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Modes of historical attention: wonder, curiosity, fascination

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ABSTRACT


Among non-verbal motivating aspects of knowledge production, the modes of attention we name wonder, curiosity and fascination stand out. These different modes of attention are sometimes closely intertwined but can still be fruitfully analyzed as three distinct ways in which we encounter and approach objects that attract us or that we want to gain insight into. Wonder, curiosity and fascination will initiate different questions and direct toward various conclusions such as contemplation, causality and reminding. Awareness of which mode of attention one is performing when doing historical work will influence the kind of history one ultimately presents.

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Introduction

Although historians are aware that their approach to the past includes non-verbal modes of attention, there are nonetheless aspects of this phenomenon that merit further scrutiny. For instance, we should distinguish between moods, emotions and modes of attention when considering the past. Moods, such as melancholy and indifference, indicate our attunement to temporal existence in the world. In contrast, emotions, such as fear, joy and sorrow, are reactions to specific objects, events or actions that are harmful or beneficial. Modes of attention differ from emotions by an active focus on a specific object. Among the most common modes of attention, we find wonder, curiosity, and fascination. Since I am primarily interested in this last category, I will not say anything further about moods and emotions and, yet it seems important to clarify the difference here at the outset, since all tend to be used interchangeably. For example, it is common to categorize wonder as

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an emotion, even though it only fits uneasily in such taxonomy (Vasalou: 12–19; Costa 2011, 147–52; Fuller 2012, 67).

Attention is a capacity out of which reflection, perseverance, concentration and formation of character grows. That is why the capacity to pay attention is considered an important aspect of character-formation. A subject who pays attention to his or her surroundings and willingly forms him or herself in relation to a model became the ideal of pedagogy already in the late eighteenth century. It is necessary, the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte wrote, ‘to mention that anyone who cannot *pay attention* cannot *philosophize*’ (Fichte 1988, 202). To be able to maintain a coherent sense of the world was of central concern to a subject who wanted to protect his or her integrity when confronted with new kinds of visual experiences, such as the early cinema (Crary 1999, 4; see also Hagner; Brendecke 2018, 20–23).

A discussion of modes of attention must bear in mind that the distinctive ways in which we focus our attention on objects shape our subjectivities. We learn to gaze at objects and pay attention to other people, and our culture trains us to appreciate some objects and persons over others. It is necessary to point out that the use of the word gaze is not a concession to the idea that this is just another version of detached spectatorship, however. Modes of attention are often subject–object relationships of intense effect and desire. As part of the way we approach objects of study and bind ourselves to them today, they must be comprehended as bodily experiences that involve intense concentration, stillness, muteness, listening and repetition. As such, they are aspects of historiography that uses the body to perform an encounter with a lost object in the present. Modes of attention are ways of performing encounters and serve to evaluate the importance of objects for our goals. Thus, even though wonder, curiosity and fascination are historically contingent phenomena they will, in our contemporary understanding of them, direct our attention in different ways. These modes of attention are three ways in which we approach objects in order to turn them into history, i.e., the discursive evaluation of the relationship between the past and the present. Modes of attention are a shorthand for a pre-reflexive assessment of this relationship.

That three modes of attention have been singled out does not exclude other ways of attending, but wonder, curiosity and fascination seem to be the most significant in the Western tradition and contemporary theory. Since fascination is both the least known of these modes and seems to be the most frequently referred to by scholars in historical sciences, it will receive more attention than the other two. This does not mean that wonder and curiosity are of less importance. In order to avoid misunderstandings, let me stress that the objective of the paragraphs below is not to analyze the way these modes of attention have changed and interlocked with each other

historically, but to illustrate how they today are three distinct ways of evaluating objects, which hold consequences for the way we connect the past and the present. As several examples will illustrate, there is a discourse on fascination in the field of history that merits further scrutiny. The presence of the word fascination among historically inclined scholars is not just a way in which they express their interest in a certain topic. Something far more compelling is at stake. The analysis below, which starts with wonder and curiosity, should, therefore, be read as a first attempt to understand the role of fascination as a mode of attention in historical studies.

