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Attention, Distraction and Curiosity: Remantling our Mental Infrastructures

Abstract

This introductory article sets the stage for the various contributions assembled in the volume by reframing our current “crisis of attention” within a larger triangulation between attention, distraction and curiosity. The continuous space between them is approached from the perspective of the Anthropocenic need to re-evaluate our extractivist infrastructures, material and mental, as ‘negative commons’ whose feral effects must be addressed and dismantled. A way out of the binary opposition between attention and distraction is advocated in the direction of a political reconsideration of the ambivalences of curiosity, as the emergence of Curiosity Studies invite us to reflect upon them. A few propositions are made along the way in order to rethink and reorganize our mental infrastructures, so as to make them more compatible with the cohabitation of a diversity of cultures and species on the surface of Planet Earth. A politics of curiosity thus opens alternatives to the attention economy by helping us both to dismantle our feral infrastructures and to remantle more sustainable mental infrastructures.

Keywords: Mental Infrastructures, Negative Commons, Ecology of Dismantlement, Attention Economy, Politics of Distraction, Politics of Curiosity, Curiosity-formation.

Triangulating our Mental Infrastructures Towards an Ecology of Remantlement

A lot of publications, conferences and public debates have been devoted to what is generally portrayed as a “crisis of attention” hitting Western societies at the beginning of the 21st century (Campo 2022). Countless symptoms suggest that an increasing number of us (especially among the younger generations) find it harder and harder to concentrate over sustained periods of time, as a lingering state of distractedness is becoming our second nature. Instead of lamenting this situation, instead of attempting to prove or disprove the reality of such a crisis, this volume hopes to reshuffle the premises and the terms of the debate. In order to do so, we will propose two major displacements.

The first displacement consists in suspending the traditional molar opposition between attentiveness and distractedness, in order to reframe the problems within *a triangulation* involving attention, distraction and curiosity (ADC) as three complementary dimensions, in relation to which most issues need to be re-situated. While we do agree that attentional issues are indeed at the core of our current societal (and anthropological) crisis known as the Anthropocene/Capitalocene/Plantationocene, we strongly believe that focusing on the positive value of attention alone can be deceptive. What is needed instead is a relational and contrasted view of the differentiated merits and dangers of all three tips of the triangle.

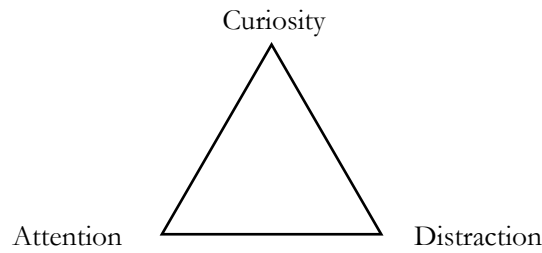


Figure 1. Attention-Distraction-Curiosity triangulation

The second displacement consists in reconsidering attention, distraction and curiosity, not mainly in the individualistic perspective of psychological issues, nor even solely as sociologically determined phenomena, but within the larger perspective of *mental infrastructures* whose conditioning apparatuses are to be located in multiple feedback loops between acquired habits, technical networks, socio-political institutions and cultural schemas (Descola 2013). In the opening chapter entitled “Quick Bites: Short-Form Attention in the Era of Platform Capitalism”, Kenneth Rogers resituates attentional issues within a broader “Attention Complex”, which encompasses and articulates many different academic disciplines, economic interests, communication technologies, pharmaceutical business models, ideological agendas and political postures in a collective assemblage that works as a regime of power. The Attention Complex emblematically illustrates what we had in mind when we invited contributors to muse about mental infrastructures, as does the “structure of feeling” Rogers draws from Raymond Williams to encapsulate “a set of experiences, moods, attitudes, and interactions that capture how people inhabit a common socio-cultural moment through shared sensibility”. In a clear, condensed (and fun) update on what has changed in the Attention Complex over the last decade, this first contribution shows that the economic approach based on attention scarcity in a world of information overload is giving way to a new ecology of attentional derivatives, where the main challenge consists in digesting quick bites into an emerging cognitive style. We may already find ourselves *beyond the attention economy* – and the remainder of this volume is dedicated to exploring some of the challenges faced by the new mental infrastructure that is currently taking shape under (and through) our eyes.

In the second chapter entitled “The Socio-Cognitive Politics of Curiosity and Attention,” Wayne H. Brekhus and Lorenzo Sabetta dig deeper in the Attention Complex by reminding us that our attentional behaviours are always structured by culturally shared understandings, with “the power of the unmarked” as a case in point: the fact that most often whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality and ability go without saying constitutes a mental infrastructure generating a discriminatory distribution of attentions, distractions and curiosities.

Obviously, in the 2020s, these mental infrastructures are powerfully overdetermined by the deployment of digital technologies. The second part of this volume is devoted to zooming in on the reconfiguration of our attentions, distractions and curiosities by digital platforms. In “Curiosity among the Ruins of *Homo Faber*. Infrastructural Capitalism and the Politics of Care,” Vando Borghi resituates the captological type of “surveillance capitalism” analysed by Shoshana Zuboff (2019) within the broader context of the progressive industrialization of our living environments as well as of our mental states. As egocidal as they are ecocidal, the platforms which condition our attentions to the world are portrayed as “negative commons,” i.e., as infrastructures which tend to ruin our living milieus even if our forms of life currently depend on them (Bonnet *et al* 2021). As a consequence, we can neither simply reject them, blow them out, or ignore them: we need prudently to “dismantle” them, with a mix of careful attention, wilful distraction and resolute curiosity.

In “The Drift of Attention Regimes in the Age of Digital Platforms: When Curiosity Was Taken Over by Reputation,” Dominique Boullier synoptically revisits the ways in which attention, distraction and

curiosity have been restructured during the last 30 years, from a first Internet weaved by the cross-pollination of curiosities, to a commercial world wide web reorganised by search engines, recommendations, matching and virality, immunizing its customers from the risk of unexpected encounters. In “The Digital Market of Interests and Feelings,” Carina Albrecht and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun zoom out of the contemporary debates about platform capitalism (Srnicek 2016) by reconsidering them in light of the experiments in sentiment analysis that took place at the Hawthorne Western Electric factory in the 1930s. This curious tale of distracted attentions reveals an underground “interest economy,” within which the workers exploited by capitalist managers as well as the users weaponized by digital platforms can regain some agency from the inside of our mental infrastructures, by playing deceitful roles in the drama of big data.

Through this diversity of investigations, a common picture of the interplay between attention, distraction and curiosity progressively comes to the surface. As users of digital networks (organized under the commercial rule of platform capitalism), as earthlings selectively informed about our environments by mediatic agenda (on which we have very little control), but also, more generally, as speakers of shared languages (with their set of built-in prejudices), as members of institutions (which can be considered as organised selectors and dispatchers of care), as workers-consumers dependent on logistical infrastructures (which allow us not to worry about the supply of our basic needs), we must acknowledge that our attentions, distractions and curiosities are externally affected and conditioned by multi-layered mental infrastructures, whose effects can be observed in terms of inner dispositions and recurrent behaviours. The various contributions collected in this volume reflect upon some of the ways in which very different aspects of our existence gain in intelligibility once they are approached through the effects of mental infrastructures and once they are situated within the ADC triangulation.

It is obviously important to measure the extent of the egocidal and ecocidal implications of our current infrastructures. What is commonly referred as “the crisis of attention” is one (crucial) component in this bigger picture. In parallel with the analyses provided by Bonnet *et al* in terms of “negative commons,” Anna Tsing and her colleagues provide another precious set of tools in their *Feral Atlas* project. The notion of *ferality* refers to the new environments generated by unintentional, non-designed and uncontrollable effects accompanying the deployment of human infrastructures. Unexpected forms of “savagery” happen to proliferate in capitalist ruins, resulting from unprecedented mixtures between human artificialisation and opportunist reactions from ‘natural’ species: “feral qualities are ways entities attune to infrastructures. [...] By beginning with the attunement between an infrastructure and an entity as the source of out-of-control spread, scholars might get used to the idea that humans and nonhumans together are equally involved in self-transformation and in transforming world history and ecology” (Feral Atlas 2020). The eight “tippers” defined as causing feral effects, while originally conceived to account for the transformations of our material environments, can suggestively be applied to the collective mental infrastructures studied in our collection of articles: TAKE (media as captological apparatuses which take, embarked with/in them whole sets of prejudices), GRID (the sciences and bureaucracies as apparatuses of categorization), CROWD (platforms as multipliers and propagators of interactions and notifications), PIPE (media and ideologies as channelling our collective thoughts), SMOOTH/SPEED (digitalization as standardization and acceleration), BURN (social media notoriety as uncontrollable toxicity), DUMP (Fear of Missing Out as a catalyst of endemic burn-out).

