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Collapsonaut Attention

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What is "collapsonaut attention", and how can we learn some basic gestures from it today? This article attempts to sketch out some answers to these two questions, which alone would deserve a book. Its function is therefore, unfortunately, more programmatic than empirical. It will have fulfilled its modest ambition if it makes others want to take a more serious look at the problems whose surface it barely scratches[1].

Collapsological discourse and collapsonaut attitudes

For the past ten years or so, in the French-speaking world, "collapsology" has been building knowledge and proposing discourses aimed at making us collectively attentive to the risks of systemic collapse that threaten the modes of production, consumption, and protection put in place by the industrialized societies that have progressively conquered planet Earth since the mid-19th century (Servigne & Stevens 2015). In its most synthetic definition, proposed by Yves Cochet, former French Minister of the Environment, collapse refers to "the process at the end of which basic needs (water, food, housing, clothing, energy, etc.) are no longer provided to a majority of the population by services regulated by law" (Cochet 2011). In the Anglo-Saxon world, a best-seller by Jared Diamond (2005) and a film by Chris Smith devoted to the whistleblower Michael Ruppert (2009), both entitled *Collapse*, popularized and updated a discovery that was regularly hammered home throughout the 20th century. Following the First World War, Paul Valéry announced in 1919 that "we, civilizations, now know that we are mortal" (Valéry 1919, 988). Following the invention of the atomic bomb, the intellectual world of the 1940s and 1950s was profoundly shaken by the threat of the next nuclear apocalypse. In 1972, the Meadows report published for the Club of Rome, under the title *Limits to Growth*, announced an inversion of the exponential curves that seem to push our consumption of energy and resources higher and higher, only to hit a ceiling (climatic and biological) that condemns us to undergo their more or less brutal inversion, in a rapid descent synonymous with collapse.

In the book *Générations collapsonautes*, Jacopo Rasmi and I attempted to reframe the perspective usually assigned to collapsology. By swapping the discourses of knowledge (practiced by collapso-*logists*) for the analogy of navigation (practiced by collapso-*nauts*), we

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invite our readers to move from the threat of a future collapse to the observation of multiple breakdowns already in progress (sometimes for a long time), and from a centering on the protected comfort of Western luxury to an opening to the precariousness imposed and suffered in the four corners of the planet in consequence of colonization.

Yet navigating in times of collapse requires a certain range of attentive postures which I would like briefly to survey and review here. This implies, first of all, identifying what, within the attentional registers privileged by the colonizing West, may have caused the sociocides and ecocides currently in progress. It then implies asking ourselves what alternatives can be favored to alter this course and redirect our decolonized and decolonizing attentions to other, less (self-)destructive, perspectives.

Attentional Extractivism

Among the competing terms used to describe our historical era, "Anthropocene" refers to the responsibility of humanity as a species for the ongoing plunder, which cheaply exonerates the populations of European origin that have imposed (through violence) on the rest of the planet the exploitative regimes from which they have been (and continue to be) the main beneficiaries. "Capitalocene" points more specifically to the responsibility of a certain regime of exploitation, exonerating in turn the environmental destruction committed during the 20th century in (Soviet, Maoist) societies that presented themselves as alternatives to capitalism. The most appropriate term might therefore be "Plantationocene", which situates the root of the current ecocide in the extractivist behaviors on which the European colonization of the world was based (in the USSR as well as in the USA) (Bonneuil & Fressoz 2017; Tsing 2017; Ferdinand 2019).

Slave sugar cane plantations, like today's agro-industrial plantations, share a certain number of defining features of extractivism: 1° they reduce a complex living environment to a single resource, exploited in the form of monoculture; 2° they deplete the biodiversity of the territory in order to extract this resource in the most profitable way (in financial terms); 3° they operate this exploitation without respecting the renewal rate of the resource in question (which is quickly exhausted); 4° they are not able to exploit the resource in a sustainable manner in the long run.

Such a definition of the extractivist attitude makes it surprisingly homomorphic with the dominant conceptions of attention that have developed over the last two centuries in our Western countries. Let us revisit these four defining features with attention in mind:

1° What does it mean "to be attentive", as is generally repeated after William James, if not to concentrate our mental capacities on the observation of an object, or on the resolution of a problem, duly extracted from complex and very diverse sensory environments, where potential stimuli that constantly threaten us with dispersion and distraction are overabundant.

2° Attention allows us to focus our intellectual faculties in order to make the most profitable use of an informational resource present in our environment, whether to avoid a danger or to take advantage of an opportunity.

