CHAPTER 3

The Screen as Instrument of Freedom and Unfreedom

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The Homology of the Screen and the Watching Self

The relationship between humans and technology is not simply one of analogy, but the tighter one of homology.

The terms originate in biology as it was on the cusp of evolutionary theory, and from Richard Owen's work in particular (Boyden 1969: 455). The homology concept not only encompasses the idea of similar function, but also that of similar structure. The analogy concept gestures only to similarity of function, one that is not necessarily related to similarity of structure. As the idea of similar structure was overtaken by that of shared ancestry—and, finally, genetics—it became common to emphasize that homologous structures need not have similar functions, although Owen intended to describe most especially those which did (ibid.: 456).

At stake is how to classify relationship. We miss something essential about our technologies if we do not analyse them, and not only with respect to commonality of function, but also with respect to shared ancestry. As Galit Wellner argues, part of the cell phone's attraction is that it has a quasi-face and functions

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as a quasi-other (2016: 105–123). The cell phone screen is not only analogous to some features of the human face, especially looking and expressing emotions. Additionally, it is homologous, generated by histories of watching through which devices and watchers have mutually conditioned one another.

Wellner argues that the concepts 'human' and 'technology' co-evolve (2016: 127). When we define the human as tool-wielding, we have already demonstrated her point. We are less likely to go in the other direction, however, and to see technologies as imbricated in their development with the humans they circumscribe. Describing this double motion, Wellner writes:

> Technology is a prosthesis in the sense that it is an object-based memory of humans. As prostheses, technologies are the exteriorization of the human memory. By complementing the interiority of humans—and not through imitation as [Vannevar] Bush thought—technology functions as a prosthesis. The prosthesis is not a simple copy of the human but rather a transformative object. For instance, the invention of the wheel was not a recording of a memory of a certain type of movement but rather a new form of movement. Once the wheel was invented, the production of similar technological artifacts could be regarded as the externally recorded memory of what is Human. Vice versa, the exteriorization of 'The Human' is the mnemonic function of technology. This double structure makes Technology un-dissociable from the human. (ibid.)

In order to give our technologies genealogies, in Nietzsche's sense of the term, we must thus also think of them as homologies in Owen's. A set of allied concepts from Wellner is useful, especially co-constitution, memory, and prosthesis. Only with this set of concepts will we be in a position to ask how our technologies evolve: not only with respect to the technologies that preceded, but also with respect to humans with whom they not simply interact, but actively share bodies and minds. And only then will we be in a position to ask after the political possibilities of the world we have thereby described.

Nowhere is this set of questions more salient than with respect to our screens.

We know from critical theory that the 20th-century cinema screen and fascism were deeply imbedded. And yet, both the cinema screen and its heirs have been present in some other political forms. This suggests that the screen can stabilize more than one kind of political form. Is this really so surprising, since it shares its heritage with the human? The cell phone and tablet screen may even advance democratic social forms.

Before turning to this issue, we must first get clear on the kinds of screens that are most salient to our everyday experience and the features of these screens. For this reason, we will first turn to some of the details of Wellner's account of the cell phone. Only then will we be able to distinguish the features and usages of screens that amplify our unfreedoms from those that advance our freedoms.

The last two sections of this chapter will attempt to tease these freedoms and unfreedoms apart.

Wellner and the Evolution of the Screen

The screen most prevalent in our everyday lives is the cell phone. The questions, then, are: what memories does it exteriorize, and what kinds of humans does it project? Before answering these questions, Wellner first gives us an account of the cell phone's evolution, as a device. She traces the changes from the early versions of cell phones into later ones, as the device makes the transition from analogue to digital technologies.

The most important transition is the larger and more important screen (2016: 91–93). The screen feature becomes so prominent in the devices that Wellner will describe it as the 'victory of the visual over the auditory' (2016: 52). It is also, interestingly, a victory for writing and literacy, although not in traditional forms (2016: 39–44). As screens became larger on the cell phone and, by extension, the tablet, they also became smaller. The normative computer, television and movie screens were all larger, but less convenient to carry around than the cell phone or tablet screens.

Wellner writes in the tradition of Marx's theory of technology, a tradition that emphasizes the ability of our technologies to advance both freedoms and unfreedoms. Sometimes, the very same technology can do both. And, in Marx's account, this does not always happen in a simplistic way (1973; 1983).

