

The Ethics of (In-)Attention in Contemporary Anglophone Narrative

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The Poetics, Ethics and Attentional Economies in Dave Eggers's *The Parade*

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Introduction

In his eighth novel, *The Parade*, Dave Eggers made an apparent stylistic turn that was openly reproofed by certain critics (Canfield; Evans; Lorentzen). In line with much of his earlier fictions and real-life actions, this short novel is concerned with the human costs of neoliberal economic practices for destitute communities around the globe. But while in his previous narratives, global sociopolitical injustices were situated in specific geopolitical contexts, the setting of *The Parade* is a road under construction in a loosely contemporary, unnamed Third-World country that has been devastated by a civil war. This spatio-temporal indeterminacy and the fact that no character in the novel has a proper name induce what Idra Novey describes as “a parable-like feel”¹ that, she laments, can “deplete some scenes of their vitality” (n.p.) and, in Benjamin Evan’s opinion, places *The Parade* “behind the times” (n.p.). However, despite the lack of specificity or of the overt metafictionality of Eggers’s previous work, *The Parade* seems rather convincing in its use of traditional realistic conventions in the handling of dialogues, attention to detail and linear progress, as well as in the management of tension, climax and epiphanic closure. The action, covering a mere fortnight, is narrated by an external narrator through the very narrow focus of one of the two engineers in charge of building the road, identified by the company under the temporary names of “Four” and “Nine.” The style is rather straightforward, with short sentences and sparse dialogues that build up emotion through contained sentimentalism.

The story starts by contrasting the opposite responses of the two operatives to the ethical demands of the precarious national population in terms of the opposite attentional models of denial and care. Their job is to pave the road that will connect the north and south of a country divided by internal conflict. The road has a strong symbolic meaning as a long wand meant to heal war wounds and signal the country’s economic recovery and promise of future progress, which makes both operatives proud of their

civilising work in the name of the company. Their movement along the road pulls the novel's narrative line forward, constructing both plot and road jointly and straightforwardly. Narrative tension is built on the very different personalities of the otherwise sparsely developed characters, exclusively defined by their different degrees of commitment to the company's strict working policy regarding "their willingness—or refusal—to see others" (Novey n.p.). This policy mostly consists of making absolutely no contact with the environment (including food, drink, and accommodation) or the local population (avoiding not just involvement in social or political issues, but also verbal communication and even eye-contact) during their mission. Thus, the experienced operative Four, through whose perspective the narration is focalised, relentlessly and even obsessively sticks to the company's policy of implementing its interests above anything else. Conversely, Nine, who is younger and on his first mission and whose task it is to facilitate Four's paving progress by foreseeing and solving any problems that may arise, is too easily distracted by the precarious social, cultural, and economic reality around the road. To him, the construction of the road is merely accessory to the local population's wellbeing. Tension builds up as the narrative vectors, pulling within/along and away from the road, intersect, bringing ethical and practical complications to the characters' mission as well as to the novel's stylistic profile in terms of attention management.

The practical complications of international intervention policies based on ethical principles aiming at the greater good (i.e. peace, economic prosperity and access to health services) are made evident by confronting the said ethical principles with Levinasian ethical practices arising out of individual encounters with natives. When the confrontation between ethical principles and practices takes place, attending to the former unflinchingly implies denying attention to the latter, and the other way round. In literary terms, this confrontation is paralleled by the readers' conflict between paying attention to form or to content: if readers attend to literary form, the novel's ethical impact would be diluted in favour of its aesthetic dimension, and the contrary would happen if they pay attention to the content. *The Parade* exploits the confrontation between these different attentional models to the benefit of plot tension and character construction, but also manages to make readers ethically accountable for the management of their attention, in some form of meta-attentional development.

The tension created by the two constructors' antagonistic positions between behaving according to the ethical demand for visibilisation of vulnerable individuals or giving preference to the neo-capitalist goal of economic profit in terms of the attention rendered to them has been the subject of academic discussion in the context of digital globalisation in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) (Fernández-Santiago and Gámez-Fernández

