

Ernst van Alphen

Leiden University

Attention for Distraction: Modernity, Modernism and Perception

ABSTRACT

Particularly in the latter half of the nineteenth century sensorial experiences changed at breakneck speed. Social and technological developments of modernity like the industrial revolution, rapid urban expansion, the advance of capitalism and the invention of new technologies transformed the field of the senses. Instead of attentiveness, distraction became prevalent. It is not only Baudelaire who addressed these transformations in his poems, but they can also be recognized in the works of novelist Gustave Flaubert and painter Edward Munch. By means of the work of William James, Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer and Georg Simmel, the repercussions of this crisis of the senses for subjectivity will be discussed.

Keywords: distraction, attention, modernity, modernism, abstraction.

In *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (1990) and in *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (1999), American art historian Jonathan Crary discusses crucial changes in the nature of perception that can be traced back to the second half of the nineteenth century. Focusing on the period from about 1880 to 1905 he examines the connections between the expansion of metropolitan cities such as Paris and Berlin, the dramatic expansion and industrialization of visual and auditory culture, and the transformation and modernization of subjectivity. Crary approaches these issues through analyses of works by three key modernist painters: Manet, Seurat and Cézanne, who each engaged with the disruptions, vacancies and rifts within the perceptual field. At the core of his project is the paradoxical nature of attention. Each artist in his own way discovered that sustained attentiveness, rather than fixing or securing the world, leads to perceptual disintegration and loss of presence, and each used this discovery as the basis for a reinvention of representational practices.

Crary does not discuss the work of Edward Munch, although Munch is also a modernist painter whose representational practice could be understood as engaging with the disruptions and vacancies within the perceptual field, and as reflecting or embodying in his works a new, modern notion of subjectivity. In this article, I will not do what Crary has omitted to do, and substantiate his argument on modernity in an analysis of Munch's works. What I will do in what follows is elaborate on the kind of modern subjectivity that came about in response to the transformations of the perceptual field that were caused by modernity. In consequence of that analysis I will make a suggestion for how this account of the modern subject in relation to the perceptual field opens up a different understanding of Munch's style of painting.

In his *Remnants of Song: Trauma and the Experience of Modernity in Charles Baudelaire and Paul Celan*, American literary scholar Ulrich Baer defines the essence of modernity as the experience of shock, of experiences that register as unresolved, of traumatic experiences that elude memory and cognition (1). Charles Baudelaire and Paul Celan are for him major figures who mark the beginning and ending of modernity. Baudelaire first recognized the dissolution of experience that characterizes modern existence. Although his confrontation with the "small shocks of urban existence" pale in comparison to Celan's efforts to testify to the Holocaust, both Baudelaire and Celan inscribe the historical events they were part of as "shocking and traumatic because they occurred in complete isolation and as absolute breaks with the belief systems that grounded their worlds" (8).

This diagnosis of modernity sounds perhaps far-fetched, but it becomes more convincing when found reflected in the observations of a writer who is associated neither with the revolutionary changes in Parisian urban life nor with the catastrophe of the Holocaust, namely John Ruskin. In 1856, a year before Baudelaire published *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Ruskin understood the paintings of Victor Turner in relation to the modern man's decreasing graspability of the world as caused by the increasing industrialization and consumption of coal:

Out of perfect light and motionless air, we find ourselves on a sudden brought under sombre skies . . . and we find that whereas all the pleasure of [earlier days] was in stability, definiteness, and luminousness, we are expected to rejoice in darkness, and triumph in mutability; to lay the foundation of happiness in things which momentarily change or fade, and to expect the utmost satisfaction and instruction from what it is impossible to arrest, and difficult to comprehend. (Ruskin 317)

It is in modernity, however, that this vanishing of the “experienceability” of the world has repercussions for the experiencing subject. This becomes very clear, for instance, in Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (*Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*) of 1910. In the years covered by the notebooks, the narrator attempts to gain some control over the sensory impressions that initially threaten to overwhelm him. He experiences this invasion of sensory stimuli most strongly in the city. In Paris he is literally bombarded by acoustic stimuli:

