

Attention shortage?

Attention crisis induces reflection on attention

Studium Generale: *Under pressure*

June 11, 2019

Cor van der Weele

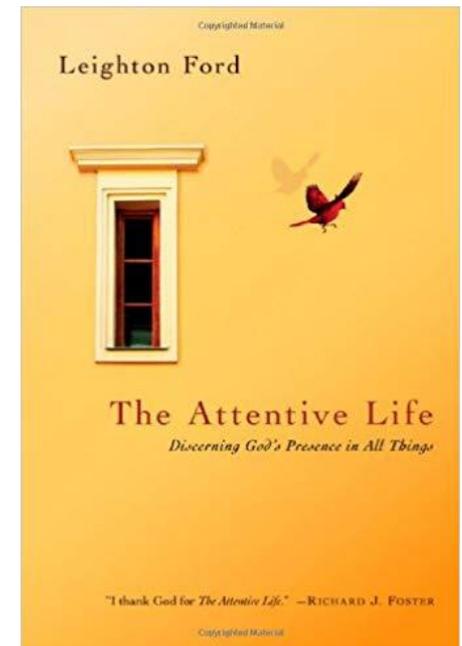
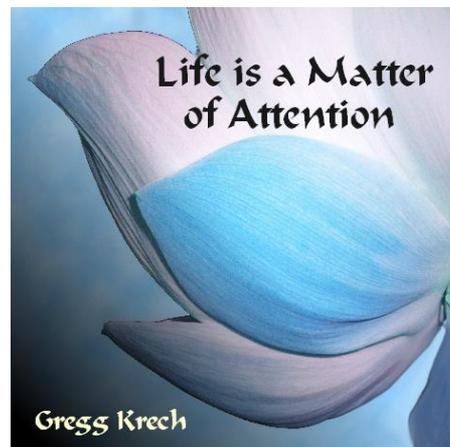
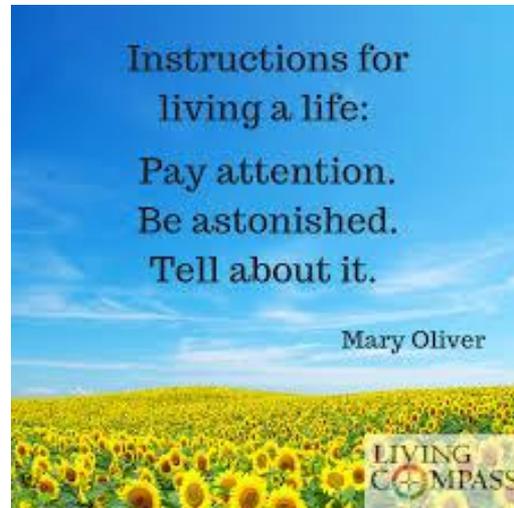
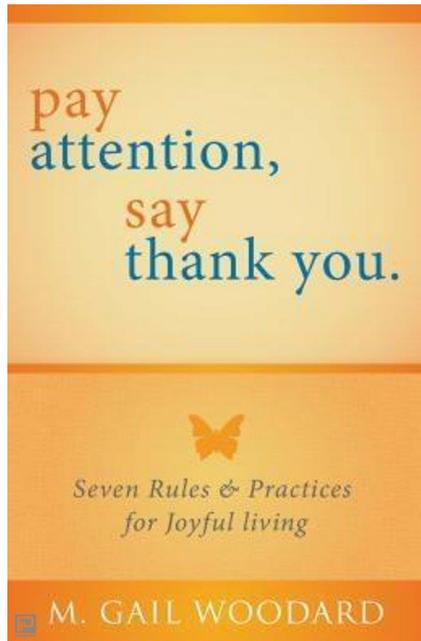
Philosophy Group



William James: “My experience is what I agree to attend to”



Attention often presented as good and beautiful



Seeing with new eyes (things that are not necessarily beautiful)

Tracey Emin about *My bed*: “I had a kind of mini nervous breakdown in my very small flat and didn't get out of bed for four days. And when I did finally get out of bed, I was so thirsty I made my way to the kitchen crawling along the floor. My flat was in a real mess- -everything everywhere, dirty washing, filthy cabinets, the bathroom really dirty, everything in a really bad state. I crawled across the floor, pulled myself up on the sink to get some water, and made my way back to my bedroom, and as I did I looked at my bedroom and thought, "Oh, my God. What if I'd died and they found me here?" And then I thought, "What if here wasn't here? What if I took out this bed--with all its detritus, with all the bottles, the shitty sheets, the vomit stains, the used condoms, the dirty underwear, the old newspapers--what if I took all of that out of this bedroom and placed it into a white space? How would it look then?" And at that moment I saw it, and it looked fucking brilliant. And I thought, this wouldn't be the worst place for me to die; this is a beautiful place that's kept me alive.”

