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Interviews

The aesthetics of dispersed attention

An interview with German media theorist Petra Löffler

Geert Lovink

When I met Petra Löffler in the summer of 2012 in Weimar I was amazed to find out about her habilitation topic. She had just finished a study on the history of distraction from a German media theory perspective. After I read the manuscript (in German) we decided to do an email interview in English so that more people could find out about her research. The study will be published in late 2013 (in German) by Diaphanes Verlag with the title *Verteilte Aufmerksamkeit. Eine Mediengeschichte der Zerstreuung* (Distributed Attention, a Media History of Distraction). In October 2011, Petra Löffler replaced Lorenz Engell as media philosophy professor at Bauhaus University in Weimar. Before this appointment she worked in Regensburg, Vienna, and Siegen. Her main research areas are affect theory, media archaeology, early cinema, visual culture, and digital archives.

With the rapid growth of the Internet, video, mobile phones, games, and text messaging, the new media debate gets narrowed down to this one question: what do you think of attention? The supposed decline in concentration and inability to read longer texts is starting to affect the future of research as such. Social media only make things worse. Mankind is once again regressing, this time busy multitasking on their smart phones. Like any issue, this one must also have a genealogy – but if we look at the current literature, from Bernard Stiegler to Nicolas Carr and Frank Schirrmacher, from Sherry Turkle to Franco Berardi, and Andrew Keen to Jaron Lanier, including my own contribution, the long view is missing. Stiegler digs into Greek philosophy but also leaves out the historical media theory angle. This also counts for those who stress solutions such as training and abstinence (a field ranging from Peter Sloterdijk to Howard Rheingold). Can a contemporary critique of attention really do without proper historical foundations?

While the education sector and the IT industry promote the use of tablets in classrooms (with MOOCs as the most current craze), there are only a few experts that warn against the long-term consequences. The absence of a serious discussion

and policy gives way to a range of popular myths. The debate quickly becomes polarised, and any unease is reduced to generational issues and technophobia. Millions of computer workers suffer from damaged eyesight, ADHD and related medication problems (Ritalin), Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, as well as RSI and bad postures due to badly-designed peripherals, leading to widespread spinal disk problems. There is talk of mutations in the brain (see for instance the work of the German psychiatrist Manfred Spitzer). Within this worrying spread of postmodern affliction, who would talk about the 'healing effects of daydreaming'? Petra Löffler does, and she refers to Michel de Montaigne, who, already many centuries ago, recommended diversion as a comfort against the suffering of souls. Why can we not acknowledge the distribution of attention as an art form, a gift, a high skill in fact?

Lovink: How did you come up with the idea to write the history of distraction? When you told me about your work and I read your habilitation, it occurred to me how obvious this intellectual undertaking was from a media theory perspective – and yet, I wondered why it was not done before. Would you call this history a classic black spot? You did not go along the institutional knowledge road à la Foucault, nor do you use the hermeneutical method, the Latourian history of science approach, or mentality history for that matter. How did you come up with your angle?

Löffler: That's a long story. Around 2000, with my colleague Albert Kümmel, I was working on an anthology about ephemeral discourses dealing with media dating back to the second half of the 19th century. We found a lot of interesting stuff in scientific journals from very different disciplines. Out of this rich material we developed a classification system consisting of discourse-relevant terms we found in the articles, and we published a book representing our research results (*Medientheorie 1888-1933, Texte und Kommentare* [2002]). One of the topics was 'Aufmerksamkeit' (attention). Later, I reviewed the material, much of it unpublished, and came across a collection of related texts which focused on 'Zerstreuung' (distraction). Like you just now, I was then wondering why a conceptualisation of distraction was missing in media theory – although important early theoreticians in the 1920s and the 1930s such as Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin have formulated powerful concepts of mass entertainment, cinema, and the political role of distraction that were quoted regularly. That's why I wanted to know more about the 'roots', the background of their thinking on distraction in other discourses.