Electric trams go clanging through my room. Cars run over me. A door slams. Somewhere a windowpane crashes down and I hear the larger shards laugh and the smaller splinters giggle. Then suddenly, a dull muffled sound from the other side, inside the house. Someone is climbing the stairs. Comes, keeps on coming. Arrives, stays there a long time, then goes on up. And then the street again. A girl screams: Ah tais toi, je ne veux plus. The tram races in, rattling with excitement, and then rattles on, over everything. Someone shouts, People walk hard, catch each other up. A dog barks. (Rilke 8)

Rilke personifies Malte's acoustic experiences—shards that laugh and splinters that giggle—transforming the sounds into active agents threatening to overwhelm the protagonist. It is as though the car is riding over him and the excess of acoustic stimuli makes it impossible for him to take

any distance or reflect on anything. He literally registers everything and, deprived of the capacity for reflection, loses any secure sense of himself.

The main character in this novel threatens to go under, due to the sensory impressions that assault him in the modern city. Stimuli penetrate his body by way of his senses, and threaten his self with disintegration. The border between him and his external reality disappears. The subject (or disintegration of it) presented here is no longer defined by reason, but by his senses. In Rilke's novel this situation is experienced as negative. The thrust of the novel, then, consists of the search for remedies against this feeling of being completely overwhelmed by sensory impressions.

90

Rilke's narrator can be seen as exemplary for a new view of subjectivity and bodily experience that became increasingly important during the course of the nineteenth century. According to this view, rationalism and cognition is no longer the foundation of subjectivity and the senses are no longer the instruments by which the rational subject can dominate its environment; on the contrary, subjecthood is formed in reaction to stimuli that penetrate the body by way of the senses. The "battle" that is thus waged through the senses is of a fundamentally different nature than it was before. While remaining the point of contact between the subject and its surroundings, the senses no longer function as an interface separating the subject from the outside world, thus enabling him to survey and control it. Instead, the senses are now conceived of as a channel or door that is continually ajar, through which the outside world penetrates the body in the form of stimuli. The balance in the power struggle between the subject and the outside world would now seem to tip decisively towards the latter.

Some theorists associate this nineteenth and early twentieth century concern for the role of sensory impressions in the creation of subjectivity with the social and technological developments of modernity. As a result of the industrial revolution, rapid urban expansion, the advance of capitalism and the invention of new technologies, the field of the senses changed—particularly in the latter half of the nineteenth century—at breakneck speed. The subject was increasingly exposed to new sensations that could no longer be fitted into the familiar world order. Therefore, in the words of Jonathan Crary, an essential aspect of modernity consists of:

a continual crisis of attentiveness. . . . the changing configurations of capitalism pushing attention and distraction to new limits and thresholds, with an unending introduction of new products, new sources of stimulation, and streams of information. (Crary, "Unbinding Vision" 22)

According to Crary, this “crisis of the senses” is the reason why the concept of “attention” became one of the most important categories in the empirical psychology of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The American philosopher and psychologist William James (brother of modernist novelist Henry James), for instance, defined the subject in terms of attention, concentration or focalization. Precisely at the point when the *distraction* of the subject starts to emerge as a new phenomenon in the course of the nineteenth century, he took the concentration and attention of the subject to be decisive for human subjectivity.

But not everyone sees distraction as a polar opposite of attention or concentration, hence, as threatening to the subject. German thinkers such as Sigfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin consider it rather as a liberation or emancipation of the subject than as its downfall. In his essay “The Cult of Distraction” from 1924, Kracauer tells us how the new media of his time such as radio and film bring about an intense form of distraction in the viewer or listener. Someone listening to the radio, for instance, will switch from one station to another. The idea of the uninterrupted unity of the traditional work of art is radically disrupted by the “fragmented sequence of splendid sense impressions” that comprises the reception of film. On the one hand, these ways of looking and listening are symptomatic of the fragmented character of modern life, “deprived of substance, empty as a tin can, a life which instead of internal connections knows nothing but isolated events forming ever new series of images in the manner of a kaleidoscope.” On the other hand, Kracauer argued that watching films would help to demolish the bourgeois worldview, “making the ‘soul’ flow out of itself to become a part of the material world . . . constantly encountering material reality” (qtd. in Armstrong 216).

