

PROLOGUE

Primal Distraction

There is no distraction today, even though one often hears there are too many distractions. Yes, this is the age of distraction; many have called it that. For a hundred years or more (in actuality fifteen hundred, since Augustine), the disintegration of attention has been lamented, and every new decade and discipline seems to offer a new explanation and remedy for the loss. Education calls out the attention brigades to fight the shifty figure that steals away our focus. Have we won the war on distraction? A more primary question would be: have we found the enemy we are hunting? Commerce wrestles over the splinters of awareness that technology has shattered. Psychology struggles to get a hold on concentration, mainly against children, even though these same children will soon be required to “multi-task” and are already clicking and scanning and surfing. Why cure them of what is surely a timely habit? Statistics and politicians battle drivers’ lapses; new media gather up the shards of culture from the broken cult. Drugged up, warned off, lured in, and made to swallow theories about a society in distraction, few have the presence of mind left to ask: what is this pervasive evil? What is the meaning of the word, the truth of the phenomenon, and moreover, who will tell the story of its arrival in this history and its fetishization in reasonable discourse?

Who can say they understand distraction?

The English word calls up several images: a mathematics of division; a morality of bad choices; a movement of dispersion across a grid of more and more disparate points; a diminishment of strength, quality, or pu-

rity; vices or quasi-vices that produce pleasure without work: amusement, diversion, entertainment. All these are practiced by notorious figures, by sidetracked workers, bored students, and dissolute citizens, by the day-dreamer, the sleeper who doesn't dream, the absentminded one. At the farthest limit, the least collected, the least "with it," lie the dead, who are permanently elsewhere. Which one or more of these do we mean when we say distraction? Burdened with the label, occupants of an age named for our chief failing, we mean, almost inevitably, when we say distraction, the lack of attention. And we know it is a fundamental thing we are lacking. Today we lack that which makes us most fundamentally ourselves, and so we credit the force that could steal the fundament from us with great powers, such that powerful acts are needed to contain it.

This furtive and destructive force, a distraction not only equal to but possibly also stronger than attention, is not the subject of this book. It must be—it is—the starting point for a prologue to the problem of distraction, but only insofar as we can quickly move through the common understanding before arriving at a different distraction, beyond the anxieties about attention that appear to determine it fully.

Disciplines cling to attention; they desire it as one desires a solution to a problem even when the outlines of the problem are still fuzzy. They write about it, lament its perversion or breakdown, and act with uncommon urgency to bring it back when it is not at hand. This is the most common circumstance in which attention appears. When it makes itself unavailable, attention becomes the object of an anxious search. Attention intensifies most, you might say, in its loss; it becomes itself when one goes in search of it. Producing itself out of fear of its unavailability, through this fiction, it must be pulled back continually from an unknown place to which it has slipped away. In this way, attention depends on an internal reference to distraction. But this reference, in turn, never seems to produce its referent. Attention constitutes itself by saving itself from a distraction whose meaning or image is even less articulable than the attention we say distraction is not.

A tautology seems to block our inquiry here. The non-attention whose negation forms the most common origin for attention can only be specified from the perspective of attention. So let us start again, taking

our departure from what is presumed to be the primary term. Although it is often described on analogy with vision, attention has other attributes worth noting. Attention is patient; it has fortitude, is obsessive even, about its activity and its objects, and, continuing in this direction, the content of its patience and the object of its obsession is greed. This is its self-referential core: it holds greedily onto greed. The hand of attention stretches out, *ad-tenere*, toward the things it wishes to take and possess, and it compels itself to do so again and again. Attention is a name for a will to possession that is comparable to vision only insofar as vision is also thought of as willful and possessive. One idea of sight co-originate with attention in this will. The more restrictive of the two is clearly attention—there can be attentive and non-attentive vision. Above all, at least in the common understanding, attention always possesses a unit, even if the unit is a conjunction of a few objects. And it possesses the unit alone, abandoning other units to other faculties or disciplines (to handle in the same way, greedily, administering their ownership defensively against other disciplines). Only to its own thing does attention give the gift of undividedness, and the gift often brings with it a share of defensive violence. The opposite of this possessiveness, we are led to assume, is distraction. Distraction either does not appropriate or impedes appropriation. Perhaps it is not even greedy about its own tendencies; it shifts, undervalues itself, gives itself away. Thus, when a discipline—a *Wissenschaft*, a methodical, repeatable relation to sanctioned objects, an institutionalized attention—restricts itself to its objects, it excludes not only other objects and disciplines but also, and more importantly, other acts or non-acts that would include them, even though they are unrelated and even if they are not properly sanctioned as objects. Reception of the human genome and a fruit fly and three hundred years of American military history and the concept of the proper name is simply not attention. Attention's conjunction is "or," not "and."