Another motivation was that in the tradition of the Frankfurter Schule, which is very influential, distraction has a bad reputation. I wanted to analyse the schools of knowledge that support that bad reputation and through this reveal the 'other' side of distraction, its positive meaning, and its necessity. For this project I had to go back to the early reflections on modernity in the 18th century and to cross very

different discourses from philosophy and pedagogy, to psychiatry and physiology, to optics and aesthetics. There was not a single constant discourse but rather various discontinuous propositions that could not easily be summarised into a respectable object of knowledge. I owe a lot to Foucault's discourse analysis and archaeology of knowledge, but for my research object stable systems of propositions did not exist, and the gaps between discourses were evident. Maybe that's why for a long time distraction seems to be only an ephemeral side product of discourses on attention – or better, a bastard that has to be hidden.

In my study *Verteilte Aufmerksamkeit. Eine Mediengeschichte der Zerstreuung*, I reconstruct the modern notion of a distributed attention, which appeared in medical articles around 1800. In these articles the distribution of attention was regarded as necessary due to the insight that, because of higher requests from a modern mediated environment, attention has to switch very fast between several sensual stimuli almost simultaneously. As a consequence, attention could no longer be described as the opposite of distraction; a certain distribution of attention, that means distraction, seems to be the normal state of mind. In this regard, a distributed or distracted attention is not only able to react on multifarious stimuli in a very short period of time, but – and this is even more important – it is also able to anticipate certain demands. This ability of anticipation qualifies distraction as a useful technique of the body and as a common cultural practice necessary in modern mediated environments. Furthermore, according to the philosopher Immanuel Kant, distraction in the meaning of diversion has become a necessity and even an art of living regarding the body's need for regeneration. Interestingly, at the same time, Kant abandons modes of deep attention attributed to absorption or absentmindedness as an unsocial habit. In this perspective distraction was assigned a social function as a leisure activity. So there is no wonder that, during the 19th century, life sciences investigated with much effort into how a balance between work and leisure, between stress and relaxation, is to be reached. A lot of experiments were undertaken to analyse attention spans and dispersive effects. Whatever the goals of such experiments, the scientists had to accept that distraction cannot be excluded or erased.

With the rise of modern mass culture, the 19th century has also experienced the establishing of a leisure industry. That's why I investigate the relations between discourses and practices, and respective sites of distraction such as the panorama, the kaleidoscope, or the cinema. In practicing these modes of distraction the senses of users were stimulated up to extreme physical effects such as dizziness. Tom Gunning has summarised such effects and the thrills of modern mass media in general under the term 'aesthetic of astonishment'. That means distraction must be regarded as a concrete state of the human body being an integral part of an apparatus, an ensemble of human and non-human agents. This thinking of

distraction aims to develop a concept of different historical cultures or regimes of distraction, which depend on specific mediated environments and also on cultural as well as social values and power relations. In my study I develop a genealogy of distraction and a focus on its importance, especially for what Foucault has called taking care of oneself. By this, I show how distraction has become normalised now that network society has taken command.

Lovink: You don't seem to be bothered by distraction. Is that true?

Löffler: It depends on my temper. I really hate to get up in the middle of the night because of a terrible noise. I guess nobody wants that. But I've been living in big cities for decades and I accept a certain level of noise as normal – because I also estimate the various leisure time distractions every metropolis has to offer. Following philosophers like Kant or psychologists like Ribot, I believe that a certain level of distraction is necessary for life balance and also a common state of body and mind.

Lovink: You have a fascinating chapter in your habilitation about early cinema and the scattering of attention it would be responsible for. The figure of the nosy parker that gawks interests you, and you contrast it to the roaming flaneur.