From an interview of Julian Schnabel with Tracey Emin in *Lehman Maupin Interview Magazine*, June 2006, pp 102-109.



My bed was made in 1998 and exhibited at the Tate Gallery in 1999.



Tracey Emin *My Bed* 1998, © Tracey Emin. All rights reserved, DACS 2014

Photo credit: Courtesy The Saatchi Gallery, London / Photograph by Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd



Attention crisis requires us to think about attention

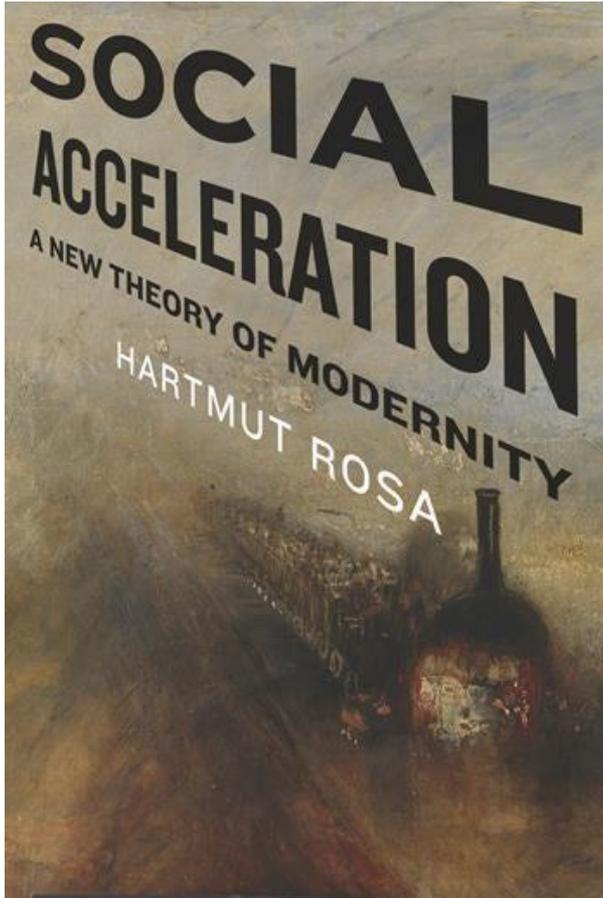
1. Attention has become a scarce resource as we suffer from cognitive overload

- Fighting distraction by learning to focus (individually)
- Reclaiming stolen attention (collectively)

2. Broader look is needed

- There are other valuable modes of attention than focus
- We need to understand emotional and social aspects
- Distraction again





LOOKBOOKHQ

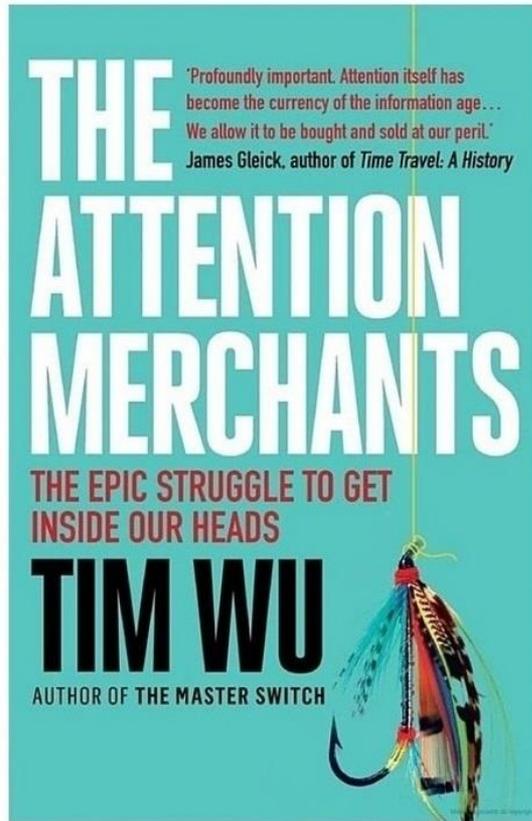
The Attention Economy

The Impact of Attention Scarcity on Modern Marketing

[READ THE E-BOOK ▶](#)

Website of UX design: “We may think of our user’s attention as a fleeting thing that we only have so much time to attract, then hold, then fight to keep.”





