

The background of the cover is a complex architectural line drawing in white on a dark teal background. It features various geometric shapes, including circles, hexagons, and rectangles, interconnected by a network of lines. Some elements resemble floor plans, while others look like structural frameworks or abstract patterns.

*Critiques and Alternatives to Capitalism*

# THE POLITICS OF CURIOSITY

ALTERNATIVES TO THE ATTENTION ECONOMY

Edited by  
Enrico Campo and Yves Citton

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# The Politics of Curiosity

Through a variety of studies in the emerging field of attentional studies, this book examines and seeks alternatives to the current attention economy. Bringing together the work of leading scholars of “critical attention studies” to reflect on issues such as technopolitics, sociopolitics, and the politics of distraction, it offers a new and multidisciplinary conceptualization of attention that emphasizes the connections between attention and curiosity, distraction, decoloniality, and care. Above all, *The Politics of Curiosity* asks us to consider the nature and ambivalence of the curious forms of politics that might be taking shape in the shadow of our current attention economy.

The “attention economy” has become a household name: we all know our attention is being harvested, commodified, and packaged to be sold to advertisers by capitalist platforms. We all complain about it; some of us dream of disconnection; others call to fight back. By focusing on attentional deficits, and by reducing attention to being focused, however, the common view may miss wider stakes, and more promising opportunities. This collective volume provides a new frame of analysis based on three displacements. Firstly, it relocates attentional issues within a triangulation that explores a continuum between attention, distraction, and curiosity. Secondly, it invites us to investigate into the mental infrastructures that socially condition our perceptions and understandings of the world. Thirdly, it points towards emancipatory politics of curiosity to provide alternatives to the attention economy. Contributions range from pedagogy to media theory, via digital studies, epistemology, sociology, political philosophy, literary history, aesthetics, film, and dance studies. They gather some of the leading scholars who shaped the study of attention, questioned the values of distraction, and explored the potentials of curiosity over the recent years. They extend across nine countries, four continents, and seven languages to provide a multicultural approach to these debates. Together, they help us understand how our current mental infrastructures have taken shape, under specific regimes of power and authority, in a world dominated by capital, colonialism, and patriarchy. But they also sketch what can be done to redeploy them around imperatives of respect and care – from a better awareness of our mental biases, online behaviours, and bodily movements, to our collective capacity to restructure classroom interactions, to launch alternative digital platforms, and to build democratic movements.

The first platform for discussion of the politics of attention and curiosity – and an essential point of reference for future debate – this book will appeal to scholars of sociology, politics, and psychology.

**Enrico Campo** is a research fellow of Sociology in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Milan, Italy. His research interests include sociological theory, sociology of knowledge, and the study of the relations among culture, technology, and cognition. He is the author of *Attention and Its Crisis in Digital Society* (Routledge, 2022) and co-editor of *Exploring the Crisis: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Investigations* (2015).

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# **The Politics of Curiosity**

Alternatives to the Attention Economy

**Edited by Enrico Campo and Yves Citton**

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# Introduction

## Attention, Distraction, and Curiosity: Remantling Our Mental Infrastructures

*Enrico Campo and Yves Citton*

### **Triangulating Our Mental Infrastructures Towards an Ecology of Remantlement**

A lot of publications, conferences, and public debates have been devoted to what is generally portrayed as a “crisis of attention” hitting Western societies at the beginning of the 21st century (Campo 2022). Countless symptoms suggest that an increasing number of us (especially among the younger generations) find it harder and harder to concentrate over sustained periods of time, as a lingering state of distractedness is becoming our second nature. Instead of lamenting this situation, instead of attempting to prove or disprove the reality of such a crisis, this volume hopes to reshuffle the premises and the terms of the debate. In order to do so, we will propose two major displacements.

The first displacement consists in suspending the traditional molar opposition between attentiveness and distractedness, in order to reframe the problems within *a triangulation* involving attention, distraction, and curiosity (ADC; see Figure 0.1) as three complementary dimensions, in relation to which most issues need to be resituated. While we do agree that attentional issues are indeed at the core of our current societal (and anthropological) crisis known as the Anthropocene/Capitalocene/Plantationocene, we strongly believe that focusing on the positive value of attention alone can be deceptive. What is needed instead is a relational and contrasted view of the differentiated merits and dangers of all three tips of the triangle.