4–11). Since the advent of digital communication and the Internet, an increasing number of voices (Citton; Crary) have been weighing the relevance of the economy of attention currently ruling world production and trade in the information society. This relevance is already felt in the impact that the economy of attention is having on the contemporary subject, and possibly, I would like to suggest, on twenty-first century literature, as well as on the role of literary creation. Richard Lanham has underlined the relevance of rhetoric in an information-based economy whose problem is information superabundance rather than material goods scarcity. Since, in this economy, the commodity in short supply is attention, “the devices that regulate [the market of] attention are stylistic devices [and a]ttracting attention is what style is all about” (Lanham xi). Alice Bennett, for her part, argues that different types of readerly attention “have evolved symbiotically with the literature of their own time,” so that, while close reading famously developed to solve the opacity and depth of modernist literature, and while hypervigilant paranoid readings emerged alongside twentieth-century identity politics, current “surface reading” (Bennett 8) is affectively charged. Thus, the kind of “reading, which glances off textual surfaces and [moves] back to the readers’ own embodied experience of affective states, finds sympathetic echoes in contemporary writing which turns the reading experience out to include the readers’ own affective engagement” (8). According to Bennett, in the twenty-first century, fictions of attention are characterised by depicting “the complexities of character attention” (9). Therefore, they deploy narrative strategies meant to “orchestrate or influence readers’ attention [and channel] readers’ attention back to themselves” by underlying how attention is represented and orchestrated by narrative features (9). In a similar line, Lanham argues that, in today’s digital world, human survival depends more than ever on our capacity to move back and forth from the physical world and how we attend to it. He calls this capacity *oscillatio*² and finds in rhetorical figures (that is, in literary expression) the instrument for humans to create the new patterns of thought needed to thrive or just survive in a world ruled by the economics of attention (xiii). Lanham’s style/substance matrix draws a horizontal axis between reflexive and non-reflexive forms of communication that he refers to as *at* and *through* or *fluff* and *stuff* respectively (158), and which roughly match the referential and poetic communicative functions or the realistic and metafictional in literary style.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the exhaustion of postmodernist self-reflective artistic experimentalism and the subsequent challenge to convey an “honest” emotional connection between author and reader (Wallace 193) becomes only more problematic as our attentional judgement is continuously forced to oscillate between the realistic claims of alleged digital transparency and the ethical demands of the embodied

vulnerabilities that either result from or produce the economy of attention. The century itself was sadly inaugurated by the ethical questions posed by Judith Butler in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, on the world media's conflation of the real and the hyperreal around the 9/11 attacks. As she pressed on the ethical impact that the public visibilisation of human precarity had on world politics, the style/substance judgement required from twenty-first century audiences began to weigh in favour of substance in ways that trivialised style, while paradoxically making it more ethically accountable than in previous decades. Still, equating the self-conscious experimentalism of postmodernist literature and art to emotional detachment and inattentiveness to the ethically and socially substantial might have been a form of oversimplification by the detractors of the postmodern. In discussing the radical realism of everyday-life aesthetics in the past half century, Andrew Epstein has underlined the political urgency of this type of formal experimentalism, arguing that it "forces us to be more conscious of the connections between live daily experience in the 20th century and the oppressive economic and political conditions of our modern capitalist society" (16). As he argues, by pulling away from familiar conventional forms that put "emphasis on closure and epiphany" and making use instead of "symbols or metaphors to hitch daily details to transcendent meanings," experimentalism fosters keen "attentiveness to the actual, complex realities of everyday life" (18). By contrast, the serious (non-playful) purposefulness, limited length, or formal purity of literary modes conveying the illusion of an allegedly transparent realism may make us blind to the material realities we are immersed in.³

In a digital economy of information where value is created by human attention, the ceaseless demand for the latter that turns the plenty of big data into the scarcity of meaningful value is clearly not grounded on Levinasian ethics, but economic profit. Yet, digital information targets the emotional component that Adrian Wells and Gerald Matthews (11–12, 80) identify as a determining factor in the engagement of selective and sustained human attention and is central for our socialisation and psychological wellbeing. However, the pornographic exhibition (Han 21–28) of human and environmental precarity that digital communication broadens to a global scale makes the demand for human attention too high to allow for an affective and meaningful ethical response and may end up sensationalising emotion in order to increase the production of human attention.

The demand for human attention in the information economy of the twenty-first century is so high as to transform any available leisure time into labour time for the production of human attention.⁴ However, the leisure component of literary discourse associated to its fictionality and aesthetic dimension is also envisioned as a way of resisting the digital demand for

attention. Thus, the wandering type of attention that, Bennett argues, is intrinsic to literary discourse (13–24) can not only become a form of deep, mindful contemplation, but also of distraction from the capitalist demands of productive attention. Neurological findings relating play to pain reduction and pointing to distraction as a treatment for attention-based, pathological forms of anxiety (Jackson 264–265; Wells and Mathews 209) make of the playful extreme of Lanham’s style/substance matrix a sort of *phármakon* against the ethical and economic malaise caused by attention economics. Under this prism, sleep (Crary 128) and literature would be able to resist the economic and social pressure exerted by the economy of attention through the common recourse to the self-consciously non-real, non-transparent and non-serious that, paradoxically enough, would stand as a premise of ethical responsiveness.

