

# PAUSING IN WONDER

## Disrupting the invasion of ‘digital stupor’ in classrooms



LOUISE AZZARELLO

Faculty of Education, York University, Toronto, Canada

**Citation:** L. Azzarello (2022), *Pausing in wonder. Disrupting the invasion of ‘digital stupor’ in classrooms* in “Dynamis. Rivista di filosofia e pratiche educative” 3(1): 43-48, DOI: 10.53163/dyn.v3i3.122

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**Data Availability Statement:** All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

**Competing Interests:** The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

### Abstract:

We are living in a time in which a sense of “digital stupor” – a sensation of “permanent electrocution” – has infiltrated our bodies and souls. It is from within the bowels of this destructive force, which permeates and overwhelms education and educators today, that I respond to Mario Di Paolantonio and Anders Schinkel’s provocation to consider the ‘educational potential of wonder’. I draw on Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi, Bracha Ettinger and Mark Fisher’s work to explore the ways in which the digital sphere institutes a crisis of attention and impedes students’ desires and abilities to pause and take time to wonder. How might educators disrupt the sense of stupor produced by the infectious magnetism of ‘the screen’? How might educators slow down time in classrooms to interrupt the frenzied pace of the digital sphere and mediate a sense of wonder that draws attention to the world not away from it? I conclude by invoking Di Paolantonio’s conceptualization of “passing time together” with an object in common as a way in which educators might mediate wonder in education, and interrupt the pull of the screen, if only for a fleeting moment.

**Keywords:** Wonder, Education, Digital stupor, Crisis of attention, Passing-time together

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We are living in a time in which a sense of ‘digital stupor’<sup>1</sup> – a sensation of ‘permanent electrocution’<sup>2</sup> – has infiltrated our bodies and souls and those of our students. It is from within the bowels of this destructive force, which permeates and overwhelms education and educators today, that I respond to Mario Di Paolantonio<sup>3</sup> and Anders Schinkel’s<sup>4</sup> provocation to consider the ‘educational potential of

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1 B. Ettinger, (2020) *The Practice of Art and Its Impact on Digital Trauma*. Castello di Rivoli Museo d’Arte Contemporanea. [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5nzgimnrFhE>

2 F. Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the pathologies of the post-alpha generation*. Minor Compositions. London 2009.

3 M. Di Paolantonio, *Wonder, Guarding against thoughtlessness in education*. “Studies in Philosophy and Education”, vol. 38, 2019, pp. 213-228. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-018-9626-3>.

4 A. Schinkel, *Education as mediation between child and the world: The role of wonder*. “Studies in Philosophy and Education”, vol. 38, 2019, pp. 479-492. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-019-09687-8>.

wonder'. In this paper, I contemplate how educators might interrupt the crisis of attention instituted by the digital sphere and provoke pedagogical encounters through which students can pause, and take time to wonder together in a classroom.

Both Di Paolantonio and Schinkel see the potential for wonder to disrupt the individualization and instrumentalization that constrains education today in order to reforge possibilities of the 'educational in education.' It is important to note that there is a temporality invoked in both Di Paolantonio's and Schinkel's understanding of wonder. A temporality that *demand*s attention and yet, is hindered by the instrumentalization of education which promotes a hyper-individualization that focusses on personal success and a market driven logic. A temporality, I suggest, that is usurped by the frenzied pace instilled through screen culture and the digital sphere.

Di Paolantonio points to reigniting the possibilities of education by lingering in wonder, by taking time to cultivate a thinking which attends to the world in a way that might "help us stay attuned and accountable to our dwelling and being together in the world"<sup>5</sup>. Di Paolantonio summons a sense of 'studiousness' in wonder, which neither rushes our thinking nor has a predefined direction. It is in slowing down to take time to 'wonder,' to question and think *together*, that we might "come to reflect on our own position in relation to the duration of the world and to others in it"<sup>6</sup>.

