and pay heed), religious and moral uses often associate attentio with the sense of hearing, with the act of listening to God’s calling or commandments. The term Aufmerksamkeit was first coined by the Enlightenment philosopher Christian Wolff in 1720, who derives it from the adjective aufmerksam, attentive.⁵ In his metaphysics Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt (Sensible Thoughts about God, the World, the Soul of Man, and all Existing Things), he defines attention as the extension of the faculties of memory and imagination, while warning that ‘attention ceases when the senses are strongly occupied by too many things at once’⁶. Here and throughout the period, the phenomenon of distraction is described by commentators, but this debate remains rather fuzzy since this state is not yet defined by one single concept.⁷ One of the first writers to use Zerstreuung to designate a state of mental fragmentation was the psychiatrist Johann Christian Reil, who in 1802 pinpoints ‘Zerstreuung und Vertiefung’ (distraction and immersion) as the two pathological aberrations of attention.⁸

Indeed, as in the case of attention, the etymology of the German and the English terms is very different. Distraction is derived from the Latin trahere, meaning to pull; dis-traction implies being pulled away from the object of one’s focus by some competing stimulus. This sense is perhaps best rendered by the German

⁵ Aufmerksamkeit replaces the older term Aufmerkung, which in the early modern period was defined as ‘Obacht, Beobachtung, geistige Konzentration’ (alertness, observation, mental concentration), Frühneuhochdeutsches Wörterbuch, ed. Robert Ralph Anderson et al., vol. 2 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1994), pp. 559–60.
4 ATTENTION AND DISTRACTION

Ablenkung, from the verb ablenken, to divert or take off course. James uses the term Zerstreueheit, meaning distractedness or absent-mindedness, with the suffix '-heit' indicating the sustained nature of this state. However, by the twentieth century Zerstreuung had become the more prominent term, a concept which could refer either to the mindset of the distracted subject or to the external cause of this mental state. For modernist commentators, Zerstreuung connotes mental (as well as physical, spatial) dispersal; in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, its self-reflexive form, sich zerstreuen, carried more positive connotations. The question of how to stop concentration from becoming rigid and pathological was, as we will see in the next chapter, a particular concern of Immanuel Kant’s.

To complicate matters even further, attention and distraction are not monolithic notions but umbrella terms encompassing a number of concepts and attendant mental states. Nineteenth-century psychologists often describe attention as a wandering spotlight which casts a range of details into sharp relief; the countermodel is a more stable and sustained state of concentration, variously described as contemplation, collectedness (Sammlung), or immersion (Versenkung). The religious overtones of these terms are no coincidence. From the eighteenth century onwards, religious devotion is used as the model for secular immersion, and this analogy continues to be used in the twentieth century, by both advocates and critics of contemplation.

The modernist period was marked by unprecedented social and technological change, which many people experienced as confusing and overwhelming; as a consequence, other, more mobile forms of attention, such as Wachsamkeit (vigilance) and Geistesgegenwart (presence of mind), gained in prominence. The latter term throws up another tricky question: where precisely is attention located? Geistesgegenwart casts it as a mental state, and yet the simultaneous emphasis on the ‘presence’ of the mind also highlights its spatial, embodied character. In modernism, as we will see, a physical, instinctive form of alertness, whereby the body overrides the (rational) mind, becomes important particularly in moments of danger.

As this brief survey has shown, attention and distraction are multi-faceted terms which reflect the equally multi-faceted, fluid nature of human experience. While these and related concepts offer a grid for debates about the mind, they are

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not static but evolve, reflecting changes in human knowledge and culture. The career of Zerstreuung illustrates this close relationship between language and experience. Its growing prominence around 1900 is a product, and symptom, of modernization, and this linguistic shift in turn perpetuates the growing consensus that, in this period, attention was a faculty in crisis.¹¹

**Time, Space, Culture**

In recent years, both attention and distraction have attracted huge interest in the humanities and beyond. Existing studies can be roughly divided into two groups. They are either (literary) historical in character, exploring periods such as the middle ages and early modern period, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,¹² or they engage with the current, digital age, which has been labelled an ‘attention economy’ or else as the ‘age of distraction’.¹³ The twentieth century is a curious blind spot in both contexts. It is often mentioned in passing, as either a precursor of the current situation or the postscript to earlier traditions.¹⁴ Both approaches


¹³ The idea of the current ‘attention economy’, in which attention is a vital and hotly contested resource, has gained in prominence since the turn of the millennium. In German, one of the most influential such studies is Georg Franck, Ökonomie der Aufmerksamkeit (Munich: Hanser, 1998); English titles include Thomas H. Davenport and John C. Beck, The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2001); Richard Lanham, The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Claudio Celis Bueno, The Attention Economy: Labour, Time and Power in Cognitive Capitalism (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017); and Karen Nelson-Field, The Attention Economy: Simple Truths for Marketers (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). They are complemented by an equally vast number of studies which cast the present as an ‘age of distraction’ and suggest various ways of counteracting this tendency, through government policy, medicine, or personal behavioural adaptations. See for instance Richard DeGranpre, Ritalin Nation (New York, NY: Norton, 1999); and Matthew Crawford, The World Beyond Your Head: How to Flourish in a World of Distraction (London: Penguin, 2015). The rise of distraction and the corresponding need to return to a slower, less frantic lifestyle is also a core theme of the thriving mindfulness movement.

¹⁴ Two trans-historical studies where a majority of chapters is dedicated to twentieth-century material are Lutz P. Koenpck’s Framing Attention: Windows in German Culture (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), which explores the role of windows in early German cinema, in the Berlin underground system of the 1920s, in Leni Riefenstahl’s Triumph des Willens (Triumph of the
are fundamentally flawed. The twentieth century is neither a postscript nor a precursor, but a vital chapter, indeed a turning point, in the history of (in-)attention. In this period, psychological knowledge first came to shape social and economic practice, and writers, artists, and thinkers actively partook in this development by adopting, reflecting (on), and critiquing prevailing cognitive practices. The fact that all this activity unfolded against a backdrop of political crisis lends this period its particular urgency and ongoing relevance.

At this point, it is worth briefly commenting on terminology and periodization. I occasionally use the term ‘modernism’ as a shorthand for the early twentieth century, but this comes with a caveat. ‘Modernism’ has overtones of social, intellectual, and aesthetic innovation, but to look at the period through the lens of attention and distraction reveals a deep-seated resistance to this idea, which manifests itself as a persistent attachment to what many contemporaries regarded as a more coherent, authentic, and contemplative way of life. Walter Benjamin’s nostalgic portrayal of a pre-industrial community in thrall to oral tales, as outlined in his ‘Storyteller’ essay, is one famous example of a more general discourse, which casts the rural past as an antidote to urban modernity. But debates about attention and distraction do not just highlight political differences; they also cut across ideological divides. As I will argue, neither the critique of modern-day distraction nor the longing for a more contemplative age, or space, are the preserve of the conservative Right but are just as readily evoked in leftist quarters. Accounts of a golden age of sustained, unbroken contemplation are clearly fictional constructs, but they do often refer to particular periods or practices to critique their own culture. This discursive strategy points to a more general feature of modernist narratives about (in-)attention, namely their profoundly historical and comparative approach. Commentators often seek to understand their own culture in comparison and contrast with previous stages of human experience. To trace this longer history, I begin my book with a survey of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and keep returning to these periods in later chapters.