The second displacement consists in reconsidering attention, distraction, and curiosity, not mainly in the individualistic perspective of psychological issues, nor even solely as sociologically determined phenomena, but within the larger perspective of *mental infrastructures* whose conditioning apparatuses are to be located in multiple feedback loops between acquired habits, technical networks, sociopolitical institutions, and cultural schemas (Descola [2006] 2013). In Chapter 1, Kenneth Rogers resituates attentional issues within a broader “Attention Complex,” which encompasses and articulates many different academic disciplines, economic interests, communication technologies, pharmaceutical business models, ideological agendas, and political postures in a collective assemblage that works as a regime of power. The Attention Complex emblematically illustrates what we had in mind when we invited contributors to muse about mental infrastructures, as does

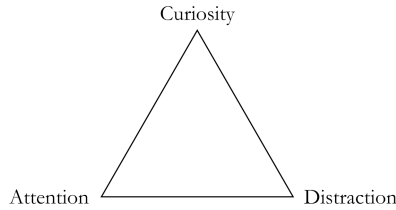


Figure 0.1 Attention–distraction–curiosity triangulation.

the “structure of feeling” Rogers draws from Raymond Williams to encapsulate “a set of experiences, moods, attitudes, and interactions that capture how people inhabit a common socio-cultural moment through shared sensibility.” In a clear, condensed (and fun) update on what has changed in the Attention Complex over the last decade, this first contribution shows that the economic approach based on attention scarcity in a world of information overload is giving way to a new ecology of attentional derivatives, where the main challenge consists in digesting quick bites into an emerging cognitive style. We may already find ourselves *beyond the attention economy* – and the remainder of this volume is dedicated to exploring some of the challenges faced by the new mental infrastructure that is currently taking shape under (and through) our eyes.

In Chapter 2, Wayne H. Brekhus and Lorenzo Sabetta dig deeper in the Attention Complex by reminding us that our attentional behaviours are always structured by culturally shared understandings, with “the power of the unmarked” as a case in point: the fact that most often whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality, and ability go without saying constitutes a mental infrastructure generating a discriminatory distribution of attentions, distractions, and curiosities.

Obviously, in the 2020s, these mental infrastructures are powerfully overdetermined by the deployment of digital technologies. The second part of this volume is devoted to zooming in on the reconfiguration of our attentions, distractions, and curiosities by digital platforms. In Chapter 6, Vando Borghi resituates the captological type of “surveillance capitalism” analysed by Shoshana Zuboff (2018) within the broader context of the progressive industrialization of our living environments as well as of our mental states. As egocidal as they are ecocidal, the platforms which condition our attentions to the world are portrayed as “negative commons,” that is, as infrastructures which tend to ruin our living milieus even if our forms of life currently depend on them (Bonnet, Landivar, and Monnin 2021). As a consequence, we can neither simply reject them, blow them out, nor ignore them: we need prudently to “dismantle” them, with a mix of careful attention, wilful distraction, and resolute curiosity.

In Chapter 7, Dominique Boullier synoptically revisits the ways in which attention, distraction, and curiosity have been restructured during the last 30 years, from the first Internet weaved by the cross-pollination of curiosities to a commercial World Wide Web reorganized by search engines, recommendations, matching, and virality, immunizing its customers from the risk of unexpected encounters.

In Chapter 8, Carina Albrecht and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun zoom out of the contemporary debates about platform capitalism (Srnicsek 2016) by reconsidering them in light of the experiments in sentiment analysis that took place at the Hawthorne Western Electric factory in the 1930s. This curious tale of distracted attentions reveals an underground “interest economy,” within which the workers exploited by capitalist managers as well as the users weaponized by digital platforms can regain some agency from the inside of our mental infrastructures, by playing deceitful roles in the drama of big data.

