The Economy of Attention and the Novel

Sibylle Baumbach

1 NOVEL FORMS OF STORYTELLING: *TWITTERATURE*

@JungleFever

Heading down to Africa on a boat. Too hot! I get the creeping sense this job isn't going to be as cushy as they made it sound.

The natives seem unhappy. Some are even violent! Why don't they appreciate how much we've done for them? Ungrateful welfare leeches, I say!

[...] Back in Europe. Feel as if I look forever into that immense heart of...what? Shadows? Night? Gloom? Something pitch black? (Aciman and Rensin 2009, 56–57)

Though, strictly speaking, not taken from a novel, but from what could be regarded as an anthology of remediated classics, this excerpt points to several key concerns which literature and literary studies in the twenty-first century are faced with. These include the growing tendency towards

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the simplification of classics, by translating them into ‘easy,’ or, as in this case, youth language; changing reading habits propelled by the digital turn; and growing anxieties about attention deficits, triggered by the overflow of powerful stimuli in our fast-paced information society and the cognitive overload we are exposed to through our constant engagement in the World Wide Web. *Twitterature* answers to all of these challenges. As claimed by the subtitle of this experimental work, published three years after the launch of Twitter, *Twitterature* presents “the greatest books in twenty tweets or less.” Tabbing the potential of the microblogging service, sixty key works of world literature, from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (c. 2100 BC) to Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957), are distilled to a maximum of twenty tweets, presented “in the idiosyncrasies and idioms of the modern day” (Aciman and Rensin 2009, xv).

For readers unfamiliar with the classics, chapter headings announce the title of the work that is ‘tweeted,’ in our case, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899). The narrative perspective matches the focalisation in the original novel where Marlowe, an English sailor, reports on his journey to the Congo. In keeping with Conrad’s novel, Marlowe’s, aka JungleFever’s, tweets describe the oppressive and exploitive colonial gaze while simultaneously offering a critique of the colonial endeavour by rendering Europe, more specifically London, the heart of the British Empire, as an immense ‘heart of darkness,’ “[s]omething pitch black” (Aciman and Rensin 2009, 57). In addition to encapsulating the basic plot, the tweets point readers to what could be regarded as the essence of this particular work by blending creative adaptation and critical readings, which are presented in easily consumable bites.

Like Twitter, which currently trumps other media of communication, *Twitterature* not only provides an arena for mingling ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’: It also offers a novel medium for storytelling as a kind of life-writing 2.0, which caters to the reduced attention span of readers who have become accustomed to digital communication, and provides a new arena for remediating and disseminating canonical texts. It quite literally *reforms* fiction. The (post-) digital reformation playfully presented in the printed collection points to the increasing engagement of twenty-first-century literature in a newly-emerging attention economy where attention has become a scarce resource that needs to be gained, conserved, and carefully allocated.

In the following, I will present a brief overview of current discourses on attention and attention deficits and their connection to fiction, before

exploring the poetics and politics of attention in twenty-first-century novels, based on two examples that elucidate the different ways in which contemporary narratives react to anxieties of (in)attention. My first example, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), engages in various facets of economic and cultural attention, boosted by the prestigious Booker Prize. My second example, Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), marks the growing interest in attention deficits while heightening the seminal role of mystery fiction in the evolvment of what I refer to as 'literary attention.' As defined here, 'literary attention' denotes both the complex ways in which literary texts respond to, engage in, and reflect upon discourses on attention and the different strategies these texts employ to draw and bind readers' attention. As I will argue, literary attention is a key element in the attention economy, which is especially prevalent in our globalised and digitalised age where attention has become a key currency that drives cultural, political, and economic exchange.

2 THE ATTENTION ECONOMY, COGNITIVE CAPITALISM, AND LITERARY ATTENTION

Despite William James' often-cited claim that "[e]very one knows what attention is" ([1890] 1950, 381), the mechanisms underlying attention continue to raise new questions (Mole 2011, 3). Some of the difficulties in defining attention stem from the manifold attention processes we conduct in everyday life. We continuously pay attention, both voluntarily and involuntarily, to a wide variety of aspects. Yet our capacity for processing information is limited. Faced with an overload of information which cannot be completely processed, the human mind necessarily selects and responds only to small subsets of stimuli. Selective attention is a biological necessity, allowing us to navigate our complex daily environments. It can be conceived as the mind's searchlight or filter, which assists us in perceptual processes, enabling the recognition and tracking of specific scenes or objects (Treisman 2006). Defining attention is compounded by the fact that it is not a unitary phenomenon. It relies on several control modules that serve to select some sources of information while suppressing others (Chun et al. 2011). While this is not the place to further explore the mechanisms behind attentional processes, it is indisputable that the technologies we live by shape our attentional capacities.