In discourses about attention, past and present, tradition and modernity are thus cast as opposed but also as interconnected. The same ambiguity also applies to the mental states under discussion. At first sight, attention and distraction may simply appear as incompatible opposites, but as my opening quotations by James, Ribot, and Helmholtz underline, this division is not sustainable either mentally or conceptually. Just as paying attention always involves a withdrawal of awareness,

Will, 1935), and in the post-war Fluxus movement; and Paul North’s study of distraction, which ranges from Aristotle and Jean de La Bruyère to Martin Heidegger: The Problem of Distraction (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012). Koepnick’s and North’s engaging books illustrate the benefits of a trans-historical approach, which brings different periods (and media) into dialogue, but also its potential drawbacks, particularly its limited ability to trace how such discourses evolve within a tighter timeframe and as part of a network of individuals, disciplines, and institutions.
so to explore one state also requires us to confront the other. By referencing both attention and distraction in my title, I underline their close relationship since the Enlightenment and particularly in modern culture.¹ Commenting on the early twentieth century, Jonathan Crary speaks of a ‘fundamental duality’ in contemporaries’ attitudes towards the two, citing the example of Benjamin, who holds ‘absorbed contemplation, purified of the excess stimuli of modernity’ as the polar opposite of distraction.¹ In Chapter 8, I challenge this interpretation, by arguing that Benjamin remains deeply attached to contemplation as the necessary complement of more mobile forms of alertness. A similar point can be made about other writers and artists. Like Benjamin, they are not concerned with one state or the other but with the interaction between the two—with how attention gives way, or rise, to distraction or vice versa. This relationship is sometimes conceived spatially, as a threshold or liminal zone, and sometimes dynamically, in terms of transition, oscillation, or dialectics. Kafka’s narratives, for instance, revolve around momentary slippages of attention and their disastrous consequences, while Musil depicts instances of epiphanically heightened awareness and the equally sudden dissipation of such states. Despite their fascination with the instability of mental experience, both writers remain attached to the ideal of sustained, immersed concentration—while highlighting, like their eighteenth-century predecessors, the dangers inherent in this state. Indeed, for Kafka, Musil, and many of their contemporaries, attention and distraction have a deeply personal significance, causing them to examine their own mind and methods, and compelling some of them to use strategies of self-conditioning to enhance their concentration. Finally, as I will outline in more detail below, the writers and thinkers discussed in this book are interested in attention and distraction not solely in relation to their own medium or discipline, but in the ways these issues shape modern everyday life, whether in work or leisure, in politics and education, high and mass culture.

¹ In highlighting their equal importance, I depart from existing studies, which have tended to focus on one or other of these two states. Studies which foreground attention include Franck, Ökonomie der Aufmerksamkeit; Jonathan Crary, Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); Bernhard Waldenfels, Phänomenologie der Aufmerksamkeit (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2004); Barbara Thums, Aufmerksamkeit: Wahrnehmung und Selbstbegründung von Brockes bis Nietzsche (Munich: Fink, 2008); and the edited volumes Liechtensteiner Exkurse III: Aufmerksamkeit, ed. Norbert Haas, Rainer Nägele, and Hans-Jörg Rheinberger (Eggingen: Edition Isele, 1998); Aufmerksamkeiten, ed. Assmann and Assmann; Wie gebannt, ed. Baisch et al.; Aufmerksamkeit: Geschichte—Theorie—Empirie, ed. Sabine Reh, Kathrin Berdelmann, and Jörg Dinkelaker (Hamburg: Springer, 2015); and Geteile Gegenwart, ed. Kleiner et al. Studies whose principal focus is on distraction include North, The Problem of Distraction; Petra Löffler, Verteilte Aufmerksamkeit: Eine Mediengeschichte der Zerstreuung (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2014); and Natalie M. Phillips, Distraction: Problems of Attention in Eighteenth-Century Literature (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016). As indicated by the latter two titles, studies which focus on one of these states do also, inevitably, engage with its opposites to some extent.

¹⁶ Crary, Suspensions of Perception, p. 50. Crary is here referring to Benjamin’s ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility’.
The focus of my study is on the German-speaking context, but with recurrent references to the international nature of this debate and to the transnational networks which connect individuals working on these issues in the age of scientific collaboration, of migration and exile.

Chapter 1 traces the history of psychology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—a period in which attention and distraction were at the centre of fast-evolving theories and experimental methods. When Wilhelm Wundt set up the world’s first psychological laboratory in Leipzig in 1879, this was a watershed moment for the discipline, but one which emerged from a long-standing tradition of psychological (self-)exploration. In the Enlightenment, attention was seen as a vital moral faculty and cultivated using techniques of self-care and self-observation, but contemporaries were more worried about the excesses of attention—its propensity to turn into fixation—than about its erosion by distraction (which did not yet exist as a self-contained concept). This hierarchy of concern began to change with the development of more targeted experiments and devices designed to measure the precise scope and duration of attention, which quickly revealed its limited and unstable character. In both the early self-experiments of figures such as Helmholtz and Gustav Theodor Fechner and the later, laboratory-based set-ups devised by Wundt and his contemporaries, the exploration of attention inevitably brought the adversaries of this state into focus. Research into attention became research into distraction.

In the German Kaiserreich, psychology became a new master discipline aspiring to underpin research across the natural sciences and the humanities, although in institutional terms, psychology long remained a sub-section of philosophy. But psychology’s self-declared dominance did not meet with universal approval. At the end of the chapter I turn to Edmund Husserl’s new field of phenomenology, conceived as a reaction against ‘psychologism’, which tried to re-establish attention as an intentional act.

Chapter 2 focuses on the time around 1900 and traces how the findings of psychology resonated with more general social debates. It starts with Ribot, who casts attention not simply as a universal human faculty but, particularly in its voluntary form, as the product of cultural conditions. Psychologists tried, and failed, to keep their laboratories free from distractions; their efforts mirror developments in society at large, where contemporaries felt increasingly assailed by an ever-growing onslaught of stimuli, and where neurasthenia, a conditioning caused by perpetual over-stimulation, became the new maladie du siècle. This chapter surveys medical debates about sensory overload, particularly at the modern workplace; it also looks at the tropes of a more general discourse, which casts modernity as a time of hyper-connectivity and social as well as mental
fragmentation, which is conducted across the fields of psychiatry, history, and sociology. It concludes with the writings of Sigmund Freud, a figure not commonly associated with this issue, whose early theories were in fact based on psychological stimulus-response models of the mind, and who continued to engage with the interplay of attention and distraction in everyday life and specifically in the context of trauma across his career.

In his *Psychopathologie des Alltagslebens* (Psychopathology of Everyday Life, 1901), Freud cites examples of writers who use parapraxis—slips of the tongue or the hand—as a plot device. A similar approach is pursued by Kafka, whose writings are explored in Chapter 3. In his risk assessments and general reports for the Workers’ Accident Insurance Institute, Kafka describes momentary distraction as inevitable in modern, technological working conditions—as a statistical constant rather than a matter of personal responsibility. A completely different picture emerges in his fiction, where such drops of attention are blamed on the individual and often set into motion a chain of disastrous events. But Kafka’s conception of the mind is shaped not only by his insurance work but also by his schooling. In 1825, a Prussian ministerial decree made psychology a compulsory part of the school curriculum in the final two years of the Gymnasium or high school; this law was emulated in Austria, where several generations of pupils studied psychology via the same prescribed textbook, which advocates Johann Friedrich Herbart’s theory of the mind as shaped by competing forces. The impact of this psychology syllabus on Kafka’s writings has so far not been explored. I trace its resonances in Kafka’s *Der Process* (The Trial, 1914–15) and across his prose fiction and personal writings, where sustained attention is held up an ideal, but also shown in its more sinister, disciplinary and (self-)destructive, dimensions.