New York, 1833:

Benjamin Day started *The New York Sun* with a new business model

- Price per paper 1 cent (instead of 6)
- Reader's attention resold to advertisers

“What Day understood-more firmly, more clearly than anyone before him-was that while his readers may have thought themselves his customers, they were in fact his product.”

→ The history of this idea



The model: draw attention with apparently free stuff, then resell it

“But a consequence of the model is total dependence of gaining and holding attention. This means that under competition, the race will naturally run to the bottom: attention will almost invariably gravitate to the more garish, lurid, outrageous alternatives – whatever stimulus may more likely engage ‘automatic’ attention as opposed to our ‘controlled’ attention.”

→ The Sun, 1835: ‘astronomical discoveries’: Life on the moon – large, winged, human-like creatures.. (Wu, p.17).

→ Within five years, he and his rivals had discovered the public’s weakness for death and violence, incessant trolling and finally fake news.

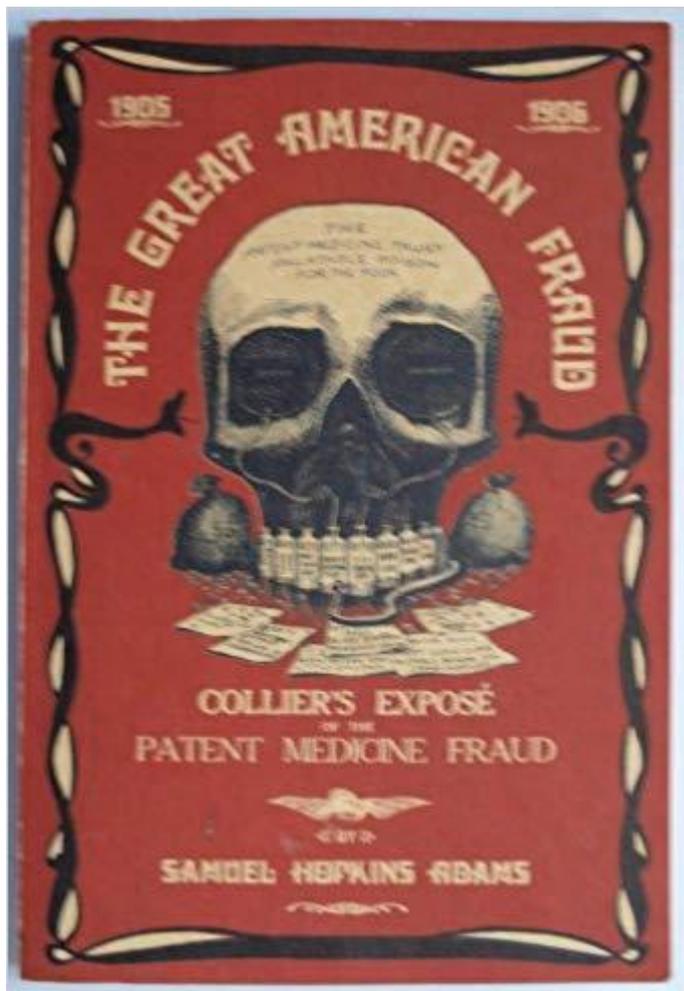


“The exploitation of human attention is in some deeper way the exploitation of our persons” (Wu, p. 23)

Backlashes

- Disenchantment
- Regulatory action
 - E.g. Life elixirs (patent medicines), e.g.
CLARK STANLEY’S SNAKE OIL LINIMENT
LIQUOZONE
 - Investigative journalism: “The great American Fraud”
 - Legislation





Newspapers

Journals

Film

Radio

TV

Internet



“As William James observed, we must reflect that, when we reach the end of our days, our life experience will equal what we have paid attention to, whether by choice or default. We are at risk, without quite fully realizing it, of living lives that are less our own than we imagine.”

