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Yves Citton

Attentional Agency Is Environmental Agency

Abstract

This chapter briefly presents the notion of “attention ecology”, at the three levels of collective attention, joint attention and individual attention, stressing the necessary integration as well as the specificity of each of these levels. It will then proceed by trying to locate our agency in relation to attentional behaviour: what can we do, and what can we not do with our attention? If attention is a scarce resource, who is in a position to command its uses?”

If the notion of attention is attracting an increased amount of attention, it is largely linked to current concerns about control. As more and more of our time is spent online—70 hours per week spent watching screens for the younger generations in the USA, according to some recent studies, with 80% of the world population expected to be connected to the Internet via a smartphone by 2020—our attention becomes ever more finely traceable and marketable, even if not (yet) directly controllable. What are the limits of control, as far as my attention goes? What can I do with my attention in such a highly mediated environment? What part of “me” can actually “do” something in terms of attentional management? Against, or with the help of, what other part of “me”?

I will tackle such complex questions from a rather narrow “determinist” angle, denying the very possibility for a human subject to master the behaviour of his or her own attention. In other words, I will not assume that we are “free to choose” our objects and qualities of attention within a given environment. My goal is not to “prove” the validity (or the necessity) of such a deterministic assumption. The reader is welcome to believe we have a direct mastery of our attention—and one might convincingly defend that what we commonly call “attention” must indeed be defined a priori as voluntary attention. My point will be, however, that even if our attention was not under the command of our intentional self at any given time, we could nevertheless speak of “attentional agency”, and devise ways of caring for it.

In order to make this point, I will (somewhat artificially) isolate four different levels of attentional agency: collective, joint, individual and computational attention. I will briefly suggest what type of agency can be observed or constructed at each level. In the last part of the paper, with the help of Roland Barthes and David Abram, I will draw further consequences from the ecological principle, cross-pollinating the question of intentionality with the question of the difference between figure and ground, objects and environments. These observations and suggestions will be based upon one single principle, which I would like to call the ecological principle, asserted by my title: attentional agency is environmental agency.

The Ecological Principle of Indirect Attentional Agency

Without falling prey to any form of conspiracy theory, it seems fairly intuitive to accept that, within a given situation, the choice of our object of attention, as well as the quality and intensity of our attention are at least partly conditioned by circumstantial factors. How many

hours have I slept the night before? How much pressure do I feel to produce what type of performance? What other pressures to perform what other type of task do I feel at the same time, potentially “distracting” me from my main task? What type of associations between what words, images, ideas, reactions, have been impressed upon me by my previous experiences? What previous trainings have led me to develop what habits in reaction to what stimuli?

In multiplying and refining such coordinates, it seems possible to construct an analysis of almost every situation showing that a large part of our attentional behaviour is indeed reactive, and that the reaction observed is massively conditioned by the sum of previous impressions and external circumstances—to adopt a vocabulary popularized by 18th-century Spinozist philosophers like Denis Diderot or 19th-century socialists like Robert Owen.

Even if such conditionings had a deterministic hold on our attentional behaviour—an assumption which some of us may not be ready to accept—it would still be possible to talk about attentional “agency”. For, as a consequence of the pressures, impressions and circumstantial conditions to which I am subjected, I may be led to question issues of attention, as well as issues related to the environmental factors which tend to influence my attentional capacity. This book in general, and this article in particular—along with the long and extremely complex chains of causation which led you, the reader, to purchase, borrow, download, copy, and finally read it—play precisely such a role: they lead you to think in a certain manner about attentional agency and environmental conditionings. But more commonly, outside of the scholarly world, parents and children are often led to question issues of attention when they discuss school grades, habits of media consumption, or lifestyles.

As you are reading these lines, you have the possibility of closing this book, or turning off the digital device on which these sentences reach you. You can do it! Why you would do so is an infinitely complex question. It may be because you are tired, and/or because I did not manage to make this article look interesting or promising enough, and/or because the previous sentences reminded you that, after all, you don’t have to finish this article and you can do something more useful or more fun instead. But whatever the cause or the trigger, the fact is that you can close the book or turn off the tablet.

Of course, there may be a few rare exceptions—say, if you have been assigned this book for a course and will have to answer a quiz within a few hours, or if you are my editor and have to correct this chapter in a rush, in order to meet the final deadline granted by the publisher to submit the book manuscript. Most readers, however, are not under such dire straits, and can indeed close this book.

