Alexandra Irimia

FIGURES OF RADICAL ABSENCE

BLANKS AND VOIDS IN THEORY, LITERATURE, AND THE ARTS

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DE GRUYTER

To A. C.

Acknowledgments

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Sections 1.2, 1.3, and 2.1. have evolved from fragments previously published in my essay "Figural Voids: Empty Signifiers and Other Figures of Absence" for the volume *Working Through the Figure: Theory, Practice, Method*, edited by Laura Marin and Anca Diaconu.[1] A significantly shorter and earlier version of the research grounding these fragments had been published as "Depicting Absence: Thematic and Stylistic Paradoxes of Representation in Visual and Literary Imagery," in Volume 4 of the ICLA 2016 Proceedings – *The Rhetoric of Topics and Forms*, edited by Gianna Zocco.[2]

An early draft of subchapters 2.2. and 2.3 has been presented at the Musacces Conference Limits of the Art in the Museum in 2017. Subsequently, it has been published as "Museums of the Void: The Exhibition Space as Empty Signifier," in the proceedings volume *Socializing Art Museums: Rethinking the Publics' Experience*, edited by Alejandra Alonso Tak and Ángel Pazos-López.[3]

Finally, section 3.3. has been developed from my article "Repetition and Intermediality in Marguerite Duras's *The Atlantic Man*: Practicing Dibutade's Craft in the XXth Century," published at the University of Montréal in a special issue of the journal *MuseMedusa*, themed *Dibutade – The Origins of Creation*.[4] An intermediary version of the analysis has been presented under the title "The Troubled Waters of Absence: Marguerite Duras's *The Atlantic Man*" at the 2019 international conference *Affects, flux, fluides. Représentations, histoires et politiques des émotions en arts*, Université de Strasbourg.[5]

Contents

Introduction: "An Outrage and a Phantasm"

Literature and the arts have always harbored a fascination for the lack, the missing, the remote, and the disappeared. What *is not*, what *is not yet*, or what *no longer is* have proven to be more powerful triggers for thought and imagination than what simply *is*. Language systems and images, much like desires, remain largely unconcerned with actual presences and feed on absence as a generative principle. But what do we actually talk about when we talk about absence? How do we resist the temptation to assign a direct object to it, and how can we theorize a form of radical absence that is oblivious to the specificities implied by the absence *of something*? And finally, can this radical absence be incorporated in discursive practices at all?

When Martin Heidegger sets out in "What Is Metaphysics?"[6] to critique the scientific discourse for its inability to formulate or indeed grasp the absence of all beings, he refers to the way in which the metaphysics of presence – foundation of both ontology and language, ruling over our understanding of both *being* and *meaning* – dismisses this most radical form of absence as "an outrage and a phantasm." In exploring several literary and artistic figures brought together for the first time as symptoms of a logic of production that questions and challenges the implied relation between presence and representation, this book is concerned with both the outrageous and the phantasmatic modes in which radical absence makes its way into modern literature, cinema, and visual arts. Occasionally glancing at performative arts and curatorial gestures as well, this exploration is grounded in theoretical underpinnings that look at radical absence through different lenses. The resulting landscape of critical theory's attempts to make sense of absence may be fragmented and heterogeneous but, not unlike a kaleidoscopic image, it reflects previously neglected complexities and uncovers new creative potentialities.

The core concept of "radical absence" is the first to require clarification. In the context of this book, "radical absence" indicates a certain degree of intransitivity added to what is generally understood by "absence." In other words, absence detached from the almost inevitable subsequent "of something." In his *Theory of Absence*, Patrick Fuery makes a distinction between what he calls "primary absences" (absolute, intransitive, non-contingent) and "secondary" ones, which do not exist outside of a relational context of presence and are always transitive, in the sense that they are always an absence *of* something:

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6 Martin Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?" [1929] in *Basic Writings*, edited by David Farrell Krell (London, New York: Routledge, 2008), 41–57.

> Absence is seen to be derived from a state of presence, as it is seen as the denial of presence. Secondary absences are those derived from a state of presence. They imply presence, acknowledge its relational context, gain their epistemological and ontological structures from it, and indicate sites of presence. They retain, and even reinforce, the binarism of presence and absence. Primary absences, on the other hand, exist outside of any relational context of presence. Primary absences exist in their own right, independent of any sense of presence.[7]

He then goes on to argue that, since every representation is a processed negotiation of presence, the quality of being present can only be experienced as a secondary derivation because it has previously been

> mediated through signifying systems – language, discursive practices, ideology, models of representation. In this sense presence itself is absence. [. . .] One of the major differences, however, is that primary absences are defined in terms of the centrality of absence rather than any referential action to a sense of presence and/or re[present]ation.[8]

Bearing Fuery's distinctions in mind, the present book does not focus on discussing themes related to a particular absence, the absence *of something* that had previously had material or immaterial consistency – like a pen, a person, a logical category, a feeling, a transcendental entity. Rather, it is interested in radical absence in relation to signifying systems and in its interactions with meaning-making strategies in images, in texts, and sometimes in their hybrid forms. More specifically, radical absence is understood in the lineage of post-structuralist thought as the fundamental vacuity inherent to language or, more generally, to any code or system of signification. Thus, the term stands for the conceptual empty space of indeterminacy filled with potentialities that are never fully actualized.[9] Or, to put in semiotic terms, the radical absence invoked here would refer to the gap between the signifier and the signified, to that which allows for the differential play and ultimately for the articulation of meaning, regardless of what that meaning might be. The unconceivable multiplicity and variety of things that are, were, or could be described as *present* is liable to throw attempts to approach the theme of absence into an endless apophatic vertigo of the kind which Donald Barthelme uses in one of his short stories about *Nothing*:

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7 Patrick Fuery, *The Theory of Absence: Subjectivity, Signification, and Desire* (London: Greenwood Press, 1995), 1.

8 Fuery, *The Theory of Absence*, 2.

9 I use "potentiality" and "actuality" here and subsequently throughout the book in the sense described by Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 31–33. See also Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 175–184, 205–219.

It's not the yellow curtains. Nor curtain rings. Nor is it bran in a bucket, nor is it the large, reddish farm animal eating the bran from the bucket, his wife, or the raisin-faced banker who's about to foreclose on the farm. None of these is nothing. A damselfish is not nothing . . . Neither is the proposition *esse est percipi*, nor is it any of the refutations of that proposition [. . .] And even if we were able, with much labor, to exhaust the possibilities, get it all *inscribed*, name everything nothing is not, down to the last rogue atom, the one that rolled behind the door, and had thoughtfully included ourselves, the makers of the list, on the list – the list itself would remain. Who's got a match?

But if we cannot finish, we can at least begin. If what exists is in each case the totality of the series of appearances which manifest it, then nothing must be characterized in terms of its non-appearances, no-shows, incorrigible tardiness. Nothing is what keeps us waiting (forever).[10]

Indeed, one of the figures of absence explored later in the book is Jacques Derrida's *différance*, which refers to the spacing and the deferral that postpone the advent of meaning through empty interstices that are, nevertheless, fundamentally conditioning the possibility of producing any meaning.

Another term in need of some explanation is "figure," since its use in the title of this book is no less specific and purposeful. It is meant to replace and dismiss the quasi-oxymoronic formulation "representation of absence," which would imply that absence can be re-presented (that is, brought into *presence* and into *a present*) without a betrayal of its quality of non-presence. I steer away from this act of conceptual disloyalty to absence in its radical form, and test how it can be conceived more adequately within the framework of an alternative regime of expression. In fact, by replacing representation with figuration[11] (a substitution more thoroughly explained in the second subsection of Chapter 1), I wish to situate my inquiry within a regime characterized by more fluid boundaries between appearance and disappearance, and by a spectral, non-mimetic, affectively-charged way of conveying – via words, images, or both – that which *is not*, that which is *no longer is*, or that which *is not yet*. For the purposes of this book, a figure of absence may equally designate the typographic blank, the empty space on the museum wall where there is no exhibit, or the disquieting effect of presence produced by a painted, photographed, or filmed surface in the absence of the slightest figure that differentiates itself against the background.

10 Donald Barthelme, "Nothing: A Preliminary Account," *The New Yorker*, December 31, 1973, 26.
11 As art historians argue, figuration is the regime of expression that informs images in the absence of representation. See for example Chiara Cappelletto, "Bill Viola ou l'image sans représentation," *Images Re-vues: Histoire, anthropologie et théorie de l'art*, no. 8: *Figurer les invisibles* (2011): http://imagesrevues.revues.org/497, last accessed May 15, 2023.

Speaking about absence in relation to a former or a future state of presence articulated by the verb "to be" is a discursive move that must be treated with caution and not taken literally. As Heidegger postulates in his essay, being cannot be rigorously predicated on absolute absence. Any form of predication readily cancels absence because language itself is built upon a metaphysics of presence. With this in mind, it should be noted that my use of the verb "to be" in regard to figures of absence is done in a most provisional way, against the background of a constant awareness that absence, in fact, *is not*. Absolute absence cannot be contained or confined by the boundaries of a former or future presence, lost or anticipated, dreaded or desired. However, I demonstrate that despite the epistemological indeterminacy and the lack of ontological consistency that characterize radical absence, its figures are neither neutral nor inert.[12] As suggested by the Heideggerian characterization as "an outrage and a phantasm," the figures or radical absence are likely to be politically and poetically charged, aesthetically and ethically active. The fourfold demonstration that this is, in fact, the case acts as the structuring principle of all the case studies discussed here. Moreover, the book highlights the formal mechanisms through which figures of absence tend to be instrumented: first, as sites of self-reflexivity for the various media into which they become apparent and functional, and second, as conceptual spaces for rebellion and contestation.

The figures of absence may carry contentious affects; hence, their potential to spark outrage. In its radical form, absence frustrates expectations. It sabotages quests for completeness and meaning, but it also disrupts the logic of production and consumption. Textual and visual variations on absence have marked modern and contemporary histories of literature and the arts, usually by signaling a break in established conventions. In such instances, the figuration of absence has accommodated the battlefields of institutional critique or avant-gardist *fronde*. Imageless films, blank books, conceptual art – all premeditate, exploit, take pleasure, and derive meaning from the outrage triggered by a confrontation with the natural terror known as *horror vacui*. The fact that radical absence resists – and openly challenges – linguistic and visual representation on the grounds that any representation relies on a certain degree of presence may (and will be shown to) trouble relations to authority and power structures, contesting hierarchies and overturning longstanding norms and conventions. This observation invites a discussion of the

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12 Describing absence in terms of ontological inconsistency and epistemological uncertainty is an idea I owe to Karen Barad's "Erasers and Erasures: Pinch's Unfortunate *Uncertainty Principle*," *Social Studies of Science* 41, no. 3 (2011): 443–454, passim.

political[13] and ethical implications[14] that have been and continue to be at stake more or less explicitly in the use of figures of absence, including figural voids and empty signifiers, in literary or artistic realms.

The phantasmatic component, on the other hand, is indicative of the immense imaginative potential of the absence of constraints. Likewise, it speaks of the unreachability of the absolute utopia of radical absence, which remains unperceivable to the senses, inconceivable to the intellect, and ineffable to all expression. In the words of Karen Barad, "the blank page teeming with the desires of would be traces of every symbol, equation, word, book, library, punctuation mark, vowel, diagram, scribble, inscription, graphic, letter, inkblot, as they yearn toward expression. A jubilation of emptiness."[15] The phantasmatic nature of absence eventually points to the fleeting spectrality and evanescence of the affective flows (fascination, terror, longing, desire, etc.) traversing these realms with various intensities. If the affective dimensions of the "outrage" provoked by absence are tied to frustrated expectations, movements of subversive or outward contestation, to politics of inclusion and exclusion, as well as to the ethics thereof, the phantasm is instead the result of a creative impulse and a *poiesis*, not deprived of its own aesthetic regime[16] and rhetoric devices (repetition, fragmentation, aporia, paradox) identifiable in textual and visual works, at both formal and thematic levels.

The four types of implications (political and poietic, ethic and aesthetic) identified in relation to the literary and artistic use of figures of absence follow the outrage-phantasm duality advanced in the Heideggerian model. They show how absence – or, to be more precise, the figures of absence – can be instrumented for purposes both internal and external to the works they belong to. However, their potentially infinite versatility stems from their fundamental indeterminacy, at the cost of maintaining their ontological "lessness" (to use a Beckettian term). This ontological austerity places a special emphasis on the relation that a figure of absence develops with the material and immaterial conditions embedded in the medium in which it arises. As such, it could be argued that figures of radical

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13 See Ernesto Laclau, "Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics," in *Emancipation*(s) (London: Verso Books, 1995), 36–46.

14 See Roy Sorensen, "The Ethics of Empty Worlds," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 83, no. 3 (September 2005): 349–356, and Patrizia C. McBride, *The Void of Ethics: Robert Musil and the Experience of Modernity* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006).

15 Karen Barad, "What Is the Measure of Nothingness? Infinity, Virtuality, Justice," *No. 099* in the series *100 Notes – 100 Thoughts*, *Documenta (13)*, edited by Katrin Sauerländer (Kassel: Hatje Cantz, 2012), 13.

16 See Heiner Goebbels, *Aesthetics of Absence. Texts on Theatre*, translated by David Roesner and Christina M. Lagao (London, New York: Routledge, 2015), and Matt Tierney, *What Lies Between: Void Aesthetics and Postwar Post-Politics* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2015).

absence are perhaps more accurately described as *functions of the medium*, rather than stable categories, as Hugo Friedrich saw them when he listed and analyzed absence among the "negative categories"[17] shaping modern sensibilities and regimes of expression. In fact, purposefully going against the grain of common misperceptions, the entire book advocates for an understanding of radical absence as a space of neutrality[18] (given its indeterminacy) instead of defining it as a matter of negation and negativity.

The first unfolding of the figures of radical absence begins with etymology, from the three possible meanings of the Latin prefix *ab-* (meaning "off," "away"). According to Jean-Pierre Mourey, *ab-* points to 1) a distancing, 2) a purely spatial form of absence, or a lack, an ellipsis, an interruption of a continuum.[19] Another possibility is to think of the absence as 3) an unbridgeable gap, or the impossible reconciliation of two mutually exclusive, incompatible elements. These three meanings of the prefix introduce an organizing principle into the semantic field of absence, which includes other possible thematizations. In philosophical discourse, radical absence is associated with the thinking of "the nothing,"[20] nothing, nothingness, and the more encompassing nonbeing.[21] Physics and natural sciences (both ancient and modern) prefer to call the absence of matter a "vacuum" or a "void". A plethora of terms denote absence in relation to space, location, and containment: break, ellipsis, emptiness, distancing, spacing, abyss, hole, gap, withdrawal, remoteness, or vanishing point. Furthermore, when related to (im)possibilities of expression, radical absence becomes effacement, concealment, secrecy, enigma, hiddenness, ineffable or unspeakable, unrepresentable, invisible, inaudible, imperceptible, silence, or blankness. It can speak of an uncertain condition in-between actualization and potentiality (the unwritten, the unpainted, the unsaid) or it can emerge as the *tertium non datur* or the result of self-cancelling rhetoric (logical impossibilities, paradoxes, aporias, apophatic speech etc.). Radical absence also brings to mind psychoanalytic discourses,[22] in Freudian (loss, desire, anxiety, melancholia) or Lacanian descent

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17 Hugo Friedrich, *The Structure of Modern Poetry: From Mid-Nineteenth to Mid-Twentieth Century*, translated by Joachim Neugroschel (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

18 See Laura Marin, *Le Neutre: Lire Blanchot dans les traces de Levinas et Derrida* (Bucharest: Bucharest University Press, 2013).

19 Jean-Pierre Mourey, "Ombres, éclats, fragments," in *Figurations de l'absence. Recherches esthétiques*, (Saint-Étienne: Université de Saint-Étienne, 1987), 26.

20 Martin Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?".

21 István Kiraly, "The Names of Nothing," translated by Emese Czintos, *Philobiblon* 20, no.1, 2015: 215–223, and Roy Sorenssen, "Nothingness," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/nothingness/, last accessed May 15, 2023.

22 See Pierre Fédida, *L'Absence* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).

(the *it*, the lack, the unattainable object of desire better known as *objet petit a*). Memory studies speak about absence in the context of blacked-out traumatic events, oblivion, forgetfulness, ruins, traces, memorials, archives, and other efforts to recuperate presence, always haunted by a specter of fragmentariness and incompleteness.

This lexical repertory of radical absence is neither clear-cut, nor exhaustive. It simply points to the multifarious internal variations and overlaps that sometimes occur even within the same discipline or field of discourse. In many cases, some of these terms are or can be used interchangeably. For example, it suffices to remain at the level of book titles to notice how James Owen Weatherall makes no distinction between "nothing" and "the void." John D. Barrow adds the vacuum, and Henning Genz equates nothingness with the empty space.[23] Brian Rotman throws the "zero" in the equation, while Robin Martin Adams prefers to call it "nil" and keeps using it as a synonym for "the void."[24]

In other cases, this chain of substitutions is blocked by important differences specific to a certain theoretical framework or to the vocabulary of one particular author or school of thought. For example, translators generally established that the Stoics carried debates over the nature of the "void," while Buddhists preferred the indeterminacy of "emptiness" instead.[25] The system of differences is further complicated by the use of translations: depending on the target language, they may generate different vocabularies for the same concept – in French, there seems to be a preference for translations semantically closer to "the void" (*le vide*), whereas in English "emptiness" or "nothingness" are encountered more often. Such nuances are even more important when translating texts from more remote traditions, like the Hebrew (see Isaak Luria's *tsimtsum* understood as a withdrawal from which everything is created, and the term *ayin* used for a specific kind of nothingness),[26] the Buddhist (the concept of *śūnyatā* brings together metaphysics, theogonies, and doctrines

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23 James Owen Weatherall, *Void: The Strange Physics of Nothing* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2016). John D. Barrow, *The Book of Nothing: Vacuums, Voids, and the Latest Ideas about the Origins of the Universe* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000). Henning Genz, *Nothingness: The Science of Empty Space*, translated by Karin Heusch (Reading, MA: Perseus Books, 1999).

24 Brian Rotman, *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1987) and Robert Martin Adams, *Nil: Episodes in the Literary Conquest of Void During the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).

25 Robert B. Todd, "Cleomedes and the Stoic Concept of the Void," *Apeiron: A Journal of Ancient Philosophy and Science* 16, no. 2 (December 1, 1982): 129–136. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (New York, Toronto: Rider and Company, 1953).

26 Joseph Dan, "Paradoxes of Nothingness in the Kabbalah," in *Argumentum e Silentio: International Paul Celan Symposium*, edited by Amy D. Colin (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1987), 359–363, and Daniel C. Matt, "*Ayin*: The Concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism," in *The Problem of*

of selflessness),[27] or the Mayan. Ancient Greek poses its own set of difficulties, too. The observation remains equally valid even with translations between more closely interrelated languages. The interchangeable character of these terms can be seen at play, for example, in the substantial differences that arise sometimes between different translations of Maurice Blanchot's work into English: see, for example, texts translated by Lydia Davis, Charlotte Mandell, Susan Hanson, and Ann Smock.

Moreover, some of these absence-related terms are charged with multiple layers of meaning, having certain meaning(s) in common usage and others in the context of a specific theoretical discourse. The vacuum (stemming from the Latin *vacuus*, which meant "void," from the verb *vacare*, meaning "to empty"), for example, meant different things even for pre-modern scientists, depending on the dominant paradigm of the time and on their understanding of the vacuum. The Renaissance meaning of *vacuum* was certainly very distant from contemporary definitions, which describe it as a state with the lowest possible energy. The everyday usage of the word "lack" has little in common with the same word used in a Lacanian context. The unspeakable as a category of affect theory dealing with trauma is slightly different from the unspeakable in apophatic speech, and perhaps more remote from the poetic category of the ineffable. To this inventory of absence in language one may add the Heideggerian opposition between the unspeakable and the unsaid, which he describes in his essay "The Way to Language."[28] Elsewhere, the German philosopher likewise distinguishes between "the nothing" and privational terms, such as "negation" (a logic operation) and "not" (a linguistic operator).[29] In fact, as Maurice Blanchot notes in his essay "Literature and the Right to Death," "negation negates nothing," it reduces and alters the nothing in order to contain it in the finite order of discourse and logic. Far from being synonymous, the two terms stand on opposing grounds. Nihilation, as the nothing's signature gesture of repelling ("the nothing nihilates") which determines a retreat of all beings, is thus a different action from negation. It does not comport the destructive meanings implied by annihilation, either.[30]

Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy, edited by Robert K. Forman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 121–162.

27 Fernando Tola, Carmen Dragonetti, Āryadeva, Nāgārjuna, *On Voidness: Study on Buddhist Nihilism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1995).

28 Martin Heidegger, "The Way to Language," [1959] in *Basic Writings*, edited by David Farrell Krell (London, New York: Routledge, 2008), 279–306.

29 Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?," 48.

30 Maurice Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction and Literary Essays*, translated by Lydia Davis, Paul Auster, Robert Lamberton (Barrytown, New York: Station Hill Openings, 1999), 373 and 52.

Meghan Vicks rightfully notes that "nothing is not absence."[31] Why should it be given any space at all, then, in a study concerned with absence? I am arguing that Heidegger's concept of "the nothing" and its nihilating force are intimately related to the double movement of spatial displacement and temporal deferral implied by the standard meaning of *absence*. As defined by the OED, absence refers to "1. The state of being absent or away from a place, or from the company of a person or persons. 2. An occasion on which a person is absent; a period of absence. 3. Inattention; failure to concentrate; mental preoccupation or abstraction; inattention to present surroundings or occurrences – usually used in the phrase *absence of mind.*"[32] Hence, absence is defined not only in terms of a lack or of a deferral in time and space but also in relation to subjectivity and (dis)affection. That which is absent is, according to the same dictionary, remote or missing ("1a. Not present in a place or at an occasion; away"), vacant ("1b. Of a place or position: empty, vacant, unoccupied"), experienced in connection with a set of expectations or attached to a particular context ("2. Of a thing, quality, etc.: that is lacking; that does not exist in or is not a feature of a particular situation, context, etc."), inscribed in historical order ("3. Distant in time; in the past or future"), and in the affective regime of a subjectivity as a state of disengagement from the surrounding presences or concern for a non-present state of facts ("4. Absent-minded, preoccupied, distracted").[33] Merriam-Webster adds to absence a negative component of frustration and failure, and contrasts it not only with presence, but also with existence. It also ties the term to anticipation, desire, and the force of repetition, by defining it as "a state or condition in which something expected, wanted, or looked for is not present or does not exist: a state or condition in which something is absent; a failure to be present at a usual or expected place."[34]

Unlike Heidegger's "the nothing," which remains the most radical absence – so radical that it can only be grasped outside of thought, in the realm of affects – many things previously believed to be "void" are, in fact, not so. The ancient concepts of vacuum and void have been used interchangeably even in scientific discourse,[35] despite a shared sense that void is a more abstract and philosophically-charged term,[36]

31 Meghan Vicks, *Narratives of Nothing in Twentieth-Century Literature* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 2.

32 "Absence" in *Oxford English Dictionary*, https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/645?redirected From=absence&, last accessed May 15, 2023.

33 "Absent" in *Oxford English Dictionary*, https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/647?isAdvanced= false&result=1&rskey=PqEMYE&, last accessed May 15, 2023.

34 "Absence" in *Merriam-Webster*, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/absence, last accessed May 15, 2023.

35 See Barrow, *The Book of Nothing*, and Barad, "Erasers and Erasures."

36 See Todd, "Cleomedes and the Stoic Concept of the Void."

while vacuum is a more technical term that has progressively lost its meaning of absolute emptiness in the light of scientific advances (in particular, in quantum physics) that define it as a state of lowest possible energy, emptied of matter, but still "far from empty," populated by strong, weak, and electromagnetic interactions at subatomic levels.[37] Art theorist Thierry Davila has examined at length several artistic explorations of this infra-world which has been wrongfully deemed absent only because it remains, under normal conditions, imperceptible to the human senses.[38] Heidegger wrote about the "becoming incalculable" of the world, which he described as "the invisible shadow that is cast around all things everywhere when man has been transformed into *subiectum* and the world into picture. [. . .] By means of this shadow the modern world extends itself out into a space withdrawn from representation and so lends to the incalculable the determinatedness peculiar to it [. . .]. This shadow, however, points to something else, which is denied to us of today to know."[39] I argue that radical absence is this "something else." Being already withdrawn from representation, it cannot be posited as an object. It can only be figured in its full unknowability, in its inescapable concealment:

> Everyday opinion sees in the shadow only the lack of light, if not the light's complete denial. In truth, however, the shadow is a manifest, though impenetrable, testimony to the concealed emitting of light. In keeping with this concept of shadow, we experience the incalculable as that which, withdrawn from representation, is nevertheless manifest in whatever is, pointing to Being, which remains concealed. [. . .] But suppose that denial itself had to become the highest and most austere revealing of Being? What then? Understood from out of metaphysics, the concealed essence of Being, denial, unveils itself first of all as absolutely not-having-being, as Nothing. But Nothing as that Nothing which pertains to the having-of-being is the keenest opponent of mere negating. Nothing is never nothing; it is just as little a something, in the sense of an object [*Gegenstand*]; it is Being itself, whose truth will be given over to man when he has overcome himself as subject, and that means when he no longer represents that which is as object [*Objekt*].[40]

Other terms denoting privation, related to absence insofar as they express remoteness, displacement, vacancy, withdrawal, remain inevitably attached to a context or a system of intelligibility. For example, forgetfulness is absence infiltrated in memory; the repressed is absence in the realm of behaviors; the incorporeal is absence of material embodiment; concealment or invisibility occur in

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37 Barrow, *The Book of Nothing*, 237.
38 Thierry Davila, *De l'inframince. Brève histoire de l'imperceptible, de Marcel Duchamp à nos jours* (Paris: Éditions du Regard, 2010).
39 Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, translated by William Lovitt (New York, Toronto, London: Harper & Row, 1977), 136.
40 Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," 154.

the absence of visibility; erasure is a re-installed absence of inscription; an omission or an ellipsis are deliberate, intended absences,[41] and so on. This attachment is also remarked by Ernesto Laclau, who points out that "the empty signifier, unlike the void, can only exist in relation to a system of signification."[42] Laclau's point is useful in that it shows how absence attached to a system of signification does not necessarily imply a transitive absence (the absence *of* this or that sign within the system, what Fuery calls a secondary absence), but it can equally refer to the constitutive, yet ungraspable absence around which each system of signification is built and which is an intransitive, primary absence, in Fuery's classification. Jacques Derrida expresses this idea in slightly different terms, referring to a "transcendental signified" instead of an "empty signifier." According to him, logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence on which it is grounded are the elaborate manifestations of a powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire for an ever-absent transcendental signified, whose absence opens up a space for free play and enables an infinite proliferation of signs.[43] The figures through which this radical absence becomes transparent, within a system of signification and in relation to it, are precisely what the following chapters will be concerned with. Similarly, for Thierry Davila (inspired by an idea previously articulated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty), the absence of visibility may stand for a sort of blind spot that cannot see and cannot be seen, but that is the very condition of all seeing:

> Therefore, there is an invisibility of art or, more precisely, an invisible art endowed with phenomenological determinations [. . .] that does not overlap with an art of the invisible, understood here as the formation [*mise en forme*] of a transcendent reality of the image [. . .], but that produces effects in different artistic periods. Thus, there is a quasi-presence and a quasi-absence of the form, tracing the identity of the process of formation itself.[44]

Not only does this absence of visibility preserve other types of phenomenological consistency, but it can also be instrumented to mean different things in different contexts, at different times. Therefore, it would be an error to assume that all invisible art objects are alike, despite their consistent resistance to forms of visible ap-

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41 Roy Sorensen, "Blanks: Signs of Omission," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (October 1999): 318.

42 Laclau, "Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics," 38.

43 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* [1967], translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 49.

44 Davila, *De l'inframince*, 13: "*Il y a donc bien une invisibilité de l'art ou plus exactement un art invisible doté de déterminations phénoménologiques [. . .] qui ne rejoignent pas un art de l'invisible entendu ici comme une mise en forme d'une réalité transcendant l'image [. . .], mais qui produit des effets à différentes époques de l'art. Il y a donc bien une quasi-présence et une quasi-absence de la forme qui trace l'identité de la prise de forme elle-même.*" The English translation is mine.

pearance. On the contrary, at least according to Thierry Davila, the absence of a visible dimension in such artworks seems to increase exponentially their dependence on the contexts of their production and reception. Last but not least, in attempting to clarify these terminological variations in the vocabulary of absence, one should not forget that often the absence of a sign can also be read as a sign in itself, deriving the negative contours of its material absence from the presence of the surrounding signs. Roy Sorensen hints to the same point when discussing typographic blanks:

> Under common circumstances, blanks are symbols. A blank is created when the symbolizer omits an inscription or sound. The omission must take place against a background of potential action. So although the margins of this page are blank, the margins of this page are not blanks. Margins frame a text but are not themselves text or even the omission of a text. Blanks require a foundation of character positions. [. . .] The size and location of a blank is just the size and position of the character position. Normally, the features of a blank are inferred from the surrounding inscriptions.[45]

However, Sorensen argues, blanks are metaphysically different from typographical inscriptions, and it is vital to distinguish among them according to various levels of inaction they perform inside a medium. He thus differentiates between inscribed blanks (such as those encountered on bureaucratic forms as unchecked boxes, dotted lines, ***, or ___) and "genuine blanks" that "signify by omission and avoid the stereotypical constraints on symbol manipulation."[46] In a manner similar to the functioning of zero and of the empty set in mathematics, such blanks are unintuitive, but theoretically central for the very existence of the signifying codes they belong to as "meta-signs,"[47] signs that indicate the absence of other signs. In so doing, they often generate semiotic disruptions and "systematic ambiguity between the absence of 'things' and the absence of signs."[48]

The lexical repositories and semantic fields usually associated with absence are, therefore, traversed by intricate, highly nuanced, and often overlooked variations. As Laura Marin insightfully pointed out in our e-mail correspondence, this terminological blur indicates the fragile indeterminacy of such terms, which are not only shifting with translation, but are manifestly permeable and fluid even within the confines of a single language. The loose rules governing their usage and interchangeability in areas of semantic overlap are, in a way, only natural, considering that resistance to fixed determinations is precisely the meaning they aim to convey. Moreover, it demonstrates the sheer inadequacy of positivist methods of inquiry in this field: linguistic and conceptual renderings of absence are in

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45 Sorensen, "Blanks: Signs of Omission," 309.
46 Sorensen, "Blanks: Signs of Omission," 318.
47 Rotman, *Signifying Nothing*, passim.
48 Rotman, *Signifying Nothing*, 2.

themselves elusive and dynamic, resisting the logic of presence that would allow for definition and categorization. In this respect, the study of absence is in line with the larger tradition of humanistic sciences, whose precision depends on their very inexactitudes:

> The humanistic sciences [. . .] indeed all the sciences concerned with life, must be necessarily inexact just in order to remain rigorous. A living thing can indeed also be grasped as a spatiotemporal magnitude of motion, but then it is no longer apprehended as living. The inexactitude of the historical humanistic sciences is not a deficiency but is only the fulfillment of a demand essential to this type of research.[49]

Instead of attempting to differentiate between void and nothingness, between what is empty and what is blank or vacuous, the researcher is better off accepting this lack of determination as an intrinsic vulnerability. A productive one, for that matter, because it stimulates thought and conceptual creativity more than a clear-cut scholarly taxonomy would do. What such an approach loses in positivist methodological rigor, it gains in truthfulness and adequacy to its subject matter since, as J. Hillis Miller puts it, these terms are "catachreses, names for something unknown and unknowable."[50] The plurality of absence-related terms and the indeterminacy of this relatedness do not provide answers, but raise questions and, for this reason, Laura Marin sees in their exploration a sort of avant-garde.[51]

Similarly, the scholarly literature on absence is vast, transdisciplinary, and resistant to classification. Aside from the vast corpus of academic articles and volumes dedicated to the analysis of thematized absence in the literary works of a heterogeneous gallery of writers (from Friedrich Hölderlin and Maurice Blanchot to Emily Dickinson, from François-René de Chateaubriand to Guillaume Apollinaire, Henry James or Yukio Mishima, from Nikolai Gogol to Samuel Beckett and Marguerite Duras),[52] a different tendency is to approach absence as a literary

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49 Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, translated by William Lovitt (New York, Toronto, London: Harper & Row, 1977), 120.

50 J. Hillis Miller, "Zero," in *Glossalalia: An Alphabet of Critical Keywords*, edited by Julian Wolfreys and Harun Karim Thomas (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 377.

51 Originally, in Romanian: "De fapt, toate aceste concepte au granițe fluide, trec dintr-unul în altul pe nesimțite, rezistența la determinarea ultimă e ambiția lor. Dar și fragilitatea lor în fața logicii pozitiviste care caută determinarea fără rest. Sînt concepte deschise, poroase, mobile, dinamice. Și cred că trebuie acceptate ca atare, cu vulnerabilitatea lor. Ele stimulează mai mult creația conceptuală și gîndirea decît analiza școlărească. Nu generează metode, dar deschid drumuri. Nu au răspuns, suscită întrebări. Din pricina asta, constituie un fel de avangardă." Laura Marin, e-mail to the author, February 2019.

52 William S. Allen, *Ellipsis. Of Poetry and the Experience of Language after Heidegger, Hölderlin, and Blanchot* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007). Inder Nath Kher, "The Landscape of Absence. Emily Dickinson's Poetry," *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 59 (1981):

topos in a wider context, not limited to the works of individual authors. Absence has been studied as a literary theme following historical periodizations; for example, in the Victorian novel, in nineteenth- or twentieth-century literature.[53] Mindful of national and linguistic boundaries, there have been investigations of absence in the German Romanticism, the German modernist novel, or in French modernist poetry.[54] More specific inquiries into particular forms of absence (for example, the absence of God) engage with wider corpora, such as pre-modern mystical discourse[55] or modern literature in general.[56] Lessness has been explored as an aesthetic category in works like Simon Critchley's *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing*,[57] which discusses works by Blanchot, Stanley Cavell, and Samuel Beckett in relation to Emmanuel Levinas's thought on death and absence. More interdisciplinary, Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit write about the works of Samuel Beckett, Mark Rothko, and Alain Resnais as exercises in the "arts of impoverishment"[58] in which effects of absence pervasively win

743–744. Laurent Cantagrel, "Dire l'absence. Chateaubriand et la mise en scène du mélancolique autour de 1800," *Romantisme* 32, no. 117 (2002): 31–44. Willard M. Bohn, "Sens et absence dans les calligrammes d'Apollinaire," *Cahiers de l'Association Internationale des Études Françaises*, no. 47 (1995): 455–470. Nancy Blake, "Henry James. Écriture et Absence," *Revue Belge de Philologie et Histoire*, vol. 64 (1986): 657–658. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Mishima. A Vision of the Void*, translated by Alberto Manguel (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1986). Sven Spieker, *Gogol – Exploring Absence: Negativity in 19ᵗʰ-Century Russian Literature* (Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, 2011). Ciaran Ross, *Beckett's Art of Absence: Rethinking the Void* (London, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). Carol J. Murphy, *Alienation and Absence in the Novels of Marguerite Duras* (Lexington: French Forum Publishers, 1982).

53 See Adams, *Nil*, but also Jolene Zigarovich, *Writing Death and Absence in the Victorian Novel* (London, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). Vicks, *Narratives of Nothing*, and Dominique Rabaté, *La Passion de l'impossible: une histoire du récit au XXᵉ siècle* (Paris: Éditions José Corti, 2018).

54 Stéphane Michaud, "Présence/Absence du corps aimé dans la poésie romantique allemande," *Romantisme* 62, vol. 18 (1988): 103–115. Stephen D. Dowden, *Sympathy for the Abyss: A Study in the Novel of German Modernism: Kafka, Broch, Musil, and Thomas Mann* (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1986). Marcel Gutwirth, *Laughing Matter: Representations of Death and Absence in Modern French Poetry* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993).

55 Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) and William Franke, *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourse in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*, vol. 1 – *Classic Formulations* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

56 Gregory Erikson, *Absence of God in Modernist Literature* (Gordonsville: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), and William Franke, *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourse in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*, vol. 2 – *Modern and Contemporary Transformations* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

57 Simon Critchley, *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London: Routledge, 2008).

58 Leo Bersani and Ulysse A. Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

over illusions of presence. Dominique Rabaté's study *Vers une littérature de l'épuisement (l'écrivain silencieux)* elaborates largely on the same topic, while limiting itself to the literary field.[59] The absent text has been described and analyzed as a literary *motif* in itself, while more fragmented textual absences have been discussed in relation to the poetical, conceptual, and visual aesthetics of blanks and erasure.[60]

Unsurprisingly, absence has also been a central concept in cultural studies concerned with memory and trauma,[61] as well as in the flourishing fields of media studies and affect theory.[62] With the turn of the millennium, the interdisciplinary study of absence and related concepts blooms in the humanities, but not only there. The year 2000 sees the publication of at least three major books discussing absolute absence from the perspective of exact sciences: most often, physics and mathematics. All three volumes mention threshold moments in the historical evolution of the concept, such as the emergence of the arithmetic zero (on which they offer contradictory accounts), Torricelli's invention of the vacuum pump, the Magdeburg hemispheres experiment, or the description of the quantum void as a state of constant interaction of particles and anti-particles.[63] A wave of studies relating scientific and mathematical explorations of the ontologically-problematic world of absence to literature and the arts will ensue. To give just two examples, American art historian and critic James Elkins brings together painting, photography, astronomy, particle physics, and quantum mechanics in his challenging *Six Stories from the End of Representation.*[64] Conversely, quantum physicists like Karen Barad undergo a discipline switch to apply their knowledge in fields like literary studies and cultural theory.

59 Dominique Rabaté, *Vers une littérature de l'épuisement* (Paris: Éditions José Corti, 1991).

60 Sorensen, "Blanks: Signs of Omission" but also Ileana Marin, *Victorian Aesthetics of Erasure in Fiction and Illustration* (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2011, published in Iași: Institutul European, 2015); and John Nyman, "Double/Cross: Erasure in Theory and Poetry" (PhD Diss., University of Western Ontario, 2018), available in the University of Western Ontario Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository, no. 5529, https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/5529, last accessed May 15, 2023.

61 Ann E. Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

62 Michael Richardson, "Radical Absence: Encountering Traumatic Affect in Digitally Mediated Disappearance," *Cultural Studies* 32, no. 1 (2018): 63–80.

63 Charles Seife, *Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea* (London: Penguin Books, 2000); Robert Kaplan, *The Nothing That Is: A Natural History of Zero* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), and Barrow, *The Book of Nothing.*

64 James Elkins, *Six Stories from the End of Representation: Images in Painting, Photography, Astronomy, Microscopy, Particle Physics, and Quantum Mechanics, 1980–2000* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

In 2004, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht critiques reducing the production of presence to meaning and interpretation.[65] This critique is not inconsequential for reshaping what is commonly understood as absence. The year 2010 has seen the inauguration of a new disciplinary subfield, the *anthropology of absence*, and the publication of an eponymous collective volume on the possibilities to remember, recuperate, or contest absence in the contemporary world.[66] In 2012, Morgan Meyer writes about "placing and tracing absence" in the context of a heavily-materialist culture.[67] The theoretical and philosophical discourse on absence have also been blooming in studies on post-structuralist thought.[68] It has likewise been addressed in heavier treatises drawing on the hypothesis of a transitory ontology,[69] or in discussions about formal absences in mental and visual imagery, or in relation to the question of referentiality challenged by empty representations.[70] A strong emphasis is laid on multidisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity as a methodological strategy to approach this elusive subject.[71]

Another fruitful exploration of absence is the practice, theory, and critique of fine arts. Curator José Roca signs in 2007 a catalog of *Specters of Absence*, bringing together the works of twelve contemporary artists experimenting with formal or thematic absence.[72] Only two years later, following a much-celebrated retrospective taking place simultaneously at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and Kunsthalle in Bern, the over 500-page catalog *Vides* comes out in print. To this day, it remains probably the most substantial inventory of artistic explorations of absence in con-

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65 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

66 Mikkel Bille, Frida Hastrup, Tim Flohr Soerenssen, eds., *An Anthropology of Absence: Materialization of Transcendence and Loss* (New York: Springer, 2010). Lars Meier, Lars Frers, Erika Sigvardsdotter, *The Importance of Absence in the Present: Practices of Remembrance and the Contestation of Absences* (New York: Sage Publications Ltd., 2013).

67 Morgan Meyer, "Placing and Tracing Absence: A Material Culture of the Immaterial," *Journal of Material Culture* 17, no. 1 (2012): 103–110.

68 Sean Gaston, *Derrida, Literature and War: Absence and the Chance of Meeting* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009).

69 Alain Badiou, *Briefings on Existence: A Short Treatise on Transitory Ontology* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006).

70 Jenny Chamarette, "Flesh, Folds, and Texturality: Thinking Visual Ellipsis via Merleau-Ponty, Hélène Cixous and Robert Frank," *Paragraph* 30, no. 2 (Edinburgh University Press, 2007): 34–49. Manuel García-Carpintero and Genoveva Martí, *Empty Representations: Reference and Non-Existence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

71 Paul Ashton, ed., *Evocations of Absence: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Void States* (New Orleans: Spring Journal Inc., 2007). Katarina Labudova, ed., *Presences and Absences – Transdisciplinary Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).

72 José Roca, *Phantasmagoria: Specters of Absence* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2007).

ceptual art.[73] With Hans Belting's *The Invisible Masterpiece*[74] and Anne Cauquelin's discussion of the Stoic category of the incorporeal in contemporary arts,[75] other forms of radical absence create their way into art theory. Most recently, media scholar Tomáš Jirsa dedicates an entire chapter in his study of affect and form to the missing subjects implied by the motif of empty chairs used in painting, conceptual art, installations, and theater.[76] Interestingly, Jirsa's analysis also unpacks several paradoxical ways in which absence relates to the transmedia art of portraiture.

This very brief inventory of studies on radical absence, ranging from physics and mathematics to art theory, from anthropology to literary criticism, and from the philosophy of representation to the history of mentalities is indicative of the broad spectrum of disciplinary interests that converge in the study of this ever-elusive concept.

<p style="text-align:center">✳</p>

After this brief lexical disambiguation and literature review, it is now time to formulate more clearly the goals, the directions of inquiry, and the structure of the present book. With a hybrid interpretative apparatus, drawing on the philosophy of language and visual representation, the volume discusses the extensive proliferation of figures of radical absence in the Western theoretical, literary, and artistic production of the twentieth century, with a special focus on works created after the Second World War and up to the present. Even though it would be far-fetched and often false to argue that these figures are exclusive inventions or discoveries of the past seven decades, and despite the fact that a majority of them have direct or circuitous roots in ancient, medieval, or pre-modern traditions, it remains indisputable – as the upcoming inventory of examples will illustrate – that they have been extraordinarily visible, appearing with unprecedented frequency and intensity in the literature, the visual arts, and the cultural theory of the past seventy years. This heterogenous corpus of works is haunted,[77] marked, and traversed by the specters of a fundamental, yet not entirely graspable absence. The book argues that, despite its elusive qualities, this radical absence is at once constitutive for, and deeply embedded in the material and immaterial conditions that determine a meaning-making system. Moreover, the emerging

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73 John Armleder et al., eds., *Vides. Une rétrospective* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, Bern: Kunsthalle, 2009).

74 Hans Belting, *The Invisible Masterpiece*, translated by Helen Atkins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

75 Anne Cauquelin, *Fréquenter les incorporels. Contribution à une théorie de l'art contemporain* (Paris: PUF, 2006).

76 Tomáš Jirsa, "The Portrait of Absence, or When the Empty Chairs Get Crowded." *Disformations*: *Affects, Media, Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), 91–112.

77 In the sense attributed to the term by Mark Fisher (via Derrida) in "What Is Hauntology?," *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (University of California Press, Fall 2012): 16–24.

figures of absence are not necessarily stable structures in themselves but, rather, are functions of the medium in which the respective meaning-making system operates.

Several patterns of figuration of radical absence can thus be identified and compared through the perspective of their ways of engaging with the materiality of their respective media. The book hosts a variety of theoretical and interpretive a) inventories, b) analyses, and c) comparisons – all concerned with either anthropomorphic or non-anthropomorphic figures of absence. These three different operations structure the book into three chapters designed to reveal a vast theoretical and interpretive potential that has previously been explored extensively in the field of social sciences, and only tangentially in literary or film studies and art criticism. In other words, this book is also a demonstration that the theorizations of absence originating in social sciences travel well when imported into literary and visual analysis, opening up for interpretation not only what *is* in a work, but also what is (meaningfully) *absent* from it. Seen from this angle, the inquiry into the puzzling and volatile field of figures of absence becomes particularly insightful: various instantiations of absence begin to make sense when treated as self-reflexive devices capable to shed light upon medium-specific (de)limitations, as well as upon a plurality of possibilities for transgressing these limits. The comparative analysis of several such figures of absence illuminates multimedial and multimodal variations in how radical absence is figured, including new modes of intermedial dialogue and their contemporary strategies for production and persuasion. Last but not least, the book dissects such strategies – ultimately *poietic* and *rhetoric* in nature – in terms of their political and poetical implications, considering their affective intensities, but also their aesthetical or ethical entanglements.

Aside from the actual case studies, the book advances a methodological model that may be further applied to other bodies of works spanning a variety of media. Central to this model is the concept of "figure of absence" which, already tested for instrumental value in the pages of this book, may be successfully deployed for future analyses of cultural artifacts.

The body of works discussed in the following chapters draws from modern and contemporary European and American literary prose: from Kafka, Melville, and Gogol to Perec and Duras, from Sterne to Gibson, Brooke-Rose, Saramago, and Safran Foer. The literary corpus refers to literature in print because the complexities of electronic literature would have entailed an entirely different analysis. A surprising variety of formal and thematic portrayals of absence in literary works is discussed along visual equivalents identified in post-World War II painting (particularly in monochromes), conceptual art (Yves Klein, Robert Barry, Terry Atkinson, and Michael Baldwin), performative arts (from John Cage to Heiner Goebbels), and experimental cinema (Isidor Isou, Guy Debord, Peter Ku-

belka, Marguerite Duras, Chris Marker, Derek Jarman, João César Monteiro, among others). The theoretical apparatus used for the analysis of these works includes writings by Martin Heidegger, Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau, Hans Belting, post-Lyotardian thinkers of the *figure* and, to lesser (although no less important) degrees, Gilles Deleuze, and Georges Didi-Huberman. Their vocabularies and conceptual frameworks answer a series of research questions, of which perhaps the most encompassing one asks how is (radical) absence figured in literature, cinema, and visual arts.

After identifying some of the mechanisms that exceed, transgress, or subvert representation and conventional meaning-making patterns, the book investigates the similarities and differences between the above-mentioned ways of figuring absence within and across the media under examination. More punctual questions arise along the way: can the concept of "empty signifier" travel from social sciences to literary and visual analysis? If so, how does it apply to the discussed works? How does it relate to other figures of absence (figural voids, Heideggerian nihilation), and how can these be adapted for literary analysis, coming, as they do, from the disciplinary realms of visual studies and philosophy? Furthermore, what are the poetical or political implications of the figuration of absence in the analyzed works? How does absence relate to the materiality and the normative apparatus informing or governing over the medium, and how does this relation change with variations that occur either within the medium or across media? What are the aesthetical or ethical stakes at play, and how do they unfold in regimes of affective intensities, when representation and intelligibility are blocked?

It is equally interesting to see what other themes, rhetorical devices, or figures are usually adjacent to, or deployed by these figures of absence, and whether they have been shown to reinforce or subvert features of the regimes of representation to which they belong. If they have, how did they achieve these self-reflexive functions? To what purpose has this potential been instrumented, and with what consequences for the production and consumption of the works?

The first chapter clarifies the theoretical stance of the book by exposing its origins and drawing a conceptual map of some of the most important turning points in the thinking of absence from 1929 (the publication year of "What Is Metaphysics") onward. It delineates four major paradigms for the interpretation of absence. The first one is imbued with Heideggerian thought and its Derridean continuation, denouncing and critiquing a metaphysics of presence that is unavoidably at work in thinking absence in relation to writing. Just as for Heidegger the nothing is, rather unintuitively, a condition for the existence of being, for Derrida all language (and even more so, all writing) is grounded in a constitutive absence that allows for the

very existence of a system of signification. This firm Heideggerian anchorage holds a privileged position in the overarching argumentative framework.

Secondly, since representation had been proven inadequate for and disloyal in expressing absence because of its inescapable reliance on a metaphysics of presence, the book explores the possibility of finding alternative systems of meaning-making. Via Laura Marin's research project[78] and, more specifically, its evocation of Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense* and Jean-Pierre Mourey's *Figuration of Absence*, I stumbled upon a theoretical vein exploring the potentialities of figural regimes. A figural regime is generally described as more fluid and more dynamic than representation, appealing to affects rather than to mimetic impulses, recognition, and intelligibility. Analyses of this newly postulated regime flourished especially after Jean-François Lyotard's 1971 re-thinking of the concept of "figure,"[79] gaining a lot of traction in French critical theory.[80]

A third subchapter brings in a new perspective developed in political semiotic, discussing the figure of the "empty signifier" through the lens of its politics of inclusion and exclusion, identity and alterity, and its potential for subversion or the open contestation of an established system of signification (be it social or representational).

Last but not least, a fourth section advances a comparative approach of Maurice Blanchot's *The Absence of the Book* and Hans Belting's *The Invisible Masterpiece* as an abstract model for text-image comparison of two ungraspable figures of radical absence that are, nevertheless, essential for the systems of writing and visual arts, respectively.

Even though these theoretical frameworks converge in many points, they diverge in others: terminological equivalences must be established, and they may often be imprecise; the paradigms and types of discourse differ, as well as their level of clarity and use of figurative language. Instead of drawing perfect equivalences or distinctions among them, or claiming to have sketched an exact cartography

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78 Laura Marin, ed., *Figura – Body, Art, Space, Image*, research project developed at the Center of Excellence in the Study of Image, University of Bucharest, 2015–2017, https://figura.unibuc.ro/, last accessed May 15, 2023.

