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# The Phenomenal Contribution of Attention

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Abstract: Strong or Pure Intentionalism is the view that the phenomenal character of a conscious experience is exhaustively determined by its intentional content. Contrastingly, impure intentionalism holds that there are also non content-based aspects or features which contribute to phenomenal character. Conscious attention is one such feature: arguably its contribution to the phenomenal character of a given conscious experience are not exhaustively captured in terms of what that experience represents, that is in terms of properties of its intentional object. This paper attempts to get clearer on the phenomenal contribution of conscious attention. In doing so it considers and sets aside two prominent impure intentionalist accounts, namely the Phenomenal Structure view of Sebastien Watzl, and the Demonstrative Awareness view of Wayne Wu. As an alternative I outline a Modification view, which draws on ideas in Husserlian phenomenology. On this view, we should think of the phenomenal contribution of conscious attention in terms of attentive modifications of what I call a ‘pre-attentive phenomenal field’. I develop this view and highlight its benefits over alternatives.

## **Introduction**

Listening to the opening of the Adagietto in Mahler’s 5<sup>th</sup> symphony, I first pay attention to the string section, and then listening to the same opening again I now pay attention to the harps. Undoubtedly, I undergo the same auditory experience, yet there is a difference which it is intuitive to describe as a *phenomenal* difference; what-it-is-like to listen with an ear for the strings, and conversely to listen with an ear for the harps, is different. More generally, the phenomenal character of one’s experience is shaped by *what one is attending to*, and *the way in which one is attending*. Put differently, the distribution and character of attention shape and affect our conscious experiences, such that it is legitimate to inquire after the phenomenal contribution of attention. What is contested by contemporary philosophers is what this phenomenal contribution amounts to, and more specifically what theory of experiences’ content and phenomenal character can best make sense of it. Now, it should be clear that the above focus needs distinguishing from (i) the idea that non-conscious attentional processes shape conscious experience, and (ii) any investigation into attentional processes or mechanisms as features of information processing systems which do not operate at the conscious level. What I will be interested in here is strictly *conscious* attention, as a phenomenal level feature.<sup>1</sup>

However, what more fundamentally is it that we are looking to explain in talking of ‘the phenomenal contribution of attention’? Here we can turn to Wayne Wu who informatively frames

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<sup>1</sup> For accounts pitched at the non-phenomenal level see Prinz 2012; Mole 2011.

the topic in terms of *phenomenal salience*, such that an account of the phenomenal contribution of attention (or just conscious attention) is fundamentally an account of *what-it-is-like* for some object (and its properties) to be salient in experience: ‘phenomenal salience refers to the way an object or property figures to a subject when she consciously attends to it in perception, a way that constitutes what-it-is-like to attend to that object or property’.<sup>2</sup> In that sense for a subject to be correctly said to be attending to an object or property, that object or property must be *phenomenally salient* to the subject. Indeed, an account of the phenomenal contribution of attention in the case where I am attending to the string section must capture the way in which the strings are *phenomenally salient* to me, such that no other object in my auditory experience is presented to me as the target of my attending. Following Wu’s framing then, providing an account of the phenomenal contribution of attention is fruitfully understood as providing an account of phenomenal salience. This framing has numerous benefits. Aside from illuminating the issue at hand, it makes it clear that conscious attention is an intentional phenomenal in at least the following sense: there is always an ‘object’ of attention in any conscious experience which involves phenomenal salience – where object here can be understood fairly broadly as covering concrete particulars, persons, animals, events, and states of affairs involving these things. Put otherwise, one cannot attend *per se*, but rather one must always be attending to *this or that*.

The aim of this paper is to critique current proposals of phenomenal salience and, drawing on certain ideas in Husserlian phenomenology, outline a novel account of the phenomenal contribution of attention, which I call the *Modification View*. The central claim of the *Modification View* is that we should think of phenomenal salience in terms of a phenomenology of selection, which involves ‘drawing items out’ from what I will call a ‘pre-attentive perceptual field’ (the details of this account are provided later). The structure of the paper is as follows. After providing preliminary remarks concerning different types of attention (section 1), I follow recent accounts in rejecting Pure Intentionalist accounts of phenomenal salience (section 2). However, I also detail worries concerning the two most prominent Impure Intentionalist accounts of phenomenal salience, namely the Phenomenal Structure view of Sebastien Watzl and the Demonstrative Awareness view of Wayne Wu (section 3).<sup>3</sup> Finally, in section 4, I develop the *Modification View*, articulating its core claims and detailing its benefits over alternatives.

Before proceeding let me speak to the broader import of the project. Understanding, and providing an account of, the phenomenal contribution of attention is central to determining the plausibility of views which often go under the label Pure Intentionalism. According to such views the phenomenal character of experience is exhaustively explained in terms of, or determined by, its

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<sup>2</sup> Wu 2011: 93-4.

<sup>3</sup> See Watzl 2017, Wu 2011.

*intentional* (or else representational) content.<sup>4</sup> Contrastingly, different varieties of so-called Impure Intentionalism hold that there are *non-content* based aspects of feature of conscious experiences which at least partly determine or contribute to phenomenal character.<sup>5</sup> So, determining whether the phenomenal contribution of attention can be entirely captured in terms of some aspect of the intentional content of the relevant experiences is clearly central to the prospects of Pure Intentionalism. If such views of conscious attention are unsuccessful – that is if *phenomenal salience* outruns intentional content – then this suggests that Pure Intentionalism cannot be the correct view of what *entirely determines* the phenomenal character of experience. However, even if we are convinced that Pure Intentionalism does not have the resources to explain the phenomenal contribution of attention, the burden is on Impure Intentionalist accounts to provide a plausible account of conscious attention. So, determining the relative success or failure of different accounts of conscious attention has broader ramifications for differing views of what determines the phenomenal character of experience.

Finally, in outlining the *Modification View* I will be freely drawing on claims made by Edmund Husserl concerning conscious attention. While my aim in this paper is neither Husserl exegesis nor to present an account which could strictly claim to be Husserl's own, certain Husserlian ideas concerning conscious attention are central to the *Modification View*, and its distinctiveness from the varieties of Impure Intentionalism about conscious attention mentioned above. Further to this, since Sebastien Watzl, in the presentation of his Phenomenal Structure view, explicitly discusses Husserl – presenting his own view as preferable to the kind of view he ascribes to Husserl – is bears explicating the relevant *Modification View* in more detail, drawing out its distinctive features (which are not, to my mind, adequately discussed in the current philosophical literature on attention), and showing how it preferable to both Watzl Phenomenal Structure view and Wu's Demonstrative Awareness view.

## 1. Types of attention

One of the difficulties in providing an account of *phenomenal salience* turns on the variety of the different forms that conscious attention can take. Given this, it is instructive to begin by getting clearer on these paradigmatic forms and the distinctions that underwrite them.

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<sup>4</sup> Approximations of this view are defended by Dretske 1999; Tye 2002: 137-51; 2014: 39-57; Harman: 1990 31-52; Byrne: 2001: 199-240. Although some of these authors have additional metaphysical commitments relating to the notion of content as *representational content*.

<sup>5</sup> Qualia realists defend approximations of this view; see Block 1996: 19–49; 2003: 165-200; Shoemaker 1996: ch.5, ch.6. Kind 2003: 225–244; Peacocke 1983 (see Dennett 1988; Martin 1998a: 157-79 for scepticism about non-intentional qualia). Alternatively, for those who appeal to the phenomenal contribution of the 'mode' of experience' see Crane 2000: 1-11; 2001: ch1. A precursor to this view is found in Searle 1983: 4-6, 12 and in Block's notion of *mental paint* (see Block 1996: 19–49 2003: 165-200). Chalmers (2004) calls this feature the 'manner of representation' of the experience.

First, we can distinguish between *overt* vs *covert* attention. Overt attention is usually taken to refer to a movement of a sense organ to achieve optimal orientation to the object to which one is attending. A classic example would be moving one's head so as to bring the relevant object into view, so precipitating foveal stimulation or foveal vision (the fovea is the part of the eye which, when stimulated, yields the highest visual acuity). Consider the kind of attention deployed when one is reading particularly small print in a newspaper. Or alternatively, the kind of attention one might pay to changing images in car mirrors when trying to park one's car. Contrastingly, *covert* attention involves no movement of any sense organ, but redirection of one's 'mental regard'. Consider a spy eavesdropping on a conversation taking place on the table behind them. When they hear the conversation turn to the location of the gun shipment, they *redirect* attention, but without any movement (indeed turning their head to look around would likely give them away).