In the light of this debate on the role of attention in current fiction and of fiction in the digital economy of attention, Eggers’s apparent move in *The Parade* from postmodern experimentalism to more realistic fictional forms to address geopolitical issues becomes somewhat debatable, thus begging for the analysis of the novel’s poetics, ethics and attentional apparatus. More concretely, the chapter explores how Eggers’s management of narrative economies of attention makes ethical demands on its readers in favour of global social justice in the civilised West. It also questions the apparent transparency of Eggers’s realistic style by claiming that the novel subtly but firmly demands a style/substance judgement from readers that aims at interrogating the ethical dimension and potential of formal experimentalism on the historical verge of its exhaustion, as well as the attentional consequences of depriving fiction of *oscillatio* in favour of weight in the ethical game.

Immersion in Surface Reading

Since the very beginning of his writing career, Eggers’s narratives have often blurred the boundaries between the fictional and the autobiographical. This is notably the case in *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, *You Shall Know Our Velocity!* and *What is the What*. But the allegorical experimentalism and obvious intertextual play with Orwell’s fiction in more recent works, such as *The Circle*, *The Captain and the Glory* and *The Every*, put forward Eggers’s use of the overtly metafictional to call attention to the pressing urgency of present-day socio-political concerns. In *The Circle* and *The Every*, special emphasis is put on exposing the threats that the digital economy of attention brings to a globalised society in the form of surveillance, ethically questionable utopianism, and totalitarianism, under the claim of safety and transparency. In this list of recent works, however, *The Parade* seems to be an exception.

As already stated, it presents two First-World company operatives as they build a road in a nameless and unidentified Third-World country. Both are instructed to implement the company's economy of deep, sustained attention to their task by suppressing all contact with the local population and surroundings. However, since the very beginning of the novel, Four and Nine are depicted as opposite not only in physical appearance, work experience and motivation, but most importantly as embodiments of antithetical models of attentional behaviour. While both are proudly committed to the improvements in economy and health that building the road will bring to the country's development and quality of life, Four's commitment to work ethics forces him to pay an exclusive attention almost verging on devotion to company protocol, whereas Nine prioritises his commitment to the immediate needs of the human beings that continuously interfere with his work.

Four's strict compliance with the company's rules—never abandoning the road, following schedule and meeting deadlines, attending to and operating the bulky machine that paves the road and refusing any kind of interaction with the natives or the natural environment—matches his neutral physical appearance, of which nothing is known beyond the fact that he wears a black jumpsuit that serves him as a uniform. Not only his identity, which is obscured for his own safety and the company's interests by travelling without passports on a private charter, but even his body are withheld from any interaction with the outside. He will only eat packed food and drink packed liquids, sleep in the company's tent by the road next to the paving machine, avoid eye contact and verbal exchanges with the local people, and even block his ears from outward noise by systematically listening to his playlist on his earphones. When Nine asks him about his personal life, Four simply lies to defend his privacy. Four's character is depicted in unison with the paving machine (also generically named by its model number, RS-80) as inhumanly mechanical and emotionally irresponsive, except for the irritation that Nine's unruly behaviour triggers in him.

By contrast, Nine's physical appearance is more personalised: he will only wear the lower half of his company jumpsuit, a white undershirt, and sandals, which, in Four's eyes, makes him look "like a tourist embarking on a day's excursion" (Eggers 2019a, 9). Four's impression of Nine's unruliness is reinforced by the latter's long hair, "dark eyes, cleft chin and wide mouth ringed with full, womanly lips" (3). All these traits point to the sensuality of this character in contrast with Four's machinic rationality. Although his real name, origin and history are as obscure as Four's, Nine's personality is open to others and his environment. He is typically smiling, conversing, discussing his emotions and impressions and is empathetic with the needs of others. Matching his personality, his body is also not

just open to but actively seeking interaction with others: he eats the forbidden local food, becomes friends with local men, and has sex with local women. To Four, Nine's behaviour and appearance are not only disgusting because he contravenes his own work ethics, but also mostly because they are potentially dangerous. The way he looks calls the people's attention, the way he eats is careless, gross, obscene:

Nine used his fingers to bring the gamey bones to his mouth for gnawing and washed the meat down with sun-colored juice. The company had advised against eating regional fruit in whole or liquid form, and strongly suggested that eggs or meat could contain *E. coli*, salmonella or ringworm. But Nine was devouring it all with abandon, his greasy hair groping his plate obscenely. [...] He was a liability.

