

ORATION ON RHYTHM

CYCLE THREE: HOLDING TENSION

Samuel Brzeski





The capacity to drive a thought away once and for all is the gateway to eternity. The infinite in an instant.

Simone Weil

We have to try to cure our faults by attention and not by will.



Reading and re-reading the same passage ten times, the reader gives up on the book. They keep finding the text interrupted by their own thoughts. They read to access their own experience, to recall their past, consider their relationships or establish their views more firmly. They are unable to read others without primarily reading themselves. They drop the book into their lap and go back to their phone.

Kae Tempest



*A receipt,
blown crazily
across the parking lot,
was, perhaps,
a moth*

Rae Armantrout



In *Attention! A Short History*, Joshua Cohen maps the history of attention alongside the history of reading, and subsequently, the history of writing, and the history of printmaking.

Attention is seen as a relational property — between reader and text, between subject and object, between receiver and information flow — which has developed with the technologies of textual information transfer.

The concentration necessary to follow a text, to interpret its meaning, is intrinsically linked to the internal process of the production of meaning in the mind of the reader.

While reading silently—letting throat and tongue rest, with even the lips stilled, the finger kept from pointing—the mind can mind itself. Freed of the body, it can skip and jump, rush ahead and fall behind, both in the text it's reading (earlier pages remembered, later pages expected), and in the text that is itself (memories and expectations).

Reading is an act
in which a retreat,
(or an escape)
from the world
and its surroundings
is fully acceptable.

Reading is an opening
between writer and reader,
a vectoral communication flow
usually experienced alone
in a meditative or contemplative state.

Reading is a careful holding of attention
on the peripheries of a tumultuous life,
a concentration, a dedication, a devotion of time.

Starting with the ancients,
Cohen moves
from the voice,
to the chisel,
to the quill,
to the pen,
to the press,
to the digital,
all the time studying
the technological advancements
within the systems and networks
of information flow.

These advancements
in speed,
in pace,
in methodology,
and in dissemination,
are felt in the rhythmic relations
and tensions between writer
and reader
and text,
in the form
of a holding of attention.

The holding of attention is linked
etymologically to the holding of tension —
deriving from archery's innate tautness and direction —
a reaching out, a decision of a subject for scrutiny,

an aiming, a purpose,
a decided intention.

Attention suggests a primacy,
an acuteness of direction,
a vector — a passage
from one to another,
a study.

Attention is an interaction — a relation —
an essential mediator charged with assuring
the relationship with the environment.
One must attend to that which enables it to live.
Attention occupies the mind.

The language of finance
is often employed
when describing
the economy of attention:
we pay attention
to objects which yield information.
In exchange for this payment,
the transaction produces
a kind of intellectual profit.
We make value judgements
on objects that deserve
our time to be spent on,
that can be invested in,
in case a better return on investment
can be procured elsewhere.

Within the economy of attention,
attentional time has become a currency
and its interruption the methodology.
Attention creates a hierarchy of value
in a currency of time,
as we ask ourselves:
What is worth my time?
What should I allow
to absorb me?

With time as currency,
each person decides
upon their individual value system
that dictates what is worth
the holding of their attention,
the holding of tension.
To pay attention to one thing
means, by default,
the sacrificing of something else,
as every subject that receives attention
results in the refusal of another.

This selection forms the basis
of the individual, and the foundation
of the personality:
*Life, then, can become a measure or frame,
an event of self-composition, or curation.*

Joshua Cohen

It is difficult to establish
just exactly when attention
is being paid
is being held.
More easily,
we can identify it's lacking.
Following this, Cohen defines attention
as a property that is most commonly defined
in terms of its absence
rather than it's presence,

*If attention is locatable, it is sensory, if it is measurable, it is processual; as both, as
neither, it can be defined only by its absence—by a subject's inability to focus; an
inability to decide on what to focus; an inability to switch focuses; an inability to resist
switching focuses.*

Joshua Cohen

Once one has chosen the subject of attention
within one's own personal hierarchy of value,
focus must be drawn upon
in acts of concentration
to refuse other sources.
Focus is problematic,
and procrastination is rife.

Within the age of *The Digital*
there is a scarcity of attention,
with multiple sources and rhythms
playing out simultaneously,
all vying for the holding
of their individual tensions.
Within this system,
the attention-property
is converted into a commodity,
and the attention-function
is converted into a process of exchange.