Next, we can distinguish between *maintaining* vs *shifting* attention. A classic case of maintaining attention is 'object fixation' where the subject remains 'locked onto' the relevant object. Cases of fear-responses illustrate this: when a dangerous object is present in their perceptual environment a subject will typically fixate on its movements, maintaining attention on it in order to track it.<sup>6</sup> Less dramatically, think of the kind of attention one pays to the hand movements of a card-trickster, looking to spot the relevant deception. Contrastingly, consider the kind of shifting attention that is characteristic of visual search tasks, where one is primed to 'search for' an object which fits a certain profile. The classic Where's Wally images have this character; one is 'scanning' the picture for Wally, or things that look like Wally, with the difficulty being that the picture has been designed to include various objects that display certain patterns that Wally also does, the most prominent being red and white horizontal stripes.

We can also distinguish between *voluntary* and *involuntary* attention. Voluntary attention can be aligned with explicit acts of attending, which usually involve an *intention* to attend.<sup>7</sup> Attention of this kind is usually what is being investigated in experimental settings when a subject is asked to do things like 'attend to the leftmost red dot on the screen'. It is also the kind of attention people express when they say things like 'I'm going to pay attention now', or 'the important part is coming up, I really need to focus'. Contrastingly, consider the way in which significant stimuli or objects *passively capture* attention. Loud noises are paradigmatic: When I hear the sound of a gunshot, attention is captured in a way which is involuntary, at least in the sense that there wasn't and needn't be any explicit intention to attend, and often attention is captured in a way over which I have little to no control (at least in the first instance; I may have *more or less control* over whether to maintain attention on the relevant object after initial attention capture). Indeed startle-responses may be one of the most familiar forms of involuntary attention capture.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Faucher and Tappolet 2002 for detailed discussion of attention and fear.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the 'active' dimension of attention see section 3 and 4.

<sup>8</sup> For discussion of startle see Robinson 1995.

Finally, we can distinguish between *synchronic* vs *diachronic* attention.<sup>9</sup> In the case of synchronic attention, the relevant object is highlighted in the subject's perceptual field *in contrast* to other objects, which while co-perceived, are nonetheless *not* attended to. Consider the example with which we began. When listening to the Adagietto in Mahler's 5<sup>th</sup> symphony with an 'ear for the string part', the strings are highlighted or 'salient' for me, in a way which contrasts with the harp part, which I still hear, but I am nonetheless not attending to. Contrastingly, we can think of *diachronic* attention as capturing the way in which objects seem or appear different from how they were prior to attention. Sticking with the same example, the string part may now seem more arresting or moving than it did prior to my attending to it.

On the basis of these distinctions, it is fair to say that the way objects are phenomenally salient is varied. As such, any plausible account of phenomenal salience must allow for the variety we find in the character of conscious attention. More specifically, there seem to be two central cases of phenomenal salience which such accounts must speak to. In the first instance, there are those cases of voluntary attention which involve explicit intentions to attend, (usually) along with the maintaining of attention on an object, and which are often characterised by the kind of synchronicity described above. Drawing again on our example, I form the explicit intention to attend the string section when listening to the music, and for the duration of my auditory experience I maintain attention on it, in contrast to the harp part. Next, consider that often outside of experimental settings and scenarios in which we intend to attend, our attention is *passively captured* in a way which is involuntary and involves a shift of attention towards the relevant object, and in certain cases this may involve those diachronic features mentioned above. So, while there may be significant variation in the precise character which attention takes in any conscious episode (or attentive experience as I will sometimes put it), at a minimum any plausible account of phenomenal salience must cover these paradigm cases.

## 2. Pure Intentionalism about Attention

Pure Intentionalism is roughly the view that the phenomenal character of experience is entirely determined by its intentional content; there are no features of experience to which we need to appeal to explain phenomenal character other than the represented features or properties of the object. Applied to the case of attention we get the following view: the phenomenal contribution of attention, and so phenomenal salience, can be exhaustively explained in terms of *represented properties* of the object. Take again our central case of the auditory experiences enjoyed when listening to the Adagietto in Mahler's 5<sup>th</sup> symphony with the different distributions of attention. The phenomenal contrast between the case in which I am attending to the string section compared to when I am attending to the harp can, so the account goes, be exhaustively explained in terms of *differences in the*

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<sup>9</sup> See Wu 2011.

*represented properties of the music*. Put otherwise, there is no further feature, in addition to these represented properties, that we need to enlist to explain phenomenal salience.

For such a view to be plausible we need concrete proposals for what the relevant represented properties are. After all, in the music case there is a shared auditory content between the two experiences which involve different distributions of attention, since I am listening to the same piece of music. William James suggests an appeal to the relative *seeming magnitude* of the relevant properties, writing that ‘in listening for certain notes in a chord, the one we attend to sounds probably a little more loud’.<sup>10</sup> The idea is that when I attend to the string section the strings seem *comparatively louder* in contrast to the harps, and vice versa when I am attending to the harps. A range of experiments conducted by Marisa Carrasco and her colleagues also support the idea that attention leads to (seeming) increases in the magnitudes of relevant properties: the experiments demonstrated that visual attention to certain comparatively lower contrast Gabor patches leads to *contrast boosts*, such that the attended-to patches appear as having the same contrast as patches which in fact are of higher contrast.<sup>11</sup>

Now, we can distinguish between *modality specific* vs *cross-modal* (or generic) versions of Pure Intentionalism about attention. The modality specific view would appeal to different kinds of represented properties across modalities, say *apparent loudness* in the case of hearing, *heightened (apparent) contrast* in the case of vision, and so on and so forth. As such there would not be one represented property enlisted to account for phenomenal salience across sense modalities, but rather we would have a *disjunctive account* of the phenomenal contribution of attention. Contrastingly, consider that the Pure Intentionalist about attention might prefer a generic view, such that there would be one property an appeal to the representation of which can be enlisted cross-modally to explain the effects that attention has on the content of experience. One candidate for such a generic property might be the (relative) *determinacy* of the object (and its properties) to which we are attending. For example, it might be held that in focusing attention on a particular patch of red, say in contrast to other co-perceived red patches, the patch to which I am attending looks to be *of a more determinate shade*. Alternatively, in the auditory case, perhaps the string section now appears ‘clearer’ or ‘sharper’ than the harp part.<sup>12</sup>

Let me first focus on this generic version of Pure Intentionalism about attention and the appeal to determinacy, since this looks the most plausible proposal for what the generic represented property

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<sup>10</sup> James 1890: 425

<sup>11</sup> See Carrasco *et al* 2004. For further philosophical discussion of the import of these experiments see Block, 2010, Stazicker 2011, and Beck and Schneider 2017.

<sup>12</sup> See Nanay 2010 for this kind of view. An alternative might be to appeal to the idea that attention leads to there being a *perceptual object* whatsoever. However, this seems implausible if we accept that we can be aware of items in our peripheral perceptual field ‘as objects’, say the cup on my desk which is currently not my focus of attention but is nonetheless in my peripheral visual field (see section 4 for more discussion of ideas relevant to this).

might be (it also taps into widely shared background intuitions that attention to objects make them ‘clearer’ or ‘sharper’ in some way). First, it bears repeating that the view is not merely that attention boosts the (relative) determinacy of the object (and its properties) to which we are attending, but that such effects *exhaust* the phenomenal contribution of conscious attention, as part of the intentional content of those experiences. Put otherwise: phenomenal salience is *nothing more* than the relevant effects on perceptual determinacy as reflected in the represented properties (and so intentional content). Given this, if perceptual determinacy and phenomenal salience can come apart, or if we can find cases in which phenomenal salience outstrips perceptual determinacy then the view will be false.