In twenty-first-century society, characterised by continuous access to a surge of information, boosted by digital communication technologies, attention has become “a highly perishable commodity” (Davenport and Beck 2001, 31) with high (exchange) value in political economy, targeted marketing, and knowledge management (Bueno 2017, 2–4). In this context, Twitter and *Twitterature* can be regarded as both symptoms and products of ‘knowledge capitalism’ (Burton-Jones 1999), which has come to define contemporary societies where productive processes are contingent on the successful selection, processing, and management of knowledge and information (Bueno 2017, 5). These new demands are at the core of the ‘attention economy,’ where “part of the value of the commodity [...] comes from the amount of (unpaid-for) [...] attention it has absorbed” (Beller 2006, 181).

According to Herbert A. Simon, who first introduced the term ‘attention economy’ in 1969, the “wealth of information” in post-industrial societies “creates a poverty of attention, and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it” (6–7). Michael H. Goldhaber (1997) took this approach further by focussing on the seminal role of the internet in capturing, measuring, and channelling attention through algorithms to personalise information for segmented audiences, based on users’ habits and preferences. Offering immeasurable access to information as well as excessive connectivity, the World Wide Web constitutes a system of sustained distraction due to an oversupply of powerful stimuli, which vie for our limited time and attention. As Nicholas Carr suggested, “the Net seizes our attention only to scatter it” (2011, 118). Instead of deep engagement, it fosters rapid shifts of attention, which strain our working memory and thus our ability to select, process, connect, and store information (125). As a result, our attentional focus becomes increasingly dispersed. Insofar as this “divided attention” (Greenfield 2009, 70) might be conceived as “the precursor and prerequisite for multitasking” (70), however, it can be regarded as the necessary evolutionary outcome that allows us to navigate our increasingly digitalised world and deal with the hyperstimulation that we have come to live by.

N. Katherine Hayles has identified a generational shift from “deep” to “hyper attention,” claiming that “hyper attention,” i.e. rapid switches of attention “can be seen as a positive adaptation that makes young people better suited to live in [...] information-intensive environments” (2012, 99). According to Hayles, hyper attention, which includes the ability to scan vast quantities of information, has largely replaced deep attention, which

is needed for problem-solving, learning, and sustained concentration on a single object. While both forms of attention help us successfully interact with our environment, Hayles emphasises the need to engage in longer circuits of attention to “ensure that deep attention and close reading continue to be vibrant components of our reading cultures” (69). This demand for deep attention puts new challenges to pedagogy and education, which are bound to train students in “[t]hinking, fast and slow” (Kahnemann 2011). It also points to the seminal role of the humanities and especially literary studies in countering growing anxieties about attention deficits.

While these anxieties are no postmodern phenomena, they are particularly conspicuous today. This is confirmed by the rising number of self-help manuals published during the last two decades, such as Maggie Jackson’s *Distracted: Reclaiming Our Focus in a World of Lost Attention* (2018) or Winifred Gallagher’s *Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life* (2010), which offer advice on how to train mindfulness. Only very few works, however, consider deep reading as part of the focus formula. One exception is Nicholas Carr, who argues that the sustained attention which enabled readers to disengage from outward stimuli is a cultural achievement, a refinement of our naturally distracted brains, whose ability to rapidly shift attention to any changes in one’s surroundings was once necessary for survival (2011, 64). In a similar vein, Martha C. Pennington and Robert P. Waxler, in a recent work entitled *Why Reading Books Still Matters: The Power of Literature in Digital Times* (2017), regard “literature and book culture [...] as a significant type of countercultural activity,” which challenges “Mainstream Values,” such as “efficiency & speed,” “browsing & dispersed attention,” and “consumerism & amassing of wealth,” by (re-)introducing “Enduring Human Values,” including “thoroughness & dedicated time,” “contemplation & focused attention,” and “cooperation & empathy” (211).