(7)

The external narrator's single focalisation through Four's consciousness fuels dramatic tension by anticipating the conflict between the two extremes of Lanham's style/substance matrix. While Four's attention focuses on the purpose-orientated game position along the motive spectrum, Nine's focuses on the entertainment/pleasure-oriented play pole. Readers need to barely wait for two pages to learn that "in an instant he [Four] knew Nine was an agent of chaos" (5), an impression that will be proved right as the action unfolds when Nine puts himself in danger of death and Four risks his life, and the company's interests, to save him. The whole action is in fact constructed as a series of variations or expansions on the same minimal plot kernel: descriptions of Four following protocol to the detail—as he builds the road, tends to the machine, sets his tent, eats and takes all sorts of precautions—while ignoring or refusing to respond to all sorts of extraneous elements continuously assaulting him. At the end of each variation, Nine, who has been absent from the task due to some distraction, comes back to Four to report on his ramblings, which invariably contravene protocol in being increasingly perilous. Thus, although the building of the road and the plot develop linearly, Four and Nine remain locked in the same conflictual position between their respective attentional models, which makes them hesitate between remaining on the road and moving away from it, between the meaning of their task and the means to carry it out, while readers hesitate between the ethicality of each position and between paying attention to the formal dimension of the text and its content.

Although the narrative uses Four as the main focaliser, it also prevents readers from identifying with his attentional model and its corresponding work ethics because, while his attentional model is notably boring, his work ethics falls short of being empathetic and appears to be ethically

irresponsive to the needs of others. Typically, the novel abounds in passages paying attention to seemingly irrelevant details in Four's routines where action stops and virtually nothing happens in terms of plot development:

Four unzipped his tent door and ducked inside, removing his boots before entering. [...] He opened his pack and removed and unrolled his sleeping bag and inflated his pillow. He retrieved from his pack another, heavier, nylon roll. [...] He returned to the RS-80 and set the water tank to boil. He went to his tent, retrieved a half-liter cup and filled it with hot water from the vehicle. He poured a packet of freeze-dried beef into the cup, and stirred it with a spoon. As it cooled, he installed his earphones and pressed play.

(31–32)

The whole thoroughly descriptive passage takes about two pages of absolutely irrelevant tasks performed by Four with the most acute attention. By contrast, while paving the road, he will equally relentlessly avoid paying attention to people demanding it. Most of Chapter X, for instance, describes Four rejecting interaction with a nameless man over seven pages (81–87).

Conversely, Nine's enthusiastic engagement with the cultural and natural environment, his interaction with the local population and empathetic response to their precarious living conditions prompt readers to identify with his attention model. While it helps fuel the plot, his attentional behaviour paradoxically slows down—or rather hinders—the progress of the road construction. Contrary to Four's sustained and deep, executive attention, Nine's is superficial and mostly led either by individual orienting mechanisms towards the sensual (Jackson 243) or by joint orienting mechanisms towards the social (244), that seem to empathically respond to human vulnerability (185–213). Typically, Nine's exchanges with Four involve calling his attention to the local reality around the road (either its precarity or its exuberance) and prompting him to engage in it:

I assume you saw the cargo plane basically broken in half beside the road? [...] Can we at least eat outside? [...] Did you see any of the women? [...] You see how many businesses have already popped up? [...] Did you see the beauty shop?

(33–36)

Unlike Four's short, directive (mostly dismissive) statements, Nine's language is expressive and figurative, including poetic devices like repetitions, alliterations and similes that at times build into an insistent symbolism: "The road is a highway of life, don't you see? Like a mighty

tree. And all these homes and businesses opening alongside, they're like roots extending from the tree, digging in, drawing life from the tree" (38). While this is initially very appealing to readers in aesthetic and ethical terms, Nine's motivations are gradually revealed to be hedonistic, selfish and narcissistic, even when his attention to the local population is aimed at providing help and care. This is most evident in his interaction with local women, whom he sexually objectifies by projecting his desires on them, regardless of the damage that having sexual intercourse with him might bring them. As with local food, which he likes on account of its being "*intriguing*" rather than good (7; original emphasis), what he likes most about local women is that "there's an allure in the enigma" (35), to the extent that, at some point, he compares women to food in how cheap they both are in that country: "You know what she cost? [...] Less than what we're paying for breakfast. And she was fresher than this [food]" (7–8). Even while he is fully participating in their communal activities, Nine's motivations are less concerned with the good he can provide to the local population than with the attention and gratefulness he gets from them, which seems to give him a sense of ethical self-purposefulness and even of racial superiority:

My heart is full [...]. I don't know if I've ever felt so immediately and profoundly connected. They know me. They look at me, they see me, they acknowledge me in a way no one ever hears. At the same time, I know and they know that I am nothing but that I am listening. That I care. And so what we do here matters [...]. Don't you ever stop and feel good about any of this?

