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The Captivated Gaze. Diderot's Allegory of the Cave and Democracy

Christine Abbt

Department of Philosophy, University of St. Gallen, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

The problem of the captivated gaze has been taken up repeatedly in philosophy. Plato's Allegory of the Cave stands paradigmatically for this. Here, the gaze at the shadowy images prevents people from taking the path to the sun. Denis Diderot's critical reinterpretation of Plato's Allegory of the Cave is less well known. In Diderot, the view of the artificial light images is just as captivating as Plato's shadow images. Unlike there, however, Diderot does not distinguish between perception and cognition but instead focuses on the significance of the seemingly unimportant shift of the gaze within the cave. Diderot determines the starting point of the realisation of freedom in the liberation of one's own gaze from the captivation intended by third parties. Prerequisites for the liberation of the gaze are the realisation of an interruption. It is shifts in the alignment of the eyeballs that become visible here as lucid intervals and which, in Diderot, become the starting point of power analysis and the site of revolt and freedom practice. In this article, I will show how Diderot's demand for enabling the individual realisation of lucid intervals is not first and foremost an aesthetic, but a highly political one. The criteria of art, which are defined by Diderot and have not lost their relevance until today, are based on his explosive insight that the incessant captivation of the gaze stands in the way of democratisation.

KEYWORDS

Digitisation; Diderot; allegory of the cave; attention; lucid intervals; democratisation

Introduction

This article focuses on the problem of the captivated gaze and argues for the democratic relevance of liberation from this captivation. I will argue that art has a decisive role in this liberation and explore the criteria that enable or even initiate interruptions. To do so, I am going to explore how Denis Diderot's reflections can help us find answers to some of the current problems and questions. The text is structured in five steps: First, I focus on the problematisation of the captivated gaze in Denis Diderot's critique of Plato and show the relevance of Diderot's analysis. Secondly, I will explain why the persistent captivated

CONTACT Christine Abbt  christine.abbt@unisg.ch  Department of Philosophy, University of St Gallen, Unterer Graben 21, 9000 St Gallen, Switzerland

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gaze can be described as problematic in the context of democracies. I will discuss why it is important for the realisation of democratic principles that persons repeatedly release the gaze from being hijacked and let it roam and wander. Here I will distinguish between letting one's gaze wander and being distracted. Thirdly, I ask which aesthetic and artistic strategies are conceivable to set the gaze in motion, to recapture one's own gaze instead of continuing to let it be expropriated. Fourthly, I explain why Diderot focuses on the importance of civil society in addition to artists and art for realising democratic freedom. Finally, I address the theme's topicality. I will argue that Diderot's reflections can offer helpful perspectives for these challenges today, where the captivated gaze is especially discussed in connection with digitalisation. The gaze is repeatedly captured over longer periods of time by personalised devices that shape our looks and also our way of communicating. What happens to us when we are sensually hijacked by our smartphones? Does this affect our political self-understanding? And if so, what are the democratic responses to it?

The Captivated Gaze as the Starting Point of the Critique of Power

There is a long tradition of problematising the hijacked gaze. For example, Plato's Allegory of the Cave can be read in this light.¹ This allegory is brought forward at the beginning of Book Seven in the dialogue *The Republic*. Socrates describes, as is well known, an underground cave from which a steep passage leads upward to the surface of the earth. Prisoners live in the cave. They are tied up in such a way that they can only look forward at one single wall of the cave. Therefore, they cannot see the exit, which is behind their backs. They do not even know of its existence. They cannot see themselves or the other prisoners either; the only thing they ever get to see is the wall they are facing and the shadow images on it.

These shadows are caused by fire light and by the people who are standing behind a small wall and moving different kinds of objects. "Picture also, along the length of the wall, people carrying all sorts of implements which project above it, and statues of people, and animals made of stone and wood and all kinds of materials".² Their voices echo in the cave. The prisoners believe that these voices belong to the shadows because they know nothing about the people behind the wall. The prisoners consider these moving shadows to be alive. They would also not believe anyone who enlightened them that this was not true. Artificial light play is preferred to natural sunlight, appearance is preferred to the insight into the ideas, as Socrates says. A prisoner who was forcibly dragged to the surface of the earth against his will would resist even longer. It takes a long time for one once captive and now liberated, to become willing and able to look into the light of the sun. Only once one looks at this light and recognises the difference between real animals and living beings and artificially represented ones, then this one would not want to go back to the cave anymore. One reason is that nobody will believe the returnees in there. No one could accept, that there is another light outside the cave. Even more, the cave dwellers would even kill those who wanted to free their gaze, if they could.