What does it mean to close a book or turn off an electronic device—or, for that matter, to open one or turn it on? Each of these gestures alters the environment which will condition our attention in the minutes ahead. If your attention is being controlled, right now, by the sentence that I have written for this book, it is because—for whatever reason—you did not close it a few seconds ago. Attentional agency rests on this time delay. I suggest to speak of indirect attentional agency to account for this delay, i.e., to account for the fact that, even if I cannot control my attention itself at any single moment, I can, in most circumstances, modify the environment which will condition my attention at some point in the future.

Collective and Joint Attentional Agency

This indirect attentional agency can operate at four rather different levels and scales. At the level of our collective attention (Citton 2014a), which deals with the various systems of

communication (aka “media”) reaching us as members of a “public”, it is difficult and complex but nevertheless possible to take or promote measures now which will modify the media environment that will condition our future attention. Éric Piolle, the Green Party mayor of the city where I teach, Grenoble (France), recently decided not to renew the contract his predecessors had negotiated with advertisement agencies, whereby commercial ads were displayed on 326 posters, in exchange for a few hundred thousands of euros a year. This political decision, taken a few months ago, will (marginally) alter the collective attentional environment in the city of Grenoble—our “ambient commons” (McCullough 2013). (On a much bigger scale, Sao Paulo took a similar measure in 2007.) Through political organization, we could—or rather: we can—call for measures that would ban paid advertisement on any type of media.

Indirect attentional agency at the level of collective attention does not have to sound like a utopian dream restricted to hopeful activists. Thousands of laws and decrees already regulate our collective attentional environments: in the US, the FCC vigorously enforces a law that bans obscenities on the air at all times, as well as indecent or profane programming between 6 am and 10 pm; in most European countries, during election time, the access political parties can have to voters’ attention on public broadcasting systems is strictly regulated.

It would be naïve to disqualify such measures as reactionary and outdated forms of censorship, no matter how ridiculous they may seem at times. Regulating the flow of stimuli that occupies our collective attention and fuels our mental life is just as important as regulating the quality of the water and of the air that sustains our physical life. What is surprising and worrying is the ridiculously small amount of political attention we devote to such regulation of our collective attentional environment. No serious improvements of our current “mediarchic” political systems (Nimmo 1993; Citton 2014b) can be expected until we drastically reshape the media infrastructure that conditions our collective attention. To assert that attentional agency is environmental agency, in this case, means something very concrete: our political decision-making process is the mere result of the attentional environment our current (de)regulations allow the media to establish for us. It is ludicrous to complain about the political outcome while not seriously attempting to restructure the attentional environment that produces it.

The second level where indirect attentional agency needs to be directed is joint attention (Eilan 2005), i.e. the situations in which the participants’ attentions affect each other in real time and in mutual interactions, as illustrated by what happens in a classroom, in a performance hall or around a dinner table. Here too, attentional agency can consist in regulating the interactions with explicit rules, like taking turns in speaking and listening, or like turning off one’s phone in a concert hall. Much more prevalently, however, joint attention is a matter of intuitive adjustments and informal attunements. What we call “politeness” or “good manners” improperly describes these deeply embodied features of intersubjective behaviours, which are required for human communication to succeed. As a species, we have had thousands of years to develop such fine attunements in face-to-face interactions, and this may explain why we are still so clumsy in our electronic forms of interaction, which mankind has only invented a few decades ago.

Because so much of this joint attentional environment is generated from under the radar of awareness, so to speak, it is very difficult to exercise agency at this level. Enforcing rules of politeness and mutual respect often misses the point: people rarely “choose” to be rude or unpleasant. Rather than lamenting and stigmatizing rude behaviours, environmental indirect agency should rather look at what pushed individuals to pay insufficient attention or care to

each other. Often, it boils down to unequal, asymmetrical structures of interaction, which drive one party to break the rules of an engagement (rightly or wrongly) perceived as oppressive and humiliating. The most efficient way to “act”, at this second level, probably consists in caring for a fair sharing of attention (Franck 2005). While most mass media are built around asymmetrical structures (millions of people look at the celebrity, who has no way nor time to see them), joint attention demands environments that favour reciprocity.