(37–38)

By the middle of the novel, as the self-interest in Nine's playful model of attention becomes more obvious, it starts preventing readers from identifying with him, prompting them instead to see him as the liability that Four felt he would be from their first encounter. Eventually, Nine's engagement with the locals makes him deadly sick, forcing not only Four, but also them to help him at their own peril. Deprived of the satellite telephone and medicines that Nine had secretly given to the local population, Four has to rely on the help of a man who needs the road to be finished as soon as possible so that his wife can go to a hospital in the capital (103, 120). Prompted by the need to help Nine, Four ends up engaging in close cooperation with the locals in acts of stealing and bribing, giving away the company's utilities and leaving the valuable SR-80 machine alone on the road. Thus, Four gets from locals the help and attention he previously refused to give them and becomes the person in charge of attending and responding to Nine's ethical demand. By contrast, Nine's attention to the

needs of the local population is likely to have a girl killed by her father for having had sex with the operative—an event that seems totally irrelevant for Nine as he celebrates his recovery from illness.

Critique of Fluffy Detail

Both the novel's shifting of its readers' ethical appreciation of each character's attention model and its turn from delving into static, irrelevant details or "small asides" (Kelly n.p.), to the description of hectic relevant action, hinge on a significant change in Four's attentional model during "the boy" episode in Chapter VIII (Eggers 2019a, 65–74). In this episode, the presence of a child in the middle of the road forces Four to get down from the paving machine and put him beside the road. Since the young stranger is left on his own in the middle of nowhere, at the end of that day's work, Four decides to break protocol and go back to check on his wellbeing. After finding the boy where he left him, he decides to take him to the closest village through a forest that turns out to be mined. As the warning sign only shows when Four is already in the mined field, tension peaks when he realises that they are both in deadly danger, and the episode ends up with their safe return to the road. This incident is not only relevant in that it marks the shift of Four's attentional behaviour, but also, and most importantly, in that it anticipates the complication and further development of the relation between empathic attention and ethical response in the second part of the novel. Interestingly, the interaction between Four and the strange boy is not triggered by any demand on Four's attention from the child, who would not respond to Four's questions in any other way than by occasionally casting a blank stare on him that is full of ethical significance and hails back to Levinas's definition of the face (Levinas 98).

It is the boy's radical vulnerability in the middle of the road, his bare feet and almost naked body, together with his tender age and his irresponsiveness to the impending threat of the bulky machine's progress and the volume of its alarm siren, but most significantly, his inscrutable face, that appear to have caused this change in Four. Not so much the boy's helplessness, but the sheer strangeness of his mute presence, his absolute refusal to demand attention, is what seems to cause the change in Four's attention model. To readers, this adds to the visualisation of the boy's fragile body in front of the massive RS-80 machine, as well as to his weightlessness in Four's hands and his trust in Four as he approaches him, thereby depicting one of the most emotional and intriguing moments of the novel, with its vaguely obscure symbolism. The boy's radical vulnerability does not only demand that Four (at)tends (to) him, but also confers a sentimental intensity to the passage that heightens the readers' attention to it. However, in technical terms, together with the tension raised by Four's

realisation that he is stepping through a minefield, the contained lyricism and heavy ethical load of this moment reaches the perfect balance between style and substance in Lanham's matrix. To Four, helping the child is a distraction from his task that he tries to envisage, all the way back to the boy, as something that was actually part of the company's protocol (Eggers 2019a, 69) and might even look good on the company (71). But at the climax of the passage, while Four is holding the boy in the midst of a mined forest, the narrative freezes momentarily to pay attention to how he "could smell the boy's salty skin and dusty hair" (71), or as he returns him to a safe spot, to notice "the boy's tiny feet, light as a newborn deer" (72). At this climactic moment, neither attention to style is defused by its high-emotional content, nor is emotion lessened by attention to style. Instead, the balance between them seems to reinforce the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of the episode as they balance each other.

Both Peter Boxall and Timothy W. Galow agree that Eggers's turn away from those "postmodernist orthodoxies" (Boxall 2013, 16) that would typically call the readers' attention to his own writing process, allows him to create a pared-down style and pay more attention to characters and events (Galow 2014, 99). However, *The Parade* complicates these assumptions. The fact that the characters are nameless and that the spatio-temporal setting is unspecific point to them as allegories of the global sociopolitical and economic present. Yet, by refusing to develop them in depth, Eggers is also calling the readers' attention to their obscurity—or, in Byung-Chul Han's terms, their "negativity" (2015, 1–8)—with respect not only to an attention economy that disregards the specificity of their embodiments, but also to the attentional irrelevance of the narrative itself. In this sense, *The Parade* would qualify as one of those contemporary fictions that, as Bennett argues, are characterised by problematising the limits of attention (Bennett 2018, 12). In *The Parade*, the balance between substance and style has a nested, fractal shape that relies on attention both as theme and narrative strategy. This fractal structure is based on the repetition of the same basic kernel (Four's attention to protocol details and denial of attention to human vulnerability, followed by Nine's inattention to protocol and attention to the locals, and their ensuing consequences) with variations increasing in relevance and plot tension.