Löffler: Yes, the gawker is a fascinating figure, because according to my research results it is the corporation of the modern spectator who is also a member of a mass audience – the flaneur never was part of it. The gawker or gazer, like the flaneur, appeared at first in the modern metropolis with its multi-sensorial attractions. According to Walter Benjamin, the flaneur disappeared at the moment when the famous passages were broken down. They had to make room for greater boulevards that were able to steer the advanced traffic in the French metropolis. Always being part of the mass of passers-by, the gawker at the same time looks for diversions, for accidents and incidents in the streets. This is to say that his attention is always distracted between an awareness of what happens on the streets and navigating between people and vehicles. No wonder movie theatres were often opened at locations with a high level of traffic, inviting passers-by to go inside and, for a certain period of time, become part of an audience.

Furthermore, many early films were actualities showing modern city life. In these films the camera was positioned at busy streets or corners in order to record movements of human and non-human agents. Gawkers often entered the view of the camera gesticulating or grimacing in front of it. That's why the gawker has become a very popular figure, mirroring the modern mass audience on the screen.

Today, to view one's own face on a screen is an everyday experience. CCTV-cameras in public spaces record passers-by, often without their noticing. Also, popular television shows that require real-life participation, such as casting shows,

offer members of the audience the opportunity to see themselves on a screen. At the same time, many people post their portraits on websites and social networks. They want to be seen by others because they want to be part of a greater audience – the network community. This is what Jean Baudrillard has called connectivity. The alliance between the drive to see and being seen establishes a new order of seeing which differs significantly from Foucault's panoptical vision. Today, it is no more that the few see the many (panopticon) or the many see the few (popular stars) – today, because of the multiplication and connectivity of screens in public and private spaces, the many see the many. One can conclude that the gawker or gazer is an overall phenomenon, a non-specific subjectivity of a distributed publicity.

Lovink: In your study you show that, like in so many other instances, the 'birth' of attention as a modern problem arises during the late 18th century. I am joking, but Kant seems to be the first and the last philosopher who praises distraction. What is it with this period around 1800? You studied at least two centuries worth of material. Which period is the most interesting?

Löffler: From the perspective of a media archaeologist, I would say the period around 1800, just because things look different from a distance. I was really surprised by regimes of distraction arising around 1800 in psychiatry, where people suffering from mental breakdown were cured with the help of sensual shocks and spectacular performances. At the same time, the need to distribute one's attention, to react on different stimuli almost simultaneously, was increasingly regarded as necessary. This formulation of a distributed or distracted attention can be considered as an effect of the dynamics of modernity, its drive to economise every part of living – even the human body. What we used to declare as the phenomena of our time, such as multi-tasking, can already be found in discussions about distraction 200 years ago. So it seems that changes in our mediated environments regularly provoke discussions about regimes of attention and questions the role of distraction.

Today, with the ubiquitous use of information technologies, discussions about distraction or distributed attention, the balance between stress and relaxation, arises again, and philosophers like Richard Shusterman consider the body's role for that purpose. For me, Kant's quest for distraction as an art of living resonates in such accounts.

Lovink: I can imagine that debates during the rise of mass education and the invention of film are different from ours. But is that the case? It is all pedagogy, so it seems. We never leave the classroom.

Löffler: The question is, leaving where? Entering the other side (likewise, amusement sites or absorbing fantasies)? Why not? Changing perspectives? Yes,

that's what we have to do. But for that purpose we don't necessarily have to leave the classroom. Rather, we should rebuild it as a room of testing modes of thinking in very concrete ways. I'm thinking of Jacques Rancière's essay 'Le partage du sensible', and his suggestions about the power relations between teachers and pupils. Maybe today teachers can learn more (for instance, soft skills) from their pupils than the other way around. We need other regimes of distribution of power, also in the classroom; a differentiation of tasks, of velocities and singularities – in short, we need micro-politics.

More seriously, your question indicates a strong relationship between pedagogy and media. There is a reason why media theorists like Friedrich Kittler pointed to media's affinity to propaganda and institutions of power. I think of his important book *Discourse Networks*, where he revealed the relevance of mediated writing techniques for the formation of educational institutions and for subjectivation. That's why the question is, what are the tasks we have to learn in order to exist in the world of electronic mass media? What does 'Bildung' mean for us today?