Individual and Computational Attentional Agency

The third level, individual attention, where a subject pays attention to an object, seems to provide the most intuitive examples of attentional agency. Of course, this agency is always “embedded” in (hence conditioned by) the larger environment of collective attention and (earlier) joint attention: your (personal) eyes and mind are currently in contact with the sentences I am (personally) writing only because our collective attention has been drawn on issues of attention scarcity, through articles, blogs, declarations, discussions, seminars and conferences. Our basic intuition, however, is right: it will be very long and difficult for you and me to reshape the media infrastructure, whereas we can decide fairly easily to close this book, turn off this computer, put our phone in silent mode, cancel our contract with the cable company, subscribe to *The Nation* or *Jacobin* instead of *The Economist*. All such actions will modify the environment that will structure and condition your attention in the minutes, hours, weeks, years ahead. And since the three levels I have rather artificially separated here are in fact intricately tied to each other (the more individual subscribers to *Jacobin*, the more the issues it raises will seep through public debate, other media and collective attention), such individual decisions are indeed extremely important—for us individually, of course, but also for us collectively, no less.

Here too, while all of us already do take measures that precondition our future attentional environments within various time-scale (from buying a book at the station before getting on the train to banning professional emails on holydays), it is surprising how rarely and superficially we discuss problems and devise solutions in terms of managing our attentional environments. More and more firms set policies to regulate the flow of emails (containing them within office hours), but very few of us take explicit steps towards putting a check on the increasing flows of solicitations that threaten to drown us. Most of us can warn our correspondents that we will stay off mail (social networks or text messaging) a few days per week; or establish a stereophonic procedure of inquiry whereby, when an information seems important, we systematically consult a source located at the other end of the ideological spectrum, in order to interpret it though a different lens; or reserve moments of the week to read poetry.

Most of us share the feeling of merely reacting to solicitations that appear to be pushed upon us—whereas, in fact, we push them on each other. As several books have correctly stressed (Gallagher 2009; Jackson 2009), even at the individual level, our attentional environments seem to be chaotically tossed around, like a boat constantly submerged by ceaseless incoming waves. Of course, we are not stupid: if we could easily remedy the stress induced by this situation, we would have already done it. No quick fix will suffice to “empower” us at the individual level, while the causes of this submersion are structural and socio-economical, inscribed in the very modes of collaboration that sustain (as well as undermine) our lives in the global empire of neoliberal capitalism. Nevertheless, raising issues of attentional agency may

help better identify the problems and devise more appropriate and more strongly socialized solutions.

A fourth, and somewhat transversal, level should be added to account for the current developments of our digital age, computational attention, by which I mean our capacity to use, control and reprogram the technological devices in which we increasingly externalize our attentional tasks. The very notion of individual attention deserves to raise suspicion, since what is attentive in each of us, at the beginning of the 21st century, is a deeply intertwined mix of skills (located in my body) and of computational capabilities (located in the digital equipment most of us use to enhance our performances). Machinic attention has become so intimately associated to most of our daily cognitive operations that our supposedly “individual” attention is in fact almost always an “augmented” form of attention, resulting from a complex interaction between human and machinic attention. The wide appeal of the notion “interface” symptomatizes the ontological problem raised by this (in fact not-so-new) situation: where should I situate a screen, a keyboard, a computer, a smartphone, an algorithm (like PageRank), when I attempt to draw a line separating “me” from “my environment”? Speaking of “computational attention” reunites what would be artificially separated if we failed to include our digitally-augmented capabilities in what actually constitutes our “individual” power and agency.

At this forth level, however, agency takes on a much more precise and pragmatic form. As it redraws the boundary between me and my environment, computational attention reveals how much this new part of “me” is only partially (and variably) “mine”. As we all know, and as Bruno Latour (2013) has eloquently shown, my tools and devices remain transparent—to the point of feeling like a part of me—only as long as they perform their tasks as expected. Comes a dysfunction, or a breakdown, and they traumatically reclaim their independence. Hence the precise location of agency at the level of computational attention: the power to hack, i.e., the power to break into the back box and fix it, adapt it, customize it, control it, reappropriate it, subvert it (before or after it breaks down). It doesn’t matter whether you believe that we are never fully or always “free to choose”, one thing is clear in terms of agency, under both assumptions: hackers are freer than those of us who treat our electronic devices as impenetrable black boxes.

Three Modes of Attentional Agency

To conclude, I want to depart from the spatial and implicitly quantitative approach that has guided me so far (how much power? situated at what level?), in order to account for intensive and qualitative differences of attentional agency. I will do so by summarizing three modes of listening that Roland Barthes (1977) distinguished and defined in a rarely read encyclopaedia article (see Citton 2018).

