



**Enrico Campo, *Attention and its crisis in Digital Society*,
Abington, New York: Routledge, 2022**

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Volume 26, numéro 1, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1091336ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1091336ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Georg Simmel Gesellschaft

ISSN

1616-2552 (imprimé)

2512-1022 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Mele, V. (2022). Compte rendu de [Enrico Campo, *Attention and its crisis in Digital Society*, Abington, New York: Routledge, 2022]. *Simmel Studies*, 26(1), 137–141. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1091336ar>

viewer who was firstly interested in understanding, decrypting and so clarifying (first for himself) the social universe before criticizing it and thus trying to estimate what kind of disposition of things should be appropriated. Even if in some works (e. g. *The Philosophy of Money*) a refusal of a certain situation described can be felt, Georg Simmel placed himself in a different position, devoted to seeing and listening the things instead of changing them. He was literally seduced by the images of his *Umwelt*. In this sense, he was near to that historical conception of philosophy which was fully expressed (and accomplished) by Hegel and radically modified by Marx: the comprehension *by means of concepts*. From a certain point of view, the lack of a critical theory in Simmel constitutes a lost opportunity. But the wit and the uniqueness of his essays, together with Harrington's patience, will allow us to forgive him. The readers of *Essays on Art and Aesthetics* will find out soon.

VINCENZO MELE

Enrico Campo, *Attention and its crisis in Digital Society*, Abington, New York: Routledge, 2022.

From a look that is not blinded by the supposed novelties of the present, it is evident that the fear of the advent of the “Middle Ages of Distraction” caused by technological innovation is not only a recent fear related to the advent of digital media, but has accompanied the West since its origins, accentuating since the advent of the industrial economy. Indeed, capitalism is characterized by the prevalence of rational action over purpose, which – as described by both Marx, Weber, and Simmel – requires not only physical effort but equally a mental effort of concentration toward a task that becomes increasingly specialized and one-sided. At the same time, however, in capitalism individuals must not only be “concentrated” producers but also “distracted” consumers by

the images of advertising that tend to contend with attention devoted exclusively to work. In his essay *Berliner Gewerbe-Ausstellung*, devoted to the 1896 Berlin Trade Exhibition, Simmel observed that in such settings a peculiar characteristic of modern industrial production becomes especially evident: the ever greater importance of the offer of goods with respect to the demand for them gives rise to the “shop–window quality of things” (*Schaufenster-Qualität der Dinge*), according to which “objects tend to take on a seductive aspect, to the detriment of their utility” (Simmel, 1991 [1896], p. 121). Thanks to the enormous size of the buildings and the light transparency of their clear surfaces, the industrial Expos gave rise to spotless, bright settings, where individuals are agreeably subjected to bedazzling overstimulation by a colored carousel of light, sound, and an unheard of quantity of objects on display. These observations — elaborated on further after developing his theory of value in the *Philosophy of Money* — served to capture the structural quality of the modern capitalist economy: above and beyond their use and exchange values, any commodities produced must be endowed with a symbolic and communicative surplus value, whose purpose is to arouse the consumer’s desire and imagination. The birth of industrial design, the phenomenon of advertising and, lastly, the increasing ascendancy of marketing in production activities testify to the extent that the “shop– window quality of things” has escalated in contemporary capitalism, making the consumption of goods ever more tied to communications and the public imagination, and less and less to the actual use value of any concrete product. According to Simmel, the metropolitan spirit is involved in an ambivalent dialectic between “the intensification of nervous stimulation (*Steigerung des Nervenleben*), brought on by the rapid and constant change of external and internal sensations” and the “intensification of consciousness” brought about by the same causes. There is a red line that goes from the metropolitan *blasé* personality as described by Simmel at the beginning of twentieth century and the distracted men/women in front of the screens of their cellphones. According to Simmel, “humans are creatures of difference” (*Unterschiedswesen*, Simmel, 2021 [1903], p. 192), which

means that their consciousness is stimulated by the difference between the impression of the moment and the one that precedes it. If we are exposed to a series of uniform stimuli, our consciousness never experiences sufficient stimulation to develop. In other words, the metropolis stands as an environment rich in stimuli, information, and messages that could enrich and differentiate our personality, but we can no longer appropriate them, because we are saturated and indifferent. In other words: *distracted*.