79 Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours, figure* [1971] (Paris: Klincksieck, 2002). English edition: *Discourse, Figure,* translated by Anthony Hudek and Mary Lydon (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

80 To name only a few titles, in chronological order: the already cited Mourey, *Figurations de l'absence*; Marc Vernet, *Figures de l'absence. De l'invisible au cinéma* (Paris: Éditions de l'Étoile, 1988); François Aubral, Dominique Château, eds., *Figure, figural* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999); Philippe Dubois, "La question du figural," in *Cinéma, Art(s) plastique(s),* edited by Pierre Taminiaux and Claude Murcia (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004); *Images Re-vues: Histoire, anthropologie et théorie de l'art,* no. 8 – *Figurer les invisibles* (2011): http://imagesrevues.revues.org/430, last accessed May 15, 2023.

of the circulations of ideas related to absence, I prefer to use them complementarily and to observe how they illuminate one another. The complexity and the heterogeneity of the material requires a principle of non-exhaustivity and non-determinism regarding both the categories used in the theoretical preamble, and the figures identified across media. They are decidedly not mutually exclusive or inclusive. Instead of speaking of a single unified theory of absence, I draw attention to the existence of a heterogeneous, transdisciplinary, and transmedia field within which a variety of figures of radical absence operate autonomously and can be understood through a variety of frameworks.

The second chapter is concerned with non-anthropomorphic figures of absence. Its structure is driven by a medium-bound exploration of the theories and concepts exposed in the previous chapter. The findings are categorized into distinct subsections dedicated to instances of figures of radical absence identified in writing (with five subcategories of its own), painting, curatorial practice, music, theater, and experimental cinema. The chapter shows that, regardless of how far expression is pushed toward its liminal regions, lead into crisis, questioned, and endangered by radical gestures of absence, the figures of absence remain attached – even when in opposition – to their systems of signification and/or figuration, to the materiality and normativity of these systems, as well as to the power relations and the affective intensities that traverse and shape them. Didi-Huberman's insightful distinction between *figured* figures and *figuring* figures helps to understand how, in this paradigm, the overarching concept of "figure of absence" is related to the *figuring* regime of the figure (thereby prone to historical evolution and change), while an empty book, frame, exhibition space, stage or screen remain *figured* figures because of the ontological limitations and constraints imposed by their material actualization. Even if the ideal construct of the figure of absence refers to the void (but necessary) place that allows for the figuring of the figure, its existence can only remain virtual, forever unactualized, like Blanchot's model of the *Book to Come* and Belting's *Invisible Masterpiece*. Its materiality is eventually reduced to a minimum; for this reason, writers, painters, and directors preoccupied by the theme of absence recurrently adopt and focus on strategies of gradual formal impoverishment.

The undoubtedly incomplete list of figures of absence sketched in this chapter registers not only multimedial and intermedial variations, but also multimodal variance within a single medium – as it was the case for the various strategies of figuring absence in writing through missing texts, lipograms, cuts, and erasures as "additive subtractions," programmatic vacuity of the subject matter, or explorations of the *topos* of ineffability. Absences are shown to be created and instrumented through inversions, repetitions, fragmentation, and point-counterpoint self-cancelling struc-

tures that arrest all differential play and the tension between binaries reproducing the absence/presence dynamic: the blankness of the typographic space and the darkness of the ink, light and shade, noise and silence, emptiness and fullness, and so on. In their strictest sense, non-anthropomorphic figures of absence remain apophatically out of reach for the possibilities of figuration and signification. Situated beyond the normative and controlling power of narration, escaping the stability of representational structures and the dynamic flows of figuration, and dismantling even the most basic prerequisites of literature and the arts, the figures of absence can be described as the ground zero of creation; a utopian space where absence figures and signifies itself.

The third chapter deals with anthropomorphic figures of absence. It illustrates this category with two case studies: an archetypal figure (Dibutade, the protagonist of one of the myths concerning the origins of painting) and a literary character typology (the archivist, tasked with the preservation of written records). Both are "recording entities" and convey the sense of a certain lack: the former longs for an absent Other, while the latter tries to cope with a fragmentation and loss of self caused by the mechanicity and impersonality required by his job description. Just like in the case of non-anthropomorphic figures, in the two case studies (Marguerite Duras's *The Atlantic Man* and José Saramago's *All the Names*) a particular emphasis falls on text-image intermediality and versatility, on rhetorical strategies of integrating radical absence into the medium, and on self-reflexive implications that testify to the specificity of its material and immaterial conditions. What is particular to the human-shaped figures of absence, however, is the way in which they interact with the subjectivities that they figure, disfigure, or reconfigure.

To sum up, the book describes a range of figures of absence, together with their political, poietic, ethical, and aesthetical implications. For this purpose, it lays the basis of a transmedial inventory of figures of radical absence occurring in modern and contemporary works, situated at various distances from the core of the Western canon in literature and visual arts, including cinema. However, it does not limit itself to that. It identifies, summarizes, and assembles several key theoretical frameworks for thinking radical absence in relation to a variety of systems of signification and, on the basis of their complementarity, it advances a model of analysis that can be adapted for future explorations. Part of the innovative potential is the introduction of new concepts (the "figural void") and the reframing of newly emergent ones ("figures of absence" or "radical absence"), to better match the needs of text-image analysis. Additionally, it encourages the transdisciplinary circulation of concepts and theories that may prove useful to illuminate previously uncharted territories. This was the case with the concept of "empty signifier." Despite its origins in semiotics, it flourished in social and political science and, to my knowledge, it has not pre-

viously been used for literary and visual analysis. Of course, this conceptual import had to be tested for validity first, on a corpus of heterogeneous examples. This is the scope of chapters 2 and 3.

Another point of novelty is the distinction between anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic figures of absence, as well as the comparison between the two. This comparison exposes a surprising number of similarities between the mechanisms at work behind the two types of figures. Multiple points in which the two typologies overlap or converge become apparent after a close examination in terms of their ethic, aesthetic, politic, and poietic implications on their own medium and signifying tradition. A strong affective dimension is also intensively present in both cases, telling of intricate relations to desire, loss, longing, anticipation, or remembrance. The comparison also reveals several points of divergence, but these are fewer. Perhaps the most important one is the level of entanglement the figuration of absence maintains with the (de)construction of a (fictional) subject – and not just any subject but, in particular, one that acts as an operator of textual or visual inscription. Such characters are, therefore, endowed with intrafictional meaning-making agency, which enables them to occupy a privileged place within the verbal or visual narrative, as meta-signs among signs.

Eventually, the book surveys the rhetorical strategies at work within and among a wide range of media, from writing and painting to curatorial practice, music, theater, film, and cinema. While efforts to chart figures of absence in each of these media have proven fruitful before (both in anglophone and francophone scholarship), this book is – to the best of my knowledge – the first one to suggest the need to discuss them together as first signs of the emergence of a transdisciplinary and transmedial field of inquiry in the study of absence.

The reader will hopefully find this exploratory playground to be "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," to use the title of one of Hemingway's short stories that is itself no stranger to the figuration of radical absence. The story is concerned with the anxious and quasi-mystical experience of daily human encounters with absolute nothingness, whose very naming is uncontainable in any one language. Hemingway transgresses the monolingual limitations of the text to introduce a sense of a radical alterity of absence, something that remains completely foreign and, at the same time, strangely familiar:

> What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was a nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it all was *nada y*

pues nada y nada y pues nada. Our *nada* who art in *nada, nada* be thy name thy kingdom *nada* thy will be *nada* in *nada* as it is in *nada.* Give us this *nada* our daily *nada* and *nada* us our *nada* as we *nada* our *nadas* and *nada* us not into *nada* but deliver us from *nada; pues nada.* Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee. He smiled and stood before a bar with a shining steam pressure coffee machine.[81]

81 Ernest Hemingway, "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," in *The Oxford Book of American Short Stories*, edited by Joyce Carol Oates (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 299.

Chapter 1
What Is a Figure of Absence? Theoretical Frameworks

There are at least as many kinds of absence as there are presences. Moreover, there are several conceptual entities sheltered under the connotations and denotations of the words "figure" and "figural." To avoid getting lost in a disproportionate confrontation with this multiplicity, I should begin by explaining what kinds of figures and what kinds of absences populate the pages to follow.

This chapter identifies and describes specific ways of domesticating a few paradoxes inherent to the act of representing absence, given that representation implies (not only etymologically) a process of presentification, of bringing forward a presence into the layered presents of its production and reception. In 1939, Martin Heidegger noticed a significant shift in the way previous regimes of representation had become obsolete because they did not acknowledge the constitutive and dynamic force inherently maintained in relation to the represented object. Instead of reaffirming the self-unconcealing of objects that grants to representation its "truth" (*aletheia*), the German philosopher notes the reverse and previously neglected movement through which, in modernity, presencing is not as much a matter of being as it is a matter of representability (and, therefore, a relation with a newly constituted subject):

> Representing is no longer the apprehending of that which presences, within whose unconcealment apprehending itself belongs, belongs indeed as a unique kind of presencing toward that which presences that is unconcealed. Representing is no longer a self-unconcealing for X, but is a laying hold and grasping of X. What presences does not hold sway, but rather assaults rules. Representing is now, in keeping with the new freedom, a going-forth – from out of itself – into the sphere, first to be made secure, of what is made secure. That which is, is no longer that which presences; it is rather that which, in representing, is first set over against, that which stands fixedly over against, which has the character of object. Representing is making-stand-over-against, and objectifying that goes forward and masters. In this way representing drives everything together into the unity of that which is thus given the character of object.[82]

What happens, therefore, and what features of representation are at stake when one attempts to represent an absence? How is absence integrated, if at all, into a system of representation, and with what aesthetic or ethical consequences? What

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[82] Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 149–150.

alternative ways of expressing an absence exist outside of representation? Lacking a pre-existing term for the heterogeneous and more or less marginal, quasi-semiotic phenomena that have in common certain patterns of disruption and deviation from the standard conventions of creating and conveying meaning, I have chosen to call them "figures of absence." The reasons supporting this choice include Martin Heidegger's critique of the metaphysics of presence (through the lens of Jacques Derrida's continuation of this legacy), but also Lyotard's (dis)loyal heritage of thinking the intricate complexities surrounding the figure. Last but not least, I refer to Claude Lévi-Strauss's and Ernesto Laclau's views on the semiotic possibility of empty signifiers, together with their potential political implications. This theoretical assemblage combines perspectives that belong to different schools and traditions of thought (philosophy, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, structuralism, post-structuralism, and deconstruction) but are reunited by an interest in the figuration of absence and an awareness of the differences between figuration and representation.

Under various paradigms and influences, from the interwar avant-gardes to the punk scene of the 1980s, from suprematist mysticism to quantum physics, from the eighteen different kinds of void postulated in Zen Buddhism to minimalist conceptual art, an impressive number of explorations of absence have seen the neon lights of the art scene, have drowned in typographic ink or in endless surfaces covered with monochrome paint, or have been projected, silenced, or performed in front of puzzled or outraged audiences. To testify for this enormous variety of paradigms of thought and representation, I refer to them as "figures of absence." To indicate a deeper detachment from contextual contingencies and cultural or historic particularities, I use the term "figures of radical absence" instead, pointing to the fact that I am not interested in the transitive aspects of absence (as absence *of* one thing or another), but rather in its absolute manifestation as an intransitive category.

Figural voids are figures of absence that refer (deliberately or not) to unused or unusable potentialities of figurability, regardless of the medium and the expected content. They are provocative plays of (mostly unfulfilled) expectations. Mallarmé's anxiety in front of the blank page does not stem from the material page itself, but from its being a figural void, a space of indeterminacy capable of hosting all potentialities while actualizing none. However, just like the typographic blanks separating – and inhabiting, even – written words, the emptiness implied by the figural void is a prerequisite condition of representation. As Anne Cauquelin puts it, in a slightly different terminology (she calls "void" what I have called "radical absence"), "[The void] is present with and at the same time as all spoken word, accompanying any utterance of any kind, because it is the very con-

dition of the utterance. [. . .] the condition is included in what it conditions, being both its core and its end."[83]

Switching from language to motion pictures, here is a more explicit analogy: in order to properly accommodate the projected motion pictures, the projection screen must be in itself completely empty, unstained, without any differential quality attached to it. Just like this-à perfectly empty screen (which is, of course, an absolute utopia because the surface will never be completely empty), the figural void is the figure of the absence that is at once inherent and necessary to any representation, lying at its very core[84] and allowing for its existence and its internal dynamics. Just like the paradoxical region of calm that stays untroubled in the eye of a storm, the white, empty screen (or the white, empty canvas) must remain perfectly still in order to make literal space for the illusion created by the images. In the often-invisible center of a figural vertigo, there is always an infinitesimal, untroubled region of still emptiness.

In this sense, any given figure is always already a figure of absence. The faintest differentiation against a background, just as the above-mentioned cleavage inflicted by the figural (from within the image, upon the image), is the mark of a split, the symptom of an interruption, the opening of an internal abyss. In his article "Ceci est mon corps," Philippe Le Roux notes that an absolutely indeterminate medium is necessarily infinite, boundless, because its interruption would automatically impose determinations upon it, while also drawing attention to its presence:

> If we imagine an absolutely indeterminate medium, without the faintest internal differentiation, be it a sound, the most monotonous and uninterrupted sound, or an indefinite, uninterrupted and unoriented surface, we glimpse a first possibility of structuring this medium in the simple solution of its continuation. A sound that breaks and then resumes is turned into rhythm. Likewise, the basic articulation of a formerly amorphous material is already a figure of absence in that which it is absence itself, the interruption or the removal of mate-

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83 Cauquelin, *Fréquenter les incorporels*, 30: "*[Le vide] est présent avec et en même temps que toute parole prononcée, que toute énonciation quelle qu'elle soit, car il est la condition de cette énonciation même. [. . .] la condition est comprise dans ce qu'elle conditionne, comme étant son noyau et sa fin.*" The English translation is mine.

84 The idea is not new – it simply echoes in wider terms Maurice Merleau Ponty's phenomenological insights according to which visibility involves, implies, and is built upon invisibility. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 300: "*Quand je dis donc que tout visible est invisible, que la perception est imperception, que la conscience a un punctum caecum, que voir c'est toujours voir plus qu'on ne voit, – il ne faut pas le comprendre dans le sens d'une contradiction – Il ne faut pas se figurer que j'ajoute au visible parfaitement défini comme en Soi un non-visible (qui ne serait qu'absence objective) (c'est-à-dire présence objective ailleurs, dans un ailleurs en soi) – Il faut comprendre que c'est la visibilité même qui comporte une non-visibilité.*"

rial which, in the moment of silence that breaks the flow of continuity, creates the form. Suppressing or suspending that which figures is already, intrinsically, a figuration of absence. In this way, figuration demonstrates that it cannot be, in turns, neither figuration of presence, nor figuration of absence, but rather a figuration of absence, through absence.[85]

For the purposes of the upcoming argument, it is important to keep in mind Le Roux's observation that any articulation is, by its very nature, an interruption or a withdrawal exerted upon an initially amorphous material. Any creative gesture that shapes, frames, outlines, or otherwise creates a form (therefore, rendering it present and bringing it into the present) is always already a process that generates absence, not only presence, regardless of whether that presence is immediate or mediated (a representation).

1.1 Against the Metaphysics of Presence: Heidegger and Derrida

It is difficult, if not impossible, to avoid mentioning the names of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida when discussing twentieth-century reflections on absence, non-being, and nothingness in Western thought. Without pretending – or even aspiring – to exhaust the multifarious explorations of more or less defined figures of absence in their respective frameworks of thought, this chapter begins with an attempt to ground further discussions in a highly-influential philosophical tradition and in the context of post-structuralist reflection. The main references are Heidegger's "the nothing" and the "nihilation" described in his 1929 essay "What Is Metaphysics?,"[86] as well as the nuanced distinctions he draws between

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85 Philippe Le Roux, "Ceci est mon corps," in Mourey, *Figurations de l'absence*, 97: "*Si l'on s'imagine un milieu absolument quelconque, sans la moindre différenciation interne, qu'il s'agisse d'un son, le plus uniforme et le plus continu qu'il se puisse, ou d'une surface indéfinie, unie, non-orientée, on aperçoit une première possibilité de structuration de ce milieu dans la simple solution de continuité. Un son rompu puis continué se mue en rythme. Ainsi, une articulation élémentaire du matériau précédemment amorphe est déjà une figure de l'absence, en ceci que c'est l'absence même, l'interruption ou le retrait du matériau, qui, dans l'instant de silence, crée la forme. La suppression ou la suspension de ce qui figure est déjà, intrinsèquement, une figuration de l'absence. La figuration montre ainsi qu'elle ne peut être, au gré des vents, soit figuration de la présence, soit figuration de l'absence, mais figuration de l'absence, par l'absence.*" The English translation is mine.
86 Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?" (*WIM* for in-text abbreviated citation).
    NOTE: Although the present book makes use of some of Heidegger's influential philosophical ideas, it does so in condemnation of his infamous political views. For more reading on the controversies surrounding the use of his philosophical work in the light of his political engagements, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique: Heidegger, l'art et la politique* (Paris: Chris-

silence, the unspoken, and the unsaid in the 1959 essay "The Way to Language."[87] As some of the most preeminent sites for the discussion of Derridean thought on absence, I selected the 1967 *Of Grammatology*[88] and the 1970 essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences,"[89] along with references to signature concepts such as the *trace* and the *différance*. While acknowledging the many differences (in field, scope, arguments, rhetoric, etc.) between the two authors, I am discussing them together because of their shared interest in the blind spots of Western metaphysics, the relation of thought to language, and of poetry to philosophy. Another reason is the fact that Derrida interpreted and developed several Heideggerian hypotheses.

Heidegger distinguishes the thinking of "the nothing" from the intellectual history of nihilism which, following Nietzsche, he identifies with metaphysics and with its desire to disregard or counter thought that would conceive of the nothing as a source for Being. In the words of David Farrell Krell's foreword to "What Is Metaphysics?," for Heidegger, "nihilism does not result from excessive preoccupation with the nothing. On the contrary, only by asking the question of the nothing can nihilism be countered."[90] His critique opens with the observation that scientific discourse is exclusively concerned with beings, "solely beings, and beyond that – nothing."[91] The meaning of this formulation is twofold: firstly, it announces that scientific thought wishes to know nothing about nothing; secondly, it is still paradoxically calling upon the nothing it rejects in order to define its object of inquiry.

Simultaneously rejected and required by the grounds of scientific thought, the nothing becomes an interesting *locus* situated at once inside and outside human reasoning. It is perhaps the place J. Hillis Miller refers to when he tries to unpack the the rhetorical and tropological implications of zero: "a place of slip-

tian Bourgois, 1988), translated by Chris Turner as *Heidegger, Art, and Politics: the Fiction of the Political* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990). See also the dossier "Symposium on Heidegger and Nazism," *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 2, 407–487 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), and *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, edited by Richard Wolin (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992).

87 Heidegger, "The Way to Language" (*TWTL* for in-text abbreviated citation).

88 Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (*OG* for in-text abbreviated citation).

89 Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (London, New York: Routledge, 2001), 351–370. (*SSP* for in-text abbreviated citation).

90 Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?," 44.

91 Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?," 47.

page, where things become somehow a little irrational or mindboggling."[92] This paradoxical *topos* whose existence is so illogical that borders on madness is also apparent when Derrida speaks in "Structure, Sign, and Play" about the *center* that is present only in its absence. Later, we will see it at work in Ernesto Laclau's discussion of the limits posed to the systematicity of a system and which, as limits, are situated both within and outside of the system. Scientific thought seems, thus, to abandon the question of nothingness to "a studied indifference" as the only possible response to such conceptual anomalies. The philosopher talks about the nothing taking the terrifyingly indeterminate contours of "an outrage and a phantasm,"[93] if approached from a scientific perspective designed to investigate only what "there is," not what "there is not."

This ontological impossibility further extends into an extremely problematic rendering into speech, because of the inherent inadequacy of predication itself:

> What is the nothing? Our very first approach to this question has something unusual about it. In our asking we posit the nothing in advance as something that "is" such and such; we posit it as being. But that is exactly what it is distinguished from. Interrogating the nothing – asking what and how it, the nothing, is – turns what is interrogated into its opposite. The question deprives itself of its own object. [. . .] every answer to this question is also impossible from the start. For it necessarily assumes the form: the nothing "is" this or that. With regard to the nothing, question and answer alike are inherently absurd. [. . .] thinking, which is always essentially thinking about something, must act in a way contrary to its own essence when it thinks of the nothing.[94]

Consequently, the nothing's resistance to predication is accompanied by an imperative for its "intransitive" thinking that removes any object of thought and, therefore, leads to a kind of self-reflexive movement that questions thought itself. This self-interrogation brought about by the vicinity of an ever-unreachable absence ("a phantasm") resurfaces rather frequently in our subsequent analyses of figures of absence rendered in various media and regimes of representation. Returning to the question of the impossible predication of the nothing, it is metonymically telling of a wider incompatibility between the nothing and language as

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92 J. Hillis Miller, "Zero," 370. He continues glossing on this illogical positionality of the arithmetic zero on page 372: "a more than slight obscurity hangs over the way zero is both an absolute starting place, an absence of number, and yet at the same time a number. Also it seems more than a little odd to say that zero is the bottom, the starting point, and yet at the same time the intermediate point between positive and negative numbers. [. . .] I shall return to these oddnesses, that seem to hang over the zero or haunt it, when I discuss the rhetorical or tropological implications of zero."
93 Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?," 47.
94 Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?," 48.

"the house of Being"[95] and "guardian of presencing."[96] As the following chapter shows, this incompatibility is fruitfully explored by Christine Brooke-Rose in *Between*,[97] a novel written entirely without any conjugation of the verb "to be." The author motivated this exclusion with an intention to express the refusal of stable and determined presence, and to attempt a more adequate wording for the flowing and nomadic subject in the interstitial spaces of what "there is not."

Remaining in the field of linguistic subtleties, Heidegger proceeds to distinguish the nothing from the category of logical negation and its linguistic operator, the "not." He postulates that even though "the nothing is the negation of the totality of beings; it is nonbeing pure and simple," it does not rest under the determination of the negative and it does not fall under the logical category of negation, since doing so would imply being accessible through the intellect. It has already been demonstrated otherwise:

> Do not the "not," negatedness, and thereby negation too represent the higher determination under which the nothing falls as a particular kind of negated matter? Is the nothing given only because the "not," i.e., negation, is given? Or is it the other way around? Are negation and the "not" given only because the nothing is given? That has not been decided: it has not even been raised expressly as a question. We assert that the nothing is more original than the "not" and negation.[98]

Using the verb "to be" in this provisional fashion, to predicate on the nothing in the absence of any ontological implication, is an impulse to attempt another breach in the linguistic resistance of the concept, to formulate a question in its regard despite the just-mentioned formal impossibility of inquiry. "Then," Heidegger continues, "we must at least satisfy what remains the basic demand for the possible advancing of every question. If the nothing itself is to be questioned as we have been questioning it, then it must be given beforehand. We must be able to encounter it."[99] Common, everyday usage of the word (though deprived of the definite article upon which Heidegger insists on every occasion) indicates that if the nothing is to be encountered, its quest must proceed from an intuitive "definition" (suspended in quotation marks by the author himself, most aware of the log-

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95 Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," [1947] in *Basic Writings – from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964),* edited by David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993), 217.

96 Heidegger, "The Way to Language," 305.

97 Christine Brooke-Rose, "Between," [1968] in *The Christine Brooke-Rose Omnibus: Four Novels* (New York: Carcanet, 1986), 391–575.

98 Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?," 48.

99 Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?," 49.

ical leap) of the nothing as "the complete negation of the totality of beings."[100] However, this definition is not very helpful considering that it only extends the requirement of an encounter: in order for this negation to be able to come into effect, the totality of beings must precede it as a given. And how could it present itself as a given to an essentially finite being, such is man? Negating the "idea" of the totality of beings would only lead us, he argues in anticipation of a deceitful solution, to the "idea" of the nothing, and not to "the nothing itself," not even to its domesticated form, a "camouflaged but absurd concept of a nothing that is."

Faced with this difficulty, Heidegger proposes a switch from a purely intellectual approach to what one could name in retrospect a theory of affects *avant la lettre.*[101] His thesis is that despite human inability to conceive of a totality of beings without transforming it into an unusable abstraction, man nevertheless may experience this totality in certain *moods*, like boredom[102] or love.[103] However, these two moods conceal instead of unveiling the nothing, unlike anxiety (distinct from fearfulness), which may – though rarely and fleetingly – bring the subject in front of nothingness itself. Describing anxiety, Heidegger highlights its intransitive character, which distinguishes it from fear (of something), by using three dots as graphic placeholder (the ". . .") for that which triggers anxiety by remaining unnamable and intangible, completely suspending any possible denomination or predication. Later in the book, I refer to this category of graphic artifices integrating an absence into the order of a discourse (visual or textual) as figural voids and/or empty signifiers.

Here is how the typographic placeholder works in avoiding the mention of the nothing (to elude the impression of a false transitivity), while preserving its absence of all determination, contour, or differentiation: "A peculiar calm pervades it. Anxiety is indeed anxiety in the face of . . ., but not in the face of this or that thing. Anxiety in the face of . . . is always anxiety for . . ., but not for this or that. The indeterminateness of that in the face of which and for which we become anxious is no mere lack of determination but rather the essential impossibility of

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100 Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?," 49.

101 Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?," 50: "What we call a *feeling* is neither a transitory epiphenomenon of our thinking and willing behavior not simply an impulse that provokes such behavior nor merely a present condition we have to put up with somehow or other."

102 Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?," 50: "Profound boredom, drifting here and there in the abysses of the existence like a muffling fog, removes all things and human beings and oneself along with them into a remarkable indifference. This boredom reveals beings as a whole."

103 Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?," 50: "Another possibility of such revelation is concealed in our joy in the presence of the Dasein – and not simply of the person – of a human being whom we love."

determining it."[104] It is easy to notice how, for Heidegger, the receding of language signposts the receding of being or, rather, the receding of the totality of beings.

Moreover, this receding is anxiety-inducing not as "mere disappearance," but as the "slipping away of beings as a whole," including of the subject. "Anxiety reveals the nothing" in the sense that not even the anxious subject is able to escape this "slipping away": "it is not as though *you* or *I* feel ill at ease; rather, it is this way for some *one*. In the altogether unsettling experience of this hovering where there is nothing to hold onto, pure Da-sein is all that is still there."[105] As such, anxiety as the affective response to the encounter with the nothing robs the anxious subject not only of the hold on any other being, but also of speech (more generally, of language) and of his sense of self. The most imprecise and powerless description of this encounter – "it was nothing" – is also the only accurate one. In this respect, Heidegger's analysis of anxiety strongly resembles Freud's description of melancholia, which maintains in relation to mourning the same absence of object as anxiety does in relation to fear.[106]

With this rhetorical artifice, Heidegger derives the closest possible insight into "the nothing" from its seemingly inconclusive everyday usage. He also sets the knowledge of nothingness on pragmatic and affective linguistic grounds. This observation will prove most useful in the subsequent analysis of figures of absence in writing, yet it will not remain without consequence in other systems of encoding, either.

Anxiety appears therefore as the fundamental mood in which the nothing "is revealed and from which it must be interrogated" (*WIM*, 51). However, it does not show itself as an object, but as a "slipping away of the whole," a "shrinking back before . . . that is surely not a sort of flight but rather a kind of bewildered calm" (*WIM*, 52). Heidegger speaks about this movement of distancing as a repelling force of the nothing (he calls it *nihilation*), distinct from the more common gestures of negation or annihilation. Beings are beings insofar as they are repelled from the nothing. It is precisely this retreat, this repulsion, that which discloses the being as being, as the radical other of the nothing that nihilates (*WIM*, 52). At this point, it is important to mention that, since it renders possible the "openness of beings as such, the nothing does not merely serve as the counterconcept of beings; rather, it originally belongs to their essential unfolding as such" (*WIM*, 53). This is perhaps

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104 Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?," 50.

105 Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?," 51.

106 Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, edited and translated by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1974), 243–258.

the most significant aspect that separates the nothing from negation: while nega-tion "can make denials only when something deniable is already granted to it" (*WIM*, 53), the nothing participates in (and is required for) the disclosing of being.

Negation requires a previous affirmation, while the nothing does not depend on the pre-existence of being. On the contrary, the being arises as a turning away from the nothing. Similarly, "the not does not originate through negation; rather, negation is grounded in the not that springs from the nihilation of the nothing. But negation is also only one way of nihilating; that is, only one way of behavior that has been grounded beforehand in the nihilation of the nothing. [. . .] Nothing is the origin of negation, not vice-versa" (*WIM*, 54). Also, negation is only one type of nihilative behavior among others (i.e., failure, prohibition, privation, repres-sion, cancellation, effacement) in which the nothing – a radical, intransitive ab-sence – manifests itself.

Any inquiry into the question of nothing extends "beyond or over beings" (*WIM*, 55), which is also true of metaphysical discourse and methods. This over-lapping of fields encourages a thinking-together of the nothing and being, not as a pair of opposites, but in a relation of belonging. As Heidegger concludes,

> The nothing does not remain the indeterminate opposite of beings but reveals itself as be-longing to the Being of beings. "Pure Being and pure Nothing are therefore the same." This proposition of Hegel's (*Science of Logic*, vol. I, *Werke* III, 74) is correct. Being and the nothing do belong together, not because both – from the point of view of the Hegelian concept of thought – agree in their indeterminateness and immediacy, but rather because Being itself is essentially finite and reveals itself only in the transcendence of Dasein which is held out into the nothing. [. . .] Only in the nothing of Dasein do beings as a whole, in accord with their most proper possibility – that is, in a finite way – come to themselves.[107]

Metaphysical in its nature, the question of nothing not only concerns the entire field of metaphysics, but it is also prone to put its questioners into question as well, and thus reveal man as "a lieutenant of the nothing" (*WIM*, 55) that will have access to the truth of being only with the price of renouncing himself as sub-ject. The instruments of human logic and the whole of science deriving from it must therefore necessarily consider the nothing when deployed to study being. Eventually, science must rely on metaphysics and not the other way around even if – or rather, precisely because – as Heidegger postulates, "the truth of metaphys-ics dwells in this groundless ground" (*WIM*, 57) which is the nothing:

> Conceived from out of metaphysics [. . .] the hidden essence of being, the refusal, reveals itself first of all as the absolute non-being, as the nothing. But the nothing, as the nothing of beings, is the keenest opponent of mere negating. The nothing is never nothing, and neither

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107 Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?," 56.

> is it a something in the sense of an object; it is being itself whose truth will be given over to
> man when he has overcome himself as subject, when, that is, he no longer represents beings
> as objects.[108]

If the nothing is the hidden essence of being, perhaps we could then think of absence more productively as a hidden presence that eludes and resists its explicit manifestation. Heidegger supports this model and uses it (to give but one example) when writing about the shadow: "Everyday opinion sees in the shadow merely the absence of light, if not the complete denial. But, in truth, the shadow is the manifest, though impenetrable, testimony of hidden illumination. Conceiving the shadow in this way, we experience the incalculable as that which escapes representation, yet is manifest in beings and points to the hidden being [*Sein*]."[109] The second section of this chapter discusses that which escapes representation in terms of *figuration*, and explores the possibilities of alternative renderings of absence outside and beyond regimes of representation that would potentially further cancel or obscure it. Roy Sorensen addresses the question of shadows more extensively and uncovers its philosophical underpinnings in a separate study that I will not discuss here.[110]

This dialectical cancellation of the tension between antithetical terms is a recurrent trait in the Heideggerian discussion of presence and absence, as it transpires in his discussion of language to which belong not only the said and the spoken, but also the unsaid and the unspoken (and, one could add, the unwritten). For Heidegger, "the saying is showing" and language shows, "it lets what is coming to presence shine forth, lets what is withdrawing into absence vanish. [. . .] It liberates what comes to presence to its particular presencing, spirits away what is withdrawing into absence to its particular kind of absence. The saying joins and pervades the open space of the clearing which every shining must seek, every evanescence abandon, and to which every presencing and absencing must expose itself and commit itself" (*TWTL*, 297). This observation not only has the merit of bringing together linguistic and visual apprehensions of absence – which will prove useful in my upcoming discussion of the intermedial model for the analysis of radical figures of absence literature and visual arts – but it also introduces the concept of a space in which both absence and presence manifest themselves.

Granted and dispensed through a process that Heidegger names "propriation" (an experience, not an event, nor a happening), this "open space of the clearing" is

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108 Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *Off the Beaten Track*, translated by Julian Young, Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 85.

109 Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," 85.

110 Roy Sorensen, *Seeing Dark Things: The Philosophy of Shadows* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

one "into which what is present can enter for a while, and from which what is withdrawing into absence can depart, retaining something of itself while all the while in withdrawal" (*TWTL*, 298). The territory for the coexistence of absence and presence, and the experience of propriation that allows for their simultaneous occurrence are conceptual figures that contribute to the weakening, if not to the complete dissolution of the logical tensions that usually characterize theoretical discourses on absence and presence. Moreover, they help to understand how absence is intrinsically embedded into the very nature of language, verbal or visual, and how this embeddedness comes to the fore in art. In the foreword to Heidegger's *Basic Writings* anthology, David Farrell Krell notes that for Heidegger "a great work of art opens the world in such a way as to reveal, however obliquely, something that resists unconcealment. That opaque, resistant, recalcitrant, anomalous accompaniment to the transparent worldliness of the world."[111] Not only is this particular kind of irretrievable, radical absence always present in the work, insofar as it can be considered a work; more importantly, it is an essential function of the work, its source, its end, and its condition of existence.

Jacques Derrida gives many names to this fundamental absence and argues that its naming is the locus, or rather "not a fixed locus, but a function" (*SSP*, 353–354) of an inexhaustible chain of substitutions of signs. Following Saussure, this free play of repetition, variation, and substitution is what accounts for the existence of language or, in more general terms, of any system of signification. Three of the many figures under which Derrida elaborates on this phenomenon of radical, yet constitutive absence, are the "transcendental signified" (*OG*, 49), the "différance" (*Differance*, 3), and the "center" (*SSP*, 352). The supplement[112] and the trace[113] are described along similar rhetorical and conceptual lines.

The *transcendental signified* is a concept formulated in relation to a response to the absence inherent to signs, if it is true that the structure of the sign is informed and determined by a remainder (Derrida calls it "trace") of an everabsent, unreachable "other." As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak rightfully notices in

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111 David Farrell Krell, "Foreword," in *Martin Heidegger – Basic Writings* (London, New York: Routledge, 2008), xii.

112 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 303: "The supplement comes in the place of a lapse, a nonsignified or a nonrepresented, a nonpresence. There is no presence before it, it is not preceding anything but itself, that is to say by another supplement." Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 314: "The supplement is neither a presence nor an absence. No ontology can thing its operation."

113 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 6: "The Trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general. Which amounts to saying once again that there is no absolute origin of sense in general. The trace is the difference which opens appearance and signification. Articulating the living upon the nonliving in general, origin of all repetition, origin of ideality, the trace is not more ideal than real, not more intelligible than sensible, not more a transparent signification than an opaque energy and no concept of metaphysics can describe it."

her preface to *Of Grammatology*, this view agrees, on the one hand, with Lacan's description of the signifier as a combination of presence and absence, a combination indicative of "a desire[114] for something that the subject has not, the other of the subject" (*OG*, lxv). By definition absent from immanence, outside and beyond the realm of the tangible and perceivable reality, this signified is projected into transcendence.[115] On the other hand, Spivak does not fail to notice that Heidegger's Being, too, "even under erasure, could be a transcendental signified" (*OG*, lxv). It is a matter for further reflection whether "the nothing" could be considered another example of transcendental signified or not.

The *difference* is another figure of absence pointing to that which resists representation while being the very condition of articulation that makes representation possible, through spatial distancing and temporal deferral. It is not absence *per se*; it is rather the deferring of presence[116] inherent for the functioning of the representation or signification it articulates (on a sensible or intelligible level):

> [différance] cannot be exposed. One can expose only that which at a certain moment can become present, manifest, that which can be shown, presented as something. present, a being-present in its truth, in the truth of a present or the presence of the present. [. . .] Reserving itself, not exposing itself, in regular fashion it exceeds the order of truth at a certain precise point, but without dissimulating itself as something, as a mysterious being, in the occult of a nonknowledge or in a hole with indeterminable borders [. . .] every exposition it would be exposed to disappearing as disappearance. It would risk appearing: disappearing.[117]

The final formula, disappearing as disappearance, is strongly reminiscent of Heidegger's coming into being of beings with the occasion of their withdrawing, as withdrawal, from the repulsive force of the nothing in the process of nihilation.

The *center* is a third Derridean instantiation of radical absence. When the concept of center is applied to a totality, a system (in particular, a system of signi-

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114 I shall return to this question of desire in the third chapter, in the context of the intricate relations absence maintains with the subject and the affective regimes it re-enforces or engenders. Moreover, it resonates with the affective intensities of desire presupposed by the figure, as Lyotard and theorists of his tradition explained (see Section 1.2.).

115 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 50: "One could call play the absence of the transcendental signified as limitlessness of play, that is to say as the destruction of ontotheology and the metaphysics of presence. [. . .] This play, thought as absence of the transcendental signified, is not a play in the world."

116 Derrida, "Difference," [1968] in *Margins of Philosophy* [1972], translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 9: "The sign represents the place of the present. It takes the place of the present. When we cannot grasp or show the thing, state the present, the being-present, when the present cannot be presented, we signify, we go through the detour of the sign. [. . .] The sign, in this sense, is deferred presence."

117 Derrida, "Difference," 5–6.

fication), it reveals itself as simultaneously responsible for the structurality of the system and for its free play of differentiation (by its nature, the center *holds* the system in place). It is also the only element within that structure that escapes structurality and closes off the play of permutation, substitution, and transformation taking place in the rest of the totality. The impossible, "contradictorily coherent" (*SSP* 352) localization of the center transports it outside of itself and makes it "reside," so to speak, in this permanent displacement: "The center is not the center" (*SSP* 352). Switching from spatial to temporal terms, the center would perhaps translate into another signature Derridean figure of absence, namely the origin. In fact, Derrida himself equates "the central signified" with "the original or transcendental signified," which is "never absolutely present outside a system of differences" (*SSP*, 354) and never absolutely present inside it, either, because of its heterogeneity with the rest of the system. What is even more interesting is that the center is not only the equivalent of the (irrecuperable) origin, but also of the equally imprecise end. Between the two absent, unperceivable, unrepresentable, and unintelligible points, the entire history – together with its weighty presences – unfolds and tries to obscure their absence:

> And again on the basis of what we call the center (and which, because it can be either inside or outside, can also indifferently be called the origin or end, *archē* or *telos*), repetitions, substitutions, transformations, and permutations are always taken from a history of meaning – that is, in a word, a history – whose origin may always be reawakened or whose end may always be anticipated in the form of presence.[118]

Since language is part of this history, there is no language to denounce its false presentification of what can never actually be brought into presence: centers, origins, ends. The reason for this elementary lack is simple and explainable through the fact that language itself is a system that privileges presence, obscuring the absence of the signified with the presence of the signifier. As Derrida himself points out, "we have no language – no syntax and no lexicon – which is alien to this history; we cannot utter a single destructive proposition which has not already slipped into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest" (*SSP*, 354). In other words, the metaphysics of presence cannot be dismantled through language (or through any system of signs, for that matter), because language itself becomes unusable without its hold on presence. We have seen this impossibility at work before, when Heidegger pointed out that his concept of "the nothing" is incompatible with most basic linguistic structures, such as simple predication or interrogation. Possessing an awareness of this impossibility is the closest human mind could reasonably (that is, through reason) get to an

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118 Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences," 352–353.

understanding of absence. This does not mean, however, that other approxima-
tions of it have not been attempted. As the following section will show, the aware-
ness of such limitations inherent to thought and representation have led to
explorations of an alternative regime: figuration.

1.2 The Figural Void: Absence in Post-Lyotard Figural Thinking

Thinking the concept of *figure* as a radical semiotic device, a "nonsignifying
sign,"[119] makes it able to encode multiple ontological regimes in an ontologically
negative key already presupposing configurations, assemblages, and degrees of
intensity related to absence. Moreover, it is a concept active in multiple para-
digms or systems of textual or visual expression. While an overwhelming major-
ity of the existing theoretical discourse on this subject discusses the figure as a
more or less stable tool deployed for the re-presentation of a presence, I attempt
here to demonstrate the exact opposite.

By introducing the figure (understood in its performative sense, rather than
as a fixed structure) into the troubled realm of theoretical attempts to render ab-
sence perceptible and/or intelligible, I am interested in the aesthetic implications
of what may be called, for present purposes, "a figural void." A figural void is a
space of impossible figuration, or from which the figuring, the figured, and the
figurable underwent a radical process of withdrawal, or have been removed by
virtue of an external agency. The conceptual framework at work here summar-
izes a series of theoretical attempts to decipher ways of figuring absence in liter-
ature and the arts, authored by scholars such as Jean-Pierre Mourey, Philippe
Dubois, and Anne Cauquelin. Subsequently, I introduce a similar model from the
field of social sciences, namely the "empty signifier," as developed by Ernesto La-
clau in the mid-1990s. Before proceeding to examples of mechanisms of figuring
absence in a variety of media, I will summarize some of the directions taken by
the discourse on the figure since the 1971 publication of the most extensive work
on the matter, François Lyotard's *Discourse, Figure*.

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119 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [1972], trans-
lated by Robert Hutley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane [1977] (Minneapolis: University of Minne-
sota Press, 10th edition, 2000), 241.

1.2.1 Discourses on the Figure after Lyotard

As confirmed by a large corpus of theoretical efforts aiming to describe the figure and the figural, every attempt to do so opens or ends with a statement on how problematic and reductive it would be to try to inscribe these concepts within the confines of a definition. The complexity of this subject matter accounts for the existence of a plurality of significations assigned to the figure (and the concepts derived from it) in fields as varied as arts, mathematics, textual or visual rhetoric, as well as in discourses on plasticity, psychoanalysis, faciality, or cartographies of bodies and spaces. In a way similar to the disorienting complexity of the term "absence," the concept of "figure" likewise resists clarity and precision in conceptualization.

Undoubtedly, Jean-François Lyotard's 1971 *Discourse, Figure* is one of the broadest critical gestures able to shed some light upon the rather indeterminate realm of the figure. Starting from several intuitions sketched by Maurice Merleau-Ponty on a manuscript version of *The Visible and the Invisible*, Lyotard acknowledges the limits of the already existing notions of "figure" and "figurative" and claims the need for a new theoretical approach able to do more justice to their heterogeneity.

The originality of Lyotard's proposal sprung from his suggestion that the phenomenological discourse on a certain invisibility at the very heart of the visible, being both *inseparable from* and *constitutive for* it, is similar in its premises and conclusions to the discourse of Freudian psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytic discourse likewise speaks of an unconscious *inseparable from* and *constitutive for* consciousness. Lyotard assimilates, thus, the space of invisibility inherent to the visibility of the figure (and accountable for its figurability) to the unconscious. Moreover, he conceives this unconscious space of vague, indeterminate phenomena which nevertheless informs the visible (or rather the perceptible, in more general terms) as the place of manifestation of the figural. Lyotard's figural is, therefore, something profoundly different from the figurative, namely a mutation intimately related to plasticity and desire, a spatial manifestation of a semiotic indeterminacy that transcends the sign and the symbol, and cannot be contained in the linguistic space. In a sense, it acts as the visual supplement of language, while being irreducible to language or to any given system of signs.

This inaugural split between the *figural* (as transgression of the figure, whose multiple avatars made its meaning always dependent on the type of discourse it belonged to) and the *figurative,* as formulated by Lyotard, has been well received and widely adopted in critical theory. Ten years after *Discourse, Figure,* Gilles Deleuze explicitly instrumentalizes this distinction in his famous analysis of paintings by Francis Bacon:

Bacon often explains that it is to avoid *the figurative, illustrative,* and *narrative* character the Figure would necessarily have if it were not isolated. Painting has neither a model to represent nor a story to narrate. It thus has two possible ways of escaping the figurative: toward pure form, through abstraction; or toward the purely figural, through extraction or isolation. If the painter keeps to the Figure, if he or she opts for the second path, it will be to oppose the "figural" to the figurative. Isolating the Figure will be the primary requirement. The figurative (representation) implies the relationship of an image to an object that it is supposed to illustrate; but it also implies the relationship of an image to other images in a composite whole which assigns a specific object to each of them. Narration is the correlate of illustration. A story always slips into, or tends to slip into, the space between two figures in order to animate the illustrated whole. Isolation is thus the simplest means, necessary though not sufficient, to break with representation, to disrupt narration, to escape illustration, to liberate the Figure [. . .].[120]

Commenting on the widening gap that modern painting opens between figure and figuration (understood as the figurative regime of mimetic representation), Deleuze insists on the dynamic nature of the figure. The figure, he claims, abandons fixed meaning, stable structure, and precise contours in order to unsettle the painted surface through sensations, rhythms, fields of resonance, and violent, transformative forces. Philippe Dubois, another thinker of the figure and the figural, will restate this point. According to him, the representational potential of images is weaker than their figurative power.[121] In other words, the power of images lies in the primacy of figuration over representation.[122]

If Lyotard's figure inhabited the critical point of juncture between psychoanalysis and phenomenology, Deleuze's analysis gives less importance to the Freudian undertones. As early as *A Thousand Plateaus* (1972), he conceives the figure in closer relation to (in)corporeality: "It is always by means of something incorporeal that a body separates and distinguishes itself from another. The figure, insofar as it is the extremity of a body, is the noncorporeal attribute that limits and completes that body: death is the Figure."[123] This observation also puts the figure's relation with representation in a new perspective if, together with Deleuze and Guattari, one agrees that "representations are bodies too!"[124]

Marking their point of separation from Lyotard's perspective, other authors will advocate for the possibility to study the figural as a transgression of the figure by deploying a vocabulary of transgression that is distinct from the one pro-

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120 Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* [1981], translated by Daniel W. Smith (London, New York: Continuum Books, 2003), 3.

121 Dubois, "La question du figural," 55.

122 Dubois, "La question du figural," 57.

123 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* [1972], translated by Brian Massumi [1987] (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 107.

124 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 86.

posed by Freud. François Aubral, for example, invites to reflect on the figure in terms of *unpredictability* and *openness*, leaving behind Lyotard's strict Freudian interpretations: "If transgression implies a law, maybe there are other modes of distancing, renewal, or invention that develop in a less normative *tempo*?"[125]

By this token, one could argue that Philippe Dubois made use of a less normative tempo in his article "La question du figural," where he explicitly undertakes the risks of ignoring the distinction between the figural and plasticity. Instead, he uses them interchangeably and justifies his choice by invoking their common etymological root: both *plasma* in Greek and *fingere* in Latin are related to the idea of shaping, modeling, giving form to a material, or changing the existing one.[126] This apparent coincidence anticipates Dubois's conclusion: the figural is not only a structure, but also an event, an image-event provoked by the image, within the image, acting upon the image, and potentially identifiable by a series of symptoms to which I shall return later. Moreover, Dubois operationalizes the term. He refers to the "figural potential (*puissance*) of the objects" explaining that what touches us in several scenes extracted from Godard's and Hitchcock's cinema is not the object on display in itself, but rather its *mise en forme*, its staging within (and through) images.[127] His argument continues with a series of equivalent distinctions: presence versus representation, figuration versus narration (echoing Deleuze's remarks on Bacon's figures), potential versus power, sensation versus signification. According to the author, the first terms in these pairs are consistent with each other in the same way that the second terms are among themselves. This parallelism across contradictions allows him to oppose – in an ever Deleuzian rhetoric – the machine of *presence-figuration* (operating in depth and intensity,[128] not by means of rationality and knowledge, but through a fragmentary, selective, and affective memory; not a rhetorical, but rather a poetical device) to the *representation-narration* machine. While the former generates sensations endowed with a figural potential (*puissance*), the latter produces significations, being a machine of rhetorical power.

This distinction helps to understand how, due to its figural potential, figuration is situated beyond the controlling power of narration and representation,

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125 François Aubral, "Variations figurales," in *Figure, figural*, edited by François Aubral and Dominique Château, 242–243: "*Si la transgression suppose la loi, peut-être existe-t-il des modes de mise à distance, de reprise et d'invention qui évoluent sur un tempo moins législatif?*" The English translation is mine.

126 Dubois, "La Question du figural," 54.

127 Dubois, "La Question du figural," 57.

128 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 5: "Figures depend on intensive thresholds."

thus alluding regulatory principles and structures.[129] Also, it makes clear the fact that figures may equally inhabit figurative and abstract painting – they are in no way restricted to what is ordinarily classified as "figurative painting." Figures are, in this sense, neither images, nor forms or structures, but internal events constitutive for all three categories, dependent on "intensive thresholds" that help to build up what he calls a "figurative memory" characterized by fragmentariness and indeterminacy.

Acknowledging this indeterminacy, Dubois explains his understanding of the figure as a complex concept that covers a territory with four dimensions: the figurative (*le figuratif*), the figured (*le figuré*), the figurable (*le figurable*), and the figural (*le figural*). The *figurative* is, in Erwin Panofsky's terms, iconographic. Concerned with the subject matter, the composition, the details, it is that dimension of the image (visual or not) which follows a mimetic principle. As such, it is the object of art history and, more precisely, of iconography. On the other hand, the *figured* implies a second degree of meaning within the logic of representation. It is the product of semantic operations and, therefore, the working matter of iconology. Following Dubois's reasoning, the *figurable* is the latent state of figuration, its figural potential dealing with the conditions of access to visibility and the virtual existence of an image. It has been extensively used in the study of medieval theology and Freudian psychoanalysis in order to account for the impossibility to figure either the divine or the unconscious.

