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Attention and its Fringes in the Aesthetical Discourse (18th-21st Century)*

*Formes de l'attention:
L'attention et ses marges dans le discours esthétique (XVIIIe-XXIe siècles)*

Edited by Alberto Frigo

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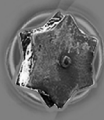
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Introduction

Alberto Frigo

Attention is said in many ways: as a focused, direct or selective perception, as a more intense degree of consciousness, or as a “retentive and constructive” grasp that projects an intelligible structure on a sensory datum. However, beneath and beyond these multiple definitions that diffract its essence, attention is always rooted in a background of inattentiveness. A background from which attention stands out and which, at the same time, constitutes the ground from which it derives its possibility. For it is only from a prior inattention that attention can emerge - and by drawing from it the materials for its constitution. Attention is thus said in all its figures by difference from inattention, which in fact represents its shadow (focused vs. unfocused perception, direct vs. indirect, selective vs. indistinct, more intense awareness vs. (almost) unconscious small perceptions, etc.).

I.

This relative approach to attention is probably the corollary of the dominant role assigned to visual attention in speculations about attention as a psychic phenomenon. Our eyes allow precise vision only at an angle of three degrees in the fovea axis. Around

this zone of maximum acuity, however, a wider field opens up, characterised by a progressively less sharp and nevertheless possible vision: objects that fall into it can be seen without actually looking at them. It is therefore within the domain of the unattentive that the (visual) attention asserts itself. But there is more.

For if we renounce the privilege too often granted by aesthetic reflections to the role of the beholder, it is also on the side of artistic creation that the solidarity of attention and inattention becomes obvious. By way of example, let us limit ourselves to the case of painting, and its three times. In the first moments of a painting, attention and inattention appear inseparable, or even take over continuously. This observation, which is a practical truism for anyone who has faced, with a brush in his hand, a blank canvas, has a kind of theoretical blueprint in the blot method proposed in the eighteenth century by Alexander Cozens.



Alexander Cozens, '*Blot*' drawing, British Museum, London.

Cozens renews the old atelier practice, preached among others by Leonardo, of looking at the stains of old, soiled walls, in order to find the occasion and suggestions for pictorial creation. But Cozens' "artificial blot" (an ink stain, more shapeless than a sketch) is "a production of chance, with a small degree of design; for in making it, the attention of the performer must be employed on the whole, or the general form of the composition, and upon this only; whilst the subordinate parts are left to the casual motion of the hand and the brush". Here we have the intertwining of attention and inattention, and the difference is only between degrees, with no real solutions of continuity. So that, Cozens adds, if one moves away from the drawing, its parts become indistinct enough that attention fades away, making the drawing a blot, and "on the contrary, if a blot is placed at such a distance that the harshness of the parts should disappear, it would represent a finished drawing".¹ Beyond the technical trickery, everyone having brushed a sketch from a blank canvas can measure the general truth of this unity of attention and inattention. It is from the solidarity of these two perceptive postures that the painting emerges.

But this does not only apply to the first moments of the pictorial process - on the contrary, it is almost a constant. Technical analyses of the pictorial experience and the pictorial process would make it possible to illustrate this. Let us evoke here an image that is almost its emblem: the blurred right hand of the painter in Vermeer's *Allegory of Painting*.

¹ Cozens (1785), pp. 12-13 / 72-73.



Jan Vermeer, *Allégorie de la peinture*, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

It is almost a transitional object: it is certainly the painter's hand, but because of the blurring of the lines and the analogy of the colours, one can also recognise the sketch of the model's face, which is beginning to appear on the canvas. So that the hand of the opener and the material of the work merge. But in this blurred hand, one should also recognise the trace of an experience of attention-and inattention that lies at the bottom of the pictorial work: for attention to the subject to be painted relegates the canvas to inattention and condemns to the periphery of the gaze, where the view becomes blurred, the perception of one's own hand. In reverse, when the painter's gaze is fixed on the canvas, it is the model

who sinks into inattention, and if sometimes the artist puts his eyes on his own hand at work (which, in fact, happens quite often), then it is the canvas and the subject to lose the privilege of attention. In short, the painting, while it is being made, feeds on the fundamental solidarity of attention and inattention.