Two aspects are particularly important with regard to Diderot: (1) In Plato there are two clearly distinguishable accesses to the world, the one in the cave and the one outside. (2) In Plato's case, no one wants to leave the familiar environment voluntarily. All resist,

at least in the beginning, to be led away from the shadow images and use the exit. These two aspects are subjected to a radical rewriting by Diderot.³ In Diderot, firstly, there is nothing else than a cave. A way out of the cave understood as a way to pure knowledge does not exist. Everyone remains attached to sensual perceptions without exception, and therefore all are together without alternative in the same situation, namely in the cave mode of impure light. Secondly, some prisoners would like to see more than the wall of shadows, but those behind the wall prohibit it. They are interested in keeping them as prisoners in the cave and thus, in the belief that the shadows are the only possible reality. According to Diderot, there are people with an intrinsic will for change, but they are prevented from realising this will by third parties. There are prisoners who want to expand their views and others who seek to prevent that. Those persons behind the wall, who in Plato's parable do not assume a relevant function, come to the fore in Diderot's explanation of the cave. They are portrayed as having a strong interest in leaving others in the fettered situation. From the outset, the question of cognition is first of all for Diderot one of power, the maintenance of power, and the distribution of power. Personal freedom is thereby imagined as the possibility to oscillate freely between different sensory impressions and points of view. Diderot underlines a close connection between personal freedom and authority over eyeballs.

Diderot's Cave Report appears in *Salon de 1765* and contains a fundamental critique of Plato's Allegory of the Cave.⁴ In this text, there are numerous conversations about paintings in an exhibition. The dialogue centres on the question of whether there is a clear and satisfactory rationale for emphasising the difference between original and copy. Diderot suggests that this question is irrelevant to perception. Whether someone actually sees an image or imagines it from memory can have exactly the same consequences for the perceiver. The central question then is what it means that persons always produce simulacra and are confronted with simulacra, because the very first original does not exist, at least it does not and can never be recognised. "In the cave you only saw the facsimiles of people, and in his canvas Fragonard would not have shown you anything more than similarities".⁵ (*"Dans la caverne, vous n'avez vu que les simulacres des êtres, et Fragonard sur sa toile ne vous en aurait montré non plus que les simulacres"*).⁶ Although Diderot distinguishes between endless play with images and impressions and concrete finite human existence, in relation to perception this distinction is emphasised as irrelevant. Diderot's *Salon de 1765* has been read primarily as an important contribution to philosophical aesthetics.⁷ Yet, this reading misses the central political character that appears in Diderot's interpretation of the cave dream.

The first-person narrator, who calls himself "Diderot" in Diderot's dialogue, after having read Plato's Allegory of the Cave and falling asleep, dreams of the Allegory. In the dream, Diderot himself is inside the cave with many other people. Most of them are as unfree as the narrator himself. They are trapped and cannot move without restriction, but they seem content. They laugh, sing, and drink. One might think that this is their "*état naturel*" (natural state)⁸, according to the reporting person. They convey joy and happiness, but also lead to tears and feelings of pain, depending on what is being shown. The prisoners' gaze is directed at a large canvas. Fascinating light shows can be seen on it.

Behind Diderot and the other prisoners, there is another group staging the play on the big screen. "Behind us there were kings, ministers, priests, doctors, apostles, prophets,

theologians, politicians, rascals, charlatans, artisans of illusions and the whole troop of merchants of hopes and fears” (*“Par derrière nous il y avait des rois, des ministres, des prêtres, des docteurs, des apôtres, des prophètes, des théologiens, des politiques, des fripons, des charlatans, des artisans d’illusions et toute la troupe des marchands d’espérances et de craintes”*).⁹ These people hold figures in their hands, which are so numerous and successful that all human situations can be recreated with them. The colourful transparent figures are projected by light – (there is a lamp behind the people playing) – on the walls. They appear so alive, as if they were not images, but living beings. These productions have, as is already said, a great effect on the viewers.

