

« **Restructuring the Attention Economy: Literary Interpretation as an Antidote to Mass Media Distraction** » in Cynla Akdere & Christine Baron, *Economics and Literature. A Comparative and Interdisciplinary Approach*, London, Routledge, 2017, chap. 15.

Yves Citton

**Restructuring the Attention Economy:
Literary Interpretation as an Antidote to Mass Media Distraction**

ABSTRACT: If human attention is our scarcest resource, as we are told by prophets of the attention economy, then the capacity to “receive” (cultural) goods matters even more than the capacity to produce them. In the age of scarce attention, literature appears simultaneously as luxury (who has the time to read 700 page novels nowadays?), as resistance against the alienation of our attention by market-driven media forces (doesn’t the poetical line provide a vital alternative to the bottom line?) and as a source of deeper knowledge about the fundamental mechanisms of valuation (what is valorized except that to which we pay attention?).

A considerable amount of articles, conferences, monographs or collective publications have been devoted, over the past 20 years, to the relations between economics and literature. Most of them have focused on the economic content of literary works, answering the general question: *how authors X or novel Y represent economic relations?* While this remains a stimulating way to have economics and literature cross each other’s path, I will suggest another approach to set them into dialogue, by taking stock of the new developments of what is increasingly called “the attention economy”.

Poets, playwrights, novelists and artists did not wait for economists to realize that attention was a scarce resource. As Richard Lanham eloquently stressed, what is rhetoric, but attention economy practiced and taught more than 2000 years before Herbert Simon, Dallas Smythe or Richard Serra explicitly theorized it in the 1970s? Even before modern art competed for mass audiences, the notion of “style” has often been elaborated as an attention-catching device (Lanham 2006). But if it is accurate to say literature preceded economics in paying attention to attention, this article hopes to suggest that literature may still be ahead of the game, now that attention has been widely recognized as being our most scarce and most precious resource. Were we to conceive of the literary experience primarily as an attentional practice, we might find in it a possibility to overcome some of the dead ends in which our commercially driven mass media have trapped our collective attention.

The Attention Economy and the Upsetting of Old Economics

Discussions about the attention economy took off around 1996-1997 with a series of interventions and debates launched around Michael Goldhaber, who claimed a “new economy” was emerging: “like any economy the new one is based on what is both most

desirable and ultimately most scarce, and now this is the attention that comes from other people” (Goldhaber 1996). The main argument could be summarized as follows.

In the “old” economy, which lasted from the Neolithic period until the end of the 20th century, scarcity would concern mostly material resources and goods. The production of material goods required human attention, but economies were organized around the trading of the things which embodied productive labor. These goods were used in the (reproduction of human life, but the economic sphere dealt with the *indirect* (re)production of human life through material goods.

In the “new” economy, which is only emerging at the beginning of the third millennium, an increasing amount of resources are devoted to the *direct* (re)production of human life, as witnessed by the expansion of services (to the expense of agriculture and industry) in the distribution of the workforce. Humans always took “direct” care of other humans, but it was usually done outside of the economic sphere (by mothers, grandparents, children, priests, etc.). As the service economy takes an ever expanding share of our GDP, producing human capacity and human relations is increasingly important¹.

As the digital economy unfolds, the production of cultural goods, which also dramatically expanded throughout the 20th century, provides cultural services not only on a new scale, but within a new configuration: digital cultural goods (text, music or video files), even if they still require material resources to be invented and produced in their prototype, can now be reproduced, communicated and broadcasted at a marginal cost close to zero—at least as far as the individual emitter and the receiver are concerned, since apart from the purchase of the computer and from the monthly connection cost accruing to the individual subscriber, the collectivity still needs to mobilize a lot of material resources and energy to produce, operate and cool the servers spread throughout the world.

The ability offered to individuals to share or download a book, an image, a song, a film on the Internet “for free” (once equipment, connection and electricity cost are taken care of) has led many to focus their definition of “the new economy” on the *non-rival* nature of cultural goods in a digital environment: I can give you my music file without losing it, whereas I lose my car or my pen if I give them to you. The attention economy is here to remind us that cultural goods are non-rival in their communication, but *not* in their reception—where another form of rivalry counterbalances the superabundance of available goods: the opportunity cost of devoting one’s attention to *this* rather than *that* cultural product.