Through this diversity of investigations, a common picture of the interplay between attention, distraction, and curiosity progressively comes to the surface. As users of digital networks (organized under the commercial rule of platform capitalism), as earthlings selectively informed about our environments by mediatic agenda (on which we have very little control), but also, more generally, as speakers of shared languages (with their set of built-in prejudices), as members of institutions (which can be considered as organized selectors and dispatchers of care), as workers-consumers dependent on logistical infrastructures (which allow us not to worry about the supply of our basic needs), we must acknowledge that our attentions, distractions, and curiosities are externally affected and conditioned by multilayered mental infrastructures, whose effects can be observed in terms of inner dispositions and recurrent behaviours. The various contributions collected in this volume reflect upon some of the ways in which very different aspects of our existence gain in intelligibility once they are approached through the effects of mental infrastructures and once they are situated within the ADC triangulation.

It is obviously important to measure the extent of the egocidal and ecocidal implications of our current infrastructures. What is commonly referred as “the crisis of attention” is one (crucial) component in this bigger picture. In parallel with the analyses provided by Bonnet et al. in terms of “negative commons,” Anna Tsing and her colleagues provide another precious set of tools in their *Feral Atlas* project. The notion of *ferality* refers to the new environments generated by unintentional, non-designed, and uncontrollable effects accompanying the deployment of human infrastructures. Unexpected forms of “savagery” happen to proliferate in capitalist ruins, resulting from unprecedented mixtures between human artificialization and opportunist reactions from “natural” species:

[F]eral qualities are ways entities attune to infrastructures. . . . By beginning with the attunement between an infrastructure and an entity as the source of out-of-control spread, scholars might get used to the idea that humans and nonhumans together are equally involved in self-transformation and in transforming world history and ecology.

(Feral Atlas 2020)

The eight “tippers” defined as causing feral effects, while originally conceived to account for the transformations of our material environments, can suggestively be applied to the collective mental infrastructures studied in our collection of chapters: TAKE (media as captological apparatuses which take, embarked with/in

them whole sets of prejudices), GRID (the sciences and bureaucracies as apparatuses of categorization), CROWD (platforms as multipliers and propagators of interactions and notifications), PIPE (media and ideologies as channelling our collective thoughts), SMOOTH/SPEED (digitalization as standardization and acceleration), BURN (social media notoriety as uncontrollable toxicity), and DUMP (fear of missing out as a catalyst of endemic burnout).

While these approaches correctly call for “an ecology of dismantlement” prudently and carefully taking apart the infrastructures causing feral effect on which we currently depend, the studies collected in this volume put more emphasis on the no less necessary *remantlement* of our mental infrastructures. In proposing this neologism, we refer to the ways in which psychiatrists and psychoanalysts model our mental development: from an original experience of unrelated stimulations (warmth, sound, shapes, food), the newborn baby learns to “mantle” these scattered impressions into an integrative figure of “the mother” (her hands, her voice, her gaze, her milk). In some forms of neurodiverse developments (often labelled as “autistic”), this integrative mantlement cannot be operated, for instance, if these various sensations are perceived as incompatible (Meltzer 1975; Golse 2016). Instead of mantling the mother-figure in an integrative object (later to be considered as a subject), dismantling it helps the infant cope with a traumatic situation of contradictory dependence, in which the same entity who brings it food and warmth is also perceived as bringing pain and misery.

Our reframing of the ADC triangulation is an invitation to study our current societal/anthropological crisis in the perspective of a parallel between the material and the mental infrastructures centred around the *homo oeconomicus*, both of which have been elaborated and imposed worldwide by the Western ethno-class over the last centuries (Wynter 2015). Our material negative commons must be dismantled because they are built on a mental dismantling between contradictory and incompatible needs and aspirations – eco-anxiety, solastalgia, but also xenophobia, religious fundamentalism, and the exacerbation of white supremacism being the symptoms of this situation. The etymology of the mantling gesture refers to the fact of wrapping together separated entities into one protective “mantel.” Revisiting current issues like our ecological crisis of attention under the scope of the ADC triangulation, considered as a crucial site of reconfiguration of our mental infrastructures, calls for a mental, political, and environmental *ecology of remantlement* (Guattari [1989] 2014). We collectively need to find more sustainable, respectful, and just ways to collect, process, distribute, and save resources at the level of planetary-wide logistics and, in order to do so, we need to devise better mental infrastructures of attention, distraction, and curiosity, more attuned to our shared potentials and fragilities.