While these approaches correctly call for “an ecology of dismantlement” prudently and carefully taking apart the infrastructures causing feral effect on which we currently depend, the studies collected in this volume put more emphasis on the no less necessary *remantlement* of our mental infrastructures. In proposing this neologism, we refer to the ways in which psychiatrists and psychoanalysts model our mental development: from an original experience of unrelated stimulations (warmth, sound, shapes, food), the newborn baby learns to “mantle” these scattered impressions into an integrative figure of “the mother” (her hands, her voice, her gaze, her milk). In some forms of neurodiverse developments (often

labelled as “autistic”), this integrative mantlement cannot be operated, for instance if these various sensations are perceived as incompatible (Meltzer 1975; Golse 2016). Instead of mantling the mother-figure in an integrative object (later to be considered as a subject), dismantling it helps the infant cope with a traumatic situation of contradictory dependence, in which the same entity who brings it food and warmth is also perceived as bringing pain and misery.

Our reframing of the ADC triangulation is an invitation to study our current societal/anthropological crisis in the perspective of a parallel between the material and the mental infrastructures centred around the *homo oeconomicus*, both of which have been elaborated and imposed worldwide by the Western ethno-class over the last centuries (Wynter 2015). Our material negative commons must be dismantled because they are built on a mental dismantling between contradictory and incompatible needs and aspirations – eco-anxiety, solastalgia, but also xenophobia, religious fundamentalism and the exacerbation of white supremacism being the symptoms of this situation. The etymology of the mantling gesture refers to the fact of wrapping together separated entities into one protective “mantel.” Revisiting current issues like our ecological crisis of attention under the scope of the ADC triangulation, considered as a crucial site of reconfiguration of our mental infrastructures, calls for a mental, political and environmental *ecology of remantlement* (Guattari 2014). We collectively need to find more sustainable, respectful and just ways to collect, process, distribute and save resources at the level of planetary-wide logistics and, in order to do so, we need to devise better mental infrastructures of attention, distraction and curiosity, more attuned to our shared potentials and fragilities.

From Attention to Distraction

In the current situation, the infrastructures that preside over the implementation of the ADC triangulation are overdetermined by a system of relations between users, technologies and corporations often referred to as an “attention economy.” Considered at once as the reactor that fuels the profits of digital capitalism and as the root cause of generalised cognitive deterioration, the attention economy thus represents the hegemonic discursive frame that shapes the common understanding of attention (understood as concentration), the modes of its circulation (as a trading system), and any problems produced by this system. Yet, in order to remantle our mental infrastructures, we believe it is necessary to de-essentialise this economic-discursive system and thus emphasise its historical and contingent nature. Indeed, although the expression “attention economy” often refers to a common defining element – namely, the idea that human attention is a resource to compete for because is capable of generating value – in reality its meaning has varied greatly over time.

This ambiguity is already present in the very early stages of the recent diffusion of the concept of the “attention economy,” when it began to circulate in the early 1990s with very different functions: on the one hand, it represented an attempt to prefigure the revolutionary changes that digital technologies were to produce in the overall economic system, while on the other, the concept served as an orientation guide to extract profits from the then “new” economy. Therefore, in one case the concept had a predictive function and in the other a performative one. With regard to the first approach, Michael Goldhaber (1997) was certainly among the first in the English-speaking cultural milieu to publish between 1996 and 1997 his principles of the economics of attention, understood, however, as he made clearer later on, as an economic system that was completely different from the previous one and which, once fully realised, would probably have made “the pursuit of money largely irrelevant” (Goldhaber 2006). Clearly, it was the predictions of the second type, those with a performative function, that were realised. In this respect, it is enough to recall the famous expression that in the late 1990s, Eric Schmidt, future Google CEO, said that “the twenty-first century would be synonymous” with attention economy (Crary 2013, 75), understood here more modestly as a business model based on the free provision of services in exchange

for users' personal data, to be sold for advertising purposes. More in general, therefore, as Tiziana Terranova (2012, 2) pointed out, a substantial part of the debate on the attention economy had the function of reassuring commercial businesses, as attention reintroduced a principle of scarcity "which is what allows the Internet to become an economic medium again, that is, a medium to which all the axioms of market economics can once again be applied."

A further significant step that contributed to making the discursive paradigm of the attention economy hegemonic – and thus to spread the idea that our attention is a resource to compete for – occurred in the early 2000s. On the basis of the work Herbert Simon (1971, 40-41), the scope of the attention economy has been extended well beyond the new economy, basically to all types of business (Davenport and Beck 2001): according to these approaches, in order to make profits, managers must learn to govern their own attention, that of their employees and their consumers, also thanks to the knowledge offered by cognitive psychology, considered capable of unlocking the secrets of attention. Finally, towards the end of the first decade of the 2000s, in confirmation of Dallas Smythe's (1981) intuitions, the awareness that the governing of collective attention, as well as the possibility of exploiting it for economic purposes, was now firmly in the hands of the Tech Giants gained strength, and several publications began to discuss about the harmful effects of digital technologies. It is therefore in this context that the concept of the attention economy served as a discursive frame of reference to legitimise the idea that attention is a resource and to warn of the risks associated with the consumption and degradation of this resource.

But is attention really just a resource? Are we really doomed to a hell of distractions hegemonized by Tech Giants? Actually, as early as the 1990s and thus at the same time as the idea of the attention economy first became popular, another group of scholars proposed an alternative narrative to the mainstream. Our volume is very fortunate to include among its authors some of the most important representatives of the "critical attention studies" scholars (Rogers 2014), starting with the Austrian sociologist Georg Franck, who already in 1993 published an article entitled "Ökonomie der Aufmerksamkeit" [The Economy of Attention] (2019). In that work and in subsequent ones, Franck points out that attention should not only be considered a resource, but is actually a form of capital – on which it is therefore possible to make financial speculation and which, if it accumulates, is self-reproducing. Moreover, it could not exist if not in relation to specific infrastructures of measurement, accumulation and distribution. Thirty years after proposing his idea of the economics of attention, Franck discusses – in the interview published in this volume – the role played by the notion of curiosity in his theoretical framework, calling for an encompassing notion of the economy of attention supplemented by the politics of curiosity.

On the whole, strongly influenced by Jonathan Crary's (1999) foundational study, critical attention scholars have given greater historical and theoretical depth to the debate on the "crisis of attention:" indeed, they have helped to highlight how this debate tended to provide a very narrow interpretation of attention and, by doing so, they questioned, and sometimes reversed, the Manichean common wisdom praising the virtue of attention and deriding the dangers of distraction. What if being duly attentive (concentrated, focused) could prove to be as much of a problem as being distracted? What if, in certain circumstances, it was indeed better to be distracted than concentrated?

The widespread anxiety about loss of attention as well as the very centrality of the concept itself are put in perspective in Paul North's contribution to our volume. In his "Two Attacks on Attention," North invites us to question the importance of attention in the orientation of our psychic life. According to his argument, psychoanalysis warns us about the lures of an attention geared at minimizing frustration, whereas from a phenomenological perspective, attention can only fix the continuous flux of experience would, by falsifying it.

In the chapter "On the Historical Co-Construction of 'Good' Attention and 'Bad' Curiosity," David Roulier paints a broad and yet very precise picture of the long-term evolution of the words/concepts that resulted in French and English speakers being able to refer to issues of attentiveness. Tracing the complex transformations of the Latin roots *in-tendere* (*intention, entendement*) and *ad-tendere* (*attention, attente*), he shows

how much our modern understanding of attention is articulated around an often-obfuscated but ever-present form of authority. Paul North, in *The Problem of Distraction* (2011), revealed the strange asymmetry which structures the apparent binary opposition between being attentive and being distracted: distraction is *not* the absence of attention, but a certain orientation of attention towards another object – which happens not to be aligned with the (often tacit) injunction of a certain authority. David Roulier mobilizes Norbert Elias’ sociology along with lexicography to spell out this worrying promiscuity between attention and authority.

In “Distraction and its Doppelgänger,” Paul Sztulman and Dork Zabunyan synthesise the main lessons to be drawn from their long-term engagement with the *Politics of Distraction*, a multi-annual conference series which resulted in an important publication (2020). The paradoxical assertions made by Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, in post-WWI Germany, about cinema being an art uniquely tuned to unprecedented forms of mass distraction (*Zerstreuung*), has continued to resonate through multiple dimensions of our cultural life since, from the emancipatory virtue of distractedly looking through the window when your Soviet teacher attempts to brainwash you, to the Situationists’ aimless *dérives*. In “Art and the Power of Distraction: Bergson, Benjamin, and Simone Weil,” Alessandra Aloisi, author of *The Power of Distraction* (2023), pursues this reflection through a reading of Henri Bergson’s praise of artistic absent-mindedness, which unconstrains our excessively task-oriented visions, and of Simone Weil’s critique of the factory worker’s subjugated (“attached” or “connected”) attention, to which she opposes a “creative attention” which sounds very much like distraction.