Lovink: There is an 'attention war' going on, with debates across traditional print and broadcast media about the rise in distraction, both in schools and at home. On the street we see people hooked on their smart phones, multi-tasking everywhere they go. What do you make of this? Is this just a heightened sensibility, a fashion, or is there really something at stake? Would you classify it as petit-bourgeois anxieties, or a loss of attention as a metaphor for threatening poverty and a loss of status for the traditional middle class in the West? How do you read the use of brain research by Nicholas Carr, Frank Schirrmacher, and more recently the German psychiatrist Manfred Spitzer, who came up with a few bold statements concerning the devastating consequences of computer use for the (young) human brain? Having read your study one could say 'don't worry, nothing new under the sun'. But is this the right answer?

Löffler: Your description addresses severe debates. Nothing less than the future of our Western culture seems to be at stake. Institutions like educational systems are under permanent critique concerning all levels, from primary schools to universities. That's why the Pisa studies have revealed a lot of deficits and have provoked debates on what kind of education is necessary for our children. It is a debate on cultural values, but also a struggle on power relations. We are living in a society of control, and how to become a subject and how this subject is related to other subjects in mediated environments are important questions.

A great uncertainty has emerged. That's why formulas that promise easy solutions are highly welcomed. Neurological concepts are often based on one-sided models concerning the relationship between body and mind, and they often leave out the role of social and environmental factors. From historians of science such as

Canguilhem and Foucault, one can learn that psychiatrist models of brain defects and mental anomalies not only mirror social anxieties but also produce knowledge about what is defined as normal. It is up to us as observers of such discourses to name those anxieties today. Nonetheless, I would not signify distraction simply as a metaphor or a topos occurring regularly in media discourses. Distraction is in fact a concrete phase of the body, a state of the mind. It is real. You cannot deal with it when you call it a disability or a disease and just pop pills or switch off your electronic devices.

Lovink: Building on Simondon, Stiegler develops a theory of attention that might be different from the American mainstream polarity between dotcom utopians and social media pessimists. His 'pharmacological' approach is less polemic, in search of new concepts in order to leave behind the known clichés and dichotomies. His book *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* (2008) contains pretty strong warnings about our loss of concentration in reading longer texts. What do you make of this?

Löffler: Stiegler's approach combines different arguments – the clash of generations, the rise of marketing and entertainment industries. According to Stiegler, attention has a social function in connecting people in a society creating a community. When this kind of social attention is lost due to the disconnecting psycho-power of mass media, he concludes, the social tie is in danger and repression, fascination, and anaesthesia are the outcome. I would question the exceptional role attention is playing in Stiegler's considerations on community, because there are other affective modes of building social associations or adherences, such as being part of a dispersed anonymous mass audience, being a fan or addicted to a hobby. That is to say, in my opinion, modes of distraction also have a social function. Sites and modes of distraction are a playground to mediate social relations and support individualisation.

By the way, I'm always wondering how easy philosophers like Stiegler or Christoph Türcke jump from ancient cultures (the Greeks, the Romans, Stone Age populations) to modern cultures of the 21st century. I view this as suspicious. Of course, reading as well as writing were important cultural techniques over a long period of time, but both are techniques that have undergone several heavy changes in their history, long before media such as cinema or television entered the scene. Think only of the invention of mechanical printing in the 15th century, the development of the mass press in the 18th century, or the invention of the typewriter and rotary printing one century later. It is hard to imagine that these epochal events should not have had any influence on learning reading and writing. You read the columns of a newspaper or a picture book in a different way than the pages of a printed book filled with characters only. This was common knowledge even then.

Techniques such as a quick scan and scroll through a text ('Querlesen') had become widespread, and newspaper layouts support this kind of reading. The actual hype of a deep-attention reading is, seen from a media archaeological perspective, not simply nostalgic. It forgets its 'dark side', as it was seen in the civil cultures of the 18th and 19th century, when bored middle-class women were accused of being addicted to reading novels and were condemned for escaping into exciting dream worlds. Deep concentration was regarded as dangerous then, because it leads to absentmindedness and even mental confusion, making individuals unusable, particularly for a capitalist economy. Civil cultures have an interest in controlling their populations, their bodies and desires, for the sake of normalisation. In this perspective, 'too much' of whatever quality that can destabilise the public order has to be refused.