Last but not least, in Philippe Dubois's attempt to sketch the premises of a cartography of the figure, the figural proves to be the most indeterminate territory on the map. Given the difficulty to assign a positive definition to it, the author proposes a negative description. According to Dubois, the figural would be that figurable remainder that operates within an image (again, not necessarily a visual image) after having evacuated from it both the figurative content, which is iconographic or referential, and the figured layer of connotations. Rather than a stable product, the figural is described as an ever-becoming process taking place within the image as an event, as a detail, or as a field of forces and tensions.[130] In the light of this negative definition, a figural void would equally be characterized as the event of the absence of an event, the detailed lack of details, and the tensions and the forces triggered by the absence of iconographical or iconological tensions and forces. Moreover, Dubois's framework shows how a figural void has a different quality attached to it when compared to a lack of representation. The figural void is intensive and dynamic in its stillness; the absence that remains imperceptibly manifest even in the lack of figurative (or illustrative, or narrative)

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129 Dubois, "La Question du figural," 61.
130 Dubois, "La Question du figural," 61–64.

denotation and connotation is at once disruptive and fundamental. Another essential aspect is its impossibility to be further removed, negated, or withdrawn. Even when the richest abundancy of content and layered meaning is added upon it, the figural void remains embedded in the very materiality of the medium and in the very gesture of its articulation.

In the same article, the French theorist continues his argument speaking about the figural in performative terms ("the figural as an image event"). He describes it as something that interrupts or stains the image, acting upon it from within, both in depth and on its surface, with three discernible effects. Firstly, the figural triggers some kind of "flash," taking its audience by surprise; the irruption of the figural is shocking. A figural void can therefore be easily instrumented as a *geste de fronde*, in contesting a certain expressive tradition, norms and institutions of the field, political and aesthetic regimes. This is, for example, the case in the practice of exhibiting empty rooms in various conceptual art "shows," or in displaying imageless films to scandalize a certain type of audience, as it will be made more clear in the following chapters of the book. To what extent this effect of shock is truly effective, and how this efficacy has been partly lost through repetition is another side of this discussion. Scholars of visual activism, for example, deploy concrete examples to argue that the contemporary world witnesses strong transformative political effects of "the power of blanks, holes, silences, and empty spaces."[131]

Secondly, according to Dubois, the figural has the ability to tear apart the texture of representation and to embody an irreducible cleavage that splits the image, separating the visible from the legible, the iconographical from the iconological, the signifier from its signified. This split opens the image and makes it turn onto itself. The result of this self-reflexivity is either an effect of alteration (the figural challenges the figurative conventions and disfigures the regular form) or an effect of alterity, which does not modify familiar forms, but invents new, non-figurative ones instead, engendering a feeling of estrangement. The practice of empty *livres d'artiste*, frequently encountered in the contemporary landscape of artistic statements, resonates with older, nineteenth-century meditations on the blank page, such as Mallarmé's, Valéry's, or Melville's. The self-reflexive quality of the figural is also tangentially signaled in relation to the figural presence of absence in other media, as it is often the case that figural voids are presented as meditations on the nature of the literary or artistic work, on its materiality, and on the creative or destructive processes that shaped it.

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131 Trinh T Minh-ha, "The Image and the Void," *Journal of Visual Culture* 15, no. 1 (April 2016): 131.

Thirdly, apart from creating flashes and ruptures, the figural (which is, according to Dubois, an event provoked by the image itself) acts upon the image and endows it with the consistency of an intensive presence. I shall discuss this effect in more detail in relation to Jonathan Safran Foer's textual die-cuts in his challenging *Tree of Codes*,[132] but also in analyzing the alternation of images with empty frames in the experimental cinematic works of Marguerite Duras or João César Monteiro. Identifiable as a flashing revelation that surprises the perceiving subject while confronting him to the sight of a structural discontinuity, the figural moves through the image, unsettles it, operates displacements and contaminations, and permeates through the relative stability of mimetic representation to the point of figurative indeterminacy.[133] These structural discontinuities may, in some cases, become the (only) perceptible traces of the figural void. Often, they become manifest in the functioning of rhetorical or graphical devices, such as fragmentariness and repetition. One good example of repetition and fragmentation used extensively to figure an absence is *The Atlantic Man*.[134] This example is exceptionally illustrative because it proves the point in two media, both as a film and as a literary work.

In a vein not dissimilar to Dubois's approach, François Aubral understands the concept of figural as the contemporary result of a vast critical, philosophical, and aesthetic movement that challenges the classical theories of the figure.[135] Its nature no longer belongs to the realm of representation, but to that of plasticity; its novelty arises from no longer being associated to reason, mimetic imperatives, and meaning, but to affects and things irreducible to language that can only be glimpsed through the tensions and fields of forces assembled in the interstices of forms and colors. In other words, while representation is a manifest and conscious act, the figural is the opposite: irrational and latent. Similarly, when contrasted to the form, the figure is dynamic, unstable, not fixed. Aubral is very loyal to Lyotard's thinking of the figure, in both the Freudian and the phenomenological dimensions of his theoretical reasoning. To begin with, he acknowledges that the figure is characterized by thickness, intensity, and desire.[136] Far from being merely a flat form inscribed in a contour, the figure vibrates and renders desire perceptible, at the margins of discourse.[137] Reading Duras's *The Atlantic Man* as a

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132 Jonathan S. Foer, *Tree of Codes* (London: Visual Editions, 2011).

133 Dubois, "La Question du figural," 66–71.

134 Marguerite Duras, *L'Homme Atlantique* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1982). For the English translation, "The Atlantic Man" in *Two by Duras*, translated by Alberto Manguel (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1993), 29–58.

135 Aubral, "Variations figurales," 240.

136 Aubral, "Variations figurales," 199.

137 Aubral, "Variations figurales," 205.

modern transposition of Dibutade's graphic anticipation of desire and loss is revealing in this sense. Then, Aubral echoes Merleau-Ponty's *L'Oeil et l'esprit*[138] and *Le Visible et l'invisible*[139] when noting that behind the figured form, beyond any figuration, there is, necessarily, a space of invisibility which accounts for its presence. In other words, beyond contours and appearances there is a certain depth, a thickness, an invisible layer of content that cannot be expressed through language.[140] This observation can be productively correlated with Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory of the unwritten implications generating "narrative gaps" that are inherent to any narrative text.[141] To my knowledge, Iser's narrative gaps have not yet been discussed as figures of absence. The striking similarities to the "figural void" paradigm I delineate here (the narrative gaps and the figural voids alike are inherent absences that accompany a textual presence and allow for its functioning, despite their impossible complete articulation through language) indicate that such a parallel is more than justified.

1.2.2 Figures and Figurations of Absence

The study of figured absence has an eclectic tradition and several critical landmarks, stemming mainly from French theory. As early as 1987, Jean-Pierre Mourey's edited volume of interdisciplinary essays points to the transmedial complexity of this particular category of figuration.[142] Only a year later, Marc Vernet publishes *Figures de l'absence. De l'invisible au cinéma.*[143] In this book, he identifies five distinct figures used in cinematography (a spectral medium itself) to signal the existence of absent images belonging to an off-screen space: the look at the camera, the subjective amera, the superimposition, the portrait, and the absent character.[144] Each one is illustrated with examples from canonic films and points toward a mismatch in refer-

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138 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'Oeil et l'esprit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).

139 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).

140 Aubral, "Variations figurales," 201–202.

141 Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), passim.

142 Mourey, *Figurations de l'absence.*

143 Vernet, *Figures de l'absence au cinéma.*

144 Gilles Deleuze has a similar reading of the off-screen (or out-of-field) space and the voice-off in his *Cinema II: Time-Image*, particularly in relation to the cinema of Robert Bresson and Jean-Luc Godard. Toward the end of his book, he also references Marguerite Duras's work, to which I shall return later, as an example of visual and audible deployments of such referential mismatches to indicate absences inside the perceptible frame (see pp. 278–279). I thank prof. Cezar Gheorghe for pointing out this Deleuzian mirroring of Vernet's insights.

entiality, when the referent happens to coincide with the material conditions of the cinematic production (the camera) or with gaps in the narrative (the subjectivity implied by a certain point of view, plot gaps, absent characters). Strangely enough, Marc Vernet does not make any reference to the myriad of experimental imageless films. Ever since Isidor Isou's 1951 *Treatise on Venom and Eternity* (*Traité de bave et de l'éternité*), passing through Guy Debord, Marguerite Duras, Peter Kubelka, Tony Conrad, Derek Jarman, and João César Monteiro, the history of cinema tracks the use of blank frames of various grains and colorations. Some of the above-mentioned directors go as far as making films that are entirely deprived of images.

More recently, another framework has been advanced by Anne Cauquelin,[145] who revisits contemporary art through the filter of the four categories of the incorporeal (time, place, void, the expressible) described in the ancient writings of the Stoics. Her account testifies to the complex (transmedial, transcultural, transhistorical) implications and connections that necessarily accompany a study of absence.

In his essay "Ombres, éclats, fragments," Jean-Pierre Mourey points to the three distinct meanings of the prefix *ab-* in Latin. Firstly, *ab-* ("off," "away") may be read as a sign of distancing, a purely spatial form of absence. Secondly, it may signify a lack, a more radical figure of loss, an ellipsis that interrupts a continuum. Thirdly, it is the mark of a deep, unbridged gap between two elements whose reconciliation is impossible. The strongest example of this incompatibility would be the one deeming any regime of representation unfit to properly accommodate the divine, as is the case in some systems of belief.[146] One may think of Hegel's account of Pompey the Great's entry in the Holy of Holies in the Temple of Jerusalem, where the emperor was amazed to discover that this most sacred room, which he imagined filled with sights unseen, was, in fact, empty.[147] However, the realm of absence is so vast that it accommodates both *what cannot be figured* and *what can only be figured*.[148] As such, the absence is a *non-lieu*, a paradoxical territory which lies simultaneously outside of figuration and within it – a structural impossibility to which, as demonstrated in the previous subchapter, Jacques

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145 Cauquelin, *Fréquenter les incorporels*.

146 Mourey, *Figurations de l'absence*, 26: "*L'incompatibilité suppose une différence radicale qu'aucun seuil [. . .] ne peut résoudre, effacer, suturer. [. . .] Aucun élément du monde sensible, aucune image ne peuvent donner une représentation adéquate du Divin. Cette représentation sera aimantée, travaillée par de l'irreprésentable.*"

147 Cited in Devorah Baum, "Le Rien et les Juifs," in *Vides. Une rétrospective*, edited by John Armleder, 425.

148 Mourey, *Figurations de l'absence*, 9: "*La figuration s'instaure toujours, d'ores et déjà, sur fond d'absence: absence du réel qui est figuré.*"

Derrida dedicated a lot of attention in his long-discussed essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences."

Further attempts at approaching absence reveal more of its inherent contradictions. For example, the figuration of absence meets its most radical form either in the absolute absence of figuration, or in its overabundance. Referring to multiple aesthetics built around *horror vacui* (Baroque or Islamic art, to give only two common examples), Mourey points out that the awareness of an absence does not necessarily lead to silence, emptiness, nothingness – and, broadly speaking, to what I have called a "figural void." Absence might just as well trigger an infinite proliferation of figures, a swirl of convoluted appearances, a staged, yet unstable excess of figuration.[149] Perhaps due to these extreme, polarized tendencies, the strongest absence-effects (if one may call them this way) are those created through a certain staging, a careful *mise en scène.* In his article "La *tabula rasa* ou le vide de la peinture," Maurice Frechuret validates this view, speaking about "stagings involving figures of absence, never in a straightforward way, [. . .] but via progressive and elliptic images in which often innuendos and the undertones are more convincing than pure visibility."[150]

To illustrate Frechuret's point, I shall briefly cite one example. Yves Klein's empty exhibition called *La spécialisation de la sensibilité à l'état de matière première en sensibilité picturale stabilisée*, opened in 1958's Paris at the Iris Clert Gallery. Even if the entire exhibition consisted of nothing but a white, empty room, it was by no means a careless enterprise. The walls had been painted white by the artist himself, witty invitations had been sent well in advance, blue cocktails were served at a blue entrance. The works of art "on display" were immaterial, certainly absent to the five senses. Klein insisted on referring to them as bits of his pictorial sensibility, and some were even sold in exchange for quantities of

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149 Mourey, *Figurations de l'absence*, 7: "*La conscience du manque (manque d'une vérité salvatrice, d'un socle, d'un fondement) n'entraîne pas pour autant le silence, le vide. Elle peut susciter un tourbillonnement de figures, des redoublements vertigineux: la prolifération des arabesques, la spirale des volutes, l'enfilade des masques cachent le vide, le rien. La scénographie de l'excès, la théâtralisation de la mise en abîme, les métamorphoses et les ambivalences déploient leur faste. Dans son* Anthologie de la poésie baroque française, *Jean Rousset note cette proximité: de la conscience du vide naît le besoin de l'illusion, de l'inconstance des choses, le goût du décor, du déguisement. [. . .] Ainsi, quand l'expérience intérieure est l'intuition de l'inconstance, du peu de poids des choses, d'une vacuité, l'une des attitudes éthiques, esthétiques est de jouer de l'illusion, de redoubler celle-ci. Une autre stratégie serait le dénuement, le silence, l'effacement de soi.*".

150 Maurice Frechuret, "La *tabula rasa* ou le vide de la peinture," in Mourey, *Figurations de l'absence*, 111: "*des mises en scène où les figures de l'absence se mettent en place, jamais frontalement, [. . .] mais dans des images progressives et elliptiques où souvent les effets suggestifs sont souvents plus convaincants que la visibilité pure.*" The English translation is mine.

much more material gold. Others, according to the artist, were simply taken away, impregnated in the clothes of visitors, who had to pay as much as 1,500 francs to for the privilege of "seeing" and taking home these pieces of immaterial pictorial sensibility. In so doing, Klein thematizes the alienation of the artwork by offering a most radical example of the proximity of artistic production and the capitalist logic of supply and demand. What clearer depiction and denunciation of the work of the capital in art could he have devised?[151] Perhaps for having missed this exact point, staged so bluntly, Klein referred to those who complained about having nothing to see in his entirely void exhibition with disdain and exasperation: "They are all blind!"[152] One could also object that, on a very literal level, there was not just nothing to see: there still remains the question of the fragments of blue at the entrance, as if hinting to the fact that the matter of nothingness is never as simple as it seems at first sight. In Gaston Bachelard's words: "There is an imaginary beyond, a pure beyond, one without a within. First there is nothing, then there is a deep nothing, then there is a blue depth."[153] The reader will discover and recognize more examples of countering the deceiving simplicity of "The Big Nothing"[154] in the following sections dedicated to the transmedial potential of the figures of absence.

The figurations of absence are, therefore, endowed with a rhetoric and a topology of their own. The resulting regime of figuration is not to be confounded with a regime of representation: the difference between the two would be that while figuration refers to an articulation of the figures, representation implies a more or less transparent strategy of *mimesis*, a certain emphasis on repetition

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151 For a more contextualized exploration of the work of the capital in art, see Sophie Cras's analysis of Yves Klein in *The Artist as Economist: Art and Capitalism in the 1960s*, translated by Malcolm DeBevoise (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), as well as Nuit Banai, "Rayonnement and the Readymade: Yves Klein and the End of Painting," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 51 (Spring 2007): 202–215. A more detailed account of Klein's engagement with the question of artistic exchange value is offered by Rosalind Krauss and Thierry de Duve in "Yves Klein, or The Dead Dealer," *October* 49 (Summer 1989): 72–90. For a more general theoretical approach, see Bojana Kunst, *Artist at Work: Proximity of Art and Capitalism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2015).

152 Yves Klein, *Vers l'immatériel* (Paris: Éditions Dilecta, 2006), 22: "*Ils sont tous aveugles!*".

153 Gaston Bachelard, "The Blue Sky," in *Air and Dreams, An Essay on the Imagination of Movement* [1943], translated by E. R. and C. F. Farrell (Dallas: The Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1988), 167–168.

154 "The Big Nothing" is the name of a "major group exhibition on exploring themes of nothing and nothingness in contemporary art" curated by Ingrid Schaffner, Bennett Simpson, and Tanya Leighton. The exhibition was open May 1 – August 1, 2004 at the Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Arts and it included over sixty artists' works from the 1970s to the 2000s. Official website: http://icaphila.org/exhibitions/1770/the-big-nothing, last accessed May 15, 2023.

and reproducibility.[155] Nevertheless, as it will be explained in the subchapter dedicated to *The Atlantic Man*, repetition can be instrumented to serve the figuration of absence as well, not only its representation. In fact, Mourey himself continues the argument by explaining how the fragment (in fact, any result of an interruption, a syncope, an ellipsis) is a matrix for figuring absence, for it is the trace of a loss, the present mark of an absence, and it functions by the logic of synecdoche. Other figures able to embody absence may conform to a different logic – the logic of metaphor, for example.[156]

Mourey points to another necessary distinction, namely the one between the "presentification" of absence (the return of the absent as present, the overcoming of the *ab-*) and the figuration of the absent as absent.[157] According to Mourey, the work of figuring absence – namely, articulating figures that convey a sense of absence and render it perceptible – is a work of staging, a way of keeping it at a distance through subtle effects that replace, with a stronger impact, the usual inventory of signs explicitly gravitating around the idea of absence (deserted or abandoned places, graves, ruins, and others).[158] Mourey's hypothesis is based on examples drawn from Romantic or modern painting (Caspar David Friedrich, de Chirico), but its validity is indeed broader and exceeds the margins of the canvas. One may recognize intimations of it in the words of Maurice Blanchot, who refers to the same effect of necessary distancing when exploring the poetic possibilities of grasping absence: "We see clearly, then, why poetic language can revive things and, translating them in space, make them apparent through their distancing and their emptiness: it is because this distance lives in them, this emptiness is already

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155 This distinction between figuration and representation belongs to Mourey, *Figurations de l'absence*, 11.

156 Mourey, *Figurations de l'absence*, 42–43: *"C'est un fragment, il porte trace de la violence des hommes et du temps: ses bords sont à vif et le vif de cette coupure le marque comme fragment. Parmi les figures de l'absence, les unes sont des restes du corps, de l'objet perdu [. . .] Les autres sont produites en substitution à ce qui a été perdu. [. . .] Métaphores de l'absent, elles peuvent aussi par l'unité, l'euphorie de leur forme, affirmer la pérennité de ce qui a disparu. La puissance du fragment tient à sa nature paradoxale. Ce qui saute aux yeux, c'est ce qui manque, fait défaut."*

157 Mourey, *Figurations de l'absence*, 32.

158 Mourey, *Figurations de l'absence*, 3: *"Tout autrement, certaines peintures mettent en scène l'absence. Elles produisent (pro-ducere) un effet d'éloignement, de défection ou de manque. Celui-ci ne résulte pas d'une figure, d'un détail nommables, localisables. L'impression d'absence naît d'un je ne sais quoi qui est l'effet de l'ensemble du dispositif pictural, d'une scénographie. La peinture de De Chirico, de Friedrich serait fastidieuse si elle se réduisait à un catalogue de signes de l'absence: places vides, fenêtres fermées, roulottes abandonnées pour le premier, ruines, tombeaux, bateaux échoués, arbres morts pour le second. La désolation et le vertige du vide, chez Friedrich, naissent du télescopage d'un plan proche (avec ou sans personnage) et d'un plan lointain. Les plans intermédiaires sont supprimés."*

in them; thus it is right to grasp them, and thus it is the calling of words to extract the invisible center of their actual meaning."[159] Or, as he notes several paragraphs earlier:

> [. . .] that ability to represent by absence, and to manifest by distance, which is at the center of art, an ability that seems to distance things in order to say them, to keep them apart so that they can be illumined, a capability of transformation, translation, in which it is this very apartness (space) that transforms and translates, that makes invisible things visible and visible things transparent, thus makes itself visible in them and is revealed as the luminous heart of invisibility and unreality from which everything comes, and where everything is completed.[160]

Blanchot situates the figurations of absence in the common grounds shared by language and images. In a similar gesture, Mourey acknowledges that this ontologically unstable concept is, quite transparently, as much a matter of writing as it is one of visuality.[161] Moreover, not only that the figuration of absence transcends the limits of a single medium; it even goes beyond the linguistic and the visual. The absence takes on so many forms, to the point of being so polymorphous that it preserves no stable form at all. However, its presence might still be figured. I have already shown that the figure is not a form, but rather an event, just as figuration is not a representation, an indication, a signification, or an

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159 Maurice Blanchot, "Joubert and Space," in *The Book to Come* [1959], translated by Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 58. In the original French, Maurice Blanchot, "Joubert et l'espace," in *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 72: *"L'on voit bien alors pourquoi la parole poétique peut susciter les choses et, les traduisant dans l'espace, les rendre manifestes par leur éloignement et leur vide: c'est que ce lointain les habite, ce vide est déjà en elles, par où il est juste de les saisir et que les mots ont pour vocation d'extraire comme le centre invisible de leur signification véritable."*

160 Blanchot, "Joubert and Space," 56. In the original French, Blanchot, "Joubert et l'espace," 70: *"ce pouvoir de représenter par l'absence et de manifester par l'éloignement qui est au centre de l'art, pouvoir qui semble écarter les choses pour les dire, les maintenir à l'écart pour qu'elles s'éclairent, pouvoir de transformation, de traduction, où c'est cet écart même (l'espace) qui transforme et traduit, qui rend visibles les choses invisibles, transparentes les choses visibles, se rend ainsi visible en elles et se découvre alors comme le fond lumineux d'invisibilité et d'irréalité d'où tout vient et où tout s'achève."*

161 Mourey, *Figurations de l'absence*, 41–42: *"La figuration de l'absence dans du visible, sa visualisation, ne sont pas une opération simple dès lors, mais un redoublement entre le dire et le voir. Ce qui se donne à voir dans une peinture a certes son propre ordre spatial, architectonique, mais en même temps, comme telle ou telle description littéraire, ce qui s'y figure est d'ores et déjà du discours (un certain discours sur le sujet humain, sur l'être du monde). [. . .] L'étude des figurations de l'absence permet de repérer des points nodaux, éléments communs au discours philosophique et à l'image littéraire, picturale. [. . .] les éléments qui s'imposent comme déterminants dans les figurations de l'absence appartiennent à la fois à l'ordre du discours et du voir. Dans la dialectique de la présence et de l'absence, ils s'altèrent, s'inversent, se métamorphosent."*

image, as described by Husserl.[162] In this sense, Bruno Duborgel identifies a specific figure of absence in the *moiré* patterns, a strange articulation of space which allows for an endless interplay of appearance and disappearance. What is visible can be seen because of the invisibility of a complementary figure. Due to the permanent co-dependency of absence and presence, the image is unstable and momentary, emerging from the potentialities of the interwoven inscription and effacement in the pattern of a texture (or a text):

> Moiré – [. . .] fabric that has become sub-stance of appearance and disappearance, space of flexible and continuous conversions of one into the other. Each presence of a configuration of forms and rhythms of light emerges out of a disappearance, "absorbs" a previous state, but equally suspends its possible return. Disappearing hardly means being absent; appearance is consistent with the absence which sustains it; it is itself one of the dis-covered, momentary figures, possible instantiations of the tissue or of the text. Every state of presence brought to visibility retains – in the double sense of "holding back" and of "remembering" – the alterity and the absence that its own highlighting seems to put on hold, until the position of the seeing eye changes. [. . .] Inscription and effacement imply one another [. . .] and are given, paradoxically, coefficients of depth on moving surfaces.

> *Moiré – [. . .] étoffe devenue sub-stance de l'apparition et de la disparition, espace des reconversions souples et incessantes du même et de l'autre. Chaque présence d'une configuration de formes et de rythmiques lumineuses se nourrit d'une disparition, « absorbe » un état précédent, mais aussi bien ne fait que tenir en suspens son retour possible. Le disparaître n'est guère que s'absenter; l'apparaître fait corps avec l'absence dont il se soutient; il n'est lui-même qu'une des figures momentanées, dé-couverte, des émergences possibles du tissu ou texte. Chaque état de présence portée à la visibilité retient- au double sens simultané de « tenir en retrait » et de « se souvenir » – l'altérité et l'absence que sa propre mise en exergue semble mettre entre parenthèses, le temps d'une posture du regard. [. . .] L'inscription et l'effacement se disent l'un l'autre [. . .] et se donnent paradoxalement coefficients de profondeur sur surfaces mobiles.*[163]

In "Ceci est mon corps," Philippe Le Roux formulates two challenging questions. The first one is closely related to the features of the *moiré* pattern: if absence can only be understood in relation to presence, wouldn't it be worth asking whether presence and absence are each other's negation, or if, on the contrary, they imply one another in the act of figuration? His answer is that the very figuration of the absence is, simultaneously, fundamental and threatening for this frequently misunderstood opposition. The figured absence, he says, already takes the consis-

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162 Edmund Husserl, "Expression et signification," in *Recherches logiques* II (Paris: PUF, 1969), 27–35. For a detailed explanation of Husserl's terminology and the differences separating these terms, see Philippe Le Roux, "Ceci est mon corps," 95–97.
163 Bruno Duborgel, "Moires intérieures. Sur quelques tapis photographiques de Maurice Muller," in *Figurations de l'Absence*, 69.

tency of a presence, despite the fact that it engenders a double absence: the absence which is figured, as well as the absence inherent in every figuration. The second question draws on an analogy: if figuration engenders some sort of presence, what is that which opposes figuration in the same way as absence opposes presence? To this, Philippe Le Roux's answer is "ipseity," opening a circle that will be closed sixteen years later by Dubois. As shown at the beginning of this study, the latter holds the figural responsible for an effect of alteration and estrangement (*altération et alterité*):

> Ipseity, without any other form but itself, remains inarticulate and it is neither spoken nor shown. It is ultimately inaccessible and, more importantly, invisible, and it is more related to absence than to presence. On the contrary, figuration encounters the visible in forms, interprets it, manifests it, and in doing so, prepares the spectator's initiative, through which presence enters the picture. All figuration, even the figuration of absence, is also a presence, as figuration. Thus, figuration surmounts the ambiguity of absence and presence, leaving behind the ipseity of the unnamed real.[164]

In this explanation, the concept of ipseity becomes similar to Heidegger's concept of propriation, as the event that brings beings into their own being, the event that allows for the "in itself" of being.

Anne Cauquelin invites her readers to consider the surprising stance taken by the Stoics in their attempt to conceptualize the void. According to Apollodorus, cited by Diogenes Laertius, *to pan* ("the All") includes *to holon* ("the finite body of the world") and the void, an infinite space deprived of direction, limits, orientation, or content. "By the totality of things, the All, is meant, according to Apollodorus, (1) the world, and in another sense (2) the system composed of the world and the void outside it. The world then is finite, the void infinite."[165] This void surrounds the world (it is nowhere to be found inside it) and counts as one of the four species of "incorporeal," together with time, space, and the expressible. The only determination that applies to it is the ability to potentially contain matter, without actually doing so. "It is called void a space that doesn't contain any body,

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164 Le Roux, "Ceci est mon corps," 107, originally in French: *"L'ipséité, sans autre forme qu'elle-même, demeure inarticulée, et n'est ni énoncée ni montrée; elle est, à la limite, inaccessible, et, plus spécialement, invisible, et s'apparente davantage à l'absence qu'à la présence. A l'inverse, la figuration met le visible en formes, l'interprète, le manifeste, et, par-là, y prépare l'initiative du spectateur par laquelle advient la présence. Toute figuration, fût-elle d'absence, est aussi, comme figuration, une présence. La figuration surmonte ainsi l'équivoque de l'absence et de la présence, laissant en arrière l'ipséité du réel innomé."* The English translation is mine.

165 Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, translated by Robert Drew Hicks, vol. II, Book VII (London: William Heinemann, 1925), 247.

but could contain one," writes Cleomedes.[166] Diogenes states the same about the incorporeals:

> The world, they say, is one and finite, having a spherical shape, such a shape being the most suitable for motion [. . .] Outside of the world is diffused the infinite void, which is incorporeal. By incorporeal is meant that which, though capable of being occupied by body, is not so occupied. The world has no empty space within it, but forms one united whole. This is a necessary result of the sympathy and tension which binds together things in heaven and earth.[167]

For the Stoics, the void was impossible to figure. Its role was precisely to make room for figuration, to create a space for the world to "breathe" by inserting a neutral space that allows for the play and movement of signs.[168] Three examples of figural voids (*formes du vide*, as Cauquelin calls them) are given, partly overlapping with the figures of absence identified by J.-P. Mourey. The first form of the void is the gap, the pit, the hole (*le trou*) that appears in a pre-existing *dispositif* as an interruption or a lack; either way, its ontological regime is a negative one.[169] The second form described by Cauquelin is "the immaterial under the sign of white" (*l'immatériel sous le signe du blanc*) exemplified by monochrome paintings.[170] Without getting into details kept for a separate section dedicated to figures of painted absence, I will simply point out, in agreement with the French author, that similar to the first form of void, the monochrome requires the materiality of a medium in order to make itself seen. The empty canvas, as a figure of absence specific to painting, needs to be put on display somewhere in order to assert itself as such.

A scene from Alberto Moravia's novel *La Noia* (*Boredom*) is an excellent example of performative *ekphrasis* that proves how an empty canvas becomes a work without, for that matter, losing anything of its emptiness:

> I remember perfectly well how it was that I stopped painting. One evening, after I had been in my studio for eight hours, painting for five or ten minutes at a time and the throwing myself down on the divan and lying there flat, staring up at the ceiling for an hour or two – all of a sudden, as though at last after so many feeble attempts I had had a genuine inspiration, I [. . .] slashed repeatedly at the canvas on which I had been painting, not content until I had reduced it to ribbons. Then from a corner of the room I took a blank canvas of the same size, threw away the torn canvas and placed the new one on the easel.

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166 Cleomedes, *On the Circular Motions of the Celestial Bodies*, cited in Cauquelin, *Fréquenter les incorporels*, 22.

167 Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives*, 245.

168 Cauquelin, *Fréquenter les incorporels*, 36.

169 Cauquelin, *Fréquenter les incorporels*, 45.

170 Cauquelin, *Fréquenter les incorporels*, 51.

Immediately afterward, however, I realized that the whole of my – shall I say creative? – energy had been vented completely in my furious and fundamentally rational gesture of destruction. I had been working on that canvas for the last two months, doggedly and without pause; slashing it to ribbons with a knife was equivalent, fundamentally, to finishing it – in a negative manner, perhaps, as regards external results. In fact, my destruction of the canvas meant that I had reached the conclusion of a long discourse which I had been holding with myself for an interminable time. It meant that I had now planted my foot on solid ground. And so, the empty canvas that now stood on the easel was not just an ordinary canvas which had not yet been used; it was a particular canvas that I had placed on the easel at the termination of a long job of work.[171]

Thus, the work fully coincides with its materiality, and the moment of its completion finds it in the same state of visibility as before the beginning of painting. The creative effort imprinted upon it is imperceptible, while the "solid ground" of its footing is likely to have, for the uninformed spectator, the consistency of thin air. The absence of paint on canvas does not imply, paradoxically, the absence of painting. The empty canvas presents itself as a long-awaited solution to painterly aporias.

Finally, the third form of absence identified by Anne Cauquelin is "the withdrawal or the displacement" (*le retrait ou le déplacement*).[172] It refers to multiple phenomena that push the contemporary work of art towards its periphery and its context, "abandoning its pretensions of producing specific objects, defined by their inner consistency."[173] Instead, just like *anopticity* (*anopticité*), a term coined by Marcel Duchamp, Yves Klein's 1962 empty exhibition of a room at *Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris* from which he had removed all paintings, or Robert Morris's *Statement of Aesthetic Withdrawal* (1963), it dislocates the scope of artistic practice from the realm of visibility and inserts it into a conceptual space. Morris's work consists of a typed and notarized text serving to negate the "aesthetic quality and content" of a previous work by the same artist, referred to as "Exhibit A." In other words, the second work is nothing more than the statement of a loss, an immaterial deprivation: the voluntary withdrawal of aesthetic value from another work. In a sense, the gesture reiterates in conceptual terms the visual era-

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171 Alberto Moravia, *Boredom*, translated by Angus Davidson (New York: New York Review Books, 2004), 3–4.

172 Cauquelin, *Fréquenter les incorporels*, 58.

173 Cauquelin, *Fréquenter les incorporels*, 79–80: "*Périphérie ou contexte: tels sont les nouveaux mots d'ordre de l'activité artistique – qui excluent le corps cerné, délimité, de l'oeuvre, pour promouvoir l'espace qu'elle habite, ses alentours. Comment qualifier et définir ce mouvement de passage des corps vers leur habitation, cette transmission de l'aura en présence à une area en extension et dissémination? [. . .] Le terme d'art contextuel – Paul Ardenne – pourrait convenir à ce transport de l'oeuvre vers son extérieur, quand l'art abandonne sa prétention à produire des objets spécifiques, définis par des critères internes qui les rendent consistants.*"

sure of a Willem de Kooning's drawing by Robert Rauschenberg (which had taken place exactly ten years earlier), with the difference that now the author of the original work is identical to the author who engenders and signs its absence. Towards the end, Anne Cauquelin's analysis performs a similar gesture of self-erasure. This extensive attempt to illustrate, describe, and define the incorporeal concludes with the recognition of the overwhelming indeterminacy of the subject matter, an indeterminacy that immediately renders any such effort vain, null, and void.[174]

The figures of absence already identified by Marc Vernet, the contributions to Jean-Pierre Mourey's volume, and Anne Cauquelin's theories revisiting the Stoic incorporeal in the context of contemporary art are not mutually exclusive. With the exception of Vernet's five figures pointing to the absent presence of an off-screen space in cinematography, these figures are not medium-specific, either. Rather, they are attempts to grasp absence from fleeting viewpoints and angles that are never quite wide enough. Bearing in mind that aiming to create an exhaustive taxonomy of such figures is nothing short of a utopian endeavor, in the remaining two sections of the first chapter I shall add more terms to the general "resistance to theory"[175] that characterizes the figures of radical absence.

1.3 The Empty Signifier: Laclau and the Politics of Absence

The theoretical history of the empty signifier begins with Claude Lévi-Strauss, who forges the term in his 1950 *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*. According to Lévi-Strauss, an *empty* (or *floating*) signifier – he uses both adjectives interchangeably – is "an undetermined quantity of signification, in itself void of meaning and thus apt to receive any meaning."[176] The original formulation of the concept has occurred in relation to Lévi-Strauss's analysis of *mana*, which the French anthropologist uses as a prime example of empty signifier:

> In the system of symbols constituted by all cosmologies, mana would simply be a *valeur symbolique zero*, that is to say, a sign marking the necessity of a symbolic content supple-

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174 Cauquelin, *Fréquenter les incorporels*, 133: "*[Les incorporels] Inutile de les illustrer, ils n'ont pas d'image; inutile de les décrire, ils n'ont pas de forme – et en cela, ils sont bien invisibles; inutile de les assigner à résidence, ils n'ont rien qui puisse les fixer.*"

175 Paul de Man's *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

176 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, translated by Felicity Baker (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), 64. For the French original, see Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Introduction à l'oeuvre de Marcel Mauss," in *Mauss, Sociologie et Anthropologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), 43.

> mentary [my italics] to that with which the signified is already loaded, but which can take
> on any value required, provided only that this value still remains part of the available re-
> serve and is not, as phonologists put it, a group-term.[177]

Its "zero symbolic value" allows the empty signifier to receive any value, while preserving none and being equally detached from any. In a sense, the empty signifier may be described as an empty screen upon which any image may be projected but which, at the end of the projections remains perfectly white. It is "a placeholder, like zero, that may be filled with an infinite number of particular beliefs or experiences. Mana is not the absence of signification, but a meta-term that gives the whole system differentiated meanings without itself having any particular signification. It is therefore a zero degree in ethnology."[178] Its function is to resist the absence of signification, without attaching itself to any particular signified.

Another good example of this radical semiotic phenomenon is described by other structuralists in relation to the phonetic system: "A zero phoneme is opposed to all the other phonemes in French in that it entails no differential characters and no constant phonetic value. On the contrary, the proper function of the zero phoneme is to be opposed to phoneme absence."[179] Similar definitions have been given to contrast the introduction of the 0 as a mere placeholder or separation marker in the Babylonian counting system[180] with its later use in Hindu algebra, where it eventually gained the meaning of a null quantity embedded with the idea of zero quantity, emptiness, and nothingness.[181] But let us not engage with specific system of signs for now. In his volume *Semiotics: The Basics,* Daniel Chandler defines the empty signifier as follows:

> Many postmodernist theorists postulate a complete disconnection of the signifier and the
> signified. An "empty" or "floating signifier" is variously defined as a signifier with a vague,

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177 Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction*, 64.

178 J. Hillis Miller, "Zero," 376.

179 Roman Jakobson, John Lotz, "Notes on the French Phonemic Pattern," *Word* 5, no. 2 (August 1949): 155.

180 Barrow, *The Book of Nothing*, 29: "Yet the Babylonian zero should not be identified totally with our own. For the scribes who etched the double chevron sign on their clay tablets, those symbols meant nothing more than an 'empty space' in the accounting register. There were no other shades of meaning to the Babylonian "nothing'. Their zero sign was never written as the answer to a sum like 6 − 6. It was never used to express an endpoint of an operation where nothing remains. Such an endpoint was always explained in words. Nor did the Babylonian zero find itself entwined with metaphysical notions of nothingness. There is a total absence of any abstract interweaving of the numerical with the numinous. They were very good accountants."

181 Georges Ifrah, *The Universal History of Numbers* (London: Harvill Press, 1998), cited in Barrow, 35: "The Indian zero stood for emptiness or absence, but also space, the firmament, the ce-

highly variable, unspecifiable or non-existent signified. Such signifiers mean different things to different people: they may stand for many or even *any* signifieds; they may mean whatever their interpreters want them to mean. In such a state of radical disconnection between signifier and signified, a sign only means that it means. Such a disconnection is perhaps clearest in literary and aesthetic texts which foreground the act and form of expression and undermine any sense of a natural or transparent connection between a signifier and a referent.[182]

Therefore, an empty signifier is a semiotic space upon which any meaning may be projected, but which resists all fixed attribution of meaning, because its signified is either absent or repressed. To put it differently, one may think of it as a meta-sign, functioning both internally, within the work, as a sign among signs, and externally, outside of it, as an organizing principle of all the other signs of its system. "A meta-sign whose meaning is to indicate, via a syntax which arrives with it, the absence of certain other signs," in Brian Rotman's words.[183]

An important question arises when unpacking the use of empty signifiers, and it is addressed by Ernesto Laclau in his essay "Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?" How is it possible, he asks, that a signifier not attached to any signified can still be considered part of a system of signification? In short, his answer is:

> We do not have to deal with an excess or deficiency of signification, but with the precise theoretical possibility of something which points, from within the process of signification, to the discursive presence of its own limits. An empty signifier can, consequently, only emerge if there is a structural impossibility in signification as such, and only if this impossibility can signify itself as a distortion of the structure of the sign. That is, the limits of signification can only announce themselves as the impossibility of realizing what is within those limits.[184]

Laclau continues by explaining how these specific "signifiers of pure cancellation of all differences"[185] may exist inside a system of signification which is, by its very nature, differential: "there can be empty signifiers within the field of signification because any system of signification is structured around an empty place resulting from the impossibility of producing an object which, nonetheless, is required by the systematicity of the system."[186] This explanation is highly reminiscent of Jacques Derrida's discussion of the *center* and the *origin*, the paradoxical

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lestial vault, the atmosphere and ether, as well as nothing, the quantity not to be taken into account, the insignificant element."

182 Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2007), 78.

183 Rotman, *Signifying Nothing*, 1.

184 Laclau, "Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics," 37.

185 Laclau, "Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics," 38.

186 Laclau, "Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics," 39.

existence of which has been presented in more detail at the beginning of this chapter, in relation to Heideggerian thought.

The case of the vanishing point in perspective painting, for example, confirms both Mourey's reminder of one etymological meaning of absence – a distancing (here, infinite) – as well as Anne Cauquelin's revisitation of the incorporeal as a space of vacancy. In a very insightful parallel drawn between the emergence of the vanishing point in Renaissance art and the emergence of zero as a symbol in mathematics, Brian Rotman remarks:

> What is exceptional about the vanishing point in relation to other locations within the picture is its dual semiotic character. Like zero it plays a very specific double role. Internally, as a sign among signs, it acts as a depictive sign on the same plane as other such signs. Accordingly, like them it represents a definite location within the real physical scene witnessed through the window frame; a location that by being infinitely far in the distance, however, is unoccupiable by a person or indeed any physical object. Externally, the vanishing point is in a meta-linguistic relation to these signs, since its function is to organize them into a coherent unified image. Its meaning, in other words, can only be retrieved from the process of depiction itself, from the way the original subjective act of witnessing is represented via the rules of perspective as an image addressed to a spectator. One can observe how the vanishing point functions as a visual zero, facilitating the generation of an infinity of perspective images as zero generates an infinity of Hindu numerals.[187]

This conception of the void attaches it to the principle of a series: the zero quantity in the decimal system, the zero phoneme in linguistics, the zero degree in stylistics,[188] and the *mana* in ethnologic systems that Lévi-Strauss takes as an example of floating signifier. All of them show how the void emerges only inside a system, at the same time as the system, fulfilling a certain function within the system: it names "an absence that has significance."[189] The empty set is still a set and, as Lacan put it, *"un sac vide reste un sac."*[190] No matter how empty, the empty signifier remains a signifier and, therefore, it cannot exist outside of a system of signification. This is what differentiates it from the void:

> The problem with voids is that they should have no dimension. As soon as you put them into something, whether it's a bottle or a gallery, a book, a museum, they have a volume

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187 Rotman, *Signifying Nothing*, 19.

188 "The zero degree is [. . .] not a total absence (this is a common mistake), *it is a significant absence.* We have here a pure differential state; the zero degree testifies to the power held by any system of signs, of creating meaning 'out of nothing'" – Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero, and Elements of Semiology*, translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 77.

189 J. Hillis Miller, "Zero," 372.

190 Jacques Lacan, "Le sinthome," in *Le Séminaire, Livre XXIII* (Paris: Seuil, 2005), 18.

and context which defeats their voidness. The true void, the true nothing cannot be conceived, it cannot be seen or imagined or thought about or written about – we don't even know if it can exist or not. It just is. Or, it just is not.[191]

What leads to the "emptying" of the signifier is the collapse of its system of differences, the identity loss that allows for its absolute mobility and, thus, turns it into a "nonsignifying sign." As Deleuze and Guattari have noted,

> The deterritorialized flows of content and expression are in a state of conjunction or reciprocal precondition that constitutes figures as the ultimate units of both content and expression. These figures do not derive from a signifier nor are they even signs as minimal elements of the signifier; they are nonsigns, or rather nonsignifying signs [. . .] that form images through their coming together in a whole, but that do not maintain any identity when they pass from one whole to another [. . .].[192]

Therefore, empty signifiers are figures of absence that may arise within the field of signification because "any system of signification is structured around an empty place resulting from the impossibility of producing an object which, nonetheless, is required by the systematicity of the system."[193] The collapse of all differential identities is fundamental for this paradoxical figure of radical absence that challenges the very limits of figuration, regardless of the medium assumed as the location of this positive impossibility. If this position is difficult (or all too simple) to render aesthetically, it is a *locus* of major significance from an ethical or political perspective because it challenges the simplicity of the distinction between identity and alterity through an overlapping of areas covered simultaneously by a logic of equivalency and a logic of difference:

> As, however, all the means of representation are differential in nature, it is only if the differential nature of the signifying units is subverted, only if the signifiers empty themselves of their attachment to particular signifieds and assume the role of representing the pure being of the system – or, rather, the system as pure Being – that such a signification is possible. What is the ontological ground of such subversion, what makes it possible? The answer is: the split of each unit of signification that the system has to construct as the undecidable locus in which both the logic of difference and the logic of equivalence operate. It is only by privileging the dimension of equivalence to the point that its differential nature is almost entirely obliterated – that is emptying it of its differential nature – that the system can signify itself as a totality.[194]

Since the empty signifier occupies within its system the two most privileged positions (the most remote liminality and the innermost centrality) at the same time,

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191 Jon Hendricks, "Nothing," in *Vides. Une rétrospective*, 514.

192 Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 241.

193 Laclau, "Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics," 39.

194 Laclau, "Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics," 39.

it is the only part of the system able to assert and abolish its own singularity, and to signify the absence of homogeneity. Laclau calls this homogeneity the "communitarian fullness" of the system.

This privileged double positionality of power engenders, according to the Argentinian political theorist, a hegemonic relationship with the other elements of the system, taken both individually and as a whole. In the words of Laclau, "Politics is possible because the constitutive impossibility of society can only represent itself through the production of empty signifiers."[195] This conclusion is reminiscent of Derrida's grounding of the possibility of thinking history in its unfolding, precisely because both the point of origin and the endpoint of history are absent and unreachable. In Laclau's terms, they are both empty signifiers.

Restating the observation in the context of the system of the arts, one could argue – as Hans Belting does, for example, and as explained in the following subchapter – that art is possible only because the constitutive impossibility of an absolute masterpiece can only represent itself through the production of empty signifiers, and never in the form of an actual work. The same point can easily be made – and has indeed been made several times (by writers such as Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Valéry, and Maurice Blanchot, among others) – about literature and the ideal model of an absolute, all-encompassing book that stands in the invisible center of the literary system and, from there, enables the proliferation of literary works.

The political potential carried by the empty signifier is surprisingly weak within the confines of an established system, but surprisingly strong outside of it. Laclau notices that "a power which is total[196] or a power which is equally distributed among all members[197] of the community is no power at all."[198] This observation brings forth another point of similarity with Derridean thought, in the reflections on the concept of *differance*. A figure of radical absence – conceived as ever-deferred and/or ever-receding presence – is similar in more than one way similar to Laclau's empty signifier: "*differance* is not. It is not a present being, however excellent, unique, principal, or transcendent it may be. It governs nothing, reigns over nothing, and nowhere exercises any authority. It is not announced by any capital letter. Not only is there no kingdom of *differance*, but

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195 Laclau, "Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics," 39.

196 As is the power of the empty signifier in regard to all other elements of the system taken as a whole.

197 As is the power of the empty signifier in regard to all other elements of the system taken individually.

198 Laclau, "Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics," 46.

differance instigates the subversion of kingdom."[199] Its full power over the differential play of signification within the system is also the reason for the deferred (that is, absent) actualization of this power, which may only act subversively, from outside the system, and not from within in outright contestation. Yet another paradox engendered by the figures of radical absence, this observation on the inside-outside power dynamics of the empty signifiers (a name among others for radical absence, when related to a system of signification) echoes Heidegger's conclusion that it is impossible to formulate a valid critique of the metaphysics of presence with and from within language, since language itself is grounded in this metaphysics and cannot function outside of a regime that privileges presence over absence.

Thinking the figure as a nonsignifying sign is a theoretical move that may help to bring together the nothing, the figural void, and the empty signifier as deviations from standard patterns of sensible or intelligible meaning-making in the systems which allow for their formulation. Regardless of whether one holds this meaning to be created either through figuration and figurality, or semiotically, the two paradigms chosen here for the analysis of anthropomorphic or non-anthropomorphic figures of absence may prove mutually enlightening. More explicitly, Laclau's empty signifier is able to preserve its political charge, in addition to which reading it in the key of post-Lyotardian figural thinking invests it with figural potential and adds the vocabulary of affects, flows, intensities, and forces to its explanatory power. Conversely, discussing particular instances of figural voids as empty signifiers is prone to illuminate the relation they hold to the system they belong to, to the materiality of their medium, as well as to more political issues like power relations, identity, normativity, laws of inclusion and exclusion, and authority discourse.

Discussing these figures of absence together, as transdisciplinary quasi-synonyms used in a chain of possible substitutions for the designation of the same phenomenon (the empty space of an absence, be it physical, conceptual, or both, within a literary, cinematic, or artistic work) creates a complementarity of theoretical standpoints useful for the understanding of absence in a way that exceeds the boundaries of a single work, medium, or discipline of inquiry. If the deceiving simplicity of a textual or visual vacuum initially suggests that there is very little, if anything at all, to investigate in such liminal phenomena of radical forms of expression, a second look through these theoretical lenses combined proves surprisingly revealing.

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199 Derrida, "Differance," 21–22.

1.4 Textual and Visual Absences: Belting and Blanchot

> I cannot help feeling, Phaedrus, that writing is unfortunately like painting.
> (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275d)

Thinking the possibility of a center for a system is always already thinking its absence from the system, argued Jacques Derrida in "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Science."[200] His reflection also extends to the thinking of other figures of absence in relation to the systematicity of a totality, such as the origin, the end, the transcendental signifier. Further developing Lévi-Strauss's concept of "empty signifier," Laclau inferred that any system is built around such a constitutive absence which not only allows for the proliferation of differential identities, but also is the *locus* of their collapse. Therefore, the empty signifier would be simultaneously the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of every system of signification, its origin and its end, its center, and its most remote boundary. But how can one imagine such an impossible construct of thought? How can it be described, if imagined? And, perhaps more importantly, how is it integrated into the field it simultaneously opens up and closes off? In what exactly consists its variance from system to system? I will provide tentative answers to these questions with the help of two conceptual models of what I identify as figures of radical absence in literature and visual arts (be them called empty signifiers or transcendental signifieds, figural voids, resurfacings of "the nothing" in the being of the work, absent centers, origins, ends, and so on).

In his book *The Invisible Masterpiece*,[201] Hans Belting argues that if one thinks of the system of the arts, this impossible object – at once responsible for the systematicity of the system and absent from it – would be *the absolute masterpiece.* The eternal and unattainable ideal of the masterpiece and the will to create it are the principles that hold all forms of art together as a system; it is, so to speak, their reason to exist, but the very existence of this ideal is entirely impossible.