3° We feel no obligation to "give back" anything to the living environments from which we derive information, nor do we feel responsible for ensuring their sustainability. All information is good to take as long as it can be useful to us—the very idea of "owing" something to what we draw information from seeming ridiculous or preposterous.

4° Our standard attention is therefore conceived according to a perfectly self-centered economic rationality, not only short-sighted, but properly "dromophile" (intrinsically inclined to maximize speed): having only limited attentional resources, I must invest them as sparingly as possible in objects that promise me the best return on investment. As a consequence, I constantly scan my visual, auditory and olfactory fields so as to spot as quickly as possible what I need to dodge as dangers, and so as to extract from these fields every potential benefits.

Conclusion: the extractivist attitude—which we increasingly see as causing the collapse of our living environments—not only governs the financial logics structuring economic growth oriented towards capital accumulation. It also governs the very way our attention "treats" the sensory environments in which we evolve. The French language clearly reveals this homomorphy between colonial extractivism and attentional extractivism insofar as it offers the same word (*traiter*) to designate these three (seemingly unrelated) operations: the cognitive procedures by which a system "processes" information (*le traitement de l'information*), the manual (and now mechanized) procedures by which a cow is "milked" (*la traite des vaches*), and the historical processes by which certain African populations were "enslaved" to enrich Europe through a cruel and criminal triangular trade (*la traite esclavagiste*).

Religious respect for backgrounds

Is human attention intrinsically extractivist? Do our ways of processing information want us to enslave and milk the world to its last drop? Certain anthropological speculations and certain discourses emanating from the neurosciences seem to push us in this direction. Once people have moved out of the hunter-gatherer lifestyle, the Neolithic revolution in agriculture, and then the industrial revolution in mass consumerism were bound to cause imbalances tending to collapse (Scott 2017). The cause of this could be found in the reward system regulating our individual brains, which are prone to get carried away by the short-lived effect of dopamine jaculations (Lachaux 2011; Bohler 2019).

Without wanting to exclude a priori such causalities, we can explore a different path by looking for non-extractivist attentional regimes, observable within our current empirical behaviors. This leads us to hope that historical and social causalities play a determining role in what leads a population to give precedence to an extractivist regime that tends to ransack its environment. Rather than a superior fatality or a neuronal curse, attentional extractivism should then be considered as one—among others—of the multiple attentional regimes that individuals can adopt and that societies can favor. Our current breakdowns would then result from the global hegemony of certain societies and cultures, whose structure would particularly value extractivist attention within their population. These hegemonic populations can be called "omnivores" by Ramachandra Guha (2006, 233 sq.), in contrast to "ecosystemic peoples" and "climate refugees", or they can be called (Westernized) "Humans" in contrast to "Earthbounds" in the new "Gaia wars" (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro 2016) and in the "New Climatic Regime" (Latour 2018).

As examples of non-extractivist modes of attending, we can point to at least two attentional regimes with which we—omnivorous humans—are already familiar, since they have long offered internal alternatives to extractivist attention. I will turn to the philosopher

Gilbert Simondon, the thinker of individuation and technical mediations, to describe these two attentional regimes that can correct some of the dangers of the extractivist attitude: one is located within a certain form of aesthetic sensitivity, while the other is to be found in a certain form of religious respect.

In the light of Simondon's theses, we can characterize the technosciences as operating a work of extraction of figures (patterns, figures, models) located and isolated within the perceptive background that constitutes our living environments. Where a non-equipped observer will see a swollen leg, more or less hairy and covered with scars, an expert trained by years of medical studies will see a case of thrombosis, and will use measuring devices to track down the evolution or displacement of the blood clot obstructing the vein. The quantitative figures provided by these devices will help the physician to "figure out" what is happening, they will allow precise dosing of the anticoagulant medication, thus helping to act preventively to avoid pulmonary embolism. Such a clinical view illustrates what is most valuable in extractivist attention: by processing sensory data as quickly, as precisely and as relevantly as possible, the doctor saves the life of her patients. If she had undertaken to meticulously count the visible hairs on the swollen leg, or if she had asked the patient to come and see her every morning for an hour to tell her about her dreams or early childhood memories, the blood clot not identified as an imminent danger could have been fatal.