Let’s first consider a case in which perceptual determinacy and phenomenal salience come apart, such that perceptual determinacy is not *necessary* for phenomenal salience. Say you are someone who has impaired vision, such that to see the world around you with any degree of clarity (or determinacy we might say) you need to be wearing glasses, although your impairment is not so bad that you cannot distinguish objects in your visual field, even if their boundaries can sometimes be somewhat ‘fuzzy’. Say you are in a room with various objects located at various positions and distances from you, but you have been deprived of your glasses. It is plausible to think that just in virtue of attending to different objects that occupy your visual field you will not obviously therefore gain any more determinate perception of any of those objects, such that despite focusing attention say on the leftmost object, it does not therefore become *more determinate*. Given your visual impairment the object will remain blurred. Nonetheless it is *that specific blurry object*, namely the leftmost one, which as you attend to it, is *phenomenally salient for you*; it is ‘highlighted’ or ‘picked out’ from your (blurry) visual field, such that there is no other object in your visual experience that is presented to you as the target of your attending. But phenomenal saliency in this case isn’t co-extensive with any noticeable change in determinacy, or at least such a change in determinacy doesn’t seem necessary. Our subject is plausibly taken to be deploying visual-spatial attention, but they need not enjoy any increase in the relative determinacy of the object to which they are attending; it is not as if in virtue of attending to the leftmost object it somehow becomes ‘less blurry’ than its co-percepts; ‘everything is blurry, but I’m focusing on *that blurry object*’, our subject might say.<sup>13</sup> If this is a plausible description of how such a case would (or at least could) play out then perceptual determinacy and phenomenal salience can come apart.

It also seems that phenomenal saliency can outstrip perceptual determinacy. Say we agree with proponents of the determinacy view that perceptual attention can lead to an increase in (relative) determinacy. What reason is there to think that such determinacy-increases *exhaust* the phenomenal contribution of attention, such that all there is to phenomenal saliency is the relevant increase in

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<sup>13</sup> Watzl makes a phenomenological observation which chimes with this analysis: ‘What-it-is-like to look through a pane of glass that gives you a more determinate view of (a part of) the left side is not at all what is like to focus your attention on something to your left. Visual-spatial attention does not feel like spatially delimited eagle vision’. (2017: 170) It is also worth noting that Husserl (1982: §92) makes a similar argument.



determinacy? Take the following case: Say we discover (through experimental means) that visual-spatial attention to a written sentence on a newspaper ‘sharpens’ the image for typical subjects by a specific magnitude. We then construct an image of the written sentence which has the same degree of sharpness (whatever precisely that is) as is enjoyed in the case where visual attention is focused on it; we thus artificially replicate the supposed boost in determinacy which visual-spatial attention putatively affords. Now we present our subject with two images, the first unaltered written sentence (image 1) side by side with the artificially sharpened second image (image 2). We ask our subject to ‘focus on’ the first unaltered image, and then to switch attention to the second image. If the determinacy view were correct – if the relevant changes in represented determinacy exhaust the phenomenal contribution of attention, capturing all there is to phenomenal saliency – then there should be *no phenomenal contrast* between the attentive experiences in which the subject is attending to the first image and to the second image. What-it-is-like to attend to *image 1* should be identical to what-it-is-like to attend to *image 2* (since they both have the same intentional content *qua* relevant determinacy of the image as a represented property). But this seems incorrect: arguably what-it-is-like to attend to an image (image 2) which artificially replicates the relevant sharpness of a previously attended image (image 1), is not the same as what-it-is-like to attend in the first instance to the original unsharpened image that is ‘made sharper’, by one’s attending to it. Surely, *attending to a sharpened image* does not ‘feel the same’ as attending to image that is ‘brought into focus’ in one’s so attending. Something looks to be different in the first case when one attends and experiences an increase in determinacy *in virtue of one’s so attending*, whereas in the second case the relevant attentional-effect *qua* represented property has already been built into the image (so to speak). It is a natural further question what explains the phenomenal difference here (if we take it as intuitive that there is one), but for the moment we can just stress the point that the determinacy-view comes unstruck in cases like this – it predicts phenomenal identity where there is phenomenal difference.<sup>14</sup>

Note, it is implausible to say that in the case in which I attend to image-2 that it becomes ‘yet sharper’ (or yet more determinate), and that it is this further *increase in determinacy* which explains the phenomenal contrast between the cases. Plausibly there is an upper limit to how ‘sharp’ or ‘determinate’ the image can be experienced as being, which is fixed not just by the relative ‘sharpness’ of the image but the acuity of the subject’s visual apparatus.<sup>15</sup> And it surely can’t be the case that whenever we replicate some ‘further sharpness’ in a yet different image and then attend to it that visual-spatial attention yields *yet more sharpness or determinacy*.

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<sup>14</sup> See Watzl 2017: 173-4 for a somewhat similar way of showing that phenomenally saliency can outstrip perceptual determinacy, using ‘appearance replicas’ which turn on different distributions of attention across cases.

<sup>15</sup> The ‘sharpness of the image’ could be artificially increased beyond the point at which such an increase could be registered by the human eye.

What is the lesson to be drawn from cases like these in which we *replicate* the supposed determinacy-boosting effects of perceptual attention? Arguably it shows that in our original cases the phenomenal contribution of attention was not exhaustively captured by the representation of determinacy, since we can enjoy experiences which artificially replicate that effect, and so in which the intentional content is the same (identical determinacy of image), but which seem to phenomenally contrast with our original experience. Simply put: the phenomenal contribution of attention cannot be entirely captured by appeal to representation of heightened determinacy.

Say we are convinced by the above considerations and take the view that *generic* Pure Intentionalist views of attention are not the way to go. Might we not then opt for *modality specific* versions of the view, at least holding out the possibility that Pure Intentionalism about attention might be correct cross-modally, it is just that we need to find the modality specific properties. Let's take the visual case, and what seems, given Carrasco's experiments, a plausible candidate for the relevant modality specific properties that can be enlisted to explain phenomenal salience, namely *heightened contrast*. The claim would be that heightened contrast, as a represented property, is co-extensive with phenomenal salience; put otherwise, in the case of vision, where we find the representation of *heightened contrast*, we should also find *phenomenal salience*.

If such a view were correct, we should expect that in a given scenario in which there are objects of different contrasts that the one which is of *highest contrast* will be the phenomenally salient one. But, at least according to Wayne Wu, this need not be the case:

Our visual world is filled with objects that differ in contrast, brightness, saturation etc. Our capacity for conscious attention to an object, and thereby rendering it phenomenally salient, is not in principle limited by the relative magnitude of these parameters although attention can be correspondingly more or less difficult in specific cases (Wu 2011: 103)<sup>16</sup>

As Wu goes on to argue, the problem in the case of an appeal to the representation of *heightened contrast* is that it seems possible for the subject to attend to, and thereby 'make phenomenally salient', the (represented as) *dullest contrast* object in their visual field, thus undermining the necessity of *heightened (comparative) contrast* to phenomenal salience. And on the flip-side, just by being represented as *higher contrast* an object is not thereby necessarily phenomenally salient – we can always ignore it or simply decide not to attend to the (represented as) highest contrast object – which suggests that the

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<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, Husserl (1973: §17) provides an example which bears out Wu's point, writing: "To be sure the heightening of the affective power is necessarily determined by certain alterations of the mode of perceptive givenness of the object, as for example, that of the whistle of a locomotive which passes in front of us; but such a mode of givenness need not by itself bring about a turning-toward of the ego. One need not pay attention to a powerful stimulus if one is engaged in conversation with an 'important person'.

representation of *heightened (comparative) contrast* cannot suffice for phenomenal saliency.<sup>17</sup> Put simply, the candidate representational property for capturing phenomenal salience in visual perception turns out not to necessarily co-vary phenomenal saliency, such that phenomenal saliency is not plausibly tied to that candidate represented property. According to Wu the problem generalises:

Given any visual parameter that can plausibly be used to define salience [where salience is a represented property of the object] including parameters that have continuous magnitudes such as brightness or (colour) saturation, it seems that we can always consciously attend to the object in the visual field that is lowest in magnitude along that parameter. Similarly, we can ignore an object of great magnitude. (Wu 2011: 104)

If these arguments are along the right lines, then it seems that even Pure Intentionalism about attention as restricted in scope to specific modalities – in this case vision – might be problematic.