“We must act, individually and collectively, to make our attention our own again, and so reclaim ownership of the very experience of life.” (Wu, p. 353)

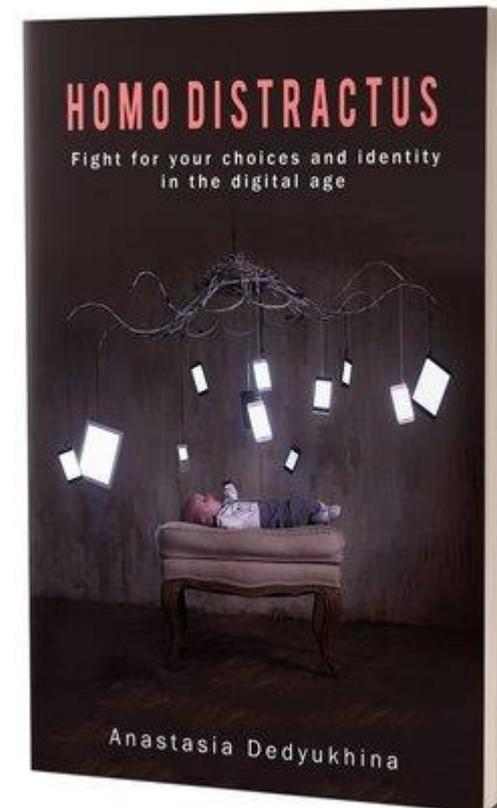


Homo Distractus

How The Modern Economy Thrives On Our Attention And How To Fight It Back

→ Taking back control with 4 Principles

- Time management
- Space management
- Relationship management
- Self management



MAITREYABANDHU

Life WITH FULL ATTENTION

A PRACTICAL COURSE IN MINDFULNESS

How to IMPROVE Concentration & Focus

FOCUS YOUR ATTENTION



A Two-Minute Mindfulness Practice to Unhijack Your Attention



Highly Effective Methods To Help You Focus and Get Things Done!

the Attention, FOCUS & Concentration Success Manual

pay attention!

FOCUS!

Keep it Together!

ATTENTION ACTIVITIES for KIDS

THE OT TOOLBOX

PETER HOLLINS

THE SCIENCE OF POWERFUL FOCUS

23 METHODS FOR MORE PRODUCTIVITY, MORE DISCIPLINE, LESS PROCRASTINATION, LESS STRESS

IMPROVE YOUR CONCENTRATION

How to Stay Focused Despite Distractions



"Did you know that you have about 60,000 thoughts each and every day? You've got the capacity to manifest any state of being you choose, you are in control! What you can manifest and accomplish if you can master the art of concentration and focus and that is what will help you with today, if you let me."



Michael Widmore

“The winners of the coming decade are those who manage their attention well” (NRC, May 24, 2019)



Fight distraction & concentration leakage

- Manage your e-mail, manage your time, manage your relaxation, manage the amount of external stimuli
- Stop multitasking

Our brains are overwhelmed by stimuli → attention is scarce, we need to smartly manage it.



Broader look is needed:

- There are other valuable modes of attention than focus
- We need to understand emotional and social aspects



Is focus the only valuable attention goal?

- Is relaxing only a means for working better?
 - Think of a walk with ‘evenly suspended attention’
- Is focused attention the only valuable model for work contexts?



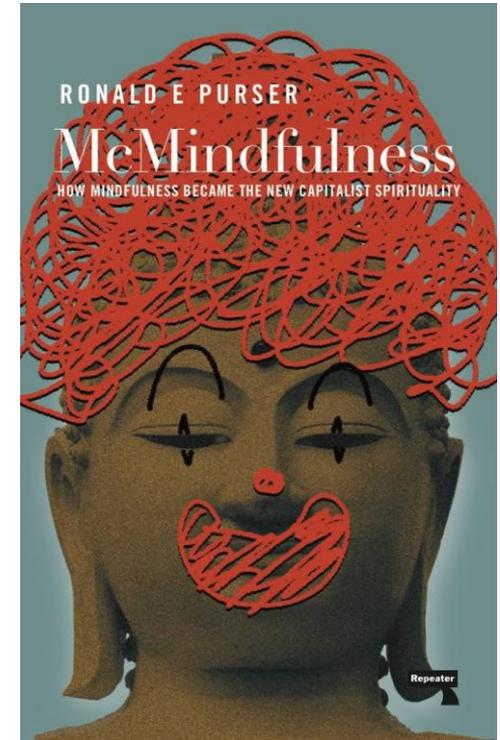
“How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality”

Mindfulness as a quick fix



At work, we are also part of the attention economy

Jon Kabat Zinn:
It is about paying attention to the awareness of awareness



Is focused attention the only valuable model for work?