In the “new” economy, therefore, the main scarcity—and hence the new source of value—is no longer in the material goods traded among economic agents, but in the *human attention* needed to “consume” them. Since it is still necessary to produce computers, servers and power plants (and food, medicine, houses and clothing) for people to sustain their life and for cultural goods to circulate, the new economy did not so much *replace* the old one, as it *adds another layer* which is rapidly taking a hegemonic role over the whole economic sphere, reconfiguring the lower layers in line with its new logic².

Talks about the “information overload” or about the need to “(re)design organizations for an information-rich world” (Toffler1970; Simon1971) predates the late 1990s, but it is only at this moment that “the attention economy” became a household name (among Internet

¹ An important critique of the many delusions generated by this “great transformation” of our economies has been written by Méchoulan 2011.

² For a broader view on this evolution, see Moulrier Boutang, Yann (2012.)

futurologists and marketers, if not among economists)—as the following Ngram Viewer charts, based on occurrences compiled from the Google Books database show (see figure 1 for English and figure 2 for French).

< **FIGURE 1 AND FIGURE 2 HERE** >

Apart from the debates generated around Michael Goldhaber's claims in close interaction with the discussions about a new digital economy, Georg Franck published his book *Ökonomie der Aufmerksamkeit. Ein Entwurf* in 1998, which sketched a broader sociological approach for the attention economy, with an emphasis on issues of visibility, celebrity, reputation, and prominence (Frank 1998, 1999). In 2001, John C. Beck and Thomas H. Davenport released for Harvard Business School the most widely known book adapting these issues for managers and marketers, helping them build strategies more finely tuned to the "attention-scape" specific to each situation (Beck, Davenport 2001). While advertisers, spin doctors and PR experts were more and more explicitly referring to the attention economy, cultural critics like Jonathan Beller were putting it at the core of their denunciation of the capitalist society of the spectacle (Beller 2006).

From one side of the ideological spectrum to the other, there seemed to be an agreement on the revolution about to happen: "In the past, attention was taken for granted, and goods and services were valuable., many goods and services will be given away for free for a few seconds or minutes of the user's attention" (Beck & Davenport 2001: 213). The attention economy upsets our oldest economic habits: instead of having to pay to gain books, we will soon be paid to read them. Since a book, a film or a commercial add exist only where they are viewed by human subjects, the consumer is now holding the most precious currency in her head (rather than in her purse). In this new economy, "to look is to labor": "mass media, taken as a whole, is the deterritorialized factory, in which spectators do the work of making themselves over to meet the libidinal, political, temporal, corporeal and ideological protocols of an ever-intensifying capitalism" (Beller 2006: 112 & 181; see Smythe 1977 for an earlier version of this argument).

While economics as we knew it still rules the industrial production of the paper, films, computers, trucks and container ships which bring us the means to connect to the Internet, the attention economy is setting a whole new set of rules, turning all of our models upside down, since the main form of scarcity is now owned by the receiver rather than by the producer. In our societies ever more devoted to services, to the direct production of human relations and to the communication of cultural goods, economics has to be updated and re-invented, by taking attention as its new form of capital.

Towards a Literary Management of Attention?

While literary scholars will welcome being paid to read, they may think the theoretical debates about the new currency of the new economy concern mostly economists. They would be wrong. What is happening with the upsetting of the traditional economic models is no less than *economics becoming literature.*, we literary scholars, are *already* paid to read, aren't we? (So are most economists and most researchers.) The attention economy provides us with a

most exciting example of intimate relation between economics and literature since attention economists are merely re-discovering what literary writers and critics had been practicing and theorizing for decades and centuries.

If we bring a new phrase into the search engine provided by Google Books Ngram Viewer (the “economy of attention”), and if we expand its historical scope further back, all the way to 1850 instead of 1950, a new picture emerges, different from the supposed “revolution” of the late 1990s (see figure 3 for the English and 4 for the French).