Building on the above, let me now explore another significant, but in this case more general, objection to Pure Intentionalism about attention, which turns on the *gradeability* of attention. Consider the idea that one can attend *more carefully or closely*, or one's attention can be captured *more strongly*, or *comparatively weakly*. The problem is that it is not clear how to best make sense of the *gradeability* of attention on an account which explains the phenomenal contribution of attention exclusively in terms of relevant differences in represented properties of the objects attended to. The Pure Internationalist would have to say that the relevant *grade* of attention, say whether one is attending more or less carefully, is something whose phenomenal contribution is exhaustively reflected in the 'grade' or relevant different magnitudes or determinacy of a represented property of the object (e.g., the image becomes 'more clear' the *more closely* I attend to it). Yet, regardless of whether that is plausible as an account of the way gradeability works in conscious attention – does the image really become *clearer and yet more clear* the *more one focuses on it?* – it is at best only a partial account. This is because the way in which I am attending, *now more carefully and closely*, *now less carefully and closely*, is an *activity* which is inescapably something 'I am doing', as an activity of the subject, and more importantly *that it precisely how it seems* (reflecting that the phenomenology of attention includes what we might call a 'subject-side' contribution or aspect, as well as an 'object-side' contribution or aspect).<sup>18</sup> As, we will see in the

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<sup>17</sup> See Wu 2011: 102. For a similar argument against Pure Intentionalism based on shifts in attention see Speaks 2010.

<sup>18</sup> This is also reflected in attention-based responsibility ascriptions: i.e., we can be, to more or less extent, held responsible for failing to pay attention, or not paying *sufficiently close* attention, to pertinent things, in a way it seems less plausible we can be held responsible for *perceptually representing something a certain way*, even if in the relevant cases attentionally-focused perceptual experience leads to relevant 'noticed' differences in represented properties of objects. When I encourage someone to 'pay *closer* attention', this isn't obviously just an injunction to *represent the object more determinately, or more clearly*, even if in paying closer attention that is one of the effects.

following sections the idea of conscious attention as an *activity of the subject* is central to extant varieties of Impure Intentionalism about conscious attention, as well as the Modification View which will be considered in Section 4.

Supporting the above, a range of relevant terms for both attention-capture scenarios and voluntary-attention cases, also display that it was not merely a *change in the object* but *change in the subject* which is present in attentional contexts; we talk of the subject who was, in attentive experience, more or less ‘distracted’, ‘arrested’, ‘diverted’, ‘touched’, ‘moved’, ‘immersed’, ‘scrutinizing’, ‘engrossed’. These terms reflect relatively gradeable modifications or modulations of conscious experience (an idea I will return to in the *Modification View* presented in Section 4), which it is strained to think are, phenomenologically, *exclusively* a matter of the objects of the relevant experiences *seeming a certain way*.

The next step if we find the considerations broached in this section plausible is expressed in the following claim: the phenomenal contribution of our attending to whatever specific object that we are (in any given modality), cannot be exhaustively captured by appeal to any represented properties of the object. Put otherwise, the phenomenal contribution of attention cannot merely be a matter of the (putatively additional) *content* of attentive experiences, but should also be explained in terms of some non-content based aspects. To say this much is to move in the direction of an Impure Intentionalist account of phenomenal salience. It is worth noting, however, that regardless of the details of any such account they can all accept that attention (in various different ways, and perhaps differently in across modalities) modulates and modifies the relevant represented properties of the object, perhaps along the parameters and magnitudes we have been discussing (e.g., heightened contrast, loudness etc.). The central claim is just that given the considerations offered so far this cannot be the whole story.

### 3. Varieties of Impure Intentionalism

In this section I focus on two varieties of Impure Intentionalism; first the Phenomenal Structure view offered by Sebastian Watzl and secondly the Demonstrative Awareness view of Wayne Wu.

According to Watzl we should think of the phenomenal contribution of attention as turning on the way in which attention involves a (re)organization of a subject’s field of consciousness, along the lines of relative centrality. As Watzl puts it, ‘the fact that your experience is structured by relative centrality is what constitutes the phenomenal property shared by *all* conscious attention episodes’.<sup>19</sup> For Watzl the ‘conscious field’ is composed of what he calls qualitative parts, which for our purposes we can take to be intentional experiences. The key idea is that such experiences bear what he calls ‘centrality’ relations to other experiences within that conscious field – some experiences will be central, some will be peripheral. As such in any given overall conscious experience which involves attention there will be an overall phenomenal structure which is to be specified in terms of the relative

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<sup>19</sup> Watzl 2017: 184.

centrality relations that hold between the relevant experiences. For example, the current pain I am experiencing may be *more central* relative to the background noise I can hear (my auditory experience). This phenomenal structure is categorically not a represented property of any attentive experience (or any experience involving the deployment of attention), but rather is theorized by Watzl as a *structural feature of consciousness*. And he is clear that the relative centrality of experiences within the conscious field need not co-vary or correlate with any ‘appearance properties’ the objects of those experiences are represented as having. As he puts it: ‘none of these [appearance properties] *correlates* of occupying particular positions in a subject’s centrality system should be mistaken for what it *is* for an experience to be central, in the field, or at the fringe of consciousness. The correlates [the attention-specific represented properties] will vary from case to case, are likely different in different sensory modalities, or in different types of organisms. Centre, periphery, and fringe and structural and not qualitative features of conscious experience’.<sup>20</sup> Clearly then Watzl’s phenomenal structure view counts as a variety of *Impure Intentionalism* about conscious attention; it appeals to a specific non-content based aspect, namely phenomenal structure (understood in terms of relative centrality relations of experiences), to explain the overall phenomenal character of attentive experiences.

Watzl also provides a specific gloss on the notion of phenomenal salience. According to him what it is for some object to be phenomenally salient is for it to issue ‘a felt instruction to restructure one’s field of consciousness so that something else becomes central’.<sup>21</sup> This is borne out, he claims, in the case of hearing a fire alarm: ‘the fire alarm experience tells you something. It tells you, first, something about what is happening outside: there appears to be sound with a certain auditory quality in a certain direction. But your experience also seems to tell you something else. It seems to tell you to look and listen to what is happening there’.<sup>22</sup> He then goes on to further frame the idea as follows: ‘In the case of *phenomenal* salience what is represented as to be achieved is a *centrality* structure. We experience a command to put a certain qualitative part at the centre of consciousness. In the case of the fire alarm the command is roughly: put the experience of this fire alarm at the centre of your experience’.<sup>23</sup>

There are further aspects of Watzl’s detailed view of attention but for our purposes the above overview will suffice as for framing the Phenomenal Structure view. Let me now detail some worries one might have with this view.

We can label the first worry as the ‘Mental Tinkering’ objection as a development of an objection suggested by Wu.<sup>24</sup> According to the view under consideration in paradigmatic cases of attention

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid: 195. For reasons that need not concern us here Watzl prefers to frame what we have called *attention-specific representational properties* as ‘appearance properties’ (see Ibid: Ch.8).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid: 213.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid: 214.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid: 221. There is some debate about whether Watzl use of *phenomenal salience* tracks what is arguably a less theoretically demanding use as outlined by Wu 2011 (see Wu 2019: 945-53).

<sup>24</sup> See Wu 2019.

capture (which involve the involuntary shift of conscious attention to the relevant objects) the ‘instruction’ we get from the world is, at least in part, to restructure our *conscious field*, such that we put the relevant experience ‘at the centre’ of that field. But in a certain respect the relevant ‘instruction’ or ‘command’ seems *misdirected* or at least might have the potential to interfere with what we might think should be the primary focus of the subject in paradigmatic cases of attention capture, namely the relevant object in ‘the world’. Put otherwise, insofar as we want to talk in terms of ‘commands’ or ‘instructions’ from perceptual objects in paradigmatic cases of attention capture surely the relevant command would, say in the case of danger, be *run away from that*, or *get away from that*, or something to this effect. As Wu puts it, ‘the goal of a capacity to have attention captured [in such cases] is to allow the creature to respond directly to external changes and not to fiddle with its internal world...if there is a command given in attentional capture, it is to orientate to the world.’<sup>25</sup>