The same applies, finally, to the moment following the completion of the painter's work. On this point it is more difficult to allege theoretical evidence. We should no doubt cite long and very accurate pages from John Berger's great novel *A Painter of Our Time*, which in our opinion constitutes one of the most lucid conceptual analyses of what happens in a studio, between the painter and the canvas. Let us rather risk an ekphrasis on this point, in the absence of a much longer phenomenological analysis, which is undoubtedly more difficult to put into words. Together with *The Pink Workshop*, *The Painter's Family* and *The Red Workshop*, the *Interior with Aubergines* is part of a series of paintings by Matisse in 1911.



Henri Matisse, *Intérieur aux aubergines*, 1911, Musée de Grenoble.

The artist's definition of the painting as "an important decorative work", the complex vicissitudes of elaboration and the series of repentirs that prepared the final version of the painting would require a separate commentary. But for our purpose it is sufficient to describe what the painting shows and to propose a hypothesis on the status of this vision. The interior is undoubtedly a studio: this can be guessed from the phantasmatic presence of a canvas frame, turned against the wall of the fireplace on the left, but also from the drawing board, the mirror, the screen and the empty gilded frames, echoed by the frame scrawled on the wall glimpsed through the window on the right. It is even possible that the squares that can be guessed from the reflections in the mirror are blank canvases. A studio, then, but when? In our opinion, just after the painter has dropped his brush, after a close combat with the canvas, probably quite long, facing the model made up of three aubergines, two pears, a vase and a small statue. The painter's eyes bore for minutes or hours a great deal of attention, focusing alternately on the canvas and on the still life to be painted. The reflection in the mirror indicates the impassable distance between reality and its representation. But when the artist's tired eyes detach themselves from the canvas and return to the ambient reality, everything becomes blurred - what was previously relegated to the realm of the inattentive, because outside the axis that connects the canvas and the model, has difficulty reclaiming the normal attention that is due to it. Thus, inattention and attention are

once again intertwined in the painter's regaining his perception of the world - hence the singular economy of multiple perspectives that interpenetrate and superimpose themselves in Matisse's painting. The truth of the experience portrayed here is clear to anyone who has worked facing an easel: it takes a long time before, once the brush has been removed, the motif of the tapestry ceases to spill over, in its indistinction, onto anything else around us, or the figures outside the window regain their identity, or the frame, previously glimpsed at the margins of the gaze nailed to the canvas, regains its materiality. The gaze that we spontaneously take on the world, in a mostly unthinking way, is here staged by Matisse in his condition of perplexity "after painting": that is to say, when the artist's vision is still partially caught up in the tangle of attention and inattention that pictorial practice imposes.

Thus, it is not only *before* the start of the creative process, when the painter's search on the canvas the form, nor only *during* the pictorial work, with the attention-and-inattention to the canvas and the subject, but also *after* the confrontation with the model has (provisionally) come to an end, that the visual attention is always found together with the inattention. That our eyes at the end of a work session wander uncertainly between an inability to pay attention to what is around us and the effort to regain a "normal" attentional relationship with the surrounding space, nothing less normal and almost necessary in the economy of attention-and-inattention that characterises the experience of

painting.

II.

Philosophy, by the way, has never ceased to strive to think what painting exhibits in its practices. In a famous definition of the *Principles of Philosophy* (I, § 45) Descartes seems, in one and the same gesture, to lay down the requirement of clarity and distinction for all knowledge worthy of the name and to link to this requirement the function of attention: “the knowledge on which one wishes to establish an unquestionable judgment must be not only clear, but also distinct. I call clear that which is present and manifest to an attentive mind; just as we say that we see objects clearly, when they are present they act strongly enough and our eyes are disposed to look at them”. So not only is the idea given to the attentive mind evident. But the attention, in its optical paradigm and in its mental dimension, is focused, at the very least, only but on what is given with sufficient evidence to a subject capable of sustaining the effort to grasp it. Consequently, everything that gives too much (by dazzling), or not enough (by remaining obscure) escapes the realm of the knowable. Hence also, and above all, the implicit corollary that attention can only be focused on a single object, which strikes the eye hard enough to detach itself from the others around it. Moreover, clarity often finds its fulfillment in the distinction,

which characterizes an idea (and a vision) “so precise, and different from all others, that it understands in itself only what is manifestly apparent to the one who considers it right”. Now, despite the fortune of these “clear and distinct” formulas that defined a Cartesian approach to perpetuated attention up to the threshold of the twentieth century, another way is possible. And it is, paradoxically, always up to Descartes to have opened it.