Though *Twitterature* does not foster ‘deep attention,’ it is part of this “countercultural activity.” By remediating the fragmentation and immediacy provided by the microblogging service, it integrates Twitter-culture into the realm of (traditional) print media. It thus serves as a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the current preoccupation with attention and attention management, which has emerged from the awareness that the digital revolution might come at a cognitive cost and which has impacted the development of the novel.

3 POSTCOLONIAL ATTENTION GAMES AND THE BOOKER

The attention economy also regulates literary markets: From their enhanced presence in social media and customer-specific recommendations based on buying habits to elaborate marketing campaigns, publishers and booksellers take the necessary measures to draw and hold consumers' attention. They are assisted by popular literary prize culture, which ensures that the 'best' works of fiction do not fly under the public radar, even though what is deemed 'the best' remains highly controversial. For the Anglophone novel, the Booker Prize is a case in point. The award for the 'best' novel of the year written in English is preceded by a carefully orchestrated and deliberately prolonged three-stage selection process (from the announcement of the longlist, to the shortlist, to the winner), which "generates suspense while maximising commercial appeal" (Huggan 2001, 118).

As James English (2002) argued, however, the attention elicited by literary prizes first and foremost derives from controversies that surround these awards, and the Booker Prize is a naturally born winner when it comes to provocation and dispute. It was founded in 1968 under the sponsorship of an agribusiness company, Booker McConnell, which was rooted in colonial economies, more precisely in the sugar industries of Guyana. Associated with the attempt to improve the company's public profile and sugar-coat "an exploitative colonial regime" (Ponzanesi 2014, 58), the Booker Prize has been accompanied by a series of scandals. The best known to date occurred in 1972 when John Berger openly denounced the Booker's "colonialist enterprise built on the backs of black plantation workers in Guyana" (English 2002, 114), and donated half his prize money to the Black Panthers. Notwithstanding "the by now well-established tradition of Booker-bashing" (Ponzanesi 2014, 60), the Booker has become a catalyst for postcolonial fiction, launching what were then new talents, including Michael Ondaatje, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, John M. Coetzee, or Aravind Adiga.

Its selection criteria, however, remain opaque. While Jodie Archer and Matthew L. Jockers' *The Bestseller Code* (2016) seems to suggest otherwise, there is no recipe for a Booker (Edward St Aubyn's witty riposte to the Booker, *Lost for Words* [2014], made a point by favouring a cookery book as prize-winner, cf. Baumbach 2018). And yet, certain patterns emerge: Although the Booker strives for literary "worldliness" (Said 1983, 39), its shortlists have often revealed pronounced attention on novels connected

with former strategic colonial holdings, which was repeatedly criticised as “an overdose of postcolonial political correctness” (Ponzanesi 2014, 60).

Commenting on the current literary prestige economy, English called the Booker “a perfectly magical guarantor of an imperfectly magical system” (2002, 60). It is almost ironic that its signature novel is deeply rooted in magical realism: Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* has not only won the Booker Prize in 1981, but has been deemed the ‘best of the Booker’ in 1993. Rushdie’s unreliable narrator frequently challenges readers’ attention to historical facts, which the narrator occasionally gets wrong (cf. Rushdie [1981] 2008, 229–30). The novel thus highlights (and by means of magical realism also bridges) the gaps between different (hi)stories, pointing to the discrepancy between colonial and postcolonial storytelling while displaying the “strategic exoticism” (Huggan 2001, 77) that caters to the attention of especially Western readers.

Whereas Rushdie’s novel does not explicitly reflect upon different levels of attention, Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* (1992) suggests that there is a profound difference between national modes of reading as well as between what one could refer to as ‘colonial’ vs. ‘postcolonial’ reading. When Almásy urges Hannah to decelerate her “too quick and American” way of reading Kipling, this is a call for deep attention:

Read him slowly, dear girl, you must read Kipling slowly. Watch carefully where the commas fall so you can discover the natural pauses. He is a writer who used pen and ink. [...] Your eye is too quick and North American. Think about the speed of his pen. What an appalling, barnacled old first paragraph it is otherwise. (Ondaatje 1992, 100)