By the early twentieth century, then, the methods and theories of experimental psychology started to filter through into everyday life. This process is most evident in the emergence of a new discipline: Psychotechnik or psychotechnics. Pioneered by the psychologists William Stern and Hugo Münsterberg, the latter William James’s successor at Harvard, psychotechnics was a comprehensive programme of aptitude testing and training. Its methods were used in the First World War on both sides of the conflict, but while most countries scaled back their investment in this area after the war, in Weimar Germany psychotechnics was vastly expanded and its methods rolled out across civilian society in an effort to boost productivity with a depleted workforce. Chapter 4 maps out this ambitious but deeply invasive project, which aimed to fundamentally reshape the minds and behaviour of individuals at the workplace and through mass entertainment. Siegfried Kracauer’s sociological study *Die Angestellten* (The Salaried Masses, 1930) paints a deeply critical, even bleak, picture of these methods and their exploitative impact on Weimar society.
While the rollout of psychotechnics was relatively short-lived, it profoundly shaped German society in the so-called ‘Golden Twenties’, a period of unrivaled creativity. Its far-reaching impact on the literature and culture of the Weimar years has so far only been thematized in a couple of studies.³⁷ In Chapter 5, I turn to the Austrian writer Robert Musil, whose engagement with psychotechnics is rooted in a professional as well as a personal interest in this field. Like Kafka, Musil was taught psychology while he was still at school. He then went on to conduct his doctoral research with the renowned psychologist Carl Stumpf, in whose laboratory he also took part in self-experiments. After the war, Musil briefly worked as scientific adviser to the Austrian Ministry for Military Affairs, advising officials about the potential applications of psychotechnics in the army and beyond. This stint had lasting repercussions for his literary career; Musil repeatedly struggled with his own productivity and turned to psychotechnical methods to make his writing more focused and effective. But he also tried out psychotherapy and autosuggestion in his quest to enhance his concentration. As I argue, these different methods are reflected, and played off against each other, in his texts. His unfinished novel Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften (The Man without Qualities, 1930–2) casts psychotechnics in an ambivalent light, oscillating between irony and serious endorsement. Here, as in his short prose writings, however, the attempt to control the mind is disrupted by moments of epiphanically intensified experience. While divine illumination is cited as one possible cause of these incidents, Musil’s texts neither confirm nor disprove this explanation.

Musil was an avid reader of the self-help books of Swiss psychologist Charles Baudouin. Chapter 6 puts this interest into a wider context. The Weimar drive to optimize cognitive performance was not confined to the workplace but also had a profound impact on people’s private lives, where this effort was continued with different means. This chapter explores the booming market for self-help literature in the interwar period, and specifically for guides promising readers ways to enhance their own concentration in the face of an increasingly complex and competitive world. Focusing on three such books, the chapter explores both their different approaches, which range from meditation to comprehensive programmes of self-discipline, and their similarities—most notably the promise to make the reader fit for the modern attention economy.

Chapter 7 shifts the focus from texts to images and specifically to photography and its role in modernist debates around attention. Adopting a diachronic approach I first trace the role of photography in nineteenth-century psychological experiments, where the medium was used to record the outer signs of attention in face and body. In the 1920s, the resurgence of physiognomy coincided with a

revival of portrait photography for the purpose of classification, for mapping out the different strata of modern society. As Weimar photographers pursue this project, however, they come up against a number of obstacles, among them the perceived difficulty of finding subjects capable of projecting a sense of presence and authenticity in the age of distraction. This challenge is thrown into sharp relief by historical comparison; in the period, art historians celebrated the work of photography pioneers such as David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson in Scotland, whose portraits were rediscovered in Weimar Germany and held up as a model and ideal. The quest for stillness, for authentic faces, in the age of distraction united portrait photographers from across the aesthetic and political spectrum. In the second half of my chapter, I compare portraits by Erna Lendvai-Dircksen and Helmar Lerski, whose photobooks hark back to early photography but use very different methods and subjects to do so.

One of the critics who explored photography from a wider historical perspective was Walter Benjamin. Chapter 8 traces Benjamin’s sustained and multidisciplinary engagement with attention and distraction and their dialectical interaction. Benjamin first begins to explore these questions during his student years, when he encounters experimental psychology via the journal of his cousin-in-law, the psychologist William Stern; he continues to pursue the dynamics of (in-)attention in his writings on anthropology and literature, on history and modern culture. His most famous text on this issue is ‘Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit’ (The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, 1935–6); in a close reading of its five different versions, I trace the presence of psychotechnics in Benjamin’s argument, specifically in his analysis of film. While he initially conceives of film as a critical medium which can expose the underhand impact of psychotechnics on everyday life, film is later recast as a quasi-psychotechnical training device which institutes a detached, non-contemplative state of mind. This shift, however, should not be read as indicative of a wholesale U-turn in Benjamin’s attitude towards matters of attention. As his writings of the 1930s show in particular, (religious) contemplation remains important as a model of non-instrumentalizing engagement with the world alongside a pre-rational, embodied form of alertness, which Benjamin casts as essential for the project of a ‘rescuing’ kind of critical inquiry.

Benjamin principally explores attention in relation to the visual media; but contemporary debates on this issue are also concerned with the role of aural perception, in everyday life and particularly in the field of music. Like Chapter 7, Chapter 9 pursues this question from a diachronic perspective. It explores how the model of sustained, contemplative listening first emerged in aesthetic debates around 1800, as part of a drive to underline the autonomy of (instrumental) musical works, and was then put into practice in the listening culture of the period. Treatises such as Eduard Hanslick’s Vom Musikalisch-Schönen (On the Musically Beautiful, 1854), however, show the fragility of this model even at
the time, a diagnosis which gathers momentum in the twentieth century, when the crisis of traditional musical formats such as the symphony concert is treated as yet another symptom of a larger cultural shift towards distraction. However, as the chapter concludes, responses to this shift were far from uniform, and while some critics and practitioners sought to restore the capacity for sustained, contemplative listening among contemporary audiences, others, such as the musicologist Heinrich Besseler, pursued a different route, looking to earlier periods for examples of embodied and only semi-attentive listening practices.

These debates around musical listening form an important backdrop for the writings of Theodor W. Adorno, for whom music is the key paradigm in his discussion of attention and distraction. Chapter 10 begins with Adorno’s essays of the 1920s and 1930s, where he first develops his critique of popular music and the attendant ‘fetishistic’ and ‘regressive’ listening practices. But Adorno’s often uncompromising critique of modern listening habits undergoes a marked change when, in the early years of his American exile, he is confronted with the experiences of empirical listeners while participating in the Princeton Radio Research Project. While he is critical of US-American musical radio broadcasts, such as the educational flagship programme ‘NBC Music Appreciation Hour’, he develops his own alternative series of broadcasts, in which he tries to instruct his (young) listeners in what he regards as sustained and constructive modes of listening. The second half of the chapter turns from his musical writings to his aesthetic theory and his more personal, self-reflexive essays of the 1950s and 1960s, where the model of sustained listening is applied to non-musical contexts. Here, I return to Adorno’s dialogue with Benjamin; their correspondence in the 1930s reveals sharp divergences concerning the role of contemplation and distraction in modern culture, and yet Benjamin’s stance on this matter continues to inflect Adorno’s writings far beyond Benjamin’s premature death in 1940. In his later writings, Adorno comes much closer to Benjamin’s model of a non-contemplative kind of reception, which he transposes from mass culture to modernist music and literature.