It would seem then, that the answer to the tautology or near-tautology—attention is not non-attention—is to describe the positive contents of the concept and the act, to derive the concept of attention from what it is and does, and to define distraction as the negation of this. Yet, by this argument alone attention cannot definitively be said to be attentive. Its will to possession cannot be derived from observation of its activity. This is because attention can possess anything but itself.¹ And for this reason

attention may not be a unitary thing; there may not be a single unambiguous disposition called attention, or at least there is no way of verifying that there is. An argument *ex negativo* can perhaps demonstrate this problem. When the intellect is duly disciplined, the blinders on, so to speak—when it pays attention—what faculty remains to attend to it—to attend to the attention to objects? If attention is the only intellectual disposition that produces truth, this poses an enormous problem, akin to classical formulations of the problem of reflection. To attention attention cannot be paid. Franz Brentano made this impossibility a cornerstone of empirical psychology, and this insight had broad effects in twentieth-century philosophy and psychology. For Brentano, as well as for his students such as Husserl and Freud, the intellectual mode in which attentive thought can possibly come to be studied is not itself attention.² Insofar as attention is constitutively hidden from attentive thought, the scientist of attention is forced to work on an “oblique” path; the faculty by which she does this may best be called parattention, a sideward glance that targets its object somewhat like the eye sees its blind spots, less by seeing them than by registering non-seeing in a visual way. Where attentive thought is considered the prime condition for truth, where the attendable is the only candidate for the true (be the objects empirical, intellectual, or divine), this is tantamount to an admission that the nature of attention is neither verifiable nor unverifiable. Attention may be asserted by disciplines; they may even practice it or claim they are practicing it; nevertheless, it cannot be understood in a disciplined way, at least insofar as discipline is associated primarily with attentive thought.

Attention is not an attendable, and this is where its supposed opposite, distraction, begins to take on supreme importance. This is also where the problems we are dealing with cease to be only our problems; they are not recent, but lie at the heart of an old understanding of thought. For as long as a grasping, excluding, unequivocal attention has been desired as the fundamental human disposition, we have been living in an age of (potential) distraction. Most attempts to place cognition at the font of human life, from Aristotle to Descartes to Husserl, depend on it, however clandestinely.

For this reason, when we ask what we mean when we say distraction, we could answer: when faced with the crisis of the loss of attention, we

mean attention's opposite, its determinate negation, the negation of the uncertainty that arises when we try to ground attention in itself. Distraction, according to this reasoning, means the disintegration or misdirection of a unified, stable, directional mental force for possession of sanctioned objects. In the most common understanding today, distraction means a divided or a diverted attention.³ Here a third problem develops. The dialectic begins to break down, insofar as, in this picture, the two concepts, attention and distraction, are not opposites at all, but rather contraries, the one, distraction, consists in the other, attention, to the lowest degree. The age of distraction, it turns out, was always but the age of attention, and what it lacked more than anything was its eponymous phenomenon. There is no distraction, only an attention to the zero degree. What we call distraction is attentive thought degraded until it can do nothing but clamor for a return to its ideal. "Age of distraction" is a terrible euphemism, shibboleth for a posited utopia, and, at the same time, a mask behind which deep uncertainties teem. Naming itself thus, the age assures itself that attention awaits, before or after it. Its task is to find a way to it, whether the way runs back or forward.