In addition to the slightly satiric blow against the stereotype of American surface-culture, the instructions for deep reading, which—according to Almásy—unlock the beauty of Kipling, provide the key to the enigma surrounding the English patient, who ironically compares himself to “a book [...] [s]omething to be read” (269). Almásy’s identity cannot be disclosed by mere surface reading, but unfolds slowly by decoding the multiple layers that emerge beyond his burnt skin and in-between the pages of Herodotus’ *The Histories*. This mode of deep reading, however, is subverted by Ondaatje’s narrative. With its highly fragmented style and multiple shifts in perspective, the latter is fashioned in opposition to the traditional, colonial novel represented by *Kim* (1901) insofar as it disrupts modes of sustained attention. Instead, the polyphonic, discontinuous narrative of *The English*

Patient caters to the taste of the next generation in that it both demands and trains divided attention, which is required to connect the individual stories and intertexts, read between and beyond the lines, fill in the gaps, and embrace the cultural hybridity that underlies the narrative and distinguishes Ondaatje's characters. These different modes of reading do not only suggest that colonial texts are largely fashioned as readerly texts, whereas postcolonial novels are writerly texts (sensu Roland Barthes): They point to a novel awareness of the poetics and politics of attention, which is particularly conspicuous in twenty-first-century novels.

As I will argue below, many of these novels critically reflect upon different modes of attention, by exposing how narratives elicit, guide, and also manipulate readers' attention, and by foregrounding attention as a resource, a scarce commodity, and "a new pool of global [...] power that is starting to become recognized as the 'attention economy'" (Rogers 2014, 7). For illustrating what can be referred to as 'the postcolonial literary attention economy,' the Booker winner of 2008 shall serve as an example: Aravind Adiga's debut novel *The White Tiger*.

4 THE POLITICS AND POETICS OF ATTENTION IN ARAVIND ADIGA'S *THE WHITE TIGER*

The highly appraised novel describes the career of Balram Halwai, whose ambition and inclination to bribery and corruption lead him from the rural Laxmangarh to Bangalore, or, as he describes it, from an "India of Darkness" to an "India of Light" (Adiga 2008, 14). Especially issues of social mobility and social hierarchy in the face of rapid globalisation are at stake in this narrative. According to Balram, India has deteriorated from a traditional caste system to a Darwinian jungle:

[I]n the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies. And only two destinies: eat — or get eaten up. (64)

Instead of expressing nostalgia for an irretrievable past, Balram quickly adapts to the emerging consumerist society of postcolonial India. Born into a family of sweet-makers and rickshaw-pullers, he pursues a career as driver with the son of a New York-educated landlord, Ashok Sharma, and eventually establishes his own company in the thriving city of Bangalore. Challenging the rhetoric of 'India Shining,' a marketing slogan developed

by the Indian government in 2004 to convey economic optimism, Balram's journey into the "India of Light" propels his moral degradation. He breaks with his family and traditional values, is absorbed by his desire for success, follows the footsteps of his master, and eventually even takes his place to found his own start-up, which is an endeavour he pursues at all costs:

I'll never say I made a mistake that night in Delhi when I slit my master's throat. I'll say it was all worthwhile to know, just for a day, just for an hour, just for a *minute*, what it means not to be a servant. [...]. Ha!

Yours for ever,
Ashok Sharma
The White Tiger
Of Bangalore

boss@whitetiger-technologydrivers.com. (Adiga 2008, 321)

This is the ending of the novel. What is ironic about Balram's ascent in Indian society is that its premises are false. While Balram claims that success is only possible by breaking with the traditional system (or breaking out of the "rooster coop" [173] as he calls it), his entrepreneurship does not subvert but cement a hegemonic system that thrives at the expense of subordinate classes.

The novel has been read as a critique of the "neoliberal rhetoric of entrepreneurial innovation" (Brouillette 2014, 8), the corrupted morals, and the increasing social and economic inequality driven by globalisation. The role of aesthetic and political attention, its distribution and manipulation, however, has not yet been explored. This is all the more surprising since Adiga's novel tabs the full potential of 'attention.' The term, derived from the Latin verb *ad-tendere* ('to stretch towards'), denotes "[t]he action, fact, or state of attending or giving heed," "observant care," and "[t]he action of attending to the comfort and pleasure of others" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 'attention,' n. 1–3), covering a broad spectrum of meaning from the mental power of 'attending' to the act of service. The narrator, Balram, is not only attention-seeking: He is a master in observing processes and characters around him, and propels his career by 'attending' to a rich entrepreneur—Ashok. The master-servant relationship, which alludes to the continuation of postcolonial hierarchies in capitalist Indian society, is eventually turned upside down when Balram emerges as the victorious entrepreneur and adopts his master's name, devouring him in an act of 'cannibal capitalism' (Hind 2014) and thus moving from second to

pole position, from B to A. This shift is made possible by a genuine, overt inattentiveness on the part of Ashok, exposed by Balram:

Drivers like to say that some men are *first-gear* types. Mr. Ashok was a classic *first-gear man*. He liked to start things, but nothing held his attention for long. (Adiga 2008, 120)

Balram seems to be the opposite. He pays attention not only to the market and stakeholders, but also to his self-fashioning as ‘white tiger’—a title attributed to him as a boy by a school inspector. The white tiger, described as “the rarest of animals, the creature that only comes along once in a generation” (Adiga 2008, 35), can be read as both a relic from the “postcolonial exotic” (Huggan 2001, 117), pointing to the traditional, mystical India, and as indicating India’s newly emerging ‘tiger economy.’ Essentially, the tiger, the national animal of India, is a symbol of power, strength, agility, elegance—and alertness.

Like his namesake, Balram is the most vigilant of all characters. As Ashok’s driver, he frequently observes his master through the rear mirror, countering his master’s gaze. Only shortly before Balram’s gruesome murder of Ashok, their eyes meet, foreshadowing their change of roles:

I glanced at the rearview mirror — and there was Mr Ashok, his eyes also bobbing up and down. I thought, *Aha! Caught you, you rascal!* And his eyes shone, for he had seen *my* eyes, and he was thinking the same thing: *Aha! Caught you, you rascal!* We had caught each other out. (Adiga 2008, 199)

There is only one instance when Balram fails to return the gaze: When he encounters a real white tiger during a visit to the zoo, Balram collapses (cf. 277). Read as an allegory on the postcolonial condition, Balram’s temporal effacement by India’s signature animal could be interpreted as pointing to his inability to ultimately replace the grand, oppressive narrative of a deeply exoticized India, which will prevail, not least because it constitutes an important element in the postcolonial attention economy, as represented, for instance, by the Booker.

What emerges from the narrative is not a postcolonial but a neocolonial image formed in India’s ‘heart of lightness’ in strategic alliance with China, “now the workshop for the world” (Dawson 2015, 81), whereby India is presented as superior partner. These neocolonial tendencies are supported by the genre Adiga chose for his narrative. *The White Tiger* is an email novel,

written in the tradition of the epistolary novel, but surpassing the traditional (colonial) genre by incorporating new communication technologies.

The narrative is composed of Balram's emails to the Chinese Premier, "His Excellency Wen Jiabao" (Adiga 2008, 3), who never writes back. His silence subverts the premises of globalisation, the grand narrative of worldwide connectivity, which allows for global knowledge exchange and from which the novel takes its cue. The Premier's lack of attention to Balram's messages suggests resistance towards changes in the global attention economy, which has been focusing on India, also pushed by the postcolonial attention it has drawn. The Premier's silence can further be read as a rejection of a new global market, in which China might have to 'attend' to India as the stronger economic power of the two awakening giants.

Adiga's attention games do not stop here. Through the first-person perspective of Balram, the readers of the novel are put into the position of the Chinese Premier, of the economically uprising East, even though they potentially constitute the out-group (and the victims, the Ashoks) in this proposed new alliance between China and India. By paying attention to Balram's story, Adiga's readers are consuming the engaging narrative and are simultaneously consumed by its dark humour. Ultimately, it is us who make Balram's ascent possible. And it was the Western prize and prestige culture that turned it into a success story.

In playing with readers' attention and alluding to key mechanisms in the attention economy, which Balram has mastered perfectly, Adiga's novel strikes a fine balance in the tension between promoting an "apparently neutral and innocent *plaisir du text*" and representing "a form of capital circulating through interlinked symbolic and commercial economies" (Ponzanesi 2014, 80). As cultural commodity, which originates and culminates in India, *The White Tiger* is not only an example of New Orientalism: Its narrator Balram frequently directs our attention to the paradoxical combination of cultivated cosmopolitanism and a strategic self-exoticism, which many postcolonial narratives are (still) grounded in.