Developing this objection, one might think that the original appeal to fire *alarms* – as one of Watzl’s examples and one to which Wu also responds – in fact is apt to skew the analysis. After all, fire *alarms* are indicators or notifiers of possible fire, which are artificially designed to capture attention. Yet insofar as the *fire alarm* itself is not that which is dangerous one might be drawn to think that it makes sense to theorize such an episode of hearing a fire alarm as involving a kind of experienced-directed command, namely to affect some change in the phenomenal structure of one’s conscious field. Contrastingly, consider the following example. Say, rather than hearing a fire alarm, someone actually sees a fire breaking out at the end of the corridor at which they are standing. Insofar as there is any ‘command’ experienced as being issued from the object (which in this case is the relevant event infolding), it is surely not to *restructure one’s field of consciousness* to put ‘this experience’ – the visual experience of the fire breaking out – at the centre (relative to some other experiences which should be put at the ‘periphery’ or ‘fringe’, perhaps my phone beeping in my pocket). In paradigmatic ‘danger contexts’ in which attention is captured, the relevant perceptual object is *the danger* (as we might put it), rather than being a mere indicator or ‘sign’ of (potential) danger. In those cases, it should be clear that any experience (rather than world) directed ‘command’ is going to be open to the charge of *misdirecting* (and improperly using up) the subject’s cognitive resources. The subject should be first and foremost *attending to the danger as a means to react appropriately to it*, and insofar as our attentive experiences, particularly in paradigmatic attention capture scenarios, were pervasively characterised by experience-directed commands to enact re-organizations of our ‘conscious fields’, then we would be engaging in oddly *mental* activity, in what is first and foremost a salient ‘worldly’ or ‘non-mental’ scenario.

A second, related worry about the Phenomenal Structure view is that it is susceptible to a version of a worry Gilbert Harman raised with ‘sense datum’ views of intentional experience.<sup>26</sup> According to Harman we should resist any confusion of the properties of the Intentional Object of experience

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<sup>25</sup> Wu 2019: 948.

<sup>26</sup> See Harman 1990.

with the *properties of the experience itself*. Arguably, analogously, it might be said that when it comes to conscious attention, we should avoid confusing *an activity* concerning the Intentional object of experience with an *activity* concerning the experience itself. The Phenomenal Structure view seems to imply, even if only indirectly, that a central part of the phenomenology of attention turns on an activity which involves the re-organizing or re-structuring one's conscious field (even if what one is re-organising are fundamentally intentional experience of objects). Contrastingly, we might think that conscious attention is first and foremost an activity concerning how we *structure or prioritise objects in the world*. To use the above example, it is the *fire* (and its danger) that is 'prioritized' relative to the beeping of my phone, not *per se* my *experiences of these things*. Put simply: the relevant 'priority structure' seems to be 'out there' rather than 'in here', and what gets 'restructured' is not *my mind* but rather 'the world', or more precisely the objects in it.<sup>27</sup> In response, it might be said that the effect of *prioritizing certain objects in world*, through attending to them, is also to affect a change in one's conscious field *qua* the relative centrality of the experiences of those objects. But even if that is the case then it seems the kind of re-organization of a subject's conscious field which the Phenomenal Structure view takes to be of critical importance to understanding the phenomenal contribution of attention might merely be a downstream *effect* of attention being focused on objects in the world in the specific way it is, rather than constituting its fundamental nature at the phenomenal level.

Developing this objection with a different example and from a slightly different direction, arguably the Phenomenal Structure view also has the consequence that it blurs the boundary between paradigm cases of attentive experience whose objects of concern are exteroceptive 'worldly matters' and rarer instances in which subjects do indeed attempt or engage in attention-based re-organisations of their experiences themselves (as 'items' in their 'inner conscious field'). Consider, for example, the way in which subjects who experience a range of unpleasant unbidden and intrusive thoughts and feelings might attempt (with the help of certain therapeutic techniques), and perhaps regardless of the *specific contents* in any concrete instances (say such thoughts and feelings just have for the subject a general marker like 'one of those thoughts/feelings I don't want to have'), to *redirect attention* toward more pleasant thoughts and feelings. In those cases, the subjects might plausibly be described as attempting to *restructure their field of consciousness*, attempting some alteration of the priority structure of, in this case, a range of conscious thoughts and feelings. But that kind of activity seems like something which is not only more rarefied, but substantively different from the way in which in paradigm cases of attention capture and indeed voluntary attentive experience our focus is *first and foremost* the worldly matters *represented by our conscious experiences* rather than the experiences themselves. The worry then might be expressed by saying that the view under consideration is apt to theorize paradigm cases of attentive experience as much closer to the kinds of case described above that we intuitively take them to be; the attention-based activity described in our intrusive thought example clearly should not be

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<sup>27</sup> I develop this idea in more detail in section 4.

taken as the paradigm case of attentive experience, but on the Phenomenal Structure view it isn't clear why not, and perhaps more pressingly the view seems to blur the distinction between these kinds of cases.<sup>28</sup>

Now, it should be noted that these worries are not to be taken as decisive objections against the view. Rather they just document problems that the view might have to overcome or respond to.

Next, we can turn to Wu's Demonstrative Awareness view. According to Wu rather than thinking of the phenomenal contribution of attention, and so phenomenal salience, as turning (exclusively) on the representation of any (attention-specific) property, we should appeal to a specific manner or mode of representation that is constitutive of attentive experience, which according to Wu is *demonstrative cognition* (in this sense the view counts as a form of Impure Intentionalism, since 'modes' or 'manners' of representation are not aspects of content). Here is how Wu frames the view in the case of voluntary attention: 'It is hard to find cases when voluntary attention and awareness of it come apart. In general, when we voluntarily or intentionally attend to x, whether in directing attention to x or simply maintaining attention on it, we do so with awareness of what we are doing.'<sup>29</sup> The idea, therefore, is that phenomenal salience is constituted by a kind of higher-order or reflexive demonstrative awareness, such that at least in cases of voluntary attention, where it is intuitive to describe attentional selection as an intentional action, we are cognitively aware that the relevant object is the 'target' or 'focus' of our *intentions to attend*. Put otherwise, phenomenal salience is fundamentally a kind of *awareness that we are actively attending to object we are*.

Returning again to our stock case, consider the attentive experience in which I am listening to the opening of the Adagietto in Mahler's 5<sup>th</sup> symphony with an ear for the string section. According to the Demonstrative Awareness view what it is for the string section to be phenomenally salient – what constitutes the phenomenal contribution of attention in this (and similar) cases – in contrast to the co-perceived (but unattended) harp, is that in voluntarily selecting the string section I enjoy a reflexive, cognitive awareness of the string section as the target of my activity of attending.<sup>30</sup> I enjoy an awareness of what I am doing *qua* actively attending in the way I am to specifically the object that I am. As Wu goes on to gloss the view: 'synchronic phenomenal salience is intelligibly related to the

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<sup>28</sup> There is also a worry that Phenomenal Structure view, insofar as it appeals specifically *imperative contents*, is apt to seem cognitively sophisticated, or over-intellectualised. Since developing this objection would require saying significantly more on the nature of imperative contents I don't develop this objection here. However, it is worth noting that the *Modification View* sketched in Section 4 does not posit such contents, and in general is less susceptible to the charge of over-intellectualisation than both the Phenomenal Structure view and the Demonstrative Thought view (see below for discussion).

<sup>29</sup> Wu 2011: 110.

<sup>30</sup> In this sense, not any *reflexive awareness* would do – it is *demonstrative reflexive awareness*, as the awareness that we are actively attending to the object we are.



selectivity of perceptually-based demonstrative thought, namely that one is thinking in a specific way about just that object in contrast to other concurrently perceived objects.<sup>31</sup>

Now, even if we find this kind of (higher-order) Demonstrative Awareness view initially plausible, a significant question is how it deals with cases of paradigmatic attention capture, especially given the obvious point that it is less intuitive to describe the case in which my attention is passively captured by environmental stimuli as involving an *intentional action*. Wu says the following: ‘intuitively the diachronic salience of an object to which we shift attention [covering paradigmatic cases of attention capture] is that of its coming to occupy our thoughts by anchoring them whereas prior to attending to it, it does not anchor those thoughts’.<sup>32</sup> Take a paradigm case of attention capture, say that of a fear episode with involves a passive capture of attention by an approaching aggressive dog. In such a case attention is involuntarily captured, and typically maintained on the object for as long as it remains a threat. What it is for the aggressive dog to be *phenomenally salient*, according to the Demonstrative Awareness view, is that once attention is so (passively) captured, the aggressive dog now is such that it *anchors cognition*, whereas prior to such capture of attention it did not. As such, we still putatively enjoy an *awareness that we are attending to the object we are*, which takes the form of a demonstrative-cognitive awareness of the way the aggressive dog *and only the aggressive dog* has become our focus. Or so seems a plausible gloss on how the Demonstrative Awareness view deals with such cases.