< **Figure 3 and 4 here** >

While expanding the historical scope merely reveals that people already wrote about the “*économie de l’attention*” in French before the Internet, since the use of the phrase had a first peak around 1900, the addition of “economy of attention” to the search in English tells us a much more interesting story. That the peak of paying attention to attention appears to be in the first quarter of the 20th century, rather than in the first decade of the 21st century, may be due to a statistical fluke (since today’s publishers of new books may not want their latest release to be made available on Google Books). What we can learn from going back to the data charted on these curves, however, is that the phrase “economy of attention” was not so much used by economists, or marketers, but rather—for more than a century before Michael Goldhaber and Georg Franck—by rhetoricians, literary critics, psychologists and theorists of aesthetics.

Two books devoted to the attention economy help us understand this displacement of the lexicographic curve, towards the beginning of the 20th century and towards the arts. Art historian Jonathan Crary produced the most fascinating and stimulating study to date on the history of the modern management of attention. He shows that the last decades of the 19th century witnessed a striking rise in the study of human attention as four parallel trends converged towards making it a crucial problem of the time: experimental psychologists developed new devices to measure it; managers needed new tricks to keep the workers attentive to the boring repetitive actions demanded by the assembly line; the emerging consumer society needed new baits to lure shoppers into freshly designed modern stores; new media technologies emerged to capture the spectators’ gaze into ever more amazing visual experiences (from the Kaiserpanorama to cinema and beyond). The current rediscovery of the crucial issues of the attention economy—including its pedagogical/pharmaceutical form of Attention Deficit Disorder—merely rehashes a fundamental problem is at least 150 years old:

Since the late 19th century, and increasingly during the last two decades, capitalist modernity has generated a constant re-creation of the conditions of sensory experience, in what could be called a revolutionizing of the means of perception. [...] Inattention, especially within the context of new forms of large scale industrialized production, was treated as a danger and a serious problem, even though it was often the very modernized arrangements of labor that produced inattention. It is possible to see one crucial aspect of modernity as an ongoing crisis of attentiveness, in which the changing configurations of capitalism continually push attention and distraction to new limits and thresholds, with an endless sequence of new products, sources of stimulation and streams of

information, and then respond with new methods of managing and regulating perception. (Crary 1999: 13-14).

Rhetorician Richard Lanham suggests we should broaden our historical horizon even further: attention economists have been around for more than 2000 years, since rhetoric, while “usually defined as ‘the art of persuasion’, might as well have been called ‘the economics of attention’” (Lanham 2006: xii). Whether the orator grabs our interest in his initial *captatio benevolentiae*, whether he sustains it by inserting stories in his argument, or whether he fuels it by appealing to our effects of compassion or indignation, his specialized skills consists in the management of his audience’s attention. Well before the assembly line, the Galeries Lafayette or cinema was invented, rhetoricians, literary writers and critics were already developing an economy (and an economics) of attention in their speeches, poems, tales, novels and treatises. Foresight or wishful thinking, Richard Lanham wants us to believe these literary skills—practiced for 2000 years and abundantly discussed as “economy of attention” by scholars in stylistics one century before the current rise of the “attention economy”—will soon be viewed as central to the current reconfiguration of our modes of production:

The devices that regulate attention are stylistic devices. Attracting attention style is all about. If attention is now at the center of the economy rather than stuff, so then is style. It moves from the periphery to the center. Style and substance trade places. And so do real property and intellectual property. [...] The arts and letters now stand at the center. They are the disciplines that study how attention is divided, how cultural capital is created and traded. When our children come home and tell us they have majored in English or art history, no longer need we tremble for their economic future. (Lanham 2006: xi-xii)

Hopeful (or humoristic) as this may sound, a good point is made. Most of what we (in the rich Western world) produce and consume depends crucially on questions of design, i.e., style (looks, brands, fashion, etc.). Hundreds and thousands of workers are hired, displaced, laid off, when a certain style (Apple, GM, Tommy Hilfiger) starts or stops being trendy. The countless bubbles on which our economic growth relies (before they burst) always rest on matters of persuasion and belief: even in our age of automated trading, machines may be driven by numbers, but bulls and bears still feed on elaborate forms of discourse, rather than on raw data. As for the more mundane realities of the attention economy, what are cultural goods but stylistic devices?