If this focus of expert attention on a few very precisely identified figures (often with the help of technical devices) saves lives, it does, however, have a cost, which generally remains hidden: the figure extracted from the situation in order to give us the means to respond to it relevantly in emergency situations risks dazzling us to the point of making us forget the presence of the background from which it was extracted. Any figure appears to our perception only by detaching itself from a background, which it tends to make invisible. The very suggestive thesis proposed by Gilbert Simondon in the last part of his book about *The Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* (1958) is that religion and aesthetics have the anthropological function of reclaiming this background that has been obscured and obfuscated by the figures that have been extracted from it by means of the technosciences.

What do monotheistic religions call "God"—if not that which remains beyond the objects, calculations, measurements and punctual causalities through which our knowledge allows us to act upon our world? Where does the divine lie—if not in the persistence of certain background effects? In the background of a blood clot stuck in the vein of a leg (with the risk of hindering the functioning of the lungs), there is a whole life, with its dreams, its childhood memories, its beliefs, its values. We know that one of the major problems of our highly specialized scientific medicine is to erect each sick limb as a pathological tree that hides the forest of the patient's general state of health. We can give certain forms of religion (*religio*) credit for "linking" (*ligare*) the specific figures that guide our daily activities to a background that is far too vast and complex to be known as such, but whose existence and importance it would nevertheless be demented (and fatal) to neglect or deny—extractivism being the appropriate name for this neglect and for this denial.

By taking up (and reversing) the Spinozist equation of *Deus sive natura*, one can conceive of ecological sensibility as a religious attention to a Nature respected as a God—that is, as an invaluable background, whose importance and value will always far exceed the sum of the (profitable) figures recognized in it. Such "respect" is to be understood in its

etymological resonance (*re-spectare*): it urges us to "look twice" before undertaking something which, on the basis of certain figures extracted from the situation, could lead to irreversibly altering its background. We would remain close to Spinoza—whose motto displayed the imperative *Caute!* ("Be careful! Watch Out!")—by considering the "principle of precaution" as a current avatar of this religious respect for a background that tends to disappear behind the figures that obsess us: respect for nature, for the environment, for the milieu of life that our extractivism is currently collapsing under our feet.

Precaution and religious respect are intimately linked to attention, i.e., to attending as a practice of care. Here too, beyond or below what we can extract from a situation for our own benefit, something demands from us to look twice at what connects us to other sentient beings within a certain situation. We can refer here to Natalie Depraz's (2014) beautiful phenomenological analyses of the attentional gesture as a gesture of suspension of our spontaneous reactions of appropriation. We are truly attentive to what is facing us only if we take the time to see how it is more than what we usually reduce it to for our benefit. We cannot be truly attentive (*attentif* in French) without being considerate (*attentionné*) at the same time.

Aesthetic attention to textures

Gilbert Simondon pointed out another way to reconnect us to the backgrounds that our techno-scientific figures obfuscate—the way of aesthetic experience. In extracting the figure of a thrombosis from the inspection of the swollen leg, the doctor's attention had to leave the patient's opinions and values in the background, but she also had to neglect a whole series of sensitive characteristics presented by this singular leg (for example, its degree of hairiness). The figures blind us not only to the living backgrounds from which they stand out, but also to the sensorial textures that carry them—textures that always give more to observe than what we notice in them.

Jean-Marie Schaeffer (2015) has precisely analyzed what distinguishes "aesthetic attention" from "standard (extractivist) attention". The latter, as we have seen above, tries to process as much information as possible, as quickly and economically as possible, investing just enough mental effort in it necessary to recognize dangers to be avoided and opportunities for profit to be seized. It therefore engages in an intense and incessant work of categorization, which our needs for survival and our ambitions for prosperity tend constantly to optimize. While walking down the street, checking my e-mails, surfing the internet, I classify all the thousands of stimuli that come my way every minute into the categories through which I have learned to make sense of my environment.

What happens, on the contrary, when I wander through an art gallery? Certainly, I continue to categorize the surrounding objects into dangers (a pillar against which I could break my nose) and opportunities (works that I have come to see in order to gain an aesthetic experience, or to make a selfie to send to my friends). Vast sections of modern and contemporary art have taken pains to destabilize these classifications, for instance by taking a urinal out of the bathroom to put it in the exhibition room. In relation to what I identify as works of art, however, my attention is no longer limited to classifying images according to pre-defined categories: the museum experience is not reduced to "recognizing" a tree, a Virgin Mary, an urban landscape in a painting. Rather, once the tree, the face or the landscape

has been recognized, the aesthetic experience consists of investing in the work of art a surplus of attention that will allow us to notice, in what the artist proposes, something other, something more than what is recognized as a pre-defined figure.

