By 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 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 appear late 2013 (in German) with Diaphanes Verlag under the title "Verteilte Aufmerksamkeit. Eine Mediengeschichte der Zerstreuung" (Distributed Attention, a Media History of Distraction). Since October 2011 Petra Löffler has 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 hyper growth of internet, video, mobile phones, games, txt messaging, the new media debate gets narrowed down to this one question: what do you think of attention? The supposed decline in concentration and today's inability to read longer, complicated texts is starting to affect the future of research as such. Social media only make things worse. Human kind is, once again, on the way down hill, this time busy multitasking on their smart phones. Like any issue this one must have a genealogy too, 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 entirely missing. Bernard Stiegler digs into Greek philosophy, yes, 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). But 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 hype), there is only a hand full of experts that warn against the long-term consequences. The absence of a serious discussion and policy then gives way to a range of popular myths. Quickly the debate gets polarized and any unease is reduced to generational issues and technophobia. Deceases amongst millions of computer workers vary from damaged eyesight, ADHD and related medication problems (Retalin), Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, 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 deceases, 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 suffering of the souls. Why can't we acknowledge the distribution of attention as an art form, a gift, in fact a high skill?

Geert 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 (a major study in German speaking countries after your PhD if you want to become professor) it occurred to me how obvious this intellectual undertaken was from a media theory perspective—and yet I wondered why it wasn't done before. Would you call its history a classic black spot? You didn't go along the institutional knowledge road a 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?

Petra Löffler: That's a long story. Around 2000, with my colleague Albert Kümmel, I was working at an anthology about ephemeral discourses dealing with media dating back to the second half of the nineteenth 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 published a book representing our research results (Albert Kümmel and Petra Löffler, Medientheorie 1888-1933, Texte und Kommentare, 2002). One of the topics was 'Aufmerksamkeit' (attention). Later I reviewed the material, much of it was unpublished, and came across a collection of related texts, which focussed on 'Zerstreuung' (distraction). Like you now, I then was wondering why, in media theory, a conceptualization of distraction was missing up to date, although important early theoreticians such as Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin, in the 1920s and the 1930s, 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 of distraction in other discourses.

Another motivation was that in the tradition of the Frankfurter Schule, which is very influential until now (not only in Germany), distraction has a bad reputation. So, I wanted to analyse the schools of knowledge that support

that bad reputation and through this way 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 various discontinuous propositions that could not easy be summarized into a respectable object of knowledge. I owe Foucault's discourse analysis and archaeology of knowledge a lot, but for my research object stable systems of propositions didn't exist, and the gaps between discourses were evident. May be 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 hide.

GL: You don't seem to be bothered by distraction, is that true?

PL: It depends on my temper. I really hate to get up in the middle of the night by a terrible noise. I guess nobody wants that. But I have been living in big cities for decades and I accept a certain level of noise as normal—just because I also estimate the various leisure time distractions every metropolis has to offer. Following philosophers like Kant or psychologists like Ribot I belief that a certain level of distraction is not only necessary for a life balance, but also a common state of body and mind.

GL: You got 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 street roaming flaneur.

PL: 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 sensations and 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 looks at the same time for diversions, for accidents and incidents in the streets. This is to say 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, becoming part of an audience. Furthermore many films of the period of Early Cinema were actualities showing the modern city-life. In these films the movie-camera was positioned at busy streets or corners in order to record movements of human and non-human agents. Gawkers often went into 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. Not only CCTV-cameras at public spaces record passers-by, often without their notice. Also popular TV-shows that require life-participation such as casting shows once more offer members of the audience the opportunity to see themselves on a screen. At the same time many people post their portraits on websites of 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 to being seen establishes a new order of seeing which differs significantly from Foucault's panoptical vision: Today no more 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. Insofar, one can conclude, the gawker or gazer is an overall-phenomenon, a non-specific subjectivity of a distributed publicity.

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

PL: From the perspective of a media archaeologist I would say, of course, 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 a 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 more and more 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 economize every part of living, even the human body. What we used to declare as phenomena of our

time such as multi-tasking can be already found in discussions about distraction two hundred years ago. So it seems that changes in our media 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 again consider the body's role for that purpose. For me, Kant's quest for distraction as an art of living is resonated much by such accounts.

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

PL: 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 have to leave the classroom necessarily. Rather, we should rebuilt it as a room of testing modes of thinking in very concrete ways. I'm thinking of Jacques Rancière's suggestions, in his essay Le partage du sensible, about the power relation 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 micropolitics.

More seriously, your question indicates a strong relationship between pedagogy and media. There's a reason why media theorists like Friedrich Kittler had pointed to media's affinity to propaganda and institutions of power. I think of his important book Discourse Networks, where he has 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 means 'Bildung' for us nowadays?

GL: There is an 'attention war' going on, with debates across traditional print and broadcast media about the rise in distraction, in schools, at home. On the street we see people hooked on their smart phones, multitasking, everywhere they go. What do you make of this? This is just a heightened sensibility, a fashion, or is there really something at stake? Would you

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classify it as petit-bourgeois anxieties? Loss of attention as a metaphor for threatening poverty and status loss of the traditional middle class in the West? How do you read the use of brain research by Nicholas Carr, Frank Schirrmacher and more recently also the German psychiatrist Manfred Spitzer who came up with a few bold statement 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?