My sneaking suspicion is that Stiegler and Türcke are focusing only on small sections of media history, because their interest is to construct almost apocalyptic scenarios of a great divide. Not surprisingly, Türcke, in his book on hyperactivity, criticises newspapers for having reduced the length of articles while at the same time having advanced numbers and sizes of pictures. Other changes are more important and unnoticed by these philosophers. With the rise of personal computers and multi-media devices using touchscreens, tactility has again become a major human faculty. Media based on haptic operations change the interplay of the senses and create new habits – and therefore writing and reading have to amplify their dimensions.

Lovink: There is (the New Age cult of) mindfulness. And there is Peter Sloterdijk. What do you make of such calls to exercise, to save attention through training? It all boils down to dosage. Do you believe there is a 'will to entropy'? Altered states that invite us to enter unknown spaces? Would it make sense to study another side of the so-called loss of attention in the drug experiences, as described from Baudelaire and Benjamin to Huxley and Jünger?

Löffler: I guess the training of our senses and the experiments of losing self-control belong to the same regime of taking care of oneself. It occurs to me that one major difference between the self-experiments you name and what I have analysed is the isolation of the people experimenting with drugs to enter altered states of body and mind. One reason why I have studied not only discourses but also practices of distraction was the fact that most of the diversions of urban culture were built on (and for) a mass audience. To be with unfamiliar others at the same place and at the same time was an experience, a thrill people were addicted to. Today, other mass entertainment forms have emerged such as multiplex cinemas, public viewings, or big sports events – which are, of course, unthinkable without the rise of mass communication and mass media like television. That's why I'm not

sure if the description made by Nicholas Carr and Frank Schirrmacher that we are now living under a brutal regime of a cannibalistic monster-machine nourished by our attention – the personal computer – is telling the whole story.

Lovink: How would you situate your own work inside what is known as German media theory? History of ideas meets archaeology of knowledge? You have a strong interest in medical discourse, which is, again, very strong these days. Would you say that media steer our perception?

Löffler: Maybe I'm not the right person to answer that question. I would like to describe my work as a combination of archaeology of knowledge and media archaeology. In German media studies the epistemology and history of media has played a crucial role. In the 1980s, Kittler inaugurated a discourse analysis of media that highlights the importance of the materiality of media, the a priori of technique, and the power of institutions. The main question is how media constitute what can be known and how media influence the ways we consider the world. Scholars like Siegfried Zielinski or Wolfgang Ernst have developed the field of media archaeology further. Recently, interdependencies between media techniques and infrastructures in addition to cultural or body techniques are an important topic of research, mostly by scholars such as Bernhard Siegert or Erhard Schüttpelz. At the same time, media philosophers everywhere rethink mediation in terms of triangular relations. In recent debates questions of media ecology and ontology, and mediated modes of existence, have gained much attention.

My strong interest in medical discourse derives from the role it plays for formulations of normality. This is, of course, a Foucaultian perspective. The distinction between what is regarded as normal or abnormal behaviour, or sane and insane, is always a result of cultural negotiations. I'm interested in the role mass media play in these negotiations. In my point of view, perception is a relay, and media can intensify the permeability of it. No more, no less.

Lovink: Seen from other areas, Germany is still the country of Schiller and Goethe, of high literature and philosophy. Students still read tons of thick and complex books, so it seems. You teach in Weimar, and that must certainly be a strange one-off museum experience. Is there something we can learn from the German education system, or are you as pessimistic as everyone else when it comes to the lack of books that young people read these days, the decline of the shared canon, and the long-term implications this has for the intellectual life and the level of thinking and critical reflection? Do you see long-term impacts of the computer and the Internet on German theory production?