Drawing on Marx, Andrew Feenberg uses the example of the adaptation of industrial machines to the height of children, taken as a sociological fact: and used, interestingly, as an argument that only children could operate such machines (1999: 86–87). In light of such an argument, child labour does seem mandated by machines. Technology hobbles and curtails human possibilities. Importantly, however, it only does so because machines have been built this way in the first place.

Applied technologies are never totally neutral, as they are always 'built up" in some way to accommodate social ends and purposes. Again, Feenberg is helpful:

> [The thesis that technology is politically neutral] reifies technology by abstracting from all contextual considerations. This approach is relatively persuasive because, as in other instances of formal bias, the decontextualized elements from which the biased system is built up *are* in fact neutral in their abstract form. The gears and levers of the assembly line, like the bricks and mortar of the Panopticon, possess no intrinsic valuative implication. The illusion that technology is neutral arises when actual machines and systems are understood on the mode of the abstract technical elements that they unite in value-laden combinations. Critical theory shatters this illusion by recovering the forgotten contexts

> and developing a historically concrete understanding of technology. (2002: 82, emphasis in the original)

Societies can also selectively develop technologies that advance unfreedoms, while ignoring others that might advance freedoms. Engels, worried already in 1865 about the mining particulates affecting air quality in and around Manchester, noted our reliance on fossil fuels (1975: 530–547). This insight did not cause either him or Marx to give up on their interest in energy technologies or their unexplored possibilities. Among other reasons, this is why they were excited, at the end of their lives, about advances in electricity.

Marx's theory of technology's ambivalent possibilities came to Feenberg elegantly via Herbert Marcuse. Paulo Freire also derived the idea from Marcuse, and we shall see his development of it in later sections of this chapter. In Wellner, the idea of technology's ambivalence develops as a criticism of Martin Heidegger, whose inattention to social context causes him to develop a negative view of technological mediation, and also the notion that technology has a singular essence. In place of this, Wellner develops a historically concrete and contextual consideration of the cell phone and tablet screen. She is careful to attend not only to the unfreedoms that these screens may direct, but also to the freedoms that they enable.

In place of the singular Heideggerian technological essence, Wellner offers a discussion of three invariants that are features of the large-screen digital cell phone. The first invariant is the phone's function as both a wall and a window, a mechanism for dividing attention in one of several ways. The second invariant is the cell phone's function as a quasi-human face: she might have noted that the increasing size of the cell phone screen causes it to approach the actual size of the human face; this is accomplished in the tablet. The third invariant is the cell phone's memory prosthesis: the way in which the cell phone functions as part of the human mind.

Wellner's concept of 'multi-stability' helps describe the amplified ambivalence of the cell phone when compared with other technological artifacts (2016: 12–13). Wellner argues that while technological artifacts like Heidegger's hammer can be used in more than one way, limits of use and function are often built into their design. In most contexts, we would feel silly carrying a hammer around, and this is rarely if ever true of the cell phone. So while we might use the hammer as a paperweight, it could hardly become an object of what Wellner calls 'everyday carry' for most of us, unless we were carpenters (2016: 56–57). Even then, the carpenter is likely to have a cell phone, too. That is to say, the cell phone has a greater degree of multi-stability than the hammer: it has a greater capacity to be used in more ways than other kinds of technological object.

For this reason, Wellner might have added multi-stability as a kind of fourth invariant of the cell phone. In its multi-stability, the cell phone has the ability to join context in many different ways. Already in Marx's account, political ambivalence was a feature even of more modestly stable technologies. The cell phone's

multi-stability thus amplifies its political possibilities. It will be especially able to adapt to new purposes and contexts: both contexts that curtail freedom, and those that advance it.

Screens and Unfreedom

Near the end of Chapter 1 of *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, Brazilian Marxist educational theorist Paulo Freire refers to both of Herbert Marcuse's major works, *One-dimensional man* and *Eros and civilization*. Freire writes:

> More and more, the oppressors are using science and technology as unquestionably powerful instruments for their purpose: the maintenance of the oppressive order through manipulation and repression. The oppressed, as objects, as 'things,' have no purposes except those their oppressors describe for them. (2007: 60)

This criticism applies readily to the face-sized digital screen: take, for example, the screen's role in establishing purposes of the kind Freire warns about here. One of the primary prescribed purposes occurs when the subject to whom screen technologies are addressed is addressed primarily or even solely as a consumer of commodity goods. A companion-prescribed purpose situates the normative human life around the wage-labour form, and the salaried labour form in particular, even if this latter form is only aspirational.