PL: Your description addresses severe debates. Nothing less than the future of our Western culture seems to be at stake. Institutions like the 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. On the one hand it's a debate on cultural values, but on the other it's 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 is 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. And it is up to us as observers of such discourses to name those anxieties today. Nonetheless, I would not signify distraction as a metaphor. It is in fact a concrete phase of the body, a state of the mind. It's 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.

GL: Building on Simondon, Bernard Stiegler develops a theory of attention that might be different from the US-American mainstream polarity between dotcom utopians and social media pessimists. His 'pharmacological' approach is different, 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 from 2008 contains pretty strong warnings about our loss of concentration to read longer, complicated texts. What do you make of this?

PL: Bernard Stiegler's approach combines different arguments––the clash of generations, the rise of marketing and entertainment industries. I'm always wondering how easy philosophers like Stiegler or Christoph Türcke in Germany jump from ancient cultures (the Greeks, the Romans or—to name another popular example—Stone Age populations) to modern cultures of the 21st century. I take this as suspicious. Reading as well as writing were, of course, important cultural techniques over a long period of time––but, both are techniques that have undertaken several heavy changes in their long taking history, long before media such as cinema or television have entered the scene. Think only of the invention of printing, the development of the mass press in the 18th century or the invention of the typewriter one century later. It's hard to imagine that these epochal events should not have had any influence on how to learn 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 quickly 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 especially bored middle-class women were accused of being addicted reading novels and were condemned because of escaping in exciting dream worlds. Deep concentration was then regarded as dangerous, because it leads to absentmindedness and even mental confusion making individuals unusable especially for a capitalist economy. Civil cultures have an interest to control their populations, their bodies and desires, for the sake of normalization. In this perspective, a 'too much', of what quality ever that can destabilize the public order has to be refused.

My sneaking suspicion is that Stiegler or Türcke are focussing only to small cuttings of media history, because their interest is to construct almost apocalyptic scenarios of a great divide. Not surprisingly Türcke, in his actual book on hyperactivity, criticizes newspapers for having reduced the length of articles and at the same time having advanced number and size of pictures. But other changes are more important––unnoticed by these philosophers. With the rise of personal computers and multi-media devices using touch-screens tactility has become again a major human faculty. Media based on haptic operations change the interplay of the senses and create new habits—and insofar writing and reading have to amplify their dimensions.

GL: 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?

PL: 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've analyzed is the isolation of the persons experimenting with drugs to enter altered states of body and mind. One reason why I've 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 entertainments 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 for instance by Nicholas Carr and Frank Schirrmacher we are living nowadays under a brutal regime of a cannibalistic monster-machine nourished by our attention witch is known as personal computer is telling the whole story.

GL: 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 the medical discourse (which is, again, very strong these days). Would you say that media steer our perception?

PL: Maybe I'm not the right person answering that question, but 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. Friedrich Kittler, in the 1980s, has 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 thereby 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 at the one hand and cultural or body techniques at the other are an important topic of research, namely by scholars such as Bernhard Siegert (Weimar) or Erhard Schüttpelz (Siegen). At the same time media philosophers not only in Germany rethink mediation in terms of triangular relations. In recent debates questions of media ecology and ontology respectively mediated modes of existence have gained much attention.

My strong interest in the 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 or insane is always a result of cultural negotiations. I'm interested in the role mass media play in these negotiations. Perception, in my point of view, is a relay, and media can intensify the permeability of it. No more, no less.

GL: Seen from other countries and continents Germany is still the country of Schiller and Goethe, 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 already see long-term impacts of the computer and Internet on German theory production?
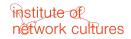
PL: Weimar is not only the city of Goethe and Schiller. Nietzsche lived here, and the Bauhaus had its first residence here. And there is Buchenwald, a concentration camp of the Nazi regime, too. Before I came to Weimar I was teaching in Vienna. From your point of view it seems I'm collecting strange one-off museum experiences. But, one mayor difference between these university cities (and, by the way, to 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's not a classical alma mater: there is no faculty of humanities, but 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 own 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's the intellectual climate around here.

German theory production has an affinity to media archaeology and the history and philosophy of cultural practices. Friedrich 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 lanced a research group locating 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 also in the future, but they have to be advanced by others such as working with data and their different representations for instance as pictures or circulating information of any format in order to manage the interplay of senses in computer-based environments.

GL: 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 would still be alive, do you think he would say the same of 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?

PL: For Adorno's thinking of negativity and the Frankfurt School art is an autonomous and alternative sphere of society. And it's art's alterity and autonomy that is the condition for its power to undermine the capitalistic order. That's why, for these thinkers, it's not a question of morality to reject popular mass media of entertainment, it's, I would say an ‚ontological' question, because these media give not room for reflecting the mode of existence in capitalist society. But Adorno's position is not so much definite as it seems at first sight. I was surprised reading in Dialectics of Enlightment that, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, a total excess of distraction comes, in its extremity, close to art. This thought, it occurs to me, resonates Siegfried Kracauer's utopia of distraction of the 1920s dealing with modern mass media, especially cinema. In this passage of their book, Adorno and Horkheimer are saying, and that is revolutionary for me, nothing less than that an accumulation and intensification of distraction is able to fulfil 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 about

what Adorno would say of the Internet.