Hence it is not so irrational to advise young generations to turn to literary masters like Shakespeare and Goethe, Gracián and Proust, Pavese and Rushdie, to understand, absorb and master the fine art of attention management. The relation between literature and economics would thus develop on an entirely new ground. We would no longer look for economic realities (trade, debt, exploitation) in the plot of famous novels, to understand how literature “represents” the economy. Instead, we would analyze how stylistic devices govern the reader’s attention within the limited space of the book, to understand how comparable stylistic

devices govern our individual and collective attention within the open space of our societies³. We would no longer try merely to recognize economic mechanisms at work in fictional worlds. Instead, models of storytelling, of analogical thinking, of navigating within a complex web of information, of staging and performing communication, would be developed in close reading of literary texts, to be projected onto our economic reality. Such a reversal is already practiced in literary courses designed for business schools all around the world, with “Shakespeare for Managers” as a classic of the genre. Perhaps the theoretical frame provided by the attention economy can help us go beyond this application of literary tricks to business practices.

Four Regimes of Attention

Attention comes in many forms. Psychologists and neuroscientists show that a lot of what our attention catches, sorts out, registers or brushes aside is done without our being aware of it at all: our brain attends to many complex tasks before we can even think about paying attention to them⁴. Apart from this first difference between *back-of-mind* and *front-of-mind* attention, Beck and Davenport make two other helpful distinctions. “You pay *voluntary* attention to things you find innately interesting, things you’d focus on even if doing so were explicitly forbidden. *Captive* attention is thrust upon you”, as when you have to suffer through commercial ads before the main feature in a movie theater. “We pay attention to some things because we wish to avoid negative experiences (*aversive* attention)”, for instance when we notice a danger sign, whereas “we pay attention to other things because we think they may bring us positive experiences (*attractive* attention)”, for instance when we see the feature film after the commercials (Beck and Davenport 2001: 23).

Such categories do not seem to help much for accounting for the literary experience: don’t we all read books voluntarily, with the best of our front-of-mind abilities, because we find them attractive? Maybe not: for several children—and probably for *all* of us initially—reading literature in school is motivated by aversive attention (we want to avoid a bad grade), developed in a captive setting (we can’t wait for the school day to end), with a good help from our back-of-mind (as we desperately try to recollect what the teacher was talking about while we drifted off, daydreaming). Even in our adult age, the quality and intensity of the attention we devote to any book or page are very much mixed and fluctuating.

Over the last two hundred years, however, literary studies have progressively developed a specific, and rather odd, economy of attention, which we may now take for granted, but which deserves closer consideration. I will attempt to describe its originality by contrasting it with the four “regimes of attention”. French sociologist Dominique Boullier has identified in a series of suggestive articles not yet translated into English (Boullier 2009, Boullier 2012: 41-57).

The first regime relies on the sudden stimulation provided by an *alarm* (in French: *alerte*): a threat, a warning sign, an opportunity pops out and makes me notice it. Alarms are characterized by their saliency: they jump at us, from unexpected places, even if we were not

³ For a summary attempt to view the novel as shaping our relational gestures over the last 300 years, see Citton 2013.

⁴ For a good synthesis on the current research by neuroscientists, see Lachaux 2011.

particularly looking for them. The regime of alarm is dominant in the way the media constantly attempt to draw our attention in terms of scandals, crises and scoops. Countless Hollywood movies and TV series also rely on a steady diet of (back-of-mind) alarms as they speed up their editing—knowing that our brain is wired to suspect a potential threat in each significant alteration of our sensory field.

In direct symmetry to this state of exposure to constantly renewed forms of saliency, the regime of *loyalty* (in French: *fidélisation*) relies on the identification of trusted channels which we consider as safe and reliable sources of goods and data. Style is precisely what helps us identify such trusted channels, through the names of brand or authors, through artistic currents and schools characterized by specific aesthetic features, through certain manners of acting or speaking which inspire us confidence or diffidence.

The third regime of attention identified by Dominique Boullier is *projection*: wherever we go, we carry with us a certain sensitivity, we filter the stimuli through a certain number of criteria which we constantly tend to “project” around us, to orient ourselves within old and new environments. Our attention—and our identity—is defined by what we are sensitive or insensitive to: certain smells, certain views, certain tolerances and allergies, patterns, *Gestalts* and *imagos*, which trigger pleasure or pain in us. Projective attention allows me to feel at ease everywhere, to negate, so to speak, the diversity of the environments through which I travel, since it pushes me to “attend” to the same things wherever I am. Boullier explicitly plays with the military connotations of “projection of power”: the extreme model of projective attention is that of a colonizing mission, which deletes local features to impose the colonizer’s standards.

