Of colours twelve, few known on earth, give light in the opaque,
Plac’d in the order of the stars, when the five senses whelm’d
In deluge o’er the earth-born man; then turned the fluxile eyes
Into two stationary orbs, concentrating all things:
The ever-varying spiral ascents to the heavens of heavens
Were bended downward, and the nostrils’ golden gates shut,
Turn’d outward, barr’d and petrify’d against the infinite.

—William Blake, Europe: A Prophecy
This book is based on the assumption that the ways in which we intently listen to, look at, or concentrate on anything have a deeply historical character. Whether it is how we behave in front of the luminous screen of a computer or how we experience a performance in an opera house, how we accomplish certain productive, creative, or pedagogical tasks or how we more passively perform routine activities like driving a car or watching television, we are in a dimension of contemporary experience that requires that we effectively cancel out or exclude from consciousness much of our immediate environment. 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, whether visual or auditory, for the sake of isolating or focusing on a reduced number of stimuli. That our lives are so thoroughly a patchwork of such disconnected states is not a “natural” condition but rather the product of a dense and powerful remaking of human subjectivity in the West over the last 150 years. Nor is it insignificant now at the end of the twentieth century that one of the ways an immense social crisis of subjective dis-integration is metaphorically diagnosed is as a deficiency of “attention.”

Much critical and historical analysis of modern subjectivity during this century has been based on the idea of “reception in a state of distraction,” as articulated by Walter Benjamin and others. Following from such work has been a widespread assumption that, from the mid-1800s on, perception is fundamentally characterized by experiences of fragmentation, shock, and dispersal. I argue that modern distraction can only be understood through its reciprocal relation to the rise of attentive norms and practices. I will explore the paradoxical intersection, which has existed in many ways since the later nineteenth century, between an imperative of a concentrated attentiveness within the disciplinary organization of
labor, education, and mass consumption and an ideal of sustained attentiveness as a constitutive element of a creative and free subjectivity. No doubt some will respond that I am comparing qualitatively different notions of attention: that, for example, a cultivated individual gazing on a great work of art could have little or nothing in common with a factory worker concentrating on the performance of some repetitive task. However, as I will argue, the very possibility in the late nineteenth century of concepts of a purified aesthetic perception is inseparable from the processes of modernization that made the problem of attention a central issue in new institutional constructions of a productive and manageable subjectivity. What I hope to suggest are the ways in which modern experiences of social separation and of subjective autonomy are both intertwined within the resplendent possibilities, ambivalent limits, and failures of an attentive individual.

This book is an attempt to sketch some outlines of a genealogy of attention since the nineteenth century and to detail its role in the modernization of subjectivity. More concretely, I will examine how ideas about perception and attention were transformed in the late nineteenth century alongside the emergence of new technological forms of spectacle, display, projection, attraction, and recording. I attempt to describe ways in which new knowledge about the behavior and makeup of a human subject coincided with social and economic shifts, with new representational practices, and with a sweeping reorganization of visual/auditory culture. In this book I construct a relatively unfamiliar vantage point from which to study a generalized crisis in perception in the 1880s and 1890s and in doing so to indicate how the contested notion of attention was central to a range of social, philosophical, and aesthetic issues during those years and, indirectly, to subsequent developments in the twentieth century.

There are several important reasons why I have chosen the problem of attention as a frame through which to examine a group of objects in this historical period. Perhaps most significantly, attention, as a constellation of texts and practices, is much more than a question of the gaze, of looking, of the subject only as a spectator. It allows the problem of perception to be extracted from an easy equation with questions of visuality, and I will argue that the modern problem of attention encompasses a set of terms and positions that cannot be construed simply as questions of opticality. In recent years, within the expanding study of visuality, vision has too often been posed as an autonomous and self-justifying problem. Privileging the category of visuality runs the risk of ignoring the forces of specialization and separation that allowed such a notion to become the intellectually available concept that it is today. So much of what seems to constitute a domain
of the visual is an effect of other kinds of forces and relations of power. At the same time "visuality" can easily veer into a model of perception and subjectivity that is cut off from richer and more historically determined notions of "embodiment," in which an embodied subject is both the location of operations of power and the potential for resistance. At the present moment, to assert the centrality or "hegemony" of vision within twentieth-century modernity no longer has much value or significance at all. Thus, as I will argue, spectacular culture is not founded on the necessity of making a subject see, but rather on strategies in which individuals are isolated, separated, and inhabit time as disempowered. Likewise, counter-forms of attention are neither exclusively nor essentially visual but rather constituted as other temporalities and cognitive states, such as those in trance or reverie.