Admittedly, the company's decision to use numbers instead of names to refer to its operatives is instrumental in limiting the readers' knowledge of their identities. From a narrative perspective, this is rendered plausible through focalisation. By focalising the action through Four's consciousness, the generalised lack of attention to persons and circumstances may be attributed to Four's commitment to the company's protocols, to his disregard for the needs of others as an operative hardened in previous missions, to impotence in the face of their uninhabitable vulnerability, or

to his duty to go back home safe. Thus, some characters like “Medallion” (Eggers 2019a, 90) are merely nicknamed by Four on account of some detail he perceives of them, rather than by their actual names. However, the novel’s focalisation through Four conditions its straightforward, neutral and contained style, which may distract readers from the fact that the heterodiegetic narrator is neither omniscient nor objective. Four’s emotional detachment from the people and setting around him is often conveyed either through his excessive attention to irrelevant detail (for example, his tiresome daily revision of the company’s utensils, as seen above) or to details the relevance of which he refuses to acknowledge:

“Check it out, Nine said, and pointed to the side of the road. [...] None of this was new. [...] The soda bottles full of diesel, lined up on the roadside and sold by shrunken grandmothers. The stray dogs and children holding babies. [...] The spent rifle shells. The teenagers wearing mirroring sunglasses and carrying unloaded AKs [...], the white trucks full of aid workers fretful or debauched.”

(11–12)

Similar details abound in the novel mostly aimed just to point to the contrast between the undeniable significance of the ethical demand they make and Four’s inattentiveness to them, as readers overlook the fact that if they can read about such details, it must necessarily be because Four sees them. As the novel unfolds and roadside distractions get increasingly pressing in demanding Four’s attention and care, it becomes ever more evident that Four is actively withholding his response by refusing to pay attention to them. However, the episode with the boy shows, through Four’s indirect internal monologue, that his refusal to pay attention and respond to the ethical demands of vulnerable others obeys an external—rather than internal—motivation, the authority of which he surrenders to despite his own conflicting personal inclinations. By surrendering his ethical freewill to a superior corporate authority, Four convinces himself that in some way beyond his reasoning capabilities, he is acting correctly for the greater good. Although Four is more humanised in his reasoning and affects at this point, readers might still condemn him for the cowardice behind his self-deceit. Even when he puts his own life at risk to save Nine, Four’s ethical motivation is mixed with compliance with the company’s interests as his attention is called from too many conflicting demands:

Four was alone with Nine, whom he now understood to be a dying man. [...] He had not cried since he was a boy and would not cry now. But the helplessness overtook him. He could not leave Nine, but if he

stayed, and Nine died here, what then? [...] The company would suffer grave damage to its reputation in the region and around the world.

(129)

Following plot complications that are plausibly resolved, Four manages to save Nine's life and build a perfect road within the deadline without having to stain his company's records with a call for assistance. Contrary to David Canfield's opinion that "*The Parade* declines to complicate their [initial] snap judgments" (n.p.), the novel's denouement redeems Four from the readers' condemnation of unethically, making them reassess their initial view of Nine's narcissistic hypocrisy, while paradoxically leaving them "no more certain about the ethical imperatives behind the narrative" (Kelly n.p.). As the novel seems to head towards an all-is-well-that-ends-well resolution, readers are abruptly forced to confront a *deus ex machina* that breaks all their expectations not only thematically but also formally. With the road finished and ready for the parade of irrelevant characters made relevant as they swarm along it to walk towards the capital that will bring them redemption from civil war and precarity, a military convoy sets fire on them. The novel thus provides a closure that, as Sophie M. Dess did not fail to notice, opens to complex ethical and aesthetic reflections as well as to their interconnectedness (n.p.).

Singularly attentive readers might agree with Dess's interpretive key, as they find an intentionally obscure intertextual reference. All through the novel, Four's most unvarying distraction from the ethical demands that strive to divert him from his task is having recourse to his earphones. Episode after episode, Four relentlessly blocks his attention to setting, characters and conversation by plugging his earphones into his ears. On page 48 readers learn that he does this to calm down and therefore assume that the music he listens to has a soothing effect that helps him concentrate on attending to his duties. Only seven pages from the novel's epiphanic ending, however, Nine's attention is drawn to Four's earphones and for the first time in the novel, Four opens himself to his workmate and allows him to listen to his recording. To Nine's and the readers' surprise, the recording

[s]ounds like a kitchen [...]. Plates and silverware being set. [...] A child's voice. [...] Now a quick wet clinking [...] I'm thinking eggs being whisked in a bowl? [...] Now someone's humming. [...] Wow. A loud banging. What is that? Sounds like a woodpecker. [...] Now eggs are simmering [...]. Now a sound like chopping. Someone's chopping something. [...] Hm. Just sounds of silverware. Tinkling. How long does this tape go on?