The thought of Benjamin and Adorno forms a kind of diptych, which illustrates both the tensions and the dialogical nature of this overarching debate. Writers, artists, and thinkers engage with matters of (in-)attention not in an isolated, individualist manner, but as mediated through the arguments and practices of their contemporaries and predecessors. As a consequence, this debate unfolds not in a linear way, but as a network of resonances and responses. To underline this open-ended process, Chapter 11 turns to three more recent writers—Paul Celan, W. G. Sebald, and Felicitas Hoppe—who continue this discursive tradition in (explicit or implicit) dialogue with earlier periods. For all their differences of style and approach, they are all concerned with the nexus between attention and memory; in exploring it, they evoke images and narratives which we have encountered in other contexts, refiguring them for their own age.
The Limits of Attention

In its scope and structure, my book reflects one of the core insights of psychological research, namely the limited and selective nature of attention. In a field as vast as this, some difficult decisions have had to be made, concerning both the remit of this study and its methodology. Attention and distraction continue to be at the centre of psychological research, which has in turn garnered considerable interest in the humanities. Cognitive approaches have become increasingly popular in literary studies,¹⁸ yielding valuable insights into historical practices and trans-historical patterns of engagement. While I occasionally refer to this research, I do not pursue a cognitive approach. My main aim is not to assess past discourses against current models, but rather to reconstruct these arguments within their historical context and to trace how they evolved over time. Psychology is the starting point of my narrative and remains a reference point throughout, as both theory and practice, as it shapes modern society and culture. In my book, I focus on its resonances in literature, photography, and music; film is not the subject of a dedicated chapter but is discussed across several chapters, as an important, interconnected part of this field. Alongside the arts, thought is the second major strand of this book. Here, I have sought to highlight the resonances between different disciplines, such as sociology, medicine, psychoanalysis, and history, before focusing on the dialogue between a group of thinkers loosely associated with Critical Theory (Kracauer, Benjamin, Adorno, Horkheimer). Others have rightly emphasized the contribution of phenomenology to this debate;¹⁹ here, I confine myself to brief discussions of Husserl’s response to experimental psychology, and of Heidegger’s impact on musicology.

Among the many other writers who could have fruitfully featured in this book, I want to single out Rainer Maria Rilke and Robert Walser. Rilke’s Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge (The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge, 1910) offer an early literary response to the cognitive challenges posed by urban modernity. Echoing Georg Simmel’s 1903 essay on ‘Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben’ (The Metropolis and Mental Life), Rilke’s protagonist feels violated by the onslaught of stimuli which enter his surroundings, his body, and his mind. Unable to either process or fend them off, Malte responds to this challenge not by retreating from the world, but with heightened openness and self-exposure. The

novel’s programme of ‘sehen lernen’ (learning to see), which also underpins the closely observed miniatures of Rilke’s *Neue Gedichte* (New Poems, 1908), transplants Enlightenment programmes of attentional self-education into the modern world, anticipating the self-help programmes of the 1920s.²⁰

A very different response to the challenge of mental and social fragmentation can be found in the works of the Swiss writer Robert Walser. Where Rilke seeks to capture transitory moments of intensified awareness, Walser’s texts anarchically resist the imperative of sustained attention. This resistance is most apparent in his last novel, *Der Räuber* (The Robber, 1925). Recorded in micrographic writing over the course of just six weeks, it is a feat of extreme concentration,²¹ but the narrative does not reflect this effort but rather draws the reader into a vortex of fragmentary observations and abandoned storylines. Its first sentence sets the tone: ‘Edith loves him. More on that later’.²² Time and again, the first-person narrator interrupts the narrative through interjections such as 'Hang on a minute please. Let me think. Okay, now it’s fine, it’s fine²³ and 'But here comes something new again'.²⁴ Where Malte seeks to reassert control over his mind and senses, Walser’s narrator (who is separate from the protagonist) is unable or unwilling to make this effort: 'How all these impressions are crowding in on me. And on him [the Robber] they’re probably crowding in too'.²⁵ The narrative enacts a state of mind which it also diagnoses in its protagonist. Beneath this scattered narration, however, lurks a sharp alertness. The narrator stresses the Robber’s ‘Hang zur Genauigkeit’ (‘tendency to be precise’), while also warning the reader: ‘Many think we are forgetful. But we think of everything’.²⁶

Like all the writers featured in this book, Walser and Rilke respond to the same enduring challenge: how to orient ourselves in an ever more complex world, where concentration is vital and yet increasingly elusive. While this question affects people across the ages, the interplay between attention and distraction takes on a particularly urgent as well as productive dimension in the early twentieth century. In this period, the issue of (in-)attention highlights profound ideological differences but also bridges divides; most importantly, it produces responses which are astonishing in their richness and creativity.

²⁰ On attention in the *New Poems*, see Alford, *Forms of Poetic Attention*, pp. 139–41.
²¹ Jochen Greve, the editor of the novel, highlights Walser’s concentrated working method; he probably wrote the novel in only six weeks, and it is likely that each of 35 paragraphs was written in one day. Jochen Greve, ‘Editorische Notiz’, in Robert Walser, *Der Räuber* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986), pp. 195–9 (p. 197).
²⁵ ‘Wie alle diese Eindrücke auf mich eindrängen. Auch auf ihn drängten sie wahrscheinlich ein’. Walser, *Der Räuber*, p. 44.
²⁶ ‘Viele halten uns für vergeßlich. Aber wir denken an alles’. Walser, *Der Räuber*, p. 120.
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Virtue, Reflex, Pathology
Attention from the Enlightenment to the Late Nineteenth Century

Enlightenment Attention

One of the most influential precursors of modern psychology was the polymath Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), who coined the terms ‘perception’ and ‘apperception’ to map out the difference between preconscious and conscious experience. Perception designates a stimulus that has not yet attracted conscious awareness. As Leibniz stresses, ‘at every moment there is in us an infinity of perceptions, unaccompanied by awareness or reflection’; these include ‘alterations in the soul itself, of which we are unaware because these impressions are either too minute and too numerous, or else too unvarying, so that they are not sufficiently distinctive on their own’.¹ Perceptions vary in terms of their clarity and intensity, ranging from the obscure and confused to the clear and distinct. The latter require the input of consciousness; only perceptions which enter into the subject’s consciousness become clear and vivid,² and Leibniz uses ‘apperception’ to describe this act of self-reflexive experience. Attention thus invests sensory perceptions with a vital level of clarity, lifting them out of their state of semi-obscurity and above the threshold of conscious awareness. That said, this distinction is gradual rather than absolute, for noticeable perceptions arise by degrees from those which are too minute to be observed; apperceptions, in turn, are not clearly defined entities but composites, made up of an infinitesimal number of smaller perceptions, or ‘petites perceptions’.

Leibniz was also one of the inventors of infinitesimal calculus; in his model of the mind conscious and preconscious perceptions shade into each other, but the

subject is never wholly aware, let alone in control, of her own experience. His is a threshold theory of attention, which involves minute gradations of awareness and a fluid shifting from perception to apperception and back again, rather than any clear-cut, absolute distinctions.

