“ONLY CONNECT”: THE AESTHETICS OF FRAGMENTATION AND MINDFUL LITERARY STUDIES

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1. Only Connect

“On or around June 1995, human character changed again. Or rather, it began to undergo a metamorphosis that is still not complete, but is profound – and troubling, not least because it is hardly noted” (Solnit 2014: 256). The opening of Rebecca Solnit’s essay “We’re breaking up: Noncommunications in the Silicon Age” recalls Virginia Woolf’s often-cited statement “in or about December, 1910, human character changed” (Woolf 1966 [1924]: 320). Both claims refer to a sea change in modes of social connectivity, which did not happen on a specific date (as suggested by the qualifying “[o]n or around” or “in or about”), but gradually evolved from new demands on human attention and crises of perception, which were propelled by rapid advancements of new technologies and marked the beginning of modernism or digitalism, respectively.

1995 is generally perceived as the year in which the internet first became commercialised (cf. Naughton 2016: 12): Companies such as Amazon and eBay started to offer online services for the roughly 16 million people who had access to a new virtual ‘reality’. 1910 was also a watershed year (cf. Stansky 1997): It marked the end of the Edwardian period and a departure from realism, heralded by the first London-exhibition of post-impressionist paintings, which pointed to a crisis of perception that had already been registered in European art in the late 19th century (cf. Crary 1999). These developments suggest a rather different reading of E.M. Forster’s memorable epigraph to his novel *Howards End*, published in 1910: “Only Connect” (Forster 1998 [1910]: 3).

Forster’s credo, which primarily addressed the “the difficulty of connecting our ordinary, conventional personalities with our transgressive sexual desires” (Kirsch 2015: 233), but is often read as advocating the connection between human beings across constructed frontiers between class, race, and nation (cf. *ibid.*),

strongly resonates with both Woolf's and Solnit's claims. Especially "[o]n or around June 1995", the clarion call "only connect" could not have been more fitting insofar as it points to one of the key ironies of 24/7 connectivity. As suggested by Solnit, the desire to connect has led to a scattering, a "breaking up" of human connection and a dispersion of our attention in the attempt to respond to the vast amount of external stimuli which have multiplied radically in the digital age. As Solnit concedes, "[a] restlessness has seized hold of many of us, a sense that we should be doing something else, no matter what we are doing, or doing at least two things at once, or going to check some other medium" (2014: 259). As one of the many consequences, "[r]eading books has become hard; the mind keeps wanting to shift from whatever it is paying attention to pay attention to something else" (ibid.).

This crisis of attention has not only affected human character and modes of reading, but also literary composition. As Woolf recalls, "[a]nd so the smashing and the crashing began. [...] Grammar is violated; syntax disintegrated" (1966 [1924]: 332-333). This disintegration of characters on the page and in the world (and, since the end of the 20th century, also in the world wide web), which is at the core of the changes registered by both Woolf and Solnit, gave rise to an aesthetics of fragmentation that defined modernist fiction and became prominent again in post-1995 fiction, in narratives after the digital turn.

As I will argue, this aesthetics of fragmentation, which deliberately disrupts the state of flow (cf. Csikszentmihályi 1990) commonly associated with narrative immersion, has shaped and continues to shape 21st-century fiction, driven by increasing anxieties about attention. These anxieties afford new opportunities for literary studies, which tie in with Forster's credo "Only connect". I would like to propose, therefore, that one of the principal tasks of literary studies in the 21st century is to engage in cross-disciplinary attention studies and assess the complex function of 'literary attention' in the greater attention economy which characterises contemporary Western cultures. Such an approach requires three interconnected steps: first, to engage in current debates about mindfulness, attention, and changing modes of reading; secondly, to analyse attention mechanisms in literary texts by scrutinising the various representations of attention as well as the function of characters as 'attractors' and 'detractors' who serve to guide readers' attention; and thirdly, to explore the connections between these 'attention narratives' and the attentional frameworks they are embedded in. This consideration of the macro- and microstructures of literary attention ultimately requires a cross-disciplinary approach, which takes into consideration attention studies in philosophy, cognitive psychology, art history and also cultural studies. The latter have recently begun to explore "the attention complex" (Rogers 2014) which, fuelled by what Kenneth Rogers refers to as the "ADHD-industry"

(ibid.: 166), influences modes of literary production and reception as well as marketing strategies in the book trade.

Focussing on the complex macro- and microstructures of attention that have shaped and continue to shape literary texts, literary attention studies or ‘mindful literary studies’ will not only help unveil the various ways in which narratives titillate, engage, challenge and also, to some extent, refine readers’ attentional capacities: By foregrounding narrative strategies of attention, mindful literary attention studies will also, on a larger scale, help scrutinise attention narratives that dominate our culture, politics and society – the attention narratives we live by.

