

Andrew Epstein's
*Attention Equals Life: The Pursuit of the Everyday
in Contemporary Poetry and Culture (2016)*

Review

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Attention Equals Life has two related but distinct themes. Firstly, the way in which “profound anxiety about the fate of attention has become one of the defining issues of our time” (4). Secondly, the way in which this anxiety has sparked “a powerful craving for closer contact with the most taken-for-granted and familiar aspects of the quotidian, a desire for greater knowledge and more thorough documentation of our own daily lives” (4) in culture in general and in post-war American poetry in particular. Andrew Epstein examines the relationship between the contemporary “crisis of attention” and a concomitant “everyday hunger” through readings of the work of a varied set of poets linked together by reference to a broader social context and to “a parallel and far-flung tradition of intellectual and philosophical inquiry” (14). His survey of the latter is concise and comprehensive, while his framework allows for an effective perspective on the poets he looks at. Together, these two aspects provide ample evidence of the claim that the quotidian carries ethical and political implications.

This wide scope of the survey does however lead to a sense that the study raises more questions about its subject than it is prepared to answer. By his own admission, Epstein leaves several contradictions unresolved, most notably pertaining to the role of technology: “If new technological advances and digital media are to blame for making us feel estranged from the everyday, as we so often hear, why have they paradoxically also given us so many new ways to attend to and record the quotidian?” (34). Susan M. Schultz, in “Poetry as Attention”, is blunter: “Yes, to really look at our lives is to resist distraction [...] and yes, the everyday

really is intriguing, entertaining even. [...] But what really is the point?” Schultz makes distinctions that Epstein seems unwilling to among his subjects, noting that “while attention to detail and not to scaffolding may liberate us, just a tad, from the strictures that bind us, that attention can seem as drab as garbage”. As she argues, there is a difference between the focused investigation into the felt experience of racism in Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* (2014) and the unfiltered listing of every word spoken or action performed over a specific time-period by the poet in Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Soliloquy* (2001) and *Fidget* (2000).

Goldsmith’s conceptual projects anticipate, as Epstein points out, the “life-logging craze, wearable computing, and the ‘quantified self’ movement” (242). Evgeny Morozov concludes in his critique of these trends that the fundamental assumption at work is that the data gathered can reveal “some deeper inner truth about who we really are, what we really want, and where we really ought to be [...] a core and stable self – if only we get the technology right” (232). The “everyday-life project” form – a “predetermined, rule-bound procedure that seeks to compel a new kind of attentiveness to ordinary experience” (Epstein 229-230) – arguably follows this logic. By contrast, *Citizen* emphasises the way in which the quotidian, and the way in which it is experienced, exerts its own shaping effect on the individual, and on further acts of perception. This flux is reflected in Rankine’s use of inventive and varied forms and media.

As William James notes in a passage referenced by Epstein, attention consisting in “the taking possession of the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought” (381-382). Epstein also quotes James’s further argument on the significance of attention: “Only those items which I notice shape my mind – without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos” (403). The subject selects which object to attend, the mind taking an active role in determining perception and experience. At the same time, the object shapes the mind perceiving it. Epstein uses the term “sceptical realism” to describe the work of writers who “insist on the importance of attending to and presenting the real” while remaining “acutely aware that we have no access to an unmediated reality” (9). Such work is inherent opposed to the logic of the “quantified self” or “life-tracking” movements, which aim at a technologically-assisted insight into personal behaviour with the aim of perfecting the individual. In Epstein’s convincing account, however, both emerge from the same impulse.

Attention Equals Life is a significant contribution to the study of how this modern contradiction continues to play out in contemporary culture, and offers a clear way of talking about how a “redistribution of the sensible” might be

achieved through a recognition of the inherently mediated nature of perception. In seeking to situate its subject within the widest possible context, though, it offers a choice to the reader, between attending to what unites a disparate set of poets, and focusing on particular work and ideas to the exclusion of others.



WORKS CITED

- Epstein, Andrew. *Attention Equals Life: The Pursuit of the Everyday in Contemporary Poetry and Culture*. Oxford University Press, 2016.
- James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. Vol. 1, Harvard University Press, 1981.
- Morozov, Evgeny. *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism*. Public Affairs, 2014.
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