In Diderot’s dream, unlike Plato’s, there is no way out of the cave for anyone. All are and remain together in it. They are however in this variant, divided into, on the one hand, players and, on the other hand, spectators. Some set the action of figures, colours, forms, and stories in motion and play, the others gaze at the screen. Many of the spectator’s gaze spellbound at what is shown and they are at the mercy of the effects of these moving images. This does not make them unhappy as long as they themselves or others do not strive to understand the game, its conditions, and effects. However, we can find a third group of people in Diderot’s Cave. It is the group of those who, being still among the spectators, turn their gaze, look around, and want to know more. These people want to shift their gaze. They suspect that there may be more and want to reach a broader sight. They notice their own situation in the cave as one among possible ones and thus develop a relationship between themselves and others. Yet, the group of representatives of power in the background tries to prevent this by all means. It is said, that those who mediate with hope and fear threaten with a fearsome voice those who dare to turn their heads, to widen their perspective, and to take a look at the conditions of the stagings. Whoever nevertheless attempts to do so, exposes himself to great danger and must expect punishment, according to Diderot.

Unlike Plato, Diderot is not concerned with the distinction between brightness and shadow or with the difference between those who reach the sunlight and those who will never see it. No one reaches the bright sunlight. All are exposed to the “artificial” illumination of lamps and the ways of dealing with it. Diderot transfers the difference between light and darkness, truth-seeking and self-deception, authenticity and artificiality, to the interior of the cave with no exit and redefines it. The fundamental shift between Plato’s and Diderot’s representations of caves is that there is no such thing as unimpaired cognition, but always perceptions and ways of looking at something. The difference relevant within the cave is primarily a power-related one and concerns the scope of action of the cave dwellers.

Three groups are clearly separated in Diderot’s work. The first group, which is highlighted in Diderot’s dream image, includes those in power who set the productions on the screen in motion. The power-maintaining interest of this group of people is emphasised. They absolutely do not want anyone from the ranks of the spectators to strive to understand the order in the cave. The second group includes the bystanders, who seem to be unquestioningly set up in their bound state. They laugh and cry, depending on what they are shown, and cannot generate these sensations from within themselves, neither remembering nor imagining nor reflecting. Finally, a third group includes those arrested who want to shift their gaze, to let it wander. These are those who try to move their eyes and seek a change of perspective. Within their extremely limited possibilities, these

people strive for a form of resistance. Their resistance is reduced to the smallest shift of the gaze. Therein lies the withdrawal feared by the powerful. The realisation of an interruption in the consumption of images contains explosive power. For it is that moment in which, on the one hand, the absoluteness of repression is revealed as an illusion, and in which, on the other hand, the conditions underlying the play on the screen can be better understood. It is the moment in which the presumably necessary is unmasked as possible. The group of people who undertake a shift of gaze gain knowledge in relation to their own situation and that of others. They do not achieve knowledge, first of all, but they manifest the possibility of criticism.

The Democratic Relevance of Shifting the Gaze and Lucid Intervals

As it has been shown, the walk out of the cave is reduced in Diderot's depiction to a barely noticeable movement of the eyeballs. In this shift of the gaze Diderot, however, locates immense aesthetic, epistemological, ethical, and above all political relevance. To withdraw from exposure means, at least for the duration of the realisation of the withdrawal, the possibility of insight into the circumstances. The shift of the gaze concretised the indispensable starting point of any kind of freedom. In the interruption lies the potential for the analysis of power. Diderot ascribes indispensable importance to the liberation of the gaze from its state of captivity for democratisation processes. The way to a political order of free and equality is still very far from there, but it is not possible without this shift. In Diderot's cave dream, averting one's gaze encompasses a form of resistance for which Iris Därmann coined the term "Undienlichkeit".¹⁰ Whoever withdraws from the permanent stimulus, and thus makes himself unserviceable, resists by withdrawing. Därmann coins the apt term of a *passivization* for this and shows that within a long tradition of political philosophy, these minimal and at best failed forms of resistance hardly received any attention. In contrast to Hobbes, Locke, or Rousseau, for example, who hardly attribute any political weight to such forms of passivisation, Diderot places these practices at the centre of his analysis of power and elevates them to the starting point for the determination of freedom and critique.