Even if we entitled the third part of this book “Praises of Distraction,” none of these contributors, of course, attempts simply to reverse the traditional moral hierarchy between attention and distraction. Beyond the obvious dangers of inattention at the individual level, Dominic Pettman, another important thinker on the question, hinted at a major problem faced by the collective effects of *Zerstreuung* (which, in German, refers to distraction as a form of scattering): contrary to the “hyper-synchronization” feared by Bernard Stiegler, contrary to the “standardization of experience” denounced by Jonathan Crary, “what if the *raison d’être* of so-called social media is to calibrate the interactive spectacle so that *we never feel the same way* as other potential allies and affines at the same moment? In this case it is quite deliberate that, while one person is fuming about economic injustice or climate change, another is giggling at a cute cat video. And – two hours later – vice versa. [...] Staggered distraction” (Pettman 2016, 29).

Indeed, a leitmotiv of this volume is that each tip of our triangle comes with its own problems – and that it matters to map out more precisely the specificity of their (related but different) ambivalences. While distraction is used by the authors we just mentioned to help identify some shortcomings of attention, it may be enlightening to call on curiosity to shed light on common features (and limitations) shared by attention and distraction. One of these common features is the fact that, in most of the public debates about their current “crisis,” both tend to be conceived as *exogeneous*. This is clearly (and etymologically) the case of distraction, which consists in some external stimulus irresistibly attracting us, pulling us away (*dis-trahere*) or turning us away (*dis-vertere*) from what we were considering or doing (or expected to perform). While less obvious, this exogeneity is still very much present in the prevalent understandings of attention. A great deal of what is said, written and feared about it concerns its “captability,” whether in the narrow sense of Computers As Persuasion Technologies, prevalent in the attention economy supporting platform cap(i)talism, or in the much broader sense revealed in David Roulier, whereby our modern notion of attention has been constructed around the internalization of institutional, functional, social (i.e., external) control within each individual. In both cases, what I end up being attentive to results from punctual tactical moves, long-term strategic maneuvers, constitutive institutional settings or general field-properties that are located outside of the individual, whose attentional “choices” are thus exogenously conditioned.

By contrast, one of the constitutive features of the ways in which Western cultures conceive curiosity is to assume its endogeneity: it emanates from a desire located within the subject. This is why he – or more

commonly she – can be blamed and punished for it (as in Eve, Pandora or Bluebeard’s stories). Something, deep inside some hard-to-define internal abyss, drives us to want to know/see/hear/find out something in the external world, for better or worse. By drawing a continuous line between its three tips, our triangulation helps to see that while this endogenous origin of the drive to know is a core feature of curiosity, it is also shared by certain conceptions of attention, eager to reclaim it against its alienation by captological powers.

By reframing attention, distraction and curiosity within a reflection on mental infrastructures, the remainder of this book will attempt to demystify this mysterious inner origin of the curiosity drive. Before doing so, however, it may be useful to resituate the endo-/exogenous dichotomy within the developments of our current attention economy. Reconsidered within the very long term of the past millennium, our access to cultural artefacts has shifted from a PULL regime (where the listener-viewer-reader goes out of his/her way to find a desired artefact and pull it out of its shelf) towards a PUSH regime (where artefacts come our way by their own movement, pushed by an instance in charge of their promotion). Within the much shorter history of digital communications, as discussed here by Dominique Boullier, the 1990s Internet originally presented itself as an open field for explorations in the PULL mode, surfing from link to link, whereas the attention economy of the commercial platforms has added to this original Internet – which is still here, as Kenneth Goldsmith (2020) rightly reminds us – another layer almost entirely governed by PUSH dynamics.

We would like to suggest that the importance of triangulating attention and distraction with curiosity, in the 2020s, rests in major part on the need to think harder about *an alternative to cap(i)tability*, the latter being defined as the extractivist logic of captological capitalism. In an age when a majority of what appears on our screens comes in the form of notifications, email solicitations, pre-filtered personalized feeds, peer-preferred contents and advertisement-pushed programs, a healthy reaction to these daily assaults of incoming baits might be to use the PULL *vs.* PUSH dichotomy as the ultimate compass to orient ourselves in this brave new world: let’s do our best to downgrade or ignore what appears as a result of the PUSH regimen, in order to privilege whatever shows up as the result of a PULL activity. In other words: let’s do our own research! Or again: let’s trust our curiosity!

The postlude of this volume – “Sticking with Speculation: A Practice in Noticing Attention” by Asaf Bachrach and Joe Dumit – is intended to make this invitation concrete: it consists of a practical exercise to explore the dynamics of attention and curiosity, in their puzzling intricacy of push and pull (taken as literally and as physiologically as possible). Under which conditions can we modulate our perception of the hand (or of the instrument) that pushes or pulls, in order to feel it as a part of our perceiving body, or as an aspect of the environment to which we attend, or as a cog in the inextricably mental and material infrastructures through which we experience our world?

Reclaiming Curiosity

It has become a commonplace to be surprised by the curious lack of scholarly curiosity about curiosity. While the theme had been well identified and studied for decades within the field of literary studies (Houdart and Jacques-Chaquin 1998; Benedict 2001), while the epistemologist and historians of science & technology studies had written extensively about the evolutions and forms of the desire to know in Western culture (Blumenberg 1983; Daston and Park 1998), while cultural historians had researched the continuity between the 17th century *Cabinets de curiosités* and the 19th century museums (Pomian 1990), and while the link between curiosity and travelling had been established for a long time (Stagl 1995), virtually all of the major contributions to what has emerged as “Curiosity Studies” was published in the 21st century (with the notable exception of Czechowski 1993). By the mid-2010, half of the published articles popping

up with a “curiosity” word search in philosophy, and more than a third of the articles in psychology, had appeared after 2000 (Ilhan et al. 2018, 2).

The turn of the century can be emblemized by the birth and rise of *Cabinet Magazine*, which took off in 2000 and consistently gained reputation and visibility since then, publishing a selection of articles in the form of a monumental book in 2013 under the heading of *Curiosity and Method* (with a puzzlingly synthetic reflection on curiosity by Justin Smith 2013) Our own volume is blessed by an essay written by D. Graham Burnett, one of the pivotal animators of *Cabinet*, who retraces the continuities and evolutions that affected the overlapping zone between attention and curiosity studies over the past twenty years – while simultaneously providing a wonderful example of the ever-surprising methods devised by the magazine to investigate curiously about curious phenomena.

In parallel to the growing amount of attention paid to attention and its economy, in relation with the defence of distraction against the one-sidedness of concentrationism, something is definitely happening in the 21st century to reconfigure the ADC triangulation towards an urgent reconsideration of curiosity. It is in this direction, we think, that our mental infrastructures can be remantled, and this will be the underlying assumption of our collective book. This reconfiguration could benefit from a preliminary overview of the contrasts between attention, curiosity and distraction, in what seem to be their shared understandings in the 2020s – the remainder of this introduction being dedicated to presenting some of the reasons, stakes and specificities of the growing role attributed to curiosity in this triangulation.

Attention	Curiosity	Distraction
Mostly discussed as exogenous (exposed to PUSH)	Endogenous (inner drive to PULL)	Exogenous (subjected to PUSH)
Subjected to authority	Insubordinate	Alienating
Unequivocally good	Morally ambivalent	Unequivocally bad
Gender neutral (or associated with men)	Strongly associated with women (Eve, Pandora, etc.)	Strongly associated with today’s youth
Directional & figural focus (<i>mono- pragmosunè</i> , ‘known unknowns’)	Background & 360° (<i>poly- pragmosunè</i> , ‘unknown unknowns’)	Scattered & unstable (<i>a- pragmosunè</i> , ‘unknown knowns’)
Structural separation between the subject and the object of attention	Dynamic feedback between curious objects and curious subjects	Evaporation of the subject absorbed and dismantled by temptational objects

Table 1. Attention-Distraction-Curiosity comparative synopsis

Within this contrast, a broad (and highly reductive) survey of the disciplines involved in Curiosity Studies, mapping out what is being done within the academia and its margins, may help us understand what is at stake in the possible reconfiguration of the ADC triangulation around this increasingly attractive tip.

A first constellation of research can be identified around a cognitivist attractor, where psychology, analytic philosophy, information science and computing gather to “explicate” the inner mechanisms of the individual curiosity machinery, i.e., to explain them by making them explicit, with a view towards making them quantifiable and automatized. Curiosity is treated and analysed as a property of the human (or animal) mind, resulting in certain modes of behaviours, accomplishing a certain function, engaging certain processes (see Inan 2012; Inan et al 2018; Papastephanou 2019; Mišćević 2020).