Recent intellectual history has been written in accordance with this conceptual shell game. Theories of attention depend on distraction, since alone attention cannot be understood. Distraction is then defined as a divided or hugely degraded attention. In this way the tautological structure of the concept is preserved. One book that claims to critique the emphasis on attention nevertheless makes its unspoken commitment to an attention theory of distraction plain. The author describes his program in the introduction: "I am interested in how Western modernity since the nineteenth century has demanded that individuals define and shape themselves in terms of a capacity for 'paying attention,' that is, for a disengagement from a broader field of attraction . . ." (Crary I). In the current fever for finding lost attention, Jonathan Crary's plan might seem like a change, a revolution even. It is true, as long as we think of it as the fundamental capacity of an eternal psyche, attention does not seem susceptible to historicization. Crary attacks this assumption, challenging the intellectual complacency that led to the concealment of the history of attention. Drawing his theory of history mainly from Foucault, in order to argue that the emphasis on attention has arisen recently and for political reasons, Crary writes a gene-

alogy of attention in which it appears as a mode of “perception,” in order to expose its hidden source not in God or the psyche, but in “other kinds of forces and relations to power” (2). Behind the age’s obsession with attention, Cray reveals an essential act of power, by which he means the power of the state over “individuals.” Domination is the hidden motivation for the modern push toward attention. With this theory, however, Cray confines his inquiry to the very edifice he wishes to dismantle. What he calls the “modernization of perception,” that is, the increasing demand for control over the receptive capacity of “a subject,” in order to insure that the subject “is productive, manageable, and predictable, and is able to be socially integrated and adaptive,” relies unreservedly on the terms, continually operative in his argument, “subject,” “field of attraction,” and even the methodological motivation for his whole project, the unassuming phrase “I am interested” (4)—each of which has already answered the question of distraction in advance. Here a “subject,” as a priori subjugated to its outside, can only approach the world through an a posteriori “attraction,” and although in modernity its scope may have narrowed from a field to, say, a point, the ontological assumptions underlying the schema remain the same.⁴ Distraction is diversion, and diversion is a version of attention.⁵

How would distraction appear if it were released from its subordination to attention, to perception, to the subject? Few ask, and those who do often cannot abide the peculiar conclusions to which the inquiry leads. Another distraction that is not diversion, not a species or degree of attention, appears rarely in the history of the thought of thought. This is not all that can be said about it, however. Its rarity seems to follow a pattern, a pattern closely intertwined with the path of Western philosophy beginning in Greece, namely: banishment and return.

The specter of a non-attentional distraction haunted Aristotle in his attempt to theorize the soul. Chapter 1 argues that what frightened Aristotle was the image of an intermittent interruption of cognition. A century and a half earlier Parmenides had already envisioned something like this as the defining characteristic of mortals. It was also, Parmenides demonstrated, the chief threat to the new discipline he was inventing: true thought of what is. In the course of the movement from Parmenides to Aristotle in which the intellect, *nous*, rose to prominence, the image, and

with it the problem, of a primal distraction beyond attention was banished in Ancient Greece. This banishment had a long life: even today it affects studies of Aristotle, where this distraction—not-always-thinking—is rarely mentioned. In the drive to understand what was meant by thinking, periodic non-thought, *to mē aei noein*, remains at the margins. Yet banishments prepare the way for returns. Even if the forces and events that led not-always-thinking to surface again in Europe in seventeenth-century France are too many and too multifaceted to be accounted for without oversimplifying, it is nevertheless the case that primal distraction appeared at the end of the *Grand Siècle* and there for the first time it gained a name and a face in Jean de La Bruyère's figure, later called "le distrait." Chapter 2 offers an ontological and political interpretation of this figure, in part by contrasting him with Pascal's famous concept of *divertissement*, a near-contemporary theological counterpart.