The behavioural decision-making literature emerging from business schools has adopted this prescribed purpose uncritically. Even or perhaps especially when this literature takes itself to be promoting human goods, it does so with an implied premise that the subject to whom it is addressed is either a consumer or an aspirational consumer, with a salaried job.

Consider Shlomo Benartzi's *The smarter screen: surprising ways to influence and improve online behavior* (2015). Benartzi, an UCLA behavioural economist, has innovated apps that help users save for retirement, including projecting an aged photograph of the saver onto the screen. In his 2015 book, he describes applying the same techniques to the health insurance market. He suggests limiting numbers of visual choices on the online health insurance exchanges so that participants can more accurately choose plans suited to their needs, without overpaying.

Noble though these efforts may be, they operate only against the backdrop of a very limited conception of human need. The real fear inspired by the aging photograph corresponds to a society that has accepted senior poverty. The need to economize in health insurance choices corresponds to a society that has accepted that health will be a commodity most available to the very rich. Indeed, in Benartzi's account, the story about how best to present insurance choices on a screen is no different from how Amazon should present its shoes

or how Expedia should present its hotel rooms. In fact, he suggests that we migrate best practices from one platform to another.

For what it may be worth, the magic number is four choices, combined with a sports-based bracket system for limiting down choice types. This schema is especially important if the chooser is choosing on a phone or tablet rather than on a computer screen. The number four helps to avoid overwhelming choosers with too many choices, poorly visible on face-sized screens, and helps to eliminate an empirically documented 'middle bias' that sways decisions if five choices are given. No doubt such strategies work. But they work precisely by enabling prescribed purposes: by setting health insurance alongside footwear, hotel rooms and, perhaps most egregiously, snack foods (Benartzi 2015: 72).

Benartzi also seeks to combat the failures of reading comprehension when reading is done on a screen, particularly in comparison to reading done on paper. Benartzi cites good empirical work, the Anne Mangen Norwegian education study from 2013, in order to demonstrate what anyone with good cognitive training knows instinctively albeit impressionistically: if you read it on a screen, it is harder to remember what you read (2015: 67; see also Baron 2015).

Years ago, I made the mistake of reading Pascal Mercier's *Night train to Lisbon* on a tablet screen: a terrible choice for a novel with words as powerful and beautiful as Mercier's, which I remember only as a general feeling or tone. Even in writing about the experience now, I misremember the title as *Midnight train to Lisbon*, realizing the error only as I put the references section together. Not only am I missing the detail and texture of the narrative, I cannot even correctly recall the title of the book! For this reason, I gathered paper versions of all the books and articles listed in the References section, including Benartzi's, for this chapter: preferring, of course, public versions from libraries in order to minimize the environmental impact of the reading practice.

There is, of course, a literacy bias to the judgment. As Freire points out, the screen has the ability to overcome literacy bias by conveying truths via image rather than word, and so to enable a more diverse array of interlocutors (2007: 121). Similarly, Naomi Baron emphasizes that the new forms of screen reading practices allow an increased use of image alongside text (2015: 6). And, indeed, images that are not simply propaganda can be used to advance truth and freedom. Even still, the literacy loss is still a loss, and particularly for those not already adept at switching between different kinds of reading practices.

Benartzi offers a different explanation for the loss of reading comprehension than Mangen does: one that rightly pays attention not simply to the technological artifact, paper or screen, but rather to the co-constitution of human and screen. Perhaps, he speculates, it is neither the paper nor the screen that fully accounts for the differences in Mangen's study, but rather the habituation of the screen user to certain features of screen technology. We have become, in his hypothesis, habituated to read too quickly on screens, and with interruptions. This habituation bears consideration beyond Benartzi's discussion of the strategy of using difficult fonts in order to slow readers down.

Throughout his book, Benartzi rightly highlights what he calls our 'attention economy'. This is, on the one hand, a culture of speed. It is, on the other, a culture of interruption. In my own work, I have argued that multitasking and interruption are features built into screen technologies (2013: 35); Wellner argues that this is one of the potential costs of a multi-stable device (2016: 96); Daniel Keller argues that acceleration is a feature of contemporary reading habits (2014). In particular, the tabbed web browser, the series of apps running simultaneously, hyperlinks, images and pop-up technologies pull our on-screen attention in several directions, simultaneously. And this is just our on-screen attention. If we try to participate simultaneously in the non-screen world, as we often do, still other vectors are possible. Our devices can even compete with our other devices.