Jean-Marie Schaeffer speaks of "delayed categorization" to account for this aesthetic experience: the attentional regime specific to it consists in delaying the gesture of categorization that standard attention constantly projects onto our environment. Such a delay allows the emergence of other characteristics, generally invisible to our (necessary) classifying haste. Yes, I do recognize an angry human face in this painting. But what else is there to see in the sensory data presented to me? Among these other possible things to be seen, deeper attention can allow me to notice a minor detail that can hardly be seen in the background, or a strange spot on the lip, the absence of irises in the eyes, the thickness of the paint, the choice to exhibit this painting next to another—all things which can lead me to see and think differently about what faces are, about what they do, about anger, about humans, about societies.

This momentary suspension of categorization opens up the possibility of revising our categories, challenging them, refining them, and bringing out the unexpected. From this point of view, we can consider the aesthetic experience as a "meta-extractivist" practice: by preventing me from extracting from my sensory data information pre-formatted by my pre-existing categories of recognition, this type of experience allows me to extract not only specific information about my environment, but other informational categories that will make me better able to grasp the richness and complexities of this environment. This delay and this reflexive (meta) position of retreat are then only a detour to make extractivism less brutal, less coarse, and perhaps less (self-)destructive—which is already very valuable.

But certain types of aesthetic attention can also give us a glimpse of a more radical alternative to extractivism. In a seminal opening chapter of their book *Thought in the Act*, Erin Manning and Brian Massumi (2014) attempt to understand how the attention of people categorized as "autistic" differs from what we consider to be standard attention. Their reflection leads them to contrast two perceptual modalities. On the one hand, the dominant "neurotypical" (extractivist) attitude has socially formatted us to categorize everything around us into pragmatic categories that allow us to have an active grip on the different elements of our environment in order to make the most of it. On the other hand, certain "neurodiverse" (non-extractivist) attitudes, illustrated by autism, would not be oriented towards the potential actions permitted or called for within our environment. Instead, they would explore the intrinsic richness of the textures offered by this environment.

In this second case, it is no longer a question of extracting from the experience something useful for subsequent actions. It becomes a question of immersing oneself in the present experience itself. This form of immersion is not, of course, reserved for those whom we stigmatize as "autistic": it also characterizes a large part of our musical listening, for instance. The intuition is that we can hope to find in the taste we are developing for immersing ourselves in the enjoyment of certain textures a powerful and radical alternative to the reign of extractivism.

Resources, affordances, invites

A key-concept taken from the psychologist James J. Gibson can serve as a pivot for a reflection contrasting neurotypical and neurodiverse attentions—the concept of affordance. A detail of translation will allow me to underline its important implications. The English language uses the verb *to afford* in an economic sense, which indicates the ability to make a certain expenditure to purchase a certain good or a certain service. The word *affordance*, on the other hand, refers to the possibility offered by a certain feature of our environment to be seized upon by a certain intentional action. Typically, the handle of a cup is designed and constructed to allow a human hand to grasp it easily and firmly. Similarly, a water-soaked wicker branch allows a basket weaver to bend it into a strong and durable basket, whereas a sunflower or bamboo stem would lack the necessary flexibility or durability to be manipulated and exploited in the same manner.

Erin Manning and Brian Massumi characterize neurotypical attention by saying that it drives us to reduce our environment to a sum of affordances. I don't see a cup (rich with its own textures), but only something to grab to quench my thirst. I don't see plants (with their own life), but resources to weave baskets, plant stakes, build fences, and so on. Being socialized by an education that habituates us to ask *what's in it for me?* (what can I get/extract from it?), we tend to perceive around us possible *uses* (affordances), rather than *beings* coexisting with us on this planet.