Schinkel is interested in the ways in which, different forms of mediation enacted by educators can ignite the potential of wonder and disrupt the "boredom that is common in schools"<sup>7</sup>. He suggests, "wonder draws our attention to the world, it asks us to (really) look or listen; and in many cases it lures us towards better, deeper, more comprehensive, more nuanced, understanding"<sup>8</sup>. Schinkel is ultimately interested in how wonder about the world, mediated by educators, can interrupt the learning process which has been rendered stagnate so that education's transformative potential might be reinvigorated. I suggest, that no matter which of the various forms of mediating wonder that educators embark upon, a pause in the linear regimented tempo of education is needed.

5 M. Di Paolantonio, *Wonder, Guarding against thoughtlessness in education*, cit., p. 217.

6 Ivi. p. 220.

7 A. Schinkel, *Education as mediation between child and the world: The role of wonder* cit., p. 482.

8 Ivi. p. 481.

Di Paolantonio's and Schinkel, although in different ways, both envision the potentiality of wonder in education in ways in which students have time to think about the world in all its marvels and horrific complexities. However, for educators to mediate a sense of wonder conceived as such, they must find time to disrupt the crisis of attention induced by the infiltration of digital sphere into their classrooms. I suggest, it has become increasingly difficult but necessary to reawaken a notion of wonder that allows students to attend to world, and their place in it, because of what Ettinger describes as a sense of 'digital stupor.' According to Ettinger "we are subdued by the screen gaze"<sup>9</sup> functioning in a state of 'digital stupor'. 'Digital stupor' is induced by the pull of the screen which sucks us inward and dulls our ability to attend to the world.

The persistent inward pull of the self-centered screen produces a mechanism of fragmentation, impeding students' ability to attend to others and the world. Consequently, I ask how might educators induce a sense of wonder in students amidst the thoughtless surrender that has welcomed the digital sphere into enter the very core of education? How might educators disrupt the sense of stupor produced by the infectious magnetism of 'the screen'? How might educators slow down time in classrooms to interrupt the frenzied pace of the digital sphere and mediate a sense of wonder that draws attention *to* the world not away from it?

### *The infiltration of 'digital stupor' into the classroom*

From the mid 1990's to present day the never-ending expansion of the digital sphere has accelerated at an unprecedented speed and infiltrated classrooms with a stealth force. Screens have infiltrated our bodies and souls and those of our students. Not only are we wired into our screens – our screens are wired *into* us. Digital devices are not objects separate from our being, rather they have merged into us. As Hagi Kenaan, tell us, "we have lost the capacity to see the extent to which our existence has become screen-compatible, or more bluntly, after

Baudrillard, that we ourselves have become the screen"<sup>10</sup> Consequently, when a teacher asks a student to put away

9 B. Ettinger, *The Practice of Art and Its Impact on Digital Trauma*, 11:01.

10 H. Kenaan, *The ethics of visibility: Levinas and the contemporary gaze*, en. tr. by Batya Stein, I.B. Tauris, London. 2013, p. xviii.

their smartphone (which is in fact a highspeed data processing device) it often feels as if you are asking a student to relinquish part of their very being. In an activity a colleague and I designed for secondary school students, we asked students to create life-sized bodies and to somehow represent impacts of oppression upon that body. Although students were *not* required to make the body represent themselves some students did. Interestingly, two of the students who chose to represent themselves portrayed their cell phones as *part* of their bodies. These students did not view their cell phones as an object separate from themselves. Rather, they understood the devices to be an integral part of their beings. One student depicted his head-phone-wires as tentacles that merged into his physical being enabling information from his phone to flow directly into his brain. The other student transformed her hand into a pink blob to represent her phone as part of her physical being. Both students did this deliberately. They understood their phones to be vessels of connectivity embedded in their bodies that allows the world to come to them, thus ensuring they are constantly connected to the digital flow that gives their lives meaning. The draw of the screen is relentless and its hyperactive rhythm thwarts time and holds students' attention hostage.