All of the functions and processes spelled out through these explications of curiosity, after they have been hypothesized, formalized, isolated, tested and reproduced under experimental conditions, are then ready to be extracted from their bodily substrate, put to use for productive purposes and implanted in

electronic automata, according to the “grammar of actions” well analysed by Philip Agre’s (1994) “capture model” – with the risk of seeing later on these mechanical procedures imposed back onto human behaviours through managerial injunctions. Understanding and exploiting curiosity is obviously of crucial importance for marketers and advertisement-designers (Cochoy 2016). As stated by Georg Franck in this volume, the mental infrastructures generated by and around advertisement can be described as a “curiosity economy” no less than as an attention economy. When the Harvard Business Review published a spotlight section entitled “Why Curiosity Matters” in September-October 2018, it delineated “The Business Case for Curiosity” (Gino 2018), spelling out “how leaders can nurture curiosity throughout their organizations and ensure that it translates to success.” Meanwhile, at the Wharton School of Business of the University of Pennsylvania, a Center for Curiosity launched a “Reimagine Education--Cultivating Curiosity Award” seeking “to understand how curiosity might be defined and measured, so that it might be harnessed” (Swidler 2020 30).

On the front of exo-somatisation, that is on the front of the externalization of curiosity, this measuring and harnessing pave the way to a process of automation, with the search for “a mechanism of Intelligent Adaptive Curiosity, an intrinsic motivation system which pushes a robot towards situations in which it maximizes its learning progress” (Oudeyer et al 2007). This has led to “digital interactive quantitative curiosity assessment tools” (Tor and Gordon 2020), as well as to “recent work in machine learning [which] has demonstrated the benefits of providing artificial agents with a sense of curiosity – a form of intrinsic reward that supports exploration” (Dubey and Griffiths 2020).

Obviously, the development of deep learning through neural networks is bound deeply to affect our understanding of curiosity. Up until recently, computing machines could only calculate data pre-filtered and pre-interpreted by human agents. With the development of ubiquitous computing, the multiplication of sensors and the progress of deep learning, powerful forms of automated attention have become a reality over the last 20 years, as illustrated by facial recognition on surveillance cameras or by the experimentations with driverless cars. We are now reaching another level with the perspective of automating curiosity itself, as computing machines can be programmed through “intrinsic motivation” and “intrinsic reward” to optimize their search for previously unspecified patterns that emerge only as the result of their inquiry.

The impact of Large Language Models, like ChatGPT and other “stochastic parrots” (Bender et al 2021), on the future of curiosity is still unpredictable at the moment. The computational “latent space” on which these models operate – i.e., the mathematical structure assigning the probability for a word/pixel to be followed/neighbored by another word/pixel, based on processes of statistical induction – results from centuries of curious investigations made and recorded by generations of human subjectivities (lately under Western, and English-speaking, domination). While the basic material of the latent space is the outcome of human curiosity, its product, insofar as it is a statistical average, tends to downplay our eccentric curiosities by tending to align its results with the majoritarian mean. The main danger, in our dealing with Artificial Intelligence, is not so much their free-wheeling as our own attempts to master them: we judge them successful when they provide what we expected. We elevate them as an optimized mental infrastructure, which we hope to consult as a source of truth and authority, whereas it would be much more empowering to experiment with them as generators of unimaginable/unthinkable unknown, i.e., curious things.

Jacopo Rasmi’s contribution to our volume, entitled “Platforms of Curiosities: Weird Ways of Publishing Movies,” illustrates a much more interesting possibility of interaction with digital technologies. “Shadow platforms” like UbuWeb and Derives.tv take advantage of the communication networks and computation possibilities brought by the digital era, but manage to design them as distributors of curiosities and enhancers of curiosity, rather than as maximisers of financial profit and streamliners of tastes. Rasmi’s investigation provides a glimpse into what mental infrastructures of curiosity could look like, in an alternative world where industrialized commercial platforms would have given way to

independent, lovingly and generously curated amateur platforms. The encouraging lesson of his article is that such platforms actually exist (and manage to remain active): this alternative world of emancipated and emancipating is already part of our reality – it is up to us to connect our curiosity with theirs.

Apart from cognitivist and computational approaches, Curiosity Studies have also been developed in direction of the sciences of education and the arts of pedagogy. Often in complicity with the practice of (black) study promoted by Stefano Harney et Fred Moten (2013, 2021; see also Meyerhoff 2019, Schildermans 2021), curiosity has been mobilized radically to question the organisation, premises and tendencies of our educational institutions, from Kindergarten to graduate schools. Most of these analyses converge in pointing at the contradiction between, on one side, lip-service paid to education promoted as a dynamic of emancipation and discovery and, on the other side, institutional constraints which systematically stifle whatever curiosity students may bring in the classroom (Engel 2015). When school critics like Paolo Freire write about the “anaesthetizing of curiosity,” or when Ivan Illich sees teaching as a “disabling profession,” their indictment is confirmed by data such as Tizard and Hughes’ 1984 study of preschoolers which found “that the average number of questions the children asked went from 26 per hour while at home to 2 per hour while in preschool” (Swidler 2020, 115). From standardized-test assessments to top-down pedagogical practices, all the way to the straightjacket of increased tuition costs inducing a return-on-investment approach to upper education (Heller 2023), an overall alignment of the school experience to authoritative inculcation and market imperatives keeps students from taking the risks and from facing the uncertainties associated with curiosity (Lewis 2012 and 2021). The dense and rich synthesis provided by Arjun Shankar and Perry Zurn in their concluding essay “On Teaching Curiosity” suffices to show both how their “critically curious pedagogy” fits our current educational ideals, and how far most teachers still are from implementing these ideals in their classroom:

We have found several practices especially useful when seeking to infuse curiosity into our classrooms: (1) bringing students into the process of deciding on assignment goals and content, (2) making curiosity an explicit part of the assignment prompt, (3) cultivating a research mindset in students through the assignment protocol, (4) providing multimodal variations to assignment structure, (5) linking assignments to students’ experiences outside of class, and (6) creating a collaborative environment in which assignment outputs can be discussed. (Shankar and Zurn 2020, 281)

Curiosity studies also bring both water and dissent to the mill of the historiography of the Western sciences. It is another commonplace to narrate the history of curiosity as being dominated by a moralistic condemnation from the Ancients until the end of the Middle-Ages (Leigh 2013), followed by mounting praises for scientific (or “theoretical”) curiosity starting in the Renaissance and culminating in the Modern period (Blumenberg 1983; Ball 2013). However, this classic and reassuring narrative, which had prevailed for many decades, is coming under attack on at least four fronts at the beginning of the 21st century.

First, the dynamic of technological discoveries catalysed by scientific curiosity is perceived as reaching a self-defeating runaway pace in the fetishisation of innovation, which should be considered not only as an instrumentalization of curiosity but as its taming, preventing its more revolutionary dimensions to unfold (Nowotny 2008). The remaining fronts uncover the darker sides of scientific curiosity and of its broader consequences. The second grievance concerns what Lauren Guilmette, from the case of the medical gaze on persons of ambiguous sex, has labelled “the violence of curiosity:” “a cruelty that one senses in the fissures between memoirs, medical reports, and fictions – in their shuddering silences and discursive excesses. [...] This curiosity grew violent particularly when it purported to be neutral and disinterested” (Guilmette 2017, 8, 17). A third front emerges when this violence of curiosity is revealed in the way a proudly modern and “scientific” inquisitiveness has (mis)treated not only minoritarian populations in the Western world, but non-Western populations all around the world: in countless occasions an

ethnographic “curiosity for the Other” has turned into, or paved the way for, the exploitation and suppression of the forms of life (and sheer existence) of these populations (Corey 2019). In his contribution to this volume, Lionel Manga revisits the colonial divide about “Tribulations of Curiosity” in the case of Cameroon, by contrasting the undercommon will to share joyful knowledge among the *Curiosae* with the appropriative extortion of profit and truth performed by Western *Inquisitors*. Intimately linked with the three previous questions, a fourth ever-widening front reveals the dramatically destructive effects of Western techno-scientific (in)curiosity on our environments worldwide, from the tortures imposed to other-than-humans in the name of scientific inquisitiveness to the ravaging of ecosystems in the name of industrialization, and all the way to the feral effects of our logistical infrastructures.

Redefining Curiosity

The resulting moral (and political) ambivalence of curiosity will be at the core of our analyses: ‘curiosity seems to be historically and structurally prone to deliver the best and the worst of human will-to-know (for remarkable syntheses on what can be reproached to epistemic curiosity, see Dunnington 2018; Engel 2018; Papastephanou 2019). Before reflecting about what curiosity can do, however, we need to observe what it is, or rather and more modestly, how it has been defined and subcategorized, the plurality of what has come to be referred to as curious playing a central part in what makes it so interesting – and so ambivalent.