2. Minding Attention and Attentional Reading

In contemporary culture, it has become commonplace to claim that the world wide web has disconnected us from the world and the characters around us. Due to our continuous engagement in multiple communication channels and social media platforms, we can hardly keep up with our several digital selves and the pace of our personalised newsfeeds. Furthermore, we increasingly seem to become outsmarted by our phones or watches, which force us into a mode of reactivity, leaving us in a state where we experience continuous deficit, as multiple devices vie for our attention. It is not without irony that the same world wide web that is part of the problem has started to offer us new solutions in the guise of mindfulness apps, designed to train our ability to focus. It is no less ironic that these apps are usually accessed on our smartphones, which in turn include tools that measure our screen-time, and alert us to the hours we spent on social media, browsing the web, or emailing.

Mindfulness apps, which run under promising labels, such as “MindFi”, “Insight Timer”, or “Headspace”, rely on two principles that drive contemporary markets: “ROA (return on attention)” (Neen 2018: 121) and “IBC – *inattention by choice*” (ibid.: 4) whereby the latter seems particularly difficult to attain. They are key products of what has come to be known as the ‘attention economy’ (Davenport/Beck 2002) – an environment where, based on the recognition that attention is a scarce resource, “part of the value of the commodity [...] comes from the amount of (unpaid-for) [...] attention it has absorbed” (Beller 2006: 181). As attention studies in psychology have confirmed, our cognitive capacities are limited. Since we are unable to respond to all external stimuli we encounter in any given situation, our attention has to be selective to prevent our minds from cognitive overload. Therefore, it filters incoming stimuli, allowing only the information that is deemed most relevant in a specific context to be fully

processed (cf. Anne Treisman's attenuation theory [1964]). While some filtering processes are guided by our intentions and goals (endogenous attention), others are triggered by automatic responses to salient sensory stimuli (exogenous attention) (see Clark et al. 2014). The latter is especially important in the digital marketplace, as "digital technologies now privilege our impulses over our intentions" (Williams 2018: n. p.).

The continuous battle for our attention has also affected literary markets, which target both endogenous and exogenous attention. Bestseller lists and literary prizes, which aim at promoting the 'best' works at a specific time and also influence modes of story-telling (cf. Baumbach 2018), are competing with strategic marketing tools, employed, for instance, by Amazon and Google, "the epicenter of the attention economy" (Schwartz 2018). These tools use algorithms to determine consumers' penchants, based on their buying and browsing habits. Insofar as digital marketing measures cater to an abundance of individual tastes by offering a sheer unlimited variety of different contents, they respond to and also nurture an increasingly fragmented audience. As Chris Anderson has observed in connection with new demands on the economy in the digital age, "[i]nfinite choice equals ultimate fragmentation" (2010: 181).

Surfing the web, we are not only trading our attention: We become captivated by our own attentional habits, which are fine-tuned by strategic marketing mechanisms that capitalise on our cognitive capacities. Fragmentation is part and parcel of this process. As Casey Schwartz observed in a recent article, published in *The New York Times*: "Our attention is sold to advertisers along with our data, and handed back to us battered and piecemeal" (2018). As a consequence, companies have embarked on "the corporate capture of our mental faculties and attention in the service of a state-based ideology of endless economic growth" (Doran 2017: 16) and developed "new psychotechniques of attention" (Rogers 2014: 8), which allow them to track, draw, and ultimately bind consumers' attention.

These new technologies have also affected our ways of perception: N. Katherine Hayles (2007: 187) has noted a generational shift that has largely replaced "deep attention", i.e. the sustained attention that is needed for immersing, for instance, in a single activity, such as reading a novel, with "hyper attention", i.e. the rapid switching between different strands of information. What still needs to be explored, however, is the extent to which new forms of communication and novel technologies that change the ways in which we interact with texts, i.e. e-readers, have taken their toll on our attentional capacities.

According to Maryanne Wolf, "[s]kim reading is the new normal", which requires us to develop "a new literacy for the digital age" (2018: n. p.). Synthesising studies by Ziming Liu (2005), Karin Littau (2006), Andrew Piper

(2012), and Lisa Guernsey and Michael Levine (2015), which have identified growing tendencies of skimming in reading, she emphasises the importance of the physicality of texts for understanding the information they convey, and examines how screen reading inhibits comprehension and the development of empathy. Wolf suggests “that critical analysis, empathy and other deep reading processes could be the unintended ‘collateral damage’ of our culture” (2018: n. p.). To adequately respond to the proliferation of digital reading, she argues, “[w]e need to cultivate a new kind of brain: a ‘bi-literate’ reading brain capable of the deepest forms of thought in either digital or traditional mediums” (ibid.).