*The frenzied tempo of the 'screen gaze' and the electrification of attention*

Drawn in by the seemingly all-knowing screen the student's gaze is in constant motion; their beings radiate frenzied-panicked-surges that seem to keep them on edge always anticipating the next ping, afraid to miss out on something, anything, everything. Students frantically shift their eyes from their screen, to the teacher, to their screen, to their work, to their screen, to the textbook, to their classmate's screen and (sometimes) back to the teacher's projected screen at the front of the class. Students move in and out of their screens constantly – living life in fragmented intervals of distraction, anxious waves of anticipation and sporadic flashes of excitement. They play games, scan their social media platforms, watch the most recent YouTube sensation, or stream latest Netflix show, or podcast. Students scroll through images of violent tragedies, then roused by the sound of a ping, laughter erupts as the student reacts to a text or image sent by a friend – all the while sitting in a classroom supposedly attending to the lesson at hand. Berardi explains:

Focusing on an object for a certain deal of time is becoming an impossible task for a large number of kids: attention tends to change immediately its focus, looking for a new object. There is a direct relationship between the exposure time of the mind to the video-electronic stimulus and the growing volatility of attention. Never in the history of humankind has the mind of a child been exposed to such a fast and invading bombardment of info impulses. It is obvious that this acceleration is producing unpredictable effects on the cognitive domain.<sup>11</sup>

Consequently, the infectious magnetism that pulls the gaze *into* the screen institutes a crisis of attention. Thus, time and attention are consumed and rendered disjointed by the constant rhythms of students' digital devices.

Inundated with an over an overabundance of stimulation leads to a 'permanent electrocution' and a crisis of attention<sup>12</sup>. The sensation of permanent electrocution creates a frenzied sense of numbness, increased problems of attention, anxiety, panic, and fragmentation.

[The] acceleration of stimuli is a pathogenic factor that has wide ranging effects in society. Economic competition and digital intensification of informatic stimuli, combined together, induce a state of permanent electrocution that flows into a widespread pathology which manifests itself either in the panic syndrome or in attention disorders.<sup>13</sup>

Likewise, Marc Fisher notes, if "something like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is a pathology, it is a pathology of late capitalism – a consequence of being wired into the entertainment-control circuits of hypermediated consumer culture"<sup>14</sup>. Students' screens draw them into their own worlds thus making their ability, and I might add their desire, to attend to and wonder about a specific object *together* in a classroom a difficult enterprise.

The pull of the 'screen gaze,' makes attending to a particular task, or object outside the screen more difficult than ever before. Students' attention is focused inward, bound by their desires, and fears they remain absorbed in their own worlds, lulled into a hyper-alertness waiting for the next text, notification or poke. Berardi suggests that we are functioning in a "sort of continuous excitation, a permanent electrocution, which leads the individual mind as

11 F. Berardi, *Prekarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the pathologies of the post-alpha generation*, cit., p. 98.

12 Ivi, pp. 36, 39, 45.

13 Ivi, p. 36.

14 M. Fisher, *Capitalist realism: Is there no alternative?* Zero Books, Winchester, U.K. 2009, p. 25.

well as the collective mind to a state of collapse”<sup>15</sup>. Fisher notes that students are “too wired to concentrate”<sup>16</sup>. Consequently, I suggest ‘digital stupor,’ does not simply induce a state of distraction and a dulling of one’s senses, but rather it produces an *electrified numbness*. This electrified numbness instils a disconnected daze rather than a direct connection to anything or anyone. The pull of students’ screen draws them into their individual mediated worlds with no desire (or so it seems) to take time and wonder about what is outside of themselves, unfamiliar or challenging.

Accordingly, students are left in isolated, frenzied trances waiting for the next thing to appear on their screen separating them from the world and the need to wonder about the world – because it seems – at least to them – that the world is at their fingertips.

The agitated constant distraction produced by the hyper-stimulation of the digital sphere in some ways mirrors Di Paolantonio’s depiction of a curiosity which urges students “to attune themselves to the world through an instrumental appetite and a frenzied mode of attention (temporality),” which positions their relation to the world “as a resource to be consumed and sequestered for [themselves]”<sup>17</sup>. Curiosity in this sense acts as a functional apparatus of the instrumentalization of education through which students are encouraged to consume knowledge quickly and move on to ‘learn’ the next thing. This interpretation of curiosity is reproduced through the digital sphere. Enter your question into a search engine, accept the first answer that appears and move on without thought, or even a brief moment of criticality. Curiosity viewed in this way is the antithesis to Di Paolantonio’s notion of a ‘world making’ sensibility of wonder. Wonder in this sense, Di Paolantonio tells us, “lights up a world through the *admiration* and *care* that we are able to broach, and through the questions that we share with each other when we wonder about those ungraspable things that give pause between us”<sup>18</sup>. How might educators mediate this sensibility of wonder in classrooms where the fragmented pull of students’ screens seems all powerful? How do educators interrupt the frantic pace of the ‘screen gaze’?