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” Walter Benjamin presents that over the course of modernity, distraction of the viewer-listener becomes less and less the opposite of attention. Rather, being distracted is a special form of attention through which entirely different objects penetrate the subject. He compares the effect of cinema with Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis, which made it possible to isolate matters that hitherto “floated along unnoticed in the broad stream of perception” (235), subjecting them to analysis. The fragmented structure of film carries the viewer’s attention with it, and distracts it in the sense that at such moments conscious reflection is impossible. In order to illustrate this distracted manner of seeing, Benjamin quotes Georges Duhamel, who, incidentally, and unlike Benjamin, regarded film as a great danger: “I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images” (qtd. in Benjamin 238). But the discontinuity

in the sequence of film images and the “shock” that this brings about in the viewer ends up facilitating a “heightened presence of mind”:

The distracted person, too, can form habits. More, the ability to master certain tasks in a state of distraction proves that their solution has become a matter of habit. Distraction as provided by art presents a covert control of the extent to which new tasks have become soluble by apperception. . . . Reception in a state of distraction, which is increasingly noticeable in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in the film its true mode of exercise. The film with its shock effect meets this mode of reception halfway. The film makes the cult value recede into the background, not only by putting the public in the position of critic, but also by the fact that at the movies this position requires no attention. The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one. (Benjamin 240)

92

At first sight, the “reception in a state of distraction” that Benjamin regarded as having been triggered by the new media takes on paradoxical forms. Because subjects are no longer capable of organizing and anticipating their own perceptions, and because they are distracted by discontinuous sensory impressions, they become capable of attaining new or higher insights. According to this notion of things, distraction is an element of attention, seen as a dialectic apparatus. The subject who gets these new insights is, however, not the same subject as the one proposed by the Enlightenment who acquired insight by means of controlled observation and rationality. The subject of modernity acquires insight while being subjected to a mechanical process, unintendedly and accidentally.

The notion of subjectivity in modernity described so far differs radically from conventional notions of the subject in Modernism. According to the conventional view, the modernist subject is not characterized by distraction, disintegration, loss of self and inability to experience the world, but by distanced observation, reserved intellectualism, scepticism and irony, and a pursuit of an authentic self.¹ These qualities seem to embody a notion of strong individualistic subjectivity rather than the loss of it. I will, however, rearticulate these two opposed notions of subjectivity as a distinction between the world-sensitive subjectivity and the defensive subject. But how can a strong, individualistic subjectivity be seen as “defensive”?

In order to solve the apparent contradiction between modernity and literary modernism, in order to historicize, as well as to argue that the individualistic subject is a defensive one, I will invoke one of the most important

¹ See, for example, Fokkema and Ibsch (24).

and canonical essays written about modernity, and moreover, written in the middle of it, in 1903: “The Metropolis and Mental Life” by the German sociologist Georg Simmel. Like Baudelaire before him and Benjamin after him, Simmel describes the psychological foundation of metropolitan subjectivity as determined by the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli. “Lasting impressions, the slightness in their differences, the habituated regularity of their course and contrasts between them, consume, so to speak, less mental energy than the rapid telescoping of changing images, pronounced differences within what is grasped at a single glance, and the unexpectedness of violent stimuli” (Simmel 325). This metropolitan life stands in sharp contrast to the slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of the sensory-mental phase of small-town and rural existence.