Wonder and curiosity

The conventional story is that Western philosophy (science) began with wonder. It is still the mode philosophers and theologians favour when discussing the beginnings of philosophical reflection. As a point of departure for thinking and its relation to truth, wonder has been a problem in Western intellectual history from Plato to Heidegger and beyond. In the early modern period, wonder was primarily associated with experiences of novelty, the previously unseen and unexpected. Objects of wonder included amazing natural scenery, extraordinary phenomena and unusual formations. The qualities that made them strange, and a puzzle to the inquisitive mind, inhered in the objects themselves, making them both desirable and incomprehensible.

As a mode of attention, wonder may inform historians' approaches to their objects of study. Lorraine Daston's and Katherine Park's seminal *Wonder and the Order of Nature* traces the different valences of wondrous things and the intertwined roles of wonder and curiosity as motivating forces in inquiries about the world. But their study is not only a history of objects that aroused wonder in early modern Europe but also a performance of wonder based on the experience of being captivated by natural scenery such as skies filled by the light of an aurora borealis, sunrises and meteorites. 'These (rather than any pioneer spirit) surely inclined us toward such topics in the first place' (Daston and Park 1998, 11). The book presents itself as a witness to the way wonder initiates history as a gazing at the marvellous strangeness of a past world.

Their argument that wonder declined by the end of the Enlightenment (Daston and Park 1998, 323) has been contested by Sophia Vasalou, who argues that wonder continues to be a central mode of attention in any inquiry even today. Wonder is not just a gazing in stunned awe or a quasi-religious sentiment (although these can be aspects of it), but a productive encounter with the world. Like the kind of spiritual exercises that were central to

classical philosophy, wonder evaluates objects as worthy of being remarked on:

To wonder: to be dazzled by seeing, to truly remark, to be alive in the consciousness of what stands before our eyes; to see, to *really* see. Marked in these notions, we may say, is wonder's status as a mode of attentiveness whose higher status as an ideal speaks to our yearning for a way of being or way of living shaped by an intense aliveness to the world (Vasalou 2015, 204).

As can be gathered from these reflections, the experience of being stuck in front of objects, intensely searching their hidden secrets, or bewildered by an object that escapes comprehension through ordinary categories of understanding, is common to descriptions of wonder as a mode of attention. Like the other modes under consideration here, it is oriented towards the qualities of the objects, and their presumed inherent values or secrets. Among the qualities that trigger wonder are novelty and uniqueness. Although premodern thoughts on wonder often highlighted the greatness or utter strangeness of wondrous things, today wonder may also include everyday objects and occurrences. When wonder is understood as a way of watching or approaching such objects, it is a gaze in which ordinary things turn strange (Rubenstein 2008, 4, 10; Greenblatt 1991b, 20).

The most telling aspect of wonder as a mode of attention is revealed in Stephen Greenblatt's remark that intense gazing at an object that arouses wonder creates silence and stillness: 'Looking may be called enchanted when the act of attention draws a circle around itself from which everything but the object is excluded, when the intensity of regard blocks out all circumambient images, stills all murmuring voices' (Greenblatt 1991a, 49). This suggests that concentration on an object in the mode of wonder is ultimately about finding the truth, beauty, the idea (form) or being itself. Considering wonder's close association to the history of philosophy, this is of course hardly surprising. In *History as Wonder*, Marnie Hughes-Warrington argues that historians have been in dialogue with metaphysics for centuries in a wish to make 'general sense of the world' (Hughes-Warrington 2018, xii). Therefore, we find wonder at work at the 'boundaries, thresholds, and limits of time, thought, feeling, experiences and reality. That location has been persistent and continues today' (xvi). In traversing the border between the past and the present, physical worlds and spiritual worlds, objects and selves, wonder seeks sense. In the conventional vocabulary of Western philosophy, this is the contemplation of the beautiful and true as the ultimate response to the chaotic experience of the world. The logical end of Hughes-Warrington's account is that making sense of history would amount to contemplating the past as completed and its relationship to the present as orderly. Wonder makes the past an aesthetic object of desire and contemplation. This seems to have been the reason why Hayden White so often taunted historians for being contemplative rather than

interested in solving real problems (White 2014, 42). Apparently, wonder retains aspects of classical desire (*eros*) and the calmness and stillness of a satisfied need fulfilled by the possession of the object.

This is in accord with reflections on wonder by non-historians, which shows how closely this mode of attention is bound to philosophy and theology. Martin Heidegger is a perfect example, although he tried to twist wonder out of the grip of the philosophical tradition by arguing that it is not primarily a way to focus on the unusual but a way of making the ordinary and familiar seem strange (Heidegger 1994, 143–53). Still, in his thinking, wonder creates a clearing in which an encounter with Being can take place.