### **From Attention to Distraction**

In the current situation, the infrastructures that preside over the implementation of the ADC triangulation are overdetermined by a system of relations between users, technologies, and corporations often referred to as an “attention economy.”

Considered at once as the reactor that fuels the profits of digital capitalism and as the root cause of generalized cognitive deterioration, the attention economy thus represents the hegemonic discursive frame that shapes the common understanding of attention (understood as concentration), the modes of its circulation (as a trading system), and any problems produced by this system. Yet, in order to remantle our mental infrastructures, we believe it is necessary to de-essentialize this economic-discursive system and thus emphasize its historical and contingent nature. Indeed, although the expression “attention economy” often refers to a common defining element – namely, the idea that human attention is a resource to compete for because it is capable of generating value – in reality its meaning has varied greatly over time.

This ambiguity is already present in the very early stages of the recent diffusion of the concept of the “attention economy,” when it began to circulate in the early 1990s with very different functions: on the one hand, it represented an attempt to prefigure the revolutionary changes that digital technologies were to produce in the overall economic system, while on the other hand, the concept served as an orientation guide to extract profits from the then “new” economy. Therefore, in one case the concept had a predictive function and in the other a performative one. With regard to the first approach, Michael Goldhaber (1997) was certainly among the first in the English-speaking cultural milieu to publish between 1996 and 1997 his principles of the economics of attention, understood, however, as he made clearer later on, as an economic system that was completely different from the previous one and which, once fully realized, would probably have made “the pursuit of money largely irrelevant” (Goldhaber 2006). Clearly, it was the predictions of the second type, those with a performative function, that were realized. In this respect, it is enough to recall the famous expression by Eric Schmidt, future Google CEO, who said in the late 1990s that “the twenty-first century would be synonymous” with attention economy (Crary 2013, 75), understood here more modestly as a business model based on the free provision of services in exchange for users’ personal data, to be sold for advertising purposes. More in general, therefore, as Tiziana Terranova (2012, 2) pointed out, a substantial part of the debate on the attention economy had the function of reassuring commercial businesses, as attention reintroduced a principle of scarcity “which is what allows the Internet to become an economic medium again, that is, a medium to which all the axioms of market economics can once again be applied.”

A further significant step that contributed to making the discursive paradigm of the attention economy hegemonic – and thus to spread the idea that our attention is a resource to compete for – occurred in the early 2000s. On the basis of the work of Herbert Simon (1971, 40–41), the scope of the attention economy has been extended well beyond the new economy, basically to all types of business (Davenport and Beck 2001): according to these approaches, in order to make profits, managers must learn to govern their own attention, that of their employees and their consumers, thanks to the knowledge offered by cognitive psychology, considered capable of unlocking the secrets of attention. Finally, towards the end of the first decade of the 2000s, in confirmation of Dallas Smythe’s (1981) intuitions,



the awareness that the governing of collective attention, as well as the possibility of exploiting it for economic purposes, was now firmly in the hands of the Tech Giants gained strength, and several publications began to discuss about the harmful effects of digital technologies. It is therefore in this context that the concept of the attention economy served as a discursive frame of reference to legitimize the idea that attention is a resource and to warn of the risks associated with the consumption and degradation of this resource.

But is attention really just a resource? Are we really doomed to a hell of distractions hegemonized by Tech Giants? Actually, as early as the 1990s and thus at the same time as the idea of the attention economy first became popular, another group of scholars proposed an alternative narrative to the mainstream. Our volume is very fortunate to include among its authors some of the most important representatives of the “critical attention studies” scholars (Rogers 2014), starting with the Austrian sociologist Georg Franck, who already in 1993 published an article “Ökonomie der Aufmerksamkeit” [The Economy of Attention] (Franck 1993, 2020). In that work and in subsequent ones, Franck points out that attention should be considered not only a resource, but actually also a form of capital – on which it is therefore possible to make financial speculation and which, if it accumulates, is self-reproducing. Moreover, it could not exist if not in relation to specific infrastructures of measurement, accumulation, and distribution. Thirty years after proposing his idea of the economics of attention, Franck discusses – in the interview published in this volume – the role played by the notion of curiosity in his theoretical framework, calling for an encompassing notion of the economy of attention supplemented by the politics of curiosity.