What are the reasons for this impossibility? The main reason becomes apparent via a pragmatic observation: the production of such an absolute work would lead to the end of all other work. If the masterpiece is truly absolute and worthy of its name as a crown of all creation, this renders any further artistic effort worthless and unnecessary because perfection has already been achieved. Just to clarify: in this context the masterpiece is not simply an excellent work, of which art history records plenty. *The invisible masterpiece* is, instead, a concept used in

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200 Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play," passim.
201 Hans Belting, *The Invisible Masterpiece*, translated by Helen Atkins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

its most exclusive, singular sense, revealing this ideal object in its essential, inescapable concealing: "A masterpiece cannot be invisible. If it were, we could not discuss it. So I use the term as a metaphor for the idea of a work that comprises art in the absolute – a state beyond the reach of every tangible artwork. This book's title, therefore, does not refer to any specific work, but only to an unattainable ideal."[202] The term, therefore, becomes an empty signifier and, while it can never be fully realized under the mode of mimetic representation, it can be figured, albeit fragmentarily, vaguely, and imprecisely, under the mode of uncanny affective intensity (Aby Warburg's *pathosformel*? Robert Vischer's *empathy*?).

By showing itself only through the impossibility of its adequate representation, the invisible masterpiece meets the criteria – intransitivity, detachment from contingency, inner contradictory coherence – to qualify as a figure of radical absence. As explicitly stated throughout the volume, Belting's insight has drawn inspiration from Honoré de Balzac's 1831 short story "*Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*" ("The Unknown Masterpiece")[203] and its 1991 very loose cinematic adaptation, Jacques Rivette's *La Belle noiseuse* (*The Beautiful Troublemaker*). Both Balzac and Rivette seem aware of the intrinsic challenge hidden in the premises of the plot and find ways to subvert – in writing and shooting film about painting – the conventions of intelligibility and sensibility of their respective media. However, they are constrained to do so in a less radical way than Belting, who can afford the luxury of exposing and denouncing the masterpiece as the theoretical abstraction it is, as "the ideal of absolute art [. . .] [which] persistently drove artistic production but always eluded it."[204] The difference between the artistic and the theoretical approach is likewise posited explicitly: "While in real works, art necessarily becomes an object, the ideal of art had to be released from such reification in order to serve the unbounded imagination."[205] The masterpiece can only be invisible (that is, absent from the field of the visible) because the very condition for full potentiality is its ever-deferred realization, its ever-distanced presence.

The invisibility Hans Belting refers to does not point exclusively to the masterpiece's lack of visual consistency. On the contrary, it is the symptom of a wider and deeper absence, a constitutive lack that is central for the existence of any work, just as the vanishing point, an infinitesimal space impossible to locate, is both central *to* and visually absent *from* Renaissance painting. The experience of

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202 Belting, *The Invisible Masterpiece*, 11.

203 Honoré de Balzac, "Maître Frenhofer," in *L'Artiste*, no. 2, August 1831, Paris, republished as "*Le Chef d'oeuvre inconnu*," in *Études philosophiques* [1837], edited by Pierre-Georges Castex (Paris: Gallimard, 1986).

204 Belting, *The Invisible Masterpiece*, 12.

205 Belting, *The Invisible Masterpiece*, 11.

the ever-vain attempt to fix it may well be described in a scene Georges Perec uses in his book written almost entirely with figures of absence – *La Disparition* (*A Void*): "Staring at his rug in this way starts grating on Vowl, who, a victim of optical illusions, of sly tricks that his imagination is playing on him, starts to fancy that a focal point is at long last within his grasp, though just as it's about to solidify it sinks again into a void."[206] The phenomenon is the same as the one described by J. Hillis Miller when discussing the fundamental unknowability of allegory. Far from being a fault, it is its very strength: "This impossibility of clear understanding or expression is, on the terms of the story, a lucky thing, since to understand fully, to fill the gap, would be to be dead."[207]

It is easy to notice how the red thread conceptualizing the idea of "masterpiece" in the sense conferred by Belting begins in the system of plastic arts, in Frenhofer's monstrous non-figurative painting around which the entire Balzacian short story gravitates. As it permeates into literature (in Balzac's text), under the form of a fictional object given to a not-less-fictional sight, it is accompanied by Pierre Vidal's illustrations,[208] which enhance the visual dimensions of the work and help to maintain a self-reflexive touch for this linguistic meditation on visual arts. Rivette's film plays once again with different degrees of textual, pictural, and cinematic potential to accommodate visibility and invisibility. Eventually, this conceptual lineage is continued by Belting, who poses the masterpiece as the absent origin and the absent end of art history – both contributing, even in their absence, to allowing art history to unfold at all.

This example of transmedial permeability of the concept of masterpiece migrating back and forth between the verbal and the visual as systems of figuration, representation, and signification illustrates the points made by Derrida and Laclau: such figures of radical absence (to gather under one overarching denomination the center, the origin, the end, the supplement, the trace, the transcendental signified and the empty signifier, along with the entire chain of possible substitutions, to which I have added the figural void) are by nature unstable. Moreover, they are situated at once inside and outside the system whose origin they are: in painting and outside painting, in writing and outside writing, in fiction and outside fiction. They are present in all these systems as absence and, paradoxically, are absent from neither.

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206 Georges Perec, *A Void* [1969], translated by Gilbert Adair (London: Harvill, 1994), 6.

207 J. Hillis Miller, "Zero," 388.

208 And exactly a century later, by Pablo Picasso – http://www.openculture.com/2014/01/behold-pablo-picassos-illustrations-of-balzacs-short-story-the-hidden-masterpiece-1931.html, last accessed May 15, 2023.

To further complicate this already very problematic positionality, I suggest that there is an equivalent figure of radical absence that originates in writing. A textual (moreover, literary) anticipation of Belting's invisible masterpiece may be found already in Mallarmé's utopian *Le Livre* (The Book), an ideal object that conceptually contains the sum of "existing relations between everything." A major inspiration for modern literature, arts, and philosophical thought, it has constituted, among other things, the main point of departure for Maurice Blanchot's *The Book to Come*[209] and for his essay "The Absence of the Book."[210] In these works, Blanchot concentrates very useful theoretical insights derived from Mallarmé's pure abstraction of a Book:

> [. . .] as a cosmic text-architecture: an extremely flexible structure that would reveal nothing short of "all existing relations between everything." This "Grand Oeuvre," wholly freed from the subjectivity of its author and containing the sum of all books was, for Mallarme, the essence of all literature and at the same time a "very ordinary" book. The realization of this "pure" work that he planned to publish in an edition of precisely 480,000 copies never progressed beyond its conception and a detailed analysis of structural and material questions relating to publication and presentation. Yet to Mallarmé, The Book, which was to found the "true cult of the modern era," was by no means a failure. "It happens on its own," he explained of The Book's unique action in one of his final statements.[211]

Since The Book is all-encompassing, there can be nothing outside of it. This lack of alterity is precisely what renders all differential play insignificant. The extreme comprehensiveness that characterizes it – including things and relations not yet actualized – sets it outside of time, above and beyond all history, in an ever-deferred advent fashioned after a Messianic model: "for only the Book is identified with the announcement and expectation of the work it is, without any other content than the presence of its infinitely problematic future, always existing before it can exist and never ceasing to be separated and divided in order to become, in the end, its very division and separation."[212] If the conceptual Book contains everything that ever was, is, and is yet to come, its material counterpart can only be empty from the cancellation of all differences that could have possibly articulated this uncontainable content. Thus, it constitutes the ideal form of

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209 Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, translated by Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

210 Maurice Blanchot, "The Absence of the Book," in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction and Literary Essays*, 471–486.

211 Klaus Scherubel, *Mallarmé, The Book* (New York: Printed Matter Inc., 2004). Internet resource. https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/42638/mallarme-the-book/, last accessed May 15, 2023.

212 Blanchot, "The Book to Come," in *The Book to Come*, 234.

"writing without writing," able to bring literature to "that point of absence where it disappears"[213] and where it is present only in its disappearance.

This paradoxical presence-in-disappearance likewise troubles the visuality of literary images. For example, in the first page of Kafka's *The Castle*, the Castle itself cannot be seen and is never depicted, yet it absorbs the entire attention of the characters and, ultimately, the reader's too. The mysterious building is a true figural void, an overwhelming signifier whose meaning K. struggles in vain to find: "There was nothing to be seen of Castle Mount, for mist and darkness surrounded it, and not the faintest glimmer of light showed where the great castle lay. K. stood on the wooden bridge leading from the road to the village for a long time, looking up at what seemed to be a void."[214] Blanchot stresses the idea that a constitutive part of any system is what resists it, what lies outside the exclusionary limits that delineate its meaning-making structure. In other words, a constitutive part of any system of signification is the non-signifiable. Shared by all arts, regardless of whether they operate with images, words, or rhythms, this aspect leads to an effacement of medium-specific boundaries insofar as the radical figure of an outer, unbounded and undifferentiated void (reminiscent of the Stoic tradition, as Anne Cauquelin explained) is concerned: "Art, as images, as words, and as rhythm indicates the menacing proximity of a vague and vacant 'outside,' a neutral existence, nil and limitless; art points into a sordid absence, a suffocating condensation where being ceaselessly perpetuates itself as nothingness."[215] Unlike the Stoic doctrine, however, Blanchotian thought sees that this "sordid absence" is not only the state of the "outside." It also resides in the innermost regions of art, as its very core, being perhaps the equivalent of the Derridean center[216] only present in its absence: "[. . .] art withdraws into the most invisible

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213 Blanchot, "The Search for Point Zero," in *The Book to Come*, 207.

214 Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, translated by Anthea Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.

215 Maurice Blanchot, "The Original Experience," in *The Space of Literature* [1955], translated by Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 241–242.

216 Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play" 352: "The structurality of structure [. . .] has always been at work, has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a center or of referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin. The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure – one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure – but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the play of the structure. By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form. [. . .] Nevertheless, the center also closes off the play which it opens up and makes possible. As center, it is the point at which the substitution of contents, elements, or terms is no longer possible. At the center, the permutation or the transformation of elements [. . .] is forbidden. At least this permutation has always remained interdicted (and I am using this word deliberately). Thus it has always been

and the most interior – into the empty point of existence where it shelters its sovereignty in refusal and the superabundance of refusal. [. . .] Nothing is more important than this absolute autonomy which is refusal, and than this refusal which, through a change in sign, is also the most prodigious affirmation."[217] As such, this figure of absence that surrounds and inhabits the system of art – simultaneously interior and exterior, negative and affirmative – cancels all possibilities for articulation and difference to the point of reconciling pairs of contraries, neutralizing sensible or intelligible tensions, reversing established orders ("through a change in sign"), and exposing the immense subversive potential of what escapes representation and signification.

Just as Belting's masterpiece cannot be otherwise than invisible, Blanchot's writing without writing as the closest approximation of written absence is necessarily unreadable, unless it brings itself into presence and, therefore, cancels itself: "What we can say about this writing, which is absent from the book and yet stands in a relationship of otherness with it, is that it remains alien to readability, that it is unreadable insofar as to read is necessarily to enter through one's gaze into a relationship of meaning or nonmeaning with a presence."[218] Given their impossible, ever-distant, and ever-deferred actualization within the systems which they engender, maintain, and help to proliferate, the Book represents for the system of writing what the masterpiece represents for the system of art. They are, indeed, empty signifiers, in the sense advanced by Ernesto Laclau:

> The being of the systematicity of the system which is represented through the empty signifiers is not a being which has not been actually realized, but one which is constitutively unreachable, for whatever systematic effects that would exist will be the result, as we have seen, of the unstable compromise between equivalence and difference. That is, we are faced with a constitutive lack, with an impossible object which, as in Kant, shows itself through the impossibility of its adequate representation. [. . .] However, if this impossible object lacks the means of its adequate or direct representation this can only mean that the signifier which is emptied in order to assume the representing function will always be constitutively inadequate.[219]

Despite being "the condition for all reading and writing," the Book cannot be brought into presence. It is necessarily written without writing and "paralyzed by reading": "The Book is not only the book that sits in libraries – that labyrinth in which all combinations of forms, words and letters are rolled up in volumes. The

thought that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality."

217 Blanchot, "Literature and the Original Experience," in *The Space of Literature,* 214.
218 Blanchot, "The Absence of the Book," 481.
219 Laclau, "Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics," 40.

book is the Book. Still to be read, still to be written, always already written, always already paralyzed by reading, the book constitutes the condition for every possibility of reading and writing."[220] The Book is not identifiable, it "is made to disappoint all identity and to deceive comprehension as a power of identification,"[221] and can only be grasped in the receding of what it is not. For this reason, writing is always already a gesture of nihilation, a proliferation of absence. The reference to nihilation is thus linked to our previous discussion of "What Is Metaphysics?". Blanchot expresses this idea in recognizably Heideggerian rhetoric: "To write is to produce absence of the work (worklessness). Or: writing is the absence of the work as it produces itself through the work and throughout the work. [. . .] The book: a ruse by which writing goes towards the absence of the book."[222]

For Blanchot, as for Belting, thinking the Work is a mixed-media endeavor, combining the resources of linguistic and visual figurative language. In a remark about poetic language that does not lose any of its validity when applied to other arts, Blanchot describes meaning-making in poetic language in terms of a central, yet absent visibility: "We see clearly, then, why poetic language can revive things and, translating them in space, makes them apparent through their distancing and their emptiness: it is because this distance lives in them, this emptiness is already in them; thus it is right to grasp them, and thus it is the calling of words to extract the invisible center of their actual meaning."[223] This summarizes and exposes Blanchot's indebtedness to Heidegger (the idea of appearing through disappearance), as well as his agreement with Derrida's thinking of the difference as spacing and infinite deferral. Moreover, it anticipates Belting's instrumentation of invisibility in his description of radical absence as a central figure that reigns over the meaning-making field which it simultaneously engenders and subverts.

To conclude, returning to the intermedial itineraries of such figures of radical absence, I would like to foreground the chiasmic model that brings together Blanchot and Belting in their analyses of the Book and the masterpiece as absolute, empty signifiers situated at once at the origins and at the ends of their respective arts. Belting's conceptual model of constitutive absence departs from a literary work on painting (Balzac's) and further derives its functioning in the system of visual arts via painting, photography, and cinema. Blanchot extends the absence of the Book to the more general absence of the Work, signaling that this radical absence situated beyond the borders of the sensible and of the intelligible pos-

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220 Blanchot, "The Absence of the Book," 471.

221 Blanchot, "Literature One More Time," in *The Infinite Conversation*, translated by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 405.

222 Blanchot, "The Absence of the Book," 473.

223 Blanchot, "Joubert and Space," in *The Book to Come*, 58.

sesses the strength to reduce all interarts and intermedial variation to the conditions of their respective materialities. Despite the material differences in their actualized individual occurrences, a book, a painting, or a performative rhythmed sequence maintain the same paradoxical relation to the radical absence from which they originate and to the ideal form (just as radically absent, being forever unachievable) which they aim to approximate, but which always necessarily eludes them.

The tensions at work inside this most fertile and most sterile void (that is perhaps the most radical figure of absence) are identifiable, as the following chapter will seek to demonstrate, in a wide range of media: literature, painting, conceptual art, curatorial practice, performance arts, and cinema. Following and extending the Blanchot-Belting parallel and the fundamental overlap between The Book and the invisible masterpiece, the upcoming sections cast a glimpse at the recent histories of each of the above-mentioned artistic media, without inferring causal explanations or relations of influence between various occurrences of absence in the form or content of the works under discussion. I do not intend to imply that the proliferation of the figures of absence in modern and contemporary literature and visual arts is in any way a result of the above-mentioned theories and of the authority of their father-figures. As plausible as such influences may be in some cases, it is not my purpose here to collect factual evidence for the construction of a causal theory-to-practice deterministic model. Rather, I approach this rich proliferation of absence as an undercurrent that traverses the literature and the arts of the twentieth century (especially after 1945). Although it is not in any way specific to this era, it has visibly and extensively made itself manifest in the literature and the arts of this time. What I am most interested in is, once again, the overarching infrastructure of non-causal, unintentional interferences and transmedial contaminations, which I see as symptoms of a wider radical semiotic phenomenon of meta-signification and auto-reflexivity, exceeding the boundaries of any specific system of signification. In his *From Point and Line to Plane*, Wassily Kandinsky articulates an illustrative example of this transgressive potential:

> The geometric point is an invisible thing. Therefore, it must be defined as an incorporeal thing. Considered in terms of substance, it equals zero.
>
> Hidden in this zero, however, are various attributes which are 'human' in nature. We think of this zero – the geometric point – in relation to the greatest possible brevity, i.e., to the highest degree of restraint which, nevertheless, speaks.
>
> Thus we look upon the geometric point as the ultimate and most singular union of silence and speech.

> The geometric point has, therefore, been given its material form, in the first instance, in writing. It belongs to language and signifies silence.[224]

This book adopts a similar interdiscursive approach in examining a variety of figures of absence in their circulation across and beyond the realms of text, image, and sound, but also geometry, corporeality, and materiality. It examines figures of written absence in empty books and books on emptiness, as well as in other literary avatars of absence. Then, the discussion extends to visual arts, where empty signifiers take the shape of empty paintings and other figures of framed absence. Conceptual artworks that engage with the abyss of nothingness and the void lead the way to the emptying of even the most unexpected signifiers, such as the gallery space (exemplified, but not limited to "the white cube" or "the black box" models) or the museum. The series of non-anthropomorphic figures of absence ends with a discussion focused on how they operate in a performative environment, on stage and on screen, highlighting the performative dimension of the figural void. Afterwards, I move to anthropomorphic figures of absence, be them archetypal or typologic, that embody the outrage and the phantasm of radical absence in constructions and de-constructions of alterity and the self.

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224 Wassily Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*, translated by Howard Dearstyne and Hilla Rebay (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2012), 18.

Chapter 2
Non-Anthropomorphic Figures of Absence

2.1 Figures of Written Absence

> A gap will yawn, achingly, day by day, it will turn into a colossal pit,
> an abyss without foundation, a gradual invasion of words by margins,
> blank and insignificant, so that all of us, to a man, will find nothing to say.
> (Georges Perec, *A Void*)[225]

Writing maintains intricate relations to absence in more ways than one. The previous chapter presented tangentially some reflections belonging to perhaps the two most-cited authors when it comes to intimations of writing and absence: Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida. Next, I list an entanglement of examples of figures of absence identified in the literary field.[226] For the sake of clarity, I group these examples in a set of non-chronologic montages, centered around several major "modes" of articulation: the empty books (generally blank or almost blank volumes conceived by conceptual artists functioning as *livres d'artiste* and carrying a more or less obvious author's statement), die-cut literary works or conceptual transformations thereof, lipogramatic writing,[227] instances of missing texts within literary texts, auctorial intentions to "write about nothing" in various meta-literary statements and, eventually, the *topos* of ineffability with a specific emphasis on the absence of traits and figurability in modern literary characters that resist or defy literary depiction.

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida refers to writing as "the name of two absences," meaning that writing implies by its very nature the absence of a signatory (the writer), who is physically detached from his text once written, and the absence of the referent, dislocated through the use of a system of signs (language) which replaces the referent and speaks of it always already in its absence.[228] The vacuity of this absence is, Derrida argues, embedded in the conditions of signification. In

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225 Georges Perec, *A Void,* 16.

226 For a similar discussion of non-literary examples, see my article about scientific publications that play with the absence of text: Alexandra Irimia, "Running on Empty: Blanks and Voids in Academic Publishing," KWI-BLOG, March 29, 2023, https://blog.kulturwissenschaften.de/running-on-empty/, last accessed May 15, 2023.

227 The term refers to texts from which one or more letters of the alphabet have been deliberately avoided. This form of textual experimentation is called *lipogram*, from Gr. *lipogrammatos*, meaning "missing a letter."

228 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 41.

good Saussurian tradition, Derrida maintains that the system of language is relational, meaning that every sign refers to another sign. Any sign is, as such, only "a second deferral of the advent of signification," with each mediation more remote from the promise of signification. If "the 'sign of a sign' signifies nothing" (*OG*, 43) then language is, from the beginning, condemned to a constitutive absence, to a fundamental lack of signification.

Drawing from H. J. Uldall and the Copenhagen School, Derrida further notices that there are symptoms of this absence both in writing and in speech: "in orthography, no grapheme corresponds to accents of pronunciation and, [. . .] reciprocally, in pronunciation no phoneme corresponds to the spacing between words" (*OG*, 59). Therefore, the functioning of writing and of speech alike is characterized by a certain "inherence of gaps" (*OG*, 69) that accounts for the "impossibility of an absolute presence" manifest in either of them. Since meaning-making through language demands the insertion of spacing, there can be no truly continuous flow of signs, because its physical contiguity is necessarily compromised by necessary pauses. The inherent presence of spacing and, therefore, the absence of continuity is an essential and unsurpassable condition of writing. If, following Derrida, the production of meaning is made through *différance*, then this process implies the articulation of what is separated (in its double meaning, distinct and distanced) through the free play of differences. Even the smoothest flow of writing relies on fractures and ruptures, on the gaps emergent in both graphic and ideatic continuums. Under the name of ellipses, holes (*trous*), or interruptions, these gaps are a constant presence in various theoretical taxonomies of figures of absence, as we have seen in the previous chapter with Anne Cauquelin's inventory of *forms du vide* and Jean-Pierre Mourey's threefold explanation of the etymological meanings of the Latin prefix *ab-*. I shall mention here in passing, with a reference for which I am indebted to John Nyman,[229] that these gaps also resurface among the conditions of existence of written and spoken formulations for authors like Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser. The two literary theorists call these gaps by the Latin noun *lacunae* or with the more theoretical term "forms of negativity."[230] The authors carefully advocate against the confusion of these textual absences with the neighboring, yet distinct linguistic regimes of negation, apophatic discourse, and nihilist philosophy:

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229 John Nyman, "Double/Cross: Erasure in Theory and Poetry" (PhD Diss., University of Western Ontario, 2018), available in the University of Western Ontario Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository, no. 5529, https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/5529, last accessed May 15, 2023.
230 The term "gaps" is used as such in Iser's reader-response narrative theory.

the implications, omissions, or cancellations that are necessarily part of any writing or speaking. These lacunae indicate that practically all formulations (written or spoken) contain a tacit dimension, so that each manifest text has a kind of latent double. Thus, unlike negation, which must be distinguished from negativity, this inherent doubling in language defies verbalization. It forms the unwritten and unwritable-unsaid and unsayable-base of the utterance. But it does not therefore negate the formulations of the text or saying. Rather, it conditions them through blanks and negations. This doubling, to which we refer as negativity, cannot be deduced from the text or, in fact, from the world that it questions and that, to a lesser or greater degree, it necessarily casts in doubt. And, in all these operations, it cannot be conceived as preparing the way for any substantialist idea or positivity (see Iser). Indeed, it must be carefully discriminated from any ideological rupturings, from the negativity inherent in *theologia negativa*, from a *via negativa* and, equally, from any nihilism (see Derrida).[231]

Acknowledging the inherence of this foundational absence in which writing is grounded, and anticipating the theoretical importance it will gain in the late twentieth century, Maurice Blanchot had already elevated "writing without writing," the complete refusal of writing, to the rank of the ultimate literary gesture. This refusal of writing is quasi-fictionally documented by Enrique Vila-Matas in his *Bartleby & Co.* as "Bartleby's syndrome."[232] Renouncing (literary) writing and framing this renouncement as a radical creative gesture is a rather common trope which has been used more or less dramatically by a rather large number of writers in the history of world literature. One of the best and most recent examples is Marin Mălaicu-Hondrari's *The Book of All Intentions*, a novel that draws its force from seeing writerly suicides as yet another extension of Bartleby's syndrome.[233] Similarly, as mentioned previously, Blanchot's conceptual models of the "book to come" and the "absence of book" have become figures of radical absence: they are remote, illegible, and immaterial origins, epitomes, and ends of all writing.

The absence of writing is only one among many manifestations of absence in various forms of written production. The following pages are concerned with a provisional catalog of multimodal variations of (un)written absence. This inventory does not aim to be exhaustive but rather to indicate the diversity under which absence presents itself within the confines of textual conventions.

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231 Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser, "Introduction" to *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, edited by Sanford Budick, Wolfgang Iser (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), xii.

232 Enrique Vila-Matas, *Bartleby & Co.*, translated by Jonathan Dunne (London: Vintage, 2005).

233 Marin Mălaicu-Hondrari, *Cartea tuturor intenţiilor* (Bucureşti: Editura Vinea, 2006, Cartea Românească, 2008). I owe this reference to prof. Cezar Gheorghe.

Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, the examples provided function as an inventory of samples for the punctual analysis and validity testing of a series of critical features and dimensions I intuitively attributed to figures of absence. Among them, I count a certain capacity these figures have for reflection over the material conditions and immaterial norms shaping their medium, occasioning both self-reflexivity and a questioning of the relations of power and authority that govern the medium. Other important dimensions are the affective charge they carry or trigger as figural entities, and the way in which affects enhance, alter, or block processes of production, reception/consumption, and meaning-making.

2.1.1 Empty Books

The blank page is a recurrent presence in literature. It has been frequently associated either with the fertile potentiality of all writing, contained in the promise of the writing-to-come, or with the sterile writer's block. The tension between the two gives rise to an uncanny effect, detailed for instance by Herman Melville in one of his short stories. In "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," one of the protagonists visits a paper factory. The sight of an endless river of blank sheets triggers an association with the indeterminacy characterizing the human mind at birth and with John Locke's once fashionable theory of the *tabula rasa*:

> It was very curious. Looking at that blank paper continually dropping, dropping, dropping, my mind ran on in wonderings of those strange uses to which those thousand sheets eventually would be put. All sorts of writings would be writ on those now vacant things – sermons, lawyers' briefs, physicians' prescriptions, love-letters, marriage certificates, bills of divorce, registers of births, death-warrants, and so on, without end. Then, recurring back to them as they here lay all blank, I could not but bethink me of that celebrated comparison of John Locke, who, in demonstration of his theory that man had no innate ideas, compared the human mind at birth to a sheet of blank paper; something destined to be scribbled on, but what sort of characters no soul might tell.[234]

Melville and Locke alike see the empty pages not as symptoms of a creative block, but quite the opposite: as promises of infinite potential that can be actualized, one sheet at a time, in the most diverse forms. However, in their infinite potentiality, empty paper sheets can also signify death and unspeakable violence or

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[234] Herman Melville, "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," in *The Oxford Book of American Short Stories*, edited by Joyce Carol Oates (Oxford, London: Oxford University Press, 1992), 88.

trauma. Written empty signifiers come in print in various forms, with various degrees of affective and creative intensities. About their most radical avatar, *the empty book,* there is little to be said, since it takes a step or two outside of language itself; it seems to favor a loud silence instead. This silence can be extraordinarily heavy and lengthy, as Belu-Simion Făinaru emphasized in his *White Library – Memories of Absence,* part of the installation on display in the Romanian Pavilion at the 2019 Biennale in Venice. The work consists of white bookshelves hosting several tens of thousands of white paper sheets – a spectral archive of the unwritten, of that which has never been or was not yet written, or of what has been written and forever lost. The disquieting assemblage points to the infinite potential of writing as well as to the constitutive absence that enables its existence. It also troubles ready-made associations between the (im)possibility of writing and the preservation or the effacement of individual or collective memory, when absence functions as an oxymoronic repository hosting that which has ceased to be.

Taking the slightly different form of a volume counting 1,800 (empty) pages, absence and writing are likewise problematized and questioned in James Lee Byars's *Cube Book* "catalog and exhibition" at Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. This cubic *livre d'artiste* edited by Piet de Jonge has been printed in as many as 500 copies in its first edition. *Sigurður Guðmundsson*'s *Journey Book* (Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, 1977) exposes the reader to the blank whiteness of its unstained and unmarked pages, this time with a twist: the artist has hidden a portrait of himself in the middle of the book. Besides reflections on writing's potential for archival and diffusion of knowledge, this empty book also becomes an identity play and an exploration of hazard and self-effacement. In most cases, the portrait remains invisible to the impatient "reader." It goes undetected and eventually lost or dissolved amidst the disorienting absence of text that precedes, exceeds, and follows it. The absence of writing becomes, in a way, both the framing and the obscuring of the image of the writer.

Speaking of effacement: the covers of Irma Blank's *Blank Book* (published by Colpo di fumine, Verona, 1995, in 99 copies) bind together white, yet numbered pages from which the written content had been deleted through erasure, a "material practice that leaves its trace in the very worlding of the world."[235] Therefore, it is able to produce only more or less superficial absences, not absolute, intransi-

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[235] Karen Barad, "Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-turning, Re-membering, and Facing the Incalculable," *New Formations – A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics* 92 (Autumn 2017): 73.

tive ones. Although Irma Blank dispenses with words, she nevertheless maintains the format of the printed (and numbered) page as a frail signage of the resistance she poses to surrendering to complete blankness.[236] At the same time, the creation of a blank that is not entirely homogenous and undifferentiated contributes to setting into motion a series of ambiguities and paradoxes of authorship and self-identity defined in privational terms, in a visible pun with the artist's (the writer's?) last name.

Another one of her books, *Ur-Buch ovvero Romanzo blu* (which translates as "Originary Book or Rather Blue Novel"), printed in 1997 in 100 copies by Archivio Nuova Scrittura in Milan, encloses 1,400 unmarked pages, all of them uniformly covered in blue ink. This monochromatic play on the absence of the origin (and the Blanchotian absence of the book) unfolds through the undoing of writing, in the absence of all articulation, trace, figure, or marking. Not least, it indicates the author's extensive work as a painter, including her experiments with asemic writing and calligraphy in paintings with writerly titles such as "Transcripts," "Signals," "Radical Writing," "Twelve Silent Chapters."[237] If writing is grounded in a constitutive absence, then exposing the absence of writing, page after page – moreover, doing so in the color of ink and explicitly naming this absence a "novel" – is an outright subversion (through intentional misuse) of the material and immaterial conditions of bookishness, in general, and of the novelistic genre, in particular. The overabundance of ink can be "read" as a rhetorical hyperbole that obscures and blocks access to writing, where writing stands for the controlled, regulated usage of ink which is, by virtue of this set of quantitative and qualitative regulations, invested with meaning.

The non-white monochrome printing game is also played by a Turkish-Armenian conceptual artist active in France, Sarkis Zabunyan, whose volume *Blackout* (Geneva, 1975) consists of a little over 100 pages printed in black ink on black paper. This time, the absence is not that of writing, but (paradoxically) of the typographic space that is not covered by letters yet is necessary for their reading. What is on display is the writing without its absence, namely without the

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236 Only a year earlier, in 1994, she had published another *livre d'artiste* entitled precisely *No Words*, in an open dialogue with the text of Gertrude Stein's *Everyone's Autobiography*, and likewise dismissive of critical, editorial and pictorial conventions in her effort to "free writing from the servitude of meaning. [. . .] Blank's art doesn't deprive writing of meaning. Rather it prolongs that otherwise fleeting experience of seeing before knowing, when meaning is ripe with potential" (Marcia E. Vetrocq, "Irma Blank: Painting Between the Lines," in *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 2019, available at: https://brooklynrail.org/2019/06/artseen/Irma-Blank-Painting-Between-the-Lines, last accessed May 15, 2023).

237 Vetrocq, "Irma Blank: Painting Between the Lines."

very difference that allows for its legibility, in the form of the contrasting surface delineating the contours of letters and filling the gaps between words, lines, and paragraphs. Again, as in the preceding example, the laws of the game of writing are subverted through the visual rhetoric of inversion and hyperbole.

The text disappearing against its background is a flexible strategy fitting not only the typographic conventions that organize the production of books, but also those governing the more fragmentary and less enduring periodicals. The "first issue, volume one, last issue" of *Perfect Magazine* loudly affirms its existence as a non-periodical periodical publication that refuses the seriality and the linear temporality of the genre by reconciling its origin and its end through the perfect material identity of the first and the last issue. In addition, it humorously satisfies the desire for completeness for any potential collector, librarian, or archivist. Coordinated in May 2003 by Mathieu Copeland, this issue of the *Perfect Magazine* is an imperfect empty signifier: inside it, the white of the page is "stained" with the (different) white of the text, testing the thresholds of legibility in almost the same way as Malevich's *White Square on White Background* (1918) had pushed those of non-figurative painting. Copeland's approach is, in a perfectly balanced chiasmus, the exact opposite of Sarkis's *Blackout* project. The contrasting difference that produces legibility is reduced to a minimum and, as such, it occasions reflections on the interchangeability of the non-colors usually associated to obscurity and effacement.

The material conditions of writing, as framed by the norms and formats of its most common medium, the printed page (in books, journals, or other *ephemerae*), can be reduced and impoverished even further after the dismissal or the obscuring of the actual text. What is interesting is that even in the absence of actual and legible writing, such artifacts maintain a spectral quality of bookishness. Perhaps the most radical reduction of the materiality of the empty book is *concept* by herman de vries.[238] The Dutch artist insisted on and emphasized this spelling without capital letters as part of his wider refusal of all kinds of hierarchy and authority, thus revealing an important political statement he formulates with so little means in terms of the materiality of the work. The book, "printed" at The Eschenau Summer Press in 1981 in 150 copies, is as empty as it can get: it is merely a folded piece of cardboard. *concept* is one of de vries's total of six experimentations with empty books, among others including *untitled* (Arnhem, 1960) or *with white* (Bern, 1980). The former turns its very title into an empty signifier, while the latter deprives the book of any inscription at all: the title, the names of the authors

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238 The title and the author's name are intentionally and purposefully written in lower case.

and editors are printed on a detachable paper strip and are, therefore, not inscribed in the actual book.

These few examples show several (intentional or unintentional) possible material interpretations of the "writing without writing" and the absence of the book theorized by Maurice Blanchot. In her essay "Ni mot, ni image: livres vierges," Anne Moeglin-Delcroix provides more extensive insights on similar variations and strategies of unwriting, mostly in the context of provocative *livres d'artiste* that explore the liminal conditions of the medium, such as the chromatic regimes of the ink and of the page – variables that may either enable or block legibility.[239] In doing so, they preserve a certain affective intensity in either the coloration of the page and the visible contestations of the standard paratextual configurations (on a material level), or in the radical ways of signposting the absent writing (on a conceptual level). This brief inventory of examples supports my argument that a philosophically charged notion of absence fundamental to writing is here instrumented to seek new ways to subvert standard authorial and typographic practices and conventions at work in an aesthetic of *bookishness* explored both literature and in conceptual art.

2.1.2 Die-Cut Books

Die-cut prints are another way of inserting a more literal absence into the space of writing, relying on an even more radical aesthetics of material subtraction and impoverishment. The figure of absence Anne Cauquelin named *le trou* (the hole, the gap, the pit) is actualized in this printing technique that carves into the page (s) to delineate and manipulate a negative space and engage in a dialogic contrast with the rest of the imprinted text – should there be any text present at all. An often-cited example is architect Jeannie Meejin Yoon's sculptural work *Absence*,[240] published in 2003 in New York as a non-site-specific memorial work in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The book is massive and heavy, made up of 110 pages of die-cut cardboard, which grants it a remarkable physical presence signifying the weight of the tragedy. The conventional paper is therefore absent, and so are any inked markings: the only word written in the book – "absence" – is basically cut into the surface of the front cover. The rest of the book's "text" is made of

239 Anne Moeglin Delcroix, "Ni mot, ni image: livres vierges," in *Vides. Une retrospective*, 405–415.

240 Jeannie Meejin Yoon, *Absence* (New York: Printed Matter Inc., 2003), available at: https://www. printedmatter.org/catalog/16965/, last accessed May 15, 2023.

one pinhole and two identical squares die-cut into each of its one-hundred-and-twenty pages – one for each story of the towers including the antenna mast. These removed elements lead the reader floor by floor through the missing buildings towards the final page where the footprint of the entire site of the World Trade Center is die-cut into a delicate lattice of absent structures.[241]

Disaster, like trauma and grief, resists representation. Following Blanchot, the writing of the disaster can only come close to some kind of truth when it falls silent.[242] The respectful restraint brought about by this printed silence is, still, imbued with affective intensities on the edge of the cuts that stand in the book for the twin towers. It speaks volumes about contemporary regimes of individual and/or collective remembrance and the rhetoric of national memory.[243] The negative space in the book is a transparent metaphor for the two towers, a metaphor that adds depth to the surface of the mass media coverage and travels well across national boundaries and linguistic barriers, rendering a work of mourning that exceeds the signifying potential of language intelligible and archivable as a mnemonic artefact on a global scale. Meejin Yoon's discrete yet extremely powerful approach highlights ethical concerns regarding the representation of unspeakable violence. It does so perhaps even more poignantly than other, better-known attempts that use figuration instead, such as Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*.[244] Her work does violence at once to the page and to the tradition of monolithic, impersonal monuments, cutting deep into the (already sensorially distorted) materiality of the medium itself.

Another famous example of this rarely used strategy of remembrance through the sharpness of a cut is Jonathan Safran Foer's 2010 *Tree of Codes*.[245] The book similarly draws strength from the writing's relation to memory, the (im)possibility of its full preservation, and acts of respectful mourning. It is a physically dimin-

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241 Meejin Yoon, *Absence*.

242 Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* [1980], translated by Ann Smock (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

243 For an in-depth exploration of the topic of absence in memorial art in general, or in the particular case of Ground Zero, see: Linda S. Watts, "Reflecting Absence of Presence? Public Space and Historical Memory at Ground Zero," *Space and Culture* 12, no. 4 (2009): 412–418. Marita Sturken, "The Aesthetics of Absence: Rebuilding Ground Zero." *American Ethnologist* 31, no. 3 (2004): 311–325. Nicholas Wolterstoff, "The Social Practices of Memorial Art," in *Art Rethought: The Social Practices of Art* (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2015): 122–151. Joel McKim, "Agamben at Ground Zero: A Memorial without Content." *Theory, Culture, Society* 25, no 5 (2008): 83–103. World Trade Center Site Memorial Competition, *Reflecting Absence: Statement.* Available at http://www.wtcsitememorial.org/fin7.html, last accessed last accessed May 15, 2023.

244 Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).

245 Jonathan Safran Foer, *The Tree of Codes* (London: Visual Editions, 2011).

ished version of Bruno Schulz's collection of short stories *The Street of Crocodiles*.[246] Foer explains how he got the idea of cutting out words from Schulz's book to outline that the text is part of a larger *opus* that has been irretrievably lost along with the brutal disappearance of the author during the Holocaust. As Rebecca Walkowitz describes it,

> In *Tree of Codes*, Foer has cut out words from the pages of the book, so that we see both gaps (literal cutout spaces in the paper) and words from other pages, which lie beneath those gaps. *Tree of Codes* (the title itself involves paring away letters from *The Street of Crocodiles*) uses the codex – the structure of paper sheets lying one on top of the other – to engage readers in the turning of pages, encountering holes, and registering loss or absence. Moreover [. . .] the reader's intensive experience of her own body is meant to evoke by contrast the unfelt loss of other bodies, especially the loss of the novel's author, who was murdered by a Gestapo officer in 1942. Loss, gaps, and absence are a condition of the novel's history, which Foer seeks to make palpable through his adaptation.[247]

The Tree of Codes is in itself a ramification of absences: the initial author and most of his work have been brutally erased by the tragic swipe of political violence unleashed in the Holocaust, of which Foer's mutilated rendering is only a fragment telling of the horror and the dimensions of the loss. The absence of written words is complemented by an absence of the actual printable surface. Another important absence manifest here is the silencing of the fact that the text is stemming from a translation (there is no mention of that in the book), so the original presence of the writing is even further obscured.[248] The text also speaks of an absence which seems to haunt and permeate not only the material form and the paratext of the book – the almost magical realism of the narrative gravitates around the progressive descent and withdrawal of a father-figure into madness.

Paradoxically, this pervasive absence manifest at all levels of writing (graphic, linguistic, literal, semantic, semiotic) emphasizes the corporeality of the writing and turns a copied work into an "embodied text" (in the words of Katherine Hayles[249]) made of molecular units of meaning and interstices of nonsignifying void. The text is allowed literal space for breathing and behaves like a living organism

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246 Originally published under the title *Sklepy cynamonowe*, literally translating as *Cinnamon Shops*. For the English translation used by Foer, see Bruno Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles* [1963], translated by Celina Wieniewska (London: Picador, 2012).

247 Rebecca L. Walkowitz, "The Persistence of Books," *World Literature Today*, 2016, https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2016/may/persistence-books-rebecca-l-walkowitz, last accessed May 15, 2023.

248 The observation about the absence of any reference to the fact that the text is a translation belongs to Rebecca Walkowitz and it is developed in her article "The Persistence of Books."

249 Katherine Hayles, "Combining Close and Distant Reading: Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* and the Aesthetic of Bookishness," *PMLA* 128, no. 1 (2013): 231: "these embodied texts re-

that must be handled with care, due to the frailty of its graphic limbs. Moreover, it makes its reader aware of his own corporeality and of the touching contact (physical and affective) he makes with the reading.[250] The complexities implicit in the space left vacant by the die-cut words go beyond the purely linguistic aspects of the text:

> In Foer different complexities are created by the words that show through the die-cut holes from one, two, or even three pages beyond, words that are read again as the page is turned, until they finally take their place on their own page. Foer has displaced the zoom effect from a linguistic register to a material-semiotic mode that depends on the positions of the holes. [. . .] syntactically disruptive, they [the hole words] nevertheless color the page words with connotations that exceed what the page holds.[251]

Thus, absence contaminates the experience of reading itself, when it does not arrest it with the question of what would be an appropriate reading of the text: horizontally (page by page, blocking what is visible through the graphic holes) or rather in-depth (confronting the disorienting textual landscape of meaningless fragments and loose punctuation visible through multiple layers of absent writing). While the reader of any prose is ascribed the task of actively filling its inherent narrative gaps, here, "as in all non-linear text forms, this fact is augmented and becomes visible."[252] At the end of the book, another question arises: does the reading stop here? How complete and truthful is a knowledge of *Tree of Codes* in the absence of a reading of Schulz's original text?

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quire not only close reading and hermeneutical interpretation but also (since these texts tend to be patterned) digitization and textual analysis, as well as consideration of the embodied senses involved in producing meaning. Texts that employ their bodies to create narrative complexity must be read not for their words alone but also for the physical involvements readers undertake to access their materialities – including smells, tactile sensations, muscular manipulations, kinesthetic perceptions, and proprioceptive feedback."

250 Hayles, "Combining Close and Distant Reading," 227: "I argue that a group of contemporary novels engage in strategies that entice readers to become intimate with the novels' bodies through physical manipulations of their printed forms. These manipulations go beyond the automatic turning of pages, as if these books were determined to reawaken passion by introducing novelty into what have become routine physical encounters. Moreover, the novels displace some degree of narrative complexity from the semantic register of words to the physical forms they present, entwining their materialities with the reader's empathic, proprioceptive, and muscular mind-body."

251 Hayles, "Combining Close and Distant Reading," 229.

252 Julia Grillmayr, "When Letters Fail – Silences and Blank Spaces in Jonathan Safran Foer's Literature" in *Texts with No Words: The Communication of Speechlessness*, edited by Eva Gillhuber and Rita Rieger, PhiN Beiheft 15/2018, 43.

Commentators of the work usually speak of *erasure* in relation to Foer's strategy of excavation through the complex layering of a text. However, I argue that erasure is not the right word to describe this form of intricate textual absence, because of a fundamental difference that separates the erasure from the cut-up. Unlike a "simple" effacement, the cutting gesture dispenses with the very surface of inscription, thus rendering impossible any subsequent inscription and/or overwriting on the respective surface. From this perspective, despite similarities in the preservation of a strong relation with a most-revered original work (the absence of which constitutes the very condition of existence of the reworking), Foer's volume differs from Robert Rauschenberg's framing of an erased drawing by Willem de Kooning,[253] for example. Regardless of these differences, it can safely be stated that, instrumented in the manner described above, both erasure and die-cutting are effective strategies of what Mike Brennan called "additive subtraction."[254] They add to a work on the conceptual level as much as they substract on the material level. Where the absence produced by subtraction disrupts the linearity of the text, it nevertheless adds in depth and perspective by drawing attention to "*both* texture and textuality"[255] of the work. Moreover, this act of semantic erasure, removal, or withdrawal stands at the very center of the signifying possibilities of the works themselves. Louis Armand draws the same conclusion in discussing Marcel Broodthaers's blacking out of Mallarmé's famous poem *Un coup de dés (jamais n'abolira le hazard)*. The black-out "creates a field of open-substitution, of semantic dark matter defined both by a stark materiality and a radical ambivalence. The univocal command of meaning is placed, as it were, in suspense or 'under erasure' – a stance [. . .] whose concreteness is nevertheless political insofar as the ambivalence of this abyssal text suspends any hierarchy of reference."[256] Armand's observation resonates clearly with Derrida's infinite play of substitutions and with Laclau's political understanding of empty signifiers as radical cancellations of hierarchies, troubling the production and the stability of both power and meaning.

The obscuring of writing through repeated cutting gestures literally empties out the signifiers and leaves only a trace of their former location, position, and

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253 For a comparative analysis of erasure in fiction and graphic illustrations, see Ileana Marin, *Victorian Aesthetics of Erasure in Fiction and Illustration*. For a more extensive list on the use of absence through erasure in modern and contemporary arts, see Mike Brennan, "Additive Subtraction," *Eloquence of Absence: Omission, Extraction and Invisibility in Contemporary Art*, Modern Edition, http://www.modernedition.com/art-articles/absence-in-art/erasure-in-art.html, last accessed May 15, 2023.

254 Mike Brennan, "Additive Subtraction."

255 Louis Armand, "Under Erasure: Blackholes, Holographs & the Missing Letter." *Formes Poétiques Contemporaines*, no. 14 – *L'effacement*, edited by Michel Delville, Gerald Purnelle, 2019: 39.

256 Armand, "Under Erasure," 38.

approximate size. When one catches a fleeting metaphorical glimpse of the un-speakable horror of genocides through the gaping holes of the book, *Tree of Codes* borrows an apophatic rhetoric and becomes a vehicle for the circulation of affects (inconsolable grief, an act of dialogic remembrance, painful and fragile acts of mourning and commemoration).[257] It is also a heavily charged political, historical, and ethical statement.

Another approach that is very similar to Foer's – and curiously contemporary with it – is Joseph Havel's work *A Void*,[258] exhibited in New York in 2009, one year before the publication of *Tree of Codes*. A postmodernist American sculptor, Havel carefully cut out almost all the words of Gilbert Adair's translation into English of Georges Perec's *La Disparition* (translated as *A Void*) and exhibited the remainder as a mutilated hardcover. The only word he spared is, on page 101, a very brief exclamation ("No!"), as if to contrast and distinguish, in Heideggerian terms, the work of nihilation from the much less powerful work of negation. It is true, never-theless, that this strategic, rhetorically effective *mise-en-scène* bestows upon the simple "no!" (shouted to counter an unknown, absent action or affirmation) some-thing from the spectrality of its surrounding absences, with all the rhetorical devi-ces of repetition, inversion, and oxymoron[259] mobilized in the case of the empty *livre d'artiste* that hides in its middle a portrait of its author.

In Havel's *A Void*, not only is the text missing, but even if it were present it would have programmatically missed the vowel "e" (central in both English and French), as it may be already known to the reader familiar with Perec's lipogra-matic writing to which I shall soon return in a dedicated section. The surrounding absences, manifest or implicit in the reference to the lipogramatic novel, bring a subtle change to the meaning of the "No!" As Roy Sorensen explains in his article on "Blanks as Signs of Omission," it is important to note that the occurrence of an isolated unit of meaning is not equivalent to the occurrence of the exact same

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257 Hayles, "Combining Close and Distant Reading," 231. Grounding her argument in the analysis of *Tree of Codes*, Katherine Hayles advocates for "a reader-response theory that takes the mind-body fully into account."

258 Joseph Havel, *A Void* (cut-up book), 2 x 8 x 10 in (5.1 x 20.3 x 25.4 cm), New York, 2009, https://artmap.com/yvonlambertny/exhibition/joseph-havel-2010, last accessed May 15, 2023.

259 Maya Lin's renderings of underwater topography as wooden seascape sculptures in her se-ries *Bodies of Water* (2006) are a good illustration of the use of oxymorons in sculpture, offering solid consistency to a negative space, and thus granting material presence to volumes usually perceived to be empty. I am grateful to Prof. Ileana Marin for signaling this possible connection to Lin's work.

unit of meaning in a series, all the more so when the unit is the only element of the series.[260]

2.1.3 Writing *Without*: Lipogramatic Writing

The procedural poetics of lipograms (from the Greek verb *leipein*, meaning "to omit") usually implies the deliberate omission of a letter in a text. This constraint imposed upon writing is a landmark of experimental literature projects of which perhaps the most widely-known proponent is the French group OuLiPo. As Susan Elkin documents in her article "Lipograms: The Presence of Absence," the lipogramatic tradition goes, however, as far back as the ancient Greeks. It is continued in Latin ancient and medieval literature, in early French monastic writing and, most prolifically, in literary Baroque and Mannerist sensibilities within and beyond the Spanish *Siglo d'Oro*, up until French nineteenth-century drama and American twentieth-century novels.[261] Elkin dutifully notices that the constrained writing contagion has proven versatile enough to spread through all genres and permeate all literary forms.

The deliberate absence of a linguistic unit in lipogramatic writing should not be confounded with unintentional omissions due either to chance, to hurried writing, or simply to the relatively low frequency of some characters in everyday language. There are cases, however, in which the absence of a letter is bluntly

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260 Roy Sorensen, "Blanks: Signs of Omission," 310: "formal linguists emphasize the difference between a single letter and a string containing just that letter."

261 Susan Elkin, "Lipograms: The Presence of Absence," *Verbatim – The Language Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 15: "The Greek poet Lasus (born in Achaia 538 BC) wrote an ode to the centaurs and a hymn to Ceres without recourse to the letter *s*. A thousand years later, in the fifth century AD. Tryphiodorus amused himself by writing twenty-four books, each one of which excluded a different letter of the alphabet. Then there was Fulgentius, who wrote a book with twenty-three chapters, each of which also eschewed a different letter of the alphabet. Pindar had a go at it too. One of his odes has no *s*. [. . .] Peter Riga, a canon at Notre Dame in Rheims who died around 1209, [. . .] summarised the old and new testaments in Latin verse, which he called Aurora. In the first chapter he does without *a*. In the second he rejects *b*, and so on. [. . .] Meanwhile, in Spain, Lope de Vega produced a quintet of stories, each one of which omitted one of the vowels, and an anonymous seventeenth-century novel, *Estebanillo Gonzalez*, ends with a jolly little *o*-less romance. Still in Spain, Don Fernando Jacinto de Zurita y Haro wrote a 170-page discourse without the letter *a*. "Laus Deo" (praise God!) he wrote, self-indulgently, at the end. [. . .] In 1816, *Piece sans A*, by Ronden, was staged at *Théatre de Variétés*, which shows that lipography has, at times, penetrated various literary forms – short fiction, poetry, novels and drama. There was for example, Gadsby, a 50,000-word novel in English by Ernest Vincent Wright, published in 1939."

affirmed and celebrated as a proof of mastery and skill, as it happens in the case of Ernest Vincent Wright's 1939 *Gadsby*.[262] Some of the later editions of this book carry already on the front cover the rules of the game: "*Gadbsy* – a 50,000-word novel without *E*."