1. Freud (1912) mentioned rules for analysts. The first was ‘evenly suspended attention’ : not directing one’s notice to anything in particular’ (against overload, for a state of openness and receptivity)

A countermodel of attentiveness, a full reversal of the “searchlight” model, for that kind of illuminating ‘selection’ carries the risk of seeing what one already knows. *

2. Some professions limit the scope of their member’s attention, while others train them to notice “everything”

- Compare surgeons with police detectives and investigative reporters**

*Jonathan Crary p 367/368

** Zerubavel p. 18/19



■ Metaphors of attention express different relations with the environment

- Spotlight → concentration / focus
- Slow down / stand still → “new eyes”
- Open / evenly suspended → broader / relational / reciprocal?



Emotional and Social Aspects (ESA)

1. “When tech knows you better than you know yourself.”
2. Attention between people is a reciprocal need: we use the internet also to belong, to be seen, to be admired
3. Emotional avoidances and societal patterns

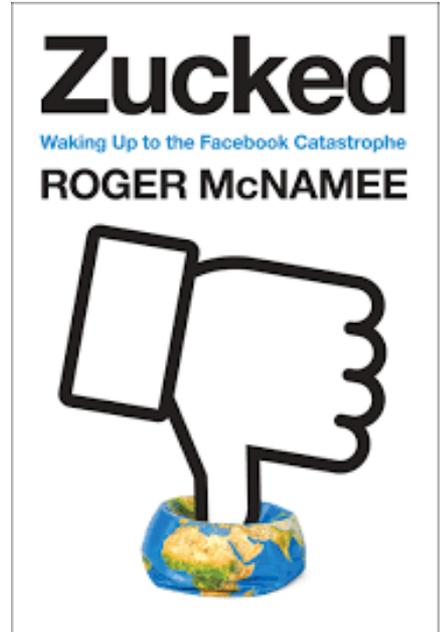


ESA 1:

“When tech knows you better than you know yourself.”

Google and Facebook constantly follow us to figure out how to keep us engaged

- The science of persuasion and ‘brain hacking’
 - Emotions
 - Anger / hate
 - Extreme content
 - polarization
- Filters, algorithms, suggestions, likes



Wu: “But a consequence of the model is total dependence of gaining and holding attention. This means that under competition, the race will naturally run to the bottom: attention will almost invariably gravitate to the more garish, lurid, outrageous alternatives – whatever stimulus may more likely engage ‘automatic’ attention as opposed to our ‘controlled’ attention.”



ESA 2:

Internet & social media help us to belong & be seen and admired

Attention between people is reciprocal: We do not only pay attention to others, we also need others to pay attention to us.

→ We use internet also for our own need to belong, to be seen, to be admired

Wu: at a certain point there were more bloggers than blog-readers in the USA

“Instagram is the crowning achievement of the ‘celebrification’ of everyday life and ordinary people, a strategy developed by attention merchants for the sake of creating cheap content.” (p. 314)

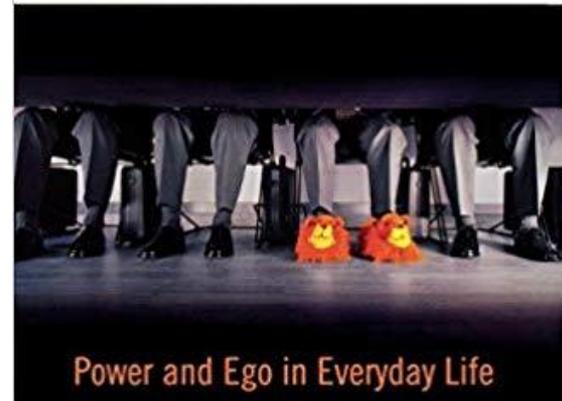


Charles Derber (1979 / 2000):

Our competitive and overly individualistic society changes makes us insecure

- reciprocity becomes competition
- What looks like self-celebration is really self-doubt