On the whole, strongly influenced by Jonathan Crary’s (1999) foundational study, critical attention scholars have given greater historical and theoretical depth to the debate on the “crisis of attention”: indeed, they have helped to highlight how this debate tended to provide a very narrow interpretation of attention and, by doing so, they questioned, and sometimes reversed, the Manichean common wisdom praising the virtue of attention and deriding the dangers of distraction. What if being duly attentive (concentrated, focused) could prove to be as much of a problem as being distracted? What if, in certain circumstances, it was indeed better to be distracted than concentrated?

The widespread anxiety about loss of attention as well as the very centrality of the concept itself is put in perspective in Paul North’s contribution to our volume. In Chapter 4, North invites us to question the importance of attention in the orientation of our psychic life. According to his argument, psychoanalysis warns us about the lures of an attention geared at minimizing frustration, whereas from a phenomenological perspective, attention can only fix the continuous flux of experience, by falsifying it.

In Chapter 3, David Roulier paints a broad and yet very precise picture of the long-term evolution of the words/concepts that resulted in French and English speakers being able to refer to issues of attentiveness. Tracing the complex transformations of the Latin roots *in-tendere* (*intention*, *entendement*) and *ad-tendere* (*attention*, *attente*), he shows how much our modern understanding of attention is

articulated around an oft-obfuscated but ever-present form of authority. Paul North, in *The Problem of Distraction* (2011), revealed the strange asymmetry which structures the apparent binary opposition between being attentive and being distracted: distraction is *not* the absence of attention, but a certain orientation of attention towards another object – which happens not to be aligned with the (often tacit) injunction of a certain authority. David Roulier mobilizes Norbert Elias’ sociology along with lexicography to spell out this worrying promiscuity between attention and authority.

In Chapter 9, Paul Sztulman and Dork Zabunyan synthesize the main lessons to be drawn from their long-term engagement with the *Politics of Distraction*, a multi-annual conference series which resulted in an important publication (2021). The paradoxical assertions made by Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, in post-World War I Germany, about cinema being an art uniquely tuned to unprecedented forms of mass distraction (*Zerstreuung*), has continued to resonate through multiple dimensions of our cultural life since, from the emancipatory virtue of distractedly looking through the window when your Soviet teacher attempts to brainwash you, to the Situationists’ aimless *dérives*. In Chapter 10, Alessandra Aloisi, author of *The Power of Distraction* (2023), pursues this reflection through a reading of Henri Bergson’s praise of artistic absent-mindedness, which unconstrains our excessively task-oriented visions, and of Simone Weil’s critique of the factory worker’s subjugated (“attached” or “connected”) attention, to which she opposes a “creative attention” which sounds very much like distraction.

Even if we entitled Part III of this book “Praises of Distraction,” none of these contributors, of course, attempts simply to reverse the traditional moral hierarchy between attention and distraction. Beyond the obvious dangers of inattention at the individual level, Dominic Pettman, another important thinker on the question, hinted at a major problem faced by the collective effects of *Zerstreuung* (which, in German, refers to distraction as a form of scattering): contrary to the “hyper-synchronization” feared by Bernard Stiegler, contrary to the “standardization of experience” denounced by Jonathan Crary,

what if the *raison d’être* of so-called social media is to calibrate the interactive spectacle so that *we never feel the same way* as other potential allies and affines at the same moment? In this case it is quite deliberate that, while one person is fuming about economic injustice or climate change, another is giggling at a cute cat video. And – two hours later – vice versa. . . . Staggered distraction.

(Pettman 2016, 29)

Indeed, a leitmotiv of this volume is that each tip of our triangle comes with its own problems – and that it matters to map out more precisely the specificity of their (related but different) ambivalences. While distraction is used by the authors we just mentioned to help identify some shortcomings of attention, it may be enlightening to call on curiosity to shed light on common features (and limitations) shared by attention and distraction. One of these common features is the