Despite these anxieties about attention deficits and potentially harmful effects of digital reading, digital culture has afforded changes that might even have advanced, rather than damaged our cognitive capacities. As Paul Smart suggests, “the Web is a forum in which we confront some of our most potent intellectual and cognitive challenges” (2014: 327). Insofar as the multiple different stimuli we are forced to attend to when immersed in online culture, demand ‘divided attention’, which refers to the ability to divide our mental effort among two or more different tasks and respond to two or more different demands, one could argue that our engagement in online culture ultimately refines our ability to multitask, i.e. to switch between different surfaces and perform several tasks simultaneously – an ability that is indispensable for navigating our increasingly complex environments. Consequently, as Ziming Liu suggested in a paper on “Digital Reading” which evaluates different studies on digital vs. traditional reading, “[r]ather than deprecating digital technology as hurting our reading quality in the online environment, we should embrace its potential and expect technological advances will reduce the problems even further” (2012: 92). After all, Liu continues, “technology is constantly improving and reading practices themselves are evolving” (ibid.).

Despite the digital turn, traditional reading, i.e. print reading, is unlikely to disappear. As studies have shown, depending on the context and purpose of reading, people still tend to prefer print over digital media. This has been explained by the “affordances” of paper (cf. Sellen/Harper 2002; Liu 2012: 92), which allow the physical interaction *with* the text, enabled *by* the text through its materiality, the quality and shape of the paper it is printed on. The sense of touch and even the smell of paper (cf. Darnton 2009), for instance, underline the presence of a printed text, which enables a radically different reading experience than a digital text accessed on a tablet or e-reader. To what extent a printed text affords more intense or more immersive engagement than a digital text, however, remains disputable. Like printed texts, which are associated with ‘fixity’, it is also digital, more ‘fluid’ texts (cf. Liu 2012: 91) that enable physical interaction, as readers are encouraged to scroll, swipe, and also tap on words, engaging with the

text in the process of reading. Following Hayles, who claimed that “digital and print literacies mutually reinforce and extend each other” (2010: 75), we could argue that the “‘bi-literate’ reading brain”, as proposed by Wolf, is afforded by and also affords digital *and* print media while displaying a deep awareness of the potentialities and limits of both modes of reading.

These observations and the recent debates surrounding anxieties about attentional deficits in the digital age suggest two important functions of literary texts: On the one hand, 21st-century literature could act as counter-weight to the new wave of ‘hyper attention’ by engaging readers in ‘deep’ or ‘sustained attention’, i.e. “the ability to maintain attention on task requirements” (Manohar et al. 2014: 1030). On the other hand, 21st-century narratives could aim at striking a balance between ‘deep’ and ‘divided’ attention by engaging readers in different modes of reading which respond to new demands of our times. Both tendencies exist. Recent years have seen series novels, including J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* (1997-2007), Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* saga (2005-2008), Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* Trilogy (2008-2010) or George R.R. Martin’s epic fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-2019). Though the success of the latter was partly driven by the movie-adaptations and the successful HBO series *Game of Thrones* (2011-ongoing), the popularity of these novels points to an intense desire for, and wide-spread practice of, ‘deep reading’ especially, but not exclusively, among young-adult readers. A similar trend is confirmed by popular mega-novels, such as Eleanor Catton’s monumental novel *The Luminaries* (2013), Donna Tartt’s *The Goldfinch* (2013) or Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* (2009), all prize-winning novels (the Booker Prize was awarded to Catton and Mantel, the Pulitzer Prize to Tartt), whose considerable length (between 672 and 848 pages) has not impeded their popularity. Length, however, is no guarantee for ‘deep reading’: As David Letzler has argued, mega novels include a number of passages that are designed for skimming, which does not, however, impede their value as training areas for attention: “Given how utterly mega-novel text overwhelms our limited working memory and how often it dissolves its most important text into a large amount of cruft, [...] we must hone our ability to modulate attention to an extremely fine degree, filtering the latter so as to better perceive the former” (2017: 233). Drawing attention to “the cruft of fiction”, he argues, mega-novels ultimately help readers control their attentional capacities.

The “‘bi-literate’ reading brain” that Wolf calls forth (2018), which caters to both ‘deep’ and ‘hyper’ attention, however, seems to be stimulated best by narratives that replicate the fragmentation, “the smashing and the crashing” (Woolf 1966 [1924]: 332-33) of characters in a digital environment and engage readers in modes of reading that respond directly to new communication technologies of our times. These novels celebrate fragmentation while conveying

a sense of wholeness and unity through the materiality of the medium they are presented in. Whereas the past years have seen the emergence of several, multimodal narratives, such as interactive digital narratives (see Koenitz et al. 2015), which require readers to shift between multiple platforms in order to follow the plot and call for “a media-conscious narratology” (Ryan/Thon 2014: 4), there is an even stronger trend to incorporate digital communication technologies in print media by replicating e-mail or twitter conversations in narratives presented in the traditional form – the printed book. What started as playful experimentation at the crossroads between digital and print media has grown into a popular new genre, the email novel.