For in his *Interview with Burman* he admits that “it is not true that the mind can conceive of only one thing at a time: it cannot conceive of many, but it can conceive of more than one, for example now that I conceive and think, at the same time, that I speak and eat”.² Attention is no longer necessarily nailed down to the presence of a single object, present in all its evidence. On the contrary, one can conceive of the same shared attention, which at the same time reaches two things, one of which is undoubtedly more or less apparent than the other. Moreover, isn’t it the same for visual attention? It certainly focuses on one point or one object, but it also extravagates around that object, and according to the science of vision, it is precisely these jerks of the eye that explore the field of the visible surrounding what the gaze is aiming at that ensure the latter its obviousness.³ And it is precisely on the basis of an analysis of the ocular system and the laws of optics that Hobbes succeeds in asserting, against Descartes and Kepler, that “if

² Descartes (1981), p. 22 [AT V, 148]. See also Dubuclez and Pelletier (2017). On Descartes’ approach to the fringes of attention, see Rodis-Lewis (1982).

³ See Charrak (2009).

the eye is motionless, no object can be seen except in a confused manner. Indeed, if the eye is motionless, the optical axis remains motionless; an axis on which only distinct vision occurs, but only from a single point. It follows that there can only be distinct vision if the eye travels through the parts of the object one by one and in order (although movement in the eye is so small for small objects that it is not noticeable)".⁴ Fixed attention leads to confusion, and therefore to inattentive perception, but in the reverse, it is the flow of perceptions that are slippery and therefore necessarily unfixed and partly unfocused that allows attention to be focused on the object as such.

It will be up to 18th century philosophy, and particularly to Condillac, to make explicit and develop in all its corollaries the fundamental connection between attention and inattention. Condillac in fact recognises the function of attention to open up the field of true thinking: attention assigns perception to an exclusive content and in so doing fixes a stable object on which the other operations of the soul are grafted. But the genetic analysis, deployed in the *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* and in the *Treatise on Sensations*, is based on the principle of solidarity between the operations of the mind and the modifications of the material of knowledge. This allows him to point out the specificity of the condition of consciousness that precedes and at the same time makes it possible, as a later modification, the development of attention: "Consciousness is, in my opinion, the feeling that warns the soul of the

⁴ Hobbes (1658), II, 2, p. 201..

presence of a perception, either that I notice that it is I who experiences this perception, or that I do not notice it. When I notice it, it's because the consciousness of this perception is sharper than that of others, that it warns me more; and that produces attention".⁵ The unnoticed perception therefore precedes the attentive perception and even accompanies it, because "being attentive to something means being more aware of the perceptions it gives rise to than of those that others produce, acting like it on our senses".⁶ Hence, on the one hand, the space that Condillac, but also Rousseau and many other authors of the same period, devote to the forms of lethargy, of the spirit that merely vegetates, of the languishing soul, where the absence of interests or needs that line the surface of the perceived renders the mind incapable of "untangling", as Condillac repeats several times, from an undifferentiated background a single object, which is the object of that focused consciousness that is attention. On the other hand, thanks to the fiction of the statue that gradually acquires the five senses, Condillac provides an extremely lucid characterisation of the confusion and inattention that always lurks at the margins of attentive perception. In this way, these authors provide the best analysis of attention as a threshold phenomenon, which finds in inattention the background against which it emerges and the background from which it feeds.

⁵ Condillac (1953a), p. 98..

⁶ Condillac (1953b), p. 12.

III.