Finally, the last regime of attention, which stands in symmetrical opposition to projection, is that of *immersion*: instead of recognizing the same familiar things in all the environments I cross, I am let to dive into immersive worlds which are originally alien. Apart from what we can experience in movie theaters or video games, the most emblematic experience of immersive attention is provided by my first arrival in an exotic city where I don’t speak the language, don’t know the customs or standards, and where I have to find my way on my own. Since I neither master nor even know the rules of the games played by the locals, my attention consists in an attitude of multidirectional and open-minded vigilance: as dangers and rewards may come from all sides, in any shape and size, my awareness of my environment needs to be as intense, yet wide and unfocused.

These four regimes of attention are not to be seen as exclusive of each other: Dominique Boullier presents them rather as four polarities which help us analyze and map the specific mixed attention we mobilize in any situation. I took time to summarize them because I believe they can help us better understand the specificity and importance of what has been developing over the last 200 years in literary studies. If we use these four poles to map various experiences in terms of attentional regimes, we could first oppose the ideal of *classical art*, based on the projection of rules, norms and expectations, and on the loyalty to certain pre-existing styles, to the practice of *modern art*, keen to shock us with alarms, and eager to immerse us in unfamiliar situations. But we would also be in a position to sharpen the fundamental distinction which makes literary interpretation a perfect “antidote” (counterbalance if not counter-poison) to our mass media regime of collective distraction.

< **Figure 5 here** >

These four “polar” regimes allow Dominique Boullier to show the pernicious effects of a *mass media* configuration riding merely on *alarms*: the political agenda is subjected to a constant state of distraction, due to the reliance on alarms (scandals, shocks, disasters, crises) to draw audience (along with advertisement money). This regime structurally keeps us from collectively addressing the long-term issues which loom at the horizon, and which we can only discuss after they explode in our face—i.e., when it is too late for anyone to devise satisfactory and non-catastrophic solutions. In the economy and in politics, not to mention the most obvious case of environmental issues, our mass media collectively fail us because of their structural mix of ceaseless alarm, preventing any anticipatory reflection, and of rigidly formatted *projection*: whatever news may come from around the world, it will be “processed” (like processed cheese) within a maximum of 90 seconds of images and 2 minutes of expert comments in the evening TV broadcast. The crucial function of “agenda setting”—which commands the orientation and focusing of our collective attention—is not so much conditioned by content as by formal constraints: even the most intelligent and benevolent journalists are bound to “project” this formatting on the reality they attempt to “cover” (a suggestive expression!), just in the same way as an army projects its power on the land it attempts to occupy. Mental occupation is what attention is all about, uncomfortably surfing on the thin line between oppressive alienation and purposeful absorption.

Literary Interpretation as Attentional Regime

In contrast with the mix of alarm and projection which seems to characterize our current mass media regime, *literary interpretation* could be between the poles of loyalty and immersion. It pushes *loyalty* to its limits insofar as—with the development of hermeneutics since the late 19th century, of psychoanalysis after the 1930s, of the *nouvelle critique* in the 1960s, and of deconstruction at the end of the 20th century—it attempts to be loyal to the text even against or beyond its author’s self-conscious intentions. In spite of the return to neo-historicism and *critique génétique* after the 1990s, most current practices of literary interpretation are founded upon the premise of the quasi-sacredness of the text: changing a word or even a comma in a page written by Mallarmé, Thomas Mann or Ezra Pound would be sacrilege—just as altering the word of the Prophet or the letters of the Torah. Where the interpretive activity consists in looking as attentively as possible at something which preexists (here: the text), it is founded upon a necessary (even if evolving) loyalty to this preexisting “letter” (for which a new “spirit” has to be ceaselessly reinvented).