In other cases, as in Carol Shield's short story "Absence,"[263] the missing letter is less explicitly pointed at within the text. Moreover, its absence is also attached to deeper considerations about self-effacement, with the involuntary abandonment of the letter *i*:

> She knew more or less what she wanted to do, and that was to create a story that possessed a granddaughter, a Boston fern, a golden apple, and a small blue cradle. But after she had typed half a dozen words, she found that one of the letters of the keyboard was broken, and, to make matters worse, a vowel, the very letter that attaches to the hungry self.[264]

Obviously, the meaningful absence of the letter *i* and, therefore, of the first-person pronoun, is a strategy that only works in English. The absence of *e* triggers an entirely different register of absences, swiping off the page all definite articles ("the") and the past tenses requiring past participles of regular verbs ("-ed"), to name only the quickest examples that come to mind. The deliberate omission of wide categories of words impregnates the lipogramatic text with certain sonorities and phonetic registers (while excluding others), as well as with uncanny temporalities brought about by words that have long gone out of use or are not yet common in everyday language. In general, the tight linguistic anchorage of lipogramatic writing is artificially enhanced, making the translation of such texts notoriously difficult (when at all possible).[265] Paradoxically, the absence of a letter works towards a strengthening of the lexical and semiotic ties of the text to its linguistic system of origin.

Wright's *Gadsby* had inspired Georges Perec to write his famous *La Disparition*, translated into English as *A Void* by Gilbert Adair.[266] The novel also functions as raw material for Joseph Havel's sculptural die-cut. In a *clin d'oeil* to Wright and his readers, Perec includes in the novel a character named Lord Gadsby V. Wright. He maintained the same constraint (writing without *e*) and the same book length of approximately 50,000 words. Unlike his American lipogrammist predecessor, however, Perec instruments absence in more profound ways, relating it to irretrievable losses that have shaped his past:

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262 Ernest Vincent Wright, *Gadsby* [1939] (Frankfurt: Outlook Verlag, 2018).

263 Carol Shields, "Absence," in *Dressing Up for the Carnival* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2000).

264 Shields, "Absence," 92.

265 Kate Briggs, "Translation and the Lipogram," *Paragraph* 29, no. 3 (2006): 43–54.

266 Georges Perec, *A Void*, translated by Gilbert Adair (London: Harvill, 1994).

the absence of a sign is always the sign of an absence, and the absence of the E in A Void announces a broader, cannily coded discourse on loss, catastrophe, and mourning. Perec cannot say the words *père*, *mère*, *parents*, *famille* in his novel, nor can he write the name Georges Perec. In short, each "void" in the novel is abundantly furnished with meaning, and each points toward the existential void that Perec grappled with throughout his youth and early adulthood. A strange and compelling parable of survival becomes apparent in the novel, too, if one is willing to reflect on the struggles of a Holocaust orphan trying to make sense out of absence, and those of a young writer who has chosen to do without the letter that is the beginning and end of *écriture*.[267]

Three years after *La Disparition*, Perec further experimented with a reversal of his in-text politics of inclusion and exclusion, namely with an inverted lipogram. Also known as univocalic writing, this constraint forbids the use of all vowels but one. In Perec's *Les Revenentes*,[268] the letter "e" reasserts its right to presence (denied now to all other vowels), even with the price of several deviations from standard French spelling and orthography. Given the enhanced difficulty of this further refinement of lipogramatic stylistic artifice, Perec sometimes deliberately misspells words to allow the insurrection of the *e* (it suffices to take a look at the title, whose conventional spelling would have been *Les Revenantes*) and allows the use of semi-vowels such as *y* or *w*, or even the presence of foreign words ("twelve" instead of *douze*) in order to stick to the self-imposed constraint. The more extensive literal absence becomes far more oppressive than the absence of just one letter. Repeated deviations from linguistic norms mark as many moments of interruption and fracture in the smoothness and the flow of the narrative.

These observations hold true for all univocalic writing, including Christian Bök's recent *Eunoia*.[269] As the Canadian author confesses in the afterword ("The New Ennui"), he draws greatly from Perec and the exploits of the OuLiPo in his ambitious project to write five univocalic chapters (one dedicated to each vowel). As a matter of fact, the word "eunoia" is chosen as a title because it is the shortest English word containing all five main vowel graphemes. To top up his fascination with vowels, the writer experiments with several lipogramatic translations of Arthur Rimbaud poem *Voyelles* (*Vowels*) in the second part of the book.

The word *eunoia* is a rhetorical term referring to the benevolence a speaker needs to elicit from his public in order to ensure a proper reception of his message. In keeping with this literal etymological meaning, the title of the novel may hint to a necessary degree of commitment that is required from the reader to properly accommodate this challenging reading experience. To compensate for

267 Warren Motte, "Reading Georges Perec," in *Context* 11, http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/read ing-georges-perec/, last accessed May 15, 2023.

268 Georges Perec, *Les Revenantes* [1972] (Paris: Juillard, 1997).

269 Christian Bök, *Eunoia* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2009).

the sense of a somewhat disjointed narrative induced by the arbitrariness of the words which the lipogramatic constraint imposes, Bök tries to bind together Chapter A, Chapter E, Chapter I, Chapter O, and Chapter U on a thematic level, adding to his set of rules and increasing the difficulty of his creation:

> Eunoia abides by many subsidiary rules. All chapters must allude to the art of writing. All chapters must describe a culinary banquet, a prurient debauch, a pastoral tableau and a nautical voyage. All sentences must accent internal rhyme through the use of syntactical parallelism. The text must exhaust the lexicon for each vowel, citing at least 98% of the available repertoire (although a few words do go unused, despite efforts to include them: parallax, belvedere, gingivitis, mono-chord and tumulus). The text must minimize repetition of substantive vocabulary (so that, ideally, no word appears more than once). The letter Y is suppressed.[270]

An all-encompassing inclusion of the available lexical repository is therefore proven impossible and there are several imposed *topoi* whose presence is meant to compensate for the inner coherence lost in the arbitrariness of the convention at work in the text. Among these *topoi*, I place a special emphasis on the *ars poetica* included in each chapter, which serves to confirm that the occurrence of figures of radical absence is usually accompanied by a manifest self-reflexivity of the medium. Coincidentally or not, Carol Shield's "Absence" also makes references to the writing process undergone by its main character confronted with a creative crisis, as one of the keys on her typing machine gets stuck and becomes unusable. In *Gadsby,* the "e" key is voluntarily tied down by the writer to avoid the infiltration of the dismissed vowel in the text, through accidental use. It becomes obvious how the material contingency involved in the production of these works is closely engaged with the radical constitutive absence they affirm.

In other examples of constrained writing for which the name "lipolexical" would be perhaps better suited than "lipogrammatical," the ban is bestowed upon entire categories of words. Michel Thaler's 2004 novel *Le Train de nulle part*[271] (*The Train from Nowhere*), for example, dispenses entirely with verbs. The author makes, however, a concession for the adjectival use of past participles. The table of contents reveals a formal concern for the structuring of the chapters according to the letters of the Greek alphabet and the dedication page is written in the rhetoric of avant gardist *fronde*, identifying the rejection of the verb with a (political) liberation from "the invasion" and "the dictatorship" of predication. As such, the advent of this exclusion is formulated as a warrant for a new age of writing, a somewhat revolutionary gesture of the "absolute present" (presence?)

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270 "The New Ennui," in Bök, *Eunoia*, (e-book, no page number).

271 Michel Thaler, *Le Train de nulle part* (Aix-en-Provence: Éditions Adcan, 2004).

that kills off temporal modulation and utters a firm engagement with a dangerous revitalization of modernity:

> To all the fierce enemies of the word, unconditional followers of the absolute present. To all the partisans of the decolonization of the written word and the killing or, in a more acceptable way, the silencing and exclusion of the word. The word, this invader, this dictator, this usurper of our literature since forever!
>
> To all the followers of this new movement: people from the margins in search of a real renewal of the writing, stuntmen of the modernity, trapeze artists of the stripped image and the absolute poetic feeling.

> *À tous les farouches ennemis du verbe, adeptes inconditionnels du présent absolu.*
>
> *À tous les partisans de la décolonisation de l'écrit et de la mise à mort ou, d'une manière plus acceptable, de la mise au silence et de l'exclusion du verbe. Le verbe, cet envahisseur, ce dictateur, cet usurpateur de notre littérature depuis toujours !*
>
> *À tous les suiveurs de cette nouvelle mouvance: gens de la marge en quête d'un réel renouveau de l'écriture, cascadeurs de la modernité, trapézistes de l'image dépouillée et du sentiment poétique absolu.*[272]

Nevertheless, it is easy to see in these programmatic claims that the "new regime" of writing is prefigured as no less dictatorial and oppressive than the one it seeks to overturn. The absence here functions in a highly politicized context and is imbued with revolutionary violence reminiscent of earlier avant-gardes promising aesthetic renewal. There is a great deal of posing and theatricality involved, especially if one considers the circumstances under which this book was launched. Instead of the regular launch, the author staged at Sorbonne a funeral ceremony for what he calls "the death of the verb." He asked all members of the audience to attend the event dressed in mourning attire. If, as I tried to show in the theoretical framework in Chapter 1, the figures of absence display a certain resistance to predication, in Thaler's approach the absence *is* predication itself. The lack of verbs leads to a lack of action and traditional plot, in a rather unsubtle subversion of the narrative.

Christine Brooke-Rose is less restrictive an author (though perhaps more effective and certainly more stylistically complex) in her choice to ban not all verbs, but only the verb "to be" in her short multilingual novel *Between*.[273] Published in 1968, thus sharply preceding Perec's revolution in contemporary lipogrammatic writing, the novel follows the intimations of a conference interpreter

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272 Thaler, *Le Train de nulle part*, e-book (no page number). The English translation is mine.
273 Christine Brooke-Rose, "Between," in *The Christine Brooke-Rose Omnibus: Four Novels* (New York: Carcanet, 1986): 391–575.

whose thoughts and sensations are recorded in phenomenological[274] juxtapositions with a complete disregard for spatio-temporal precision. Most of these intimate stream of consciousness fragments occur during international flights, being therefore suspended between (but also above, and beyond) time-zones and national or linguistic frontiers. As such, they refuse to stabilize themselves in the fixed coordinates implied by the potential use of "to be" in regard to either the subjectivity of the main character, or the world around her. The absence of this essential verb stands, in this sense, for the absence of clear delineation between subjects (or places) and for the entangled and uninterrupted flows of thought, affects, languages, myths, politics that do not allow any truth or merit in the reduction of reality to the simplicity of statements such as "I *am*" or "there *is.*"

This divergence between a fixed, static perception of being, on the one hand, and a fluid and dynamic one, on the other hand, is consistent with Philippe Dubois distinction between figuration and narration already presented in Chapter 1.[275] To phrase it differently, Brooke-Rose's figure of absence is actualized in a radical subversion of classical ontology, in the fluid, ethereal, and transitory state of not simply being, but *being-in-between*. It inhabits the intersubjective space of transcultural, transhistorical, and translinguistic communities and communications.

In the context of the dawn of globalization already visible in the 1960s, Brooke-Rose's experimental writing is not deprived of political and ethical implications. It explores the ways in which a subject's sense of self, identity, and foreignness are altered and re-shaped by the suppression of a traditional regime of being that has been rendered obsolete in a world of continuous flows, transfers, and exchanges.

2.1.4 The Missing Text

The figure of the missing-text-within-text (lost manuscripts, purloined letters, printing faults leading to incomplete narratives and the like) is discussed extensively by Paula Geldenhuys,[276] who describes it as an example of a pure signifier, emptied of its signified by theft or displacement. This echoes Laclau's "empty sig-

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274 I invoke phenomenology in relation to aesthetics following Mikel Dufrenne, *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, edited by James M. Edie, translated by Edward S. Casey (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

275 Dubois, "La question du figural," 55.

276 Paula Geldenhuys, *The Missing Text: A Study in Absence* (Leics: Troubadour Publishing, 2013).

nifier" together with Anne Cauquelin's third figure of absence (*le retrait ou le dé-placement*). It also underlines the importance of peripheric elements in a phenomenon Geldenhuys calls "paratextual inversion." In short, the missing text is presented in its absence, and it is signaled as absent through insertions of paratextual elements (footnotes, preface, epilogue, commentaries). In this way, the secondary layers of text permeate and take over the central narrative authority of the primary text. The displaced text requires, in order to be rendered visible, a textual supplement. As Jacques Derrida put it in *Of Grammatology*, "it is always necessary to add a supplement of presence to the presence that is concealed."[277]

While discussing occurrences of this figure of absence through examples ranging from Poe to Henry James, Luigi Pirandello, Lacan, Italo Calvino, and Agatha Christie, Geldenhuys puts forward another interesting observation: in such writings, absence becomes a strange intertextual device through constant, peripheral references to the missing text, in a movement of "continuous creation-and-elimination of consistent ontological parameters."[278] This self-cancelation performed by the text, as it pops in and out of existence, is strangely consistent with the way in which contemporary physics and, in particular, quantum field theory describes the vacuum as "a sea composed of all the elementary particles and their antiparticles continually appearing and disappearing."[279] This back and forth movement that is taking place between presence and absence gains in momentum, ontological indeterminacy, and epistemological uncertainty with the advent of electronic text files, which may be made to self-erase shortly after reading.

Perhaps the best-known example of a self-destroying document is William Gibson's 300-line floppy-disk poem *Agrippa. A Book of the Dead*,[280] programmed to efface itself after a first reading. The poem has also been printed in an artist's book format, whose pages were treated with photosensitive substances that lead to a gradual fading of the words of the poem following their exposure to light. This text, always on the verge of disappearance before sinking forever into non-being, also relates to absence in its subject matter. It speaks semi-biographically about the feeble persistence of personal memory and the gradual expansion of absence despite man's best efforts to store and archive former (photographically inscribed) presences. From this perspective, the work is much more than a poem – it crosses the border to the realm of conceptual art. At the same time, it

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277 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 306.

278 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 68.

279 Barrow, *The Book of Nothing*, 230.

280 William Gibbson, *Agrippa. A Book of the Dead,* 1992, available at:
https://web.archive.org/web/20131123072903/http://www.williamgibsonbooks.com/source/agrippa.asp, last accessed May 15, 2023.

problematizes the digital shift of the poetic and conceptual interplay of absence and presence previously explored in standardized forms of inscription and textual materiality (ink printed on paper). What the progressive fading cancels is not, technically, the text, but further attempts at subsequent re-readings. The only permitted encounter with the poem is the first one, which is also the last. Consequently, the increased sense of urgency generated by an awareness of the text's non-iterative temporality becomes an integral part of the reading experience. Once again, the absence of the text is forced upon the reader only to emphasize a specific aspect (this time, the irretrievable temporality) of its presence. Even though presence is rarely questioned in its relation to time, Gibson's poetic experiment serves as a reminder that ultimately no presence is everlasting.

Alternatively, in a similar self-cancelling rhetoric, digital text files may become unavailable immediately after their download, as it happens to the .pdf document that sets in motion the plot in Anne Garréta and Jacques Roubaud's 2009 novel, *Éros mélancolique*.[281] The text of the file is forever deferred for the reader: the protagonist downloads it but then his laptop is stolen on a train (*Le Train de nulle part*?). A detective plot is built around recuperating it and regaining access to the text. Later on, the missing text becomes apparent on the printed page, but entire blocks of writing are obscured by a graphic blank acting as an empty signifier, an interruption in the flow of reading which deprives the prose of its legibility and the expected advent of meaning. The first encounter with the .pdf that is so central to the plot of this novel happens in a blog post, which ends with the words: "I ask him or her who will first read this page to download this story, by clicking on the link below. Once downloaded and entered in your possession, it will disappear from this page. Éros mélancolique (.pdf file, 9 MB)."[282] As it is often the case, the most visible absence is only one among many absences at work in the same text. This co-written novel engages also on a thematic level with that which escapes visibility and/or legibility. The text generates a state of constant deferral in both affective memory and visual representation.[283] The result is

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281 Anne F. Garréta, Jacques Roubaud, *Éros mélancolique* (Paris: Éditions Grasset et Fasquelle, 2009).

282 Garréta and Roubaud, *Éros mélancolique*, 9 (my translation, underlined in the original).

283 Garréta and Roubaud, *Éros mélancolique*, 27–28: "Son visage me fuit sans fin. Quand je la regarde, je cherche ses yeux, son visage, je crois les voir. Mais quand je veux, la nuit, les yeux fermés, recomposer ces yeux, ce corps, ils se dérobent, ma mémoire comme frappée d'aveuglement. [. . .] Son image me fuit sans fin. Son visage me hante évanoui. Je ne cesse de la perdre de vue, même quand elle est là, non loin de moi. Rien n'arrête sa fuite, ne couvre la distance qui me sépare de son lointain. [. . .] Pour la capturer, j'ai imaginé la prendre en photo [. . .] mais longtemps, toutes les photos ont été mauvaises, illisibles. Elle, elle était invisible dans l'image, même nette, même parfaitement exposée."

something close to an apophatic *ekphrasis*, a writing aiming to capture not the absence of sight or of the object of sight, but the very impossibility of fixing that object (a beloved face, for instance) in an image. The figural void created in this way, unrepresentable in affirmative regimes of either text or image, testifies to the intermedial potential of this figure of absence.

Returning to Paula Geldenhuys's framework, she describes the missing text as a semiotic device with the help of which "absence itself becomes the meaning."[284] Her main analysis follows the plot in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter*, the most famous missing text in world literature. The model remains valid for the rich critical heritage it has occasioned, including the examination of the ever-secret letter via Lacan's *Seminar on the Purloined Letter* and Derrida's commentary in "The Purveyor of Truth." Geldenhuys's argument concludes with several observations on the self-reflexive potentiality actualized by the use of this literary *topos*. Her conclusions contribute to a confirmation of my own hypothesis, according to which figures of radical absence have a strong tendency to inspire self-reflexive observations of their own medium, normativity, and conditions of existence:

> It is not so surprising then that metacommentary should turn out to be one of the defining characteristics of Missing Texts, since all forms of commentary (the gloss, the footnote, and all paratextual addenda) are essentially a means of propagation of – and therefore an infinite extension of – any text. Furthermore, the text goes to great lengths in order to disguise in manifold wondrous ways its own embedded commentary and the manner in which it undergoes displacement thereby, thus promoting itself to the ranks of Missing Texts. [. . .] The seeming insurrection of aggressive commentary usurping the status of primary narrative is in truth none other than the result of the Missing Text's efforts to disguize its own meta-commentatory nature.
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>   [. . .] It is significant that the original contents of the purloined letter in the story of that name are never revealed to us. All we are provided with is a detailed account of its *new contents* by means of a quotation which will lead us to another text, and then on again to an infinite series of textual *substitutions*. Furthermore, the example of the re-directing and re-sealing of the purloined letter will also ensure that contemporary Missing Texts will adopt – and adapt themselves to – the limitless itinerary of the signifier, in their fascination with an endless series of textual facsimiles and lost originals, fakes and forgeries, suspect translations, dubious copies, and disappearing portions of text.[285]

Loss, theft, self-effacement, and other forms of voluntary or involuntary displacement of writing create a narrative figural void, a non-signifying vacuum (in Gel-

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284 Geldenhuys, *Missing Text*, 15.
285 Geldenhuys, *Missing Text*, 233.

denhuys's words, a "seductive textual anti-world"[286]) that accommodates multiple roles: it may function as the mysterious secrecy that advances detective plots (as in Poe, or Garréta and Roubaud), it may speak of the non-persistence of texts and the frailty of memory (Gibson), it may serve postmodern plays of intertextuality (Calvino, Borges), and it may open endless possibilities of interpretation while sticking to none, in the good empty-signifying tradition of Iserian narrative gaps [*Leerstelle*]. Furthermore, the missing text allows for an increasing proliferation of paratextual content, reversing the power hierarchies established between the original text and its commentary, in terms of authority, credibility, and symbolic pre-eminence.

2.1.5 Writing Nothing

Turning the page to texts that are not missing but are nevertheless built on the absence of subject matter, one must also consider the recurrent *topos* of the writer forsaken by the muses who, lacking an object more worthy of attention – or simply wanting to highlight the gratuitous nature of his trade or to the mastery of his style –, declares that (s)he wants to "write about nothing." This rhetorical *captatio* is not a new invention and covers a wide array of authorial attitudes, from *ennui* and disenchantment with the world to the open acknowledgement of a writing deemed (sometimes sincerely, other times with false modesty) unworthy of consideration, and, finally, from an affirmation of poetic skill to an admitted defeat in front of the unspeakable or the ineffable. It is, of course, a self-defeating statement, since writing about having written nothing, writing nothing, or willing to write nothing is still writing "something," a "something" that is, in its turn, intimately related to absence.

More than nine centuries ago, William IX, Duke of Aquitaine wrote "a verse about sheer nil" (*Farai un vers de dreit rien*),[287] a poem about nothing in which the lyrical subject's self-assumed lack of individualizing traits might have inspired Robert Musil's *Man Without Qualities.* Centuries later, in a similar gesture, Macbeth famously refers from within the text to his story as "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" (V, iii). The specter of "writing about nothing" also famously haunted Gustave Flaubert, who wrote to Louise Colet in January 1852 about his work at the time, which would later be known to

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286 Geldenhuys, *Missing Text*, 233.
287 William IX, Duke of Aquitaine, "Farai un vers de dreit rien," in *Lyrics of the Middle Ages: An Anthology*, edited by James J. Wilhelm (New York, London: Garland Publishing, 1990), 54–55.

us as *Madame Bovary*: "What I find beautiful, what I'd like to do, is a book about nothing, a book with no external attachment, which would hold together by the internal strength of its style, as the earth floats in the air unsupported, a book that would have almost no subject at all or at least one in which the subject would be almost invisible, if that were possible."[288] Even if the resulting novel certainly cannot be interpreted as an empty signifier, its creation from an attested will to make a textual imprint of a figural void is worthy of attention. Angela Leighton's observation, although initially formulated with regard to poetry, is valuable here:

> [nothing] is a word which already toys with its own content, enjoying the hologram effect of being a thing and an absence, a sound, and an emptiness, there and not there. The nineteenth-century aesthetes invoke it frequently as a (perhaps false) modesty trope, in order to advocate the insignificance of content and the importance of form and style. [. . .] Having 'nothing to say' is a way of allowing the shape or sound of writing to be heard, rather than its substance understood.[289]

A century later, one could hear a similar statement voiced by (a surprisingly Flaubertian) Andy Warhol: "I wanted to paint nothing. I was looking for something that was the essence of nothing."[290] Surprising Flaubertian tones also resonate in Virginia Woolf reflections on her novel *The Lighthouse*, to which she refuses the attribution of any particular meaning. She writes about this refusal in a 1927 letter to Roger Fry: "I meant *nothing* by *The Lighthouse*. I saw that all sorts of feelings would accrue to this, but I refused to think them out, and trusted that people would make it the deposit for their own emotions – which they have done, one thinking it means one thing another another . . . directly I'm told what a thing means it becomes hateful to me."[291] Despite being the symbolic center around which all the human agency revolves in the novel, the lighthouse remains an opaque signifier, devoid of a stable, fixed meaning. It is thereby open to any and all interpretations from the part of the reader and to the affective investments of the characters. As Ravit Reichman rightfully notes about Woolf's remark on the lighthouse, "the fact that its meaning changes with every reader suggests that Woolf is

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288 Gustave Flaubert, Letter to Louise Colet of January 16, 1852, in *Correspondance*, vol. 2, edited by J. Bruneau (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 31.
289 Angela Leighton, "Nothing, but: An Afterword." *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 263.
290 Quoted in Victor Bockris, *Warhol: The Biography* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2003), 154.
291 Virginia Woolf, "To Roger Fry," 27 May 1927, in *Congenial Spirits: The Selected Letters of Virginia Woolf*, edited by Joanne Trautmann Banks, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989, 228, cited in Ravit Reichman, *The Affective Life of Law: Legal Modernism and the Literary Imagination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 83.

not interested in any finite value, but rather in what it means for something to have sentimental value."[292] In other words, confirming *avant la lettre* Laclau's hypothesis, Woolf understands that empty signifiers draw attention not so much to their ability to accommodate any particular signification, but rather to the process of signifying itself.

The nothing in the work of Samuel Beckett is certainly of a different nature, stemming from a profound awareness of the simultaneous impossibility and necessity to write: "Having nothing to say, no words but the words of others, I have to speak. No one compels me to (there is no one): it's an accident, a fact."[293] This Beckettian awareness will later be dissected thoroughly by Blanchot in *The Book to Come* and, more recently, by Pascale Casanova in "The Invention of Abstract Literature."[294] As Beckett writes elsewhere, in *Malone Dies*, "nothing is more real than nothing,"[295] suggesting that radical absence may gain the consistency of the thickest reality, and subtly introducing a shade of difference between the two iterations of the nothing in the vertigo of the inescapable circularity of the sentence. Then, of course, there is the famous absence central to *Waiting for Godot*, a play in which, in the words of Vivian Mercier's review, "nothing happens, twice."[296] Beckett's fictional universe seems to be suspended in a quantum void resisting the laws and principles that govern less empty worlds, filled with "neither elements nor states, nothing but forms becoming and crumbling into the fragments of a new becoming, without love or hate or any intelligible principle of change."[297]

It is indeed a little vain to attempt to illustrate Beckett's highly original writing of radical absences with several scattered quotes. His work is in its entirety a meditation on this topic and an exploration of the liminal possibilities of language to accommodate it. Perhaps the most concentrated expression of Beckettian absence is found, not as one would expect, in *The Unnamable* or in *Texts for Nothing*, but in the short prose-poem "neither"[298] (which perpetuates, however, the spectral ontology of the two more famous texts). A longer analysis of the poem is

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292 Reichman, *The Affective Life of Law*, 83.

293 Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, translated by Patrick Bowles (London: Picador, 1978).

294 Pascale Casanova, "The Invention of Abstract Literature." *Samuel Beckett: The Anatomy of a Literary Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2006).

295 Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies. Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition. Volume II. Novels* (New York: Grove, 2006), 186.

296 Vivian Mercier, "The Uneventful Event," *Irish Times*, no. 18 (1956): 6.

297 Samuel Beckett, *Murphy. Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition. Volume I. Novels* (New York: Grove, 2006), 70.

298 Like herman de vries, Beckett willfully suspends here the unwritten law of capital-lettered titles. The poem was first published in *Journal of Beckett Studies* in 1979.

conducted elsewhere by Jonathan Boulter.[299] Without repeating it here, I would like to simply highlight its conclusion. In this poem, being itself is suspended in a state of radical absence and absolute exclusion, a state which allows for neither subjectivity nor language: "the state of being, now, is the state of "neither" [. . .] the subject is fully effaced."[300] Commenting on the central role this effacement plays in Beckett's work, J. M. Coetzee wonders about the self-contradictory mechanisms of his style, defined by simultaneous affirmations and withdrawals that amount to a zero-sum game:

> The art of Samuel Beckett has become an art of zero, as we all know. We also know that an art of zero is impossible. A thousand words under a title and a publisher's imprint, the very act of moving pen over paper, are affirmations of a kind. By what self-contradictory act can such affirmations be deprived of content? By what act can the sentences be, so to speak, erased as they flow from the pen?[301]

Coetzee's "art of zero" would then be, perhaps, a synonym for what this book means by "figures of radical absence." Regardless of denominations, though, this poetic strategy is particularly appealing (but also potentially appalling) in its transgressions of the possible, of the very limits of language. The monstrosity of this transgression engenders a traumatic encounter that is always already unspeakable, irreducible to language.

At the end of Book I, chapter XII, of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*,[302] Laurence Sterne visibly points to the insufficiency of language and writing when he leaves an entire black page to spell out his inconsolable grief at the death of the second most famous Yorick in the history of world literature. Later editions will reduce this black inkblot in size and, sometimes, in shape. My Wordsworth edition, for example, renders it in the form of a half-page tombstone. In this seemingly too easy parody of the ineffability *topos* overused in the sentimental literature of his time, Sterne signifies the very limits of signification, as Anne Garréta and Jacques Roubaud (among others) will do centuries later when they will allow the overimposition of typographic blanks on chunks of text. The intermedial gesture of placing a non-lettered surface within the body of the text and leaving it to supplement the weakness of linguistic signs has a strong visual

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299 Jonathan Boulter, *Beckett – A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 159–161, and *Posthuman Space in Samuel Beckett's Short Prose* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 197–207.
300 Boulter, *Beckett – A Guide for the Perplexed*, 160.
301 J. M. Coetzee, "Samuel Beckett and the Temptations of Style," in *Doubling the Point, Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 43.
302 Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* [1759–1767] (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2009), 23.

component, one that used to be even more provoking in the context of the eighteenth-century typographic conventions than it might seem now. In the light of this intermedial play of visibility and legibility, Sterne's black page has recently been opened to reflection and reinterpretation; a call for such interventions received contributions from 73 international visual artists.[303] Similar, more contemporary examples of this purposeful interruption of the typographic continuum convey the idea of an absence can be found in the experimental writing of the French *nouveau roman*. In Alain Robbe-Grillet's novel *Le Voyeur*, for example, a blank page hides (and stands for) a crime, while in Marguerite Duras's *L'Après-midi de Monsieur Andesmas* the blank page is used to suggest an immeasurable duration of sleep.[304]

In a different fictional register, Herman Melville inserts moments of visual blankness in his *Moby Dick* – a novel built around the "nameless horror" provoked by the literal or symbolic blinding whiteness of the mythical whale. However, Melville chooses not to block visibility with unconventional typographic visuals. Instead, he proceeds to subvert the signifying power and the representational potential of language precisely *from within* language. This figural void, a "dumb blankness, full of meaning," fascinates and terrifies in equal measures, like a particular blank space on Marlow's childhood maps in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "But there was one yet – the biggest, the most blank, so to speak – that I had a hankering after."[305] The impenetrable whiteness of Melville's whale distorts narrative and descriptive flows with uncanny affective intensities that block the mimetic potentialities of language and make an inherent, necessary switch from representation to figuration. Chapter 42 of the book, in particular, speaks of the immense, overwhelmingly opaque indeterminacy that constitutes the figural core of the novel:

> It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me. [. . .] This elusive quality it is, which causes the thought of whiteness, when divorced from more kindly associations, and coupled with any object terrible in itself, to heighten that terror to the furthest bounds. [. . .] Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the Milky Way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so

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303 Stephen Gertz, *73 Interpretations of Tristram Shandy's Infamous Black Page,* http://bookpatrol.net/73-interpretations-of-tristram-shandys-infamous-black-page/, last accessed May 15, 2023.

304 I owe both these references to Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 47.

305 Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Project Gutenberg edition, 1995 (E-Book), available at: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/219/219-h/219-h.htm, last accessed May 15, 2023.

much a color as the visible absence of color; and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows – a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink?[306]

The empty fullness of the white whale signifier haunts not only Ahab, Ishmael, and those who call him so. Its reach is intertextual and touches as far as Georges Perec's *La Disparition*, to the point of textual dissolution and disfiguration: "*Apocalypsis cum figuris*: as always, though, a survivor will hold out, a Jonah who will claim that, on that day, his damnation, his oblivion, was writ in plain sight in a Grampus's blank iris – blank, blank, blank, as a tabula rasa, as a void! Ah, Moby Dick! Ah, moody Bic!"[307] As we have already seen, Perec's work is built upon the absence of many things – of another book, of a character, of an entire chapter, of all the occurrences of a vowel – and each of these disappearances is a figure of absence in its own sense. In texts such as Melville's, Beckett's or Perec's, a radical absence is both significant and trivial. It functions as a structural opening, a potential actualization of the most remote possibilities inside a system which privileges a metaphysics of presence.

When theorizing the impossible accommodation of the nothing in the system of language in "What Is Metaphysics?," which one may remember from the first chapter, Heidegger acknowledges the relative impotence of language to give radical absence an adequate, intransitive formulation. For this reason, the philosopher chooses to refer to the nothing with a graphic placeholder, the ". . .".[308] The ellipsis becomes an empty signifier for the infinite nothingness above and beyond the realm of words and intelligible articulations. Melville figured this "[. . .]" via his white whale, an overwhelming monolith of unfigurability and unknowability endowed on more than one occasion with mystical connotations. For Beckett, this non-bracketed sign of the suspension of language is contained by the word "neither," in the absence of all determinations that would attach it to a presence, to contingency. Perec approximated it by articulating absence on every possible level of his *La Disparition*, as if to leave a red thread that guides a hallucinating Vowl – and the reader – to an intriguing "absence of the book":

> To his right is a mahogany stand on which sit 26 books – on which, I should say, 26 books normally ought to sit, but, as always, a book is missing, a book with an inscription, "5," on its flap. Nothing about this stand, though, looks at all abnormal or out of proportion, no hint of a missing publication, no filing card or "ghost," as librarians quaintly call it, no conspicuous gap or blank. And, disturbingly, it's as though nobody knows of such an omission: you

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306 Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, Project Gutenberg edition, 2010 (E-Book), available at: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2701/2701-h/2701-h.htm, last accessed May 15, 2023.

307 Perec, *A Void*, 73.

308 Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?," 50.

had to work your way through it all from start to finish, continually subtracting [. . .] to find out that any book was missing; [. . .] Vowl is avid to grasp a book, any book at all, in his hand, to study its small print (with a possibility of chancing across an important fact, a crucial tip) but in vain; his groping hand is, alas, too far away for any physical contact. But what (his mind runs on), what would such a book contain? Possibly a colossal, a cosmic dictionary? A Koran, a Talmud, or a Torah? A magnum opus, a Black Book of black magic, cryptograms, and occult mumbo jumbo . . .

A unit is lacking. An omission, a blank, a void that nobody but him knows about, thinks about, that, flagrantly, nobody wants to know or think about. A missing link.[309]

The Blanchotian undertones of this absence of book and the self-reflexivity at work in writing about it in a book called *La Disparition* will hopefully not be lost on the reader.

This non-chronological montage of literary works engaging with figures of radical absence that resonate on both formal and thematic levels gets close to its end. Without claiming to have exhausted the entirety of the material, it hopes to have at least revealed several important variations of what Ihab Hassan has called "the literature of silence" or "anti-literature." Reaching a conclusion that resonates with my point about the self-reflexivity of radical absences in literature, he notes:

Clearly, the silence at the center of anti-literature is loud and various. Whether it is created by the shock of outrage or of apocalypse, whether it is enhanced by the conception of literature as pure action or pure play, and of the literary work itself as a concrete object, a blank page, or a random array, is perhaps finally irrelevant. The point is: silence develops as the metaphor of a new attitude that literature has chosen to adopt toward itself.[310]

Numerous other studies tackle the literary treatment of absence from a thematic perspective only,[311] but that does not concern the purpose of this book, which is more interested in figures of radical absence as formal strategies. Let us now move on from written figures of radical absence to their visual equivalents.

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309 Perec, *A Void*, 12–13.

310 Ihab Hassan, *The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett* (New York: Knopf, 1967), 15.

311 For example, for a study of absence in the contemporary French novel, see Dominique Rabaté, *Désirs de disparaître. Une traversée du roman français contemporain* (Rimouski: Université du Québec à Rimouski, Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, 2015). For the German modern novel, see Stephen Dowden, *Sympathy for the Abyss*. I have already cited similar studies of a transnational scope, published for the more general realms of the literature of the nineteenth century (Robert Martin Adams, *Nil*) and of the twentieth century (Meghan Vicks, *Narratives of Nothing*). Transdisciplinary studies originating in psychology or affect studies are also worthy of mention – see William Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

2.2 Figures of Painted/Framed Absence

> I paint the impossibility of painting.
> (Bram van Velde)[312]

In 1955, Yves Klein submitted an orange monochrome to the jury curating the painting exhibition for the *Salon des Réalités Nouvelles.* It provoked, indeed, the indignation the artist had counted on. The jurors asked him to add something to the uniform canvas, no matter how little (a form, a shade, a gesture) so that the entire work would meet the minimum expectation they had for what a "painting" ought to look like. He turned down their offer, claiming that the work was already in its final form as a monochrome.

This subchapter may have equally opened with a reference to Kazimir Malevich's squares, to the monochromes signed by Ad Reinhardt, Frank Stella, Jules Olitski, Robert Rauschenberg, Imi Knoebel, Gerhard Richter, Cy Twombly, or by the Gutai artists.[313] The choice would have made little difference, even though each artist had its own specific motivation for creating paintings that are neither figurative, not abstract, but simply evade any composition and get as close as possible to the visual representation of a homogeneous figural void. Some of them put forward an aesthetic of obliteration and vacuity, others conceived the absence of differential markings on the canvas as a visual space of freedom and full potentiality. The contrasting views of their creators placed monochromes in a permanent play of identity and non-identity, limitation and transcendence, negativity and positivity. In a letter to Betty Parsons, Robert Rauschenberg writes about his *White Painting [three panel]*:

> They are not Art because they take you to a place in painting art has not been [. . .]. They are large white (1 white as 1 God) canvases organized and selected with the experience of time and presented with the innocence of a virgin. Dealing with the suspense, excitement and body of an organic silence, the restriction and freedom of absence, the plastic fullness of nothing, the point a circle begins and ends, they are a natural response to the current pressures of the faithless and a promoter of intuitional optimism. It is completely irrelevant that I am making them – *Today* is their creator.[314]

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312 Charles Juliet, ed., *Conversations with Samuel Beckett and Bram van Velde* (London, Champaign: Dalkey Archive, 2009), 62.

313 For a detailed exploration of Malevich's *Black Square* and its predecessors, see Andrew Spira, *Foreshadowed: Malevich's "Black Square" and Its Precursors* (London: Reaktion Books, 2022).

314 Robert Rauschenberg's letter to Betty Parsons, October 18, 1951, in Walter Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s* (Houston: Houston Fine Art Press, 1991), 230.

Aware of the inner contradictions of his recent work, Rauschenberg's words are also relevant for having anchored a figure of absence into the present, a present to which he grants the functions and privileges of the author. In this respect, his white canvases resemble John Cage's *4′33″,* the non-silent silence foregrounding the circumstantial sounds surrounding each of its performances. Or, to find another painterly correspondent, Rauschenberg anticipates (and most probably inspires) the *Invisible Paintings* of the New York-based Swiss artist Bruno Jakob, who exposed paper to various natural elements ranging from Zurich snow and Venetian air to more intangible phenomena, such as "love" and "brain air." The paper was deemed imprinted with the invisible quality of these atmospheric "events." For this reason, it was classified as a painting by its author, who delegated authorial agency to entirely external material or immaterial circumstances. For artists like Rauschenberg, Cage, or Jakob, their painted or musical work became progressively more dependent on a seemingly passive recording of their temporal present and contingent presences than on the agency or the subjectivity of their respective human author.

Max Beckmann is, on the contrary, less willing to accept an interpretation of monochromes and/or empty canvases as effortless collaborations between humanity and the world. Instead, he sees in them an act of exposing the primal vacuum that human nature tries to cover and escape: "[T]his unending void whose foreground we constantly have to fill with stuff of some sort in order not to notice its horrifying depth. Whatever we poor humans do if we did not create some such idea as nation, love, art with which to cover the black hole a little from time to time. This boundless forsaken eternity."[315] For Beckmann, the monochrome is a signifier for the unknowable absence that filled the space before the beginning of the world, an approximation of the ungraspable origin from which all creation unfolded and which, ever since, has silently and secretly accompanied all creation.

Furthermore, Beckmann's artist statement can equally be read in the vocabulary of anxiety described by Heidegger as the only affect produced at the encounter with "the nothing." Despite their apparent opacity and muteness that would perhaps suggest some sort of tranquility, monochromes can become rather disquieting for the spectator even when the filling color is the brightest, or the most neutral. Robert Motherwell made a point of this in a very telling parallel between painting and the mythical whiteness of the whale in Melville's *Moby Dick* or the blank white paper praised or despised by many writers: "There is a chapter in Moby Dick that

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315 Quoted in Robert Storr, "Burnt Holes, Bloody Holes: Art After Catastrophe," in *Destroy the Picture: Painting the Void 1949–1962*, edited by Paul Schimmel (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2012), 241.

evokes white's qualities as no painter could, except in his medium. [. . .] A fresh white canvas is a void, as is the poet's sheet of blank white paper. But look for your-selves. I want to get back to my white-washed studio. If the amounts of black or white are right, they will have condensed into quality, into feeling."[316] The painter's statement is also interesting in that it recalls the discourse of affects and qualitative intensities triggered by a secret equilibrium of light and darkness achieved with the chromatic precision of an alchemist. In this sense, the affective charge of the figural comes into play, even in the absence of all graphic figure or figuration. The figural void is, as such, non-intelligible and non-signifying, but intensive and dy-namic in its stillness, characterized by an impenetrable depth and thickness that resist and disrupt the language of representation.

It is not my purpose here to rewrite a chronology or to remake an inventory of monochromes as (almost) empty canvases, for that has already been done in several books[317] and exhibitions.[318] Instead, I propose to understand them as empty signifiers endowed with figural force, in the sense advanced by Philippe Dubois and already presented in the first chapter. Monochromes are commonly received with a variety of reactions: they may leave the viewer either puzzled by the silent or strident elegance of the naked picture plane, or caught in the web of the intricate texture of the canvas showing itself through the layer of paint. Other times, of course, the viewer feels tricked or disappointed in his quest for meaning by the material austerity of the monochrome.

Aware of the risk of negative reception – or perhaps eager to highlight it, as Klein was, *pour épater les bourgeois* – the creator of the monochrome refuses not only the figurative illusions of representation, but also denies a hasty and uncom-plicated satisfaction for the viewer, whose expectations are (ideally) recalibrated

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316 Robert Motherwell, quoted in Matt Tierney, *What Lies Between: Void Aesthetics and Postwar Post-Politics* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2015), 86.

317 See Paul Schimmel, ed., *Destroy the Picture*; Iwona Blazwick, ed., *Adventures of the Black Square. Abstract Art and Society 1915–2015* (London: Prestel Verlag, 2015); Lucy R. Lippard, *The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* [1973] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Andrew Spira, *Foreshadowed: Malevich's "Black Square" and Its Precursors* (London: Reaktion Books, 2022).

318 I have already mentioned *The Big Nothing* (ICA Philadelphia, 2004). Other related retrospec-tives: *Nothing Exhibition* (signed by Graham Stevens, 1984), *Nichts* (*Nothings*, Schirn Kunsthalle, 2006), *Cancelled, Erased, and Removed* (New York, 2008), *Vides. Une rétrospective* (Centre Georges Pompidou, Kunsthalle Bern, 2009), *Le Musée qui n'existait pas* (Centre Georges Pompidou, 2010). Individual exhibitions: *Au-delà de signes* (Mathieu Grenier); *May I help you?* (Andrea Fraser); *To-morrow Is Another Fine Day* (A Retrospective) – Rirkrit Tiravanija, 2004–2005; *Il Vuoto/The Void* (Emilio Prini, Rome, 2007); *Air* (Fia Backstrom, MoMA, 2009); *The Work of Art Is Nothing* (Jan Håfström, Galleri Andersson/Sandström, Stockholm, 2015).

and whose attempts at recognition and understanding are sabotaged right at the beginning of a quest for meaning. What the viewer is offered, instead, is pure sensation, together with the affective specter it may resonate with in his own sensibility. According to Dubois's figural logic, the initial reaction of shock is followed by a rupture. In the case of monochromes, one may rightfully wonder how and where this fracture can arise within the (ideal, yet never fully realized) perfect homogeneity of the canvas. To answer this question, I shall return once again to Blanchot, in *Literature and the Original Experience*, via Dora Vallier's interpretation[319] cited subsequently by Thomas McDonough:

> The impersonal artwork appeared, in contrast, precisely because of "a break in the circuit of usage, a gap, an anomaly" that marked it off from the rationalized world of use and significance. It instead was an event taking place "in that anterior region which we cannot designate except under the veil of no," [. . .] "a region where impossibility is no longer deprivation, but affirmation."[320]

In other words, it is futile to look for the gap *inside* the work precisely when the work defines itself as a homogeneous and undifferentiated surface. Instead, the closest one can get to this type of work is to realize that *it is* a fracture, *it is* a difference that allows for the advent of some form of meaning, if only when regarded in the wider context of art history. The constitutive absence of the work then ceases to function in a negative regime and becomes an affirmation that may be celebrated and exhibited as such.

A pictorial exorcism of figuration, the monochrome is the painting's degree zero, the work of an absence subverting and replacing representation through a more discrete play of intensity and affect. There is no exit from and no entry into the canvas; no journey,[321] but as Beckett famously put it in *Texts for Nothing* IV, "what counts is to be in the world, the posture is immaterial."[322] The viewer's blank stare on an undifferentiated surface may be simultaneously "read" in any

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319 Dora Vallier, *Abstract Art*, translated by Jonathan Griffin (New York: The Orion Press, 1970), 138.

320 Tom McDonough, "The Mercurial Monochrome, or the Nihilation of Geometric Abstraction," in Iwona Blazwick, *Adventures of the Black Square*, 249. The Blanchot quotations in the text are taken from Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, translated by Ann Smock (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 222–223.

321 Kenneth White, *La Figure du dehors* (Paris: Grasset, 1982), 23: "*Dans le Bouddhisme, personne ne va nulle part, puisque la 'personne' n'existe pas, et que le monde étant un tout, on ne peut aller 'nulle part'. Il s'agit seulement d'être pleinement au monde, un monde vide de distinctions, un monde blanc. Vivre et voyager aussi c'est suivre le chemin du vide.*"

322 Samuel Beckett, "Texts for Nothing IV," in *Collected Shorter Prose* (London: John Calder, 1984), 84.

way, and in no way at all. The uniform figural void may be a metaphysical state-ment, as Michel de Certeau explains in "L'Extase blanche"[323] or, on the contrary, the lazy work of a *dilettante*. What the empty canvas says about itself could be phrased along the same lines as the iconic Warholian paradox: "I am deeply superficial."

Figures of absence in painting may, however, get even more deeply superficial than that, when they even renounce their painterly surface. Empty frames, for ex-ample, have been around as autonomous works at least since 1883, when Mey-Sonier exposed his *Tableau d'à venir* (*Painting to Come*) at the *Salon des Arts Inco-hérents*.[324] True to the indeterminacy of the future and anticipating in its title Blan-chot's *Book to Come* (*Le Livre à venir*), the frame is a figural void and an empty signifier in the sense that it has not been put on display for itself (a wooden, deco-rative object), but for the emptiness or the perfect transparency it manages to iso-late. This very modern (and quite early) gesture of defiance touches upon the furthermost limits authorized by painting as a medium, pointing to the void behind the image (just as, many decades afterwards, Lucio Fontana's cuts disclosed the in-discernible void beyond the canvas), to the radical logic of "the medium is the mes-sage." In Ernesto Laclau's words:

> As, however, all the means of representation are differential in nature, it is only if the dif-ferential nature of the signifying units is subverted, only if the signifiers empty themselves of their attachment to particular signifieds and assume the role of representing the pure being of the system – or, rather, the system as pure Being – that such a signification is possible.[325]

This provocative gesture of defiance and rejection directed against a tradition of representation or its institutionalized regime of normativity has been repeated many times over in art history, to the point of becoming a cliché in the imaginary of the modern crisis of representation. There is a famous 1911 photograph of *Mona*

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[323] Michel de Certeau, "L'Extase blanche," in *La Faiblesse de croire* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), 315: "*Voir Dieu c'est finalement ne rien voir, c'est ne percevoir aucune chose particulière, c'est participer à une visibilité universelle qui ne comporte plus le découpage de scènes singuliers, multiples, frag-mentaires et mobiles dont sont faites nos perceptions.*"

[324] At the same *Salon*, a generation before Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*, the French humor-ist Alphonse Allais presented a series of monochromes, accompanied with brief descriptive texts that entered a witty dialogue with the indeterminacy of the image. In a sense, these associations denounce the arbitrariness with which signifieds may be attributed to empty signifiers, without chasing away their indeterminacy. Some examples of Allais paintings include *Récolte de la to-mate par des cardinaux apoplectiques au bord de la mer Rouge* (red monochrome, 1884), or *Pre-mière communion de jeunes filles chlorotiques par temps de neige* (white monochrome, 1883).

[325] Laclau, "Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics," 308.

Lisa's absence symbolized by the empty place the painting used to occupy on the wall, after being stolen by Vincenzo Perrugia. Of course, it is not by accident that Hans Belting has chosen this photograph for the front cover of his *Invisible Masterpiece*, considering how the book talks about the masterpiece as the radical absence that grounds and excludes all painting. The Louvre hosted many more artwork absences, yet of lesser popular appeal. Another good example has been recorded in 1942, when Paul Almàsy photographed the empty frames of tens of artworks evacuated from the Louvre to prevent wartime damage from the bombings. The absence of the artworks is then shown to be heavily dependent on geopolitical contingencies and the ethics of world heritage preservation.

A 2018 exhibition curated by Paul Ramirez Jonas at 601Artspace in New York plays creatively with the absence of lost, stolen, or destroyed artworks.[326] Not without reason, the exhibition is called *A Void*, making explicit reference to Perec's novel I have already discussed. Similarly, the Isabella Stuart Gardner Museum in Boston has on display a series of empty frames referring to the 1990 theft in which thirteen extremely valuable works in its collection (by Vermeer, Rembrandt, Degas, Manet, and Flinck) have been stolen and remained unaccounted for to this day. Steven Lubar compiles a more complete visual inventory of exhibited placeholders for displaced artworks in contemporary museal environments.[327] Faced with these creative instrumentations of absence, one hears once more the echoes of Anne Cauquelin's analysis of displacement as a figure of absence. It also recalls Paula Geldenhuys's analysis of missing texts, describing a gradual shift of emphasis from a work's content towards its context and paraphernalia.