In the context of the neocolonial exploitation of India, the novel also challenges readers' 'moral attention' (Nussbaum 1985). Instead of providing "training in a tender and loving objectivity that we can also cultivate in life" (527), the narrative entangles its readers in a complex net of moral unreliability. Prompted to empathise with Balram by the first-person narrative, we accompany him, as he plunges more and more deeply into moral darkness until he cuts his master's throat with a broken whiskey bottle, when our own moral attention as 'witnesses' to this scene is challenged:

I rammed the bottle down. The glass ate his bone. I rammed it three times into the crown of his skull, smashing through to his brains. It's a good, strong bottle, Johnnie Walker Black — well worth its resale value.

The stunned body fell into the mud. A hissing sound came out of his lips, like wind escaping from a tyre. (Adiga 2008, 285)

Balam's account includes several attention devices which decelerate our reading speed as if to allow readers to savour the moment of murder and reflect upon Western voyeuristic tendencies (cf. Huggan 1997, 424), which are exposed through the satirical tone of this passage. These devices include repetition, anthropomorphisms, and markers of fascination, such as the poeticisation of a horrific deed and the highly ambivalent image of the snake, which represents allure and death (cf. Baumbach 2015).

The case of Balam illustrates that "it is through attention that a specific technology of governing the self is realized" (Rogers 2014, 202). The immense success of the novel, propelled by the Booker Prize, and the narrative's connection to greater attention economies suggest the need to expand current approaches in postcolonial literary studies by the category of 'postcolonial attention.' This includes a deeper analysis of the poetics and politics of attention, which offers new perspectives on discourses on domination and resistance while considering seminal forces in today's economy of attention, such as marketing and publishing strategies, and also anxieties about (in)attention, driven by the digital turn and discourses on 'attention disorders.'

5 ATTENTION DEFICITS AND NOVELS OF DIS-EASE: MARK HADDON'S *THE CURIOUS INCIDENT* *OF THE DOG IN THE NIGHT-TIME*

Narratives that focus on attention impairment based on either neurodevelopmental disorders, such as Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Asperger's Syndrome, or neurodegenerative diseases, such as Alzheimer's and dementia, have skyrocketed during the past decades. Some of these received considerable media attention, e.g. Lisa Genova's *Still Alice* (2007), partly due to the success of its movie adaptation, or Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), which won numerous prizes including the Whitbread Book Award. These novels point to an increasing 'attention complex' (Rogers 2014). As suggested by "the ADHD diagnostic industry," for example, attention is increasingly

instrumentalised “as a neurobiological way to manufacture governable individuals to meet the needs of resurgent political and economic liberalism” (Rogers 2014, 163–64). It is a common misconception, however, that ADHD and further alleged attention ‘deficits’ are ‘disorders.’ As studies have shown, people diagnosed with ADHD, for instance, are more distractible, but also often more creative, and may thus more easily adapt to rapid changes due to a greater flexibility in their thinking (Mlodinow 2018).

Twenty-first-century novels that deal with attention deficits challenge these misconceptions. Many of them are written from a first-person perspective to offer immediate access to allegedly ‘defective’ minds. Haddon’s *Curious Incident* is a case in point. It is narrated through the perspective of a fifteen-year-old boy, Christopher Boone, who shows symptoms strongly reminiscent of Asperger’s. In contrast to ADHD, Asperger’s does not thwart the ability to sustain attention, but often manifests itself in ‘mono’ or ‘tunnel’ attention, in “stereotyped or restricted patterns of interest” and “a lack of appreciation of social cues and a lack of empathy” (Kewley 2013, 51).

While Christopher experiences difficulties in reading people’s faces and interpreting their emotions (Haddon 2003, 2–3; 60), he is by no means inattentive. His mathematical and logical skills are outstanding (“I know [...] every prime number up to 7507” [2]) and he notices the tiniest detail: “I see everything” (174). To prove his exceptional vigilance, Christopher recalls how he once saw a herd of cows and could reproduce their individual coat-colour patterns as well as name their position on the field. His acute attention to detail connects to, and surpasses, the creative imagination associated with children’s ability to “see things big” (Falconer 2009, 101). The desire for this “enlarging gaze” (98) might have contributed to the great success of Haddon’s crossover novel, which was the first novel published simultaneously in an edition for children and adults respectively, and which was particularly successful among adult readers (25).