Leibniz’s theory of the mind exerted great influence on philosophers and psychologists in the following centuries; as we will see, his categories of perception and apperception remained important reference points for subsequent theories of attention, which continued to explore the shift from preconscious perception to attention as a state of conscious, self-reflexive awareness. In the history of psychology, the focus of this enquiry underwent various changes. In the eighteenth century, thinkers were particularly interested in the role of what they called the ‘dark’ or obscure regions of the mind and how they could be illuminated, subjected to the reign of reason and morality.

In eighteenth-century Germany, writers and philosophers engaged with these dynamics, as did scholars working in fields ranging from physiology and physics to law and theology. Not all of them were affiliated with a university; psychology was a loosely defined field of intellectual enquiry rather than an academic discipline in its own right. It was a subject of experimental exploration, but also the foundation which enabled such enquiry in the first place, essential for the acquisition of (self-)knowledge and hence for the Enlightenment project as a whole. Attention transformed curiosity—that initial spark needed for intellectual engagement—into more sustained interest, enabling an individual to maintain focus while helping him or her to master fear, superstition, and other distractions.

As Michael Hagner puts it, ‘the moment reason becomes important, so does attention’. This faculty was neither instinctive nor universal but had to be carefully cultivated. The importance of fostering attention from an early age was recognized by Enlightenment pedagogues. Though children were naturally curious, they were regarded as lacking the capacity for sustained, rationally controlled concentration. Specific exercises were designed to train their attention; writing in 1782, the reform pedagogue Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi encouraged teachers to make their lessons more tangible and engaging. Focused concentration was one important skill, but Pestalozzi also stressed the need to train a more wide-ranging, distributed kind of attention; to this end, teachers should make their pupils do several tasks at once.

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such as repeating words while drawing on their slates.⁷ Other pedagogues, such as Joachim Heinrich Campe, emphasized the role of the nuclear family, and particularly of the mother, in the formation of the child’s mind. In his 1785 treatise ‘Über die früheste Bildung junger Kinderseelen’ (On the Earliest Education of Young Children’s Souls), he enjoins mothers to pay constant attention to the well-being of their children from pregnancy onwards to ensure that they prosper.⁸

The Enlightenment’s programme of attentional training started in the nursery and continued into the classroom, but ultimately this was an open-ended, lifelong endeavour. In adults, attention was seen as the bedrock of the rational and moral life.⁹ Philosophers, pedagogues, and physicians devised programmes of self-care designed to strengthen voluntary attention and curb its involuntary counterparts. These were laid out in hygiene treatises, the precursors of modern self-help guides, which offered advice on how to subject the appetites of the body and the senses to the control of the rational mind.¹⁰

One particularly detailed such programme was set out by the philosopher Georg Friedrich Meier (1717–88) in his five-volume Philosophische Sittenlehre (Philosophical Treatise on Morality, 1753–61), a comprehensive guide on how to lead a morally responsible life. Attention is at the heart of this project,¹¹ figuring as both a means and an end in the process of moral self-improvement. The second volume, published in 1754, includes the chapters ‘Von der Selbstkenntnis’ (On Knowing Oneself), ‘Von der Beurtheilung seiner selbst’ (On Self-Evaluation), and ‘Von der Sorge für uns selbst’ (On Caring for Ourselves). Fundamentally, the period believed that attention could be optimized with sustained practice, ‘Übung’, which would in turn yield both intellectual and moral rewards. A central theme in Meier’s argument is moral vigilance, ‘moralische Wachsamkeit’ (MPS 397 and passim), which involves scrutinizing one’s thoughts...
and actions for their moral implications. This is no easy goal; indeed, ‘it seems as if people flee from themselves and shy away from casting a bold glance straight at their inner life’.¹² Most people, he argues, care more for their body than their soul and are primarily concerned with their material situation. In addition, they are constantly distracted by minor concerns, leaving them little time and attention to focus on what is truly important.

Denn, wenn unsere Gedanken unter unendliche viele Gegenstände zertheilt sind, oder, wenn sie gar zu stark und emsig auf eine ganz andere Sache als uns selbst gerichtet sind; so sind wir zu der Zeit nicht im Stande, an uns selbst zu denken. Wer nun in einer beständigen Zerstreuung lebt [...], der vergißt seiner selbst, und er erlangt niemals eine recht klare und deutliche Erkenntniß von sich selbst. (MPS 389–90)

[For if our thoughts are dispersed among an infinite number of objects, or too strongly and busily turned towards a matter other than ourselves, then we are incapable of thinking of ourselves. He who lives in perpetual distraction [...] will forget himself, and will never attain a clear and vivid understanding of himself.]

How can this state of perpetual distraction be overcome? To do so involves banishing from the mind all those distracting concerns ‘which will hinder our understanding of ourselves’.¹³ This requires first of all a change in daily routine. The sensible person ‘must take some time out to gather his mind in the face of all distraction [...] and henceforth occupy himself with the contemplation of himself so as better to get to know himself’.¹⁴ Distilling the advice of ‘some old moral treatises’, Meier recommends that readers start each day by reflecting on themselves and the day ahead, then take time over the course of that day to compare their behaviour with the outline, or ‘Entwurfe’, drawn up in the morning, and finally use the evening to take stock of the preceding day—‘what we have done well, where we have been lacking, where we could have done better’.¹⁵

Meier compares this routine of constant self-monitoring to the behaviour of the prudent wanderer

welcher auf einem gefährlichen Wege immer vor sich hin sieht, auf die Strecke des Weges die vor ihm liegt, damit er bey Zeiten die Gefahren desselben entdecke und prüfe, ob er rechte sey. Manchmal kehrt er sich um und sieht zurück auf den

¹² ‘[E]s scheint, als wenn die Menschen sich selbst fliehen, und sich scheuen, recht in ihr Inwendiges hinein einen ferschen Blick zu thun’ (MPS 389).
¹³ ‘[…] welche uns an der Erkenntniß unserer selbst hindern könnten’ (MPS 387).
¹⁴ ‘Folglich muß ein vernünftiger Mensch gewisse Zeiten aussetzen, in welchen er sein Gemüth von aller Zerstreuung sammlet […] und sich alsdann mit der Betrachtung seiner selbst beschäftigt, um sich selbst besser kennen zu lernen’ (MPS 390).
¹⁵ ‘[…] was man guts gethan, wo man gefehlt, wo man es besser hätte machen können’ (MPS 392).
Weg, den er schon zurück gelegt. Manchmal bleibt er stehen um zu sehen, wie der Weg unter seinen Füssen beschaffen ist [...], damit er nicht gleite, und damit er keinen Fehltritt thue. (MPS 392–3)

[who, walking a perilous path, is always looking ahead, at the road ahead, so he can recognize any dangers in good time and assess whether he is on the right track. Sometimes he turns around and looks back at the road he has already travelled. Sometimes he stops to check the path beneath his feet [...], so that he does not slip and take a wrong step.]

Life is a perilous journey requiring utmost vigilance—a vigilance which is not solely focused at the present but also involves looking both backwards and ahead, into the past as well as the future.¹ This is to avoid the literal as well as metaphorical dangers of diversion, or ‘Ablenkung’, from the straight, moral, path. Another way of achieving this awareness is to keep a diary; while merely thinking about a goal or issue harbours the risk of becoming distracted from it, writing about it enables the individual ‘to keep his thoughts together and think more sharply’.¹⁷ Writing, in other words, can help focus the mind, stabilizing the faculties of memory and reflection—though Meier concedes that those people who lead ‘a monotonous and methodical life’,¹⁸ where each day follows the same pattern, may not need to keep a written record.