Diderot both as the author of the cave's dream and as a figure in the cave seems not alone in this view of relevance. The interruption of the continuous overflow of stimuli is considered not least also by the wire-pullers of the stagings in the cave as highly dangerous with respect to their supremacy. They fear the visualisation of one's own looking as a special perspective among others and know about the resilience of the noticing of different groups in the social space and the becoming visible interrelationships of effects, which exist between all in the cave. They therefore massively intimidate those who want to let their gaze wander. In their view, those who rule over the gaze also rule over the whole world. Diderot confirms this view, but without believing in a totalisation of power. For power, it becomes clear, shows itself as power only through an interruption of it. Seen in this way, power itself is not independent of those who rebel against it. For the cave to become a space of the political, liberation from the bondage of the gaze is essential. The central question for Diderot is therefore not how we can clearly distinguish between real images and artificial ones, or between the view of one screen and the view into the cave, but how we can always free ourselves from the captivation

of the gaze, how the change of perspective succeeds and thus the possibilities of differentiation, pluralisation, and criticism.

What can be opposed to capture? Diderot's answer to this political question is: interruptions, caesura, deflections, and some moments of suspension. Based on this conviction, Diderot develops in his work what I call a political aesthetic of lucid intervals.¹¹ An interval is a temporal space between two states. It means here an interruption or pause between two captures of perception. In the captivated state, the gaze cannot be turned. Perception is at the mercy of immediacy. Only through the interruptions and silencing of this permanent maintenance of presence can other movements of looking and thought be set in motion. Not in every case an interval lead to a deepening of reflection, but without such intervals reflection and reasoning are impossible. Only when an interruption leads to the adoption of a new view and even to second-order thinking, one can speak of a *lucid* interval. Those who fix their own eyes constantly spellbound on one canvas and allow themselves to be emotionally guided by the images presented without interruption do not come to realise the situation in the cave and notice themselves as spectators. Processes of distancing, imagination, remembering, and self-reflection are dependent on intervals. Without the interruption of the flow of constantly strong emotion evoking signals or the shutting down of the willing absorption they do not come about. The persistently captivated gaze continuously prevents the construction of a relationship between self and other, or between I and self and makes any striving for a change of the unjust situation purposeless.

Here a distinction can be made between two forms of distraction. Intervals mean an in-between. They describe transitional and interruptive situations in which other modalities of perception can begin. To be distinguished from intervals that lead to new directions and ways of looking is a form of distraction, which in turn prevents a self-determined direction. Distraction here then means constantly being carried away, without reaching another or a new way of looking at things. In Diderot's depiction of the cave, this dispersal is not explicitly addressed. It can be concluded from the text that distraction would have similar effects on imagination, memory, and reasoning as the constant captivation of the gaze.

According to Diderot, critical thinking requires at the very least the shift of the gaze as a prerequisite of the adoption of different points of view. For Diderot, the linear gaze is not only detrimental to critical thinking in a figurative sense but also in a concrete, physical sense. Critical thinking and bodily movement are brought into a connection by Diderot. One-dimensional structured perception is not conducive to complex thinking.

Another relevant aspect that can be considered in Diderot's analysis is sleep. Sleep can be thought as well as a form of interruption of the flow of perception, as a possibility for setting new processes and restructuration. Although sleep is not addressed explicitly, Diderot's analysis of Plato's allegory takes place within a dream. Diderot dreams his fundamental criticism of Plato. In a philosophical tradition consistently aligned with Plato, Diderot thus, according to the account, remarkably frees himself for his part not in the waking state, but in sleep and dreaming. From this point of view, sleep is also an uncontrollable place of retreat, where impressions are processed unpredictably and linked anew. Sleeping, too, would have to be reduced or at best made impossible in

order to prevent any digression as it is forced in the cave.¹² From a democratic point of view, on the other hand, sleeping and other forms of interruption of permanent absorption need to take place. There must be an interest in creating conditions that welcome various lucid intervals.

The Liberation of the Gaze as a Task of Art

As I have explained, Diderot's conception of the interplay of perception, body and reflection, as well as his demand for intervals that interrupt monotonous looking, do not lead him only to a philosophical deepening of the distinction between original and copy or between real and artificial or between true and false, but also and above all to a political analysis of power. This analysis raises, at least from an enlightened point of view, also the question of how to respond to the intense deployment of dominant power. What can be held against? How can the shift of gaze and thus the suspension of the unfolding of power be supported as much as possible? In Diderot's work, these questions lead to a differentiation and qualification of art. Diderot's expectations of art production, which I clarify in the following, are based on the demand to enable or pre-structure lucid intervals.