With the view outlined, let me now consider some worries. The first concerns putative cases in which I can enjoy demonstrative thoughts about items that I would not plausibly describe as those to which I am currently attending. Take the following example. Say there are four black dots presented to a subject to on a screen. Say I am asked to focus visual attention on the right-most dot, and remain so focused for a fixed duration of time (say one-minute). During that time period, I might, if I so wish, entertain a demonstrative thought concerning the left most dot which is at the periphery of my field of vision. Say the content of the demonstrative thought is of the form <that black dot at the left edge of the screen>. It is plausible to think that during this period the right most dot remains, or at least can remain, the focus of my visual attention, and indeed is the object which is phenomenally salient to me in the theory-neutral way that we originally framed phenomenal salience, such that *no other object* in my visual experience is presented to me as the target of my attending. Nonetheless the target of the demonstrative thought I am enjoying seems to have come apart from what I am visually attending to. However, if the focus of attention *qua* what is phenomenally salient, and the target of demonstrative thought can come apart like this then we might think it questionable whether demonstrative awareness is constitutive of phenomenal salience in the way the view under consideration suggests. Of course, there is a demonstrative thought in the vicinity of attentive experience but it targets the wrong object (so to speak), and since phenomenal salience is supposed

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<sup>31</sup> Wu 2011: 111.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid: 113.

to be constituted by the *relevant* demonstrative cognition, the possibility of demonstrative cognition running free of the former suggests that there might not be the necessary connection between phenomenal salience and demonstrative-cognition the view requires.<sup>33</sup>

The above worry also connects to a related point about the connection between attentive experience and demonstrative thought. At least according to John Campbell and Husserl experiences which involve the deployment (or activity) of attention are what *explains the possibility of* (perceptually based) demonstrative thought.<sup>34</sup> Put in the language we have adopted here, we might say that phenomenal salience grounds demonstrative thought: it is because the relevant object is ‘picked out’ in an act of attention, say in contrast to other co-perceived objects, that there is the *possibility* of my demonstrative reference to it as expressed in a demonstrative thought of the kind ‘that thing over there’ or ‘this thing’. Insofar as we take demonstrative-cognition to be constitutive of phenomenal salience (or acts of attention) we might think we can no longer appeal to attentive experience and acts of attention as that which grounds the possibility of demonstrative thought.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, and perhaps more pressingly, it might be argued that the demonstrative awareness view is open to the charge of positing a cognitive complexity to paradigmatic cases of attentive experience which might limit the scope of the view in an unappealing way, specifically if we think that certain non-human animals and human infants can enjoy relevantly (phenomenally) similar attentive experiences, in which objects (and their properties) are phenomenally salient, but do not plausibly have ascribed the relevant cognitive sophistication. Now we need to be careful how we understand this objection since the sense of demonstrative-cognition which Wu takes to be constitutive of phenomenal salience need not be construed along the lines of the idea that attentive experiences necessarily involve demonstrative *judgements* deploying demonstrative terms or concepts, say of the form <*that* thing over to the left>. Rather, to repeat, the view takes the relevant form of demonstrative-cognition to be a kind of higher-order or reflexive *awareness of attending*. Perhaps in certain cases this reflexive demonstrative awareness might take the form of *explicit* demonstrative thoughts, but if we are being sympathetic to the view, we should note that it needn’t, and can just as well take the form of a less cognitively demanding *awareness of attending*.

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<sup>33</sup> Is this a case of *split attention*, perhaps with visual attention being focused on the right-most dot and cognitive-attention being focused on the left-most dot? Perhaps, but it is not clear appeal to split attention here gets the demonstrative awareness view off the hook – cognitive-demonstrative attention should not (given what the view says) dissociate from perceptual attention. Nor does it seem plausible to say, or at least it does not seem to be necessary to say, that there are *two* instances of (perceptually-related) demonstrative-cognition in this episode, one which concerns the right-most dot I am currently visually attending to, and one which concerns the left-most dot at the periphery (rather it seems the former one is absent, or at least can be).

<sup>34</sup> See Campbell 2002 and Husserl 1982: sections 35 and 37, and 1973: sections 17-18.

<sup>35</sup> For further discussion of this point, and replies on behalf of Wu to this issue see his 2011.

Nonetheless, even if we take this to be the right thing to say on this matter, such that the relevant notion of ‘demonstrative thought’ in play can in certain cases be sufficiently non-demanding to avoid worries about over-intellectualising attentive experience, we might still think that the general idea of an awareness of an intentional act (in this case acts of attention), is contentious. Put otherwise, higher-order or reflexive forms of awareness seem to go beyond the more minimal *awareness of worldly objects* and we might think it not entirely obvious whether all attentive episodes or experiences involve something of this kind.

Undoubtedly there is significantly more that could be said about both Watzl’s Phenomenal Structure view, and Wu’s Demonstrative Awareness view. My goal here was not to provide knock-down objections to either, but to suggest reasons why one might feel not entirely satisfied with those views. In any case, given what has been said here there is sufficient motivation to consider a third alternative, and it is to that which I now turn.

#### 4. Outline of the Modification View

The central claim of the *Modification View* (hereafter MV) is that we can think of phenomenal salience as connected to a kind of activity, and more specifically to *attentive modifications of a pre-attentive perceptual field*.<sup>36</sup> The goal of this section is to unpack this view, drawing on distinctive ideas found in Husserlian phenomenology, and then detail its benefits over the other varieties of Impure Intentionalism about phenomenal salience considered in the previous section. However, it bears noting that what I will be presenting is an *outline* of the MV rather than a full-dress explication or defence.

To begin to get a sense for the what MV claims it is helpful to reflect on a feature of folk discourse about attention in which we arguably see what we might call *attentive modifications* of (determinate) non-attentional modes of consciousness, such as vision and audition. We often talk of *looking* rather than merely seeing, or *listening* rather than merely hearing (perhaps also of *feeling* rather than merely touching, for the tactile mode). These attentional modifications are also gradable in a way that their non-attentive versions are not (as we saw in section 2 this is arguably a feature of conscious attention Pure Intentionalism struggles with). You can look or listen *more carefully or closely*, but you cannot *see or hear* more closely or carefully. Framing these ideas in terms of the intentional structure of the relevant attentive episodes, it makes sense to think that we go from an experience which includes an intentional content in a determinate mode, say a visual experience of a red and round ball, to an *attentional modification* which qualifies the entire conscious experience, such that the *mode* of the experience, in now *carefully looking at the ball*, has changed, and likely we also get a modification in the

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<sup>36</sup> Husserl (1982: §92) also frames attention in terms of *attentional modifications or transformations*, as ‘different modes which belong specifically to attention as such’ (see also his 1973: §17; ‘attention involves a transformation which, correlatively, is a transformation of the entire intentional background-experience into one of the foreground; the ego turns toward the object’).

content of the experience (perhaps along the suggested magnitudes and parameters covered in section 2).