Meier’s treatise is addressed at self-aware readers able to control body and soul ‘at will [...], when and how we want’.¹⁹ To do so requires moderation—the ability to resist worldly distractions. But this aspiration poses its own risks, notably the danger of neglecting one’s social duties ‘when one cares all too much for oneself’,²⁰ which is also a sin. Indeed, this need for balance and moderation also applies to the body. As Meier emphasizes, while caring for the soul we must also tend to our bodies.²¹ In matters of diet, exercise, and sexuality, the aim is not complete self-abnegation but moderation—the transformation of Christian asceticism ‘into the dietetics of moral philosophy’.²²

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¹⁶ Meier returns to the journey motif several times, for instance when he compares people who lack the necessary moral vigilance to ‘travellers whose eyes are turned everywhere, just not at that which is in front of their feet, and who therefore constantly stumble and fall’ (‘Reisende, welche die Augen allerwegen hinrichten, nur nicht auf das, was ihnen vor den Füssen ist, und welche daher alle Augenblicke stolpern und fallen’; MPS 398; see also 412).
¹⁷ ‘[...] so kan man die Gedanken besser zusammen halten, und man denkt auch schärfere nach’ (MPS 409).
¹⁸ ‘[...] ein einförmanes und methodisches Leben’ (MPS 409).
²⁰ ‘[...] wenn man gar zu viel für sich selbst sorgt’ (MPS 656).
Meier concedes that complete self-awareness can only ever be an aspiration. In one chapter, he speaks of the lacunae of darkness which resist the most sustained introspection, for ‘we are a mystery to ourselves, unfathomable to our own mind’.²³ Yet even if complete self-knowledge remains an impossible goal, we must nonetheless strive towards it, in an effort ‘gradually to dispel […] the darkness’.²⁴ Summing up this aspiration, Meier declares that ‘nothing within us must escape our attention’.²⁵ This maxim, however, is then partially retracted: ‘it is neither possible nor necessary nor permitted that we perceive the manifold things that are within us with the same degree of clarity and vividness’.²⁶ If self-scrutiny is constant and all-encompassing, it risks being side-tracked by irrelevant details and losing sight of its major concerns (MPS 397).

In Meier’s treatise, the imperative of sustained moral self-scrutiny throws up its own challenges and contradictions. The capacity to direct attention at the self is both the starting point and the goal of this journey of self-improvement. To embark on it, the reader must already have a clearly defined sense of self in order to exclude those thoughts and impressions that distract from this goal. A similar paradox underpins the temporal duration of this process, which is described as open-ended but can, in reality, only ever provide brief moments of introspection in a life lived in the midst of distractions.²⁷ Finally, as attention is redirected from the outside world to the self, it risks getting absorbed in minor concerns and losing track of its obligation to others. This is a danger replicated in the text, which is full of digressions, particularly in the section on moderation (‘Mäßigung’), where the narrative keeps interrupting itself, becoming dispersed and fragmented.²⁸

Attention and the Natural World

Both the paramount importance of attention and its inherent contradictions are apparent in eighteenth-century science. Empirical scientists, such as naturalists observing plants and animals, needed to sustain a targeted yet comprehensive focus; diaries and treatises contained extremely detailed descriptions of plants and animals, yet these threatened to dissolve the object of enquiry, and with it the observing subject, into a ‘swarm of sensations’.²⁹ Here, as in the field of morality, the period sought to cultivate a more effective and selective form of attention, one

²³ ‘Wir sind uns selbst ein Geheimniß, und wir selbst sind unserm Verstande unerforschlich. Folglich können wir nicht verbunden werden, eine solche Selbsterkenntnis zu erlangen, die gar keine Dunckelheit mehr in sich enthält’ (MPS 382–3).
²⁴ ‘[…] nach und nach die Dunckelheit […] immer mehr zu vertreiben’ (MPS 383).
²⁵ ‘[N]ichts muß in uns unserer Aufmerksamkeit entwischen’ (MPS 384).
²⁶ ‘Es ist weder möglich noch nöthig, noch erlaubt, daß wir alles Mannigfaltige, so in uns befindlich ist, in einem gleichen Grade der Klarheit und Deutlichkeit erkennen’ (MPS 387).
²⁷ Thums, Aufmerksamkeit, p. 145.
²⁸ Thums, Aufmerksamkeit, pp. 26–7.
which enabled the observer to identify the essential features of a phenomenon while disregarding its marginal and accidental details. In this way, attention ‘soldered together the objects and subjects of knowledge, both assembled from the copious but fragmentary materials of sensation’.³⁰

Practices of scientific observation have thus been described as ‘technologies of the self, often consuming more time than any other single scientific activity’.³¹ As in the field of moral self-observation, one way of safeguarding the integrity of this process was by keeping a journal. Naturalists typically recorded personal experiences alongside scientific reflections and observations; the diary was a way of ensuring a sense of mental continuity, of connecting yesterday’s thoughts with those of today and tomorrow, as the ‘bare act of transcription ensured the continuity of memory, and thus the continuity of the self’.³² The Genevan naturalist Charles Bonnet, who observed a single aphid from 5.30 a.m. until 11 p.m. every day for over a month, and was disconsolate when it disappeared, exemplifies a form of scientific attention seemingly boundless in its scope and endurance. Indeed, though the eighteenth century regarded attention as a virtue to be cultivated, it was also an appetite, a drive reminiscent of Sigmund Freud’s epistophilia or Wisstrieβ, though the period believed that this impulse ‘could be retrained by habit’.³³

The moral and the empirical facets of attention in the period come together in the poetry of Barthold Heinrich Brockes (1660–1747). His epic nine-volume poetry collection *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott* (Earthly Pleasure in God, 1721–48) is dedicated to the contemplation of nature; in highly detailed descriptions, it evokes the natural world in its sublime grandeur (the sun, the sea, the sky) and its apparently trivial details (the sunlight on a cherry blossom or a toothache). The poems reflect the scientific spirit of their age; their underlying agenda, however, is religious.³⁴ By describing nature in all its variety and splendour, Brockes wants to awaken in his readers a sense of awe and gratitude for God’s creation.

Daß man, wenn man was schönes sieht,
Sich wenigstens so viel bemüht,
Das was man sieht, recht zu sehen?
Das heißt, zum Sehn das Denken fügen,
Das heißt, sich als ein Mensch vergnügen,

³⁴ In this way, the didactic poetry of the early Enlightenment reconciles the Baroque tension between pleasure in this world and a focus on the afterlife. Following the influence of Leibniz and Wolff, who argue that the world as it has been created illustrates God’s goodness and good intentions, the goal of early eighteenth-century nature poetry was to transform this theological conception into a philosophically inspired observation of reality. By recording natural phenomena as well as bodily sensations, however, the focus of this poetry is both on outside phenomena and on the subject’s experience. Hans-Wolf Jäger, ‘Lehrdichtung’, in *Deutsche Aufklärung bis zur Französischen Revolution 1680–1789*, ed. Rolf Grimminger, Hansers Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur vom 16. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart, 3 (Munich: Hanser, 1980), pp. 500–44 (pp. 508–9).
Und Gott, in unsrer Lust, erhöhn.³⁵

[that we, when seeing something beautiful, at least make enough effort to behold properly what we see? This means adding thought to sight, this means enjoying ourselves as humans while exalting God in our joy.]