As I will show in the following, based on a closer consideration of David Llewellyn’s *Eleven* (2006), these novels embrace an aesthetics of fragmentation, afforded by digital communication technologies, which connects to the “breaking up” (Solnit 2014) of characters both with regard to the fragmentation of the self and the fragmentation of human communication. I refer to these narratives that respond to attention anxieties or engage readers in complex dynamics of attention and distraction to refine their capacities for mindfulness, as ‘attention narratives’. These attention narratives not only provide insight into “the mentality of a culture” (Nünning 2012: 164) by unveiling dominant modes of attention and distraction: They also offer an arena for reflecting upon attention and attention deficits in the growing attention economy (see also Baumbach 2019).

3. The Poetics of Fragmentation in Email Novels

Consisting entirely of emails written by different characters, the email novel does much more than merely update the epistolary novel and adapt it to the rise of new media of communication while retaining the genre’s key principle of “writ[ing] to the *moment*” (Richardson 1824: 254). It brings this notion of (dramatic) immediacy and ‘presence’ of the action to perfection by replicating the rapid transmission of messages from one inbox to the next.

Drawing on existing practices of fragmentation in digital communication, email novels create a new mode of storytelling, which attunes us to ‘broken narratives’ (Nünning/Nünning 2016), which have come to dominate our (online) communication. In addition, they foreground the usually unattended in email practices, including ‘blind copy-spy-culture’, ludicrous online aliases, emoticon newspeak, the rapid succession of online interaction, and emotional nuances that are often lost in digital communication. They further unveil changing notions of identity in media-convergent society, where the fragmentation of the self is not the exception, but the rule. As Jean Baudrillard claimed, “[o]ur private sphere has

ceased to be the stage where the drama of the subject at odds with his objects and with his image is played out: we no longer exist as playwrights or actors but as terminals of multiple networks” (1988: 16). In our increasingly digitalised environments, we have not one, but multiple workplaces, networks and e-entities, which we need to attend to 24/7 to maintain the illusion of (omni-)presence in a world wide web that never sleeps. Email novels allude to this ‘breaking-up’ of characters. Outside the sign system of the digital world, the protagonists are no-bodies, only voices. They remain a blank – with an e-identity, which secures a certain degree of anonymity by the lack of handwriting and the absence of physical bodies in the global village.

Composed of “chunks of ‘reality’” (Shields 2011: 3), email novels cater to a new ‘reality hunger’, which has sparked a growing desire for authenticity in an allegedly ‘post-truth’ society and a new interest in documentary modes (cf. Scherr/Nünning 2019). Replicating email correspondence on the page, however, they also reinforce the important role of print media in the digital age in providing a sense of coherence and wholeness in a highly fragmented and fragmenting world, such as the digital. This notion is based on an understanding of the world wide web as an agglomeration of countless fragments, which – though connected through a network of (hyper)links – are essentially and quite deliberately incomplete even though part of a whole – the world wide web. This bi-directionality is inherent in the fragment. A fragment refers to a fraction of a whole, which has been lost or, more importantly, not yet been attained. It is bi-directional in that it points to the past and to the future, to a ‘no more’ and to a ‘not-yet’, to something that does not yet exist or has not yet been grasped in full, that is in-the-making, becoming, evolving to be completed in the future. This is where the poetics of fragmentation in the email novel sets in.

As self-contained messages, emails are no fragments. If seen as part of a greater correspondence, however, they could be regarded as part of a larger, possibly complete whole. Furthermore, email communication invites fragmentation: Quite frequently, emails lack salutations or signatures, and are limited to only the most significant information. To accelerate the production and reception processes in our daily information overload, messages are pithy and compact; salutations and sign-offs are often omitted. Abbreviations, truncated sentences, and ellipses are extremely common. So are interjections, acronyms or emoticons, while orthography plays a minor role. Though email communication is produced in writing, its mode is spoken. In Matt Beaumont’s email novel *e* (2000) and its sequence *e² Squared* (2010), which includes not only emails but also chats, blogs and short messages, the trend towards an increasing fragmentation of language is already alluded to by the title, in which ‘email’ is abbreviated to ‘e’.

Beaumont's polyphonic works, inspired by "[r]eal life" (2009: n. p.), take us right into the "daily soap opera of office inboxes" (ibid.). They confront us with all the banalities, absurdities, and hidden intrigues of office communication. The various messages sent amongst employers of an advertising company are printed in chronological order, including the names of the sender, the addressee(s), also those put in 'copy' or 'blind copy', the subject heading, and the main body of the email. Whereas the subject headings indicate individual storylines, helping readers to keep track of the various threads shared between more than 20 different writers by providing guidelines ("sort it") or specific plot sequences ("relief is at hand", "FIRE DRILL" [Beaumont 2000: 59]), the notation of the times at which messages were sent and responded to adds some dramatic tension to these conversations by either underlining the immediacy of exchange or pointing to pauses that disrupt communication threads.

Daniel Glattauer's highly popular novel *Love Virtually* (2012, original title: *Gut Gegen Nordwind* [2008]) takes this fascination with time, a key element in all email novels, to extremes: Omitting subject headings and keeping the protagonists and storylines to a minimum by only employing two correspondents, Emmi and Leo Leike, the novel draws much of its dramatic tension and humour from the timing of their emails and the pauses between them, which reach from only a few seconds to several hours. The lack of specific sending times of the printed emails increases the notion of fragmentation, while heightening the immediacy of the conversation, which is presented as happening here and now.