But what more precisely does this *modification of consciousness* in moving into an episode of attentive experience amount to? The key claim of the MV is that we should theorize the modification as follows: there is a pre-attentive perceptual field and the relevant modification of consciousness is to be thought of in terms of a *phenomenology of selection* from that field, as an activity conducted ‘on it’, so to speak. Naturally, for this view to be plausible we are going to need to know more about what this *pre-attentive perceptual field* amounts to. On this issue, phenomenologist Edmund Husserl provides the following description of what he calls the ‘field of passive data’:

It we take this field as it is before the activity of the ego has yet carried out any sense-giving operations whatever with regard to it...this field is still not a pure chaos, a mere swarm of data: it is a field of determinate structure, one of prominences and articulated particularities. A *field of sense* – a field of sensuous data, optical for example – is the simplest model in which we can study this structure (Husserl 1973: §16; see also 1973: §15)

The idea of a pre-attentive perceptual field can be understood as follows. Prior to any exercise of conscious attention – whether that be the kind of voluntary attention in paradigmatic cases where we *intend to attend* or cases of passive attention-capture – we are aware of items in a ‘phenomenal world’, as items which can be said to *affect* us prior to us ‘taking notice’ of them, or prior to focusing on them. However, the pre-attentive perceptual field is not some ‘pure chaos’ or ‘swarm of data’, as Husserl makes clear. But rather this pre-attentive perceptual field has a structure to it, for example there might be certain qualitative contrasts between the items we are aware of as occupying it (certain ‘prominences’ as Husserl puts it), and in certain cases it might be those contrasts which draw attention.<sup>37</sup> Framed in more contemporary terms we might prefer to talk of a *pre-attentive intentional perceptual background*. So, essential to the MV is a distinction between what is given in the currently attended perceptual foreground and the *pre-attentive* perceptual background or perceptual field.<sup>38</sup>

Continuing to explicate the MV we can say the following. What is distinctive of attentive experience (at least in significant part) is a phenomenology of ‘drawing out’ or ‘selection’ of an item from the pre-affective perceptual field. In the case of voluntary attention this selection is plausibly described as performed by the agent on the basis of a more or less explicit intention to attend, and is maintained by them. So, when Wu says ‘in voluntarily maintaining attention to an object, we are

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<sup>37</sup> In a later passage in the same work, Husserl also claims that ‘qualitative discontinuities of considerable degree’, in the ‘field of passive data’ (in the case of the perceptual field) can attract attention (1973: §17).

<sup>38</sup> Similar ideas are broached in cognitive psychology in Neisser 1967 ch.4, who talks of ‘pre-attentive processes’ and the ‘preattentive field’.

typically aware of what we are doing with respect to that object',<sup>39</sup> the MV can agree: the relevant explicit 'awareness' in the case at hand is that of a voluntarily maintained *selection*. Somewhat contrastingly, in the case of attention capture we might say that the environment or some part of it 'draws our attention', and in that sense the selection is made for us. Nonetheless the selection is one that 'we are subject to', such that while it is passive in the sense of *involuntarily* (as contrasted with the voluntarily case in which we form an explicit intention to attend) there is still what Husserl would call an 'ego-activity', as manifest in the *phenomenology of selection*.<sup>40</sup> The subject is therefore (minimally) 'active' in both paradigm cases of attentive experience, where the relevant form of activity is to be thought of in terms of the phenomenology attendant to a conscious 'drawing out' or 'selection' of an item from the pre-attentive perceptual field.

Let me now explicate further features of the MV, drawing on further Husserlian ideas. It was claimed above that, on the MV, what is distinctive of attentive experience is a phenomenology of 'drawing out' or 'selection' of an item from the pre-attentional perceptual field. And, it should be added, for as long as one continues to pay attention to the relevant item, or has one's attention captured by the relevant item, the *phenomenology of selection*, so characterised, is ongoing. But given this, it would be a mistake, and phenomenologically inaccurate to think, that as the relevant item is 'drawn out' or 'selected' from the pre-attentive perceptual field, that the perceptual field somehow 'disappears', or that its 'role' is exhausted insofar as the relevant item has now been selected from it. Rather given that the relevant phenomenology of selection is *ongoing*, the phenomenology characteristic of the attentive experience will be one of *ongoing selectivity* of precisely this item (and no other) from the overall perceptual field (or background). A clear entailment of this kind of view is that in (ongoing) attentive experience the pre-attentive perceptual field continues to act as the relevant *perceptual background*, as what Husserl calls a 'halo of consciousness' which 'belongs to the essence of a perception effected in the mode of 'advertence to the object'', that is in perceptually attentive experience.<sup>41</sup> Put slightly differently in a latter passage he says the following: 'It is likewise obviously true of all such mental processes that the actional ones [i.e., the attentive dimension of the relevant experiences] are surrounded by a 'halo' of non-actional mental processes; the stream of mental processes *can never* consist of just actionalities'.<sup>42</sup>

Insofar as the MV commits to this idea then there are two further dimensions of the view worth remarking on. The first, is that the view will deny that there could be any instance of a conscious experience in which we are only conscious of that to which we are *attending*. Given we posit a co-present

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<sup>39</sup> Wu 2011: 110.

<sup>40</sup> For Husserl, as for Wu (2011) and Watzl (2017), attention is fundamentally an *activity* of the subject, but the sense of 'activity' is not necessarily to be construed as (always) an 'intentional action' as we get in paradigm cases of 'intending to act', but rather is a more basic form of 'ego-activity' (see Husserl 1973: §17).

<sup>41</sup> Husserl 1982: §35.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid: §37 (my emphasis).

conscious awareness of a pre-attentive perceptual field or background as continually necessary for attentive experience, then such a possibility is ruled out (indeed Husserl rules it out in the above passage).<sup>43</sup>

Secondly, one way of further developing the above ideas is the claim that a distinctive implicit component is involved in ongoing attentive experience, specifically some vague or indeterminate sense that non-attended-to items which are given in the perceptual background – presented by way of Husserl calls a ‘halo of *background-intuitions*’ which are (as we saw above) are claimed to be a necessary component of attentive experience – are given as *possible items of attention*. Put otherwise, items in the ‘pre-attentive perceptual field’, which exhibit certain ‘prominences and articulated particularities’ are, in ongoing attentive experience, given implicitly as *possible themes for attention*. In that sense, attentive experience, insofar as it is necessarily dependent on the continued co-presence of the relevant perceptual field or background, could be said to involve an implicit sense of *attentive possibility*. That is a sense that ‘one could’ (sometimes if one so wished) turn attention toward some *other item* so given in the ‘halo of consciousness’ which surrounds ‘advertence to the object’, such as anticipate, even if only vaguely or indeterminately, possible further modifications of consciousness. This would take the form of a kind of *ability-awareness* implicit in attentive experience, as a background sense of *merely* anticipated possible future directions that attention could take, as a implicit form of *attentive foreshadowing*.<sup>44</sup>

While some of the ideas discussed above warrant further explicating since I am only offering an outline of the MV I now return to the more familiar themes we have been dealing with across the paper. However, it should be clear that the MV presents a nuanced account of the phenomenology of attentive experiences (both in terms of their explicit and implicit components). And it should also be noted that talk of the ‘phenomenology of selection’ in the following should be taken to encompass the rich phenomenological analysis of attentive episodes provided in the preceding discussion.

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<sup>43</sup> As a relevant aside, conversely it is more controversial to claim that a conscious experience could exist in which there was no *attentive* component or ‘processes’ whatsoever, such that one’s ‘mental regard’ was not turned to anything. That would be the claim that it is possible to have a conscious experience in which no object is attended to at all, there would be no *attentional processes* characterising the experience (as such conscious attention would not be necessary for conscious experience). Husserl, perhaps unsurprisingly given the importance he places on the idea of pre-attentive perceptual field, entertains such a possibility: ‘There is nothing in the essence of consciousness, however, that would require, in some necessary fashion, that in it an active cogito must be being accomplished. Our “alert consciousness” can be interrupted for a period of sleep, completely dull one, in which there is no distinction to be made between an active field of focus and an obscure background. Everything then is background, everything obscurity.’ (Husserl 1989: §26)

<sup>44</sup> The idea being broached here is that attentive experience has its own ‘inner horizon’ of possibility. For reasons of space I can’t detail this dimension further. For a thorough discussion of the idea of intentional horizons more broadly see [Redacted]. Husserl gestures towards this claim (see his 1982: §35) but unfortunately the presentation there isn’t as clear as one might like.

Now, what, it might be asked, does the MV have to say about *phenomenal salience*, or more specifically, how can the ideas outlined above be applied to *phenomenal salience*. Tailing back to the start of the discussion, Wu frames phenomenal salience in theory-neutral terms: '[phenomenal salience] refers to the way an object or property figures to a subject when she consciously attends to it in perception, a way that constitutes what-it-is-like to attend to that object or property.'<sup>45</sup> For the MV *phenomenal salience* is fundamentally to be understood in terms of a first-person phenomenology of selection. The object of an attentive experience is phenomenally salient, precisely because it has been and is continuing to be *selected by consciousness*. As such, there is *something-it-is-like* for a conscious subject to be in a (general) attentional mode of (ongoing) *selectivity*, where we understand that more concretely in terms of the ideas broached above about the phenomenology attendant to an initial and ongoing 'drawing out' or 'selection' of an item from the pre-affective perceptual field.