Wonder is the basic disposition that primordially disposes man into the beginning of thinking, because, before all else, it displaces man into that essence whereby he then finds himself in the midst of beings as such and as a whole and finds himself caught up in them (Heidegger 1994, 147).

Being as the strange and unfamiliar that somehow is still akin to us echoes platonic versions of wonder (Nightingale 2004, 267). The theologian Robert Fuller seems to agree with Greenblatt's idea of wonder as a silencing of voices when he explains that: 'Experiences of wonder arrest our active will. They make possible the quiet contemplation of a grander scheme of life that strikes us as responsible for life's beauty, order, and vitality' (Fuller: 81). Wonder responds 'to the pull of the object' and its intrinsic value regardless of its relationship to the subject's plans, Martha Nussbaum explains. 'That is why it is likely to issue in contemplation, rather than any other sort of action toward the object' (Nussbaum 2001, 54).

In summary, historical studies that begin in the mode of wonder will likely end up contemplating 'history' as an ordered plot or sequence between the past and the present or as an aesthetic image of a lost world reconstructed by the historian. One can compare this to the kind of studies in which the author says that he or she has begun in curiosity. Whereas wonder is a mode of attention that ultimately seeks repose in the object itself as an image of beauty and truth or as a haven from worldly distress, curiosity is a mode in which we search out concrete, earthly matters, always in search for the next novelty. Restless and insatiable, it exemplifies humankind's desolate isolation from its divine origins as well as its self-divinization. This is obvious from the complex history of curiosity in modernity, where it has been denigrated as a sinful poking into others' business, and a dangerous search for the secrets of creation, and hailed as the primary mode of attention of modern sciences. Just like wonder, curiosity is associated with transgressions of borders, and the upsetting of established identities and categories (Benedict 2001, 4, 254). As such, this mode of attention has become intrinsic to explorations of the world; children's first encounter with nature's marvels is a conventional image of curiosity that both scientists and artists refer to (Fuller 2012, 74).

Curiosity is thus earthbound and this-worldly. This also distinguishes contemporary curiosity from wonder, which often seems to retain a desire for metaphysics. The experience of the marvellous, which is intrinsic to wonder, writes Barbara Benedict, 'makes otherness a sign of God. Pious, passive, and aesthetic, wonder, like awe, reveres the novelty it encounters. Early modern curiosity, however, seeks to explain it' (Benedict 2001, 5).

Although this comment is about pre-Enlightenment thinking, it harmonizes with studies on post-Enlightenment curiosity. Hans Blumenberg's analysis of the emergence of curiosity as a motivating force of modern sciences' quest for secular knowledge is a case in point. For him, curiosity is central to modern scientific knowledge production. Instead of happiness reached at the end of knowledge, modern science, starting from 'theoretical curiosity', always wants to go 'beyond the horizons that had been assigned to man as long as he had thought that he could remain the onlooker in repose, the leisurely enjoyer of the world, taken care of by providence' (Blumenberg 1983, 234). No longer limited to naïve childish attention or the caring study of God's creation, curiosity in modernity no longer 'bound man's attention to inessential and superficial matters, to prodigies, monstrosities – in fact, to *curiosa*' (Blumenberg 1983, 277). Instead, curiosity became an instrument the researcher and artist used and trained in the quest for unrestricted expansion and control of nature. In modern culture, this sentiment was perfectly captured by the film director Ingmar Bergman when he remarked that curiosity was the driving force behind his artistic work: 'An unbounded, never satisfied, continuously renewed, unbearable curiosity, which drives me forward, never leaves me in peace, and completely replaces my hunger for fellowship' (Bergman 1965).

Understanding natural and other processes and their usefulness for further knowledge thus became the ultimate goal of modern curiosity. This was central already in Thomas Hobbes's influential analysis of the passions. Curiosity is 'a love of the knowledge of causes' (Hobbes 1994, 58), and a lust 'that by the perseverance of delight in the continual and indefatigable generation of knowledge, exceedeth the short vehemence of any carnal pleasure' (29). As a passion, curiosity strives 'to know why, and how' (25) in order to increase power. That there is a connection between curiosity and this-worldly striving for control was, of course, also Martin Heidegger's conclusion. As a way of seeing and relating to the world, curiosity is a restless search for the distractions of novelties: 'Curiosity has nothing to do with the contemplation that wonders at beings, *thaumazein*, it has no interest in wondering to the point of not understanding. Rather, it makes sure of knowing, but just in order to have known' (Heidegger 1996, 161). In the twentieth century, the difference between curiosity and wonder as modes of attention could not be defined more appositely than this.

