

## PAYING ATTENTION TO ATTENTION

**The Poetics and Ethics of Attention in Contemporary British Narrative.** By Jean-Michel Ganteau. New York: Routledge, 2023. Pp. 191. ISBN 9781003362265.

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The latest monograph by Jean-Michel Ganteau is a valuable contribution to the critical discourse on twenty-first-century British literature. Having dedicated many years to researching contemporary British narratives, Ganteau in this book offers a new angle from which to look at them, and he does so by transforming the concept of attention into a critical and analytical tool. The author starts out from the common understanding of attention as the ability to notice something or someone and explores how this context can be used as a prism for studying a literary text. Attention is understood as the ability of a literary text to provide a singular experience of opening up to the reality of the Other. This book appears as a timely response to the shifting status of subjectivity in the new economy of attention caused by the changes in the media sphere. Applying an interdisciplinary approach, the author examines how the ethics of attention functions in contemporary British narratives, some of them authored by well-established writers.

The framework offered in *The Poetics and Aesthetics of Attention in Contemporary British Narrative* is rooted in ideas stemming from the political philosophy of late capitalism, ordinary language philosophy (OLP) and the ethics of vulnerability in literature. Building on Richard A. Lanham's observation of the contemporary subject's inundation with information and the consequent scarcity of "human attention needed to make sense of it all" (Lanham qtd. in Ganteau 3), Ganteau explores the notion of vulnerability inherent in the present-day experience within a capitalist framework. The author points out that an overabundance of information leads not only to a crisis of attention but also underscores the vulnerability of the contemporary subject, which is defined by an openness to otherness and a recognition of one's external dependencies. This premise sets the stage for Ganteau's exploration of attention as an ethical category within the realm of fiction. Drawing upon the redefinition of ethics proposed by OLP as attention to ordinary life and care for moral expressivity, the author embarks on a journey through contemporary British narratives to illustrate how fiction serves as a crucial platform for rendering the unseen and neglected reality visible.

The author positions fiction as not just a vehicle for storytelling but as a significant ethical and philosophical engagement with the world. This framework challenges the reader to engage more deeply with the text and invites a reconsideration of the prominent role of fiction in highlighting the overlooked aspects of human experience and the inherent vulnerability of living in a saturated information age. However true, the author's statement about the prominence of literature in attending and making the reader attend to the ordinary, nonetheless, does not provide any exact explanation of why this type of narrative art is given preference over other popular ones, such as cinema or video games. Ganteau is aware of this limitation, pointing out that although he views fiction as "allowing telepathic access to the consciousness of characters" and as such making possible the "sharing of perception and attention from singular, incarnated perceptions of characters, which favours the communication of intimacy and experience" (16), he does not see it as a prerogative of fiction only. At the same time, one might wonder if such exclusion of other narrative arts has a limiting effect on the theory of the ethics of attention. A closer look on how attention to the ordinary works in video games or cinema could be considered a valuable extension, opening more possibilities for this book to be further applied in various fields of humanities.

The author explores the multitude of ways in which contemporary British fiction brings the readers' attention to critical and complex issues of contemporaneity, such as social invisibilities, the intricate relationships between nature and humanity, humans and technology, and the representations of cognitive disabilities. The book covers a wide range of themes, dedicated a chapter each, which not only allows for a more thorough and nuanced examination of each theme but also reflects the author's recognition of the unique demands and considerations each subject entails.

Chapter 1, "Social Invisibilities," stands out among the others by paying particular attention to the ordinary realities of those whose visibility is more often than not hidden from the sight of the majority. Ganteau lists the various mechanisms through which the chosen texts shed light on the realities of immigrants and refugees (*The Other Hand*, 2008, by Chris Leaves), minorities (*Skin Lane*, 2007, by Neil Bartlette) and those who find themselves in the grip of social precarity and exclusion (*The Salt Path*, 2018, by Raynor Winn). All three aspects are many-faceted and deserve delicate examination, which the author brilliantly provides by using a wide range of resources on different aspects of biopolitics and linguistics, including Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Derrida.

Chapter 2, "Embedded Visibilities," enters into a vivid dialogue with the opening section by further extending the attention to the ordinary: it focuses not only on the realm of the unseen, but also, as one can infer from the chapter's title, on that of the visible. By doing so, it implies that the work of attention also includes "the

capacity to see what is in front of our eyes, waiting to be perceived, described and taken into account" (61). This chapter responds to the ever-growing anxiety about environmental issues and takes a posthuman turn in its investigation of the embedded and related subjectivity of the nature-human continuum, which gets particular attention in Sarah Hall's *Haweswater* (2002), Jon McGregor's *Reservoir 13* (2017) and Cynan Jones's *The Long Dry* (2006). The author carefully explores the mechanisms of attention presented in narratives, creating the so-called "poetics of inventory," referring to the particular means through which the complex network of interrelated subjectivities of humans and nonhuman others is described in the books.

The reimagining of the Anthropocene and the many ways in which humans are dependent on others also becomes prominent in Chapter 3, "Of (Wo)men and Machines," dedicated to the analyses of two "android novels," *Machines Like Me* (2019) by Ian McEwan and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021). The author examines the distinction between human and non-human attention, and the two novels seem to be a wise choice for analysis, as they provide two different views of the term: a systematic, automatic, and rigid mode of attention in *Machines Like Me* and a fluid, empathetic type of attention in *Klara and the Sun*. The chapter sheds light on the complexities and implications of human-machine interactions, blurring the lines between the organic and the artificial in the realm of consciousness.

Chapter 4, "Disabled Brains," continues to elaborate on the changing human subjectivity and its embeddedness, while exploring the significance of paying attention to the ordinary in narratives centred around disability. This part of the book relies on Wendy Mitchell's *Somebody I Used to Know* (2018) and Jon McGregor's *Lean Fall Stand* (2021) to showcase how cognitive disability can coexist with intense relationality and attention to others, making it possible for disabled subjects to produce their own accounts and live with their disabilities rather than merely suffering from them. The chapter emphasises the promotion of an ethical approach to the ordinary through a thorough consideration of the details of disabled individuals' everyday lives, fostering a humble vision of mundane activities and situations.

Jean-Michel Ganteau does an impressive job at maintaining the coherent, smooth structure of the book, which is in part achieved by excellent cross-referencing. The relevance of the work is further enforced by the possibility of placing it within the posthuman turn in humanities, allowing it to enter in a constructive dialogue with most recent and topical theoretical frameworks such as the ethics of alterity, affect theory and the ethics of vulnerability. In the meantime, one cannot but notice a certain lack of posthuman approach in Chapter 1, which becomes more visible as one progresses to read the other chapters, which rely heavily on posthuman terminology. This, however, does not prevent the author from achieving his main goal of staying focused on the ethics and poetics of attention in contemporary British

narratives. Ganteau concludes that attention is a fundamental aspect of narrative ethics, which includes an understanding of attention as a disposition, capacity and practice that opens up the subject to alterity.

One could feel that the work lacks a bit more critical approach to attention as the latter is viewed in strictly positive terms. However, the author's mention of *Refugee Tales* (2016), for example, in connection to *The Other Hand*, evokes other modes or types of attention, where it becomes akin to surveillance or xenophobia. Looking into the darker side of attention might contribute to a deeper understanding of the how and why of this term and add another element to the conceptualisation of attention by defining what it is not. The novelty and refreshing optimism of the *Poetics and Ethics of Attention in Contemporary British Narrative* makes it a worthy reading among recent critical works and a must-have for everyone interested in the most up-to-date trends in not only British fiction in particular, but also in the humanities in general.