By reducing the protagonists to two writers and omitting all the technical information, Glattauer prevents the skimming that email novels tend to promote. Presenting multiple communication threads and replicating of the email form (including the addresses of sender and addressee, subject headings, sending time), most email novels encourage selective reading and quick and efficient selection of information across several inboxes. While challenging our attentional capacities, they help promote a new literacy in the digital age, connecting to Wolf's "'bi-literate' reading brain" (2018). Some email novels even go one step further in that they reflect upon the manipulation of our attention, reflect upon attentional strategies, and expose attentional fallacies. David Llewellyn's *Eleven* (2006) is a case in point, as it is organised around an event that had long remained in the centre of public attention and also challenged (and continues to challenge) our moral attention.

4. Communication Shrapnel and Fragmented Attention in David Llewellyn's *Eleven* (2006)

The title of *Eleven*, a fragment, evokes an attention-grabbing date, the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September, 2001. Its cover fills the gap created by presenting the Twin Towers. Their design, reminiscent of a keyboard, hints at the increasing digitalisation of literature and at the media event surrounding the attacks as well as the Twin Towers, which have become a symbol of “horrific fragmentation” (Gioia 2013: n. p.). At the same time, it serves as an image of the *no more* (the Twin Towers) and the *not yet* (the keyboard, from which something new can arise).

The novel’s opening is remarkable for an email novel: It starts with silence, at least in the logic of email communication. The novel begins with three messages that are “SAVED IN ‘DRAFTS’” (*Eleven*: 7) by Martin Davies, a disillusioned accountant and would-be playwright from Cardiff:

FROM: martin.davies@quantumfinance.co.uk
 TO:
 SAVED: 08:33, Tuesday September 11, 2001
 SUBJECT: F**king Tuesdays

Last night we went for a drink on Mill Lane. You should have come. Anyway, as it was starting to get dark this guy came up to us, a crazy guy with a beard and he said ‘take all your money out of your bank accounts, spend all your credit cards, the revolution will not be televised’. He kept saying it was going to be the end of the world, so we might as well spend everything we’ve got. Then I realised that I’ve already spent everything that I’ve got. My credit cards and store cards are already maxed, so I’m fucked. I couldn’t sleep when I got

SAVED IN ‘DRAFTS’ (*Eleven*: 7)

The opening includes the announcement of the end – and the promise of renewal: the apocalypse, which foreshadows the horrific events of 9/11. Unlike in *e*, the headers of emails in *Eleven* are significant. The first email was written just a few minutes after the first plane hit the World Trade Center – at least this seems to be the case at a first, fleeting glance. The time indicated, however, is Greenwich Mean Time. It is actually sent five hours before the first attack strikes. As fragment, the opening email plays with our memories of the attacks and our attention to what usually passes unnoticed. It is not sent, but saved, then thrice revised, and finally released as fragment of itself:

FROM: Martin Davies
 (mailto: martin.davies@quantumfinance.co.uk)
 TO: lloyd@callotech.co.uk
 SENT: 08:51, Tuesday September 11, 2001
 SUBJECT: Morning!!

How are you? Missed a good one last night. Lisa almost got into a fight over a tray of curry and chips, and some crazy bloke told us the world was going to end.
(*Eleven*: 9)

Placing a fragment at the very beginning of his novel, Llewellyn aims at our fascination with the *no more* or *not yet*: Fragments are compelling due to their enigmatic nature, their brokenness, incompleteness, and “the darkness surrounding [them]” (cf. Tronzo 2009: 18), which stimulates our imagination. The trimmed message furthermore draws our attention to our own propensity for skim reading and the “use [of] shortened fragments to convey our thoughts” (Gazzaley/Rosen 2016: 112), which Adam Gazzaley and Larry D. Rosen have identified as key symptoms of our “Distracted Mind”. The latter emerges from “excessive demands on our brains” by “our increasingly information-saturated world [...] coupled with growing expectations of 24/7/365 availability and immediate responsiveness” (2016: xiii). It is characterised by goal interference caused by the failure of successfully integrating “bottom-up influences and top-down goals [,which] leads to constant distraction and interruption while we are trying to accomplish our goals” (ibid.: 27-28). To reach and control the latter, three major faculties are needed: “(1) attention, (2) working memory, and (3) goal management” (ibid.: 29). Llewellyn’s *Eleven* foregrounds all three faculties.