As a mode of attention, wonder prefers questions such as ‘what is the wonder? Or ‘why is there something rather than nothing?’ in order to contemplate truth or being itself. Curiosity prefers questions such as ‘how did that event produce this state of affairs?’ which will be answered by finding causal connections. Transferred to the domain of history, curiosity prefers genealogical stories of why we ended up where we are. It is thus no surprise that Michel Foucault longed for a ‘new age of curiosity’, ‘a passion for seizing what is happening now and what is disappearing’ (Foucault 1994, 325).

Fascination as a mode of attention

Wonder and curiosity are the dominant modes of attention in Western intellectual history, prominent in the history of science, theology and philosophy. As has also become clear from the overview above, these modes of attention stand in a somewhat tense relationship to modern historical sensibilities if we understand the sense of history as revolving around change and contingency. Undoubtedly, historians invoke both wonder and curiosity but the trajectories toward contemplation and the regularity of causal connections, respectively, are also at odds with what many historians implicitly look for. This suggests that there might be modes of attention that trigger other kinds of questions.

As is obvious already, my hypothesis is that fascination fills this role. As a matter of fact, there is a discourse on fascination in historical studies that suggests that this mode of attention has some affinity with history as a field of knowledge. Since this has never been studied before, as far as I am aware, I will suggest one way of understanding the role fascination plays in historical discourse based on the brief reflections some authors have made on the topic.

Before the mid-twentieth century, fascination never received sustained theoretical reflection as a mode of attention. Up until the nineteenth century, fascination was an external threat of inappropriate, dangerous and even lethal influence that endangered the integrity and life of the affected. The traditional protection against it would be charms or gestures that could avert the gaze from the harmful source. Theseus’ shield against Medusa is of course the classical image of this defence (Baumbach 2015). As a mode of attention, fascination is thus of recent origin with a different set of associations than wonder and curiosity. Generally speaking, fascination is a synthesis of the ancient ideas of threatening evil eyes and contact at a distance, including the contrary forces of attraction and repulsion (Weingart 2014; Harris 2003, 15, 17), and the classical tradition of eros in which objects attract us so much that we want to get in contact with them in order to be fulfilled by them (Degen 2012, 385–387). Although these archaic notions are only metaphorical today, they are still prominent aspects of

descriptions of fascinating encounters. This notwithstanding, there is also something else going on in fascinated attention besides subjection to an outside force and a desire to possess or be fulfilled by the object.

We see this already in Hannah Arendt's and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's concessions to fascination. In her biography of Rahel Varnhagen, the Jewish woman struggling to create a place for herself in early nineteenth-century Germany, Arendt portrays her as a person that awakens interest and desire. 'The possibility of fascination was inherent in her situation', Arendt declared. It seemed as if Varnhagen wanted people around her 'to breakthrough this fascination in order to get at her herself – that is to say, at what had happened to her' (Arendt 1997, 135). This is, of course, also a description of Arendt's decades-long attempt to comprehend Varnhagen's historical situation and personality, and perhaps even a kind of self-portrait. She describes Varnhagen as unreachable and mysterious, both attractive and repellant. Her opaqueness, mysteriousness and impenetrability, which forces the affected to return to her for new attempts at getting at the 'core' of her secrets while simultaneously being pushed back by her, is intrinsic to Arendt's description of Varnhagen: 'Confronted with this impenetrability, people had finally drawn back, just as they had previously been drawn in by her fascination' (Arendt 1997, 135).

Something undisclosed is also what seems to have drawn Gumbrecht to the non-figurative paintings of the American artist Jackson Pollock. In his description, the conventional image of being stuck in front of an object, unable to draw away from its lure, takes centre stage. He is bound to the object through the way it affects his eyes.

[No] visual artist has fascinated my eyes as much as Pollock. I say this without any hesitation or doubt – and I mean the word 'fascination' in its literal sense: Jackson Pollock's canvases irresistibly attracts me, at a level higher or lower than anything I might be aware of – and so forcefully that I am unable to avert my gaze from their presence (Gumbrecht 2013, 206).