This ambivalence is certainly linked to the changing moral judgments addressed to it, but also, and consequently, to the great multiplicity of its meanings. It is not our intention to reduce this multiplicity, on the contrary – as the various contributions collected in this volume testify – we rather want to play with it and make it productive. The effort to identify a unilateral meaning of what curiosity is, in fact, says more about the knowing subject than about the object one aspires to know: “the idea that curiosity as we understand it today is a natural and irrepressible human instinct is just an extension of the reflexive tendency to make of ourselves a model for all humanity, everywhere and at all times.” (Ball 2013, 398).

In fact, the universalistic and naturalistic tendencies have been largely dominant and, compared to our more recent past, it is psychology that has become more systematically interested in the study of curiosity. In this context, it has been conceptualized as an instance – conceived as a drive, a desire, or a motivation – that pushes a subject to seek information or knowledge. The relationship between attention and curiosity is also constitutive in this case, as attested by Daniel E. Berlyn’s (1960, 95) now-classic book *Conflict, Arousal, and Curiosity*, in which the latter is defined as a state of “high arousal” that is necessary to motivate an organism when arousal falls below the optimal level. Berlyn (1960, 274) distinguished between perceptual and epistemic curiosity, the latter being typically human, motivated by a “quest for knowledge.” It can trigger a specific or a diversive exploration, depending on whether the search is oriented toward a specific piece of information or towards “any of a wide range of sources” (Berlyn 1960, 80). In an extensive review article, George Loewenstein (1994, 93) proposed an *information gap* account, according to which curiosity works similarly to other motivational states, like hunger or pain. but with the specific aim of “filling information gaps.” Curiosity is thus based on a ratio between an internal state of the organism – a need, i.e., the awareness of lack of information – and an external opportunity to realize that need: filling the information gap ensures a reduction in uncertainty.

This line of research was later further developed: on the one hand, it was specified that curiosity motivates attempts to make sense of whole situations, more than punctual searches for missing information; on the other hand, researchers have tried to explain why curiosity takes the form of a drive that pushes the individual to search. Zachary Wojtowicz and George Loewenstein (2020, 137) have proposed considering it as a hedonic motivational state that would function to relieve the load of attentional resources required for attention allocation:

curiosity exists to direct attention in a way that does not itself require the expenditure of attention. It partially relieves serial, deliberative cognitive faculties from the burden of calculating the relative value of redirecting attention by offloading this task to parallel, associative faculties. These automatic evaluations – formed associatively on the basis of sensory cues – are then re-incorporated into deliberative decision-making as hedonic modifications to the attractiveness of maintaining or redirecting attention.

The metaphor of attention as a resource returns here, although at a higher, meta-level: curiosity is conceived as a way to by-pass (accelerate, precipitate, spare) the attentional effort invested in appraising what objects are worth attentional investment. Insofar as it operates automatic evaluations motivated by spontaneous sensory cues, curiosity reduces the resources required for the deliberate allocation of attention, while providing nevertheless a more-than-aleatory principle of selection.

The “curiosity economy” contained in the nutshell of this definition is strikingly homomorphous with the functioning of financial derivatives in our current capitalist system/ideology (Ayache 2010; Martin 2015): in both cases, a more-than-Brownian principle of trials and errors projects guesses of potential profits, which act simultaneously as measurers and as enhancers of value, in a move where evaluating cannot be fully separated from valorising. In the Hayekian idealization of financial markets, their justification is based on presenting them as impersonal procedures of discovery (Hayek 1978): since nobody knows what the future will be, let a maximum of players evaluate their options and make their bets, on the basis of their diversity of intuitions, (crackpot) theories and social positions – and the aggregated result will come as close as possible to the optimal solution, thanks to these distributed efforts of curiosity. Of course, the reality of the financial markets is a far cry from this utopian “catallaxy:” a small number of players are in a position to “make” the market thanks to their disproportionate performative power to valorise what they pretend to simply evaluate.

By redefining curiosity through their opportunity-cost theory of attention-directing motivational states, Wojtowicz and Loewenstein provide a deeper understanding of the production of value. To say that attention is value-creating is a basic principle of the attention economy. But it may be more accurate to locate the value-generating property of attention in the amount of curiosity that animates it (along the AC side of our triangle). In a Marxist vocabulary (awkwardly applied to financial derivatives!), one could say that *only curiosity generates surplus-value*, precisely because the intuitions upon which it is based – Wojtowicz and Loewenstein’s “automatic evaluations formed associatively on the basis of sensory cues” and “hedonic modifications” – short-circuit the laborious efforts that would be necessary to test and methodically assess every combinatory possibility of a given situation in proportion to the gain in pleasure it may provide.

Among the psychologists who attempt to analyse more finely the motivations that guide subjects in their curiosity, Todd B. Kashdan *et al* (2018 144-145) have come up with a “five-dimensional curiosity scale” – which seems to be of great interest for an economics of curiosity, since the Harvard Business Review included it as one of the three articles of its special dossier. These five dimensions are *Joyous Exploration* (“a motivational drive that enables rewards for seeking out the new”), *Deprivation Sensitivity* (an urge to “seek necessary information to eliminate knowledge gaps”), *Stress Tolerance* (a “willingness to embrace the inherent anxiety of a new, unexpected, complex, mysterious, obscure event”), *Social Curiosity* (an urge “to know what other people are thinking and doing”) and *Thrill Seeking* (“the hunt for varied, novel, complex, and intense experiences” with a readiness “to risk physical, social, and financial safety”). Various combinations and proportions of these dimensions generate four contrasted psychological profiles, arranged along a decreasing scale of curiosity, from the *Fascinated* and the *Problem Solver* to the *Empathizer* and the *Avoider*.

A whole bestiary of curious personalities is progressively compiled across these studies – to which Millaray Lobos Garcia contributes, in her contribution to this volume, with the four categories of *duendes*, cats, butterflies and chameleonic vines. Perry Zurn (2019), for instance, proposes to distinguish three styles of curiosity: the busybody, the hunter, the dancer. The *busybodies* have a very open curiosity; they may be interested in everything but are particularly attracted to what they perceive as new; as a result, they are reluctant to delve deeper in their research and more prone to accumulating knowledge in a haphazard manner. The *hunters* are a mirror figure to the former, as they display a focused and goal-oriented style of curiosity; their research paths are designed by a clear purpose and they have a tendency to be deeply absorbed in their research environment. Finally, the *dancer*, “this third mode of curiosity, thrives on breaks, ruptures, disruptions, and a staccato rhythm. The dancer leaps. They lift their feet from the ground and are caught up in a series of arcs and arches, brief forays into the sky [...] If the busybody arranges bits of information into loose knowledge webs, while the hunter organizes specific tracts of information into tight networks, the dancer may rupture those networks by either jumping to a new idea or throwing existing ideas into a new frame” (Zurn and Bassett 2022, 105 and 107).

Clearly, these three styles should not be conceived as rigid personality traits: we can be busybodies, hunters and dancers at different times of day, within different domains of activity, experimenting with the whole spectrum of these curiosity styles. With Perry Zurn’s work, we have already moved from the field of psychological categorizations to a philosophical approach displaying forms of life that are available to all of us.

Unlike psychology, however, philosophy has only recently begun to take a systematic interest in curiosity, and many contributions have mainly focused on the individual aspects of curiosity in relation to the search for truth. Whereas in “Curiosity, Truth, and Knowledge” and in *The Philosophy of Curiosity*, Ilhan Inan (2012; 2018) defines curiosity as an intentional mental state directed towards an “inostensible” object (i.e., an object that cannot be directly attested in our immediate surrounding), Lani Watson (2018, 295) and many other philosophers are more interested in curiosity as an epistemic virtue, characterized as an intellectual virtue that motivates “to acquire worthwhile epistemic goods” (that the curious person believes s/he lacks). Nenad Mišćević (2020, 7) offers a similar account on what he calls “inquisitiveness-curiosity” – the desire that presides over all truth-seeking processes, therefore considered as a “core motivational virtue.”