Repeating Mey-Sonier's daring gesture, Arnulf Rainer exhibits an empty frame in 1951, under the title of *Empty Painting*. Multiple variations follow, mostly playing with the arrangement of multiple empty frames: Robert Filliou in 1969 (*Untitled*), Roland Sabatier in 1965 (*Ensemble d'oeuvres infinitésimales*, 19 wooden frames), Hans Haacke in 2006 (*For real*), and Jil Weinstock in 2008 (*Green Frame Tableau*). The next step is deconstructing the frame itself, as Christian Eckart does in 1990 his *White Painting no. 617*. Esther Ferrer's *mise en abîme* in *Cadre qui encadre cadre, qui encadre cadre qui encadre cadre, qui encadre rien* (2008), literally "frame framing frame framing frame framing frame framing nothing," is another example.

Allowing his paintings to leave the exhibition space (but really not quite), the Hungarian conceptual artist Endre Tót prints *My Unpainted Canvases*, a volume of

326 Louis Bury, "Vanished Art Recalled and Reinterpreted," *Hyperallergic*, October 27, 2018, https://hyperallergic.com/467148/a-void-601-artspace/, last accessed May 15, 2023.

327 Steven Lubar, *Exhibiting Absence*, December 2, 2018, https://medium.com/@lubar/exhibiting-absence-36c5552613ba, last accessed May 15, 2023.

drawings of empty frames, true *tableaux à venir* in the tradition of Mey-Sonier.[328] The resulting book is created in the conceptual overlapping of empty *livres d'artiste* and empty pictorial frames, both of which have already been discussed above as figures of absence. In 1974, Tót fills some more empty frames with dark grey or dark blue monochromes – this time, copying the shape of frames in several rooms of the National Gallery – and gathers them in a volume called *Night Visit to the National Gallery*.[329]

In 2010, Swedish artist Klara Lidén covered in white paint piles of street posters, thus canceling their visual content while also leaving their messily covered margins to function as some sort of in-painting frame, doubling as a reminder that figurative work is hidden under the paint.

A figural void may enter a conventional picture and present itself simultaneously as a more or less violent interruption in the logic of the image, and as a sign among signs. Anna Parkina's collages in the *On* series (2006) do just that: they disrupt pre-existing figures by inserting interstices of impossible figuration. The empty signifier becomes, thus, a *meta-sign*, in the sense used by Brian Rotman.[330] A figural void may be visually instrumented in multiple other ways. In *Seven Rotations* (1979), Dora Maurer chooses to spin it in a *mise en abîme* that progressively destroys its unity and, therefore, diminishes its figural power. The artist, whose portrait suffers the same treatment as the small white piece of paper signifying nothing, seems to be teaching a true lesson on "how to disarm a void in seven easy steps." Brazilian neo-concretist Hélio Oiticica exhibits his knowledge on disarming voids in his 1958 series *Metaesquema*, where he fragments the monochrome's homogeneity and re-arranges the pieces freely, building rhythms and patterns out of empty signifiers. Oiticica, like Rothko and like Derrida, understands that maintaining a signifying relation to the world, as well as rendering that signifying relation absent, is a question of spacing and liminality:

> Rothko's tracing of an aesthetic space would appear to be free of those ambiguities or impurities that, following Beckett, we have associated with the drawing of art's boundaries. The space of art is no longer a pretext for establishing an expressive relation to occasions external to art. The world is not illuminated or redeemed within those spaces; it is merely absent. Rothko's solution [. . .] is to reenact, within the painting, the tracing of boundaries by which the work marked out its own space before any tracing took place. Or, to put this in slightly different terms, the work's relation to its outside takes place within the work itself.[331]

328 Endre Tót, *My Unpainted Canvases*, Budapest, self-published, 1971.

329 Endre Tót, *Night Visit to the National Gallery* (Devon: Beau Geste Press, 1974).

330 See Chapter 1, note 183.

331 Bersani and Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment*, 99–100.

In the ostentatious absence of mimetic or abstract representation in monochromes and seemingly empty canvases, the relation of the work to its outside is reduced to affect or to concept, sometimes to both. The dissolution (or progressive uniformization) of the pictorial image accompanies the emergence of conceptual art, with the displacement of the artistic object from its traditional, institutionalized spaces to more informal and unregulated liminal sites. Simultaneously, one witnesses the progressive emptying ("impoverishment," to use Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit's term) of the materiality of the signifiers. At times, as it happens in the case of Tom Friedman's entirely empty canvas entitled *1000 Hours of Staring*, the blunt affirmation of this dissolution anticipates and accompanies the gaze of the spectator, questioning the pertinence and the seriousness of re-thinking the limits of the art:

> Friedman's construction of an artwork from the vestiges of a heavily implied creative hiatus is, therefore, as problematic as it is undeniably amusing. While serving to acknowledge (and perhaps even obliquely celebrate) a history of immaterial and non-visible art, Friedman complicates the paradox of fulsome nothingness by seeming to suggest that, with this work at least, there's actually very little to it.[332]

This parody of the uncompromising reduction of the work's materiality touches upon artists' discourses about creative impasses turned into works in their own right, but also on the critical and theoretical attention bestowed upon such works in often vacuous performative perusals of empty signifiers. Friedman's questioning is not only playfully humorous; it is equally provocative in relation to the ethics of contemporary production and/or consumption, inside the art world, as well as outside of it. In his article "Picture Plain – The Emptied Canvas," Mike Brennan provides more examples of the ways in which the empty canvas *topos* is constantly reinvented and reconfigured in contemporary arts. He also situates these occurrences in meaningful contexts.[333]

A separate room in this gallery of framed absences is reserved for the equally impressive, yet figuratively distinct category of photographic representations of absence. An eerie subgenre of this category is concerned with capturing the absence of human subjects.[334] However, since photography is a medium that relies heavily on visible presence, such absences are often rendered visible by the con-

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332 Mike Brennan, "Picture Plain – The Emptied Canvas," *Eloquence of Absence: Omission, Extraction and Invisibility in Contemporary Art*, Modern Edition: http://www.modernedition.com/art-articles/absence-in-art/the-white-art-space.html, last accessed May 15, 2023.

333 Brennan, "Picture Plain – The Emptied Canvas."

334 In his study of the eerie as an aesthetic category, Mark Fisher readily associates this feeling with ruins and other abandoned structures. See Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016), 62.

trast with iconic, densely populated, public places. The father figure of the genre is perhaps Eugène Atget, with his photographic series that documents disappearing Old Paris landmarks from 1900s through the 1920s. To cite a collections manager from the Victoria and Albert Museum, an institution hosting a significant part of these photographs,

> What is striking about these images now is their urban solitude and emptiness. There are hints of life, empty chairs, tire tracks in well-worn dirt roads, even a solid example of a horse's recent departure front and center in one image. These are photographs where we have apparently just missed out on something – some action that has just unfolded. However, if we look a little closer, these empty streets might not be as they first appear. The reason Atget's Paris appears so devoid of people is, in fact, partly down to the photographic method Atget chose throughout his career. Although dry plate technology had allowed photographers to leave the studio, these plates were still quite "slow" (meaning they required longer exposure times to allow enough light to enter the camera to form an image). As a result, unless the people in the scene stood stock-still they would either become blurs, ghostly half-captured outlines, or simply fail to be recognized by the camera as a figure at all.[335]

Examples of urban photographers inspired to various extents by Atget's practice of figurative de-population of the urban space abound all throughout the twentieth century, but here is not the right place to draw the genealogical chart of this particular lineage in the history of photography. However, I cannot not mention a very contemporary example. The advent of worldwide lockdowns in early 2020, at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, has left an indelible trace in the collective visual representations of the metropoles around the globe, via a plethora of photographic projects and video footage depicting from various angles previously unseen sights of deserted metropoles. One of the earliest and most reputed collections of such images has been *The Great Empty*, a series commissioned by *The New York Times* in early and mid-March 2020, as self-isolation and stay-at-home orders spread all over the world.[336] A contagion of deserted urban landscapes inundated social media and newsfeeds. Quarantine politics and the collective affective trauma engendered by the fear of contamination have quickly, albeit temporarily, changed urban photography, bringing to the fore a previously unexplored quality of figura-

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335 Dan Cox, "The Empty Streets and Parks of Eugène Atget." Victoria and Albert Museum blog post. April 17, 2020. https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/museum-life/the-empty-streets-and-parks-of-eugene-atget%E2%80%8B, last accessed May 15, 2023.

336 Published by *The New York Times* on March 23, 2020, with an introduction by Michael Kimmelman. Available online at https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/03/23/world/coronavirus-great-empty.html, last accessed May 15, 2023.

tive absence in photography: it can become viral. This quality is swiftly addressed by Michael Kimmelman, in his introduction to the project:

> Cafes along the Navigli in Milan hunker behind shutters along with the Milanese who used to sip aperos beside the canal. Times Square is a ghost town, as are the City of London and the Place de la Concorde in Paris during what used to be the morning rush. The photographs here all tell a similar story: a temple in Indonesia; Haneda Airport in Tokyo; the Americana Diner in New Jersey. Emptiness proliferates like the virus.[337]

These photographic signifiers of emptiness are also the symbolic site for complex paradoxes and contradictory affects that lend them an ethereal, spectral aura. As the same Michael Kimmelman, architecture critic, notes about these real and symbolic places,

> Their present emptiness, a public health necessity, can conjure up dystopia, not progress, but, promisingly, it also suggests that, by heeding the experts and staying apart, we have not yet lost the capacity to come together for the common good. Covid-19 doesn't vote along party lines, after all. These images are haunted and haunting, like stills from movies about plagues and the apocalypse, but in some ways they are hopeful. I don't mean that buildings and fairgrounds and railway stations and temples can't look eerily beautiful empty. Some of these sites, like many of these photographs, are works of art. I mean that empty buildings, squares and beaches are what art history textbooks, boutique hotel advertisements and glossy shelter and travel magazines tend to traffic in. Their emptiness trumpets an existence mostly divorced from human habitation and the messy thrum of daily life. They imagine an experience more akin to the wonder of bygone explorers coming upon the remains of a lost civilization. They evoke the romance of ruins.[338]

Every now and then, human figures do appear in these images, although they are always masked and are shot from a considerable distance. The overall impression triggered by such photographs is that the frame includes humans not in order to refer to their actual presence, but rather to convey the massive scale of the desertion and thus to amplify the shattering absence that surrounds these anonymous figures in what the viewer was used to see as notoriously crowded places. The absence of almost all facial features, well hidden behind the ominous cloth mask, adds more subtly to the disquieting effect of these images. This visual trope is bound to leave lasting traces in the global imagery of portraiture in the twenty-first century. The presence of a masked human figure carries within itself a re-

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337 Michael Kimmelman, "Introduction," *The Great Empty – Photographs by The New York Times*, March 23, 2020. Available at https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/03/23/world/corona virus-great-empty.html, last accessed May 15, 2023.
338 Kimmelman, *The Great Empty*.

minder of the absence of the (already physically distanced) other. It may function as a metonym for a revived figure of absence: the deserted *agora.*

Obliterating the distinction between painting and photography, Hans Belting notes that "the presence of an absence is both an inherent feature and a founding paradox of any image."[339] He introduces the concept of an *iconic presence* to describe how, regardless of their medium, images have the power to "maintain a body's absence and turn it into what must be called *visible absence*," while also addressing the underexplored performative dimension of images in relation to their own mediality and visibility. According to Belting, the iconic presence is inextricably tied to the performativity of a referential absence: "images *are* present in their media, but they *perform* an absence, which they make visible."[340] Although their iconic presence is reduced to a bare minimum, the figures of radical absence are not devoid of this performative potential – on the contrary.

2.3 Figures of Absence in Curatorial Practice

In 1958, the year of Yves Klein's exhibition of invisible "stabilized pictorial sensibility in a pure state," Klein's fellow artist Robert Barry "filled" an otherwise empty gallery with radio waves. The resulting exhibition was titled, in rather opaque technical jargon, *88mc Carrier Wave (FM)* and remains a landmark in the history of conceptual art. In 1969, Barry did more or less the same thing by filling the gallery's white cube with radiation (*0.5 Microcurie Radiation Installation*). The resulting work was, needless to say, just as invisible and imperceptible as the first. Two years prior, following the *Art & Language* group's belief that the work of art is not determined by its materiality or visibility, but by its ability to be thought, Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin had set up *The Air-Conditioning Show* at the Visual Arts Gallery in New York. The show consisted, as the title suggests, in the barely perceptible flow of air in an otherwise empty gallery.

These three curatorial spaces were not, however, rigorously empty – there were still artificially-modified quantities of air, sound waves, and radiation inside. Despite being repositories of such fraught absences, especially when confronted with the expectations of the average gallery visitor, the above-mentioned galleries were far from perfect vacuums. Then, how (im)permeable is the emptiness of an empty gallery? What are the material and perceptive limits of isolating

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339 Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, translated by Thomas Dunlap (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2011 [2001]), 6.
340 Hans Belting, "Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology." *Critical Inquiry* 31 (Winter 2005): 312–313.

and exhibiting the most radical possible absence within the confines of an art gallery or a museum room?

In 1993, Bethan Huws inaugurates her *Haus Ester Piece*, an exhibition showing the empty Haus Ester Museum in Krefeld. It is worth mentioning that the museum was built by Mies van der Rohe near his other creation, Haus Lange, which hosts a white empty room exhibited as such by Yves Klein back in the 1950s. Huws's artwork started from the belief that any addition to van der Rohe's perfect structure would have ruined it, and so, just like Melville's Bartleby, the Scrivener,[341] she "preferred not to" engage in any alteration of the space. But where is the line, then, that differentiates Huws's work from van der Rohe's? How far can this gesture of complete authorial abdication go and still remain valid? The traditional ethics of authorship and the more or less institutionalized codes of conduct related to intellectual rights are contested and questioned (with debatable efficiency) by radical appropriations such as Huws's.

After the progressive emptying of the canvas and the dematerialization of the work of art,[342] the exhibition space itself becomes an empty signifier with the advent of conceptual art. Perhaps this had already happened, a little earlier, with Yves Klein's anticipation of the huge artistic potential of the figures of absence. Empty galleries and museums are, however, much less a matter of absence than an instrument able to render visible the codes and conventions ruling the presentation of the artworks. The fact has become obvious during the auctioning of the Italian artist Salvatore Garau's "invisible sculpture" in May 2021. The auction house *Art Rite* transformed the debate around this artwork "made of nothing" into a media event that focused, for lack of a visible object, on the material conditions determining its fragile reality: the buyer received a certificate of authenticity attesting the work's existence. Moreover, ownership came with very specific spatial requirements, including the condition that the invisible work be exhibited in a private house, in a roughly 5-by-5 floor space unoccupied by anything else.[343]

An empty exhibition space denies its very "exhibitionality" and refuses the instrumental logic that characterized it as a functional site. Now an "a-functional" space, the empty gallery is no longer a place for art, but validates itself *as an artwork in its own right*. In a certain sense, as Mathieu Copeland argues, an empty

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341 Herman Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener. A Story of Wall-Street* [1853], Harper Collins E-books, 2009.

342 Lippard, *The Dematerialization of the Art Object*.

343 Taylor Dafoe, "An Italian Artist Auctioned Off an 'Invisible Sculpture' for $18,300. It's Made Literally of Nothing," *Artnet News*, June 3, 2021, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/italian-artist-auctioned-off-invisible-sculpture-18300-literally-made-nothing-1976181, last accessed May 15, 2023.

exhibition is the most honest thing an artist can do.[344] Therefore, it can stand autonomously as an intentional piece of creative work itself, and not simply as a space dedicated to host, more or less temporarily, other works. By Copeland's logic, Swiss artist Urs Fischer was decidedly more than honest when he did more than simply emptying Gavin Brown's Enterprise Gallery in Chelsea. He went further and proceeded to jackhammer an eight-foot-deep crater into the floor. The resulting installation, called *You* (2007), is yet another playful engagement with the limits of absence. By sculpting straight into the facets of *the white cube*, Fischer's work challenges the standards of invisibility and neutrality that usually define it as the ideal exhibition space. With a less radical gesture, artist Maria Eichhorn exhibited tautological works such as *White Room with a View from a Window* (1990) and *Wall Without an Image* (1991) – the titles are self-explanatory enough to require no further description.

In 1969, American artist Robert Smithson drew the sketch of a *Museum of the Void*. While empty galleries were still fashionably new, he materialized the fantasy of a museum of the ultimate, absolute void, even if he only did so in pencil on paper. According to the author, such an architectural piece was needed because any other museum is a museum of multiple voids, anyway:

> Visiting a museum is a matter of going from void to void. Hallways lead the viewer to things once called "pictures" and "statues." Anachronisms hang and protrude from every angle. Themes without meaning press on the eye. Multifarious nothings permute into false windows (frames) that open up into a variety of blanks. Stale images cancel one's perception and deviate one's motivation. Blind and senseless, one continues wandering around the remains of Europe, only to end in that massive deception, "the art history of the recent past." Brain drain leads to eye drain, as one's sight defines emptiness by blankness. Sightings fall like heavy objects from one's eyes. Sight becomes devoid of sense, or the sight is there, but the sense is unavailable. Many try to hide this perceptual falling out by calling it abstract. Abstraction is everybody's zero but nobody's nought. Museums are tombs, and it looks like everything is turning into a museum. Painting, sculpture, and architecture are finished, but the art habit continues. Art settles into a stupendous inertia. Silence supplies the dominant chord. Bright colors conceal the abyss that holds the museum together. Every solid is a bit of clogged air or space. Things flatten and fade. The museum spreads its surfaces everywhere and becomes an untitled collection of generalizations that mobilize the eye.[345]

Contextualized as such, Smithson's simple drawing becomes a sample of devastating institutional critique against the Western reification of the artworks by means of their introduction in ever-larger collections that hypocritically celebrate art

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344 Copeland, *Vides*, 130.

345 Jack Flam, ed., *Robert Smithson: The Collected Works* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 42.

while actually burying and framing it as piles of obsolete objects that bear no relation to the present and only belong to the past.

Exhibiting nothing is not a simple task, yet in the second half of the twentieth century it has been undertaken multiple times, with increasing conceptual complexity that went hand in hand with material scarcity. On the occasion of such events, invitations are sent, manifestos are published,[346] posters and articles warn the public that nothing will be going on at a designated place and at a specific time.[347] For his 1958 empty exhibition in Paris, Yves Klein had sent invitations written in Braille, claiming that if the visitors cannot see anything inside the gallery, this was only because they were blind. Boris Lurie and Sam Goodman advertised their exhibition called *No Art* promising that this exhibition will "show everything." It never opened. At times, all the material proof of the curatorial "artwork" created in this way is a sign on the gallery's door, reading "During the exhibition, the gallery will be closed" (Robert Barry, 1969). Just like the disappearance of the missing text gave room and spotlight to the paratext, so the conceptual artwork moves from inside the exhibition space toward its peripheral elements. This movement of displacement is, according to Anne Cauquelin, a figure of the void in itself. Sometimes, the displacement and the material reduction are so radical that the artwork's only physical existence is on museal paraphernalia (invitations, information tags, banners, flyers, catalogs) and on merchandise sold in the museum's gift shop.

An empty exhibition is at once a claustrophobic and infinite space. For this reason, it becomes exposed to the same risk of falling into cheap derision as the monochromes do:

> What makes sense in an empty gallery is precisely what doesn't make sense anywhere else. And mainly for the same reason, this theory does not provide any means to escape from the limits of "artistic freedom" which guarantee the possibility of a critique while also allowing for a compromise; instead, it abolishes the value of art as a function of individuality, by reducing all radical stance to what Adorno called "a clown's act."[348]

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346 Piero Manzoni, *Manifesto Against Nothing for the International Exhibition of Nothing*, Basel, 1960.

347 *The Air Conditioning Show* also began as a text and drawing circulating in the art world of New York. In 1967 Robert Smithson decided to publish it in the reputed *Arts Magazine* in the November issue, which enabled its reopening many times since.

348 Pavel Buchler, "Où rien prend un sens," in *Vides. Une rétrospective*, 455: "*Ce qui fait sens dans une galerie vide est précisément ce qui ne fait pas sens partout ailleurs. Et largement pour la même raison, cette théorie ne fournit aucun moyen d'échapper aux limites de la 'liberté artistique' qui garantit la possibilité d'une critique tout en assurant un compromis, pas plus qu'elle n'abolit l'estimation de la valeur de l'art comme fonction de l'individualité, réduisant toute prise de position radicale à ce qu'Adorno appelait 'un acte de clown.'*" The English translation is mine.

There are several possible explanations that motivate the proliferation of such "clown's acts" in the seven decades that followed Klein's inaugural gesture of opening an empty exhibition. This particular lineage of curatorial figures of absence, however, has no unique justification that can apply to all empty exhibitions to the same extent. They are individual responses to complex configurations of historical and sociological circumstances, among which one may count the terrifying experiences of the Second World War, describable only in privative terms: unspeakable trauma, unrepresentable violence, arbitrary destruction, ontological absurdity, a sense of meaninglessness. Not only the cruelty of the battlefields, but also the monstrosity of the Holocaust and the unprecedented destruction caused by the atomic bomb have certainly played a role in bringing about a radical crisis of figuration and representation. Deeply embedded in the collective unconscious, such a large-scale crisis could not have escaped the grasp of the writers and the artists of the following decades. Ihab Hassan reflected in 1967 on the prominent role played by silence in the literary production of the time, a mode of expression developed as "a judgment on ourselves in a time of outrage and apocalypse."[349]

To this traumatized collective affectivity I would add the immediate threat of a nuclear attack looming over the entire world during the Cold War. Characterized by an escalating spiral of retaliation policies designed by the two poles of power to cancel each other out, the symbolic standstill brought about by a mostly frozen conflict did not offer much room for figurative variation in the artistic expression of the time. Instead, it rather favored the opacity of monochrome blocks and other figures of absence responding to the bleak prospects of a post-apocalyptic, depopulated world. The general trend of the dematerialization of the work of art, as observed and explained by Lucy Lippard, is contemporary with these largescale historical phenomena and might be a symptom thereof. However, it would be reductive to motivate the emergence of these complex and unprecedented figures of absence (so dependent on particular and individual circumstances of their creation) solely through the geopolitics of the time. What I suggest instead is that a certain *Zeitgeist* characterizing this historical period created a mimetically infertile ground and loud-enough premises of irrepresentability that have perhaps very subtly found an echo and an impossible resolution in the figures of absence that concern us here. What is certain is that the social and historical climate shared with its contemporary forms of artistic expression a certain sense of futility, meaninglessness, arbitrary destruction, bitter irony, and mutual cancellation of contraries – an atmosphere compatible with blank stares into the void of an empty canvas or an empty room. Ihab Hasan described the phenomenon with respect to the literature of the time: "the force of

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349 Ihab Hassan, *The Literature of Silence*, xi.

evasion, or absence, in the new literature is radical, indeed; it strikes at the roots and induces, metaphorically, a great silence. But the same force, moving up to the trunk and foliage, bursts into a great babel of noises. The most audible of these is the cry of outrage, the voice of apocalypse."[350] His observation applies just as well to the Western postwar art scene.

Speaking of curatorial *gestures* or of a corresponding *act* in this context points toward the performative dimension of empty signifiers – an important dimension in both empty galleries and museums filled with various intermedial forms of voids and absences. Such curatorial forms of empty signifiers are not fixed, stable structures, but events that take place inside a system and create non-conventional experiences for the public which they either *confront* in a rebellious rhetoric or, on the contrary, *side with*, in order to denounce the old-fashioned conventions of the exhibition space and to engage in institutional critique. Despite its static appearance, the curatorial usage of empty signifiers implies a fold, a self-reflexive gesture, a working of the system (of public art) upon itself.

2.4 Figures of Absence in Performative Arts

> Silence, yes, but what silence! For it is all very fine to keep silence,
> but one has also to consider the kind of silence one keeps.
> (Samuel Beckett)

> The notes I handle no better than many pianists. But the pauses between the notes
> – ah, that is where the art resides.
> (Artur Schabel)

As early as 1897, the French humorist Alphonse Allais, already introduced in this book as a monochrome painter *avant la lettre* at the *Salon des Arts Incohérents*, seemed preoccupied with the functioning of empty signifiers in multiple media, not just in visual arts. He wrote the (empty) musical score for a *Funeral March for the Obsequies of a Deaf Man*.[351] No note was ever played in rendering the piece, making the audience just as "deaf" as the public of Yves Klein's empty exhibition was "blind." As a matter of fact, in 1949, Yves Klein himself wrote the score for the *Monotone Symphony*, a musical composition consisting of a single note – perhaps an accurate acoustic equivalent for a monochrome painting. Instructions for

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350 Ihab Hassan, *The Literature of Silence*, 4.
351 Original title: *Marche funèbre composée pour les funérailles d'un grand homme sourd*. Available on Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LCOMrTyorkc, last accessed May 15, 2023.

the orchestra were likewise brief: "Hold each note for as long as you feel comfortable. Move to the next note in your own time. Ignore everybody else." Klein himself conducted the symphony in 1960, in Paris, in front of a crowd of 100 people dressed in black tie attire for the occasion. It is interesting that he describes this symphony in terms of withdrawal from the order of time and the absence of a beginning and an end:

> During this period of concentration, I created, around 1947–1948, a monotone symphony whose theme expresses what I wished my life to be. This symphony of forty minutes duration (although that is of no importance, as one will see) consisted of one unique continuous sound, drawn out and deprived of its beginning and of its end, creating a feeling of vertigo and of aspiration outside of time. Thus even in its presence, this symphony does not exist. It exists outside of the phenomenology of time because it is neither born nor will it die, after existence. However, in the world of our possibilities of conscious perception, it is silence – audible presence.[352]

Between the writing and the performance of the *Monotone Symphony*, however, a huge earthquake shook the history of music: John Cage's score for *4′33″* (originally named *Silent Prayer*) was written in 1952. It did not contain a single musical note, but it had very precisely marked durations for all the three parts it contained. The fact that it was written in the same year in which Robert Rauschenberg created his *White Paintings* is not an accident, but a deliberate and direct response to a provocative gesture. Prior to the composition of *4′33″*, Cage says in an interview, he always believed "there should be a piece that had no sound in it, but I hadn't yet written it, and the thing that gave me the courage to do it finally was seeing the quite empty paintings of Bob Rauschenberg to which I responded immediately, [. . .] mirrors of the air, [. . .] airports for the light, shadows, and particles. [. . .] The white paintings caught whatever fell on them."[353] Cage and Rauschenberg both attended Black Mountain College in 1948 (however, they have been formally introduced to one another only three years later) and they both had been influenced by Zen Buddhist thought via the writings of D. T. Suzuki.[354] Yves Klein himself was initiated in Buddhist philosophy.

Susan Sontag rightfully noticed in her essay "The Aesthetics of Silence" that John Cage was the first to understand that absolute silence doesn't exist:

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352 Yves Klein, excerpt from "Overcoming the Problematics of Art" [1959], in *Overcoming the Problematics of Art: The Writings of Yves Klein*, translated by Klaus Ottmann, New York: Spring Publications, 2007, cited in https://www.yvesklein.com/en/ressources/#/en/ressources/view/artwork/650/score-for-symphonie-monoton-silence-monotone-silence-symphony, last accessed May 15, 2023.

353 John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), 98–107.

354 Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*.

> A genuine emptiness, a pure silence, are not feasible – either conceptually or in fact. If only because the artwork exists in a world furnished with many other things, the artist who creates silence or emptiness must produce something dialectical: a full void, an enriching emptiness, a resonating or eloquent silence. Silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech (in many instances, of complaint or indictment) and an element in a dialogue.[355]

In other words, as already shown for other media, the acoustic empty signifier remains a part of its system of signification. Sontag's observation equally brings to mind Tom Johnson's musical compositions marked by long intervals of silence: *Long Decays* (for piano) and *Organ and Silence*.[356] In music as we know it, silences longer than three seconds are very rare. In Johnson's pieces, the absence of sound gains resonance and texture. It takes on the consistency of a substance and the singularity of an event. Paul Hillier noted in his review of an early Arvo Pärt piece that silence is the constitutive absence that is at once the origin and the end of all music. However, in its ideal form, it remains an imaginary state of unachievable perfection, beyond human capacities of perception and mundane possibilities of realizing it without the faintest noise:

> All music emerges from silence, to which sooner or later it must return. At its simplest we may conceive of music as the relationship between sounds and the silence that surrounds them. Yet silence is an imaginary state in which all sounds are absent, akin perhaps to the infinity of time and space that surrounds us. We cannot even hear utter silence, nor can we fully conceive of infinity and eternity.[357]

A more elaborate analysis of empty notation scores, blank records, and silent music has been conducted by Craig Dworkin in the two final chapters of his 2015 *No Medium*.[358] Also meditating on the relationship that silence maintains to music, Meghan Vicks describes it as a necessary fiction that renders the world audible, but also meaningful and comprehensible:

> Silence's relationship to music is very much like zero's relationship to mathematics, nothing's relationship to being, and nothing's relationship to narrative. Silence, zero, and nothing are each an impossible or imaginary state, yet each is necessary to the condition and conditioning of a meaning-making system, be that music, numbers, being, or narrative. Silence, like zero and the nothing it signifies, is a fiction of an original and absolute blankness – a fiction that renders possible, comprehensible, and meaningful the world.[359]

355 Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence," in *Styles of Radical Will* [1969] (New York: Picador, 2002), 15.

356 David Toop, "De biais, par ruse, vers le silence . . .," in *Vides. Une rétrospective*, 420.

357 Paul Hillier, "Arvo Pärt: Magister Ludi," *The Musical Times* 130, no. 1753 (March 1989): 134.

358 Craig Dworkin, *No Medium* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

359 Vicks, *Narratives of Nothing*, 11.

Noticeably, Vicks repeats here Kandinsky's intuition from *Point and Line to Plane*: acoustic silence is conceptually related to the mathematical zero.[360]

Dance and theater are other performative arts that, like music, rely heavily on effects of presence and intensity. Their possibilities for figuring absence come from a double usage of the body: as a material presence on stage, but also as the site and medium of figuration. The performer's body is both figured matter and figural force.

In *Aesthetics of Absence. Texts on Theatre*, the German composer and director Heiner Goebbels makes an inventory of strategies through which absence may be "embodied" on stage.[361] The first and most obvious one is the disappearance of the actor/dancer/performer from the center of attention or from the stage altogether, followed by the refusal of any dramatic action and the abandonment of dramatic expressivity. Another strategy is fragmentation, understood as a division of presence among all elements involved. Not only is the fragment itself a marker of absence, as we have already seen when reading Jean-Pierre Mourey, but fragmentation also creates a polyphony that disperses the center and displaces the subject, therefore de-stabilizing the unified presence of meaning. In the absence of a unified flow, the attention of the viewer is shifted towards the separate "voices" that make themselves perceptible in the *mise-en-scène*: the lightning effect, the text of the script, the sounds, the costumes, and so on. These voices may begin to cancel each other out, or cover one another. The absence of a central visual focus solidifies the rest of the stage in an undifferentiated background. Furthermore, an overabundance of signifieds leads to the emptying of the signifier. Above a certain threshold of saturation and complexity, the figural unfigures.

This fragmentation of spectatorial attention may also be accompanied by a de-synchronization, emphasizing the separation of the actor's voices from their bodies and the musicians' sounds from their instruments. Other theatrical figure of absence is, according to Goebbels, "the creation of spaces-between, spaces of discovery."[362] Displacement shifts presence to absence, while being precisely what allows for movement and play.

Last but not least, as in other arts, perceived absence is the result of unfulfilled expectations. Dismantling assumptions, cheating on spectatorial anticipation and defying conventions taken for granted on stage are all strategies to enhance the figural's effect of estrangement, its distancing and, ultimately, its ab-

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360 Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*, 18.

361 Goebbels, *Aesthetics of Absence*, 3–5.

362 Goebbels, *Aesthetics of Absence*, 4.

sence. Let us take, for example, the case of *This Performance* by David Weber-Krebs, presented at the *Plateaux* festival in Frankfurt am Main in 2004. The show takes place in a space without any decor and for the first 20 minutes the stage remains empty, leaving the public to its own devices and defying expectations that anything might eventually be performed. There is a mechanical sound and, every now and then, water can be heard dripping from the ceiling. At a certain point, a voice in the loudspeakers announces what remains unseen. The self-referentiality objectifies the presence of the play and, through this effect of estrangement, makes it consubstantial with its own absence:

> This performance is about to start.
> This performance is about to tell a story.
> This performance is about to make statements.
> This performance is about to have an introduction.
> This performance is about to activate a process.
> This performance is about to give a message.
> This performance is about to have a discourse.
> This performance is about to catch attention.
> This performance is about to try something out.
> This performance is about to establish a code.
> This performance is about to create a context.
> This performance is about to raise expectations.
> This performance is about to ask questions.
> [. . .] This performance is about to evolve gradually towards more autonomy.
> [. . .] This performance is about to get faster.
> [. . .] This performance is about to communicate.
> This performance is about to fail.
> This performance is about to be reduced to nothing.
> This performance is about to fade out.
> This performance is about to end.[363]

Briefly put, the visual presence is canceled and gives way to the presence of sound. But the sound, too, is displaced by referring to itself and to its own performativity: to its own sequentiality in the unfolding of a beginning, a development, and an end. Suddenly, an actress enters the stage, responding to the audience's thirst for visuality, but only to abandon it shortly after. The spectators' expectations are once again defied by the overwhelming absence of what they were anticipating. The performance further dissolves its consistency by referring directly to the effects/affects it wants to create for the viewer, shortcutting the cause-effect chain of determinations. Then again, using only affirmative sentences, it vanishes gradually into noth-

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363 Goebbels, *Aesthetics of Absence*, 40.

ingness and proclaims its failure. The mechanistic nature of the repetition also speaks of the void and reinforces a radical absence.

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida deconstructs the uncanny presence of on-stage absences, interpreting them as reversed performances from the part of the spectators. Therefore, the (literally) staged absence operates a switch of roles between the actor and the spectator, between the object and the subject of sight. This inversion leads to many others:

> But what is a stage which presents nothing to the sight? It is the place where the spectator, presenting himself as spectacle, will no longer be either seer [*voyant*] or *voyeur*, will efface within himself the difference between the actor and the spectator, the represented and the representer, the object seen and the seeing subject. With that difference, an entire series of oppositions will deconstitute themselves one by one. Presence will be full, not as an object which is present to be seen, to give itself to intuition as an empirical unit or as an *eidos* holding itself in front of or up against; it will be full as the intimacy of a self-presence, as the consciousness or the sentiment of self-proximity, of self-sameness.[364]

According to Derrida and Goebbels, the absence of the actor and of a minimal action taking place on stage has the paradoxical effect of adding a supplement of presence to the self-awareness of the spectator *qua* spectator. Therefore, as the materiality of the spectacle is meaningfully impoverished, the play moves from the stage to the inner regions of the spectator's subjectivity, forced to perceive nothing but his own spectatorship.

Another, more recent example confirms the performative dimension of empty signifiers as *acts*. In the context of the unexpected and mandatory event cancellations occasioned by the Covid-19 pandemic, Hana Třeštíková, a Prague City councilor, worked together with a ticketing company to organize nothing less than an entire *Festival of Nothing* by the name of *NIC 2020* to support artists and workers related to the art scene whose revenues have been cut short because of the social-distancing restrictions. The event explicitly acknowledges their impossibility to work, with a twist: it turns this lack of performative and curatorial content into an artistic performance in its own right, claiming financial compensations within the standard, pre-pandemic conventions of online ticketing, including everything up to seating arrangements for an event drawing attention to the lockdown-mandated lack of artistic events. Here is the official description of the festival:

> Artists all across the Czech Republic are forced to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic each and every day. Many of them are doing their best to help their communities even though their own income is currently second to none: theaters and galleries are closed, concerts canceled and living off of their online activities cannot grant them survival. We are facing a

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364 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 306.

very real danger that some institutions might simply be wiped off the cultural map. There is, however, a way to support them directly – Hana Třeštíková, a producer and Prague City Councillor has joined forces with GoOut to create the *NIC 2020* (*Nothing 2020*) project.

[. . .] *NIC 2020 is a festival that doesn't exist. Cultural institutions cannot offer you real experience due to the state of emergency but you can show them your support nonetheless – by buying a ticket for nothing.* The symbolic event will take place on the 1st of May, the Czech Day of Love, in collaboration with various cultural organizations across the country.

How does it work? As usual: Choose the event that you want to "attend" in your favorite venue's program. Pick your seat in the booking system (first row, stalls, balcony – as you wish, the better the seat the bigger your donation for your favorite artists). Your ticket is valid for one seat in the venue – the capacity is unlimited so that everyone can join.

From the 1st of April we will be adding new venues and events from across the Czech Republic. We will ask them to join our campaign, but they can also apply themselves – any cultural institution interested in selling tickets for nothing can join. The presale will be on for a whole month, until the 1st of May when we will count all sold tickets and donate the income to the said institutions.

Once the world is back to normal, we will be sure that our favorite theaters, clubs, venues, galleries, cultural hotspots, concert halls and other islands of cultural freedom will be able to continue to do what they can do best: broaden our horizons, bring us joy and most of all, provide us with unforgettable experiences.[365]

"Nic" is the Czech word for "nothing." The simplicity of the name of the festival reveals the straightforward concept behind its creation. Merely using the placeholder "Festival of Nothing" instead of the names of all the scheduled festivals, concerts, and happenings that had to be cancelled starting March 2020 is a rhetoric gesture that challenges the capitalist logic of production and retribution in the art sector, in which the general public expects to receive content in exchange for the price of a ticket. The very absence of that content makes room for a less quantifiable form of value, and it is precisely this unexpected displacement (together, of course, with the infinite seating capacity, and the tongue-in-cheek flavor of Czech humor) that makes this non-event so appealing. Buying a ticket for nothing is more than a disinterested financial transaction: it becomes, in the context of this initiative, a signifier of empathy and solidarity with the severely hit festival industry and with the art scene at large. As I am writing these lines, I am unaware whether this type of event has been replicated since, or outside the borders of the Czech

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365 Description cited from the official ticketing page of the event: https://goout.net/en/festivals/festival-of-nothing-2020/jrapf/+aptiq/, last accessed May 15, 2023. Emphasis mine. I am grateful for this reference to Paula Erizanu, who signalled this event in her April 7, 2020 article in *The Calvert Journal*: https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/11729/nothing-festival-2020-non-existent-art-shows-helping-czech-culture-scene-in-quarantine, last accessed May 15, 2023.

Republic. Although the idea of this festival is indeed very similar to the more wide-spread model of crowdfunding and other donation strategies, I believe it is worth noticing how the unusual historical circumstances have led to a new form of performative absence: one that boldly acknowledges absence while also replicating, down to the most mundane details (VIP and balcony seats, online payment protocols, e-mailed .pdf tickets), all the material and digital signifiers that usually accompany such events. At the same time, *NIC 2020* is unprecedented in celebrating and bringing into the spotlight not only the artists themselves, but the entire auxiliary staff (from sound engineers to stagehands, gallery custodians, and other workers across the art sector) that are essential to the performativity of artistic events and have been indiscriminately impacted by the lockdown. The very lack of content and the absent eventfulness of the festival, therefore, exposed the until then invisible conditions of its production. Absence is once again instrumented in a performative manner to denounce the conventions of the medium in which it becomes manifest.

2.5 Figures of Absence in Experimental Cinema

> The work of art is nothing [. . .]
> It is the perforation of the medium –
> A hole in the facts.
> (Pamela Rosenkrantz)[366]

We explored so far how various figures of radical absence can be written, seen, framed, heard, or even performed. Given that film is a hybrid medium combining text, image, sound, and play, it had only been a matter of time until absence became instrumentalized on the film roll and the projection screen. The first cinematic experience confronting the viewer with empty frames must have been one of the Lumière brothers' failed projection experiments. The first one that was intentional and not a technical mishap, however, was – to the best of my knowledge – *Traité de bave et d'éternité*[367] (*On Venom and Eternity*), a self-proclaimed "treatise" directed by the Romanian-born French poet and visual artist Isidore Isou. The film warns its audience from the very beginning, in a written message, that it is about to hear a series of poems along with the nonsignifying projection

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366 Cited in *Vides. Une rétrospective*, edited by John Armleder, 525.
367 *Traité de bave et d'éternité* (*On Venom and Eternity*), Isidor Isou (dir.), 120′, with Isidore Isou, Jean-Louis Barrault, Blanchette Brunoy, Blaise Cendrards, Jean Cocteau, André Maurois et al., Films M.-G. Guillemin, France, 1951.

of bleached and scratched film, when there is anything showing at all, and the screen is not completely black: "The lettrist poems you're about to hear signify nothing and have no meaning." Even if the soundtrack and the images are purposefully unrelated,[368] the same warning may equally apply to the film's enchainment of nonsignifying images.

Soon, Isou's daring gesture was followed by another lettrist movie, Gil Wolman's 1952 *L'Anticoncept*.[369] Unlike *Traité . . .*, Wolman's film consisted of no other images but a blank illumination on a weather balloon, with a *staccato* voiceover. The film was banned by the political censorship of the time and, as a direct response to this decision, Guy Debord – 23 years old at the time and a close friend of Isou's and Wolman's – released another film, *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*,[370] as a sign of protest and outward confrontation. Debord's 64-minute creation is an alternation of white screen sequences (when a voice-off is heard) and black screen ones (when the sound goes quiet). The last sequence of the movie is black, and its dark silence lasts for 24 minutes – about as much as the introductory sequence to David Weber-Krebs's *This Performance*.[371] Despite the anachronism of the comparison and the different media (theater and cinema), the two experiences are strikingly similar. The screen is monochrome throughout the movie, challenging the cinematic nature of this "moving image," and raising an important question: which screen is emptier, a black screen or a white screen? Which one is more silent? It is not a spectacle of absence and rejection, but a rejection and an absence of all spectacle, consistent with the Situationist principles formulated by Debord several years later. The matter is further complicated by the fact that film is a medium which allows for the simultaneity of at least two kinds of absence: the absence of image and the absence of sound.

The Brazilian conceptual artist David Lamelas takes this two-step cancellation of the medium further within the medium itself in his 1967 installation work *Limit of a Projection I*,[372] consisting of as little as a lit projector with no film roll charged at all. Insofar as Lamelas's conceptual work may still be considered a cinematic signifier (with the same indulgence with which we took Mey-Sonier's empty frame for a painting at all), it could not get any emptier.

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368 Confirming, this time for film, Heiner Goebbels's thesis about the de-synchronization of sight and sound as a figure of absence in theater.

369 *L'Anticoncept* (*The Anti-Concept*), Gil J. Wolman (dir., writer, voice-off), 61′, France, 1952.

370 *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (*Howlings for Sade*), Guy Debord (dir.), with Serge Berna, Isidore Isou, Gil J. Wolman, Barbara Rosenthal, 64′, Films Lettristes, France, 1952.

371 Goebbels, *Aesthetics of Absence*, 40.

372 *Limit of a Projection I*, David Lamelas, theater spotlight in a darkened room, 1967.

In her most radical cinematic experiment, *L'Homme Atlantique/The Atlantic Man*,[373] Marguerite Duras floods the screen with 45 minutes of complete darkness, de-territorializing the film through a blunt switch from the realm of the visible to the one of the audible. A soft-spoken, slow-paced feminine voice-off articulates a soliloquy addressed to an absence in a deliberately imperfect repetition, resembling the ceaseless movement of oceanic waves. Textual details are added to intensify the lack of sight of this Atlantic object (the object of her desire), challenging the belief that cinematic pleasure is mainly of visual nature. In the first half of the chapter dedicated to anthropomorphic figures of absence, the reader will find a more extensive analysis of Duras's film (and the eponymous book) interpreted as a modern retake on Dibutade's myth on the origin of painting.

In 1981, the same year in which *The Atlantic Man* was released, Guy Debord launches his other significant cinematic engagement with empty film frames – *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consomimur Igni*.[374] Made in 1978, it would be his last movie: as bitter as *Hurlements*, but less radical in figuring absence and violent negation.

The color of the nothing-to-see changes for the cinephiles in 1993 from black and/or white to blue. More precisely, to the International Yves Klein blue (IKB 171959) used by the French artist to evoke the void and the zones of immateriality in his work. Film director Derek Jarman lets this color take over the entire screen in a single static shot, devoid of imagery, for the entire 77 minutes of his movie *Blue*.[375] A dark, oversaturated blue screen creates the illusion of blindness and enters a permanent dialogue of frustration with the voiceover, which keeps referring to vision, visual phenomena, and a rich urban imagery. The result is a performative and autobiographical statement, partly poetic, partly diaristic – Jarman himself was almost blind at the date of the release. For him, the absence of the image is, therefore, a point of departure for an exploration of the limits of empathy and intersubjective exchange of sensations and affects.

In 2000, João César *Monteiro* brings the empty film frame back to black – in fact, to a very dark shade of grey: he insisted he did not use an absolute black. His bizarre movie *Branca de Neve* [*Snow White*][376] is a film adaptation of Swiss writer

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373 *L'Homme Atlantique* (*The Atlantic Man*), Marguerite Duras (dir., writer, voice-off), 45′, with Yann Andréa, Ina/Production Berthemont, France, 1981.

374 *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consomimur Igni* (*We Spin Around the Night Consumed by the Fire*), Guy Debord (dir.), with Duygu Erkan, 100′, Simar Films, France, 1978.

375 *Blue*, Derek Jarman (dir., writer), with Tilda Swinton, John Quentin, Nigel Terry, 79′, Channel 4 Television Corporation, Arts Council of Great Britain, Opal Records, BBC Radio 3, UK, Japan, 1993. For this film, Jarman also considered the following alternative titles: *International Blue*, *My Blue Heaven*, *Blue is Poison*, *Blueprint is Bliss.*

376 *Branca de Neve* (*Snow White*), João César Monteiro (dir.), Robert Walser (writer), with Maria Do Carmo Rôlo, Ana Brandão, Reginaldo da Cruz, 75′, Mandragoa Filmes, Portugal, 2000.

Robert Walser's eponymous theater play. The film opens with a photograph of Walser's body found dead in the snow near the Swiss asylum where he lived, wrote, and stopped writing. Afterwards, the footage proceeds, in a highly referential homage to the writer, with empty dark screens, interrupted from time to time by images of an almost clear blue sky. The ungraspable emptiness of the visual signifiers in *Snow White* was received with perplexity and outrage by the Portuguese public, but this came as no surprise in the context of Monteiro's highly idiosyncratic cinema. As the production of the film was commissioned by the Portuguese state and subsidized with a significant amount of public funds, the outrage provoked by the result triggered vehement debates on the ethics of radical experimentation when it enters in conflict with the taste and expectations of the paying general public. Countering the viewers' and commissioners' desire for an aesthetically pleasing cinematic experience, Monteiro's *Snow-White* screen remains sadistically empty throughout most of the projection, only interrupted by rapid, hermetic flashes. Most of the critics have dismissed the film as cheap, tasteless, and unethical provocation.

More recent experiments in the absence, cancellation, or erasure of the film image are Tunisian director Ismail Bahri's *Film à blanc* (2013)[377] and *Foyer* (2016),[378] but also Éric Rondepierre's series of screen captures invisible under normal conditions (*Excédents*[379] and *Spectre* [*Ghost*][380]). Bill Morrison's found footage *Decasia*[381] is another example, playing with the variously shaped blanks that appear on degraded film roll, indicating the slow effacement and fading processes that naturally occur on the chemical surface of film with the passage of time. If these movies screen – or play with – the very absence of the film image, what does one get when trying to capture the over-saturated presence of all the images in a film? Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto answers this question with long-exposure shots of theater film screenings, condensing the projection time of an entire film into a single frame.[382] He obtains shining, oversaturated screens that, just as the blank illumination, have a strong spectral quality and prevent any figure from coming into sight. Sugimoto's overexposure to the moving images shows that the excess of vi-

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377 *Film à blanc*, Ismail Bahri (dir.), Tunis, 2013.

378 *Foyer*, Ismail Bahri (dir.), 32′, La Fabrique Phantom, France, Tunis, 2016.

379 Éric Rondepierre, *Excédents*, https://www.ericrondepierre.com/en/menu-excedents.html, last accessed May 15, 2023.

380 Éric Rondepierre, *Spectre*, https://www.ericrondepierre.com/en/spectre.html, last accessed May 15, 2023.

381 *Decasia*, Bill Morrison (dir., writer, prod.), music by Michael Gordon, 67′, Icarus Films, SUA, 2002.

382 The series is called *Theaters*. It began in 1976 and is still ongoing.

sion may in fact become a kind of blindness. By the same token, as we have seen with Laclau, an excessive proliferation of signifieds empties the signifier of any fixed meaning.

An interesting place in this history of imageless films is occupied by the work of the Austrian filmmaker Peter Kubelka, composed exclusively of very dense experimental shorts and commissioned video advertisements totaling no more than one hour of cinema over sixty years of filmmaking career, between 1955 and 2012. Considering that at least 13 minutes of that hour are accounted for by various alternations of completely black or completely white frames, it is perhaps important to notice that he began directing very soon after Isidore Isou's *Traité . . .* (1951). He has lived and created during the decades in which all the above-mentioned examples of imageless films sparked their controversies. Of great interest here are two of his movies assembled into a larger work, *Monument Film*. This larger visual project exists in two forms: as a sculptural exhibition of the two handcrafted film rolls, and as a double projection (juxtaposed and overimposed) of the two distinct cinematic works.