The Pursuit of Attention



Power and Ego in Everyday Life

Charles Derber



ESA 3: Avoidance is also based on emotions

- Attractions (Netflix, youtube, Instagram)
- Avoiding what is difficult or unwelcome
- Bubbles
- Eli Pariser on our 'information diet': what we like best is not necessarily the healthiest diet; we need a mix
- Confirmation bias → polarization

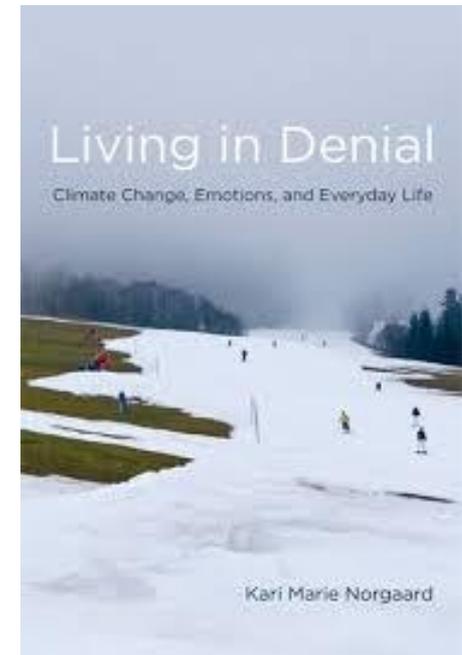
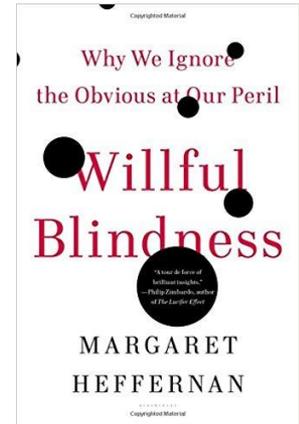


Avoidance as a source of selective attention

“Strategic ignorance” (paradoxical phenomenon)

- “If you want to eat meat you should not know too much about it”
- Kari Norgaard: Avoidance of climate change.
- Avoidance of responsibility
- When you feel powerless or uncomfortable: ‘protect yourself a little bit’
- Societal patterns: tradition is a place to hide

→ Might we be strategically ignorant about our own role in attention patterns?



Distraction again: not only constraints of time and brains

Tigchelaar: Our brains are overwhelmed by stimuli
→ attention is scarce, we need to smartly manage it.

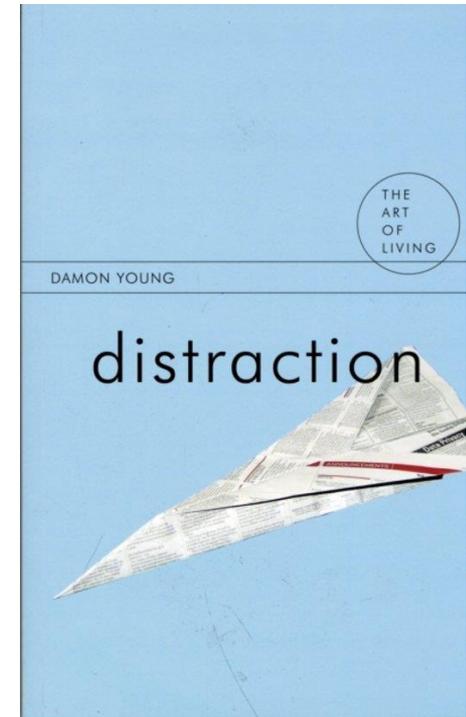
Damon Young: distraction is of all times

We avoid existential questions through distraction (we seek respite, fill the void..)

Nietzsche: “Everyone is in flight from himself”

“We allow ourselves to be managed by machines or cultivate habits of avoidance”.... Work is alienating and we turn to youtube or twitter. We seek consolation...

... but it sucks our vitality. We need people to have really good conversations with and discover what is valuable in life



In conclusion

Yes we need more skills for dealing with attention. For that goal, we need a broader view of attention than an informational overload view.

This is an individual and a collective challenge and it includes e.g. :

- Developing practices of managing individual attention
- Discovering different functions and forms and ideals of attention
- Understanding the social and emotional complexities of attention
- Philosophical (etc) attention for attention, e.g. attention & good life

→ Attention crisis is also an opportunity