15 F. Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the pathologies of the post-alpha generation*, cit., p. 45.

16 M. Fisher, *Capitalist realism: Is there no alternative?*, cit., p. 24.

17 M. Di Paolantonio, *Wonder, Guarding against thoughtlessness in education*, cit., p. 218.

18 Ivi, p. 220.

### *Surrendering to the screen*

Unfortunately, in education and particularly in schools, there is a sense of surrender to the intensification of the digital sphere and all that it encompasses. There is a managerial ‘acceptance’ of the intrusion of the digital sphere into classrooms and an attitude that we must simply manage and thus embrace what is inevitable and seemingly beyond our control. Managing this intrusion means that any concerns or questions about students’ use of digital devices in the classrooms are reduced to individual teachers’ responsibility and their classroom management skills (or lack thereof). In order to cater to what is perceived to be the inevitable fragmentation of time induced by the crisis of attention spawned by digital interventions educators are schooled in teaching as a pathological act of ‘nursing’ attention disorders.

Educators are not only encouraged to ‘integrate’ new technologies into their teaching they are also advised to reproduce the rapid-fire staccato attack of the screen by providing a constant barrage of different types of ‘activities,’ and a range of visual means to relay information. For instance, apps such as *Kahoot*<sup>19</sup> are not merely ways to ‘engage’ students (get their attention) as some educators propose, but rather the tempo of the screen becomes ‘the’ mode of communication educators are being encouraged to replicate. Instead of thinking about ways to slow down, attend to, and tend to a text, a theme, an image or a mathematical equation with care and attentiveness, educators are being told to transform themselves into screens. This transformation, of educator into screen, participates in perpetuating students’ sporadic attention and fragmented sense of time. Yet, those educators who teach by reproducing the frenzied tempo of the screen – moving from one activity to the next, never lingering to think deeply, and using the latest apps – are rewarded for incorporating technology as pedagogy. I suggest there is a cruelty in the acquiescence to the tempo of the screen as we further deprive students of the time needed to experience being in relation to each other and to wonder about the world and our place in it. Surrendering to the intensity of the digital sphere educators participate in subduing students and promote a sense of frenzied stupor rather than attentiveness.

19 Kahoot is described as a “game-based learning platform.” See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7XzfWHdDS9Q>

*Mediating wonder through pause: Disrupting the crisis of attention*

The crisis of attention induced through the ‘screen gaze’ not only engenders a sense of hyper-individualization but also swallows time. Time is consumed by the hyper need to constantly be looking for immediate pleasure located in the depths of the screen and in turn time consumes attention thus severing the potentiality of being in relation to the world. Ettinger tells us:

The phenomenological experience of social digital media is of accelerating addiction. The subject repeatedly and endlessly looks for the enjoyment achieved by immediate satisfaction of needs... Leaving no time-space for desire to appear. No time-space for wondering, *douleur* and lamenting, witnessing, for caring the other for caring *for* the other, no time to develop love, care and affective response-ability – and no possible passage from elementary empathy to ethical compassion. No possibility for imagination.<sup>20</sup>

Berardi like Ettinger, understands the problem of ‘time’ as a problem of connectivity to others and the world. Berardi recognizes that the speed of the digital sphere nullifies the possibilities and even the desire to tend to the world and our relation to it. He writes, “The experience of the other is rendered banal; the other becomes part of an uninterrupted and frenetic stimulus, and loses its singularity and intensity – it loses its beauty”<sup>21</sup>. Kenaan puts it like this: the screen “permits no encounter”<sup>22</sup>. How then do educators mediate wonder within these conditions? How do educators help students disentangle from their screens so that they might look up and see a world full of other people to wonder with?