(Eggers 2019a, 170–172)

Although *Four* does not answer the question, at the end of Chapter XXI, the answer, to the attentive reader, is 1'33", an intertextual reference to John Cage's "27 Sounds Manufactured in a Kitchen" (1983) playing the soundscape of twenty seven sounds generated by kitchen items and actions, together with Cage's comments on the macrobiotic menu he is cooking. Like Cage's piece, Egger's passage consists of Nine's comments, with a roughly average reading time of 1'33" each. While, to a reader distracted by "catch in the throat [...] sentimentality" (Kelly n.p.) and plot development, this intertextual reference may pass unnoticed, less sentimentally biased attentive readers are left to wonder on the aesthetic and ethical implications of this intertextual reference, as *Four's* interest in Cage's experimental music contradicts the assumption that his apparent intentional distraction from conflicting ethical demands must be reassessed in terms of attention to his family's request that he provide for them and survive the mission. Yves Citton has argued that by exercising our capacity "to establish vacuoles of silence capable of protecting us from the incessant communication that overloads us with crushing information," aesthetic experiences can "provide both a scale model and a full-size trial" for critical reflection about how we navigate the switches between attentional hyper- and hypo-focusing (19). With Citton's words in mind, it is easy to see that the whole of Cage's experimental reassessment of background noise as meaningful music becomes a metacritical reassessment of the novel's form and content—including the question regarding the ethical irrelevance of self-conscious formal experimentation against the poetic, transcendental and ethical potential of everyday-life art (Epstein 1)—to bring the invisible irrelevance of precarity to a representative foreground. By so doing, the novel calls its readers' attention to the invisible or inaudible, or rather the visible and audible that we generally disregard, thereby renewing our perception and privileging what Citton has theorised as an "ecology of attention" (2017). To attentive readers, the intertextual reference to Cage's experiment also unleashes a reassessment of *Four* and *Nine* as intertextual references to the *Number Pieces*⁵ that Cage composed during the last six years of his life.

Egger's text forces readers to be attentive to the two extremes of Lanham's style/substance matrix. On the one hand, it discloses *Four's* most intimate concerns over the fragility of his everyday life against the brutal precarity he is exposed to in his work. On the other, this fragility is conveyed by exposing the novel's textual fragility in terms of suspension of disbelief in favour of self-conscious metafiction. *The Parade* thus demands that it is reassessed following Lanham's argument that rhetoric is what allows human beings to survive in the current economics of attention by training readers to oscillate between their participation in the physical world and how they attend to it while keeping both in their minds at once

(xii–xiii). In this light, what might initially seem to be a stylistic and ethical turn away from postmodernist self-conscious experimentalism and into new forms of realism meant to make present-day sociopolitical concerns visible becomes a call of attention to the ways in which literary forms may engage readers in a self-conscious, accountable experience of the everyday within the global economy of attention. As a fiction of attention that induces its readers' awareness to how attention is represented and orchestrated by narrative features (Bennett 9), this novel would operate as a sort of therapy alongside the Self-Regulatory Executive Function (S-REF) model for emotional disorder (Wells and Matthews)—ranging from experimentalist ironic detachment to realistic sentimentalism—by prompting readers to oscillate between style and substance. Adrian Wells and Gerald Matthews propound as part of S-REF therapy—which aims to improve brain plasticity to control processes of selection and concentration in attention (xv)—to combine detached mindfulness with the refraining from excessive verbal processing (xxvi).

“In the digital era,” Maggie Jackson argues, “our beguiling technologies increasingly work to undermine our focus” (15) and the human capacity for care that so much depends on it (17). While simplistic formats advance uninformative and often misleading representations that discourage creativity or argumentation (28–29), the intellectual fragmentation and sensory detachment promoted by distraction nurture a culture of social diffusion (21). In line with this argument, *The Parade* orchestrates oscillation, or, in Kelly's words, “a delicate balance” (n.p.), between realism and experimentation and the divergent substances of plot and detail as strategies for training its readers' self-regulatory control in the digital economy of attention. It does so by arranging plot and character, action and detail, transparency and obscurity, simplicity and complexity, realistic suspension of disbelief and self-conscious experimentalism within an attentional fractal structure of kernel repetition and variation that reconfigures all previous passages and forces their continuous reassessment as well as the reassessment of the role of attention in contemporary fiction. As these reassessments are conducted, opposites change places depending on narrative strategies managing readerly attention and distraction.