As it has been practiced over the last two hundred years, literary interpretation can also be considered as an experience in *immersion*—a point which can be illustrated on at least two levels. First, as Italian critic Arturo Mazzarella has showed, the experience of reading modern literary fictions enacted, illustrated, explored and mapped the experience of immersing oneself in “virtual reality”, which our current videogames merely brought to a more absorbing form of sensory achievement (Mazzarella 2004; 2008)⁵. If it is common for a reader to be immersed in a fictional (possible) world, one could think the interpreter should, on the

⁵ On issues of immersion, see also Citton 2014b.

contrary, do whatever is possible to extract him- or herself from this immersive delusion, to analyze and study the text with a maximum of critical distance. It seems however, that the interpretive stance—in spite of, or rather *because* of, its critical dimension—represents an emblematic form of immersion, as defined in terms of attentional regime by Dominique Boullier.

As a polar opposite to projection, the specificity of the regime of immersion consists because I dive into an unfamiliar, or even alien, environment—an environment where I can no longer project my customary habits, standards, criteria and expectations. This is the real challenge of the interpretive adventure, as it has taken its current shape over the last decades: its goal is not so much to achieve a position of mastery, in light of which the text could finally be explained (away), made transparent, brought to its ultimate truth—but rather to confront our preexisting forms of knowledge and certainty with a radical textual Alien, which will help us refine and improve our fatally reductive and oversimplified worldview⁶. We may think we “understand” a page by Cervantes, Laurence Sterne or Denis Diderot when we first read it, in which case there is no need for literary interpretation. This form of practice is premised upon opacities or problems perceived as blurring the meaning of the text. More: *literary interpretation is an attentional regime which construes problems in the (apparently transparent) messages which circulate around and trough us*: it “projects” on the texts (even the most familiar ones) the attitude of multidirectional and open-minded vigilance required by situations of immersion in an alien environment.

Hence the constitutive paradox and tensions of this peculiar regime of attention. It uses its loyalty to the letter of text as a leverage to suspend its familiarity with the apparently transparent message of the text; it projects us into the work under conditions of immersion which make it impossible for us to project our preexisting standards. As figure 5 attempts to show, literary interpretation is located half-way between two aesthetical regimes. It shares with classical art a common attitude of loyalty, attentive to stylization and to the transmission of formal norms through time and space, even though it is as suspicious as possible towards our tendency to project standards which neuter the problems raised by the encounter with alien forms of life. It shares with modern art this desire to immerse oneself in a radically destabilizing situation, even though it is suspicious towards a regime where alarms pop out by themselves, by their own saliency: instead, it favors the patient uncovering of problems construed from within our relation with the alien (rather than in reaction to it).

The attentional regime of literary interpretation appears as a polar opposite to the attention induced by our current mass media configurations. Instead of mobilizing pre-parametered reactions to endlessly renewed alarms, imposed upon us from an Outside which almost totally escapes from our control, crushing our agency and condemning us to feelings of powerlessness—literary interpretation nurtures new sensibilities and new forms of agency, by construing highly focused problems patiently elaborated in dialogue with the exterior letter of the texts. We could thus consider the procedures of focused re-orientation constructed by interpretive attention as an antidote to the weapons of mass distraction showered upon us by the dominant media.

Rather than as enemies, however, it may be more fruitful to consider them as complementary. If it is to survive in not-always-friendly environments, any organism needs to

⁶ For more development on this point, see Citton 2012, chapters 6-8.

rely upon alarms and projections of familiar standards helping it react to previously identified threats and opportunities. Apart from this short-term processing of urgent information, it also needs a more reflexive system to devise new patterns in unforeseeable data, to re-orient itself in the constant flow of information by construing new meanings in it. A sound ecology of attention needs to rely both on the projective processing of alarms and on the interpretive elaboration of meaning. The main threat to our collective survival may come from the current imbalance between the overpowering dominance of the media apparatuses and the dramatic weakening of the institutions which traditionally nurtured and fostered our interpretive skills.

From Economy to Ecology, from Literary Studies to Media Archaeology

Let me summarize my overall argument before concluding it. Theorists of the attention economy tell us that an old process of valorization (based on visibility, reputation, celebrity, fame, prominence) is gaining new grounds, thanks to the evolution of our modes of production, social relations and means of communication. Even if it is likely to remain an exacerbated cause of conflicts and wars, as global and local environmental threats put our collective survival at risk, issues relative to the scarcity of material resources are dominated by issue relative to the scarcity of individual and collective attention. In an intensely mediated world largely run by the procedures of formal democracy, the superabundance of cultural goods, made possible by their digitalization, puts the attentional filtering (of what matters more or less for us as social agents) in the hottest of spots. Even a summary glance at our current attention economy suggests we are experiencing a crucial moment in what Jonathan Crary described as the “ongoing crisis of attentiveness” associated with modernity.