One of the aims of my book Techniques of the Observer was to show how historical transformations in ideas about vision were inseparable from a larger re-shaping of subjectivity that concerned not optical experiences but processes of modernization and rationalization. In the present book, which studies a very different field of events, one of my goals is to demonstrate how within modernity vision is only one layer of a body that could be captured, shaped, or controlled by a range of external techniques; at the same time, vision is only one part of a body capable of evading institutional capture and of inventing new forms, affects, and intensities. I do not believe that exclusively visual concepts such as "the gaze" or "beholding" are in themselves valuable objects of historical explanation.¹ My use of the problematic term "perception" is primarily a way of indicating a subject definable in terms of more than the single-sense modality of sight, in terms also of hearing and touch and, most importantly, of irreducibly mixed modalities which, inevitably, get little or no analysis within "visual studies." At the same time I want to suggest how late nineteenth-century investigations of perception were heavily invested in restoring to it some of its original Latin resonances—the sense of perception as "catching" or "taking captive," even as the impossibility of such fixatedness or possession became clear. In fact, by the 1880s, perception, for many, was synonymous with "those sensations to which attention has been turned."²

Part of the importance of the historical problem of attention lies in how it is a hinge between issues raised in the most influential modern philosophical

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reflections on vision and perception (e.g., by Jacques Derrida, Maurice Blanchot, Georges Bataille, and Jacques Lacan) and in work on modern effects of power, on social and institutional constructions of experience and subjectivity (e.g., by Michel Foucault or Walter Benjamin). The first category, very generally, shares a related transhistorical insistence on a fundamental absence at the heart of seeing, on the impossibility of the perception of presence, or of an unmediated visual access to a plenitude of being. I contend, however, that attention becomes a specifically modern problem only because of the historical obliteration of the possibility of thinking the idea of presence in perception; attention will be both a simulation of presence and a makeshift, pragmatic substitute in the face of its impossibility. In Techniques of the Observer I showed how the rise of physiological optics in the early nineteenth century displaced models of vision that had been predicated on the self-presence of the world to an observer and on the instantaneity and atemporal nature of perception. In this book I examine some of the consequences of that shift: in particular the emergence of attention as a model of how a subject maintains a coherent and practical sense of the world, a model that is not primarily optical or even veridical.³ Normative explanations of attentiveness arose directly out of the understanding that a full grasp of a self-identical reality was not possible and that human perception, conditioned by physical and psychological temporalities and processes, provided at most a provisional, shifting approximation of its objects.

Thus, it is important to emphasize that an immense social remaking of the observer in the nineteenth century proceeds on the general assumption that perception cannot be thought of in terms of immediacy, presence, punctuality. Much recent critical theory, derived from a now pointless critique of presence, has been unable to fathom that whether or not one has direct perceptual access to self-presence is intrinsically irrelevant within modern disciplinary and spectacular culture. What is important to institutional power, since the late nineteenth century, is simply that perception function in a way that insures a subject is productive, manageable, and predictable, and is able to be socially integrated and adaptive. The realization that attention had limits beyond and below which productivity and social cohesion were threatened created a volatile indistinction between newly designated "pathologies" of attention and creative, intensive states of deep absorption and daydreaming. Attention, as I will detail, was an inevitable ingredient of a

subjective conception of vision: attention is the means by which an individual observer can transcend those subjective limitations and make perception its own, and attention is at the same time a means by which a perceiver becomes open to control and annexation by external agencies.

This, briefly, is part of the intellectual scope of this project. Its concrete parameters, however, are more circumscribed. Even though I stake out a period of roughly twenty-five years, from 1879 to the very early 1900s, I do not attempt in any sense to write a history or survey of ideas or practices of perception during this time. Beginning with chapter one, I attempt to establish both why attention became a decisively new kind of problem in the nineteenth century, far removed from previous historical understandings of it, and why it became inseparable from philosophical, psychological, and aesthetic investigations of perception. Also, I outline how the many, often conflicting efforts to explain attention empirically, and to render it manageable, were ultimately unsuccessful. Throughout the following chapters I create some provisional diagrams of those last decades of the nineteenth century, diagrams assembled out of local analyses of a relatively small number of objects through which to consider the interrelated problem of perception and modernization. Although the sequence of my chapters is organized chronologically, beginning with objects from around 1879, my actual presentation is discontinuous in that I construct three relatively autonomous analyses slicing across that historical continuum.

Each of my chapters presents a constellation of objects that suggest some of the ways in which the problems of a contingent modernized perception took shape within the larger transformation of Western cultural practices in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. More specifically, each of these constellations includes some of the important forms of machine vision and techniques for the simulation of continuous movement, which were obvious components of many reconceptualizations of perception as well as central elements in an incipient reshaping of mass culture. An enduring critical problem has long been how to understand ways in which film and modernist art occupy a common historical ground. I have attempted to balance any generalizing speculation with highly specific analyses of concrete practices and objects, but at the same time I have sought to avoid shaping these in the service of "illustrating" or proving any particular thesis about the historical processes I am investigating. Probably the most important explanatory choice that I've made, however, has been to foreground a single work of art as a pivot around which each chapter is constructed. These primary works are In the Conservatory by Manet from 1879, Parade de cirque by Seurat
from 1887–1888, and *Pines and Rocks* by Cézanne from around 1900, and hence each chapter is a generally synchronic presentation of objects segmented by roughly ten-year intervals along the diachronic axis of the book.