When functioning in the first mode, which is the most common, my observant attention actively looks for indexes, traces, clues, cues which can help me accomplish the task at hand, whether to escape from a danger, satisfy a need or follow a desire. This mode of attention is geared towards speed: the quicker (and the more accurate), the better. It is a matter of alertness and sometimes of survival in a potentially hostile world: foes or preys must be instantaneously spotted, focused on, aimed at and shot.

A second mode, which can be characterized as interpretive, attempts to decipher signs whose meaning we suspect to be possibly blurred, hidden, secret, deceptive, counter-intuitive,

and unknown. It no longer suffices to spot and identify an object: one must mobilize or invent a relational structure that would reveal what is not immediately offered to view. Here, “data” do not seem to “give” information: their “meaning” must be patiently constructed. But since all data are indeed *facta* (“fabricated things” that had to be constructed as such and provided with meaning), it is fair to say that the interpretive mode is characteristic of learning, while the observant mode relies on knowing.

The third mode described by Roland Barthes was inspired to him by the psychoanalytical practice of “floating attention” (listening in a somewhat “distracted” fashion to what the patient says, trying not to understand the apparently obvious meaning of his rambling). This third mode can be described as epochal insofar as it relies on the suspension of our pre-existing categories of perception and intellection. While the observant mode merely recognizes an object readily identifiable as such, while the interpretive mode deciphers signs by recombining pre-existing categories into new structures of signification, the epochal mode sets itself up to disqualify these pre-existing categories and to draw from the sensorial and sensuous nature of the data new and unsuspected ways to construct something Barthes named “signifiante” (to distinguish it from “signification”).

Table 2.1 – Attentional Modes

ATTENTIONAL MODE	PURPOSE	OBJECTS	ATTITUDE
<i>Observant</i>	Alert	Indexes	Focalizing
<i>Interpretive</i>	Deciphering	Signs	Structural
<i>Epochal</i>	Recategorization	Signifiante	Floating

In an important recent book, Natalie Depraz (2014) helps us articulate this epochal attention in three successive moments: a) a moment of suspension (the Greek *epochè*), during which our attention is made to “float” in order to neutralize its automatic assignments of meaning through categorizing identification; b) a moment of reorientation, whereby our floating attention can attach itself to a new object intuited in what previously looked merely as a background; c) a moment of receptivity, which opens our senses and our intelligence to the particular features of this new object that starts to be constructed as a distinctive “figure” against the background in which it was originally confused.

From the semi-automatic processes triggered by observant attention, to the sometimes complex procedures mobilized by interpretative attention, and to the self-reconditioning taking place in epochal attention, each attentional mode gains in agency—from animal survival to social literacy and all the way to creative invention (in the arts, philosophy, science, technology). I will conclude this very summary (and partial) survey of attentional agency by stressing how much this “epochal” mode can also be considered as a form of “environmental agency”.

What constitutes “the matter” of epochal agency is the extraction of a (previously unidentified) figure from a ground. In a symmetrical move to what we saw when discussing computational attention, where the limits between “me-as-a-subject” and “my environment” tended to be blurred, epochal attention redraws the limits between what I consider as my background environment and the objects in relation to which I construct my subjectivity. In

both cases, the principle stated in my title obtains: attentional agency is environmental agency.

Were we to follow David Abram (1996), as I think we should, we could push this principle even further. Instead of limiting my attentional agency to the extraction of a figure from a ground, we could attempt better to understand how we—as human animals constituted by our relations to countless other living and (apparently) non-living beings—are led to incorporate these relations in forms that remain most of the time under the threshold of awareness. In other words, we may be attentive to our environment-as-ground, and not only to the figures we isolate in it—and a great deal of the damage suffered by our environment during the last 200 years may indeed come from our reducing our environment to “figures” (especially quantitative figures like capitalist profit and GDP). In order really to attend to our environment, i.e., in order to care for the relations that sustain our individual and collective life, we need to develop (or recover) a truly environmental attention: an (apparently paradoxical) attention to the ground behind the figures (Hörl 2013; Citton 2014a). As Abram shows, this radically challenges our anthropocentric worldview, turning agency inside out, since the environment thus appears to tend to itself through us. This may be the biggest and most decisive challenge raised by the proposition to identify attentional agency with environmental agency.

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