Attention is stolen:
it is stressed and divided,
parcelled out, rationed.
The distribution of attention
is based on a logic of competition,
of who shouts loudest,
or even has a voice
in the first place.



*My pulse is stuffed in my handbag, stuck to used Kleenex.
I hear it vibrate, eight times, and then it stops.*

Claire Trévien



*how good can we even feel
when any minute
our life together could be ruined
by imagining a lobster
wearing jeans*

Crispin Best



Instances of focus
where attention is held
we can call 'events' of attention.

Time spent drifting in the grey void
is just as important
as time spent in focus
within the event zone.
For there is no focus,
no holding of tension,
without the corresponding
slackness of the empty mind.

It is impossible to be
in a constant state of alertness,
in a constant state of tension.

The rhythm of attention
is found in this play between
tension and slackness,
in terms of periodicity,
in terms of frequency and duration:
an oscillation between focus and distraction,
defined by the void that exists between events,
the void that is composed of sticky connective tissue.

Each attention flow
has its own rhythm,
its own frequency,
its own intensity.
The sine wave of rhythmic tension
peaks and troughs in moments of high tension

and low slackness.

Intersecting rhythms of attention flow can accumulate,
constituting a confluence of simultaneous
rhythmic events of attention,
each of which are unfolding
on multiple different arcs:
each of which have their own timeline,
their own scale of temporality,
their own hierarchy of value
unfolding in staggered formation.

There is a tempo alteration when shifting
the focus of concentration
from one thought to another,
from one medium to another,
from one rhythm to another
from one attention to another.

The attention-shift can happen
in moments of chaotic ensemble,
when one information flow
overcomes the other
by sheer intensity
and stolen will.
A kind of act of brute force,
a sort of 'shoe horning' it in.

Other times, attention-shifts
are constituted by more fluid transitions,
when a rhythmic peak has been reached,
when an intensity has passed,
when the mind is given space
to wander freely onto the next
object of focus.



To live through the days sometimes you moan like deer. Sometimes you sigh. The world says stop that. Another sigh. Another stop that. Moaning elicits laughter, sighing upsets. Perhaps each sigh is drawn into existence to pull in, pull under, who knows; truth be told, you could no more control those sighs than that which brings the sighs about.

Claudia Rankine



*The dark collects our empties, empties our ashtrays.
Did you mean "this could go on forever" in a good way?*

Ben Lerner

*Up in the fragment rafters, moths seek out a finer dust.
Please feel free to cue or cut
the lights.*



the actual substance of our daily lives is total electronic distraction

Jonathan Franzen



In a world in which a multitude
of simultaneous and overpowering information flows
have transcended the ability for comprehension,
we are met with the prospect of overflow.

*Overflow is the opposite of scarcity: it is the boundless upwelling of information.
Moreover, and in contrast to abundance, it is overwhelming, affecting our ability to
process its effects. In studies of the economics of attention, overflow addresses how
people choose which subjects to prioritise when they have too little time and too much
information.*

James Bridle

Overflow is a terminal condition of stress.
Overflow is when the grey void of distraction and drift
is aggressively invaded by intersecting attentional demands.
Overflow is an inability to comprehend
the shifts and flux of rhythmic flow.

Prolonged exposure to the condition of overflow
risks total cognitive annihilation;
with the all-too-muchness
of the eternal instant constituting
a continual psychotic haunting.

In *And: Phenomenology of the End*,
Franco Berardi discusses how the modern
acceleration in the transmission of signs
and the proliferation of sources of information
has transformed the human perception of time.

Cyberspace (the universe of
transmitters and digital networks
that permeate present day culture)
has infinitely expanded.

Cybertime (the universe
of organic receivers in the form
the human brain and its capacity
to compute information)

has stayed the same.

Cyberspace has expanded,
but cybertime has not.

Cybertime, that is, the duration of perception, cannot be expanded beyond certain limits for it is bounded by emotional and cultural temporality, as well as by organic restrictions ... The technical composition of the world has changed, but the modalities of cognitive appropriation and elaboration cannot adapt to this change in a linear way... The expansion of cyberspace implies an acceleration of cybertime that has pathological effects on the living terminal, the human mind with its physical, emotional, and cultural limits.

Franco Berardi

This condition of temporal crisis results
in a constant stress on attention —
attention overload being the result
of an infinitely expanding cyberspace
meeting an organically restrained cybertime.

Organic and temporal restrictions
met with an impulse/ desire for more more more,
can lead to an attempting of the holding
of multiple events of attention simultaneously.