The first message is an exercise in the art of securing readers’ attention in the digital era. While the final version follows the conventions and colloquial register of a casual note passed between friends, short enough to make it likely to be read in full, the second draft is still much more elaborate and contains some reflection upon the genesis of this message and its projected reception (“I just started writing you an email, and then I realized that it was too boring for words, so I’m writing this one instead.” [*Eleven*: 7]). It also includes a hint at the value of and longing for distraction (“Went to Mill Lane. It was kind of fun. Distracting, really, more than fun” [7]). Distraction seems to be the guiding principle in the communication that follows. Most emails revolve around gossip, past relationships and social events, which are occasionally interrupted by messages from the administrator and by some notes drafted as emails that are saved by Martin. These notes serve as commentaries on the sterile and often rather pointless communication threads while providing insight into the main character, who – like the reader – struggles to focus on what is “real” (104).

The saving of a fragmentary email furthermore indicates the authoritative role of the world wide web in what we attend to and what enters our (working) memory, to which attention is the gateway. Martin’s inbox, especially his drafts-folder, serves as his working memory, storing information that he attends or tries to attend to. Though unsent, these messages can be read by us and captivate our attention, because they are presented as private notes, not composed for being

read. Especially in the digital era, the lack of privacy has become a matter of concern – a concern which this novel frequently alludes to by mingling the private and the public sphere. As suggested by the editing process at the outset of the novel, there is a fine line between saving, deleting, forgetting and rewriting – especially in the context of the 9/11 attacks, as these processes shape our cultural (and also personal) memory and might lead our attention astray.

Goal management, the third faculty required to control the ‘distracted mind’, is something that Martin (and also the reader) is grappling with throughout *Eleven*. Martin is distracted from his ultimate goal, to become a successful writer, by pointless email conversations with his friends and colleagues, his habit of drafting, and his unproductive screen attention (“I don’t know who I’m even writing this for. Half the time I’m just looking at the reflection of my eyes in the monitor. They look back” [*Eleven*: 66]). The reader is shielded from this return of the gaze, as our attention has been diverted from the screen onto the page. And yet the ‘goal’ of reading, suggested by the title, the book cover, and the opening of the novel, directs our attention to a(n) (absent) screen.

From the very beginning, our attention is geared towards the 9/11 attacks, which have been described as “shocking global media events that dominated public attention and provoked reams of discourse, reflection, and writing” (Kellner 2004: 1). In a novel preoccupied with (failed) communication, our attention is drawn to what initially remains unsaid: Following a brief conversation between Martin Davies and his colleague Lloyd Thomas about “[t]he fear of fears” (*Eleven*: 72), which leads to a taxonomy of various phobias (cf. 73), we learn of the attack on the Twin Towers through a short note, sent by Dan Jones from “mcpl-media.co.uk” at 14:06 GMT: “Tell me you are near a television” (73), which Martin denies. The TV screen is replaced by the computer screen and news websites, which all the characters seem to be glued to, while Dan comments on the scarcity of footage by broadcasting stations.

In keeping with the novel’s title, only fragments of the events are presented. What actually happened has to be pieced together by the reader, based on their (past) attention to the gruesome images that were screened all over the world. If it was our goal to engage in a 9/11-novel, a popular genre that has turned the attacks into a literary event, this goal is only partly fulfilled. Instead, our (past) attention to and our desire for images of the events are scrutinised in an email by Lisa Cullis, which is entitled “Jumpers” and directed to Martin:

Anyway...My question is this...Are they allowed to show people jumping off a burning building, even on the news? [...] because that’s what they’re showing, and if I wasn’t coked up to the eyeballs it would probably be too much. [...] It is all mildly perturbing. (83)

For readers familiar with the attacks, Lisa's remark triggers the recollection of the gruesome images that showed people jumping from the top of the Twin Towers, where they were trapped when the buildings caught fire. The most controversial of these images, one that readers familiar with the coverage of the attacks will immediately recall, is a photograph taken by Richard Drew, which points to the need for an ethics of attention.

The image, commonly referred to as "The Falling Man", was (re-)printed in numerous newspapers before it was banned based on ethical concerns (which did not, however, erase it from the digital hivemind), closely connected to those raised by Lisa. What is at stake here is 'moral attention', which can be described as the suspension of one's own goals and concerns and the recognition of and adequate response to the needs of others (see Gendron 2016; also Tronto 1993: 128). As Martha Nussbaum has argued, fiction can assist us in refining our moral attention. Based on the analysis of Henry James' works, Nussbaum concedes that novels have the potential to offer us "training in a tender and loving objectivity that we can also cultivate in life" (1985: 527) by showing that "[p]erception without responsibility is dangerously free-floating" (ibid.: 524). This is possible not despite but rather *because* of their fictionality which ensures that "we will be free of jealous possessiveness [...] towards [their] characters" (ibid.: 527), so that "our own attention to [...] characters will itself, if we read well, be a high *case* of moral attention" (ibid.: 527). Drawing on a quote from James' *The Princess Casamassima* (1977), Nussbaum claims that "[o]ur highest and hardest task is to make ourselves people 'on whom nothing is lost'" (1985: 516).