But the metropolitan subject does not just let itself be annihilated by these violent stimuli. It has its defense mechanisms:

Thus the metropolitan type—which naturally takes on a thousand individual modifications—creates a protective organ for itself against the profound disruption with which the fluctuations and discontinuities of the external milieu threaten it. Instead of reacting emotionally, the metropolitan type reacts primarily in a rational manner, thus creating a mental predominance through the intensification of consciousness, which in turn is caused by it. Thus the reaction of the metropolitan person to those events is moved to a sphere of mental activity, which is least sensitive, and which is furthest removed from the depths of the personality. (Simmel 325)

Simmel sees the intellectualistic character of the mental life of the metropolitan subject as a protection of the inner life against the sovereign powers of the metropolis. Yet, it is not only its intellectualism but also its reserve which protects the subject from being overwhelmed by modern urban life:

If the unceasing external contact of numbers of persons in the city should be met by the same number of inner reactions as in the small town, in which one knows almost every person he meets and to each of whom he has a positive relationship, one would be completely atomised internally and would fall into an unthinkable mental condition. (Simmel 331)

According to Simmel, it is because of the lack of space and bodily closeness in the dense crowds of the metropolis that mutual reserve, indifference and

the intellectual conditions of life become perceivable and significant for the first time.

Simmel's diagnosis of mental life in the metropolis does resolve the contradiction between notions of modernity as, on the one hand, being defined by a crisis of the senses (Crary) or by traumatic shock and the dissolution of experience (Baer), and, on the other hand, literary modernism as it is seen by mainstream criticism. Both distanced observation, reserved intellectualism, scepticism, irony and the pursuit of authenticity that characterizes literary modernism in conventional construction of it, as well as the world-sensitive modernism as distinguished by Benjamin, are a protection against the loss of self which threatens the subject living under the conditions of modernity. This implies a reversal of the kind of relation between the features of literary modernism and history as postulated by Fokkema and Ibsch, two Dutch scholars who have written on literary modernism. For them, the independent intellectualism and reserve of the modernist subject is not a defense strategy, but the foundation of individual subjectivity as such. They explain, for instance, the allegedly marginal role of the events of the First World War in Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* and in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* as follows:

In the Modernist world of experience, everything, even the events of war, is filtered by consciousness; historical events are made subordinate to the vision of the pondering, evaluating subject, which will never give up its independence. (Fokkema and Ibsch 34, my translation)

However, when we try to understand modernism contextually, instead of formalistically, it becomes necessary to conclude that it is not a matter of holding on to independence, as if wilfully, but of armouring the self by means of intellectualism and reserve against overwhelming threats to it. This is what I meant above by a defensive identity. It will be clear by now that this armouring of the self does not safeguard the self. The Austrian modernist writer Herman Broch articulates clearly why modernist intellectualism is compulsive instead of controlled: "The highly-developed rationality of modern metropolitan culture does not at all mitigate the human twilight, rather it intensifies it. The accepted *ratio* becomes a mere means for the satisfaction of drives and thus is robbed of its content as knowledge of the whole" (qtd. in Miller 40). According to Tyrus Miller, rationality had embarked on a journey to the end of the night (alluding to the title of Louis-Ferdinand Céline's 1932 novel), namely, reducing the individual subject to, in Beckett's words, "a peristalsis of light, worming its way into the dark" (Miller 40). This is a far cry from the triumphant

rational subject to which critics tend to cling. But it is also an overcoming of the split alleged by critics more sensitive to other kinds of modernist literature and art, the kinds that can now be considered more daring, looking the condition of modernity more directly in the face.²

These transformations of the perceptual field and the subsequent rise of new, modernist subjectivities can also inflect and enrich our understanding of Munch's painting. Rather than commenting on specific paintings, I will reflect more generally on his style. Munch has sometimes been considered as not modern enough because although there is always a tension between figuration and abstraction in his works, he remained committed to the "traditional" mode of figuration (Prelinger 156). The turn to abstraction was seductive to many artists of his generation; Munch, however, never fully embraced that style of painting. The way Munch's abstract gestures or elements of his paintings are usually read is as expressive, not depicting an object or figure, but expressing the sensibility of the artist. This sensibility can then be read in the moving gestures of paint.