Economists are summoned to develop new models and to devise a whole new set of principles to understand the dynamics of this emerging attention economy. Scholars in rhetoric, aesthetics and literary studies can bring a significant contribution to this necessary re-deployment of the economic discipline, since the analysis of “the economy of attention” can draw from a rich toolkit developed by generations and generations of research on issues of styles, design, semiotics, suspense, verisimilitude, balance, variation, modulation, perceptive saliency or formal consistency. The mapping of four regimes of attention helps us see more precisely what could be the contribution if literary studies to the restructuring of our collective attention ecology: the mix of loyalty and immersion nurtured by the interpretive attitude provides an essential counterweight to the mix of alarm and projection fostered by the current configuration of our mass media.

No less than economists, however, literary scholars are summoned to rethink and reshape their modes of research and teaching. If the attention economy upsets and reconfigures economics as a provider of models explaining social interactions, it also dissolves literary studies as an autonomous field of inquiry. Interpretive attention—conceived simultaneously as a reflection on our interpretive practices and as a reflective practice of interpretation—is less specific of literary studies than of the Humanities at large (including philosophy, semiology, history, the history of techniques, arts and sciences, but also anthropology, sociology, and maybe even economics). Similarly, it would be highly reductive to limit the object of interpretation merely to texts (even if texts have their semiotic specificity): the reflective practice of interpretation needs to bear on the mixed bag identified

as “media objects”. If traditional economics needs to reconfigure itself under the emerging dominance of the attention economy, literary studies need to reconfigure themselves within the emerging field of study identified as *media archaeology*⁷.

The attention economy cannot be studied independently from the technical devices which mediate our relations to our environments. From this point of view, the economic paradigm may be an obstacle to the proper accounting of our collective attentional ecosystems. Its most basic notions (production, exchange, trade, price, profit) are toothless, inappropriate or to be reconfigured drastically to explain and measure what happens with and around human attention. More damagingly even, the fundamental tenets of methodological individualism, which continue to dominate economics, would be a terrible obstacle to a proper understanding of human attentiveness, where any attentional move is always over-determined by phenomena of “joint” (i.e. transindividual) attention: in virtually all situations, I end up paying attention to *this* rather than *that* because others (before or around me) are or have been paying attention to it. If human attention can be better understood, it will be in terms of technically mediated *collective ecosystems*. Hence this worrying conclusion for economists: there can be no satisfactory economic study of the attention economy—only an ecosystemic approach to the attention *ecology*.

The conclusion is equally demanding on literary scholars: if interpretive practices need to be rethought within the technically mediated collective ecosystems, which structure and over-determine human attention, their work needs to be redeployed on a different conceptual and historical scale—the scale provided by media archaeology. Within the broader context of an ecological approach to perception and media⁸, this enlarged scale of operation expands in three directions which disrupts the traditional boundaries of the literary field (still strongly divided into centuries and methodologies). First, media archaeology revisits past cultural mediations (usually pre-1900) to show that our most current interrogations about our newest media were already discussed and played out in very different historical contexts, giving us more critical distance towards a fascination with novelty, which blinds us to what may be actually unheard of in our new situation. Second, media archaeology uncovers unsuspected dimensions in the cultural configurations of the past, helping us gain a fuller and more vivid view of yesterday’s problems reconsidered in light of today’s issues. Third, media archaeology blurs the boundaries between academic research and artistic experimentation, mixing theoretical approaches geared towards the acquisition of knowledge with practical experiments relying on sensory experience to question and alter our worldviews.