The first film in the project is the 1960 *Arnulf Rainer*, a film that can be described as an experiment in the problematics of visual (but also audio) rhythmicity, with a great emphasis on the absence of any figurative or figured subject matter.[383] Instead of characters, decorum, or plot (of which it is entirely deprived), the film plays with binaries like motion and stasis, rhythm and arythmia. It should be said, for the sake of our interest in intermedial connections, that Kubelka dedicated this film to an eponymous friend, sponsor, and painter who, among other things, was himself experimenting with dark monochromes and abstract figural intensities. *Arnulf Rainer* is interesting not only because of the absence of conventional cinematic content, but also because it is a film created in the absence of an editing table and even of a recording camera. More radical than all other directors of cinematic absence I have referred to so far, Kubelka dispenses even with the presence of a camera. In this way, he reduces the material conditions of cinematic creation to the film roll, the projector, and a projecting surface in a completely dark room. In his ideal film theater, the spectators are isolated in individual dark cubicles with unobstructed view to the screen, in the simulated absence of the rest of the audience, to avoid all visual or audible noise that could interfere with the aesthetic reception of the film. Of course, this added privation cuts out another important part of the cinematic experience for the spectator, for whom the simple absence of image or sound (or both) is by this time too overused to make an impression. What Kubelka adds to it is the isolation

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383 *Arnulf Rainer*, Peter Kubelka (dir.), 7′, Austria, 1960.

through which the spectator is denied the sense of community, the unspoken, yet perceptible sensation of belonging to, and sharing emotions with the rest of the audience. When the viewer is deprived of image, sound, and a sense of shared spectatorship, is there anything still left to sustain a cinematic experience, or has the medium already reached its outmost limits? Addressing this question, *Arnulf Rainer* is an important threshold in the history of experimental cinema:

> That stroboscopic film reinvented the medium as sense-attacking, storyless, color- and image-free structuralism, pushing abstraction and minimalism into a paradoxically concrete maximalism. Arnulf Rainer essentially constitutes a rhythmical modulation of the four basic elements of cinema – light and darkness, sound and silence. For six minutes and 24 seconds the film, made out of transparent and black 35mm frames, deafening white noise and the relative silence of the untouched optical soundtrack, shreds the viewer's nerves – dazzling, roaring, darkening, and hushing in ever-changing metrical variations.[384]

The second movie in Kubelka's project, *Antiphon* (2012)[385] is intended to be the last cinematic piece of Kubelka's career. It is the exact opposite of *Arnulf Rainer*, in the sense that it functions following the logic of the photographic negative, replacing the white frames in the first movie with black ones in the second (and, of course, conversely, the black ones with the whites). Likewise, all the fragments with sound in the first movie become silent in the second, and the other way around, in a complete audiovisual reversal of polarities in cinematic signs.

Despite this radical inversion, a superficial glance at the second film roll shows it as being strikingly similar to the first, in an almost complete subversion of the light/dark and sound/silence binaries that are fundamentally constitutive for all differential play and variation of intensities in every conceivable cinematic work. The term *Antiphon* is in itself indicative of this point-counterpoint self-cancelling rhetoric:

> "Antiphon" is a term used in church music to signify the response, the counter-chant, in a choral piece. It's an appropriate title for a film that will mirror an older one, and it ties in nicely with Kubelka's idea of cinema as an alternative form of liturgy. "In fact, the antiphon is older than human life," Kubelka remarks. "Birds, frogs, and cicadas have been communicating that way for millions of years. And it's also in our every-day communication, in our greeting verbiage, for example, in the repetition of "How do you do?"[386]

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384 Stefan Grissemann, "Frame by Frame: Peter Kubelka," in *Film Comment*, Film at Lincoln Center, September – October 2012, available at: https://www.filmcomment.com/article/peter-kubelka-frame-by-frame-antiphon-adebar-arnulf-rainer/, last accessed May 15, 2023.

385 *Antiphon*, Peter Kubelka (dir.), 6′, Austria, 2012.

386 Grissemann, "Frame by Frame."

The "disturbingly immaculate" frames making up both films, so distant in time, yet so visually and structurally dependent on one another, build up to create a sensorial assault on the viewer that is likely to trigger, exactly as the author intended, the uncanny affect Kubelka described as "a cold sort of ecstasy."[387] No thrills or laughter, no sentimental drama, no horror, no intellectual overreferencing – one could even say that Kubelka works in the absence of the affective repository of conventional cinematic genres. Moreover, he offers restricted access to his handmade films and forbids the creation of digital copies after them. Consequently, in the absence of official screenings, his movies cannot be seen or enjoyed anywhere else. This strict policy of limited, non-commercial access is indicative of Kubelka's intentional absence from the film market and of his rejection of the cinematographic "industry." It is also an ethical gesture of displacement and withdrawal from the logic of serial production and mass consumption. In this disengagement with digital imagery, visual enhancement, contemporary entertainment industry, and strategies of commercial success, Kubelka intersects with most of the other imageless film moviemakers mentioned above. Similarly, the American director Tony Conrad sought, with his 1966 film *The Flicker*[388] (another stroboscopic composition of alternating sequences of black and white empty frames), to question and reconfigure conventional notions of cinematic production, such as the need for a camera or even a screen. As Gilles Deleuze describes it in *Cinema II*,

> a third epoch appears when the black or white screen stands for the outside of all the images, when the flickerings multiply the interstices like irrational cuts (Tony Conrad's *The Flicker*) [. . .] The film does not record the filmic process in this way without projecting a cerebral process. A flickering brain, which relinks or creates loops – this is cinema. Lettrism had already gone a long way in this direction, and, after the geometric epoch and the "engraving" epoch, proclaimed a cinema of expansion without camera, and also without screen or film stock. Everything can be used as a screen, the body of a protagonist or even the bodies of the spectators; everything can replace the film stock, in a virtual film which now only goes on in the head, behind the pupils, with sound sources taken as required from the auditorium.[389]

The progressive emptying of the cinematic signifier and the more radical reduction of the material conditions of its production and reception required a rethinking of the norms and limits shaping the medium. As a cinematic figure of absence, the empty frame borrows from the monochrome painting a potential for chromatically induced affective intensities, while the rhythms created from the differential play

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387 Grissemann, "Frame by Frame."

388 *The Flicker*, Tony Conrad (dir.), 30′, SUA, 1966.

389 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II – The Time-Image*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: The Athlone Press, 2000), 215.

in the alternation of white and black frames (conjugated or not with a synchronized or arrhythmic alternation of sound and silence) expand the potentiality for meaning-making and sensorial effects through fragmentation and articulation.

Other imageless films, like the Fluxus project *Zen for Film: Fluxfilm No. 1*,[390] transform the absence of images into a fertile ground for a pure recording of the contingent, material micro-presences and traces of the passage of time. Described by its maker as "clear film, accumulating in time dust and scratches,"[391] this work is reminiscent of other Zen-infused creations such as Rauschenberg's *White Painting [three panel]*, Bruno Jakob's *Invisible Paintings* and Cage's *4′33″*, in which authorial agency over an empty, unmarked surface has been delegated to the environment and the unavoidable surrounding presences.

Of special note is the use of black leader ("opaque film which has been exposed with the lens cap on and then inserted between shots, so as to cause the screen to go pitch black")[392] as a creator of *différance*, in the double meaning theorized by Derrida: *spacing* and *deferral*. Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*[393] unfolds around the darkness implied by its title.[394] Interrupting the figurative flow of already semantically disjointed images (Icelandic children playing in the sun are followed by footage of a military missile, etc.), three long sequences of empty frames are used as both cinematic punctuation and hermeneutic deferral. In the words of Carol Mavor, "the black leader is interpretation postponed."[395] As imagery and figuration progressively dissolve into the disorienting indeterminacy of the pure blackness, "as if in a lightless closet, as if in the womb, as if in a bomb shelter,"[396] a female voice is heard from off-screen, entering an (in)visible dialogue with the absence of the image, the empty cinematic signifier:

> The first image he told me about was of three children on a road in Iceland, in 1965. He said that for him it was the image of happiness and also that he had tried several times to link it to other images, but it never worked. He wrote me: one day I'll have to put it all alone at the

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390 *Zen for Film: Fluxfilm No. 1*, Nam June Paik (dir.), 20′, 1964, available at http://fluxusfoundation. com/archive/fluxfilms/, last accessed May 15, 2023. An in-depth analysis of the cancellation of the cinematic medium in this film is conducted by Craig Dworkin in his *No Medium* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

391 Nam June Paik, *Zen for Film*.

392 Carol Mavor, "Happiness with a Long Piece of Black Leader: Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*," *Art History* 30, no. 5 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, November 2007): 739.

393 *Sans Soleil* (*Sunless*), Chris Marker (dir., writer), with Florence Delai, Arielle Dombasle, Riyoko Ikeda, 104′, Argos Films, France, 1983.

394 The title also appears spelled in Russian alphabet in the film, as an explicit reference to the fact that it was borrowed from Modest Mussorgsky eponymous song cycle *Sans Soleil* (1874).

395 Mavor, "Happiness," 750.

396 Mavor, "Happiness," 738.

beginning of a film with a long piece of black leader; if they don't see happiness in the picture, at least they'll see the black.[397]

The black leader carries, therefore, an undeniable affective charge, as the figural void that visually supplements the image of absolute happiness. Moreover, when functioning as a temporary suspension of the audiovisual narrative, the black frame becomes "a black pregnant pause of anticipation and longing,"[398] simultaneously triggering the viewer's desire for the image and sabotaging the fulfillment of this desire through indeterminate deferral.

Multiple references to contemporary paradigms of annihilation, such as colonial violence, the nuclear threat, and other Cold War crises inscribe the absences made visible in the black frames in the logic of international politics. Dismissing representation becomes, in this context, a political manifesto, a gesture of disobedience that is all the more radical as it infiltrates a flow of seemingly innocent images. With the figural force of a radical manifesto, the black leader subverts the regime of conventional cinematic representation precisely from within this regime, hijacking its authority and its position of power. At the same time, it silently raises questions about the ethics of remembrance and the responsibility of the cinematic medium in regard to memory, when confronted to political threats of total annihilation: "In the post-nuclear world, when the world is threatened by the most profound form of forgetting – total annihilation – this new technology of memory is rendered necessary: a way to tell the memory, without betraying it, without corrupting it."[399] As always when dealing with a problematic past, there is a temporality of its own attached to the promise of an adequate and faithful memory. Carol Mavor notices that this temporality is one of "future remembering," and the ungraspability of this distant promise of rememoration is signified by the insertions of black frames: "This 'future remembering' is the tense of *Sans soleil. Sans soleil*'s blackness is a representation of memory without betrayal; thereby, it is memory futured."[400]

From Isidor Isou to Ismail Bahri, via Debord, Duras, Kubelka, Marker, Jarman, or Monteiro (among others), the imageless film frame unites all kinds of cinematic absences, regardless of their color, affective charge, political contestations, or aesthetic and ethical implications. As shown through these few examples, material or immaterial absences manifest in cinema engage, more often than not, with self-reflexive meditations on the limits and norms governing the cinematic

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397 Voice-off from the introductory scene in *Sans Soleil.*

398 Mavor, "Happiness," 740.

399 Mavor, "Happiness," 750–751.

400 Mavor, "Happiness," 745.

medium, as well as the processes and practices of production and consumption that traverse it at different moments in its historical development. The imageless, monochromatic screen marks a shift in the *locus* where cinematic signification is born: a shift from the enchainment of images to the interstices between them. This shift has been best described by Gilles Deleuze in *Cinema II*:

> "The absence of image," the black screen or the white screen, have a decisive importance in contemporary cinema. For, as Noel Burch has shown, they no longer have a simple function of punctuation, as if they marked a change, but enter into a dialectical relation between the image and its absence, and assume a properly structural value (as in Brakhage's Reflections on Black in experimental cinema). This new value of the black or white screen seems to us to correspond to the characteristics analysed earlier: on the one hand, what is important is no longer the association of images, the way in which they associate, but the interstice between two images; on the other hand, the cut in a sequence of images is not now a rational cut which marks the end of one or the beginning of another, but a so-called irrational cut which belongs neither to one nor the other, and sets out to be valid for itself. Garrel was able to give an extraordinary intensity to these irrational cuts, so that the series of anterior images has no end, while the series of subsequent images likewise has no beginning, the two series converging towards the white or black screen as their common limit. Moreover, used in this way, the screen becomes the medium for variations: the black screen and the under-exposed image, the intense blackness which lets us guess at dark volumes in process of being constituted, or the black marked by a fixed or moving luminous point, and all the combinations of black and fire; the white screen and the over-exposed image, the milky image, or the snowy image whose dancing seeds are to take shape [. . .].[401]

Oscillating between the liminal intensities of black frames and white frames, film becomes a medium marked by a radical awareness of its own materiality.

The empty frame as a figure of absence has been instrumented in intermedial dialogue. Cinema is mingled with – and inspired by – painting, with the explicit reference to Arnulf Rainer in the eponymous movie. Conceptual art is likewise engaged with the practice of projecting imageless films. One famous example is the *Fluxus* project *Zen for Film: Fluxfilm No. 1.* A musical theme and the rhetorical device of point-counterpoint are the structuring principles of the empty frames and their rhythms of alternation in *Antiphon.* Eventually, perhaps most frequently, imageless films engage in intermedial dialogue with literature and the Western literary tradition, as it is the case with Debord's *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* or in Monteiro's *Branca de Neve*, which doubly engages with *Snow White* as a folktale and as the eponymous Robert Walser's hermetic theatrical adaptation, reinterpreted in the light of the Swiss writer's biography. Intermedial exchange becomes even more visible in the case of writers who also direct films: Marguerite Duras's film *The Atlantic Man* is more than tangentially imbued with her literary style.

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401 Deleuze, *Cinema II: Time-Image*, 200.

Moreover, it was also an adaptation, but not a book-to-film one; instead, the script of the film is turned into a "novel" in the aftermath of its cinematic production.

These multiple aesthetical or ethical, political, or poetic instrumentations of the empty frames as figures of absence are revealing of their inter- and intra-medial versatility and permeability, as well as of their virtually infinite potentialities for meaning-making and the production of affects. In this light, I find the absence of the empty frame from Marc Vernet's list of figures of absence in cinema all the more surprising.[402]

2.6 Unwritten Books and Unpainted Canvases

Non-anthropomorphic figures of absence are deeply inscribed in and highly dependent on the very materiality of the media in which they emerge. And so, to the lists of figures of absence identified by Heidegger, Derrida, Blanchot, Belting, Mourey, Vernet, Cauquelin, and Goebbels, among others, I added more material forms of indeterminacy: unwritten books and silent musical scores, missing texts and vanishing points, erased drawings and overexposed photographs, museums of the void, unperformed performances, empty frames, and monochrome canvases. How to make sense of such an eclectic arrangement?

Georges Didi-Huberman makes an important distinction between the "figured figure" and the "figuring figure."[403] According to the French art historian, the "figured figure" belongs to the paradigm of representation, still obeying the mimetic principles which make the images seem to represent something determinate. On the other hand, the "figuring figure" is part of a different image regime, one that remains forever open to new references and nuances that may change or emerge at different points in time. To put it differently, the figure is simultaneously able to move horizontally as a "figured figure," to various degrees away from the mimetic principles that always assume reality as point of reference, as well as vertically, as a "figuring figure," on the diachronic axis that records its dynamic evolution in time. Being more stable, the first type of figure opens itself more readily to visibility and intelligibility than the latter. On the other hand, the latter is more subtle: endowed with a higher potential for subversive ambiguity, it requires more complex interpretations that account for its historical anchorage and contingencies.

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402 Vernet, *Figures de l'absence au cinéma.*
403 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images. Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art,* translated by John Goodman (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 141.

How is this distinction relevant here? If the thinking of an absolute, radical absence may be regarded as a birthplace for the figural and a playground for signification, its identifiable avatars in various media remain anchored in the representational, signifying regime of the image, regardless of whether that image is literary, cinematic, photographic, painted, or otherwise. No matter how far the representation is pushed toward its liminal regions, lead into crisis, questioned, and endangered by radical gestures of absence, the figures of absence presented extensively in the preceding subchapters remain attached – even in opposition – to their systems of signification and/or figuration, to the materiality and normativity of these systems, as well as to the power relations and the affective intensities that traverse and shape them. Didi-Huberman's insightful distinction helps to understand how, in this paradigm, the overarching concept of a "figure of absence" is related to the *figuring* regime of the figure (thereby prone to historical evolution and change), while an empty book, frame, exhibition space, stage or screen will remain *figured* figures because of the ontological limitations and constraints imposed by their material actualization. Even if the ideal construct of the figure of absence refers to the void (yet necessary) place allowing for the figuring of the figure, its existence can only remain virtual, forever unactualized, like Blanchot's model of the *Book to Come* and Belting's *Invisible Masterpiece*. Its materiality is eventually reduced to a minimum (the materiality of the nothing). For this reason, writers, painters, and directors of absence have focused on strategies of gradual formal impoverishment.

Georges Didi-Huberman's observation is useful insofar as it helps to clarify that speaking of figures of absence may mean two very different things.[404] If we remain in the figurative logic of representation, then in the construction "figures of absence" the word "figure" refers to form, aspect, idea. Therefore, a figure of absence is, in fact, a mode of figuring absence by giving it a shape, a form, a distinct and meaningful contour. If we enter a figural logic, however, absence can no longer become a stabilized figure; while it remains indeterminate and shapeless, it becomes something akin to a *figuring force* that is necessarily transitive – in only being able to figure *something else.* It becomes a sort of vehicle or driving vector, an indefinite and nondescript force that orients the viewer's gaze inside the image. Simultaneously, it complements the attention to form with a more subtle acknowledgement of the materiality of that image, including the modes in which this materiality resists – or, in Warburgian terms, *survives* – in a representation. Here, however, we reach the dead end of an inescapable paradox: when

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404 I am grateful to prof. Laura Marin for emphasizing this important point in our conversations.

imagined in the interpretative key of this figural framework, such figures of absence swiftly become presences themselves.

Figures of absence are not fixed, stable structures. Instead, they are more akin to events, in the sense that they take place inside a system and create non-conventional experiences. They either confront the public in a rebellious rhetoric or, on the contrary, they rally with it in order to denounce old-fashioned conventions, to signal a moment of radical innovation, to advocate for a return to a previous set of norms (or to the primordial origins before the advent of creation), or to engage in institutional critique. Despite its seemingly uneventful appearance, the use of figures of absence brings about the fold of self-reflexivity and fuels the working of the system upon itself. The undoubtedly incomplete list of figures of absence sketched in this chapter registers not only multimedial, transmedial, and intermedial variations, but also multimodal variance within a single medium – as it was the case for the many possible strategies of figuring absence in writing through missing texts, lipograms, cuts, and erasures as "additive subtractions,"[405] programmatic vacuity of the subject matter, or explorations of the *topos* of ineffability. Absences can be rhetorically instrumented through hyperboles, inversions, repetitions, fragmentation, and point-counterpoint self-cancelling structures that speak of their potential for homogeneity via the cancellation of all differential play arising from the tensions between binaries: light and darkness, noise and silence, emptiness and fullness, and so on.

The affective range mobilized by figures of absence, regardless of their mode and medium, unfolds from shock, outrage, and disappointment (see, for example, the public debate following the release of Monteiro's *Branca de Neve*) to the peaceful tranquility of artists' statements accompanying art inspired by Zen-inspired minimalist aesthetics, or to the impersonal "cold sort of ecstasy" described by Kubelka. Other works trigger inward reflection and self-awareness (see Derrida's inversion of the spectatorial and actantial roles happening around an empty stage), a self-affirming neutrality (in the case of some empty exhibitions), or more disquieting feelings, like the unspeakable horror in silent encounters with radical alterity (*Moby Dick*). The figures of absence are ideal triggers for suspense and longing (*Sans Soleil*), as well as placeholders for strong desire (*The Atlantic Man*) or for painful remembrance and collective mourning (*Tree of Codes*). All such affects activated with various intensities have the potential to enhance, alter, or block circuits of production, reception, consumption, and mean-

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405 Brennan, "Additive Substraction."

ing making. In this sense, they contribute to what Jan Slaby calls an "affective arrangement," defined as "a philosophical concept that describes the in each case unique constellation of a particular affect-intensive site of social life. An affective arrangement comprises an array of persons, things, artifacts, spaces, discourses, behaviors, expressions or other materials that coalesce into a coordinated formation of mutual affecting and being-affected."[406] Performatively open-ended and incorporating the material conditions of their media, these figures of absence instrument the situatedness of affects as they simultaneously trigger and sabotage the reader's or viewer's quests for intelligibility, signification, and sensorial gratification.

From an ethical perspective, the figures of absence are generally problematic for reasons of (in)conformity to established norms and rules of conduct, especially in conflicts between tradition and modernity or in radical gestures of avant-gardist defiance. Their minimalistic material requirements turn the figures of absence into highly intrusive, versatile, and subtly subversive phenomena. These figures likewise engage with the corporeal presence of the work, of its producer, and of its audience, leading to paradoxes of authorship (see Huws and Mises van der Rohe), fractures in seriality (see *The Perfect Magazine*), and problems of originality and interchangeability. Depending on its staging or framing, a figure of absence can stand (or pose) at various degrees of remoteness from shared understandings of truth and authenticity. The more or less successful attempts to translate Georges Perec's lipogrammatic text, Jonathan Safran Foer's failure to mention that the text he works on is a translation, or Christine Brooke-Rose multilingual novel about contemporary regimes of translation raise another set of ethical concerns. This time, they are related to issues of national and ethnical identity (with the occasional tensions between the two), but also to questions of trans-linguistic and intersubjective exchange, relations of inclusion and exclusion, accessibility, and attitudes toward alterity and foreignness. Last but not least, as absence is intricately related to loss and the (im)possibility of preserving an appropriate and stable memory of it, the figures of absence identified so far reinforce or redefine existing regimes of personal or collective remembrance and mourning, mainly in relation to the promise of symbolic justice done to the victims of a violent past.

In their strictest sense, the figures of absence remain apophatically out of reach, beyond possibilities of figuration and signification. Any and every attempt to incarnate them in a medium transforms the figuring figures of absence into

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406 Jan Slaby, "Affective Arrangement," *Affective Societies: Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 109.

figured ones. Situated beyond the normative and controlling power of narration, escaping the stability of representational structures and the dynamic flows of figuration, and dismantling even the most taken-for-granted prerequisites of arts and literature, the figures of absence become the ground zero of creation, a utopian space where absence figures and signifies itself.

Chapter 3
Anthropomorphic Figures of Absence

3.1 Absence as a Literary Character

The space of literature accommodates a wide range of figures of absence, from the whiteness of the blank page and the space between words (both conditions of legibility), to lipogrammatic writing, die-cuts, and texts about missing texts. In addition to these, there are narrative gaps, *lacunae*, ellipses, the programmatic absence of subject matter (writing about nothing), and the *topos* of ineffability. The latter may be split into manifold variations of states of epistemological uncertainty that resist all linguistic articulation – such as the unspeakable, the unsayable, the unnamable or the indescribable – or only linguistic articulation within certaincircumstances, such as the censored, the taboo, the secret, the enigma. All are carefully unpacked and illustrated by William Franke in his two-volume anthology focused on apophatic speech in philosophy, religion, literature, and the arts.[407] While mapping and sketching a chronology of the ineffable, he writes that the unsayable is a "cross-disciplinary genre spanning a great variety of periods and regions even within just Western culture. [. . .] In fact, as a condition of sense for all genres, or a discourse indirectly articulating the silence from which any generic discourse needs to set itself off in order to be perceptible as such, apophasis is more like a genre of genres in general."[408] Franke goes on to elaborate on his concept of an "apophatic consciousness." He argues for its universality and its theological roots by studying its manifold applications "across a variety of disciplines, media, historical periods, and geographical regions."[409]

In some cases, the versatility of absence within a literary regime of representation and figuration allows it to take on the vague contours of a character. In such cases, the character is singularly defined by his lack of individualizing traits. In her cursory exploration of undefined characters in literature,[410] Meghan Vicks shows that their lack of identifying features, physical or otherwise, may prove at

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407 William Franke, *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*, Vol. 1 – *Classic Formulations*, and Vol. 2 – *Modern and Contemporary Formulations* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

408 Franke, *On What Cannot Be Said*, Vol. 1 – *Classic Formulations*, 2. More recently, Franke published *A Philosophy of the Unsayable* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014).

409 William Franke, *On the Universality of What Is Not: The Apophatic Turn in Critical Thinking* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), ix.

410 Vicks, *Narratives of Nothing*.

once subversive and constitutive for the narrative. Furthermore, she places them in relation to the Platonic notion of *khôra*[411] as space of indeterminacy that allows for the unfolding of being, and to the Derridean reinterpretation of this space. According to Vicks, "when Odysseus declares himself to be 'no one' (Gr. *outis*) he is not denying his identity (rendering it an absence) but affirming his identity as nothing, as the blank in the system that allows for cunning, play, meaning, identity, and hero to all take place."[412] Of fundamental significance for the Western literary canon, the figure of Odysseus and his cunning withdrawal into the absence of identity has benefited from a lot of critical attention, among which that of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. They noted in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that the "nobody" Odysseus has the function we have so far called, along with Levi-Strauss and Laclau, an "empty signifier":

> Odysseus discovered in words what in fully developed bourgeois society is called *formalism*: their perennial ability to designate is bought at the cost of distancing themselves from any particular content which fulfills them, so that they refer from a distance to all possible contents, both to nobody and to Odysseus himself . . . Self-preserving guile [i.e. cunning, *mētis*] lives on the argument [i.e. the gap, *outis*] between word and thing. Odysseus' two contradictory actions in his meeting with Polyphemus, his obedience to his name and his repudiation of it, are really the same thing. He declares allegiance to himself by disowning himself as Nobody; he saves his life by making himself disappear. This adaptation to death through language contains the schema of modern mathematics.[413]

The entire *Odyssey* may be read as a story of an absence, as the meaningful unfolding of repeated attempts to overcome the distance (the gap, the deferral, the spacing, the *différance*) between Odysseus and Ithaca. In this sense, the hero is defined by a constitutive absence that gives him a sense of self and directionality, thereby allowing for the coherence of the entire system of tensions and relations of the narrative structure.

Other such examples of characters defined by a lack, by a constitutive absence upon which the entire text is then constructed, become increasingly numerous in modern literature. In Daniil Kharms's very short story "The Red-Haired Man," the entire text is a description of the physical, even anatomical absence of the protagonist. This absence simultaneously allows the text to come into being

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411 Plato, *Timaeus*, translated by Benjamin Jowett, *The Internet Classics Archive*, http://classics. mit.edu/Plato/timaeus.html, last accessed May 15, 2023.

412 Vicks, *Narratives of Nothing*, 5.

413 Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, translated by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 47–48, cited in Vicks, *Narratives of Nothing*, 4.

and eventually to bring itself back to silence when confronted to the vacuity of its subject matter:

> There lived a redheaded man who had no eyes or ears. He didn't have hair either, so he was called a redhead arbitrarily. He couldn't talk because he had no mouth. He had no nose either. He didn't even have arms or legs. He had no stomach, he had no back, he had no spine, and he had no innards at all. He didn't have anything. So we don't even know who we're talking about. It's better that we don't talk about him anymore.[414]

The text is nothing but the worded absence of its main character. It originates in this absence ("There lived a redheaded man . . . ") and ends in it, because of it, in absolute epistemological uncertainty: "we don't even know who we're talking about. It's better that we don't talk about him anymore." Kharms's writing of the immaterial and inaccessible presence of this man echoes perhaps the words yelled at K. in Kafka's *The Castle*: "You're not from the castle, you're not from the village, *you're nothing*. Unfortunately, however, you are a stranger [. . .] getting in everyone's way [. . .] always causing trouble."[415] K.'s very name is absent, reduced to a signifying minimum, indicating its status as a pure narrative function in anthropomorphic disguise instead of a fully fleshed character. K. is just as empty a signifier as the Castle is. In this role, they are both the nuclei around which the entire narrative is constructed. Perhaps counterintuitively, empty signifiers are excellent narrative triggers as they always "cause trouble" in the form of ontological indeterminacy and epistemological uncertainty that elude and obscure representation, reason, logic, and other conventional meaning-making strategies. Figures of absence meddle with conventional narrative premises by compromising the reader's or interpreter's quest for stable, fixed, reassuring meaning. Since K. is obviously the initial for Kafka's name itself, the text delivers an unmistakable hint of self-reflexivity, being thus highly reminiscent of the behavior of other empty signifiers, shown in the previous chapters to be referring to themselves as a structuring absence, as the necessary and ultimate ground zero of the medium in which they emerged.

Meghan Vicks's other examples of such characters include Beckettian figures of ontological "lessness": Molloy, Murphy, The Unnamable, or the free-floating writing subjects that pop in and out of existence in *Texts for Nothing* according to a seemingly nonsensical attribution or distribution of personal pronouns. Similar, yet less radical figures that for Vicks embody a paradoxical absence of being are Nabokov's Sebastian Knight from the eponymous novel, and a gallery of lesser-known characters from Victor Pelevin's post-Soviet novels, empty either as a re-

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414 Daniel Kharms, *Today I Wrote Nothing: The Selected Writings of Daniil Kharms*, translated by Matvei Yankelevich (New York: Overlook, 2007), 47.

415 Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, translated by Anthea Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 46.

sult of ideological vacuity from which they emerged as subjects, or as the by-products of a mystical worldview in which absence is invested with layers of sacred connotations. For those preoccupied with more formal aspects, however, the most interesting embodiments of absence are found in the characters of scriveners and clerks depicted as pure recording entities whose sense of self has either dissolved in, or rebelled against the laws of repetition that feed the proliferation of writing. Nikolai Gogol's Akaky Akakievich in "The Overcoat" has the lack of consistency and the ontological poverty of his metonymic piece of clothing: "And so, in a certain department there was a certain clerk; a clerk of whom it cannot be said that he was very remarkable; he was very short, somewhat pock-marked, with rather reddish hair and rather dim, bleary eyes, with a small bald patch on the top of his head [. . .]."[416] As Vicks notes, Akaky is described in terms of *what he is not*. The emphasis of his portrayal falls on his lack of being – he occupies as little space and matter as he can (even his bald patch is small), his physical features are approximative and vague ("rather dim"), certainly imprecise ("reddish"). The overcoat, like Akaky's entire being, is made from a texture of holes and other material absences: "There is nothing to put a patch on. There is nothing for it to hold on to; there is a great strain on it; it is not worth calling cloth, it would fly away at a breath of wind."[417] Akaky was not the first, nor he was the last empty character in the Gogol's works. Another notable example is gentleman N. (for Nobody?) in *Dead Souls*, published in the same year as "The Overcoat" (1842). The only description the reader gets of him is an apophatic one that leaves the character defined exclusively by the absence of traits, rather than by his possession of any: "The gentleman in the carriage was not handsome but neither was he particularly bad looking; he was neither too fat nor too thin; he could not be said to be old, but he was not too young either."[418]

Even more nondescript is the protagonist of Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener." The eponymous character turns from a man defined by his sole function as a transcriber, a slave to the all-encompassing authority of writing, into a machine of repetition characterized by an absolute denial of relationality with the world. He is from the very beginning deprived of a portrait and of biography: "one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable." The narrator is likewise preoccupied by the undecipherable trace of Bartleby's obscure origin, sketching his character via a technique of subtracting addition (as opposed to an additive subtraction) applied to the fictional universe Bartleby belongs to, and from which

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416 Nikolai Gogol, "The Overcoat," in *The Complete Tales of Nikolai Gogol*, vol. 2, edited by Leonard J. Kent (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 305, cited in Vicks, *Narratives of Nothing*, 63.
417 Gogol, "The Overcoat," 313.
418 Nikolai Gogol, *Dead Souls*, translated by David Magarshack (London: Penguin Classics, 1961), 17.

he progressively detaches himself: "I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature. Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable except from the original sources, and, in his case, those are very small."[419] The constitutive absence that defines Bartleby is at once the central preoccupation, the origin, and the end of Melville's short story.

In this context, I go back to Derrida's statement according to which "writing is the absence of a signatory and the absence of the referent. Writing is the name of these two absences,"[420] and the trace thereof. I suggest that Derrida's affirmation is not exclusively restricted to writing, but remains valid for all forms of inscription, thus making this fundamental absence contaminate every agent that *inscribes*, articulates, and creates signifying forms on a surface, as well as everything that is inscribed, articulated, signified as a result of this process. Following Saussure, Derrida affirms the simultaneous displacement operated by any system of signification on the thing signified and the temporary suspension of the signifying subject during the process of the material production of the signifier.

The following two sections focus on the distinct character of these two absences: the absence of the signifying self and the absence of the signified (human) other. The first section is concerned with characters embodying bureaucratic subjectivity without a subject, in the figure of the human agent contributing to the proliferation of writing at the expense of the dissolution of his sense of self. I read such characters as personified figures of absence, in the context of a linguistic articulation of their being. When they are not in the service of the act of writing and when they don't surrender themselves to the endless task of transcribing various inscriptions, these clerks appear to be – like Akaky and Bartleby – devoid of being, absent from themselves. The second section is, on the contrary, concerned with the absence of the Other, focusing on a modern reinterpretation of Dibutade's myth on the origin of painting. In this myth, a female character tries to visually stabilize not necessarily her departing partner, but rather the fact of *his being absent.* I intend to show that this desire for the image is producing a visual inscription (the film) and, at the same time, blocking this visuality in representational and figurative indeterminacy (by using the empty film frame).

Each of these case studies looks at how anthropomorphic figures of absence, embodied by characters who are either writers or creators of visual representations, are shaped or effaced by their respective acts of recording and inscription.

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419 Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener. A Story of Wall-Street*, Project Gutenberg edition, no page number.
420 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 41.

Furthermore, they investigate the rhetorical means through which these figures are inscribed in their turn, as characters of a literary text. The self-reflexive fold implied by any writing about writing (or by any image that contains references to the act of seeing) occasions important meta-considerations on their respective media, as we have seen in the previous chapter dealing with non-anthropomorphic figures of absence. These self-reflective structures deploy a number of aesthetic and poetic devices to depict their constitutive absence, generating ethical and political standpoints that orient such representations in relation to questions of identity and alterity, ipseity and difference, the self and the other.

The two case studies are separated by only fifteen years: José Saramago's 1997 novel *All the Names*[421] (discussed in connection to Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and Maurice Blanchot's novel *The Most High*) and Marguerite Duras's 1981 film[422] and 1982 eponymous novel[423] *The Atlantic Man*. Having as protagonists an archivist scrivener questioning his unremarkable self during a quest for a woman whose absence is signaled by a misplaced file, and, respectively, a woman manipulating a video camera during a monologue addressed to her absent partner, the two works can be loosely described as centering on operators of writing and visual inscription. This selection is most fitting, thus, to close off the text-image intermedial approach described at the end of the first chapter with the parallel drawn between the ever-absent ideal models of literature and visual arts, via Blanchot's absence of the book and Belting's invisible masterpiece. It is interesting to notice how neither of these two works is limited to their main medium, as they both operate in the overlapping territories of verbal and visual representations.

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421 José Saramago, *All the Names* [1997], translated by Margaret Jull Costa (New York, London: Harcourt, Inc., 2000).

422 *L'Homme Atlantique* (*The Atlantic Man*), Marguerite Duras (dir., writer, voice-off), 45′, with Yann Andréa, Ina/Production Berthemont, France, 1981.

423 Marguerite Duras, *L'Homme Atlantique* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1982). For the English edition: "The Atlantic Man" in *Two by Duras*, translated by Alberto Manguel (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1993), 29–58.

3.2 The Absent Self: Bureaucratic Subjects and the Archive

> For there is a wind or ghost of a wind
> in all books echoing the life
> there [. . .].
> Drawn from the streets we break off
> our mind's seclusion and are taken up by
> the books' winds, seeking, seeking
> down the wind
> until we are unaware which is the wind and
> which is the wind's power over us
> to lead the mind away.
> (William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, Book III)

Clerks, bureaucrats, scribes, copyists, archivists, bookkeepers – they are, along with the repositories of facts and artifacts they live and work in, organs of the greater *corpus* of the archive. This human machinery of *archons*[424] is hidden in full display, at once peripheral and essential to the archive, managing its material flows, embodying the Law, maintaining, and guarding the archive's very possibility of existence.

Just like Bartleby in Herman Melville's 1853 eponymous short story[425] or Henri Sorge in Maurice Blanchot's 1948 *Le Très Haut* (*The Most High*),[426] Senhor José in José Saramago's 1997 *Todos os nomes* (*All the Names*) appears initially as "a pure recording entity."[427] His frail body is moved exclusively by, and for the purposes of, the authority of the Archive, which is also, like in the case of Bartleby, his home. Bartleby, Sorge, and Senhor José have no biographies of their own. Their quasi-anonymity, together with their secluded lives and "essential solitudes" contribute to their high degree of versatility as empty signifiers, to the interchangeable character of their seemingly unremarkable existence.

Maurice Blanchot's *The Most High* opens with an explicit acknowledgement of the non-identity of a place-holder subject, assumed by the protagonist himself: "I wasn't alone, I was anybody."[428] Expanding on the theme of identity, or rather on its production in a legal sense and its cancellation in a bureaucratic setting, Blanchot writes several pages later the following:

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424 Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 10.
425 Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener. A Story of Wall-Street.*
426 Maurice Blanchot, *The Most High/Le Très-haut*, translated by Allan Stoekl (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).
427 Cornelia Vismann, *Files: Law and Media Technology*, translated by G. Winthrop-Young (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 31.
428 Blanchot, *The Most High*, 1.

> I had suddenly noticed that people came to see her above all for official documents – identity cards, passports, and so on. From that perspective, our duties were almost the same: we collaborated with each other. Thanks to us, individuals had a legal existence, they left a lasting trace, it was known who they were: in short, I wanted to show her that, in the eyes of the law, we performed analogous functions. [. . .] But something strange happened: nobody looked at me or seemed to have noticed my presence, just as if no one had been there, as if around us there was only a noisy void, a true desert, vulgar and sordid.[429]

Even more explicitly, the subject self-portrays as a powerless nonentity in front of the law:

> I'm obviously a nonentity, a helpless fledgling. In any case, I'm only a zero because the law is everything, and that's why I'm satisfied. And I'm everything because of the law, and my satisfaction is measureless, and for you it's the same, even when you think the opposite, and especially because you think the opposite.[430]

This Kafkian dissolution of the self in a bureaucratic setting is even more startling when the reader understands that it is not a unique occurrence, happening to only one individual, but it is rather a more leveling force that is strong enough to cancel all difference. No relation of opposition (be it of contradiction or contrariety) survives, as the subjects of the law become absolutely interchangeable. With the abolition of individuality, all subjects are emptied of their personal determinations and society becomes an infinite iteration of the same Nobody. The observation equally stands for much earlier bureaucratic narratives, such as *Bartleby, the Scrivener*:

> While, of other law-copyists, I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done. I believe that no materials exist, for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature. Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable [. . .].[431]

An identical non-descriptiveness characterizes the existence of Senhor José's character in *All the Names:*

> [. . .] some of those who are born become entries in encyclopedias, in history books, in biographies, in catalogs, in manuals, in collections of newspaper clippings, the others, roughly speaking, are like a cloud that passes without leaving behind it any trace of its passing, and if rain fell from that cloud it did not even wet the earth. Like me, thought Senhor José.[432]

It is not without importance that José also happens to be Saramago's first name. Therefore, the reader is faced once again with the game of authorial hide-and-seek as in the mirroring reflection of Kafka in the character K. In this way, self-

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429 Blanchot, *The Most High*, 26–29.
430 Blanchot, *The Most High*, 91–92.
431 Melville, *Bartleby*, no page number in the e-book edition.
432 Saramago, *All the Names*, 25.

reflexive play acquires yet another validation as a feature intimately and inextricably linked to figures of absence.

In Saramago's novel, Senhor José secretly yearns for a "fall." He desires (without admitting it even to himself) the advent of a traumatic event able to bring about a self that is less himself, a subjectivity detached from his subject.

> He never dreamed that something more serious than simply falling from a ladder was about to happen to him. As a result of the fall he might have lost his life, which would doubtless have a certain importance from a statistical and personal point of view, but what, we ask, if that life were instead to remain biologically the same, that is, the same being, the same cells, the same features, the same stature, the same apparent way of looking, seeing and noticing, and, without the change even being registered statistically, what if that life became another life, and that person a different person.[433]

But where does this "another life, [. . .] different person" commence? Where is the liminal space in which the unknowability of the self encounters the unknowability of the Other? Or, as Jacques Derrida put it, "where does the outside commence? This question is the question of the archive. There are undoubtedly no others."[434] For Senhor José, the outside begins inside – inside himself, through desire, and inside the Archive, by chance. The outside begins for him, like a true beginning, with a pile of birth certificates. The bureaucratic exactitude of their content is compensated for by the inexactitude of their number, exceeding by one the number that was looked for. It is precisely this supplement, the unlooked-for birth certificate, that triggers the quest for an absence which simultaneously structures the narrative and dissolves its subject.

Contrary to what is suggested by the title, to its promise to contain "all the names," the Central Registry where Senhor José is employed is not an archive of names. It is not an archive of dates associated with these names, either. All the names and all the dates alike can be generated through a staggering, yet finite number of combinations and permutations of existing letters and numbers. Perhaps this is the secret of the Registrar's omniscience. Knowing them all is in fact the knowledge of an algorithm, a mastery of the Law that generates them and makes their archival possible. What has yet to be determined (and archived), and proves ultimately unknowable, is the infinite and unpredictable spectrum of associations that have taken, take, or will take place – and this "place" is the Archive – between these names and the dates. In other words, what the Central Registry truly archives, what makes it Historical, is not its ever-growing repository of subjects and chronologies, but the relations between the singularity of these subjects

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433 Saramago, *All the Names*, 19.

434 Derrida, "Archive Fever," 42.

and the singularity of their significant dates. The archive does not only record mere absences, but also infinite possibilities for presence and ever-unpredictable occurrences of chance that allow the coming into being (and into the present) of those (past) presences.

While the Central Registry inventories the arbitrary spatiotemporal coordinates of all human existence, the Cemetery is the other focal point of Saramago's novel, concerned with recording the – likewise arbitrary – relation that assigns physical materiality (a body) to every singular existence. This recording is apparently sabotaged by the character of the shepherd, another seemingly purely functional character defined by his subversive practice: he switches the numbers on the gravestones in the cemetery section dedicated to suicides. Nevertheless, the shepherd remains most faithful to the principle or arbitrariness that rules over every conceivable system of signification precisely when he subverts the law that associates a number with a gravestone. Unknowingly, or perhaps knowingly, he serves the ever-present gap separating the signifier from its signified and allowing for their meaningful articulation. He is, therefore, in the service of radical absence. He knows that the attribution of a number to a corpse, or of a body to a being is not more "telling" of the truth of one's being (nor more useful to the work of mourning) than the attribution of a name to that being at birth. As such, in trying to escape the Law, he falls deeper into submission to it. One may recall, at this point, Heidegger's observation that it is impossible to subvert a system (of metaphysics) from within, by making use of its laws and vocabulary. Others, like the conceptual artists discussed in the second chapter, would argue the exact opposite and advocate for subversion from within as the only efficient way, using the self-reflexive potential of the figures of absence.

Senhor José adopts a different strategy from the shepherd's: in an attempt to compensate for the monotony of his work as a clerk inscribing and transcribing demographic information in the Central Registry, he creates his own personal registry, where he extends his archival work beyond the simple gathering of names and dates. He complements the scarcity of the signifiers required by the Central Registry with photographs, newspaper clippings, biographical details, or anything that could contribute to a more or less detailed representation of the complexity of a human life that has somehow individualized itself among the general anonymity created by the archive. This overwhelming conglomerate of writing obscures, through sheer quantity, the absences it records. Like the shepherd, Senhor José reinforces his submission to the archival impulse by secretly trying to escape it. This point is consistent with what Foucault notices about Henri Sorge, Maurice Blanchot's archivist from *The Most High*:

> Henri Sorge is a bureaucrat: he works at city hall, in the office of vital statistics; he is only a tiny cog in a strange machine that turns individual existences into an institution; he is the primary form of law, because he transforms every birth into an archive. But then he abandons his duty [. . .] Yet when Sorge leaves state service, where he was responsible for ordering other people's existence, he does not go outside the law. Quite the opposite, he forces it to manifest itself at the empty place he just abandoned. The movement by which he effaces his singular existence and removes it from the universality of the law in fact exalts the law; [. . .] he has become one with the law. The law can only respond to this provocation by withdrawing: not by retreating into a still deeper silence, but by remaining immobile in its identity. [. . .] He is Orestes in submission, an Orestes whose concern is to escape the law in order to fall farther into submission to it. [. . .] He, the possessor of every name, is transformed into something unnamable, an absent absence, the amorphous presence of the void and the mute horror of that presence.[435]

I am unaware whether Saramago had read Blanchot's novel before writing *All the Names*. What is certain is that the two texts overlap in many nodes of their rhizomic structures. Like Senhor José, Henri Sorge has access to "all the names" as an employee in a state institution. He resumes his work in the "office of vital statistics" (after having been away on sick leave) with a lack of enthusiasm incompatible with his initial efficacy and rigorousness. At some point in their respective narratives, both clerks abandon their bureaucratic work with a gesture as definitive as (even if rhetorically less sharp than) Bartleby's famous preference "not to." Moreover, both Senhor José and Sorge live by themselves in sparsely furnished apartments and keep written records of their daily activities, extending their record-keeping activity at home. In fact, Blanchot's entire novel turns out to be the protagonist's diary:

> I'd have liked to write a report on the day, and, moreover, on my whole life – a report, by that I mean a simple diary. [. . .] So, I asked myself, what is this State? It's in me, I feel its existence in everything I do, through every fiber of my body. I was certain then that all I had to do was write, hour by hour, a commentary of my activities, in order to find in them the blossoming of a supreme truth, the same one that circulated actively between all of us, a truth that public life constantly relaunched, watched over, reabsorbed, and threw back in an obsessive and deliberate game.[436]

In Saramago's novel, the third person narrative is often and suddenly interrupted by direct speech. The pronominal switch occurs without being signaled with adequate punctuation, as if the voice speaking is simultaneously an "I" and an Other: "It doesn't even look like me, he thought, and yet he had probably never looked more like himself."[437] This resonates with the point I have raised earlier my

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435 Michel Foucault, "Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside," in *Foucault, Blanchot*, translated by Brian Massumi (New York: Zone Books, 1987), 37–39.

436 Blanchot, *The Most High*, 18–19.

437 Saramago, *All the Names*, 91–92.

about the non-distinctiveness of the bureaucratic self, its assumed non-identity, and the infinite interchangeability of place-holder subjects.

One day, in his lunch break, Sorge reads a newspaper article about a woman who had plunged five stories to her death. It is unclear if her death had been an accident or a suicide but, as Sorge concludes and Saramago's shepherd illustrates, "a suicide too *is* an accident."[438] As Catherine Malabou explains in her *Ontology of the Accident*, the unpredictable contingencies of an accident are not without consequence for the self-consistency of the subject who experiences them.[439] The unknown woman's birth certificate falls into Senhor José's hands exactly in the same way in which Sorge stumbles upon the article about the anonymous suicidal woman – *by accident.* In *The Telepathy of Archives*, Susan Howe describes the immediacy of such chance encounters that take place in the archive: "Often by chance, via out-of-the-way card catalogs, or through previous web surfing, a particular 'deep' text, or a simple object (bobbin, sampler, scrap of lace) reveals itself *here* at the surface of the visible, by mystic documentary telepathy. Quickly – precariously – coming as it does from an opposite direction."[440] These chance encounters are simultaneously life-restoring (for the archival material brought to light) and subject-splitting (for the finder that becomes self-reflexive):

> One historical-existential trace has been hunted, captured, guarded, and preserved in aversion to waste by an avid collector, then shut carefully away, outside an economy of use, inaccessible to touch. Now it is re-animated, re-collected (recollected) through an encounter with the mind of a curious reader, a researcher, an antiquarian, a bibliomaniac, a sub sub librarian, a poet. Each collected object or manuscript is a pre-articulate empty theater where a thought may surprise itself at the instant of seeing. Where a thought may hear itself see.[441]

Both clerks are unavoidably marked by these mysterious female figures, by their unelucidated deaths and their unknowable secrets. This hypnotic fascination changes the course of their lives and their own identities: Sorge becomes a revolutionary against the oppressive and ubiquitous order he used to serve as an archivist, while Senhor José lets himself prey to his desire for loss and, full of hope, embarks on what he knows to be a hopeless quest. This is not the place to run a full analysis of all the resemblances between *The Most High* and *All the Names*, but I will note that Foucault's commentary on the impossibility of true disobedience in Blanchot's novel

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438 Blanchot, *The Most High,* 5.

439 Catherine Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, translated by Carolyn Shread (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 29.

440 Susan Howe, *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives* (New York: Christine Burgin, New Directions, 2014), 18.

441 Howe, *Spontaneous Particulars*, 24.

also applies to Saramago's. *All the Names*, too, "the subversion of the apparent law *is* the secret law"[442] that rules over the Archive and holds it together. The fact is acknowledged by another employee of the Central Registry, while speaking about the orders he receives from the Registrar: "I have to do a deal more than just follow them, I have to interpret them, Why, Because there's usually a difference between what he tells me to do and what he actually wants."[443] What the Registrar actually wants is Senhor José's disobedience; the higher authority encourages rebellion by formally forbidding it. He therefore exemplifies how the existence of the Law is conditioned by the possibility of its violation – and this is the secret principle that allows for the inescapable power of the state, strengthened by acts of opposition. Despite multiple and scattered attempts to escape the law and subvert the order of the state, true opposition to it is impossible. Authentic disobedience is fundamentally and necessarily absent and the state is built on this very absence:

> For the State will know how to use your insubordination, and not only will it take advantage of it, but you, in opposition and revolt, will be its delegate and representative as fully as you would have been in your office, following the law. The only change is that you want change and there won't be any. What you'd like to call destruction of the State will always appear to you really as service to the State. What you'll do to escape the law will still be the force of the law for you.[444]

For law theorists such as Cornelia Vismann, absence under the form of "loss, or cancellation (from the Latin *cancellare*, to cross out), is shown to lie at the heart of the constitution of the legal order."[445] The agents that maintain that order through their writing cannot escape being marked by this absence, both as writers and as servants of the Law. A good illustration of this vacuity is rendered visible in Florian Henckel von Donnersmark's *The Lives of Others* – a cinematic rendition of the life of a clerk consisting of little else than a bureaucratic recording of the lives of others. Moreover, the non-identity of the two legal regimes (the explicit interdiction to transgress the law and the implicit encouragement of disobedience) reveals the secret of the Law: it is empty, purely conventional, and therefore arbitrary, like any convention.