The Curious Incident challenges our attentional capacities right from the start. The first chapter, entitled “2,” suggests that we have already missed something even before the narrative sets in. And, indeed, we have missed the ‘curious incident,’ the murder of Wellington, the neighbour’s dog, that happened before the narrative-within-the-narrative begins and is the driving force of the novel-within-the-novel that we are reading.

As the narrator discloses in ‘Chapter seven,’ which is actually the third chapter of the novel: “This is a murder mystery novel” (Haddon 2003, 5),

written by Christopher as part of an exercise, commissioned by Siobhan, his instructor, who also teaches him the tricks of the trade, i.e. “that the book should begin with something to grab people’s attention” (5). Our task as readers is clearly defined when Christopher reveals why he opted for this particular genre: “It is a puzzle. If it is a good puzzle you can sometimes work out the answer before the end of the book” (5). The gratification of solving the enigma is granted in *The Curious Incident*, as the reader realises, long before Christopher does, that the death of his mother was invented to cover up an affair that ruined his parents’ marriage, led to their split, and also eventually contributed to the ‘curious incident of the dog.’

Significantly, the title already hints at an instance of inattentional blindness, which Christopher—and with him the reader—will eventually overcome. It is a quotation from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s short story “The Adventure of Silver Blaze” (and not, as readers unfamiliar with Doyle might assume, from *The Hound of the Baskervilles* [1902], which Christopher repeatedly refers to in his narrative). When Scotland Yard investigator Gregory asks Holmes whether “there [is] any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention,” Holmes replies: “To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time” (Doyle [1892] 2005, 411). What is curious about this incident is that “[t]he dog did nothing” (411). The absence of an action, in this case: the missing bark, is the cue, as it suggests that the dog must have been familiar with the murderer. As it turns out, it was Christopher’s father who killed Wellington.

Christopher not only identifies with his idol Sherlock Holmes, based on their shared ability to “detach [their] mind[s] at will” (Haddon 2003, 92), which allows them to focus their attention on one specific endeavour, and their ability to adopt an “enlarging gaze” and view the world through a magnifying glass (cf. Falconer 2009, 99): Similar to Doyle’s stories, many of which disclose the mechanisms of the art of abduction that drive the narratives, Christopher’s “mystery novel” includes multiple hints on how to deal with cues and red herrings (Haddon 2003, 90–91). Though seemingly disrupting deep attention, which might be required to solve a mystery, his ‘digressions,’ many of which are coupled with graphs and drawings due to Christopher’s obsession with patterns, are the key to the narrative: first, because they support readers’ immersion in Christopher’s thought processes, and second, because they demand a genuine cognitive flexibility, which allows readers to parse the multimodal text (cf.

Mussetta 2014) and shift their attention between visual and verbal stimuli. It is Christopher's digressions, which often include metafictional comments, that prompt readers to recognize and also to move beyond the "Red Herring technique" (Laney et al. 2008) that underlies the narrative. This technique, used in psychology to conceal the objective of an experimental study to tested subjects, is based on a false rationale that "allows naturally curious subjects to 'figure out' what the study is about without *actually* figuring out what the study is about" (Laney et al. 2008, 364). As the almost exclusive focus on Christopher's (fictional) mind indicates, which is supported by the high frequency of the personal pronoun 'I' and the scarcity of other person deixis (e.g. 'we' or 'you') (Semino 2011, 422), Haddon's novel is no mystery novel, but rather a study in perception and flexible attention of a detached yet focused mind.

It is only through attentional flexibility, which verges on the hyper attentiveness which Christopher seems to 'suffer' from, that we can solve the numerous mysteries of the narrative, e.g. the 'curious incident,' the 'curious' narrator, and our own curious covert attention to preconceived notions of 'normalcy' (cf. Ray 2013), which inform our reading. The desire to identify some patterns or standards is fuelled by Christopher's obsession with pattern recognition while, at the same time, any sense of 'norm' is subverted by the narrator's exposure of common behavioural patterns as essentially arbitrary, culturally determined, and also deceiving. These include small talk, the use of metaphors, and also storytelling, which Christopher rejects in favour of mathematical, reproducible patterns, such as the system of prime numbers, which governs the numbering of chapters. And yet, to reveal the 'true' events revolving around the dog's murder, Christopher himself resorts to a conventional narrative genre, the mystery novel. What distinguishes his novel from "proper novels," which he dislikes "because they are lies about things which didn't happen," is that "everything I have written here is true" (Haddon 2003, 25).