In profound continuity with the conception of literary interpretation delineated earlier as a necessary counter-balance to the hegemony of media distraction, media archeology invites us to pay attention to the long-term, to practice loyalty by construing unsuspected proximities between distant periods, to focus our view on the media itself (rather than on its content), to elaborate on its effects in terms of deeper meaning (rather than superficial information), to immerse ourselves in unfamiliar territories to estrange ourselves from our immediate surroundings. Even defined along these sketchy lines, media archaeology provides literary scholars with the opportunity to join historians, film theorists, mediologists, anthropologists,

⁷ For good introductions to this field, see Parikka 2012, Huhtamo and Parikka 2011, Zielinski 2006, Gitelman 2006.

⁸ See Strate 2006, Casey Man Kong (ed.) 2006, along with the foundational study by James Gibson (Gibson, 1996).

artists and—why not?—economists, to devise common exercises and manoeuvres in attention ecology.

References

- Beck J. & Davenport T. (2001), *The Attention Economy. Understanding the New Currency of Business*, Cambridge: Harvard Business School.
- Beller J. (2006), *The Cinematic Mode of Production. Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle*, Hanover: Dartmouth University Press.
- Boullier D. (2012), “Composition médiatique d’un monde commun à partir du pluralisme des régimes d’attention” in Chardel Pierre-André (2012), *Conflit des interprétations dans la société de l’information*, Paris: Hermès, 41-57.
- Boullier D. (2009), “Les industries de l’attention: fidélisation, alerte ou immersion”, *Réseaux*, 154, 233-246
- Citton Y. (2012), *Gestes d’Humanités. Anthropologie sauvage de nos expériences esthétiques*, Paris, Armand Colin.
- Citton Y. (2013), “Reading Literature and the Political Ecology of Gestures in the Age of Semiocapitalism”, *New Literary History*, 44-2 ed. by Rita Felski.
- Citton Y. (2014a), *Pour une écologie de l’attention*, Paris: Seuil (translated in English as *The Ecology of Attention*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016)
- Citton Y. (2014b), “Histoire de l’illusion immersive et archéologie des media” in Braitto, Angela et al., *Technologies de l’enchantement. Pour une histoire multidisciplinaire de l’illusion*, Grenoble: ELLUG.
- Crary J. (1999), *Suspensions of Perception. Attention, Spectacle and the Modern Culture*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 13-14.
- Lum C. M. K. (ed.) (2006), *Perspectives on Culture, Technology and Communication. The Media Ecology Tradition*, Cresskill: Hampton Press.
- Franck G. (1998), *Ökonomie der Aufmerksamkeit. Ein Entwurf*, Munich: Carl Hanser.
- Franck G. (1999), “The Economy of Attention”, *Telepolis*, <http://www.heise.de/tp/artikel/5/5567/1.html>.
- Gitelman L. (2006), *Always Already New. Media, History, and the Data of Culture*, Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Goldhaber M. (1996), “Principles of a New Economy”, <http://www.well.com/user/mgoldh/principles.html>
- Huhtamo E. and Parikka J. (2011), *Media Archaeology. Approaches, Applications, Implications*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gibson J. J. (1996), *An Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, New York: Psychology Press.
- Lachaux J.-P. (2011), *Le Cerveau attentif. Contrôle, maîtrise, lâcher-prise*, Paris: Odile Jacob.
- Lanham R. (2006), *The Economics of Attention. Style and Substance in the Age of Information*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mazzarella A. (2004), *La Potenza del falso. Illusione, favola e sogno nella modernità letteraria*, Roma: Donzelli.

- Mazzarella A. (2008), *La grande rete della scrittura. La letteratura dopo la rivoluzione digitale*, Torino: Bollati Boringhieri,
- Méchoulan É. (2011), *La crise du discours économique. Travail immatériel et émancipation*, Montréal: Éditions Nota Bene.
- Moulier-Boutang Y. (2012), *Cognitive Capitalism*, Cambridge: Polity. (translated from French, *Le capitalisme cognitif*, Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2007)
- Parikka J. (2012), *What Is Media Archaeology?*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Simon H. (1971), “Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World” in M. Greenberger, *Computers, Communication, and the Public Interest*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.
- Smythe D. W. (1977), “Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism”, *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 1 (3), 1-27.
- Strate L. (2006), *Echoes and Reflections. On Media Ecology as a Field of Study*, New York: Hampton Press.
- Toffler A. (1970), *Future Shock*, New York: Random House.
- Zielinski S. (2006), *Deep Time of the Media* (2002), Cambridge: MIT Press.