This kind of attention is the basis of both human happiness and religious devotion. Attention is a God-given duty, the way we are meant to respond to the world. In contrast, the poem 'Unselige Unaufmerksamkeit' (Wretched Inattention) focuses on its absence, casting inattention as a sin, a dereliction of one’s moral duty:

So liegt die Schuld ja bloß an mir,  
Daß ich nicht das, was mich umgiebet,  
[…] nicht meines Denkens würdig achte,  
Es nicht erwege, nicht geniesse, indem ich alles nicht betrachte.  
Die unglückselig' Unterlassung, von dieser Gott geweihten Pflicht,  
Ist eine Wurzel unsrer Plagen. […]

Man sieht nicht, was man siehet; man höret auch ja so wenig, was man höret;  
Man schmecket, riecht und fühlet nicht, was man doch schmecket, riecht und fühlet,  
[…]  
Indeß verfliegen unsre Tage, als wie ein Wind, wie ein Geschrey,  
Und unser ganzes Leben fliesset, als wie ein schneller Strom, vorby.³⁶

[Hence the fault is mine alone  
That I do not deem that which surrounds me  
[…] worthy of my thought,  
Do not consider nor enjoy, for I do not regard it.  
The wretched neglect of this duty, bestowed by God,  
Is a root of our torments. […]  
We do not look at what we see; and listen just as little to what we hear;  
We do not taste, smell, and sense that which we taste, smell, and sense;  
[…]  
Meanwhile our days fly by just like a wind, a cry,  
And our whole life passes like a rapid stream.]


By looking without seeing and hearing without listening, we deny God’s glory and rob ourselves of all pleasure (‘alles Gute’). The result of such inattention is a fleeting life which is neither rooted in the here and now nor turned towards the divine. This critique of inattention strikes a surprisingly modern note, anticipating debates about distraction and acceleration around 1900. While the causes for inattention in the twentieth century are more complex, rooted in society rather than (solely) in the self, sustained attention in this period is once again described as a quasi-devotional stance, as a countermodel to a secular and superficial way of life.

Kant: The Art of Distraction

In the eighteenth century, then, detailed attention, particularly when directed at the natural world, is both a skill and a virtue, interlinking science and religious devotion. However, a rather different mode of mental engagement seems to be at work in the literature and thought of period. The pitfalls of the more sustained and immersive concentration required in these domains are explored by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). In his Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht (Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View, 1798), he distinguishes between two forms of attention, which mutually complement each other, while expounding the importance of diversion as a necessary counterweight to both.

Kant’s Anthropology is based on a lecture course he delivered in every winter semester, from 1772–3 until the end of his lecturing career in 1796.³⁷ Its aim was to analyse human experience in a conceptually rigorous manner, and in particular to illuminate the ‘dark’ or ‘obscure’ parts of the human mind.³⁸ This project was not a strictly academic one, for Kant’s lectures were also aimed at members of the general public; listeners should be able to compare the claims made in these lectures with their own experience. Anthropology was thus a central part of the Enlightenment project of self-exploration and self-improvement.³⁹

Kant’s elaborations are rooted in everyday experience. Their primary purpose is the understanding of the human faculties, their principal method observation: of people, their behaviour and its underlying motivations. In a letter, Kant describes himself as ‘ceaselessly engaged in observation, even in the midst of daily life’; listeners of his lecture course ‘are never confronted with dry reflections, but are

³⁸ That said, the purpose of Kant’s Anthropology is not moral instruction, nor are its concepts based on rigorous a priori principles, as is the case in his Critique of Pure Reason. Becker, ‘Einleitung’, pp. 10, 14.
³⁹ Becker, ‘Einleitung’, p. 11.
entertained, for they are able constantly to compare their own ordinary experience with my remarks'.

Kant’s *Anthropology* does not have a self-contained section on attention but touches on this faculty in different contexts. It distinguishes between two forms of attention: *attentio*, which is a mobile form of awareness enabling the subject to orient herself within the world, and *abstractio*, the ability to focus on one particular idea by withdrawing one’s attention from the wider field of stimuli.

Echoing Leibniz’s apperception, Kant defines *attentio* as a state of being aware of one’s own thoughts and perceptions. This act of ‘Aufmerken’, or ‘paying attention’, involves a mobile alertness, which enables the individual to orient herself in a complex environment, but this ability also carries certain risks. In one of Kant’s examples, a man has the opportunity to make an advantageous marriage but is unable to ignore a wart or tooth gap in his potential bride; as Kant comments, ‘it is an especially bad habit of our faculty of attention to fix itself directly, even involuntarily, on what is faulty in others’. Here, *abstractio* comes into play. This is ‘the cognitive faculty of stopping a representation of which I am conscious’. This more selective state of awareness enables us to hold a particular idea in our mind while withdrawing attention from the wider field of impressions. Unlike *attentio*, *abstractio* is no natural ability but a ‘strength of mind’, which can be acquired only with sustained practice.

Of the two faculties, then, *abstractio* is the higher and more accomplished, vital particularly for the work of the scholar. And yet for Kant this mindset harbours its own risks. One of the great weaknesses of the mind is its propensity to become fixated on an idea ‘on which one has expended great or continuous attention’. In children, whose attention is particularly malleable, this might manifest itself as repeating the same phrase or rhyme over and over again. But this fixation can also afflict adults, such as the priest unable to get a memorized sermon out of his head.

Having identified this danger, Kant thus turns to the opposite of attention—*distractio* or ‘Zerstreuung’. As he argues in the section ‘Von den Gemütsschwächen im Erkenntnisvermögen’ (On Mental Deficiencies in the Cognitive Faculty), distraction can be involuntary, leading to a state of absent-mindedness or *absentia*, or it can be a deliberate strategy, whereby overly focused attention is diverted ‘away from

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41 KAG 131/KAE 19.
42 KAE 20; ‘es ist aber eine besondere Unart unseres Attentionsvermögens gerade darauf, was fehlerhaft an anderem ist, auch unwillkürlich seine Aufmerksamkeit zu heften’ (KAG 131).
43 KAE 19; ‘das Absehen von einer Vorstellung, deren ich mir bewußt bin’ (KAG 131).
44 KAE 20/KAG 132.
45 KAE 101; ‘auf welche man große oder anhaltende Aufmerksamkeit verwandt hat’ (KAG 206).
46 KAE 101; ‘Abwesenheit (absentia) von sich selbst’ (KAG 206).
certain ruling ideas by dispersing it among other, dissimilar ones.\textsuperscript{47} Through their practice in \textit{abstractio}, scholars are particularly susceptible to mental disorders caused by excessive concentration.\textsuperscript{48}

Es ist eine von den Gemütsschwächen, durch die reproductiven Einbildungsfähigkeit an eine Vorstellung, auf welche man große oder anhaltende Aufmerksamkeit verwandt hat, gehäftet zu sein und von ihr nicht abkommen, d.i. den Lauf der Einbildungsfähigkeit wiederum frei machen zu können. Wenn dieses Übel habituell und auf einen und denselben Gegenstand gerichtet wird, so kann es in Wahnsinn ausschlagen. \textit{(KAG 206–7)}\textsuperscript{49}

[Absent-mindedness is one of the mental deficiencies attached, through the reproductive power of imagination, to a representation on which one has expended great or continuous attention and from which one is not able to get away; that is, one is not able to set the course of the power of imagination free again. If this malady becomes habitual and directed to one and the same object, it can turn into madness. \textit{(KAE 101)}]

Change and stimulation are able to loosen such unhealthy fixations. Kant recommends alternating between the city and the countryside, between work and play, and, in intellectual endeavours, between a variety of subjects ranging from poetry to philosophy and mathematics. The body must not be neglected, for in stimulating the body we also stimulate the mind: ‘Thus it is easier to enjoy oneself in \textit{walking} for a considerable length of time, since one muscle (of the leg) \textit{alternates} at rest with the other, than it is to remain standing rigid in one and the same spot, where one muscle must work for a while without relaxing’.\textsuperscript{50} Another useful stimulant is tobacco which, by satisfying a physical craving, also reawakens attention and draws it back to its subject, counteracting the risk of monotony and boredom \textit{(KAE 52–3/KAG 160–1)}.