For Diderot, the captivation of the gaze is also part of the task of art. At the same time, however, another task is added, namely the removal of the fetter. In the best case, art pre-structures both the attraction of the gaze and the withdrawal of it. Without captivation of the gaze, there is no interesting art. However, art has always to be able to provoke not only the capture of all the senses but also the release from captivity, the release from the spell. According to Diderot art sets stimuli and at the same time also aims at withdrawing stimuli and thus making openings possible.¹³ Art in this understanding also leads out of the art cosmos towards what is not art, what is not play. The artistic goal should hence not be to conceal the conditions and limits of art, but to make them also visible.

One prerequisite is highly conscious, never self-forgetful artists who know about the differences between play and non-play, between their art and existence. Precisely because the artist maximises play in their mastery, expansively pursues and masters it, they also know the limits of their art very well. What characterises the great artist is that they understand how infinite art and finite existence are not identical. In his famous text "Paradox of the Actor", Diderot develops his criticism of forms of artistic empathy embedded in this thought.¹⁴ When the actor forgets that they are acting, Diderot argues, they cease to be an actor. Precisely because the masterful actor imitates so well, they exactly know that they never are, and never will be the other.

The actor must endure the tension between their own being and appearance. They stage authenticity. Therein lies their special quality. In other ways, it is not possible for them to evoke lucid intervals in the audience. If the artist were to neglect or overlook the distinction between staged authenticity and authentic staging, they would not be able to set those caesura and suspension moments with the audience that Diderot is so eminently concerned with from the perspective of democratic aesthetics. The actor who endures this paradoxical situation is, for Diderot, the embodiment of an ideal. "[H]e is not the person he represents; he plays it, and plays it so well that you think he is the person; the deception is all on your side; he knows well enough that he is not the person".¹⁵ Not everyone is willing to agree with Diderot's democratic-aesthetic

demands. And not all artists want to put their mastery in the service of more freedom and equality. In Diderot's allegory of the cave, we remember that behind the wall there are also so-called "illusion artists" who stabilise the maintenance of power. Besides that, not all can be artists. According to Diderot, artist has a special relationship with freedom, insofar as they perform the changes of view and continuously try to understand the combination of imitation and their own existence. That is why they are also characterised by a special ability to convey to others the pleasure of freedom. Not everyone has this ability. It is true that there are people who strive for freedom on their own initiative. But not all of them can do it without support and, as already said, not all of them want it at all.

To conclude, the central problem for Diderot is the monotonous and even monological looking. This captivated gaze undermines other abilities and senses, such as remembering, imagining, reflecting, reasoning and thus makes criticism and individual, social, and political change difficult or even impossible. Art therefore has first and foremost the task of interrupting and of provoking and structuring lucid intervals. Impulses for art production as well as for art evaluation can be derived from this, and Diderot's own work can be measured by these expectations of art to attract and also to distract. In his writing, the change of view is used concisely and virtuously. His texts are stimulus-setting and stimulus-withdrawing. Illusion and disillusion are skilfully employed. The end is open where it is expected to be closed and emerges where it remains disturbing and strange. Diderot says it and shows it, he experiments and searches himself again and again for possibilities to perfect the play of capture and detachment. But it remains the task of art and artists to find ways of how Diderot's democratic-aesthetic claim can be successfully realised in concrete terms. Some abstract elements might be: combinations of stimulus-setting and stimulus-withdrawing; an interplay of illusion and disillusion; structuring the beginning and the end of the art performance; weights the uniqueness; initiate, incorporate changes of view, moments of suspension; using art to make visible the conditions of art and the limits of art, the similarities and differences between art and existence, etc.