The path of not-always-thinking is full of leaps. Let us affirm this from the beginning. Banishment in Ancient Greek philosophy and a belated return in seventeenth-century French moralism became legible, perhaps for the first time, only after the conceptual problems surrounding distraction began to be theorized in the early twentieth century. German-speaking writers undertook this task for concrete intellectual-historical reasons. Reacting to the supremacy of the intellect in the phenomenological philosophies of Franz Brentano and Edmund Husserl, three quite different writers, widely considered revolutionaries in their spheres, endeavored to conceptualize a radical distraction outside the dialectic with attention. Franz Kafka in fiction, Martin Heidegger in philosophy, and Walter Benjamin in cultural criticism, the foci of Chapters 3, 4, and 5 respectively, made distraction central to their writing. And although each set out to exploit specific resources of the German word *Zerstreuung*—Kafka as something like diaspora, Heidegger as dissipation, Benjamin as entertainment, with significant areas of overlap among them and differences within them—each almost inadvertently stumbled upon the most extreme and most unintentional withdrawal of thinking.

There appear to be three moments in this pattern of appearance—banishment, return, and theorization—and this book attempts to come to terms with each and to show their interrelations.

The history of thought is itself not a unitary thing. Every finite

thinker abbreviates another history of thought into an image that can be read. Aristotle does this, most famously at the beginning of the *Metaphysics*, where he sums up the arguments of his predecessors. Hegel makes this abbreviation into the very movement of philosophy. Some histories of thought are absorbed from books or other epochs or teachers. Some are elections of taste, some spring from deep convictions, some—perhaps most—slip into intellectual work through a scholar's inattention or the inattention of an age. Perhaps the greatest affront to thinking, however, is not the history or pseudo-history that is inevitably adduced, with more or less awareness, to support it, but rather the desire to present the syncretic, interested, and transient image of the history of thought as true. The truth of the relation between the most contemporary thinking and the past it claims in support of its meaning and procedure is its image-character.

The history of the thought of thought, or as Gilles Deleuze called it, images of thought, is already a dubious case, in which historical image and thought-act are extremely difficult to distinguish. Insofar as thinking routinely makes this difference, the difference between a now of present thinking and a history leading up to and preparing for it—whether by continuity or by a radical break, it matters little—insofar as thought demonstrates by means of this history that it is in fact thinking now, and to the extent that it privately calls upon its potted genealogy in order to separate “thinking” from “not-thinking” or “non-thinking,” with all the urgency of a now, the thought of thought falls into an unexpected stupidity about its own provenance. How can thought call its history into question if it can only operate by relying upon such a history to assert that it is, once again, thinking? What we think we do when we think can hardly be separated from our implicit understanding of what it means to think, and this, the meaning of thought, corresponds to the image that we inherit, co-opt, or in much rarer cases willfully invent. Thinking, it seems, will never be thought through.

Phenomenology provides one important image of what it meant for the twentieth century to think, and much has been done to extend this image of thought, to correct it or imagine alternative modes for it with other models or precursors. Acts of thinking are historical in this sense. They call upon a history of what it means to think in order to distin-

guish themselves as thinking now, as current thinking, as truly thinking and often also as the truth of thinking, even while, in order to do this, they ground their contemporaneity in prior instances that, while rejecting them, they clutch ever more tightly. The “history of thought” affirms a continuous, changing reel of thought-images to which a present thinker adds a frame, altered, to be sure, yet holding passionately onto this chain of positive appearances that lurk in the verb “to think.” In this way acts of *Geist* fall within a *Geistesgeschichte* that runs from Anaxagoras’s world-mind to Hegel’s absolute spirit and beyond. To say “I think” is to evoke this continuum, a retrospectively proleptic, self-correcting race toward the present. If we are able to admit that consciousness might not always meet itself in self-reflection, we are still not at ease dispensing with a history that has mind at its helm and as its destination.