At the very end of the novel, while Four's plane takes off, taking him back home, his eyes happily welling over “how simple it could be, cause and effect in a place like this” (Eggers 2019a, 178–179), the operative's sentimental musings are abruptly interrupted by a passenger calling his attention to the silent miniature massacre taking place below. The climactic all-is-well-that-ends-well logic that could have presided over the end of the novel is thus thwarted by Four's equally climactic anagnorisis of his involvement in, as well as his detachment from the massacre. Although the passage is painfully ironic, Four's detachment

is not ironic at all, while the readers' still might be. Together, dramatic irony and ironic detachment leave readers wondering about the ethical accountability of aesthetics as well as the aesthetic dimension of ethics in a fiction ruled by the economy of attention. Such an act of wondering is, however, a form of self-reflection not only for readers, but also for Eggers himself as a human-rights activist and fiction writer in the globalised, digital world.

Conclusion

To those who, like David Canfield, might wonder who this novel is for, on account of its “embrace of the saccharine [...] crocodile tears,” its “attention to [...] detail, utterly lacking in soul,” the heavy-handedness of its characters, or its poor management of “momentum or excitement” (n.p), this chapter’s concluding answer is: the attentive readers in the age of distraction. Conversely, the distracted readers of fictions of attention risk missing the thematic and formal depths behind its contained style as well as its balanced complications between ethics and aesthetics. Being such attentive readers is, however, particularly difficult in the current digital economy of attention because it requires a self-conscious oscillation of the limited resource of human attention between the vast ethical demands made by a global other and the aesthetic aspects regulating the attention market. Eggers has pointed to the sense of guilt and powerlessness that, as a writer and a human-rights activist, he himself experiences, confronted as he is with the impossibility to attend to the “overwhelming deluge of stimuli that we are supposed to respond to” (Bex and Craps 549) in a way exclusive of silence or seeming indifference. Perhaps for this reason, Eggers, in this novel, has recourse to attentive revision as a compositional and readerly strategy to balance the readers’ views on the text as part of such struggle.

As the analysis has attempted to show, *The Parade* leads readers to continuously reassess their views on its ethics and aesthetics and to ponder on the structural complicities and conflicts existing between the ethics and aesthetics of narrative fictions as forms of attention and distraction. This metacognitive device works as a fractal juncture, each revision operating a variation that leads readers to consider the ever-increasing complexity and relevance of human attention in the globalised digital economy of information society. In order to do so, though, the text and its author must be vulnerable to accusations oscillating between sentimentalism and demands for ethical accountability, boring stylistic and compositional simplicity or opportunistic stylistic flourish, aesthetic distractedness and exploitation of ethical responses to vulnerability. The novel thus calls its readers’ attention to the different readerly responses elicited by different forms of

textual arrangements, as much as it problematises authorial accountability for the ethical impact of aesthetic choices in the current digital economy of attention.

Notes

- 1 Also to be found in Eggers's more historically specific *The Captain and The Glory*.
- 2 According to Lanham, the poetic mind is more suited to deal with the economics of attention than the scientific mind in making style/substance judgements that require oscillating between the important and the peripheral, the planned and the spontaneous, the natural and the mannered, appearance and reality, inside and outside, why and how, or manner versus matter (157). Yves Citton also uses the term "oscillation" to describe the back-and-forth attentional movement between "immersion" or "absorption in the represented attention" and "critique" or the practice of "keeping one foot in the real situation from which we consider [the] attention" that readers engage in when facing a literary text (163).
- 3 In line with this argument, Byung-Chul Han argues that, in the age of information, digital transparency is threatening intimate, meaningful human encounters, including not just individual emotional and ethical responsiveness to others, but even political democracy and social activism, as its realist rhetoric unbalances human attention towards the substance, rather than the style.
- 4 To counter the pervasiveness of digital attention-seeking demands, Jonathan Crary has identified sleep not only as the last biological limit of attentional capitalism, but also as the only remaining human resource to pursue a "more just and egalitarian future" (128). Like sleep, literary discourse has been pointed as an instrument to escape from and solve the digital demand for attention, on account of its capacity to train sustained and focused forms of attention that render the fragmentariness of digital attention as distraction (Dewan 33–34).
- 5 Cage composed six "Four" number pieces between 1989 and 1992. Significantly, there is no number "Nine" piece in Cage's *Number Pieces*, which metaleptically advances Nine's death at the end of the novel, while Nine's death in the novel intertextually explains that there is no number piece "Nine" in Cage's *Number Pieces*.

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