Yet, there are no general aesthetic or artistic rules in Diderot's writing. Not everything works equally well at all times. For Diderot, this was obvious. Art concretises itself in a context, it is historically situated, just like people and their perceptions. Good artists react to this. They experiment with the possibilities of artistic means. In general, however, it can be stated with Diderot that art should always be capture and distraction, seduction and enlightening. It is the change in the setting of the lenses, the gazes, and the attitudes that remain targeted. Attention must be paid here to the close relationship between body, perception, experience, and cognition. For Diderot, it is not enough to distinguish between perception and cognition. He accentuates the material and thus physical conditions for perception and cognition. It is the eyeballs that create the first free space in the cave, due to their material constitution. Seeing is not generally given without the physical conditions. It is not the thinking that first and foremost becomes free, but it is the human being in their physical constitution that cannot be totally controlled. Diderot outlines here a body politic that is closely related to freedom as an individual one. The interplay of perception, experience, knowledge, thinking, and *body* cannot be reduced to fewer aspects by Diderot, on the contrary, further differentiations regarding especially the understanding of the body would have to be added. Any art or philosophy

or education that breaks up this manifold relationship and underestimates the body relevance cannot be emancipating and constructive regarding freedom and interdependence. Art at its best makes understandable what it means to be “*un être modifiable relié à d’autres*” (a modifiable being connected to others)¹⁶ and empowers one to draw conclusions from it.

The Liberation of the Gaze as a Task of the Individual and of the Civil Society

Diderot’s central question is, how the capture can be interrupted. How is it possible to temporarily reorient the gaze again and again or to let it wander. How is the gaze redirected and, if necessary, directed towards itself? Diderot addresses this question in relation to art, because he attributes to art the ability to initiate the liberation of the gaze, for cognition is always recognised in art as a sensual phenomenon. According to Diderot, unsurprisingly, perception, experience, and political attitude are closely related. In his view, the democratising desire and will for more freedom and more equality must therefore always be taken seriously as a body act and a sensual phenomenon. In this regard, long before the question of how to live together can be formulated and long before people can come together and negotiate a social contract within a state of nature, a shift of the gaze and a shift in perspective are necessary. What exists, that has firstly to be grasped as something not necessary. It can be different. This realisation is an indispensable condition for negotiation. In a historical context in which Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, or Jean-Jacques Rousseau focus on the negotiation potential of people, Diderot brings a much smaller and at the same time much more fundamental condition into view. The individual’s ability to withdraw and create a space of possibility. The situation in which one finds oneself can only become a political one by generating resistance. It is at the place and time when the limits of power are revealed that the political comes into being and can then be changed. Therefore, the prelude to the political state is not a natural situation or a contract, but the moment of revolt against the actual state of being.

Before the participatory question of how we want to live together can be discussed, we must, if we follow Diderot, establish the possibility of coming into the process of questioning. I have already explained the demands Diderot makes on art and artists. Yet, in addition, Diderot takes another group to task as well. It is the people that belong to the third group in Diderot’s cave, i.e. those who want to turn their gaze away. They are called upon to work to ensure that the change of gaze remains possible and ideally for more and more people. In doing so, it is important to promote this individually and socially on different levels.

Diderot sees the starting point of freedom in the individual that seeks to free the gaze. Strictly speaking, only those who have a will for freedom are agents of the political. This goes back that politics exists and can be determined as subject and object. For its part, the will of the individual has to be looked at more closely. With Diderot, the question of how the relation between will and body needs to be exactly determined remains open. Do the eyeballs shift first and does something like the formation of the will arise from this, or is there an intrinsic will that mobilises the shift? The most probable seems to be an intricate interplay of these two components. The elementary revolt in the individual is in any case a small one. Body and perception do not obey. By their non-conformity to authority, they

testify that the political exists, and at the same time that the political always remains limited. It can always extend only temporarily or ostensibly over other lives. Where there is life, aliveness is possible. The totalitarian is destructive and cruel, but not total.

According to Diderot, the starting point of freedom lies in the individual. In addition, the civil society is called to duty. Those who have liberated themselves are continuously responsible to impose and assert a policy of freedom and equality. Diderot sees the task in favour of freedom and liberation with all those who have freed themselves. For them, there are only two possibilities: to become oppressors themselves or to become defenders of freedom. In the first case, they say goodbye to what they have striven for, namely freedom. In the latter case, they do not contradict themselves and remain agents of a democratic order in which the realisation of freedom and equality for all is aspired to. Those who have power do not want to give it away, but those who want to be free must ensure that they become free, over and over again. To be free, according to Diderot, is always to become liberated.