Excessive concentration or \textit{abstractio} can thus be curbed through a ‘mental dietetics’; dispersing one’s attention can facilitate its ‘Wiedersammeln’ or ‘recol-lection’ \textit{(KAG 207/KAE 101–2)}, making this faculty once again freely and flexibly

\textsuperscript{47} \textit{KAE} 100; ‘Abkehrung der Aufmerksamkeit (\textit{abstractio}) von gewissen herrschenden Vorstellungen durch Verteilung derselben auf andere, ungleichtartige’ \textit{(KAG 206)}.

\textsuperscript{48} As Friedrich A. Kittler notes, around 1800 this affliction was associated not only with the scholar but also with the writer. Friedrich A. Kittler, \textit{Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900} (Munich: Fink, 1985), p. 141. A century later, William James will differentiate between ‘sustained attention to a given topic of thought’, which involves ‘that we should roll it over and over incessantly and consider different aspects and relations in turn’ and pathological states, in which ‘a fixed and ever monotonously recurring idea possesses the mind’ \textit{(PP 423)}.

\textsuperscript{49} The danger of excessive absorption is also mentioned by Meier, who cites the warning example of scholars so absorbed by their studies that they lose track of the task of self-observation \textit{(MPS 400)}.

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{KAE} 56. ‘So ist es leichter, sich eine geraume Zeit im Gehen zu unterhalten, weil da ein Muskel (der Beine) mit dem anderen in der Ruhe wechselt, als steif auf einer und derselben Stelle stehen zu bleiben, wo einer unabgespannt eine Weile wirken muß’ \textit{(KAG 164)}.
available to the subject. The object of diversion should be varied and yet coherent
enough to stem the endless proliferation of distraction, for otherwise ‘the mind
finds itself confused and in need of a new distraction in order to be rid of that
one’. As Kant concludes, the challenge is ‘to distract oneself without being
distracted’—an ability which he terms the art, or ‘Kunst’, of distraction (KAE
101/KAG 207–8).

Shock and Diversion: The Psychic Cure

Kant was not alone in advocating distraction. Leibniz had already questioned the
value of unifocal attention, emphasizing that the mind was able to attend to ‘many
things all at once’, while for the French writer Denis Diderot, distraction allowed
ideas ‘to reawaken one other’, thereby counteracting the ‘stupor of attention,
which merely rests on, or recycles, the same idea’. For the Swiss physician
Samuel Tissot, the effects of excessive concentration ranged from fatigue all the
way to madness; in his treatise De la santé des gens de lettres (On the Diseases
Incident to Literary and Sedentary Persons, 1768), he recommends that scholars
engage in hunting, sports, and games to guard their sanity.

These suggestions underline what is apparent throughout the period’s literature
on attention, namely the gendered dimension of this discourse. Just as science and
scholarship were overwhelmingly male pursuits, so the pitfalls of attention were
largely cast as dangers to the male mind. One notable exception is the phenom-
emon of ‘Lesewuth’, or reading addiction, a widely discussed problem in the
period, which was typically said to afflict women. Sufferers became so immersed
in a book, typically a novel, that they lost all sense of the world and even of
themselves. As the Kant disciple Johann Adam Bergk argued, in its most extreme
manifestations, oblivious immersion carried the risk of madness. While the

51 KAE 101; ‘das Gemüt sich verwirrt findet und einer neuen Zerstreuung bedarf, um jene loszu-
werden’ (KAG 207).
52 KAE 102; ‘sich zu zerstreuen, ohne doch jemals zerstreut zu sein’ (KAG 208).
53 Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, New Essays on Human Understanding, ed. Peter Remnant and
54 Denis Diderot, ‘Distraction (Morale)’, in Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des
arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres, ed. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert
Attention in Eighteenth-Century Literature (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press,
2016), p. 5.
55 Samuel Tissot, A Treatise on the Diseases Incident to Literary and Sedentary Persons, trans. by a
Physician (Edinburgh: Donaldson, 1772), pp. 24; 77.
56 Johann Adam Bergk, Die Kunst, Bücher zu lesen, nebst Bemerkungen über Schriften und
Schriftsteller (Jena: Hempel, 1799), p. 339. See also Kütter, Aufschreibesysteme, pp. 183–6. This
diagnosis was not shared by previous centuries. The sixteenth-century thinker Michel de Montaigne
singles out novels for their healing effect, for immersing ourselves in a story can divert us from our
dangers of excessive attention are thus coded differently for men and women, both harboured potentially disastrous consequences for the individual and for society.

The Enlightenment focus on pathologies of attention coincided with the emergence of clinical psychiatry. Medical treatises defined mental illness as the result of either a lack or an excess of mental stimulation. In 1765, the Scottish physiologist Robert Whytt first introduced the concept of nerves, which came to play a central role in this discourse, which centred around nervous illnesses and pathological nervousness. His fellow Scotsman, the physician John Brown, argued in his *Elementa Medicinae* (Elements of Medicine, 1780) that illnesses were caused either by a lack (‘asthenia’) or an excess of stimulation (‘sthenia’); therapies involved making up for either form of extreme to bring the patient back to a state of normality. A new generation of mental institutions were set up, whose purpose was not simply to lock up the insane but to treat and potentially cure them. The treatment methods developed by French psychiatrist Philippe Pinel and his pupil Jean-Étienne Dominique Esquirol were taken up by the German physician and psychiatrist Johann Christian Reil.⁵⁷ In his 1803 treatise, *Rhapsodien über die Anwendung der psychischen Curmethode auf Geisteszerrüttungen* (Rhapsodies on the Application of the Method of the Psychical Cure on Mental Disturbance), Reil draws an analogy between a state of deep immersion, in which the individual is oblivious to the outside world, and madness, ‘the soul’s cataleptic staring at one object, in a state of rapture and feverish raving’.⁵⁸ To cure this condition, Reil devises a therapy in which patients are exposed to a programme of targeted stimulation, while at the same time being shielded from harmful impressions.

The prescribed treatments ranged from physical sensations causing either pain or pleasure to sensory stimuli such as sights, sounds, and smells. In the hospital grounds, Reil envisaged building an assault course, where patients were sprayed with water and trapped in a pit; mental hospitals should also contain a theatre equipped with the latest technology, where spectacles inducing ‘terror, shock, astonishment, fear’ were staged to crowd out the ‘obsessions of madness’.⁵⁹

Reil’s plans were never realized, but they underline the period’s belief in the salutary role of stimulation and targeted distraction. To prepare patients for their return to normal life, hospitals should also host concerts, readings, and theatre performances to enable patients to practise the sustained attention and self-control expected in polite society.⁶⁰ At the same time, however, the psychic cure

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