The challenge of the thematic issue we present here is to explore the forms and functions of this essential junction between attention and inattention in the aesthetic experience. Or, if one prefers, to measure the aesthetic significance of this inattentive attention which cannot be reduced to the dictates of clarity and distinction, but which nevertheless constitutes its indispensable shadow. In a recent work, devoted to the *Painting Experience*⁷, we have approached the question from the notion of interest, by soliciting the texts of art critics (from Borghini, to Boschini and Diderot), the elaborations of philosophers (and notably the fragment *Gewohnheit und Aufmerksamkeit* in Benjamin's *Sequence of Ibiza* (1932), to the theoretical and artistic evidence of painters (Bellini, Veronese, Hogart, Tiepolo). It seemed to us, however, that it was essential to extend and broaden this investigation by looking into a series of questions as elusive as they are capital, and yet largely neglected by art historians and aesthetic specialists. In fact, if the fundamental solidarity of attention and inattention has been largely thematised by phenomenology, notably on the basis of Husserl's analyses of the notion of the horizon (this background "obscurely conscious of indeterminate realities" which is co-given, according to a specific mode of appearance, with any phenomenon), it nevertheless remains to be clarified what is the

7 Frigo (2020), chap. II.

function of unfocused attention in the approach to works and in their creation. Can a history of diffuse attention be traced, and, if so, is there a kind of rise in its importance in contemporary aesthetics? On the other hand, are the figures of unfocused attention transversal to the different arts, or should we recognise incommensurable regimes, distinguishing painting from sculpture and photography, or even music and cinema? Finally, does the opposition of attention and inattention really make sense when measured against the artistic fact, or is it preferable to consider “patterns” of attention, making the cleavage between the attentive and the inattentive an unassignable and for this reason omnipresent threshold?

The texts collected in this issue of *Odradek* are intended as a first attempt to answer these questions, by sketching a grid of attention patterns and their aesthetic corollaries. Without going back over the subjects and hypotheses put forward by the various contributions, we would like to make a twofold concluding remark.

On the one hand, a chronological observation seems to be in order: philosophical reflection on attention experienced two moments of blossoming, in the eighteenth century and between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Now, this double wave of meditations on attention, and therefore also on inattention, undoubtedly has internal reasons, linked to the evolution of the discipline, particularly with regard to the hybridisation between psychology and

metaphysics that characterises these two moments in the history of thought. Nevertheless, we can also identify precise aesthetic corollaries: Condillac's pages symbolise with Chardin's and Tiepolo's paintings, and even the often arid analysis of a metaphysician like Wolff can lead to a theory of ornament. Similarly, Benjamin's reflection on the distracted observer, who inherited the themes of late nineteenth-century psychology and consigned them, renewed, in the following century, finds its counterpart in the sculptures of Medardo Rosso, as well as in certain artistic installations and musical compositions of the second half of the twentieth century. It is yet to be seen whether other historical points of incandescence can be identified, where reflection on attention is accompanied by its implementation in art. And also, perhaps, to explore the secret and unsuspected affinities between the *Settecento* and the avant-gardes so keen on modernity.⁸

On the other hand, the often highly abstract character of the reflections on inattentive attention evoked by the contributions gathered in this issue seems to suggest a transversal application to the various artistic fields. The example of music speaks volumes here, and David Huron's recent research⁹ has strongly underlined the biological underpinning of the essential role of attention in the aesthetic appreciation of a piece of music. But what about literature, photography and cinema? Three examples

⁸ And one could even risk a prehistory of this history of affinities between the thought of attention and aesthetic choices, by following the suggestions of a master book, alas too little known, by Groenewegen-Frankfort (1951).

⁹ Huron (2006).

among many others will suffice to suggest the scope of possible research: Kafka and Max Brod discussing the psychological status of “*Verschwommenheit*” and its possible literary translations¹⁰, Walker Evans and the series of photographs of “subway portraits”¹¹, where the work of an attention which finds its perfection in the will to disappear remains “unresolved”, the work on the film editing by Harun Farocki¹².

Attention is said in many ways and it is probably in the almost infinite multiplicity of its figures standing out in various ways against a background of inattention that lies the secret of its aesthetic fecundity.

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¹⁰ See Zittel (2016).

¹¹ See Alpers (2020).

¹² See Farinotti, Grespi, Villa F. (2017).

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