As indicated by Lisa's remark, which disconcertingly renders the events as only "mildly perturbing" (*Eleven*: 83), the media coverage of 9/11 lacked the moral attention that most 9/11-novels try to elicit by focusing on characters who witness the events and/or try to cope with the trauma in their aftermath (see, for instance, Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* [2007]). *Eleven* approaches the topic from a different angle. Although it connects to 9/11-novels insofar as it also counters "the aesthetics of an age dominated by images" (Gleich 2014: 163) by focusing on verbal communication, it explores the reactions from a (safe) distance – from the inside of office buildings in Cardiff and London. What is deeply ironic and more than "mildly perturbing" is the fact that the immediacy enabled by digital communication does not eliminate but intensifies the distance between New York and Cardiff, between the characters in front of their screens and the characters on the screens who are shown jumping from the top of the Twin Towers. Though Dan Jones, as media representative, sends numerous emails that report the attack on the Pentagon and the collapse of the towers, distraction quickly takes over:

FROM: Lisa Cullis

(mailto: I.cullis@portersimpsonporter.co.uk)

TO: martin.davies@quantumfinance.co.uk

SUBJECT:

This is SO weird. From our window you can see Queen Street. There are loads of people stood outside Dixon's, just staring at all the tellies in the windows, like something out of 'Dawn of the Dead'. Jase and I have stopped watching TV, and have started watching the people watching TV. They're all shaking their heads and talking into their mobiles. Talking of 'Dawn of the Dead', have you got my copy of that in your room? (*Eleven*: 90-91)

Starting to observe other observers observing the coverage in the media theatre, our attention is directed to those who 'witness' the attacks on television and to their reactions, which are as sterile and detached as those of Llewellyn's characters, who quickly engage in diversion, escaping into the (safe) virtual realm and their own restricted, empty space: "Nothing happens in this building. Not time. Not death. Nothing" (92).

The chitchat on relationships that follows, interrupted by very few more serious reflections upon the impact of the terror attacks by Dan, highlights the absurdity of screen-to-screen-communication where responsibility is reduced to the ability to respond quickly and where human connections have dissolved into 24/7 connectivity. At the same time, the composition of the novel as a conglomeration of communication fragments, which connects to both the crumbling of the twin towers and the trauma experienced in the aftermath of the attacks, makes it impossible for readers to deeply attend to individual characters – including Martin Davies. In this respect, *Eleven* can be read as a response to an increasing empathy fatigue, which is not only experienced by the characters but also by readers due to the difficulty to connect to the novel's characters. Whereas in the semi-public office correspondence, the cultural memory about 9/11 becomes more and more manifest, in the saved space, 'saved in drafts', the protagonist seems to gradually dissolve and fragment:

FROM: martin.davies@quantumfinance.co.uk

TO:

SAVED: 15:12, Tuesday September 11, 2001

SUBJECT: RE: Wedding

[...] I don't know what's happening to me today.

I do know what's happening to me today.

I don't know what's going to happen to me today.

I'm sorry

SAVED IN 'DRAFTS' (*Eleven*: 97)

Similar to soliloquies, the saved emails offer us a glimpse into Martin's character, a character who cannot or does not dare to express himself, but instead exists as continuous draft until the end. The novel closes with an email which suggests a kind of negative totality: it is the first email, which Martin addresses to all his friends and colleagues:

FROM: Martin Davies
 To: lloyd@callotech.co.uk [...]
 Subject: 'Fucking Tuesdays'

This is my life.

Maybe I read too many books on 'How To Write A Script'. Convinced myself that every story must have a beginning, a middle and an end, and that every protagonist must have a conscious desire. There's no beginning and no middle. Everything is just a protracted last act, [...].

You might be reading this out of pity. You might be reading this out of morbid curiosity. You might be reading this because it's been forwarded to you as a joke.

You might not be reading this at all. Either way, you know what happens next.

(*Eleven*: 129-130)

This email marks an ending, which does not exist. What is highlighted here is the difference in coherence between a script and the 'real', digitalised world. Whereas the former, in the Aristotelian sense, has a beginning, a middle and an end, the latter negates this structure in favour of episodes, fragments and sequences, which are sometimes read, sometimes forwarded, sometimes ignored. The failed playwright who has been working on polishing his own communication technique, composes another fragment, which points to a totality that can never materialise.

As indicated by the metafictional comment at the end of a novel which bears quite a strong resemblance to drama (e.g. the absence of a narrator, the polyphonic structure, the soliloquies 'SAVED IN DRAFTS', the propinquity of the email conversations to dialogue), the accumulation of emails becomes the blueprint for a new literary genre and new forms of life in which fragmentation and distraction rule. It is the first time that the reader is addressed and their goals and attention are challenged in an email which is not composed for skimming. Therefore, as Martin suggests, "You might not be reading this at all".