What, one might ask, is going on in these moments of total absorption, even submission to these works of art? In Gumbrecht's case, this captivation is an aid to historical time travel to the point of departure of his intellectual journey in the years around 1950: 'I believe I now understand my fascination with his paintings better. What appeared in a state of latency, then, stands at the origin of the different order of time in which we are living now' (Gumbrecht 2013, 210). Gumbrecht's attempt to express a new experience of time with the aid of the concept of latency seems to be a matter of reminders. The aesthetic experience produces presence and the illusion that past worlds can be tangible again (Gumbrecht 2004, 94). The long and intense study of the mysteries of Pollock's paintings, and the almost petrified gaze with which he has looked at them, must in its own peculiar way have

been a very active encounter with an evaluation of the object. Gumbrecht also illustrates one of the recurrent figures of fascination: the repetitive returns to the same object or spot. These returns are obviously not performed in order to encounter novelty but in the wish to come to terms with the enigma of a fascinating object.

The classical notion of eros seems to be looming in the background to Gumbrecht's idea of latency and presence (Gumbrecht 2004, 105, 116). In this respect, there is an overlap between fascination and wonder, discernible among writers that speak of the attractiveness of wondrous and fascinating objects. We see this in works by Michael Ann Holly and Frank Ankersmit. Holly begins *The Melancholy Art* with a rather stunning statement: 'Every discipline of the humanities possesses a soul that rests quietly at the heart of its fascination with times gone by' (Holly 2013, ix). But what is this fascination? Holly leaves this unexplained, but history writing, she says, 'is a psychic activity. Both its traditional and revisionist tales are always narratives of desire, doomed searches after lost origins' (Holly 2013, 114). History writing fails to satisfy the desire for origins, but the fascination remains unaffected by this failure. The key to Holly's notion of fascination seems to lie in her remarks in connection with the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, a late-nineteenth-century building imitating a Renaissance palace filled with art: 'There are many other reminders on parade at many other museums for marking the loss of a past that cannot be denied' (130). The fascination for an artwork or a physical place is a reminder both about the insufficiency of language and knowledge to bridge the gap between the past and the present and about the past existing as an object to search for.

In contrast to Holly, Ankersmit does comment upon the notion of fascination in *Sublime Historical Experience* when he reflects on his interest in the style of Rococo. Fascination, he says, is intimately connected to the feeling of boredom and of being excluded from the outside world. The paradox of connecting boredom and fascination disappears, he suggests, when we realize that fascination is 'the tantalizing promise of a fusion between the subject and the object in the absence of the intensively desired fulfilment of this promise' (Ankersmit 2005, 287). In fascination, imagination is left to itself, and we are close to a 'pure experience, to a complete openness to what the senses present to us' (288). Fascination is thus, we might say, the kind of attention that will liberate us from the categories that force us to see things in a specific way, thus enabling us to encounter reality in 'its quasi-noumenal qualities', as he puts it. This is a crucial aspect of Ankersmit's idea of historical experience as an embrace between the subject (the present) and the object (the past). Ultimately, however, this merging will fail, and when we realize that reality will not reveal itself to us, we will turn away in boredom: 'This is the deep truth taught us by the story of

Narcissus [...] who so movingly sublimated his boredom in his metamorphosis into a flower' (289).

It is revealing that Ankersmit's study of historical experiences seems to start from the question of why people are fascinated by the past in the first place (Ankersmit 2005, xv) rather than from some historical experience. The answer that his analysis of various forms of historical experiences suggests is that, ultimately, fascination is about the scars in the life of individuals, nations, and civilizations – traces of the inevitable gulf between ideal and desire that made them who they are by reminding them of who they are no longer.

Unfulfilled figures

The examples above of the way fascination appear in historical studies, inevitably raise the question what fascination's singular contribution as a mode of attention can be that distinguishes it from wonder and curiosity. Undoubtedly, these modes reinforce each other and there are obvious overlaps in the descriptions of their favoured objects. In fascination, however, the opaque, incomprehensible objects are not new or extraordinary but rather the kinds of objects one repeatedly returns to. Although there might be desire involved, fascinating objects always retain an aspect of the threat exerted by another subject (even in the guise of an object) that wishes to control or bind us, which is one reason fascination is seen as an instrument of manipulation and even suspension of critical capacities (Abbas 1999, 351). So what is the goal of fascination as a mode of attention?