It is the task of those who are attached to freedom to arrange society in such a way that all can let the view wander and that all get to know the experiences of this wandering. Artists and those who are willing to be free are, for Diderot, capable of changing society. They form a coalition. For the continuous realisation of lucid intervals, Diderot puts the onus on art production and artists, and beyond that, as we might say today, on civil society processes and disobedience activities. Interestingly, Diderot does not attribute this capacity for freedom to either philosophers or politicians. The former are too busy trying to find the truth and focus on cognition, the latter pretend to be concerned with justice while they are interested in keeping on the power. The philosophers fail to take sufficient account of the interplay of body, perception, experience, cognition, and reasoning. The politicians know about the relationship of sensuality and freedom, but they seek power over others and therefore they do not guarantee freedom for all.

Thus, it is the task of those who seek freedom for themselves and for all and understand freedom as primarily a bodily and a sensual phenomenon, who must also assert and enforce it. To this end, it is important to recapture one's own gaze. It is indispensable to empower oneself and others to step out of the constantly flowing stream of emotional signals and to try out other and more forms of sensual perception.

Today's Relevance of Lucid Intervals

With Diderot, a form of resistance begins in the displacement of the eyeballs, in the moment of interruption of a being at the mercy of impressions. If we ask ourselves whether our gaze is captured today, it is highly likely that we quickly come to talk about digitisation or those devices that digitally enable access to the world. The one screen in Diderot's work has become pluralised in the process. There are no longer bound bodies that are forced to look at a canvas in an arrested manner. Today, each person carries a personalised screen. Some bodies move relatively freely, but their gaze is remarkably focused on a small, rectangular black box with a smooth surface. We take our phones with us everywhere. According to current empirical studies, this state of captivity of the gaze takes place for an average of around 4-5 h a day.¹⁷ That's how long people in Central Europe look at their smartphones on average. Our bodies

move, we travel around, but our gazes remain surprisingly fixed. We can see everything, but the view of ourselves as viewers sitting in front of the device is neither necessary nor intended. We give ourselves away to the screen worlds and forget about the cave situation in which we constantly find ourselves. Not only has looking become cavernous, but so has our way of communicating. We communicate continuously and with many people, but always with the same or at least with people with similar backgrounds as we do. This situation is not new, but similar to that in pre-democratic and non-democratic estates, where groups of people do not exchange and mix. In this way, the distinct affiliation to a certain group or class is thus not only cultivated but reinforced daily.

Some people will question the idea of a cavernous looking or communication as here described, since social media allowing everyone to become in a way authors of their biography and thus “artists” and since social media is putting us also constantly in contact with so many different people (think of Twitter for example). However, I am doubtful about this view. First, the selection processes regarding the people we talk to are continuously working without us having much to say in the matter. And secondly, social media is less oriented towards dialogue and conversation than towards representation and staging. Within the Net, it is evoked the exposition of personalities and positions and less the deliberating processes. Therefore, even in so called public spaces, we stay somehow in the cave and exchange information with our cave mates. Communication is, on the one hand, increasingly private or even intimate and, on the other hand, driven by our will to get attention from anonymous people. In this way, the private sphere is extended not only for the senses of seeing, but also for those of hearing and communicating. We are not stuck in the cave today, but we carry our cave around with us mostly voluntarily.¹⁸ Going out into public spheres and exchanging ideas with people we don’t share our lifeworld is becoming rarer, and when it happens, it is mostly functionally and economically oriented and to be seen by as many as possible and in the way we get the most attention.

Our cave situation also affects our bodies. Various studies show that our constant use of screens and the linear looking associated with it is detrimental to eyesight. Eye and visual problems are on the rise, even with children. Nearsightedness is a widespread disease.¹⁹ This indicates that the body, the material dimension, should be considered as a separate entity and included in the analysis of the relationship between perception, experience, cognition, and reasoning and also or most of all integrated into a better understanding of freedom and democracy.