The other case, the case of distraction, is at first glance less philosophical and more ridiculous. Can we produce a genealogy of not-always-thinking so that we can say we have thought distraction through? It is a fact that such a history has not yet been written. Someone might suggest, and rightly, that distraction’s case is hardly comparable to the history of thought, with its grand successes and stimulating paradoxes; distraction is trivial, a side issue, and one triviality among many. Surely there are a multitude of unwritten histories of minor unstudied concepts. Moreover, the lack of prior study might not indicate anything more than scholarly oversight, an accidental inattention in an otherwise efficient and responsible profession. That it has not only recently but also repeatedly been neglected over the course of the West’s intellectual history would not necessarily prove the urgency of looking into distraction now.

Something in the way it has fallen into neglect, however, hints to the contrary. Inattention, absentmindedness, *Geistesabwesenheit*, *Gedankenlosigkeit*, plus other words or technical jargon that lay claim to this concept or lack thereof are the very terms we use to describe its disappearance in intellectual history. The human sciences have left distraction unthought. Until now it has escaped scholarly notice. Clichéd as this may at first seem, the idea that inattention has escaped our notice or that absentmindedness has remained unthought or unthinkable in a conceptual history begs the question. A loop ensues when we begin to think of distraction: there must already be a concept and thus a history to be able to make the claim that

it has not yet been thought, and yet unlike other hidden threads or nodes in Western intellectual history, this one describes its own historical disappearance. The tradition has been inattentive to inattention, and thus we can argue that there is no tradition of distraction, no history of it per se. The circle in which we find distraction is not a hermeneutic circle.

The idea that a history of thought is required in order to state what thinking might be, so that we may be sure to continue doing it, this self-replicating movement, recalls an early scene in which the bond between thinking and being was discovered, or rather compelled (Parmenides calls it bondage by “fate,” “*moira*”), in the fifth century BCE. The bond between thinking and being envisioned there has survived in part due to empirical events that came after it. To mention just one: Aristotle adopted the bond of *noēsis* and *ousia*, and Aristotle was adopted by succeeding ages as master of their thought. Yet the bond also persists for internal reasons, because of an emphasis on mythical necessity, transmitted from Parmenides to Plato and beyond: *anthrōpos* is required to think and to think being; it is this being’s lot, its fate. Being, in turn, means, among other things, what lasts. It is thus no accident that something like thought again and again survives the twists and turns of history. Being survives because since Parmenides “survival” is being’s secret name. Thought survives along with it as its medium of preservation. Thus Parmenides’ dictum bequeaths two unvarying principles: thought is bound to being by fate and fate means that being survives the death of beings. The two are eternally conjoined: it is just as important that thought (*noēsis*) continue beyond any thinker or single thought (*noema*) as it is that being (*ousia*) outlive singular beings (*ontes*). These principles work together to project a thought-being construct—*nous*, *intellectus activus*, *je pense*, *Geist*, thought, mind—that outlasts the passing of sentences, vocabularies, languages, texts, schools, sciences, and philosophizing beings. What’s more, the perdurance of thought correlates precisely to the idea of historical change. Since thought is of what-is, changes in what-is bring along with them or follow from (it doesn’t matter which) changes in thought. On this one point idealism and realism agree. Whatever happens (historically), there will always be being (and not nothing) and thought (and not non-thought); true to its fate, thought will always be attracted to what-is (despite particular differences) and what-is will display itself for and through thought. For this reason there is much

less of a difference between “paying attention” and a “broader field of attractions” than Jonathan Crary assumes. The concept of change—that which happens to the attributes of a substance—does not threaten but in fact preserves the correspondence between thought and being, assuring that both remain intelligible through vocabularies, fashions, and changing institutions. In the phrase “the history of thought,” history is quite obviously the subordinate term.