Ironically, only the attentional reader is aware of the fact that this email will indeed never be read – at least not by those it is addressed to. As we have learned from a previous message by the System Administrator, who has blocked one of Martin's emails, messages that contain swear words are not delivered (cf. *Eleven*: 126-27). Consequently, Martin and his colleagues resort to self-censoring and repeatedly use asterisks to convey their favorite expression "f*ck" (cf. 75, *passim*). Since Martin breaks with this rule in his final email, his message is due

to be intercepted by the System Administrator who will notify the “department manager” (127), but none of his addressees. What deserves most attention, therefore, are the messages that are not sent.

We both know and do not know what happens next. Even though there is no ending, the novel does not refer to a blank. Instead, it foreshadows the next act in a script which seems long written: The subject line resonates with the one of the opening emails, bringing us back to the beginning. A beginning, however, which is no beginning, because it emerges as part of a greater story, which we have not read in *Eleven*, but which has become ingrained in cultural memory. What is printed between the covers of this book are fragments of an individual and cultural memory translated into the digital world, which offers storage space for broken characters of all kinds.

Confronted with the endless connectivity of the world wide web and changing modes of attention, traditional modes of storytelling need to be revised. At least this is suggested by *Eleven* – suggested and, at the same time, counteracted. While Martin rejects the fact that stories have a beginning, middle and end, *Eleven*, in its printed form, has a beginning, a middle and an end. By presenting itself as a fragment, however, the novel takes the compositional principle of fragmentation one step further: It creates a poetics of fragmentation, which promotes critical reflection upon the impact of new communication technologies on the development of the novel. It does so with regard to both the level of production and the level of reception. On the one hand, it includes digital communication techniques, where “[g]rammar is violated; syntax disintegrated” (Woolf 1966 [1924]: 333), pointing to the increasing fragmentation of storytelling in the digital world. On the other hand, it relates to a new mode of reading, which is selective and also complicates the development of ‘moral attention’ while catering to the ‘distracted minds’ that have come to define 21st-century digital culture. Referring to one of the most traumatic events of the 21st century, *Eleven* also reflects upon the production, distribution and reception of cultural memory in the digital world and urges us as readers to critically review our own attentional habits which guide our responses to media events, such as 9/11.

5. Towards Mindful Literary Studies

On or around June 2007, literary studies changed again. As indicated by Hayles’ distinction between ‘deep’ and ‘hyper’ reading, literary scholars have become more engaged in research on attention. First studies on literary attention focus on 18th-century literature (Phillips 2016; Koehler 2012), poetry at the turn of the 19th century (Gurton-Wachter 2016), post-1945 American poetry (Epstein 2016),

contemporary fiction (Baumbach 2019; Bennett 2018), and mega-novels (Letzler 2017). What has yet to be explored, however, are the interconnections between growing anxieties about attention, including trends towards hyper attention, and the development of new literary genres, such as the email novel, which are tailored to readers used to digital (and also skim) reading and challenge our attentional capacities by means of fragmentation such as Llewellyn's *Eleven*. As suggested above, these novels replicate "the smashing and the crashing" (Woolf 1966 [1924]: 332-33) of characters in the digital age while confronting us with our own communication habits and our 'distracted minds' and attuning us, in case of *Eleven*, to the lack of moral attention in screen-to-screen-communication.

As 'characters' (both on and in front of our screens) have changed again in the 21st century, one of the principal tasks of literary studies will be to combine modes of close, hyper, and also machine reading to successfully analyse the patterns, meaning and context of a specific work (Hayles 2010: 75). More importantly, literary studies should become more engaged in critical attention studies in order to respond to and explain recent developments in fiction, rationalise strategies of eliciting (or inhibiting) attention in (literary) texts, and underscore the various ways in which these texts scrutinise and help develop strategies for the manipulation and management of attention.

Mindful literary studies, therefore, will have four key objectives: (1) to rationalise strategies of eliciting attention in (literary) texts by developing a 'narratology of attention' that outlines the key mechanisms and elements of literary attention, (2) to explain the impact of attention anxieties, the growing economy of attention, and changing reading habits on the production and reception of fiction, including the development of new (sub-)genres, (3) to explore the role of literature in shaping discourses on attention and attention deficits, and (4) to highlight the ways in which narratives of attention (and distraction) expose and explain different techniques of attention management. Furthermore, mindful literary studies should also scrutinise its own attentional biases and its own attention economy, including the mechanisms that lead to the proliferation of specific research trends and principles of attention that have guided canon formation.

As suggested by the historically-oriented studies on literary attention mentioned above, mindful literary studies is by no means restricted to 21st-century narratives (even though the 21st century – due to the great impact of the digital revolution – is a particularly fruitful and still greatly under-researched area for such an approach). Not only can we assume that all texts are designed to draw attention, but anxieties of attention can be traced across the centuries, because "the malady of not marking" (Shakespeare 1997 [1598], *2 Henry IV*, 1.2.139) is essentially human. To thoroughly examine the function of literary texts in

challenging and shaping readers' attentional capacities, mindful literary studies, therefore, need to take into account discourses on attention and distraction across different eras, following Forster's clarion call: "Only connect."

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