Although we find these perspectives useful in circumscribing the semantic scope of the concept of curiosity, in this volume we are less interested in the individual search for meaningful, or “true,” or “worthy,” information, than in investigating its social, political, technological and ecological implications. In order to dismantle and remantle the mental infrastructures we live in, we must go further than these cognitivist (individualistic and intellectualistic) approaches – as interesting as they may be – and question directly the dynamics of collective curiosity and incuriosity formations. Therefore, we are more in line with Perry Zurn and Danielle S. Bassett’s (2022, 4) proposal to reframe curiosity as a “network practice, a relational practice.” This praxeological and social perspective is not without philosophical precedent and, in this regard, they draw on pragmatist and indigenous philosophy traditions, which interpret cognitive experiences as processes of weaving relationships. This implies

thinking curiosity at the edge, as a practice of connection and a promulgator of relations [...] that produce and are produced by curiosity. In this narrative, at least four sets of relations surface: the relation of an (un)knower to themselves, of an (un)knower to an (un)known, of (un)knowns to other (un)knowns, and of (un)knowns to (un)knowers. (Zurn and Bassett 2022, 56)

This approach fully renders the ambivalence of curiosity in its political and social implications, which must be evaluated with respect to the type of cognitive relations it sets in motion, questions or reinforces: as we have seen above, it can in fact either be complicit in oppressive power relations, or help to contest

them, or possibly construct new ones that open up the possibility of emancipation. We therefore subscribe to the three principles of Curiosity Studies formulated by Zurn and Shankar (2020b, xii.xiii), and we too consider curiosity – as indeed attention and distraction – as multiple, praxeological and political. These principles make it possible to address the complexity and depth of (in)curiosity formation processes, as they are part and parcel of our mental infrastructures. Curiosity thus appears as an embodied and localized practice, which lies at the threshold of our bodies and the environment. It is a practice of and on the edge, as Zurn and Bassett (2022) convincingly argue, which can be cultivated, activated, stimulated and taught through multiple devices.

From this point of view, Frank Cochoy's discussion of marketing captation devices – i.e., devices used by advertisement experts to attract attention through curiosity in order to suggest possible courses of action – can be seen as emblematic of the ways through which curiosity is canalized. Teasers, enigmas and riddles, stories and expectations, the skilful use of ellipsis and suspense, the dialectic between visibility and opacity: all are daily life resources that we use, and that are used on us, to arouse curiosity and change courses of action. Obviously, these possibilities for experimentation, as well as their consequences on the people on whom curiosity is exercised, are neither uniformly nor equally distributed: questioning this distribution brings forth the specifically political dimension of curiosity. In our view, Curiosity Studies are less interesting for the bestiaries of individual types and motivations they may categorize than for the social and political dynamics they uncover, within the mental infrastructures that make them possible – which they perpetuate or help to alter, and possibly improve.

Political Ambivalences of Curiosity

The question of a politics of curiosity owes much to Perry Zurn's work. Not only is he co-editor of the 2020 *Curiosity Studies* reader (Zurn and Shankar 2020a), which is to this day the most stimulating and promising publication in this emergent field, but he also published in the following year a monography entitled *Curiosity and Power. The Politics of Inquiry*, providing key elements to the constitution of a politics of curiosity which, he reckons, still “remains unthought” (Zurn 2021, 3). Approaching these questions through mental infrastructures is already implicit in his statement that “the very scaffolding of curiosity in a given society is the product of political architectures” (2), as well as in the notion of “*curiosity-formation*,” consisting in “institutionalized topics and methods of inquiry and interest [...] conditioned by political values, political structures and political histories” (7).

From Foucault, Zurn draws a first contrast between *institutionalized curiosity-formations*, which “increasingly isolate, control, and subjectivize people, particularly those already marginalized – and constructed as dangerous – within a given society,” and *resistant curiosity-formations*, wherein “curiosity in the hands of the people is an impulse not only to think divergently but to experiment with new, countercultural forms of life. It breaks systems of isolation, control, and subjectification” (76). From Derrida, he draws a second contrast. On one hand, a *sovereign style of curiosity*

negate[s] the inherent instability of objects, divisions, walls, and procedures, shor[ing] up the illusion of sovereignty, whether in the political or philosophical arena. Autopsic curiosity is a drive to dissect an object in the service of knowledge, cleanly separating one thing from another. Therapeutic curiosity is a drive to confine an object in the service of care, definitively isolating one thing from another. These modalities of curiosity, therefore, function within regimes of knowledge and treatment that capitalize on illusions of mastery. (100)

The cognitivist approaches of curiosity reviewed above, often appropriated by business schools, economic modelizations and computerized automation, certainly adopt (and enforce) this sovereign style – which makes both their merit and their limits. A *deconstructive style of curiosity*, on the other hand,

inhabits, resists, and disorganizes the sovereign style of curiosity in both its autopsic and therapeutic modalities. [...] Deconstructive curiosity textually resists the autopsic by not allowing a clean dissection of terms and resists the therapeutic by compromising the clean confinement of terms. In doing so, it ruptures taxonomical distinctions (101).

The political implications of such curiosity-formations are obvious. The deconstructive style further elaborates on considering curiosity as “insubordination in its purest form” (Vladimir Nabokov quoted in Zurn 2021, 128) or as having “an inherently anti-authoritarian nature” bound to “raise unexpected questions” (Swidler 2020, 117) – as opposed to viewing it as a will-to-know which is no less inherently a will-to-power, aiming for control and mastery.

It may also be helpful, however, to situate such contrasts within a broader picture that also includes *incuriosity*, as the latter, in its variant guises, is very frequently evoked in recent reflections about the politics of curiosity. Any curiosity-formation has as its counterpart a culture of incuriosity, which is expressed either in the form of explicit prohibition, of implicit taboo, or through backgrounding. In the three fronts mentioned above to illustrate “the violence of curiosity” (gender, race, ecology), we could have equally well spoken of the violence of incuriosity. The eloquent call for “feminist curiosity” made by Cynthia Enloe could certainly apply to colonialism and environmental destructions:

A “feminist curiosity” is a curiosity that provokes serious questioning about the workings of masculinized and feminized meanings. It is the sort of curiosity that prompts one to pay attention to things that conventionally are treated as if they were either “natural” or, even if acknowledged to be artificial, are imagined to be “trivial,” that is, imagined to be without explanatory significance. (Enloe 2004, 220)

Whether we are in the position of the profiteer (benefiting from patriarchal/white/carnivorous privilege) or of the exploited (as in the case of the women addressed by Enloe’s call), this type of incuriosity is political in its outcome (accepting or resisting against a form of oppression), but also in its persisting reproduction: it is the result of particular types of (in)curiosity-formations operating as our mental infrastructures. Eva-Maria Swidler (2020, 8) quotes Upton Sinclair who wrote in 1934 that “(i)t is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding it.” Our Anthropocenic incuriosity is not only the result of a sum of individual lacks of curiosity, nor of the billions of dollars spent by corporations and Hollywood to distract us from environmental issues. More than a bug, it is a core feature of our industrialized capital-driven mode of production. More than an information gap, it is an (in)curiosity-formation which is part and parcel of our negative commons – and needs to be dismantled with them.

Here again, however, the specificity of Curiosity Studies may reside in measuring the built-in ambivalence of the value-judgements and ingrained categorizations we have inherited (and internalized) from moral philosophy or from political militancy. We believe a politics of curiosity should take seriously Michel Foucault’s call to think against oneself – i.e., against the curiosity-formation (along with its moral judgements) within which one tends to operate:

the only kind of curiosity [which motivates me], in any case, that is worth acting upon with a degree of obstinacy, [is] not the curiosity that seeks to assimilate what it is proper for one to know, but that which enables one to get free of oneself [*se déprendre de soi-même*]. After all, what would be the

value of the passion for knowledge if it resulted only in a certain amount of knowledgeableness and not, in one way or another and to the extent possible, in the knower's straying afield of himself [*l'égarement de celui qui connaît*]? There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all. (Foucault 1990, 8)

To be true to the deeply political nature (Monnin 2023) of the work of dismantling (and remantling) our curiosity-formations – a task we deem “absolutely necessary if [we are] to go on looking and reflecting at all” – we must think against ourselves to keep in mind both the dangers and the merits of certain forms of incuriosity, both the strengths and the traps of certain practices of curiosity.

In the following synoptic table, we have attempted to map diverse forms of (in)curiosities in preserving their ambivalence (+/-), while situating them against the background of our general ADC triangulation. This brings to the surface the merits of a certain *ATTENTIVE INCURIOSITY* in the form of a concentration which blinds us to the outside in order to pursue an in-depth investigation, whether scientific (the very definition of an academic discipline implying a mono-focalization bound to ignore whatever exceeds its scope) or meditative (in line with Pierre Pachet's (1993) plea for a capacity to lock-in on oneself as a pre-condition to thinking). Marianna Papastephanou (2019, 9-10) praises *apragmosunè* – different from *polypragmosunè* (scattered pluri-curiosity) and *monopragmosunè* (concentration on a single object) – as a form of “politically significant epistemic restraint,” in “retreat from sterile knowledge-hunting and un-reflective political action.” This positive side of attentive incuriosity, however, needs to be put in perspective of its high price, in terms of the reconduction of prejudices, discriminations and dominations, well denounced by Cynthia Enloe in the case of feminism, and well analysed in this volume by Wayne Brekhus and Lorenzo Sabetta as forms of “bounded curiosity,” whether they result quasi-spontaneously from the privilege of the unmarked, or whether they result from oppressive strategic obfuscations.