Not-thinking tells another story, a *Geistesabwesenheitsgeschichte*, history absent mind, which is forced to dispense with a controlling spirit or *Geist* and so is barely recognizable as history. In such an account—parable, legend, or yarn may be better names for it—it would not be clear how or whether being and thought could continue their fateful *pas de deux*. One can turn one’s thought to not-thinking—or one can claim to do this—but one does so at the risk of severing the bond with being. And so, of course, distraction must be studied from within *Geistesgeschichte*, even though a history of the thought of distraction by rights falsifies its object. From the perspective of not-thinking, thought vanishes before it can gain even an inkling of its coming disappearance. Still, it is only reasonable to concede that unthought needs to be addressed from the perspective of thought; indeed—when we begin to wonder what it would look like if its history were written according to its own nature, by its own laws or by its anomy, the result is ludicrous. What would a history of distraction be if it refused to borrow stability and permanence from thought? What if it rejected thought’s temporal signature, always—*aei*? Aristotle recoils from this intuition at a key moment in his late text *De anima*. We follow him in recognizing that, admitting the existence of unthought—and we must do this in order to study it, mustn’t we?—if we admit its existence or at least its occurrence, we are forced to admit that *Geistesgeschichte* and its more technical nephew, *Begriffsgeschichte*, are inadequate to the task, or worse, that they will be drawn to pieces by their object. This is our dilemma: we must suspend our belief in the existence of the thing in order to study it, since if we believe in it, we must also believe that it will most certainly ruin the ideal intellectual act that we fantasize stands behind our study. Insofar as unthought exists it cannot be thought; insofar as it occurs it cannot be conceptualized; it affects *Geist* yet falls out of the usual history written by it about it.⁶

Many philosophers relegate this sort of distraction to the empirical realm. Kant addresses *Zerstreuung*, “distractedness,” in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, but for him it is an accident affecting only empirical consciousness;⁷ neither understanding nor reason are susceptible to it, and so it has little importance within reason’s critique.⁸ From the perspective of reason, distraction—a phenomenon for which “what is it?” is the most desperate and also the most inappropriate question—could have no transcendental condition, and so it would be unseemly for philosophy to inquire into it. The continuity of consciousness—despite the limits that Kant places on our ability to intuit its sources—is maintained by banishing distraction to the sphere of accident and illness.⁹ If the disturbance affects only empirical thinkers and not their transcendental faculties, it is an anthropological matter, and thus a minor aberrance, a contamination, an annoyance.

The frequency with which the question of unthought springs to mind in the philosophical tradition is low. It receives a long scene in Parmenides’ poem, though barely a mention in Plato. Aristotle picks it up once or twice, obliquely, and then he treats it suddenly as an unanswerable question in his late treatise on the soul. Hegel, following Kant, assigns it to the empirical as a minor detraction from habit.¹⁰ What is there to mark its reappearance in philosophical systems, however, and perhaps also to explain its infrequent treatment, is a worry about a nefarious nothing that steals away the empirical thinker’s intellectual powers, and more importantly, her relationship to eternity. What good would thinking be if no thinker could trust her special instantiation of it? Such a limit would threaten the transcendental order. The worry about this threat goes further: the thought of unthought is often accompanied by a premonition that since it is neither a being nor a thought (reality’s exclusive vectors, at least for Parmenides) it can have no cause and no origin; it remains a rumor, mere opinion, a ghost, and thus is not truly cognizable at all. How can we think about a causeless, trackless nothing that snuffs out the spark of human thinking, especially if we suspect that it is only an empirical event with no transcendental corollary?

It may be this very self-defeating aspect of the problem that enticed thinkers in the early twentieth century to rethink it. In the most general terms, for Franz Kafka, Martin Heidegger, and Walter Benjamin,

Zerstreuung—and related words and concepts—both belonged and didn't belong to the cultural and intellectual tradition they were watching—or so they thought—fall to pieces. Unthought kills thought, if only for an instant of unspecifiable length, and this suggests both the reason for which it had been neglected and at the same time why it held promise for these writers writing in and against the ductus of phenomenology in the early twentieth century.