Staying with the argument that fascination is distinct from wonder and curiosity, and that, in the field of history, it defines the relationship between the present and the past in a unique way, also means identifying a different end to fascination than contemplation and causality. This is tricky, but one opportunity is to go in the direction suggested by the art historian and theologian Klaus Heinrich's so-called *Faszinationsgeschichte*. Combining the psychoanalytical theory of symptoms with studies of religion, Heinrich argued that a culture's fears, unresolved tensions and conflicts are on display in art, literature and myths. Studying the myths and images that are continuously reused in a culture could amount to a working-through of unsolved problems in the present (Heinrich 1985, 340; Grieser 2009). Although one must be skeptical of the psychoanalytical dimension of this model, which suggests that we are dealing with pathology when we engage in fascinated attention, there is much to commend in the idea that objects can be markers for unresolved conflicts and nameless fears. It would harmonize with the way we learn to appreciate or dislike objects as salient to our well-being and needs. It would, of course, also support the interpretation suggested by Ankersmit and Gumbrecht.

Although Heinrich's *Fascinationsgeschichte* is a fairly productive way of understanding the recurrent interest in certain objects, I think there is another alternative, however. Given the fact that some of the examples above have already hinted at the phenomena of reminding, I want to suggest that what we try to attain when returning to an enthralling object are reminders of unfulfilled figures. As a critical tool, fascination is an aid that can be used to identify 'objects riddled with errors', as Ackbar Abbas put it (Abbas 1999, 358), that elicit strong attraction from people. This is apparent from the examples above, which revolved around images (paintings, patterns of composition, historical persons, etc.). Objects turned into images are objects we do not use. They are not (yet) tools with which we pursue life's activities. This suggests that in fascination, we are stuck in front of objects we cannot use (yet) or that escape transformation into purposeful tools. Maurice Blanchot, who is the most challenging writer on the theory of fascination, formulated this experience as a passage from 'the region of the real where we hold ourselves at a distance from things the better to order and use them into that other region where the distance holds us'. In Blanchot's analysis, the distance that holds us enthralled reminds us of the threat of nothingness, which 'has become something like the sovereign power behind all things' (Blanchot 1982, 261).

Death and the desire for eternity is, of course, one of the most common objects of fascination in Western culture (Des Aulnier 2009, 4–6), and although it is a prominent theme among historians, it does not necessarily hold the key to fascination. When fascinated, we return again and again to the same object; this is what it means to be captivated by an object that has become an image in Blanchot's terminology. We escape the grip of fascination by identifying reminders that make it possible to use the image (object) in a historical discourse. For instance, when Gumbrecht declared that he understands his fascination with Pollock better, he has been able to put Pollock's paintings to use as a way of connecting the past and the present as a kind of latency in which the past reoccurs or makes itself felt in the present. This, I suggest, is a general principle of fascination as a mode of attention: when returning to the object (image) of fascination, we simultaneously try to get out of this irresistibly binding attraction by seeking reminders that will turn the object-image into use. As Ankersmit suggested, the figure of Narcissus, stuck in front of his reflection, which fascinates him because he does not yet see what he sees, is the arch-image of fascination. As long as recognition is postponed, death is delayed. In other words, as long as he is not totally absorbed by the image, and reminded of the presence of Echo, who tries to communicate with him, he may remain in historical-temporal existence.

Reminders are social phenomena just as much as personal acts of memory. While apprehended in the presence, they instigate future enactment.

Reminders are highly suggestive of what goes on when we return to objects or sites of fascination. As ‘the figurative and schematical adumbration of an object, action, or state of affairs’ (Casey 1987, 97), reminders seem to work analogously to a figure-fulfilment model for historical occurrences (Auerbach 2014, esp. 78–113). That model proposed that a later event or personality fulfilled the promise already present in an earlier event or model. If the modes of historical attention involve judgements of objects related to the past as salient to our needs, fascination is the mode in which we perform an encounter with the threatening grip of nothingness, resisted by reminders of ghostly figures that demand to be fulfilled.

