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.