Multitasking implies the quick shift from one informational frame to another. Although the human mind seems perfectly suited for multitasking, doing so actually triggers a psychological mutation, producing new forms of mental suffering such as panic, attention deficit disorders, burnout, mental exhaustion, and depression.

Franco Berardi

Berardi thinks that this focus on multi-tasking and stress on attention,
leads to a reduction of time available for affection between human beings.
He outlines how this lack of time
for empathy and understanding
leads first to loneliness and existential misery,
then on to angst and melancholia.

However, successful multi-tasking
is knowing how to modulate
the sampling level at which we take in
and deal with the information drawn
from each of the considered spheres of reference —
respecting that what we gain quantitatively
by considering several objects simultaneously,
we lose qualitatively in intensity
with every new addition of information flow,
which brings about its own rhythmic signature.

Rhythmic multi-tasking
is an understanding of
the flux and flow,
the undulations and peaks,
the frequencies and intensities

of each of the spheres of reference.

Rhythmic multi-tasking considers
that each simultaneous process
has its own temporal arc
with its own time signature.

Rhythmic multi-tasking expects
an echo shift to occur
when the holding of tension
is transferred from one
rhythmic flow to another.

Rhythmic multi-tasking involves
the taking on of multiple forms
of harmonic attention flow
that peak and trough
in a staggered formation,
allowing for a composition
of attention that does not
overwhelm the mind of the receiver,
which is so limited by organic temporality.

Rhythmic multi-tasking is the inclusion
of empathy and understanding,
of intimacy and affection,
as independent and vital
attention flows that need
just as much care and consideration
as other spheres of reference,
and whose neglect will lead
to an overall rhythmic composition
that is mismatched, out of tune
out of balance and out of touch.



This is a cut-down chandelier...

Chelsea Minnis

And it is like coughing at the piano before you start playing a terrible waltz...

The past should go away but it never does...

And it is like a swimming pool at the foot of the stairs...



*What's the worst thing about this poem?
Well, it might actually throw the whole thing out
like, this is me at full stretch and this is the best you'll ever get
What did you expect? Do you even know what it's like being alive right now?
Someone's probably emailing someone else right now*

Samantha Walton



Humans think in herds and shoals
looking in the same direction
as those others surrounding;
Cars slow down on the motorway
when there has been an accident.
Sporting crowds bay and brawl
in moments of acute tension.
Episodes of political distraction
even when quite poorly executed
can still gain significant traction
through widespread panic and action.

Bearing in mind this inherent relationality
between attention flows and objects
which oscillate among human beings,
Yves Citton proposes an *Ecology of Attention*
Identifying three forms of attention flow
as collective, joint and individuating,
Citton places importance upon the understanding
of the flux and shifts in subjects of attention.

*Attention should be thought of as an interface: it is what links a subject to the object it
has selected.*

Yves Citton

Citton identifies the relationship between
presence and temporality as a key formation
in the foundations of attention

*Attention is a form of presence to oneself and to one's environment which is
intrinsically linked to the flow of time. I can only be attentive to the present: you
cannot ask me to be attentive (now) to what happened two days ago, or what will
happen in an hour.*

Yves Citton

For Citton, the principle of *joint attention*
is a matter of presence and proximity.
The ecology of attention is one in which
subjects are sensitive to emotional alteration
and rhythmic variation in moments of co-presence.

*Whether two lovers look in the same direction together or a crowd of tens of
thousands of participants mimics the movement of a wave on the terraces of a
stadium, joint attention involves the shared feeling of a co-presence that is sensitive to*

Yves Citton

the emotional variations of the individuals involved.

Joint attention connects us. It does so through the play of surfaces, whose lustre attracts the gaze of some, which in turn attracts the gaze of others. But it also connects us more deeply: it is because the attention of others touches our 'innermost being' that we are so sensitive to its slightest variations.

As our online communications increase,
Citton calls for a reconstitution of
convivial spaces of presential attention:
the culture house
the place of worship
the classroom
the library
the theatre
the museum
the gallery
the café

Within these spaces, *attention vacuoules* can be formed
in which bodily presence can be focused upon
with the diminishment of smartphone distractions.
Citton lays particular emphasis on instances of performance
— the live concert, the teacher, the gesture —
that attain the levels of co-presence
necessary for a form of well-functioning joint attention.