Benartzi cites some of the compelling empirical researches about the negative effects of cognitive load and multitasking on efficiency and comprehension (2015: 29). They replicate my own conclusions about internal time consciousness and its development in contemporary selves (2013: 15–47). Benartzi also connects these negative effects directly to manipulation. Caltech neuroeconomists can manipulate students into choosing snacks they don't like, simply by distracting them and then forcing a choice while they are distracted (Benartzi 2015: 29).

There is, I would like to suggest, more at stake than just snacks.

It would be easy, in light of the Mangen study (2013), to simply wish to return students to paper. Too easy, as it turns out. Doing so would miss the crucial insight that the change is not simply in the surface on which words are inscribed, not simply an issue of saliency, visibility, spatial placement or memory, or lighting. The change is in we readers ourselves.

As we are transformed by the speed and interruption of screen reading, we may well see the comprehension issues that began with screens migrate to paper, as features from the style of reading on screens are imported from the newer to the older surfaces. As Naomi Baron writes:

> It is one thing to observe shifts in the balance between reading modes. It's another to wager that the internet and tools we use for navigating it are redefining what it means to read. But that is precisely the possibility worrying a growing number of writers and researchers. (2015: 160)

The new 'reading' amounts to skimming for information, is easily distracted by a hyperlink, and includes an increased use of digital image alongside text. Baron focuses on the loss of comprehension of sophisticated literary texts, like Jane Austen. But her attention to the damages done to any linear text more than two pages long is also cause for worry about the comprehension of philosophy texts: perhaps, once the reading habitus has been transformed, even those philosophy texts that are still offered on a paper surface will have become inaccessible. Philosophy simply will not give up her treasures to those who have

been habituated to skim for information. Reading philosophy is neither scavenger hunt nor shoe shopping. Some of the abstract ideas philosophy tries to engage are actually compromised by the use of image, with all of its rich and binding secondary properties of objects and empirical detail.

And in a reading state conditioned by interruption, we are especially vulnerable to the final unfreedom: the unfreedom of naïve or false belief in image contents. Plato worried about the images on the cave's walls. His worries are obviously salient in the age of doctored photos and virtual reality. But to the inattentive reader of news and social media, even an undoctored photo can be misleading. Consider, for example, some 2017 season photos of some players on a football team from the United States called the 'Philadelphia Eagles'.

In the United States, a protest movement against lethal police violence against black persons called 'Black Lives Matter' began in 2013 (Khan-Cullors 2018). More recently, the issue reached the national stage when a player named Colin Kaperneck began kneeling during the US national anthem in 2016 in order to draw attention to lethal police violence against black persons, particularly when some other footballers followed him in the protest (Branch 2017).

In the autumn season of 2017, three white members of the Philadelphia Eagles football team, including Zach Ertz, were photographed while kneeling on the field (Boren 2018). The Ertz photos were put on the air in late 2018, after the White House visit of the championship team had been cancelled.

The segment in which the Ertz photos aired initially implied that the kneeling Eagles were part of the protest movement. But later the station had to issue an apology:

> During our report about President Trump canceling the Philadelphia Eagles' trip to the White House to celebrate their Super Bowl win, we showed unrelated footage of players kneeling in prayer,' Christopher Wallace, executive producer of 'Fox News @ Night with Shannon Bream,' said in a statement sent to The Post. 'To clarify, no members of the team knelt in protest during the national anthem through the regular or postseason last year. We apologize for the error. (Boren 2018: 1)

We could construct an argument, no doubt interesting, about the symbolism of the act of kneeling. We could discuss the players' intent, conscious and unconscious: let us hope it was driven by righteous protest of some kind rather than simply being intercessory with respect to the coming game. None of it matters for the purpose of this argument. The one relevant issue is that the images themselves told the tale, even before Wallace had to.

Mandatory nationalism has telltale visual signs, and none of them are on display in the photos. The stands in the background are empty. An array of people, including officials, are both walking and sitting in the background. Their bodies face angles random from one another and are very clearly not coordinated by any kind of collective action, including by a united opposition against a prescribed

collective action. Their attention is directed at an array of things: that is to say, nowhere in particular. The setting is clearly not that of the national anthem.