Löffler: Weimar is not only the city of Goethe and Schiller. Nietzsche lived here, and the Bauhaus had its first residence here. And there is also Buchenwald, a Nazi

concentration camp. Before I came to Weimar, I was teaching in Vienna. From your point of view it seems I'm collecting strange one-off museum experiences, but one major difference between these university cities (and, by the way, between many other universities in Germany) is the fact that the Bauhaus-University of Weimar is a very young university, founded shortly after Germany's reunification. It is not a classical alma mater; there is no faculty of humanities, but rather faculties of engineering, architecture, design, and media. The idea is that theoretical and practical education goes hand in hand. The curriculum offers students courses where they can train their skills in photography, film, design, or programming. The ability to develop independent solutions is regarded as very important. At the same time, Weimar is a place where a lot of research is going on, where scientists meet and theoretical debates are initiated. That is the intellectual climate here.

German theory production has an affinity to media archaeology and the history and philosophy of cultural practices. Kittler was among the first media theorists who thought about the role of the computer as a super-medium which is able to incorporate all other media. Claus Pias and Martin Warnke have just launched a research group in Lüneburg investigating the media cultures of computer simulations and their input for knowledge production. I think the faculties of reading and writing will be important skills in the future, but they have to be advanced by others such as working with huge amounts of data and their different representations as pictures, or circulating information of any format in order to manage the interplay of senses in computer-based environments.

Lovink: I want to come back to the Frankfurt School. Did you say that Adorno is moralistic in his rejection of the media as a light form of dispersed entertainment? If he were alive, do you think he would say the same about the Internet? I always wondered if there would be more sarcastic forms of critique, in the tradition of Adorno and others, that is less elitist, less traditional.

Löffler: For Adorno's thinking of negativity and the Frankfurt School, art is an autonomous and alternative sphere of society; it is art's alterity and autonomy that is the condition for its power to undermine the capitalist order. That is why, for these thinkers, it is not a question of morality to reject the popular mass media of entertainment – it is, I would say, an 'ontological' question, because these media give no room for reflecting the mode of existence in capitalist society. Adorno's position is not so definite as it first seems. I was surprised to read in *Dialectics of Enlightenment* that, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, a total excess of distraction comes close to art in its extremity. This thought resonates with Kracauer's utopia of distraction of the 1920s, dealing with modern mass media and particularly cinema. In this passage of their book, Adorno and Horkheimer are saying – which is revolutionary for me – that an accumulation and intensification of distraction

is able to fulfill the task of negation that was originally dedicated to art, because it alters the state of the subject in the world completely. With this thought in mind it would be really funny and, at the end much less elitist, to speculate on what Adorno would say about the Internet.

About the author

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Found footage photogénie

An interview with Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi and Mark-Paul Meyer

Christian Olesen

Since the late 1980s, EYE Film Institute Netherlands (formerly the Netherlands Filmmuseum) has been collecting and preserving unidentified film fragments from its collection to create an ongoing series of compilations titled *Bits & Pieces*. The compilations consist of fragments which the majority of film archives would tend to disregard in favour of restoring complete films, but which EYE considers to contain a certain kind of cinematic beauty which deserves to be preserved and shown. Currently, the series counts 623 fragments, each of which has been assigned a number, and spread out on 56 reels of 300 meters.

The initiative to create *Bits & Pieces* was taken at a time when film archives increasingly developed different institutional deontologies of preservation and when film historians went into film archives in a revisionist spirit to rediscover neglected directors, actors, exhibition practices, and technologies. The Netherlands Filmmuseum – then headed by deputy director Eric de Kuyper and assisted by staff members Peter Delpout and Mark-Paul Meyer – gained a significant reputation at this time by propagating the view that film historians continued to neglect the fact that film archives contained a substantial amount of film fragments which could not be attributed to an author or fit into an aesthetic school. Pointing to a discrepancy between the theory of film history and film archival practice, the Filmmuseum's staff began to plea for new forms of presenting and valorising the fragments they found, which ultimately materialised in the *Bits & Pieces* project.¹