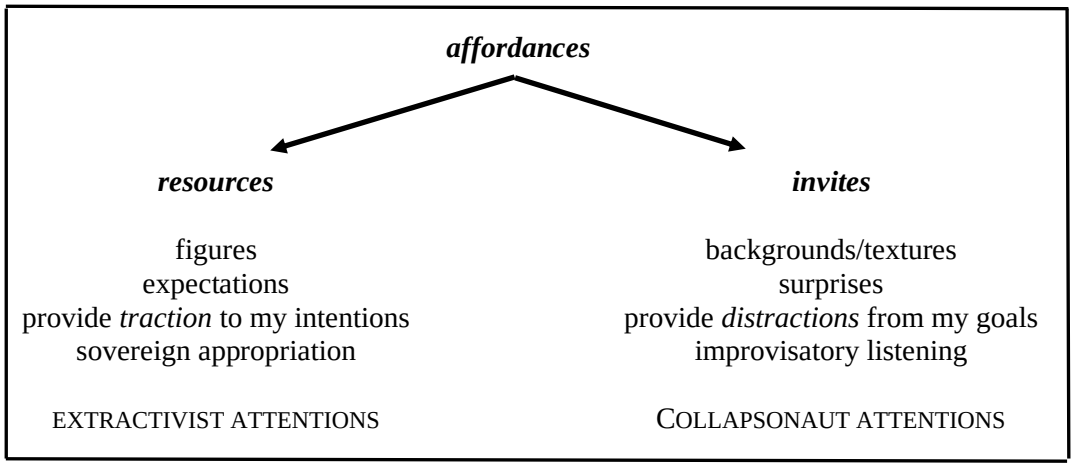
Gibson's book, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1979), has gradually become a transdisciplinary classic of ecological and psychological thinking, but it has only recently been translated into French (2014). When this French translation finally appeared, I was infinitely grateful to Éditions Dehors for making it available to students, and for officially introducing the term *affordance* in the French language, where some of us have already been using it occasionally. I was very surprised to discover, however, that the choice had been made to translate affordance as *invite*, which seemed to me to be an inexplicable blunder on the part of such an excellent publisher. It is only very recently, during the exchanges in an online seminar held in Québec, that one of the participants made me realize what good reason the translators may have had to choose the word *invite* rather than import the word *affordance*—and the notion of invite now allows me to summarize the entire path covered by the previous reflections.

I would indeed be tempted to schematize the contrast between extractivist attentions and collapsonaut attentions within a polarity internal to the notion of affordance. On the one hand, what provides traction to our action can be considered as an affordance-*resource*: my attitude, in this case, consists in appropriating something that is present in our environment and that I can use according to my needs, my goals and my own interests. The *traction* it provides is etymologically linked to "extractivist" attitude and to its various forms of capture (*le traitement d'information, la traite des vaches, la traite esclavagiste*). With this attitude, I adopt a posture of sovereign mastery towards my environment, a posture that subjects this environment as much as possible to my projects. I exploit it as a means to my ends.

On the other hand, what surrounds us can be apprehended as a reservoir of affordances—*invites*, which offer us the open possibilities of activities that we initially did not feel the need nor the desire for. These activities we feel invited to attempt defy and surprise our expectations. They may prove to be pleasant or useful—but only as an after-effect, not as the result of a habit or of a premeditated action. Instead of providing traction to my intentional

quest for profit, they can be considered as *distractions* from this quest. I discover their transformative potential by suspending my preconceived intentions and by immersing myself in what the environment invites me to do beyond my original expectation. The transformations then take place more in my internal dispositions as an acting subject than in the external manipulations of the environment.

In the first case, I take (I grasp a resource pre-identified as being needed); in the second, I am taken (I am carried away, surprised, distracted, by an unexpected invitation). Here, I orient myself in the world to exercise my sovereign control, according to the projects I invest this world with; there, I suspend my expectations to immerse myself in a listening process, in the course of which I will constantly have to improvise new, unexpected responses (unknown to myself). Here, I extract resources, according to the figures that allow me to recognize and isolate these resources within the sensory continuum; there, I navigate on backgrounds and textures, according to the unpredictable winds and waves I encounter. Extractivist attentions, in one case; collapsonaut attention, in the other.



Collaborative attentions

What does this much too cursory overview of possible alternatives to attentional extractivism teach us? First of all, the references used to illustrate collapsonaut attentions deserve to warn us of the dangers they carry. The title of this article could just as well be written *Attention: Collapsonauts!*, i.e, *Beware of collapsonauts!* Critics of collapsology rightly point out that it can depress youth, demobilize resistance, lead to selfish survivalism, or exacerbate a counter-productive precipitation in front of emergencies. Illustrating collapsonaut attention with the examples of religion and autism deserve to be seen as a warning, since, in the secular values handed down to us by the 20th century, neither religions nor autism shine as promises of a radiant future.

It should therefore be pointed out that navigation in times of collapse is a matter of constant meanderings and readjustments between contradictory directions, equally necessary and justified. Whether one blocks the rudder to steer to the left or to the right, the result will be the same (turning in circles). Collapsonaut attentions are to be conceived, not so much as a radical alternative to extractivist attentions, but rather as their punctual complement and counterpoint. A living being persists in existence only insofar as it succeeds in extracting from

its environment (the relevant information allowing this being to grasp) the elements necessary for its survival. And since no living being can understand, nor integrate in its behaviors, the ultimate implications of the relations it maintains with the other beings who co-compose this environment, we living beings are and will always be mainly guided by extractivist attitudes. Our current problem is not to "purify" ourselves from all traces of extractivist attention, but to correct its worst aberrations, which currently lead us towards ecocidal self-destruction.