	Incuriosity-Formations	
<i>ATTENTIVE INCURIOSITY</i>		<i>DISTRACTIVE INCURIOSITY</i>
Disciplinarity (<i>monopragmosunē</i>) (++) (+) Mono-focalization Meditation (<i>apragmosunē</i>) (+)		(++) Transdisciplinarity Free-Spiritedness (+) (+) Polymathy and wanderlust
Privilege (-) (-) Prejudice Strategic obfuscation (- -)		(-) Abiding Absent-Mindedness (-) (- -) Self-preserving scotomization

Table 2. Incuriosity-formations

We propose to contrast this first branch of attentive incuriosity, where a certain form of concentration results in narrowing one's sensibility and awareness, with a second branch of *DISTRACTIVE INCURIOSITY*, where a certain availability to what lies on the other side of the fence results in a certain investigative superficiality. This is what allows for transdisciplinary work, which crosses through the well-curated borders between disciplines, facing the accusation of meddling with other people's specialty, and often exposed to the suspicion met by rootless wanderlust and 17th-century free-thinking polymaths. In certain academic circles, too much curiosity tends to be seen as a form of incuriosity (by lack of depth).

On its negative side, distractive incuriosity leads us to follow whatever trend of mass-communication crosses our path, in ceaseless jumps from one notification to the next – lacking not only depth, but substance. Rather than attempting to steer one's way in life, one becomes accustomed to spineless abiding and obedient resignation. At its worst, when our salary depends on our not understanding where it comes from, this yielding attitude fosters a denial-and-escape game where distractions build a crust of self-preserving scotomization. (But isn't this the shared condition of white affluent populations in our age of climate change and collapsing biodiversity?)

When it comes to measuring the political ambivalences of curiosity-formations, the attentional side presents itself in the form of *INQUISITIVE CONTROL*. The symmetrical opposite to our Anthropocenic incuriosity takes the form of the "precaution principle," according to which one should attempt preventively to investigate, foresee and preempt the harms that can result from unleashing a new technology. More generally, one could see the positive side of institutionalized curiosity, whether at the level of an activist association or at the level of nation-States, as a mental infrastructure of investigative foresight geared towards a prudent preservation and enhancement of our common goods – and, on this point, our current governments fall tragically short of the mark.

Curiosity-Formations

<i>INQUISITIVE CONTROL</i>	<i>CENTRIFUGAL CARE</i>
Precaution principle (++)	(+++) Unconditional <i>polypragmosunè</i>
(+)(+) Foresight	Openness (+)
Institutionalized curiosity (+)	(+) <i>Neugier</i> as <i>Wissgier</i>
Sovereign curiosity (-)	(-) Curiotization
(-) Surveillance	Disorientation (-)
Coloniality (- -)	(- -) <i>Divertissement</i>
<i>Features of curiosity as control</i>	<i>Features of curiosity as care</i>
<i>Role reversal is not possible and actively avoided: a subject is curious about an object</i>	<i>Role reversal is possible and desirable: we can be subjects and objects of curiosity</i>
<i>It enforces transparency in an attempt to contain otherness</i>	<i>It preserves opacity, to remain open to otherness</i>
<i>It tends to be indiscreet</i>	<i>It is based on discretion</i>
<i>It knows no limits, except for the purpose of its goal (control)</i>	<i>It practices self-limitation</i>
<i>It can be empowering as much as mortifying</i>	<i>It tends to produce a vital game of communal growth</i>

Table 3. Curiosity-formations

The darker side of inquisitive control presents itself under the multiple guises of surveillance, from the “sovereign style of sovereignty” described by Perry Zurn’s interpretation of Derrida, all the way to colonial occupation, oppression and genocide. If Marianna Papastephanou praised *apragmosunè* as a form of epistemic restraint, it is against the background of a modernizing curiosity-formation whose epistemic curiosity was intimately linked with imperial domination and globalized exploitation:

the desire for knowledge became a typical epistemic feature of the mobile, progressive Western self who transforms unknown places into imperial property. In a similar vein, any kind of epistemic restraint was treated as indication of primitiveness and backwardness. Curiosity’s being a rationalization of colonial expansion was glossed over through another rationalization: curiosity’s purported disinterestedness. The claim to disinterestedness disguised curiosity as an apolitical, scientific concept and blocked view of its political complicities [leading] to the normalization of the death of millions and of the destruction of non-human life and of the environment for the sake of expansion and science. (Papastephanou 2019, 19-20)

On the distractive side of curiosity-formation, one could (perhaps paradoxically) identify different forms of *CENTRIFUGAL CARE*, which all have in common to favor care over control, through a movement which tends to stray us afield of ourselves. On the negative side, this resonates with the Christian condemnation of curiosity and distraction as *divertissement*, literally, as something which diverts us from

our only commendable source of worry (God and our eternal soul). Another risk of centrifugal care has been well described by Amy Marvin (2020, 194, 198) under the heading of “curiotization,” illustrated by the common cis-gaze on trans people, and understood as a “process of transfiguration into a curio which is focused on a person or group of people [...] at the risk of dissolving their living context and history. The curiotizing subjects flirt with loving perception, while peering through a fascinated but walled-off looking-glass similar to arrogant perception.” My caring about your difference only allows me to stray afield of myself by enclosing you in my cabinet of curiosity.

The more laudable and emancipating forms of centrifugal care enable us to get free of ourselves by attempting to embrace other beings on the ground of their otherness. This may take the form of valuing the new for its newness (as expressed by the German word for curiosity, *Neugier*) but, more generally still, it consists in the strange inversion that drives us to desire something in proportion that it does *not* appeal to us: the less I originally like it, the more it disturbs me, the more I can hope it will help to “untake or engue me from myself” (*se déprendre de soi-même*). The most radical forms of resistant curiosity-formation are the ones resisting our own tendencies (as they have been induced in us by the dominant mental infrastructures).

In their chapter entitled “A Writing Workshop: Arts of Joint Attention, Curiosity and Care in University,” Virginia Kastrup, Luciana Caliman and Veronica Torres Gurgel document the role played by centrifugal care in a pedagogical setting of higher education. In the development of the child, joint attention is the first experience of thinking not so much “against” oneself as “outside” oneself, since the infant *se déprend de soi-même* through an affective tuning with the parental figure: I learn to attend to what another person attends to. The case of a writing workshop illustrates how this basic experience needs to be constantly renewed, how it is empowering and how, most importantly, it takes a (micro-) institution – a collective mental infrastructure: the writing workshop itself – to foster curiosity and care. The activity of curation, which is meticulously analysed in this chapter, shows that the distinction between institutionalized vs. resistant curiosity, sovereign vs. deconstructive styles, control and care, can only be set against each other for the purpose of theoretical clarification, since they need to be delicately articulated and modulated with each other in any concrete collective practice of curiosity. Even more than a relation of ambivalence, the radicality of the nanopolitics of curiosity investigated in our volume consists perhaps in uncovering a relation of complementarity (rather the exclusivity) between these supposedly incompatible polarities.

Such a radicality is displayed in Millaray Lobos Garcia’s contribution to this volume, in which she narrates and analyses, from an insider’s perspective, the political sequence of events which led Chilean activists, between 2019 and 2022, to stage an uprising that toppled a conservative government and imposed the writing of a new constitution to replace the one inherited from the Pinochet neoliberal dictatorship, only to see this highly progressist constitution widely rejected by popular vote. Through her writing style, which calls on ghosts, plants, insects and mammals to try and understand the unfathomable, as well as through the attitudes of her fellow-actors in this political drama, Lobos Garcia sketches the contours of an “unconditional curiosity,” which pushes even further the “unbound curiosity” promoted by Brekhus and Sabetta, the “mutual curiosity” elaborated by Virginia Kastrup, Luciana Caliman and Veronica Torres Gurgel in their Brazilian writing workshop, as well as “the crucial thermodynamic opening that curiosity represents for the survival of the animal realm in the biosphere,” according to Lionel Manga.