Challenging the border between fiction and non-fiction as well as our understanding of 'distractions,' while foregrounding patterns that usually remain unnoticed even though they are essential to our environment, Haddon's novel confronts us with our own 'attention complex' (Rogers 2014) and our unease when encountering other, supposedly deficient minds. At the same time, the multimodal narrative, complex in its scope, but strikingly simple in its style, challenges our own attentional capacities and our competence in deep, yet flexible attention.

It is, of course, ironic that Christopher dislikes fiction, as he himself is a fictional character and unveils the ‘truth’ through storytelling (through the mystery novel and his metanarrative that explains the genesis of his story). Challenging our notion of fiction, the novel also challenges the narratives that have fuelled our ‘attention complex’ and directs our attention to the small things that we tend to overlook in our daily environments, which increasingly require hyper rather than deep attention.

Haddon’s novel even goes one step further. Weaving Christopher’s manifold digressions and distractions into a coherent narrative that verges on a traditional genre, Haddon turns the “curse of the information age” (Levitin 2014), i.e. scattered attention and shorter working memory, into a mind-wandering exercise. As scholars have argued, people with a history of attention deficits show high frequencies of spontaneous mind-wandering (cf. Smallwood et al. 2007). What they lack, however, are metacognitive skills, which enable them to realise and reflect upon their own cognitive processes (cf. Schraw and Moshman 1995). Haddon’s narrative makes us aware of the mechanisms (and importance) of mind-wandering and offers metacognitive instructions through its narrator. Christopher knows of his proneness to digress and employs key strategies used in direct attention training, such as “feedback, self-monitoring, and strategy identification” (Coelho 2005, 276) to successfully navigate his environment. Significantly, also storytelling belongs to these strategies. While mind-wandering has positive effects, insofar as it “allows us access to contextually unbounded information” (Coelho 2005, 235) and is connected with creativity, to be beneficial it must be coupled by metacognitive skills, which Haddon’s narrative, and—in the logic of *The Curious Incident*—storytelling provides.

6 LITERARY ATTENTION AS A NEW APPROACH FOR TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY LITERARY STUDIES

With the growing field of cognitive literary studies, scholars have started to re-examine the connection between literature and the mind. Not only can the novel be regarded as “the study of fictional mental functioning” (Palmer 2004, 5), which provides access to other minds: It also offers us insight into the ways we think, fill in the gaps in (narrative) texts, and process information to construe coherent stories. As I have argued, especially in the twenty-first century, the novel has been and continues to be shaped by growing anxieties about (in)attention while being an important product, but also a key player in our attention economy. Thereby, the novel caters

to both ‘deep’ and ‘hyper’ attention. On the one hand, emerging genres, such as ‘twitterature’ and ‘attention novels’ meet the taste of readers who have become increasingly accustomed to what Hayles referred to as ‘hyper attention.’ On the other hand, the last decade especially has seen a rise of mega-novels (Letzler 2017) and highly successful series of novels, such as J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* (1997–2007), which demand and also promote readers’ endured attention. These seemingly opposing trends mark two developments in the field of literary attention, which need to be further explored by future research. They also testify to the immense flexibility of the novel, which can easily adjust to new demands of both divided and deep attention.

Adapting Virginia Woolf’s famous statement, which renders the novel as “cannibal [...] which has devoured so many forms of art” ([1927] 1966, 224), the twenty-first-century novel could be considered as responding not only to ‘cognitive capitalism’ but also to emerging trends of cognitive cannibalism within the attention economy. Attention is both the novel’s key to survival and its unique selling point. While all texts are designed to attract attention, the attention economy demands new strategies for attracting and binding consumers, which have also affected contemporary modes of storytelling.

By responding to and reflecting upon different strategies of attention and attention management, and by exposing key anxieties regarding attention deficits, these new attention novels, of which two examples were given above, hold up a mirror to our own attention complex while fostering metacognitive awareness of the mechanisms and limits of attention and supporting cognitive flexibility. As new technologies pose novel challenges to our attentional capacities, literary studies should start attending more deeply to ‘literary attention’ by teaming up with scholars from cognitive psychology to introduce new tools for analysing the growing number of attention novels, including narratives that deal with attention deficits, such as dementia novels, which will continue to shape the literary scene.

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