In *Techniques of the Observer* I challenged conventional accounts that saw modernist painting of the 1870s and 1880s, in various ways, as constituting an epochal turning point in the historical makeup of the observer and practices of vision, and I certainly reaffirm that position here. That is, visual modernism took shape within an already reconfigured field of techniques and discourses about visuality and an observing subject. But this scarcely means these artworks should go unexamined. They are objects through which I investigate the consequences
and reverberations of the rise of subjective and physiological models of vision earlier in the nineteenth century, and they are central to any consideration of the new creative horizons as well as constraints produced by this historical transformation. However, that I am placing artworks so prominently within this project is not to afford them any sort of ontological privilege. My book proceeds from a counter assumption: I am developing the issue of attention in order to question the relevance of isolating an aesthetically determined contemplation or absorption. The field of attentive practices offers a single heterogeneous surface on which discursive objects, material practices, and representational artifacts do not occupy qualitatively different strata but are equally involved in the production of effects of power and new types of subjectivities. Thus I am not interested in recovering a primary or “authentic” meaning that is somehow immanent to these works; rather,
Paul Cézanne, Pines and Rocks, c. 1900.
by examining them I hope to construct some of the field of their exterior, to multiply the links to this exterior, “to remain attentive to the plural” of these paintings, where “everything signifies ceaselessly and several times.”

However, my intention is not to position, for example, a work by Seurat as either symptomatic of or determined by any of the discursive objects and institutional spaces to which I refer. I am insisting that certain works, and the specific aesthetic practices on which they are founded, are constitutive elements of that same field of events, that they are original fashionings of related problems. Thus the use of Manet, Seurat, and Cézanne as figures through whom to rethink developments in this period is hardly arbitrary. Each of them engaged in a singular confrontation with the disruptions, vacancies, and rifts within a perceptual field; each of them made unprecedented discoveries about the indeterminacy of an attentive perception but also how its instabilities could be the basis for a reinvention of perceptual experience and of representational practices. Monet, and to a lesser extent Degas, could well have been included but were omitted in the interest of controlling the size of the project. The reason for the choice of the specific paintings will become clear in the terms of my discussion, but briefly what they have in common is an engagement with a general problem of perceptual synthesis and with the interrelated binding and disintegrative possibilities of attention. At the same time, I’m interested in how these space-drained (but hardly flat) images are inseparable from emerging machine forms of “realism” and optical verisimilitude.

I do not need to emphasize that this book is finally less about art than about a rethinking and reconstruction of perception in which art practices were significant but hardly paramount or exclusive components. Thus I have tended to uproot these paintings from some of their familiar art historical frameworks and have bracketed any significant “vertical” explanations of artworks in terms of their relation to breaks or continuities along a linear historical trajectory of movements and styles. Instead, following Gilles Deleuze and others, I have emphasized transversal connections between objects of different kinds occupying very different locations. Deleuze’s proposition that “philosophy, art and science come into relations of mutual resonance and exchange, but always for internal reasons,” provides a way of thinking of the simultaneous but autonomous coexistence of disparate cultural artifacts, outside of mechanical or biographical notions of influence and worn-out distinctions between “high” and “low” culture.

The value of this book's title is as much in evocation as description: important for me are several resonances of the word suspension. First, I want to suggest the state of being suspended, a looking or listening so rapt that it is an exemption from ordinary conditions, that it becomes a suspended temporality, a hovering out of time. The roots of the word attention in fact resonate with a sense of "tension," of being "stretched," and also of "waiting." It implies the possibility of a fixation, of holding something in wonder or contemplation, in which the attentive subject is both immobile and ungrounded. But at the same time a suspension is also a cancellation or an interruption, and I wanted here to indicate a disturbance, even a negation of perception itself. For throughout the book I am concerned with the idea of a perception that can be both an absorption and an absence or deferral. It is this contradictory composition of perception that I will examine here, not by pontenously identifying it as part of the eternal ruses of vision, but by exploring the conditions of possibility for its historical emergence. Perhaps it is unnecessary for me to propose that the archaeology of these conditions is synonymous with the prehistory of our own present and its techno-institutional worlds.
The constant continuity of the process, the unobstructed and fluid transition of value from one form into the other, or from one phase of the process into the next, appears as a fundamental condition for production based on capital.

—Karl Marx, Grundrisse

Almost all the problems of philosophy once again pose the same form of question as they did two thousand years ago: how can something originate in its opposite, for example rationality in irrationality, the sentient in the dead, logic in unlogic, disinterested contemplation in covetous desire, living for others in egoism, truth in error?

—Friedrich Nietzsche, Human, All Too Human

One of the most important nineteenth-century developments in the history of perception was the relatively sudden emergence of models of subjective vision in a wide range of disciplines during the period 1810–1840. Dominant discourses and practices of vision, within the space of a few decades, effectively broke with a classical regime of visuality and grounded the truth of vision in the density and