To further frame the import of the MV it is instructive to contrast it with one similar sounding contemporary account, namely the view of attention offered by Campbell. According to Campbell there is a relevant sense of 'selection' that is critical to understanding attention, but for him what attention 'selects' are *unconscious information-processing routines*.<sup>46</sup> However, clearly such a claim isn't (and can't be) an account of phenomenal salience as we have been understanding it. *What-it-is-like* to attend to the relevant object or property can't be understood as constituted by the selection of unconscious information processing routines. Simply put, there would be no *phenomenology of selection*.<sup>47</sup> This functional view of the connection between selectivity and attention is clearly distinct from the MV as developed here. And while the MV might agree that *phenomenal salience*, so understood as above, could be said to supervene on the relevant *non-phenomenal* selection of information processing routines, that would not be a satisfactory account of *what-it-is-like* to attend in the way one does, where what is selected (and what continues to be selected in ongoing attention) is some aspect or item in the pre-attentive perceptual field. As such, according to the MV we are (pace Campbell and Wu) aware of the 'process' of attentional selection as an ongoing modification of conscious experience.

Clearly the MV is going to count as a further variety of Impure Intentionalism about phenomenal salience, insofar as it appeals to a phenomenology of selection, as an activity of the subject which concerns the pre-attentive perceptual field. This phenomenology, which we framed above as the *what-it-is-like-ness* attendant to a subject's being in a general attentional mode of (ongoing) selectivity from the pre-attentive perceptual field is not part of the content of the relevant attentive experiences, but rather attaches to the 'mode' or 'intentional act' component, as determining the *way in which* the

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<sup>45</sup> Wu 2011: 93.

<sup>46</sup> See Campbell 2002: 28.

<sup>47</sup> Wayne Wu (2011) seems to agree with at least this aspect of Campbell view, also claiming that the 'process' of attentional selection is entirely *non-phenomenal*.

conscious subject is relating to the relevant object, rather than being cashed out in terms of a way that object *appears* to the subject.

Let me now apply the MV to one of our stock examples. What account is given by the MV of the case where I am listening to the opening of the Adagietto in Mahler's 5<sup>th</sup> symphony, when first paying attention to the string section? The view answers as follows. Central to this attentive episode, and constituting its distinctive phenomenology, is the voluntarily maintained ongoing selection of *the string section* from the pre-attentive auditory (perceptual) field; I am in the attentional mode of an ongoing voluntary *selection of the string section*, continuing to 'draw it out'. Yet the pre-attentive auditory field in this case is not some 'chaos of sensations', say an undifferentiated 'swarm of noise'; rather it is *structured auditory field*, with 'prominences' (of contrasting timbres, pitches, and tones), on the basis I which I am able to 'draw out' the strings, and so *listen specifically to them*, rather than *merely bear them* in the way I might when I am not paying attention to any particular feature of the music, merely allowing it to 'wash over me'. Further to this, the relevant *structured auditory field* continues to be given to consciousness in the attentive episode – we do not *cease to bear* the other instruments; the relevant background auditory field is given by way of a 'halo of background *bearings*' relative to the 'attentive processes'. As such – if we follow the analysis provided earlier – items in that so given *structured auditory field* are co-presented, however vaguely or indeterminately, as possible (further) themes for auditory attention, as *possible directions auditory attention could take*, manifest in terms of we earlier highlighted as an implicit *ability-awareness* as part of the phenomenology of attentive episodes. It is the phenomenology attendant to the attentive episode so described which captures *what-it-is-like* for the string section to be phenomenally salient for me.

With the MV so outlined let me speak to its benefits over the different varieties of Impure Intentionalism about phenomenal salience considered in section 3. First, it should be clear that the MV will not be open to any charge of over-intellectualizing conscious attention, at least in terms of positing a kind of higher-order awareness in the way that Wu's Demonstrative Awareness view does. The phenomenology of selection which is constitutive of phenomenal salience can be understood as a *non-cognitive* activity and isn't to be framed in terms of any demonstrative-thoughts *that* I'm attending to the object that I am. Nonetheless, it seems plausible that this kind of view of *phenomenal salience*, and the phenomenology constitutive of it, could be what grounds our ability to refer to objects demonstratively in thought. The phenomenal activity of the (ongoing) 'drawing out' of items from the pre-attentive perceptual field, thus making them definitive *objects of attention*, seems like precisely the kind of activity which, by individuating the relevant objects, could ground cognitive acts of demonstrative reference. In this sense, the view looks to preserve the link between attention and demonstrative reference without taking the line that demonstrative-cognition is *constitutive* of phenomenal salience (as Wu does).

Next the view can provide the tools for a more theoretical gloss of a criticism that was raised concerning Watzl's Phenomenal Structure view. It was said that it is plausible that insofar as we talk



of ‘priority structures’ in the context of attentive experiences then the relevant ‘priority structure’ seems to concern the (phenomenal) world ‘out there’ rather than ‘in here’, such that what gets ‘restructured’ in terms of relative centrality is not *my mind* (or experiences therein) but rather ‘the world’, or more precisely the objects in it, such that conscious attention is fundamentally an activity concerning how we *structure the world*. Making use of the MV, we can now say that the relevant ‘structuring of the world’, or indeed the re-structuring or re-organising, that goes on in conscious attention is a matter of the subject’s activity of selectively *prioritizing* certain items which are passively pre-given in the pre-attentive perceptual field (‘out there’, so to speak), and continuing to do so. Indeed, for an item to be *prioritized*, for the MV, is for it be selected (and for it to be continued to be selected), in contrast to other possible objects of attention, from the pre-attentive perceptual field. As such the subject’s activity of attentional selectivity, according to the MV, is fundamentally *environment directed*.

The MV can also accommodate the phenomenological variety of attention, which as we saw when making distinctions between different forms of attention and different ways attention can develop (i.e., covert vs overt, maintaining vs shifting, voluntary vs involuntary, synchronic vs diachronic) is a data point which any theory of conscious attention should accommodate. What the MV can say is that the *precise way* a subject is ‘drawing out’ items from the pre-attentive perceptual field will affect the overall phenomenology of any given attentive experience. In this sense, as we should expect, there will be a significant phenomenological difference between, for example, being in an attentional mode of *voluntarily scanning* as is paradigmatic of certain kinds of visual search tasks, and that of having one’s attention suddenly captured by a loud noise. Nonetheless, the MV can respect the idea that there is a ‘phenomenal core’ to all attentive experiences, which turns on, as it was put above, *what-it-is-like* for a conscious subject to be in a (general) attentional mode of (ongoing) *selectivity*.

Finally, let me speak directly to a challenge to the MV, and indeed any view which talks of ‘attentional modes of consciousness’. Watzl in his discussion of this kind of proposal questions whether the phenomenal contribution of attention could be captured by an appeal to an *attentional mode of consciousness* because ‘two phenomenal episodes that share the same appearances [i.e., same content] and the same modes of consciousness but have different distributions of attention will be phenomenally distinguishable’.<sup>48</sup> However, the MV can agree, but note that the relevant distributions of attention are what is supposed to be captured by the relevant *modes of attention* cashed out as above. It is not that an experience being in the mode of ‘vision’ say, rather than ‘touch’ or ‘audition’ is what explains the relevant phenomenology of attention, but rather that there is *something-it-is-like* for a

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<sup>48</sup> Watzl 2017: 189. As Watzl rightly notes, the ‘mode view’ view finds expression in number of Husserl’s comments on conscious attention. While referring to Husserl a number of times (see Watzl 2017: 181-2, 189, 222-3) unfortunately Watzl doesn’t get into focus the distinctiveness of a number of Husserl’s claims about attention, some of which I have attempted to build into the MV.

conscious subject to be in a (general) attentional mode of (ongoing) *selectivity* from the pre-attentive perceptual field.

## Conclusion

The main aim of this paper was to critique current proposals of phenomenal salience and outline a novel account of the phenomenal contribution of attention, which I called the MV. Naturally there is more to be said about the MV, here I just provided an outline of the view, explicating its main claims and benefits. Nonetheless, it should be clear that it is plausible competitor to the other two varieties of Impure Intentionalism about phenomenal salience and represents a promising way of theorizing the phenomenal contribution of attention. A save a full-dress account of the MV for a different occasion.

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