In analogy with the concerns that accompanied with the birth of the metropolitan culture that represented the anxieties and hopes of the “short century” (the twentieth century), even today there are questions about the effects caused by the spread of ubiquitous media (smartphones, laptops, tablets) born with the digital revolution. Alongside the enthusiasm for the magnificent and progressive fortunes of the new economy of Google and Facebook, there is also concern about the consequences of these technological innovations on individual and collective psychology. The question – yesterday as today – is more or less always the same: does technology make us stupid? The question arises in the face of the increasing difficulty – especially on the part of the younger generation – to concentrate for a reasonably long time on a single task because of the need to do a series of cyclical activities, such as checking e-mail, texting or surfing social networks. It thus seems clear that from the point of view of attention an eminently cognitive contradiction arises alongside the structural contradiction between capital and labor. For capitalism produces not only economic crises but also “crises of attention” and cannot survive without continually revolutionizing the “means of perception” (Crary, 1991). It has the need – eminently contradictory – to expand the thresholds of attention for value production as much as possible in the direction of both “concentration” and “distraction.” These concepts – along with that of “attention” – are actually quite complex and must be sheltered from a linear conception of “mind” that is a more or less conscious legacy of the metaphysics of the Western subject. Beyond

simplified and unrealistic images, if we could perform a biopsy of our consciousness at a given moment in space and time, the landscape we would glimpse would be more akin to that “simultaneity of states of mind” represented by the literature of the crisis of the novel (Svevo, Joyce, Woolf) than to a coherent and ordered rational world. The entity we are used to calling “I” is more like a quarrelsome and mutable “coalition government” than an absolute monarchy of an enlightened despot. In our daily lives we actually inhabit different “in-between worlds” (the world of play, of dreams, of aroused life, of practical things, etc.) that we represent to ourselves through different cognitive styles, and it makes no sense to hold that one form of human experience should prevail or exclude another. All are equally necessary for the affective and biological life of subjects. Instead, it is a matter of being aware of the rules of the context in which we experience and mastering the transition from one world to another. Rather, we need to reflect on who has the social power to determine and capture the attention of subjects, inviting and influencing the transition from one world to another. In today’s world – as Enrico Campo’s book shows very well – this power is largely in the hands of the “attention economy”, i.e., that market space in which the resource that is actually exchanged is users’ attention. Delegating to the individual the ability to resist the onslaught of the advertising and consumer society only has the perverse effect of stimulating guilt and demonizing other spheres of attention.

The undoubted merit of this book is that it attempts to unravel the skein of questions that arise around the problem of the “attention crisis” with great clarity and at the same time great caution, avoiding both uncritical optimism with regard to the present (the praise of multitasking, of intense stimulation and the supposed ability on the part of the subject to manage multiple streams of information at the same time) and the mythologizing of a past that at best concerned only literate elites (the regime of deep attention, represented by the centrality of book culture). Rather, the scenario characterized by the advent of new media is depicted as a

new field of action and struggle in which what is at stake is that of conscious choice and control of different modes of human experience, not deterministically assigned to the blind forces of technology and the market.

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WU YU SHAN

Ren Qiang and Ji Zhe (Eds.), *Thinker in a Modern World - An Anthology of Georg Simmel*, Beijing: Commercial Press, 2021

In this book, Chief Editors Ren Qiang and Ji Zhe aim to aggregate Georg Simmel's theories into 14 research papers across four major topics. This book also contains the works of several Asian and European researchers who dedicated their lives to studying Simmel's theories. Together, the two parts of this book provide a rare anthology of Simmel's academic works in Chinese.

As the title of this book suggests, Simmel was undoubtedly one of the greatest thinkers of the modern world. His arguments were based on his unique logical and philosophical perspectives of sociology. Simmel stepped out of the confines of academism and provided his micro-level analysis of society in a series of prose