I understand distraction as a parontological relationship of thought to non-being and its variants: not-quite-being, more-than-being, not-yet-being, no-longer-being. Allied with figures such as presentiment, sublimity, clairvoyance, and recollection, as the advent of a mental nothing or a principle of disappearance however, it tests the limits of even these marginal mental phenomena, tending away from phenomenology and ontology toward fantasy, literature, and art. It is difficult to isolate distraction as a philosopheme that emerged within a specific historical horizon, as though it were an empirical event in the history of thought. This seems to be because it acts as the mental corollary of historical horizons themselves, and so it has no history of its own. It is hard to catch because, as a tendency toward the limit of what is, distraction is nearest when it escapes notice and most remote when attended to. As the receding-approaching limit of thinking, it haunts the history of thought and raises doubts about its legitimacy. And although it haunts, it is not itself spectral; it is closer to a capacity to receive specters. When it speaks it says: here comes nothing—an excess or shortage of what we think is. A paradoxical capacity to receive non-beings, and at the same time, inversely, an incapacity to think (if thinking is thinking being), it resists becoming an object of thought. While thought's capacity to take itself as an object remains the central problem of philosophy, as well as its central hope—as reflection—the problem of receiving distraction attracts little philosophical interest.

That which disengages moments or epochs of cognition is not strictly mental. An irruption of the non-mental within the mental, the inexperienceable within experience, it can occur when a mind or an epoch releases its hold on cherished intellectual structures, being-determining categories, and beings. Although anti-historical, it is not therefore eternal, and yet it does not seem to go away (more correct might be to say that it

brings “away” to mind). Formally, it repeats an intermission in which history dispenses with coherence. For beings and their relations this entails great risk. More than risk—it assumes an underlying discontinuum over which continuity has been draped like a shroud. Distraction is a reminder of the loose fit of historical life on the casket of its coherence.

Intimations of distraction occasionally disturb the tradition, beginning with Parmenides, that binds thought to being, although they never concentrate themselves into theories of it. One finds theories of marginal phenomena such as laughter, boredom, and forgetting, and of course of central concepts such as form, appearance, language, and so forth, but never a full-fledged “theory of distraction,” notwithstanding Walter Benjamin’s notes that bear this title. Primal distraction comes and goes yet no source can be found for its coming and going. This study presents three disturbances in this non-history of distraction: a panic within Aristotelian metaphysics, a risible scatterbrain at the edges of French moralism, and a set of attempts to bring distraction and its potentials into theoretical focus during the inter-war years of the twentieth century.

Aristotle establishes the paradigm of an intermittent phenomenon whose phenomenality remains in question because its being—which should, as the source of its on-again off-again appearance, be eternal—is intermittent as well. It comes toward us but lacks a “whence.” This sourcelessness is the source of its incoherence as a concept and its duplicity as a word, and that is why Aristotle drops the issue. And yet, although it cannot be conceptualized, distraction can be illustrated. When it returns in the seventeenth century it comes back outside philosophical discourse proper. Temporal inconsistency, intrusion of the discontinuum into the seamless weave of the everyday, the unheard-of ability to receive what-is-not in an inability to think—these traits are given a human shape in La Bruyère’s *distract*. Then, in the twenties and thirties of the last century some aspects of primal distraction are conceptualized for the first time in literature, philosophy, and art criticism. Kafka emphasizes the thoughtless-one’s ability to shake itself loose from the means-ends logic of willing; Heidegger points to the freedom that the dispersing one—Dasein—enjoys with respect to its own ground; and Benjamin imagines an internal dissipation that, brought about through new media, will lead to an uncommon politicization. Together these

tentative and partial reports on distraction contribute to an understanding of human being as one whose highest capacity is not the synthesizing process of *noēsis* but rather the periodic dissolution of its faculties. What Kafka, Heidegger, and Benjamin—taken together—intimate is the following. Where philosophy, criticism, and art theory are traditionally concerned with principles for the formation of things, distraction is concerned with their deformation, disintegration, and ceasing to be. It posits a tendency toward not-thinking and a release from being.

Please note: All the translations from Ancient Greek, Latin, and German are my own, unless otherwise indicated. In Chapter 2 published translations from the French have been used and cited, and where occasionally modified, so noted.