If we take Diderot’s dream of the cave seriously, then many are not unhappy in the cave but are captivated by the images and stories. Diderot does not deny this. He states that there are people who do not want to be free or at least do not suspect or know anything about freedom. Nevertheless, Diderot shows decidedly solidarity with those who want to turn their heads and demand freedom of moving and looking. Diderot’s focus is furthermore not on those who are shackled, but on those who intend this bondage. Two groups are given special attention: There are persons who have a vested interest in capturing the gaze of others in this way, and that this kind of captivation prevents the latter from trying out and taking other directions of gaze – especially that on themselves as captives. For – transferred to today – even if we constantly occupy ourselves with pictures and photos of ourselves, we hardly succeed in taking a look at ourselves as observers at the same time. And there are persons who, in spite of these

limitations and fixations, try to turn their gaze and look around. They move, they experiment, they shift the gaze, they realise, that they are not allowed to do so, they try it nevertheless and seek to get an overview of the situation in the cave, of themselves in it and of those who use the lack of freedom for their own advantage.

In his book *In the Swarm*, Byung-Chul Han reflects on digitised life.²⁰ Han explains and criticises how nowadays only spectacle and scandal work on the Net. He speaks of an “oppression of the present”, that captures our gazes and minds. Following Han, it is a matter of constantly outdoing one another, aiming to keep all gazes permanently spellbound. Diderot would probably also problematise this constantly one-dimensional dynamic of attraction of spectacle and scandal today and, as I wanted to show, ask for democratic-aesthetic forms that initiate not only the capture but also the displacement of the gaze. Unlike Han, however, Diderot would not primarily look for solutions outside the digital world here but rather demand them within it. He would not distinguish between what someone has to perceive and what does not but postulate the interval between different ways of looking and the adoption of different forms of looking (and communicating). The attractiveness of the black devices that promise to connect us digitally with the whole world, that make us forget our cave existence and the captivating, should then be counterbalanced by an art that knows how to set stimuli as well as how to withdraw them. Unlike Han, this art would not only take place outside the digital but also and primarily within the digital world. With the means of the medium and its structures, if we follow Diderot, attention would have to be drawn to the conditions of the Net and the digital context. Such an effort would point in a different direction than, for example, offers that are made within the Net as close as possible to reality outside the Net.²¹ Digital art, as Diderot envisions it, does not aim first to answer the question of what is real and what is fake, but rather aims to liberate from captivation. The focus is not on the correct perception but on the possibility to try out different forms of perception, to experiment, and thus to continuously differentiate. In the empowerment of a personal change of view and the experience of lucid intervals lies a power of freedom that democratic orders cannot do without.

Notes

1. See Plato, *The Republic*.
2. Plato, *Ibid.* 514b–515a.
3. See Diderot, *Salon de 1765*.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Diderot, *Salon of 1765*, 402–4.
6. Diderot, *Salon de 1765*, 262.
7. See Roy, “Irresistible Ingénues. Reading and Writing the Greuze Girl’s Body in Diderot’s *Salon de 1765*”; Duro, “Diderot and the destination of art”; Richardot, “Les *Salons* de Diderot: vers le tableau ouvert”; Pavy, “Tonalités polémiques et critiques d’art: Les *Salons* de Diderot”; Endres, “Diderot, Hogarth, and the aesthetics of depilation”; Bryson, “Strategies of happiness: painting and stage in Diderot”.
8. Diderot, *Salon de 1765*, 255.
9. *Ibid.*, 256 (my translation).
10. See Därmann, *Undienlichkeit*.
11. Benne and Abbt, *Mit Texten denken*, 59–81.

12. See Crary, *Schlaflos im Spätkapitalismus*.
13. von Held, *Alienation and Theatricality. Diderot after Brecht*, 2011.
14. See Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting*.
15. Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting*, 17.
16. Salaün, *Rira, rira pas? La place du spectateur selon Diderot*, 187.
17. See, for example, the study of Ataş and Celik on university students in Turkey: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1214011.pdf>.
18. This generates a condition that Jürgen Habermas aptly describes as a state of contemporary “semi-public sphere”. See Habermas, *Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit und deliberative Politik*, 62/63.
19. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/03/well/live/nearsightedness-myopia-children.html>; and <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/11/short-sightedness-cases-rising-globally/>.
20. See Han, *In The Swarm*.
21. See, for example, the platform *BeReal*.

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Notes on Contributor

Christine Abbt is a full professor at the University of St. Gallen (HSG), where she holds the Chair of Philosophy. She is the author of books and numerous articles in the fields of political philosophy, cultural theory, and the theory of democracy, as well as the interplay between art and politics.

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