From what I have tried to sketch above, we can therefore consider collapsonaut attentions as complementary and corrective devices, allowing us to restore parts of the experience that was stifled by the economic colonization of the world from modern Europe—for the misfortune of the colonized peoples, but also at the price of the omnivores' own peril. The provisional repertoire of attentional gestures restored by the collapsonaut attitude can already include the following seven postures:

1° At the same time as we extract figures from our environments in figures and models in order to draw from them resources useful to our survival or prosperity, let us pay attention to the background from which these figures never fully stand "out" (except in our ignorant and hallucinated imaginations).

2° Let us learn to respect these backgrounds by endowing them with an intrinsic value, necessarily greater than the profits we will occasionally be able to draw from them.

3° To do this, let us cultivate a reflexive attention by periodically questioning what we are desensitized to when we choose to pay attention to this more than to that (Fressoz 2011).

4° Let us develop the practice and the taste for the delay of categorization proper to aesthetic attention, as the latter is the dynamic heart of a reflexive attention worried about what it excludes from its consideration.

5° Let us challenge the current tyranny of neurotypical extractivism by revaluing the experiences of immersion in the textures offered by our living environments, and by recognizing these neurodiverse experiences as indispensable forms of sensitive reconnection to what, in these environments, is priceless.

6° Let us learn to receive a part of our desires and finalities from the invitations emanating from our living environments, rather than unilaterally imposing these desires and finalities upon these environments, in a self-defeating pretension of mastery and sovereignty.

7° Let us recognize the fragilities caused by the procedures of governance supposed to "short-circuit the time of disorder" (Mayerhoff 2019), let us accept the uncertainties linked to the choice of "staying with the disorder" (Haraway 2014), and let us value the collaborative arts of improvisation in all forms of activity (Citton 2016; Moten 2016).

This too summary and abstract characterization would require to be embodied in concrete examples of collaborative attentions. More than in apocalyptic narratives explicitly depicting our precarious survival in collapsed worlds (such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* or the series *Effondrement* broadcast on French Cable *Canal Plus* in November 2019), I would like to seek these incarnations in improbable dialogues that sometimes manage to find

a fragile balance between artistic practices and political speculation. Here are a few invitations to explore, in order to (not) conclude.

The recontextualized readings that Aurélien Gamboni and Sandrine Teixido (2014) propose of Edgar Allan Poe's short story *A Descent into the Maelstrom* unfold a whole pedagogy of collapsonaut attention, which illustrates almost point by point the seven principles outlined above. The considerations of the artist and theorist Hito Steyerl (2014) on our new conditions of perception and (dis)orientation in the age of ubiquitous digital images invite us to consider the collapsonaut perspective as a "free fall", both terrifying and rich in emancipatory virtues. The creative practices of sub-Saharan African artists documented by Dominique Malaquais (2019) or by Marinette Jeannerod (2020) invent countless collapsonaut ways of joyfully and tragically embodying the colonial repression of our extractivist (in)attentions. Alexandre Pierrepont's (2015) analysis of the work developed over more than 50 years by the African-American musicians of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) admirably highlights the dynamics of collective improvisation nourished by reciprocal immersive listening. The Occupy movement, the ZADs, the French suburbs or the US inner cities nourish the creativity and caring solidarity that Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013) have analyzed as characteristic of the undercommons, where everyone learns to share their individual incompleteness as the common condition of a collective navigation in the storms generated by unbridled capitalism.

Through all these cases, we learn that collapsonaut attentions are less to be conceived as new attentional regimes, which we would have to invent from scratch to stem the dramatic breakdown of ecocidal extractivism, than as collective practices that have long been experimented with, in the four corners of the world, by those whom colonization has expropriated from any fantasy of sovereignty. It is up to us to learn to listen to these practices—less as resources than as invitations.

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Abstract

At a time when "collapsology", a body of knowledge devoted to anticipating and preventing the possible collapse of our state-run institutions, is gaining in visibility in the French-speaking media spheres, how can we define "collapsonaut" modes of attention, capable of making us collectively navigate the current breakdowns? This article attempts to

contrast extractivist attentions and collapsonaut attentions, before outlining some of the basic gestures that could characterize the latter.

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