In the conventional account of abstract painting, abstraction is the binary opposite of figuration. When painting is purified from figuration, abstraction is the result. It is usually Mondrian's development that is used to exemplify this binary notion of abstraction as purification and that constructs abstraction as the radical other of figuration. Since then, different, less binary conceptions of abstraction have been brought up. In her study on Munch, *Emma and Edvard Looking Sideways*, Mieke Bal proposes to consider figuration and abstraction not as opposing modes of painting, but as modes of painting which are in dialogue (201). The abstract elements in Munch's works signify gesture; gestures that visualize the work of the painter as painterly realization of the work. With this foregrounding of the notion of gesture, she turns to a specifically gesture- and painting-oriented figural element, the hand. She argues about Munch's painting *The Wedding of the Bohemian* the following: "We have seen the one [hand] of the bride in *The Wedding of the Bohemian*, a bit of surface at the extremity of an equally poorly painted arm, the point of which was not depiction but signifying gesture" (200). She reads the poorly painted hands in *Self-Portrait with Bottles* (1938) in a similar way: "In this work I submit, it serves primarily to indicate the work of the hand with pigment and brush—art's material relations as never to be overlooked, which might happen when we focus too narrowly on the depiction" (203). The kind of dialogue between depiction and abstraction Bal describes assigns different semiotic

² This account of subjectivity and distraction was based on my earlier article, "Figurations of Self: Modernism and Distraction" (339–46).

functions to depiction and abstraction. Depiction represents figures and objects, whereas abstraction signifies gestures and the painterly realization of the work. In Munch's works both painterly functions are always combined, although the degrees in them can differ.

Bal also refers to Jonathan Crary's work on modernity and attention in order to see what the repercussions of his view are on abstraction: "Abstraction in this sense is a lack of attention. The paradoxical consequence is a distraction from the motif to the painterly realisation. This figural distraction leads to attention to the paint for its own sake; to materiality" (209). I would like to suggest another reading of the role of abstraction in Munch's work in view of the distraction I have analyzed so far. In this reading, the lack of attention does not lead us away from depiction but qualifies another kind of depiction. Munch illuminates how, as modernity caused fundamental changes in the perceptual field, figuration was no longer focused on the depiction of figures and objects, but *on the depiction of the perception* of figures and objects. It is these perceptions of figures and objects that, with modernity, become "distracted." The depiction of distracted perceptions is given form by means of abstraction. Distraction, then, does not imply a displacement from figuration to abstraction, but inserts a self-reflexive moment or gesture, into the process of figuration. One does not paint the object world, but the way one sees the object world—distractedly.

WORKS CITED

- Alphen, Ernst van. "Figurations of Self: Modernism and Distraction." *Modernism*. Vol. 2. Ed. Astradur Eysteinson and Vivian Liska. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007. 339–46. Print.
- Armstrong, Tom. *Modernism, Technology and the Body*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. Print.
- Baer, Ulrich. *Remnants of Song: Trauma and the Experience of Modernity in Charles Baudelaire and Paul Celan*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001. Print.
- Bal, Mieke. *Emma and Edvard Looking Sideways: Loneliness and the Cinematic*. Oslo: Munch Museum, 2017. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1969. 217–52. Print.
- Crary, Jonathan. *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1999. Print.
- . *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1990. Print.

- . "Unbinding Vision." *October* 68 (Spring 1994): 21–44. Print.
- Fokkema, Douwe, and Elrud Ibsch. *Het Modernisme in de Europese Letterkunde*. Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers, 1984. Print.
- Miller, Tyrus. *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1999. Print.
- Prelinger, Elizabeth. *After the Scream: The Late Paintings of Edvard Munch*. Atlanta, GA: High Museum of Art, 2002. Print.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Trans. Michael Hulse. London: Penguin Classics, 2009. Print.
- Ruskin, John. "Modern Painters." *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*. Ed. E. T. Cook. Vol. 5. London: Georg Allen, 1908. 316–20. Print.
- Simmel, Georg. "The Metropolis and Mental Life." *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*. Ed. Donald N. Levine. Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1971. 324–39. Print.

Ernst van Alphen is Professor of Literary Studies at Leiden University. His publications include *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self* (Harvard UP), *Caught By History: Holocaust Effects in Art, Literature, and Theory* (Stanford UP), *Art In Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought* (U of Chicago P), *Staging the Archive: Art and Photography in Times of New Media* (Reaktion Books). The following book is in press: *Failed Images: Photography Beyond Dominant Practices*.

e.j.van.alphen@hum.leidenuniv.nl