Successful social movements can certainly teach us a lot about the epistemic and political virtue of curiosity, as demonstrated by Perry Zurn in his riche comparative analysis of the 1960s Civil Rights movement, of the 1970s Prison Information Group and of the 2000s PISSAR (People in Search of Safe and Accessible Restrooms) mobilisation. The main lessons of his synthetic conclusion are certainly worth quoting here:

Resistance movements utilize curiosity insubordinately in at least four specific ways. First, they investigate the state of affairs for disempowered groups. [...] Second, these resistance movements

shifted not only the topic of inquiry but also the people being asked. [...] Third, these movements launched major efforts to change what got recognized as a question or a problem. [...] Fourth, they asked, “What do we need? What would a new future of care look like? And how can questions help us dream?” [...] This is the structure of politically resistant curiosity. (Zurn 2021 146)

Such resistant curiosity-formations are obviously more needed than ever. However, at the horizon of the perspectives opened by our contributors – and, first among them, those who enrich our common reflection on curiosity with words, figures, ideas and imaginaries coming from the outside, or from the margins, of the Western world (Brazil, Chile, Cameroon) – the call for an “unconditional curiosity” resonates with the demands for *an alternative conception of education, of politics and of political agency*. Far from the expectations and pretences of mastery, control and sovereignty, which sound increasingly hollow in our elected politicians’ mouths, the contributions assembled in this volume face up to the radically unsettling experience of curiosity as a “vertigo of knowledge” (Czechowski 1993). Irreducible to the intransigence generally associated with political radicality, these curious forms of politics include ‘soft’ virtues, forms of passive resistance in front of superior forces, which Tyson E. Lewis (2020, 99), in a stimulating reading of the Coen brothers’ *Big Lebowski* echoing the work of Paul North, portrays as a capacity to abide and to yield: “Yielding means giving in but also giving over (as in yielding a crop). [...] Yielding to these forces with casual, absentminded curiosity produces a yield.” Aspiring to what one does not know, thinking against one’s inherited self, pushing oneself to like the unappealing, disarming the opponents through unexpected abiding: the radicality of this unconditional curiosity-formation may prove crucially political when it comes to dismantling the material and mental infrastructures which feed us by undoing our future possibilities of life.

To quote the categories (in)famously mobilized by Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in a 2002 Pentagon briefing, we are slowly coming to the realization that well-disciplined attention to the ‘known unknowns’ (what we know we don’t know), within the dominant paradigm of economic growth and technoscientific innovation, is barely more helpful to face our dramatic planetary situation than brainless abandon to the countless weapons of mass distraction accumulated all over of screens. We also know that the threat of climate change was well understood half a century ago by the Nixon administration: what is now hitting us from the back with every flooding, heatwave and megafire is definitely an ‘unknown known’, defined by Slavoj Žižek (2004) as something we knew but pretended to ignore. We need unconditional curiosity to have a chance to bounce upon the ‘unknown unknowns’ that can pull us out of our current dead end, synonymous with unhappy ending. (And, of course, the fact that Rumsfeld agitated the ghost of ‘unknown unknowns’ to justify US aggression against Iraq, to cover up for the known absence of weapons of mass destruction, only stresses once more the profound political ambivalence of these curious matters!).

The mental infrastructures necessary to the politics of unconditional curiosity rest on at least four apparently contradictory building blocks, which this introduction and the various contributions collected in this volume hope to substantiate.

First, *an acceptance of radical uncertainty*: unconditional curiosity is a condition of survival in a world where “known unknowns” and “unknown knowns,” while they must certainly be taken into account, must always leave room for ‘unknown unknowns’, in order to develop an accidental agency (Crowley 2021) able to face the dismantlement of what we depend upon. As Geoffrey Hinchliff (2019, 175) suggested, “only once we have cultivated uncertainty [...] can a non-destructive curiosity be allowed to flourish,” a self-limited curiosity which renounces the hope to be fully satisfied in a world under full domination. Second, *a mantle of basic protection*: “To be curious requires a comfort with not-knowing, with uncertainty, and with ambiguity, and therefore requires a deep security in the sense of self, a center of gravity that keeps us grounded while being open to questioning our knowledge. The sense of security and self-

possession that curiosity is built on is surely not cultivated by our times” (Swidler 2020, 112). On this topic, etymology points to a clear limit of the approaches promoted in these pages: insofar as *securitas* is equated with the absence (*se-*) of *cura* (“worry”), it appears both as a precondition and as a contrary to *curiositas*. If too much security may render us incurious, not enough security will threaten the very possibility of being curious. Curiosity, as discussed here, implies that we feel comfortable enough to go out there, playfully search for some mind-stimulating otherness, and safely come back home to digest our catch in peaceful conditions. The centrifugal movement towards the foreign, the strange, the Alien (*das Fremde*), demands to be balanced by the possibility to process its difference, its novelty, its strangeness, within a safe (homely) space of reflection and response (Flusser 2013 159-167; Waldenfelds 2011 10-13 & 65). Should we still talk about curiosity when some resistance movements see their militants come home beaten up, mutilated or dead, or when their homes have been bulldozed? Certain feral forms of Otherness simply crush and destroy us (tsunamis, megafires, military aggression). Curiosity may not be possible when confronted with the traumas of the (Lacanian) “Real,” with Gaia’s violent irruptions (Stengers 2015), or with bombardments by heavy artillery. Hence the catch-22 of our historical conjuncture: we need a mantel of basic protection to cultivate the curiosity which will help us remantle our material and mental infrastructures.

Third, *a shared feeling of shared incompleteness*: only once the vulnerability, incompleteness and disability of one are understood and perceived as the problem of all does it become possible to prioritize the supply of everyone’s basic needs over the (self-)consummatory desires of the few. If one hopes to remantle our increasingly exposed and vulnerable forms of life, a worldview conceiving us as “all incomplete” (Harney and Moten 2021) calls for what Perry Zurn defines as *cripping curiosity*:

It begins, first, by interrogating where and when the ableist construction of curiosity is reinforced, whether in the disability community or among able-bodied minded people. [...] Second, criping curiosity involves investigating how the reign of ableist curiosity – or the process of sanitizing curiosity in the modern period – has ultimately failed. [...] Third, criping curiosity involves reimagining a curiosity whose strength and power lies not in its sanitation but in its multiplicity. (Zurn 2021, 160-161)

Finally, *a prevalence of care over control*: while the inescapable ambivalences of any responsible politics of curiosity must make room for attentive and distractive incuriosity, as well as for some amount of inquisitive control (in the form of precaution), what we qualified as “centrifugal care” must take the driver’s seat in the daunting task of remantling our social and ecological fabric, in a difficult juggling between the need for openness and the risks of disorientation. This extends from the nanopolitics of care precisely analysed in this volume by Virginia Kastrup, Luciana Caliman and Veronica Torres Gurgel in the case of a writing workshop, to the platforms of curation studied by Jacopo Rasmi in the online distribution of experimental films, and all the way to the macropolitics of care theorised by Vando Borghi as a response to the long-term development of infrastructural capitalism.

Within our ADC triangulation, the tension we suggest between curiosity-control and curiosity-care can be used to develop mental infrastructures promoting and strengthening *alternative cultures of curiosity*, in supplementation and counterweight to those already in place in advertisement, intelligence services, research labs, gossip, etc. Contrary to a prevalent opinion, the Anthropocenic crisis is not due to an (environmental) lack of material resources, but to a (political) failure to provide fair and empowering access to the existing resources, which are more abundant than actually needed (as well documented in the case of water by Selby et al 2022). During the 1990s, in a series of “open letters” to “rich people” and “intellectuals,” Congolese writer Sony Labou Tansi (2015 124-125) eloquently defended “the emergence of a common destiny to all humans at the scale of the planet,” denouncing affluent Western societies’ persistent incuriosity towards poor and exploited populations, at home and abroad, calling forth a

“revolution in awareness without which the forthcoming century would be the most painful defeat in the history of intelligence and reason.” Planetary solidarity was the only possible alternative to “a war of the worlds.”

The mental infrastructures of planetary solidarity needed to prevent this defeat can be described in terms of *curation* – where practices of care and the prudence of control ally to cure a disease by remediating it. But they demand first and foremost *alternative* modes of curation, which they will then foster through feedback loops. These alternative modes need to be based on a variety of scales (from global logistics to autonomous farming), on a coordination between a diversity of actors (from university-trained experts to carriers of vernacular knowledge), on an articulation between a multiplicity of temporalities (from emergency responses to long-term capacity-building), on the inclusion of a heterogeneity of agents (from national States to resistant groups and to non-human populations). The type of politics we need at this juncture for such alternative modes of curation is best summarised in Michel Foucault’s 1980 vision of a “new age of curiosity” – to which this collective volume hopes to bring its modest contribution:

It evokes the “care” one takes of what exists and what might exist; a sharpened sense of reality, but one that is never immobilized before it; a readiness to find what surrounds us strange and odd; a certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thought and to look at the same things in a different way; a passion for seizing what is happening now and what is disappearing; a lack of respect for the traditional hierarchies of what is important and fundamental. I dream of a new age of curiosity. We have the technical means; the desire is there; there is an infinity of things to know; the people capable of doing such work exist. (Foucault 1997, 325)

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