Citton encourages individuals to extract themselves
from the hold of the alertness media regime
and its stress upon overflow and overstimulation.
Instead, within the attention ecology,
one should learn to devote oneself, at different times,
to hyper-focusing, to open vigilance and to free-floating attention,
in order to navigate within
what he calls echosystems:

The 'mediasphere' very quickly came into view as an 'ecosystem': against our habitual way of thinking, in which the media are thought of as channels through which information circulates, it seemed sounder to see them as vaults in which resonance phenomena are organized, resulting in the synchronization of our movements, affects and imaginations. Joint attention is also based on the play of echoes... From birth to death, our attention never stops going from one echo to another, and we are its resonance.

Yves Citton

Within the play of echoes of joint attention,
Citton encourages a principle of *attentive listening*,
a listening to what preoccupies the attention of the other.
By fostering this attentive listening
we can hear the echo chamber
that nurtures the voice of the soloist,
we can perceive the resonating vault
behind the media buzz,

we can do justice to the joint attention
that gives us the confidence to speak,
and we can communicate with the commons.

This confluence of echoes
of attentive listening,
of co-presence,
is a rhythmic ecology of attention
in which we all must become mindful
of the peaks and troughs
and flows and fluctuations
of the rhythms that surround us.



*For too long, I've been passing through one of those periods in
which significance is found only in dullness. I don't know what I
need. I need to get out of these wet leggings and into a dry Martini.*

Heather Phillipson

*Let's prefer these pointless days while we can. Everything is linked.
Everything is nothing, to be accurate.*



I hate when life like an autobahn explains itself

Sam Riviere



*What poets do is pay attention, even more so than other people; it is the idea that
poetry itself can be an urgently necessary, even ethical form of staying awake and
alert to our immediate, everyday lives; and the conviction that poetry can serve as a
crucial antidote for the acute case of cultural attention-deficit disorder brought on by
today's media saturation and information overload.*

Andrew Epstein

The reading and the writing of poetry
is a form of attention at its most intense.
It is the holding of time,
the holding of tension,
of the sound and rhythms
of nuance and suggestion.

Within the delicate formation
of the rhythm of a poem,
just one formal fluctuation
(the moving of a line break,
the substitution of a word,

a breath in an alternate location)
can wholly transform
the entire intention,
of the aura
of the feeling
of the poem.

In the rendering of quotidian experience,
in the paying of attention to occurrences
and objects of interest that sometimes pass us by,
poetry is a property of the sticky connective tissue
in the void that exists between events;
a linkage, an attention,
a rhizomatic connection.

*Everyday-life poetry attends to, and in some cases decries, the very rhythms, practices,
and structures of daily life that our sped-up, addled culture threatens to obscure.*

Andrew Epstein

Poetry is free from the exigencies of narrative form.
Just as in the texture of everyday experience,
poetic form does not follow
the unlikely plot lines
seen in novels and films
of situation-complication-resolution.

Real life is not so clean:
plots and situations remain unresolved,
ideas and feelings are unreliable,
guess work, flux and flow,
the process of forgetting,
of letting things go,
the path of figuring-it-out for oneself
or of remaining in the state of not knowing
remain key to the poetic experience.

Poetry is the language of the unknown
of nuance and suggestion
of the grey void between events.
The reading and writing of poetry
is an attention given to this limbo state:
a necessary focus upon the sticky connective tissue
in the void where true time lurks.

And now I see that poetry is a form of attention, itself the consequence of attention

Donald Revell



*If you want a Halloween party
We will have to hurry up and buy some decorations
Decide which of our friends we want to invite
I don't want to invite Rob*

Richard Barrett



O Day!
literal
and unsymbolic
day:
silken: grey: sunny

James Schuyler



The irony of attempting to write
a text dealing with the difficulties
surrounding focus, multi-tasking
and the holding of attention,
whilst in the middle of a global pandemic
and thus experiencing
one of the most distracted
periods of my life
(of our lives?)
has not escaped me.

This text has been written
in conditions of limbo
of various sorts,
between frantic checks
of news applications,
between burgeoning restrictions
and flight cancellations,
between vaccines,
between mutations,
between quarantines,
between the gradual breakdown
of one relationship,
and the tentative rebuilding of another.

Between the flattening and stretching
and warping of time on a scale
and in a manner
previously unfathomable,
between a slow separation
of myself from myself
and of myself from all others,
and of all others from all others,
whilst sitting in solitary confinement,
surrounded by cushions
continually checking my phone.



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