



Bear in the park

Description

The [publicity](#) for our Mobility, Mood and Place study includes a photograph of people walking across a park (The Meadows). In the foreground thereâ??s someone wearing the unusual head mounted EEG apparatus. Everyone notices that. But neither I as the photographer nor many of the people who have seen the picture noticed a further unusual presence.



The person in the bear costume generally goes unnoticed. Such â??inattentional blindnessâ?• is more remarkable when the scene is dynamic, as in the case of one famous experiment in which participants were required to watch a video of some people passing around a basketball, and count the number of times the ball was passed. What half of the participants failed to notice was that someone in a gorilla costume entered the scene for a full 5 seconds and then left. Itâ??s fair to say that we are blind to most of our environment. We cannot attend to everything all of the time.

Attention and affect

The psychologist Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) posited the basis of a theory of emotion. By most accounts what registers as a human emotion has its seeds in *core affect*, understood in terms of an

intensity of feeling: very strong to very weak, and a pleasure scale, ranging from highly pleasurable to very unpleasant. See blog post: [Absence of melancholy](#).

Wundt's theory is further developed by James Russell and Geraldine Pratt who map emotions on to an axial system in which the horizontal axis indicates pleasure, with greater pleasure to the right and displeasure to the left. (See post: [Feeling free in flight](#).) Wundt introduced the core affect idea in his seminal book of 1897. He also introduced a third dimension – strain and relaxation – that contemporary philosopher Mog Stapleton thinks of in terms of *attention*. It matters for the emotional valence of an experience whether you are attending to the experience or if it's somehow in the background of your awareness.

Attention fatigue

As long as a person is conscious then they are attending to something or other. As I've explored in a previous post ([Soft fascination](#)), if you attend for a long period to your computer and some important work task, then you eventually succumb to a kind of attention fatigue. It's likely that the task also involves pressures of time, and is attended by certain challenges that in time deplete our cognitive resources – or it feels that way.

From a biological perspective such work weariness carries certain advantages. It alerts us to the need to change our activity. Continuous and uninterrupted fascination with the task at hand leaves us prone to external threats. But we need to recover from that state. Restoration comes from a change in activity – attending to something else. Then you can return refreshed to the more challenging task at hand.

To what tasks should we turn for recovery? As I've discussed elsewhere, environmental psychologists Stephen and Rachel Kaplan alert us to the 'soft fascination' afforded by plants, earth, rocks, mountains, clouds and the whole sensual panoply of the natural world. Kaplan and Kaplan refer to the potential of playing games, watching television and other diversions in providing respite from work-based attention. But the 'natural world' provides opportunities for directing attention that are less demanding or stressful: such as attending to the texture of the bark on a tree, the sound of the birds, movement of the clouds, or a distant horizon. Their strong point is that many people are drawn to natural environments, or should be, in so far as such settings contribute to well being.

Meditative practices typically advocate such attention: attending, focussing attention, but at the same time doing so in a relaxed state and without stress. See blog post: [In meditative mood](#).

Simons and Chabris, who conducted the gorilla experiment, make no mention in their seminal paper of the effects of fatigue on how alert we are to unusual events. However, these combined studies do suggest an important play between natural environments, attention and restoration.

References

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Note

- See Guardian article: [The illusion of attention](#).

Category

1. Nature

Tags

1. affect
2. emotion
3. fascination
4. nature

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