However, in order to see this, you must slow down enough to look at the image with care. This is not our cultural habitus in the current human–screen interface. A reader skimming rapidly through text and images is neither a critical reader nor a critical looker. One wonders if even the photo researchers at work for the television station noticed as they made their way down the checklist: right sport, right body position, right team, right year. That the images would be used deliberately to dupe an audience is a dizzying prospect; that they would be used accidentally might be scarier still. The naïve watcher not only watches: increasingly, he or she also constructs images for others to watch, and does so out of his or her own naïveté, confirmation bias, and speed.

Screens and Freedom

But there is another side to the screen as a technological artifact, and the human–screen hybrid as a functional symbiosis. Freire argues:

> The inhumanity of the oppressors and revolutionary humanism both make use of science. But science and technology at the service of the former are used to reduce the oppressed to the status of 'things'; at the service of the latter, they are used to promote humanization. (2007: 133)

As Freire is aware, it is not always easy to distinguish oppressive from revolutionary uses of technology. The screen makes this distinction especially difficult. How can the cell phone and tablet screen promote humanization? And how can they do so, particularly in light of the concerns raised in the previous section: concerns about manipulation and prescribed purposes, consumerism, reading comprehension, fractured attention and multitasking, speed and naïve or false belief in image, text, and image/text combinations?

Wellner makes some suggestions about how the cell phone and tablet screens promote humanization. Her concept of multi-stability ably counters the issues of manipulation, prescribed purposes, and consumerism. I may use my cell phone to choose shoes or snacks: I may also use it to connect with the Black Lives Matter political platform as it was written, and not just as it is portrayed in the traditional media, or to look up how to do something to avoid a consumer act, like make homemade toothpaste, yogurt, or laundry detergent. In fact, Wellner argues, in comparison with television and film, digital technologies are much less subject to domination and selection by a small elite group (2016: 125). She writes, 'Digital technologies … enable much greater control and selection by all participants' (ibid.). The political freedom described here is a democratic one.

A simplistic narrative of loss also does not capture the complexity of the changes to human literacy that the cell phone and tablet screen enable: indeed, its poignancy is risky, since the nostalgia for the paper surface may occlude recognition of the transformative and liberating changes in our literacy enabled by screens. Readers can be trained to reflect on different types of reading practices, and then to choose, mindfully, from among different types of reading depending on their purposes (Keller 2014; Carillo 2016).

In light of this suggestion, we can interpret the decision to assemble the paper materials for this chapter in a new light, less revanchist than deliberate. One might choose to assemble materials on paper for high-level cognitive work, or only to read novels famed for their beautiful language on paper surfaces. This would not stop someone from seeking a phone or tablet surface for other kinds of reading. The daily international news cannot be accessed, swiftly, in any other way. An authentic video recording of an activist thwarting a deportation or a police action makes a compelling accompaniment to a news story. Mindfulness about the difference between kinds of reading surfaces raises our consciousness about reading practices. That is to say, the new surfaces highlight the category of literacy itself.

Wellner also proposes that there may be a potential freedom in the suspensions of attention that are negatively characterized as distraction. She writes, 'I prefer the term attention over distraction, because distraction presupposes a given level of attention that can be divided, whereas I conceive attention as flexible, liquid, and dynamic' (2016: 89). Wellner elaborates a wall-window metaphor to describe the screen's functioning (2016: 87–103). The freedoms of the screen's dynamic attention economy include the ability to wall off the self from aspects of lived reality—a move that can itself be liberating when this reality is oppressive, not so different from opening a paper book. But the freedoms are not only that of the wall, but also of the window, and include the ability to open windows between distant realities, between realities of different kinds, and between interlocutors of different kinds.

The dynamic model of attention also allows us to move, not entirely into the world of the screen, but actively between virtual and non-virtual worlds. Wellner points out that augmented reality, in which a user suspends her or his attention between the screen world and the non-screen world, is not the same as virtual reality, in which a user is wholly absorbed by the screen (2016: 71). The positioning technologies of our cell phone screens, especially, are designed for augmented rather than virtual reality. In this way, our screens may actually drive us ever-more deeply into our physical surroundings rather than away from them.

Finally, because one characteristic of the cell phone screen is its mobility, Wellner points out that, with comparison to the user of film or television, the cell phone screen user is much more active, physically and spatially (2016: 148–155). Mobility advances freedom, a theme to which I will return in the conclusion.

To Wellner's suggestions, I might also add that the epistemological drive of the cell phone screen user is strong, even when it is misguided. The value of

curiosity is assumed, and even amplified, by the capacities of the devices and the humans who carry them. Curiosity, as Hans Blumenberg has argued, may be the key value of the progressive elements in the Enlightenment's dialectic (1985). If a leading value had to be chosen to define the human–screen interface, curiosity would be a likely candidate.