We can see how this works in Jacques Derrida’s fascination for the image of Socrates as conveyed in the mini-essays on Jean-François Bonhomme’s photographs in *Athens, Still Remains*. What did Socrates do while waiting for the ships to return from Delos, which decides the moment of his death? ‘He waits, but without waiting; he awaits death and dreams of annulling its delay by composing a sacrificial hymn’ (Derrida 2010, 51). In shocking contrast to modern sensibilities, Socrates welcomes death. He even consults dreams in order to know when the time of death is to come. During his waiting, he discusses the practices and preparations one must learn in order to die – that is, he practices philosophy.

Socrates’s wish to annul the delay is at odds with what Derrida is reminded of while thinking aloud about Bonhomme’s photographs, which he had approached ‘with the familiarity of a neophyte, where fascination, admiration, and astonishment were all bound up together’ (Derrida 2010, 1). The philosopher Derrida is fascinated by Socrates, who is both an object and a model of fascination in the history of philosophy (Degen 2010, 16–22), but the image is not a pond in which he tries to recognize himself. After all, recognition of self is identity and elimination of difference. ‘The echo becomes in us the original’ (Derrida 2010, 43), he says in an aside, but the echo is also a reminder of another voice in the image. In contrast to Greenblatt’s description of wonder, which, as we saw above, wants to shut out all murmuring voices, Derrida’s fascination for Bonhomme’s pictures and the image of Socrates, reminds him that they ‘bear the mourning of sounds and voices’ (43) and ‘whisper a proper name’ (3).

Derrida’s silent protest against the Socratic-Platonic legacy of philosophy as a preparation for death (Derrida 2010, 59) is, we might say, to remain fascinated by the unfulfilled figure of death as a permanently delayed event. Derrida’s silent protest expresses itself in his distancing from identifying with the figure of Socrates. Instead, he remains committed to the narcissistic question ‘who are you?’ and its delayed answer. This suggests that the question raised in fascination is about reminders rather than contemplation of Being or finding causal connections. Fascination reminds of ‘the spectral echo’ (Derrida 2010, 43) of voices insisting on delaying the time of their obliteration. They are resisting obliteration by being dual faces of time, both witnesses to a past

engagement and a demand for a future enactment or use. The echo of voices reminds us of possible histories that save them from the fascination of the past.

This leads me to a final attempt to formulate the difference between the modes of attention under consideration. An inquiry initiated by the mode of fascination – with its basic question, what does this remind me of? – will be structurally akin to an arrested narrative in which a proper ending is suspended. Curiosity, which wants to explain the present by attending to how things work, will try to reach a temporary solution in which the present is under control before revising the answer again, whereas wonder, which approaches objects in a wish to contemplate why something is, will feel comfortable with narratives of fulfilment and redemption.

Conclusion

I have suggested that the different modes of attention discussed here, despite overlaps and similarities, are fundamentally different with respect to what kinds of history (assessment of the relationship between the past and the present) they lead to. As the kind of attention most akin to philosophy and theology, the main objective of wonder is to contemplate being itself. When using wonder as a point of departure for an encounter with objects of study, historians seek rest and ultimate meaning. Intimately related to modern science, curiosity, on the other hand, is a mode of attention one uses to find out how things work in order to formulate causal and genealogical connections between the past and the present. In fascination, finally, although sometimes overlapping with the other modes of attention in the way the encounter with objects is described, we try to comprehend figures to fulfil while struggling to delay the threat of obliteration that fascination reminds us of. In resisting the opaqueness of the fascinating object, which both attracts and repels, we are holding on to life by identifying reminders that can be transformed into history.

I am tortuously aware of the essayistic character of the argument, and certainly understand the skeptical question, why should we bother with these modes of attention when they, apparently, do not change anything in the way history is done? The point is not that modes of attention define the kind of history we write, which also depends on the many mundane decisions related to career choices, funding opportunities, and institutional demands we constantly make in order to find a place in our academic or other settings. The point is that awareness of and reflection upon the modes of attention historians refer to when they concentrate on solving problems or encounter a thrilling object say something about the questions they tend to ask and the kind of answers they seek. Whether in the mode of wonder, curiosity or fascination, modes of attention will direct us to different kinds of meaning and sense-making, and model how we, as subjects in relation to objects

around us, including the past, will form or maintain a practical sense of the world. Thus, these diverse starting-points might also give us an understanding of why the products we ultimately present as an outcome of our attention differs so much.

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