In some ways, both Di Paolantonio (2018, 2019a) and Schinkel (2019) are interested in the potentiality of wonder as a relational force in education. Such a force *needs* pause *needs time* so that we might think together, question together so that we might wonder together. Such a force *needs* attentiveness – an attentiveness opens up space for the unknown to appear. As noted by Riyad A. Shahjahan, “Slowing down is about focusing on building relationships, not about being fixed on products, but accepting and allowing for uncertainty and being at peace

without knowing outcomes”<sup>23</sup>. It is this sense of slowing down that encourages the potentiality of wonder in education, the possibilities of wondering without predefined outcomes or expectations. It is pausing in wonder that opens us spaces to attend to the world.

*‘Passing time together’ to wonder*

There is a temporality necessary to engage in the sense of wonder Di Paolantonio proposes and in the understanding of mediating wonder that Schinkel offers. A temporality that attends to the present so that we might think differently about the future. The task of fostering attention, in the sense of making the world present within education is a task that demands a pause in *time*. It is at this point that I invoke Di Paolantonio’s conceptualization of “passing time together”<sup>24</sup> with an object in common as a way in which educators might mediate wonder in education, and interrupt the pull of the screen, for a fleeting moment. It has been my experience in classrooms working with secondary students, that when given time and space to ‘pass time together’ thinking *together* with a particular text, image, idea, or event in a way in which the teacher does not have an intended outcome in mind, without the pressure of finding an answer, without the need to harvest a particular idea or piece of information but instead with an openness to wonder, to ask questions, to interrogate responses, to think and rethink reactions students are willing to slow down and disengage from the frantic pace of the digital sphere and take time to think. The act of sitting together in a room with others to read, look, think, feel, and talk and to look again, to think again, and to question together while holding something in common between us opens the potential to learn something new that stimulates a sense of wonder in students.

Students’ attentiveness is engaged and a sense of being in relation with others and the world ensues. In such moments, mediated as they are, I have witnessed the cultivation of attentiveness because a space is opened for what is ‘educational in education’ to appear. Mediation of wonder through pause allows educators and students to slow down and attend to the world, to think differently about what we know and what we think we know. In these,

20 B. Ettinger, *The Practice of Art and Its Impact on Digital Trauma*, 12:56.

21 F. Berardi, *Prekarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the pathologies of the post-alpha generation*, cit., p. 70.

22 H. Kenaan. *The ethics of visuality: Levinas and the contemporary gaze*, cit., p. xviii.

23 R.A. Shahjhan, *Being ‘Lazy’ and Slowing Down: Toward decolonizing time, our body, and pedagogy*. “Educational Philosophy and Theory”, vol. 47, no. 5, 2015, pp. 488–501, cit., p. 497.

24 M. Di Paolantonio, *The cruel optimism of education and education’s implication with ‘passing-on.’* “Journal of Philosophy of Education”, vol. 50, n. 2, 2016, pp.147-159.

somewhat fleeting moments, when we attend to an object in common, the cultivation of a sense of wonder attaches us to the world rather than detaches us from the world. It is in an intentional pause that educators can interrupt and disrupt the sense of digital stupor that ruptures attention and overwhelms students today. It is in these fleeting moments that Di Paolantonio's sense of wonder is enacted. "In this sense, we can say that wonder is really a certain regard for and attentiveness to the world that opens up to a community of questions: a dynamic drive towards articulating and sharing, in an open-handed manner, our perplexities with each other"<sup>25</sup>.

Two essential elements are required to open spaces to mediate pedagogical moments of wonder, 1) the ability to pause and 'pass time together' in the sheltered space of a classroom and 2) the cultivation of attentiveness. It is in slowing down and taking time through pedagogical encounters in which teacher, students and text come together that the overwhelming frantic fragmentation sensations produced by the screen can be interrupted. In these moments of pause, educators and students together can attend to wondering about our responsibilities to the world and what it is we do in the world. Moments of pause like this offer an interruption *in time itself* which opens a space for the possibilities of wonder to take shape even if just for a moment. And it is in these moments of wondering together with students that educators reforge the 'educational in education.'

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<sup>25</sup> M. Di Paolantonio, *Wonder, Guarding against thoughtlessness in education*, cit., p. 220.