The issue of naïve or false belief in the words and images on our screens is among the most salient of our time. At its best, the repeated lesson about doctored reality could serve as an explicit mechanism for delivering the philosophical truth, important since Plato, that reality is not always easy to discern, even or perhaps especially in one's perceptions.

Still, we ought to be wary of the extreme scepticism that could result from a critique of the screen's unfreedoms, were these pursued exclusively. The message not to believe any of what you see or hear is terribly pernicious, and it is a possible outcome of such an extreme scepticism. Absolutely any kind of authority can step into the gap left by this outcome.

In a very humorous analogy about the effects of authority on the truth, Galileo writes:

> One day I was at the home of a very famous doctor in Venice, where many persons came on account of their studies, and others occasionally came out of curiosity to see some anatomical dissection performed by a man who was truly no less learned than he was a careful and expert anatomist. It happened on this day that he was investigating the source and origin of the nerves … The anatomist showed that the great trunk of nerves, leaving the brain and passing through the nape, extended on down the spine and then branched out through the whole body, and that only a single strand as fine as a thread arrived at the heart. Turning to a gentleman whom he knew to be a Peripatetic philosopher, and on whose account he had been exhibiting and demonstrating everything with unusual care, he asked this man whether he was at last satisfied and convinced that the nerves originated in the brain and not in the heart. The philosopher, after considering for a while, answered: 'You have made me see this matter so plainly and palpably that if Aristotle's text were not contrary to it, stating clearly that the nerves originate in the heart, I should be forced to admit it to be true.' (1989: 63)

Here, the very mobility of our screens into the world of lived reality, rather than away from it, may be a crucial part of their ability to advance our freedom. Whatever the screen may say, it can be compared with a non-screen world in which it is immersed, and directly so. Images found on the screen, like those of the footballers, can be re-scrutinized to see if they actually show what the text beside them claims. Doctored images can be compared with originals, or things similar to them. A doctored image can even come to have a certain recognizable look: the look of propaganda.

Let us hope that we can metabolize the comparisons with more acumen than the Peripatetic.

Conclusion: Screens in the Classroom

We learn from Paulo Freire that the revolution is pedagogical (2007: 136). The classroom is a designated forum for practising dialogical action. Rather than banish the screen from the classroom, I suggest that we invite the screen in, in order to see what its capabilities are, and also to reveal its limitations.

The classroom itself has also always been both wall and window. As a designated space or grouping of persons, it is walled off from other spaces of social interaction, whether it has physical walls or not. The actions in classrooms are elaborated according to special discursive rules. As a window, the classroom can cause us to learn about something we did not know about, or to take a critical view on our own reality. Both functions could be either amplified or cancelled by screen use.

Philosophy has always been a freedom project. At its best, the philosophy classroom amplifies our freedoms, both in its content and in its forms. An excellent use of the phone and tablet screen, within its confines, is to ask students to reflect on examples of the elementary fallacies that they find within their own social media accounts, and to share those examples with their peers. This can turn a rather stodgy exercise of learning some Latin names and stock examples—*ad hominem*, *ad populum*, *ad misericordiam*—into an intensively personal investigation of the fallacies, their limits, why they are convincing and their operation in constructing aspects of the learner's reality. The screen, with its mobility and its ability to house the quasi-faces of the learner's friends, makes the exercise possible. But it can only do this if it is invited into the classroom in a revolutionary way. The screen cannot function thus if it is simply dismissed or excluded, as it is in almost no other space.

When you ask contemporary students to exclude their phones from their learning experiences, you are asking them to leave their bodies, minds and memories behind. And, in the end, suspended attention is not simply a feature of the device; it has been built into the student. You can no more demand that students abandon their habits of split attention than you can compel them not to daydream during a lecture. As ever, attention cannot be forced: it must be earned. What a liberating classroom space could do is educate about both the powers and limits of suspended attention, leaving students and teachers alike more able to choose its distribution mindfully.

The dispersion of attention may itself be liberating. In a 1933 essay, Georges Bataille reminds us that the etymological essence of fascism is uniting, concentration (1985: 149). In contrast, our screens give us the mobility and division we may need to maintain democratic life. The screen stands at attention to no single authority, still less a united religious and military one. Its distractions are also subversions, and perhaps the very condition of emancipation.

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