If the doorkeepers (*archons*) of the archive prevent access to the pure presence of law by disguising it in the forms of a carefully guarded bureaucratic materiality

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442 Foucault, "Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside," 74.

443 Saramago, *All the Names*, 111.

444 Blanchot, *The Most High*, 137.

445 Maria Aristodemou, "Bare Law Between Two Lives: José Saramago and Cornelia Vismann on Naming, Filing, and Cancelling," in *Liminal Discourses: Subliminal Tensions in Law and Literature*, edited by Daniela Carpi (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 39.

(documents, reports, indexes, files, codes, numbers, procedures), what they actually do is prevent the other subjects of the law from seeing that inside "nothing is all there is."[446] For Foucault, too, this absence is visible: "the presence of the law is its concealment."[447] This is perhaps the reason why Senhor José's repeated negligence of his duties is treated with unexpected kindness and paternal protection by the Registrar. This unprecedented behavior coming from the highest authority in the archive demonstrates that systematicity of the (archival) system relies on the existence of an element of subversion threatening its apparent normative order. Maria Aristodemou notes that the apparent impersonality of the archive and the terrifying stacks with their files are only a disguise for the true origin of the power:

> In short, files try to give the appearance of a self-founding law, a law without a lawmaker, a command without a commander, an archive without a writer, an "act" without an actor. If files were successful in hiding the lawmaker, the actor, the origin, we might start believing that there is, indeed, a no "before the law'. There is always an actor though, and an act, often a violent one, even if it remains unconscious, forgotten or deleted. [. . .] Saramago's fiction displays the hidden actor behind the seamless appearance of administration. *All the Names* in particular shows what can happen when the supposedly impotent and insignificant administrator comes out of his hiding place and wields the power he already had.[448]

The element of subversion is precisely what ensures the proper functioning of the archive. Ernesto Laclau explained this strange relation of dependency when he described how and why the empty signifier is at once the necessary condition for the existence of any system of signification, as well as for its cancellation.[449] This observation applies to all conceivable systems of signification; it is not limited to the linguistic realm. It suffices to think of the many different archives in the novel trying to inscribe – and therefore to tame, to stabilize – the identity of the same unknown woman in their respective medium and code: linguistic, for the Central Registry; numeric, for the Cemetery; visual, for the school records which keep some of her photographs; affective, for the memories of her old godmother; or sensorial, for the personal objects left in her apartment and still impregnated with her absent presence. Her voicemail message, "I am not at home right now," can be understood (as Senhor José does) in a Derridean translation which equates the home of the *archons* with the archival space. "I am not at home" actually means "I am not in my archive," or even "I am not in any archive." Laclau's essay makes a relevant point about this resistance to representation and containment, exhibited by empty signifiers:

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446 Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 72.

447 Foucault, "Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside," 33.

448 Aristodemou, "Bare Law," 42.

449 Laclau, "Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics," 37.

> It is only in so far as there is a radical impossibility of a system as pure presence, beyond all exclusions, that actual *systems* (in the plural) can exist. Now, if the systematicity of the system is a direct result of the exclusionary limit, it is only that exclusion grounds the system as such. [. . .] The system cannot have a positive ground and, as a result, it cannot signify itself in terms of any positive signified. [. . .] But a system constituted through radical exclusion interrupts this play of the differential logic: what is excluded from the system, far from being something positive, is the simple principle of positivity – pure being. This already announces the possibility of an empty signifier – that is a signifier of the pure cancellation of all differences. [. . .] Why does this pure being or systematicity of the system, or – its reverse – the pure negativity of the excluded, require the production of empty signifiers in order to signify itself? The answer is that we are trying to signify the limits of signification – the real, if you want, in the Lacanian sense – and there is no direct way of doing so except through the subversion of the process of signification itself. [. . .] As, however, all the means of representation are differential in nature, it is only if the differential nature of the signifying units is subverted, only if the signifiers empty themselves of their attachment to particular signifieds and assume the role of representing the pure being of the system – or, rather, the system as pure Being – that such a signification is possible. What is the ontological ground of such subversion, what makes it possible? The answer is: the split of each unit of signification that the system has to construct as the undecidable locus in which both the logic of difference and the logic of equivalence operate.[450]

This constitutive split also accounts for the fragile division of the Central Registry in the sections allocated to the living and, respectively, to the dead. However, as the Registrar realizes and preaches toward the end of the novel, "the archive, despite its ontological first principles, cannot keep the dead separated from the living: the archive's own subject position, its metaphysical compact, is split. Thus, the individual archivist inevitably begins to reflect the categorical confusions of the archive."[451] In other words, the inner splitting of the archive, inevitable but also impossible, is not without consequence for Senhor José himself, whose sense of identity undergoes a progressively schizoid oscillation between self-identity and the experience of an estranged self: "Senhor José [. . .] was amazed by what he saw in the mirror, he hadn't imagined that his face could possibly get into this state, [. . .] It doesn't even look like me, he thought, and yet he had probably never looked more like himself."[452] Or, a little further in the text: "at that moment, Senhor José did not seem like Senhor José, or, rather, there were two Senhor Josés lying in bed, with the blankets up to their nose, one Senhor José who

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450 Laclau, "Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics," 38–39.

451 Jonathan Boulter, *Melancholy and the Archive: Trauma, History and Memory in the Contemporary Novel* (London, New York: Continuum, 2011), 171.

452 Saramago, *All the Names*, 91–92.

had lost all sense of responsibility, another to whom this was all a matter of complete indifference."[453] The split operates not only in the synchronic order but also in diachrony, as illustrated in the nightmare episode:

> [. . .] he stopped being Senhor José, clerk at the Central Registry, he stopped being fifty years old, now he is a very young José who has just started going to school, he is the child who hated going to sleep because every night he had the same obsessive nightmare [. . .] The child emerged screaming from the nightmare when the filthy mass was touching his feet, when the tightening garrote of fear was almost strangling him, but poor Senhor José cannot wake from a dream which is no longer his.[454]

Simultaneous with the split there is also a doubling: behind every schizoid archivist there is a schizoid archive. Both the archivist and the archive are marked by absence, by their inability to locate the lost object (in a way, they even desire its absence and deepen it even further, with their quest), mainly because their own inner configurations are unstable, blurred and marked by a paradoxical absence of themselves to themselves:

> Saramago is doubling the melancholy stakes here: he is not simply suggesting that mourning is problematized by the inability to locate the object of loss; he is suggesting that mourning cannot occur if the subject of mourning, the one subjected to the sense of loss, is himself unable to locate himself. [. . .] If José keeps the woman "unknown" to the reader, thus obscuring her identity and articulating her (uncomfortably) as a version of Freud's "dark continent," the archive works reciprocally to obscure José to himself, compelling him to become his own (dark) Other.[455]

The model of the empty signifier detailed by Ernesto Laclau explains, thus, why the unknown woman is forever unreachable and unknowable, despite the many approximations that signify her in various archives. In *The Inoperative Community*, Jean-Luc Nancy takes this issue even further and argues that the subject is forced to admit that what we all have in common is the relation to our own, and thus each other's, unknowability: "I recognize that in the death of the other there is nothing recognizable."[456] The unknown woman is a constitutive lack, the embodiment of Senhor José's sense of an absent self. Her absence is a necessary impossibility, an object of desire which, remaining forever unattainable, not only feeds Senhor José's desire and his many archives, but also makes them possible to begin with:

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453 Saramago, *All the Names*, 97.

454 Saramago, *All the Names*, 147.

455 Boulter, *Melancholy and the Archive*, 172.

456 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, translated by Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michel Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, 33), cited in William Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 228.

> [. . .] the being or the systematicity of the system which is represented through the empty signifiers is not a being which has not been actually realized, but one which is constitutively unreachable, for whatever systematic effects that would exist will be the result, as we have seen, of the unstable compromise between equivalence and difference. That is, we are faced with a constitutive lack, with an impossible object which, as in Kant, shows itself through the impossibility of its adequate representation. There can be empty signifiers within the field of signification because any system of signification is structured around an empty place resulting from the impossibility of producing an object which, nonetheless, is required by the systematicity of the system. So, we are not dealing with an impossibility without location, as in the case of a logical contradiction, but with a positive impossibility, with a real one to which the x of the empty signifier points. However, if this impossible object lacks the means of its adequate or direct representation this can only mean that the signifier which is emptied in order to assume the representing function will always be constitutively inadequate.[457]

The same reasoning stands behind the second part of *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, in Slavoj Žižek's analysis of the courtly love that adds to previous exegeses by Henri-Irénée Marou and Denis de Rougemont[458] the idea of devotion to an inhuman, impossible, and traumatic female figure. Her desirability is conditioned by the eternal postponing of the fulfillment of desire – in other words, only on condition of her absence. From this perspective, the reader may easily remember how Senhor José never takes the easy path in his efforts of tracing the unknown woman: he ventures into improbable inquiries on the streets where she used to live decades ago, instead of looking her up in the telephone book, he puts his safety and reputation at risk when he breaks into the school like a thief, instead of requesting information from the tax authorities (and so on), as if he unconsciously wishes to prolong his chase and to delay as much as possible the moment of her finding – which is also the moment of her irretrievable loss. Like Jaufré Rudel and other medieval troubadours, Senhor José takes pleasure in his waiting, in his careless risks, in his radical devotion. He knows and he even admits that his arousal is caused more by the hunt than by the prey:

> Let's imagine a hunter, he was saying to himself, let's imagine a hunter who has lovingly gathered together his equipment [. . .], let's imagine him setting out with his dogs, determined, confident, prepared, as one should be on these hunting expeditions, for a long day, and then, as he turns around the corner, he comes across a flock of partridges right by his house, ready and willing to be killed [. . .]. What interest could such an easy kill have for the hunter, with those partridges offering themselves up, so to speak, to his gun, wondered Senhor José, and he gave the obvious answer, None. That's what happened to me, he added, inside my head, and probably inside everyone's head, there must be an autonomous thought that thinks for itself, that decides things without the participation of any other

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457 Laclau, "Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics," 39–40.

458 Henri-Irénée Marou, "L'amour courtois," in *Les Troubadours* (Paris: Seuil, 1961). Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

thought, it is the thought we have known for as long as we have known ourselves and which we address familiarly as "tu" [. . .] we know that it is search that gives meaning to any find and that one often has to travel a long way to arrive at what is near.[459]

This is the case perhaps because he is aware that there is, in fact, no prey, no secret, no outside; nothing to be known: "But that outside is empty, the secret has no depth, what is repeated is the emptiness of repetition, it does not speak and yet has always already been said."[460] Why would one embark on a quest if he is aware of the emptiness of what he is looking for? There is an absurd quality to this irrational separation between cause and effect, to its senseless, melancholic motivation. The idea brings to mind one of the most striking scenes in Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, in which the protagonist receives a gift delivered with careful instructions and great efforts from beyond Mr. Honda's grave:

> "I am glad in any case that I was able to hand you the package from Mr. Honda. This means that my job is done at last. I can go home with an easy mind."
>
> I stood there and watched as the bus disappeared around the next corner. After it was gone, I felt a strange emptiness inside, a hopeless kind of feeling like that of a small child who has been left alone in an unfamiliar neighborhood.
>
> Then I went home, and sitting on the living room couch, I opened the package that Mr. Honda had left me as a keepsake. I worked up a sweat removing layer after layer of carefully sealed wrapping paper, until a sturdy cardbox emerged. It was a fancy Cutty Sark gift box, but it was too light to contain a bottle of whiskey. I opened it, to find nothing inside. It was absolutely empty. All that Mr. Honda had left me was an empty box.[461]

As Murakami's protagonist will discover afterwards, he misinterpreted the message carried by this emptiness: the real gift had been the encounter with the man in charge with the delivery. Similarly, for Senhor José, the reward of his quest is not the finding of the woman but the quest itself – the desire-driven exploration which will make him venture fearlessly in the dark labyrinth of the archive. His Ariadne is the unknown woman. She guides him from beyond the grave, without ever being aware of it, towards the possibility of finding his absent (repressed?) self that is more than a machinery of inscription in the archive.

This guidance demands irrational devotion and a willingness to suspend the differential play of a logic that would still think in binaries: "A last vestige of common sense prompted the fleeting thought that he had probably just tied the knot

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459 Saramago, *All the Names*, 52–53.

460 Foucault, "Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside," 54.

461 Haruki Murakami, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, translated by Jay Rubin (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 171–172.

in the rope that would hang him, but this madness calmed him."[462] For Susan Howe, this paradoxical state of calm madness is inherent to the Archive: "The structure displays and contains acquisitive violence, the rapacious 'fetching' involved in collecting, and, on the other hand, it radiates a sense of peace."[463] It is also synonymous with Blanchot's "gentle madness" manifest in thinking the disaster, in thinking disastrously: "Madness through excess of gentleness, gentle madness. To think, to be effaced: the disaster of gentleness."[464] In a way similar to Catherine Malabou's accidental contingencies that give birth to a new subject,[465] the unknowability of the feminine figure and its melancholic empty core disrupt the causal chain of what was thought to be the subject, separate him from reality, and withdraw him from his old self. Not only that the subject is mad; he becomes his madness, where madness refers to the disjointedness of cause and effect, the point of fracture, the meaningful absence:

> The subject "is" this very gap that separates the cause from its effects; it emerges precisely in so far as the relationship between cause and effect becomes "unaccountable." [. . .] The philosophical name for this depression is absolute negativity – what Hegel called "the night of the world," the subject's withdrawal into itself. [. . .] And the link between this depression and the destructive life-substance is also clear: depression, withdrawal-into-self, is the primordial act of retreat, of maintaining a distance towards the indestructible life-substance, making it appear as a repulsive scintillation.[466]

After discussing the melancholic female subject in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* in the context of understanding absence as distancing from vital principles, Žižek brings Otto Weininger into his argument. More specifically, he expands on Weininger's often misread assertion, "Woman does not exist," which he reads as a deconstruction of the stereotype of the unknowable feminine secret: "Woman *qua* Enigma is a specter generated by the inconsistent surface of multiple masks – the secret of 'Secret' itself is the inconsistency of the surface."[467] What does not exist, according to this view, is in fact the essentialist category of "Woman" that implies the existence of a set of traits inherent to all women. The inconsistency pointed out above resonates with the vacuity of the archivist subject, explicit in Saramago's novel as well as in Blanchot's: "I am a mask. I act like a mask and as such I play a dishonest role in this universal fabrication which spreads, over a humanity too full of the law –

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462 Saramago, *All the Names* 213.

463 Howe, *Spontaneous Particulars*, 43.

464 Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 7.

465 Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*, 29.

466 Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* (London, New York: Verso, 1994), 122.

467 Žižek, *Metastases*, 151.

like a light varnish, in order to soften the glare – a more crude and naive humanity, one that recalls the earlier stages in an evolution which, once it has arrived at its end, tries in vain to go back."[468] This absence of being hidden behind the mask is a function of the narrative and is openly performative: "And I too had a role. My role was to intervene in the story as a perpetually absent but always implied listener I said nothing, but everything had to be said before me."[469]

Derrida argues that the structure of the archive is spectral[470] because of its ambiguous ontological status which makes it neither entirely present nor entirely absent; the archive is "neither visible nor invisible, a trace always referring to another whose eyes can never be met."[471] If the unknown woman is unreachable, unattainable as an object of desire, that is perhaps because the subject of this desire (Senhor José) is himself a dislocated and fragmentary entity, a self-defined by an absence of self, and therefore its own Other.

Senhor José and the unknown woman are two possible modes of illustrating the subject's *failure* to achieve a full, unbroken identity. Both can be described as subjectivities without *any* subject (in the sense of a unified, self-consistent, and coherent human entity) – because their subjects are split, fragmented, and either pulverized in multiple archives, or driven by an irrational archival impulse ultimately generated by a self-destructive drive. The symptoms of Senhor José's progressive physical deterioration (his injuries, his shivers, his fever, his soiled clothes impregnated with grease and archive dust) are telling in this respect. According to Freud, mourning and melancholia as the two possible reactions to loss partially overlap in their symptoms and manifestations; however, "the disturbance of self-regard is absent in mourning"[472] and this situates Senhor José as a pure melancholic *subjectivity* – and not a pure melancholic *subject* because, as we have seen, his sense of selfhood disintegrates, lacking the internal cohesion and coherence needed to be referred to as a single unity. The "disturbance of self-regard" reaches radical forms in the case of the suicidal woman, whose death drive – "anarchic, anarchontic, [. . .] *anarchavic*, one could say, or *anarchiviolithic*"[473] – is both an aggression and a condition of existence of the archive. "The archive always works, and *a priori*, against itself," notes Derrida in *Archive Fever*.[474] The same can be said about Senhor José's

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468 Blanchot, *The Most High*, 179.
469 Blanchot, *The Most High*, 190.
470 Derrida, "Archive Fever," 27.
471 Derrida, "Archive Fever," 54.
472 Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 242.
473 Derrida, "Archive Fever," 14.
474 Derrida, "Archive Fever," 14.

self-destructive quest, as well as about the woman's (always) already accomplished suicide.

As melancholic subjects, they are oriented – as the archive is, too – toward the disaster that has already happened and is always yet to come. This disaster, which may be the "traumatism of astonishment"[475] provoked by the encounter with the threatening Other, is the only possible disruption of solitude for the clerk and, at the same time, the beginning of an impossible relation: "But the disaster is unknown; it is the unknown name for that in thought itself which dissuades us from thinking of it, leaving us, but its proximity, alone [. . .] and thus exposed to the thought of the disaster which disrupts solitude and overflows every variety of thought, as the intense, silent and disastrous affirmation of the outside."[476] Blanchot himself draws, in one of his late texts, a parallel between the disaster and the existence of a subjectivity *outside the subject* in the form of the "who" who comes *after* the subject: "Then if I understand you correctly, the 'who comes' never comes, except arbitrarily, or has always already come, in accordance with some incongruous words that I remember having read somewhere, not without irritation, where reference is made to the coming of what does not come, of what would come without an arrival, outside of Being and as though adrift."[477]

In his *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot has introduced for the first time the hypothesis of a "subjectivity without a subject" as a response to Levinas's theorizing of the "subjectivity of the subject." The vague definition of this new form of subjectivity includes "the wounded space, the hurt of the dying, the already dead body which no one could ever own."[478] Both Senhor José and the unknown woman are divided subjects with melancholic predispositions, with an inescapable desire for loss inscribed in their troubled subjectivities. The space opened in-between their split selves, the space of unknowability between the self and the self-as-its-Other, could be the kind of "wounded space" that Blanchot refers to as the predilect place of the subjectivity without a subject. By virtue of this resemblance, the unknown woman may not be the only empty signifier character in the novel. Saramago seems to confirm this hypothesis by leaving Senhor José's portrait and biography blank. He is, as Robert Musil would put it, "a man without qualities," an unremarkable archivist with the most common of names, characterized by "solitude or non-interiority, exposure to the outside, boundless dispersion,

475 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007), 73.

476 Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 5.

477 Blanchot, "Who?," in *Who Comes After the Subject*?, edited by Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, Jean-Luc Nancy (New York, London: Routledge, 1991), 59.

478 Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 30.

the impossibility of holding firm, within bounds, enclosed."[479] It is as if Senhor José's subjectivity overflows from the broken margins of his own subject with the same inextricable force with which the Central Registry keeps expanding beyond its ever-provisory borders. The archivist and the archive(d) likewise share the darkness of their own constitutive emptiness, what Hegel calls "the night" and describes as an inherent feature of the human being:

> The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity –
> an unending wealth of many representations, images, of which none belongs to him – or which
> are not present. This night, the inner of nature, that exists here – pure self – in phantasmagori-
> cal representations, is night all around it, in which here shoots a bloody head – there another
> white ghastly apparition, suddenly here before it, and just so disappears. One catches sight of
> this night when one looks human beings in the eye – into a night that becomes awful.[480]

Humanity (or "the totality of being," in the words of Heidegger), "the supplement that supplements nothing,"[481] is what gives stability to the "nothingness" of the subject, to its absence from itself. However, once the subject enters the symbolic regime (or any system of signification grounded on the split between a signifier and a signified), he begins to signify himself. In doing so, he projects himself as a sign among signs. As such, his being remains forever detached from his material body, attributed to an impersonal subjectivity "which no one could ever own":[482] "Ah, yes, wounds heal over on the body, but in the report they always stay open, they neither close up nor disappear."[483] The paper is different from the body in its ability to host affects and subjectivities. *The Most High* also reflects on this dissociation between writing and corporeality: "you're a book; you don't exist."[484] There is no "I" to feel the pain inscribed in the archive, a pain which, nevertheless, doesn't cease to exist. Exactly like Blanchot's disaster, "it does not touch anyone in particular; 'I' am not threatened by it, but spared, left aside. It is in this way that I am threatened; it is in this way that the disaster threatens in me that which is exterior to me – an other than I who passively become other. There is no reaching the disaster."[485] There is no reaching the unknown woman, either, because she is secret and "separate, that which is the most separate."[486]

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479 Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 30.
480 Donald Philip Verene, *Hegel's Recollection* (New York: SUNY Press, 1985), 7–8, cited in Žižek, *Metastases*, 145.
481 Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 30.
482 Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 30.
483 Saramago, *All the Names*, 110.
484 Blanchot, *The Most High*, 48.
485 Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 1.
486 Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 1.

Maria Aristodemou also writes about the inherent violence of the symbolic order which separates the subject from his own sense of self and from the Other. This inherent violence is the nothing that nihilates and estranges everything by turning everything into an absence:

> I looked over my hand at a pair of fascinated and terrified eyes. It was absolutely quiet, motionless, lying on the ground, it was there, I saw it, completely and not its image, as much from within as from without; I saw something flow, solidify, flow again, and *nothing in it moved,* its every movement was total numbness, these wrinkles, these excrescences, this surface of dry mud its crushed insides, this earthen heap its amorphous exterior, it didn't start anywhere, it didn't end anywhere, it didn't matter which side you caught it from, and once its form was half perceived it flattened out and fell back into a mass from which eyes could never get free.[487]

For Aristodemou, what is unusual in *All the Names* is the fact that this separation (which takes place in the archive and in every archival gesture) manifests itself as a living being in its own right:

> If the word, as Hegel insisted, and as Lacan never tired of repeating, is "the murder of the thing," then the symbolic order we inhabit, with its elaborate languages, rules, and prohibitions, cannot be other than the universe of death. [. . .] Where the symbolic order fetishizes the signifier at the expense of the real, and the form of the law at the expense of its substance, works of art like Saramago's novels [. . .] succeed in resurrecting inert signifiers and immobile corpses and turn them into living, breathing and growing bodies. [. . .] Language's murder of "the thing itself" means that the human subject is forever alienated from the truth of its being as well as from that of its fellow subjects.[488]

Like in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes*, where the die-cut interstices were to be read as living cells ensuring the flows of air and nutrients for the greater organism of absence, the Central Registry is another breathing, absence-storing entity: "What you could hear most clearly was a muffled sound that rose and fell, like a distant bellows, but Senhor José was used to that, it was the Central Registry breathing."[489] Let us stop for a moment on the movements of this breath that strangely endows the archive with something close to a life of its own. In *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, Levinas understands breathing as the disinterested openness of the interior to the outside, of the self to the other, a gesture capable to transcend the categories of being and non-being:

> An openness of the self to the other, which is not a conditioning or a foundation of oneself in some principle, a fixity of a sedentary inhabitant or a nomad, but a relation wholly differ-

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487 Blanchot, *The Most High*, 248 (emphasis mine).

488 Aristodemou, "Bare Law," 37–38.

489 Saramago, *All the* Names, 170.

ent from the occupation of a site, a building, or a settling oneself, breathing is transcendence in the form of opening up. It reveals all its meaning only in relationship with the other, in the proximity of a neighbor, which is responsibility for him, substitution for him. This pneumatism is not nonbeing; it is disinterestedness, excluded middle of essence, besides being and nonbeing.[490]

By this token, the breathing archive is animated by "the wind of alterity," the phenomenological symptom of the approach of the Other which offers the possibility of a beyond on condition of a responsibility for this beyond, a responsibility which necessarily and inevitably splits the subject:

> A further deep breathing even in the breath cut short by the wind of alterity. The approach of the neighbor is a fission of the subject beyond lungs, in the resistant nucleus of the ego, in the undividedness of its individuality. It is a fission of the self, or the self as fissibility, a passivity more passive still than the passivity of matter. To open oneself as space, to free oneself by breathing from closure in oneself already presupposes this beyond: my responsibility for the other and my aspiration by the other, the crushing charge, the beyond, of alterity.[491]

Isn't this an accurate description of what happens to Senhor José after his encounter with the spectrality of the unknown woman inscribed in her archived records? The space of the archive, its breath, is what allows for the encounter to literally "take place." According to Derrida, "there is no archive without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside"[492] – the archive always already implies its alterity. To a certain extent, it even contains it. Furthermore, Levinas notes how, already for Kant, "space remains a condition for the representation of an entity, and thus implies a subjectivity."[493] This subjectivity implied by the spatiality of the archive is, I argue, the subjectivity which no "I" (no subject) can own. It is, therefore, the equivalent of Blanchot's "subjectivity without a subject," driven by the promise of its future and already past disaster, "the already dead body which no one could ever own, or say of it, *I, my body.*"[494] It manifests itself as a discrete flow of air, invisible yet perceptible and vital, as described in the William Carlos Williams's poem which opens, as a premonition or a promise, this section: "For there is a wind or ghost of a wind / in all books echoing the life / there [. . .]." It is not incidental that Susan Howe cites it too in her *Telepathy of Archives* – it is the wind that permeates and animates all archives, the drive that makes Senhor

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490 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 181.

491 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 180–181.

492 Derrida, "Archive Fever," 14.

493 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 179.

494 Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 30.

José unable *not to* seek the unknown woman (responsibility, says J. Hillis Miller, is the imperative to do "that which one cannot not do"),[495] until he loses his self. The loss of self also translates in the inability to distinguish the archive from the "archive fever," the destructive fascination it exerts upon the subject: "seeking, seeking / down the wind / until we are unaware which is the wind and / which is the wind's power over us / to lead the mind away."[496]

This desire for loss, which can be called, among its many possible names, "archive fever," is the irresistible attraction of the Outside, the call of the Other which is always already lost. In his essay on Blanchot, Foucault expands on this force of attraction and on its being rooted in a constitutive absence. For him, attraction is based on desire, and therefore on absence. Furthermore, it describes the play of forces that tie Senhor José so intimately both to the Central Registry and to the unknown woman, whose clothes have the scent of the archive:

> Attraction is no doubt for Blanchot what desire is for Sade, force for Nietzsche, the materiality of thought for Artaud, and transgression for Bataille: the pure, most naked, experience of the outside. It is necessary to be clear about what the word designates: attraction, as Blanchot means it, does not depend on any charm. Nor does it break one's solitude, or found any positive communication. To be attracted is not to be beckoned by the allure of the outside; rather, it is to experience in emptiness and destitution the presence of the outside and, tied to that presence, the fact that one is irremediably outside the outside. Far from calling on one interiority to draw close to another, attraction makes it imperiously manifest that the outside is there, open, without intimacy, without protection or retention (how could it have any when it has no interiority, and, instead, infinitely unfolds outside any enclosure?)
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> [. . .] the outside never yields its essence. The outside cannot offer itself as a positive presence [. . .] but only as an absence that pulls as far away from itself as possible, receding into the sign it makes to draw one toward it (as though it were possible to reach it). Attraction, the marvelous simplicity of opening, has nothing to offer but the infinite void that opens beneath the feet of the person it attracts, the indifference that greets him as if he were not there, a silence too insistent to be resisted and too ambiguous to be deciphered and definitively interpreted – nothing to offer but a woman's gesture in the window, a door left ajar, the smile of a guard before a forbidden threshold, a gaze condemned to death.[497]

Another interesting point Foucault makes is the way in which, for Blanchot (and, as we have shown earlier, for Saramago as well), to be attracted by something means to become "the moving body of attraction itself:"

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495 Joseph Hillis Miller, "The Ethics of Narration," in *The J. Hillis Miller Reader*, edited by Julian Wolfreys (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 39.

496 William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, Book III, cited in Howe, *Spontaneous Particulars*, 13.

497 Foucault, "Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside," 27–28.

> Negligence is the necessary correlate of attraction. The relations between them are complex. To be susceptible to attraction a person must be negligent. [. . .] This kind of negligence is in fact the flip side of a zealousness – a mute, unjustified, obstinate diligence in surrendering oneself, against all odds, to being attracted by attraction, or more precisely (since attraction has no positivity) to being, in the void, the aimless movement without a moving body of attraction itself.[498]

Senhor José advances zealously (that is, negligently) in his anti-quest, until the complete loss of his position as a subject. In this regard, thinking of the meticulosity of his endeavors, one could ask the same questions and give the same answer as Foucault: "How could attraction not be essentially negligent [. . .]? For it is the infinite outside, for it is nothing that does not fall outside it, for it undoes every figure of interiority in pure dispersion. One is attracted precisely to the extent that one is neglected. This is why zeal can only consist in neglecting that negligence, in oneself becoming a courageously negligent solicitude."[499] Senhor José surrenders himself to the devoted quest for the unknown woman, whose absence emerged as a surplus of presence from the convoluted entrails of the writing that constitutes the archive.

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida notes that writing is the name of two absences and, as all inscription, it maintains an ineffaceable relation to death: "Spacing as writing is the becoming-absent and the becoming-unconscious of the subject. [. . .] All graphemes are of a testamentary essence. And the original absence of the subject of writing is also the absence of the thing or the referent."[500] In Saramago's novel, the original absence that marked Senhor José as a purely functional, blank character defined exclusively by his writing becomes consistent with the absence of the lives he inscribes and archives, metonymically represented by the absence of the unknown woman (whose function is reduced to that of pure referent). As writing and written characters, they are both incomplete subjects marked not only by the gaps inherent to writing where absolute presence is necessarily impossible, but also by a fractured sense of identity. Melancholically aware of an inner, indeterminate absence, they become figures of this absence, subjectivities solely moved by an intense desire for their own self-effacement: the unknown woman commits suicide, and Senhor José proceeds to lose himself in the dark depths of the archive.

Assuming that Senhor José has ever held the position of a unified subject, being the "pure recording entity" (subject without subjectivity?) which he was prior to the traumatic moment of encounter with the unknowability of the stranger, his sense of selfhood, his "I," is – now, after the fatal and vital encounter – divided, multiplied, dispersed, canceled as an autonomous entity. This self-effacement (which is, at the

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498 Foucault, "Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside," 28–29.
499 Foucault, "Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside," 31.
500 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 69.

same time, the highest possible form of self-affirmation) is rendered visible by Se-nhor José's complete assimilation in the darkness of the Central Registry, in the clos-ing line of Saramago's novel. By sacrificing his subject in order to become pure subjectivity, he has now, in fact, become one with the archive.

3.3 The Absent Other: *The Atlantic Man* and the Troubled Waters of Absence

Marguerite Duras's 1982 *The Atlantic Man*[501] (hereafter, *TAM*) has a hybrid textual structure that stands at the border of several literary genres and inhabits the over-lapping territory of two media: literature and cinema. Its 30 pages accommodate no more than 2,400 words, together with the many interludes of silence that sepa-rate them in the form of typographic blanks. The graphic arrangement of this ex-perimental work situates *The Atlantic Man* on the border between prose poetry and self-centered narrative, written for its most part in the second person. Rather inconsistent with the French editorial labels that classify it as a novel (*roman*) or a short story (*nouvelle*), the text lacks not only the standard length, but also the epic strength and complexity that would justify being referred to by either name.

Before being branded as a novel and published by Les Éditions de Minuit,[502] the text was the transcript of the soundtrack of an eponymous movie (*L'Homme Atlantique*,[503] 1981) created by Marguerite Duras from cuts left aside in her previ-ous film (*Agatha et les lectures illimitées*, 1981). As a film, *TAM* is a different kind of experiment than its textual counterpart, defying fundamental conventions of its own medium. Several disparate images of the ocean shore and of Duras's last partner, the future writer Yann Andréa, alternate with a black screen that is on display for most of this 45-minute-long, almost imageless cinematic experience. Throughout the film, Duras's voice is heard reading at a slow, monotonous pace what is not yet – but will later become – a literary work in itself. The origin of the text also accounts for its fragmentary structure, preserving the cutting gestures of the *montage* and remediating the imageless frames of the film into typographic blanks that isolate the already minimalist, hermetic paragraphs.[504]

The radical visual statements deployed in Duras's parallel versions of *TAM* (the written and the screened) converge mostly on the image – or rather the *im-*

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501 Duras, "The Atlantic Man," in *Two by Duras*, 29–58.

502 Duras, *L'Homme Atlantique* (Paris: Minuit, 1982).

503 Duras, *L'Homme Atlantique*, 45′, with Yann Andréa, Ina/Production Berthemont, France, 1981.

504 While it is true that not all fragmented texts come from fragmented movies, the fact that *TAM* is a transcript of cinematic fragments definitely has an impact on its written form.

agelessness – of a figure tied, more or less vaguely, to a former love story. This is perhaps the main *"trait"* (understood as "characteristic," but also as a visual, graphic trace) that outlines the proximity between *TAM* and Dibutade's mythical gesture, drawing the contours of her lover's shadow projected on the wall.[505] Both creative approaches originate in the intimate relations that representation and figuration hold with the ontological interplay of absence and presence, and in particular with their spectral (in)visibility.

If, for Dibutade, the development of these relations needs no further demonstration, because it constitutes the very substance and structure of her myth (read literally *and* allegorically), I argue that a Dibutadian craft shapes the central absence of *The Atlantic Man.* This craft, like the work itself, is transmedial, so we first need to examine how it transfers from cinema to literature (as opposed to conventional adaptations that usually proceed the other way around, from the literary work to the adapted film). Secondly, an aesthetic analysis shows the predominance of fragmentation and repetition among the rhetorical devices used by Duras to experiment with remarkable *effets d'absence* [absence effects].

In the absence of an actual image, the cinematic medium generates new and surprising relations with time, temporality, and duration, further problematized by the use of black leader in the interruption and fragmentation of conventional footage. The empty black frames function simultaneously as cinematic punctuation and a strategy for suspending, deferring, or blocking meaning. In addition, the voiced-over imageless sequences are explicit in their intention to trigger affective reactions of anticipation, suspense, and longing. They elicit a strong desire for imagery while also provoking a progressive frustration of this desire. To grapple with *TAM*'s dual status as a literary and a cinematic work, I will briefly recall

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505 A thorough analysis of Ancient Greek texts attributes both the name and the gesture to the father of the girl, a potter, and therefore links the representation of absence to plastic arts instead of painting. According to the dedicated entry in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the girl's name was actually Kora of Sicyon and her father, Butades of Sicyon, was mistakenly called Dibutade – see Hugh Chrisolm, "Butades," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 4, 11th edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910, 877). Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux likewise argues for the inconsistency of Dibutade's myth as developed in Romanticism with the ancient sources and highlights how this myth on the creation of painting is an invention in itself – see Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux, "'La fille de Dibutade', ou l'inventrice inventée," *Cahiers du Genre* 43, no. 2 (2007): 133–151. Not inconveniently, the French critic advocates for a re-configuration of Dibutade's daughter as the originary figure anticipating the advent of photography as imprint of shadows, instead of the founding-figure of painting. Nevertheless, for the intents and purposes of this study which is more concerned with Duras's *TAM* than with the Greek origins of the myth, I shall preserve the name Dibutade and the Romantic version of the myth.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's famous comparison between arts of consecutiveness and arts of simultaneity.

3.3.1 Absence and Intermediality

In his classic *Laocoön, or The Limits of Poetry and Painting*, Lessing argues that both poetry and painting aim to create pleasurable illusions. While both refer to absent things as present and to appearances as realities, the two media differ in their objects and in their modes of imitation. The famous interarts comparison summarized in sections 15 and 16 of *Laocoön* distinguishes between arts of consecutiveness and arts of simultaneity.[506] The former are verbal arts and music, defined by a temporal structuring principle and by the pre-eminence of invention and progression in their way of representing actions. The latter are visual arts, which unfold in space rather than in time; they privilege execution over invention and juxtaposition over progression in the representation of bodies. To apply Lessing's observations to the book and the film under discussion here implies – as the German author himself does for the purposes of his polemic with Winckelmann – to expand the two terms of comparison and to read them in a broader sense. What he calls "poetry" would stand for literature as a whole and what he describes as "painting" would refer to an expanded realm of the visual, including photography and the film image. It remains undeniable, however, that both the film and the novel cannot unfold outside a certain temporal order. For this reason, my reading pays special attention to the relation the two versions of *TAM* maintain with time.

In reading Lessing, one cannot neglect the author's personal preference for the verbal over the visual, which continues an ancient ekphrastic tradition. Marguerite Duras's use of both verbal and visual media, at least in the case of *TAM*, does not take any side in this dispute. She does not claim to offer a twentieth-century response to the *Paragone* debate on the supremacy of arts – even though, at times, one may be tricked into thinking she does. At a certain point in the movie and in its transcript, the voice over asks: "Why not make a film? From now on writing would be too difficult. Why not a film?" (*TAM*, 47). Duras decides to make a film out of the impossibility to write the absence of the loved Other, out of the failure of language to fully grasp the loss that constitutes this absence. Translating this failure, the movie is almost entirely deprived of its images. *TAM* is an experimental film that pushes its medium-specific boundaries so far that it

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506 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön, or The Limits of Poetry and Painting* [1766], translated by William Ross (London: J. Ridgway & Sons, 1836), 146–163.

ceases to be "visual" at all. It is a film meant to be seen blindly. Or unseen. When the screen turns black, the film is reduced only to the audible version of its literary counterpart, and this can hardly stand as an argument for the superiority of the cinematic medium over the literary one. Marguerite Duras too acknowledges the powerlessness of images: "I wanted to say: film believes it can preserve what you are doing at this moment. But you, from where you are, wherever it may be, whether you have gone away still bonded to the sand, or the wind, or the sea, or the wall, or the bird, or the dog, you will realize that film cannot do that" (*TAM*, 37). Further on, she acknowledges again the insufficient powers of the cinematic medium: "The film will remain like this, as it is. I have no more images for it. I no longer know where we are, at what end of what love, at what beginning of what other love, in what story we have lost ourselves. It is only for this film that I know. For the film alone I know, I know, I know that no image, no single image more, could make it last any longer" (*TAM*, 54).

The images vanish from the screen, but the monologue goes on for a while until the ending credits. Could that be seen as an argument for the superiority of verbal language? Hardly that, either. Rather, *TAM* shows that the representational potential of both artifacts, verbal and visual, has been exhausted. The two media are equally limited in their powers to render an absence present, "as absence": "There are also remains of that exaltation that comes over me from not knowing what to do with all this, with all the knowledge I have of your eyes, of the immensities your eyes explore, *to the point of not knowing what to write*, what to say, *what to show* from their pristine insignificance."[507] As discussed in the previous chapters, representation is a matter of displacing the referent, while inscribing its absence into the present and into the presence of its sign – an interplay of absence and presence unfit for the mimetic reproduction of absolute absence: "The film will remain like this. Finished. You are at once hidden and present. Present only through this film, hidden from yourself, from all knowledge anyone could have of you."[508] Therefore, this presence of an absence deems its object unknowable otherwise than in the form of a trace or a secret, an incomplete representation unfaithful to its referent.

The *you* to whom Duras addresses her monologue makes flickering appearances. On a first level, biographic and cast-related, it refers to Yann Andréa – the sole actor of the movie and the writer's last partner in Duras's biography. In the film, just as in the French text, he is addressed formally with the plural *vous* instead of the more common *tu* that may have been expected instead in a late twentieth-century lover's monologue. In the English translation, this important nuance is inev-

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507 Duras, "The Atlantic Man," 55 (emphasis mine).
508 Duras, "The Atlantic Man," 54 (emphasis mine).

itably lost. On a metafictional level, however, the *you* may just as rightfully address the audience, in its plurality of readers and/or spectators. The entire audience or each individual at a time is addressed formally, as a stranger. This observation quickly brings to my mind, extending the interarts comparison, Urs Fischer's emptied exhibition room at Gavin Brown's Enterprise Gallery in New York, for which the artist had jackhammered several feet into the floor to challenge the invisible materiality of the *white cube* as conventional empty signifier in current curatorial practice.[509] Surrounded by impeccable white walls, the resulting crater speaks of a lack, makes room in the already empty space for loss, for absence. The installation is called *You* and it preserves the same ambiguity as in *TAM*. Who is the missing "you"? The visitor of the gallery? A lost lover? A divine entity? Meaning? The lack of determinacy surrounding this unanchored deictic qualifies it to become what Derrida would call a "transcendental signifier."[510]

A metafictional, self-reflexive reading implies the hypothesis of a film acutely aware of its medium, pointing at its own self-awareness: "you are the only one to stand [. . .] in my presence, at this very moment of the film that is being made," (*TAM*, 34) "the camera will now capture your reappearance" (*TAM*, 48). There lies implicit a meditation on the film's ability to capture a unique presence in a unique moment of time, which would otherwise be lost outside the cinematic medium. Several pages later, the film is again self-referential in showing itself as being aware of the particular circumstances of its screening: "You will look at all the people in the audience, one by one, each one in particular. Remember this, very clearly: the movie-theater is in itself, like yourself, the entire world, you are the entire world, you, you alone" (*TAM*, 50). In all its emptiness, the nothing displayed on the screen overflows its material margins. By cancelling any separation of the darkness of the projection room from the darkness that is projected, the film endows the rectangular projection surface with the infinite width and depth of the world. To say that, for Duras, watching the film is perfectly synonymous with apprehending the world is not so far-fetched a hypothesis, considering how this film's spectator hears, looking at an empty screen, the following:[511]

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509 The work has been referred to in the section dedicated to the empty exhibitions as figures of absence, in Chapter 2.

510 See Chapter 1.

511 The quotation maintains the original use of blank lines to separate paragraphs, producing a powerful effect of fragmentation and distancing that isolates bits of text. This graphic arrangement likewise emphasizes a conscious use of spacing (*différance*) as a meaning-making strategy departing from the material conditions of existence implied by writing.

You will look at what you see. But you will look at it absolutely. You will try to look at it absolutely. You will try to look at it until your sight fails, until it makes itself blind, and even through this blindness you must try again to look. Until the end.

You ask me: look at what?
I say, well, I say "the sea," yes, this word facing you, these walls facing the sea, these successive disappearances, this dog, this coast, this bird beneath the Atlantic wind.

Listen. I also believe that if you were not to look at that which appears before you, it would become apparent on the screen. And the screen would go blank. (*TAM*, 32–33)

Duras proves that not-looking, too, is a something that may become visible, "apparent on the screen." If the screen is empty, she argues, it is so because the spectators are not really looking at it. At least, not looking hard enough. Not looking "absolutely."

In *TAM*'s black frames, the disappearance of the image is equally the disappearance of bodies and actions. It is obviously progressive, unfolding in the time of the projection or of the reading, but also curiously static, fixed in the claustrophobic desertedness that takes over the entire field of view: "You are on the edge of the sea, you are on the edge of those things trapped among themselves by your eyes" (*TAM*, 39). Seen in this way, the film is just as much visual as it is verbal. At times, it is paradoxically more verbal than visual. The visuals are intentionally blinded, testifying for the fundamental opacity of the cinematic medium (in need of a certain darkness to project the motions of light). The imperative commands to listen, to see, to look, or, on the contrary, *not* to look at something account for a sort of rhythmic backbone of the film and/or of the prose: "You will not look straight at the camera. Except when you are told to do so. [. . .] You will also forget about the camera" (*TAM*, 31). Or: "You will pass once again in front of the camera. This time you will look at it. Look at the camera. The camera will now capture your reappearance" (*TAM*, 48). This obsessive insistence on looking at the camera may remind the patient reader of Marc Vernet's figures of absence in cinema. One of them (indeed, the first) was precisely *le regard à la caméra*. Vernet argues against a more traditional opinion, which sees this visual rhetorical strategy as an open admission of a presence of something beyond the square(d) frame of *diegesis*.[512] He

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512 Vernet, *Figures de l'absence au cinéma*, 9: "*Pour nombre d'auteurs, c'est par l'absence du regard à la caméra, par son évitement systématique que se définit le cinéma narratif, par opposition à toute autre forme de cinéma. [. . .] La thèse traditionnelle veut donc que le regard à la caméra ait pour double effet de dévoiler l'instance d'énonciation dans le film et de dénoncer le voyeurisme du spectateur, mettant brutalement en communication l'espace de production du film avec l'espace de réception; la salle de cinéma, en faisant entre-deux disparaître l'effet-fiction. De sorte que le regard à la caméra serait 'l'intérdit majeur' et le 'refoulé du cinéma narratif.' Tout cela est générale-*

then proceeds to contradict this view by showing that looking at the camera can have multiple underpinnings (from expressing a desire to the Brechtian denouncing of the artifice of enunciation) and effects (from empathy to alienation, from opening the possibility of a dialogue to the blocking of this possibility). Therefore, context is essential for an accurate interpretation of this figure of absence.

In *TAM*, looking at the camera is an action instrumented to show a desire for control, a wishful configuration of the power relations at play between subject and object, lover and loved, abandoned and departed. The voice-off that imperatively demands from the only character to maintain direct visual contact with the video-recording device is quasi-dictatorial, imposing itself upon the image, interacting with it, and reconfiguring it in real-time. However, there is no image at all, there is only the verbally reinforced absence of image, and these imperative stage directions begin to resemble, with all their performative force, a desperate attempt to control and detour the flow of memory. The voice-off appeals to the authority of the camera and to its claims to the truth: "You will look at the camera as you look at the sea, as you looked at the sea and the windowpanes and the dog and the tragic bird in the wind and the still sands braving the waves. At the end of the journey, the camera will have decided what you will have looked at. Look. The camera won't lie" (*TAM*, 51). The camera is so powerful, that leaving its field of view functions as the cinematic equivalent of non-being. It also has the power to transgress temporalities, swinging backward from future ("you will look") to past ("as you looked") and then forward to *future antérieur* ("will have decided what you will have looked at"). This time-travel modifying the past from the future is made at nauseating speed and emphasizes the dictatorial agency of the recording instrument, which surpasses the agency of the filmed subject.

Adding to this imperative approach, the camera must be looked at only under permission,[513] in a way that obscures the fact of its being a camera, an artificial eye, an instrument of alternative sight. The absence on screen is, in such moments, the symptom of a haunting disappearance, an ontological predicament that admits no contestation:

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ment admis, comme on admet, par la formule qui la désigne, que cette figure cinématographique, le regard à la caméra, est homogène et unique."

513 The interdiction and the permission mark the beginnings of the two symmetrical halves of the text: "You will not look straight at the camera" (*TAM*, 29), "this time you will look at it, look at the camera" (*TAM*, 48).

> Only your absence remains now, bodiless, without any possibility of reaching it, of falling prey to desire.
> You are precisely nowhere.
> You are no longer the chosen one.
> Nothing remains of you except this floating absence, ambulatory, that fills the screen, that peoples by itself, why not? a prairie in the Far West, or this abandoned hotel, or these sands.
> Nothing happens, except this absence drowned in regret and which, at this point,
> leaves nothing to weep for.   (*TAM*, 40–41)

The emptiness of the frame speaks of the emptiness of all the surroundings. Should the author have attempted to convey this radical statement in writing with the same level of intensity, she could have done that by leaving all pages blank; then, her book would have been similar to one of the empty *livres d'artiste* presented earlier, in Chapter 2. While Duras is far from renouncing textuality, browsing through *The Atlantic Man* rapidly shows how, occasionally, through the use of wide typographic interstices, the page does remain (intermittently) white. Its white opacity that obscures all vision may be the strongest possible contrast, chromatically speaking, with the blackness on the empty screen, yet both have the same quality (in the sense that they are both figural voids) and accomplish the same function. They are both material expressions of absence integrated in – and exposing – the materiality of their respective medium and remaining attached to its systems of signification while also suspending its signifiers.

Lessing considered visual arts to be descriptive, and verbal arts to be rhetorical.[514] However, in the case of the film and the piece of prose discussed here, the supposedly visual medium is barely more descriptive than the textual one (the protagonist is given, briefly, a figure and a body, but he is more present symbolically, in his absence, than figuratively, in his bodily corporeality). On the contrary, the cinematic medium proves to be even more rhetorical than its verbal counterpart; it makes use of the literary tropes in the text – such as oxymorons (the spectator is insistently invited to look at the empty screen, the predilect place of the image hosts the lack of image), hyperboles (the empty screen is boundless; one must look at it "absolutely," with a hyperbolized form of sight), metaphors (the empty screen is a metaphor for loss, blindness or oblivion), and repetitions (as exemplified in the second section of this subchapter) – and it adds in visual rhetoric, with the shocking effect of the absence of images. As such, modern text and film dissolve the ancient oppositions between visual and verbal arts by experimenting with intermediality. The cinematic medium is able to provide a "cer-

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514 Lessing, *Laocoön*, 144.

tificate of presence," as Youssef Ishaghpour names it, while the words produce an "indefinite virtuality" realized, materialized, and objectified by the film.[515] Duras's "novel" speaks the vocabulary of film directing (it gives indications to the only actor, operates cuts, dictates the general atmosphere and nuances, etc.) while, conversely, her film hardly achieves more than its printed transcript in terms of actual, presented content.

Furthermore, the novel transgresses its medium and ostentatiously incorporates script directions; this already creates a sort of genre hybridization between novelistic fiction and scriptwriting. At the same time, the film takes a step back from the potentialities of its medium and, by refusing the visual component, at times, it regresses to being pure speech only. But since the speech is, in its turn, impregnated with countless visual references, the intermediality of the work is absolute and perfectly circular: the book can be read only if accompanied by an understanding of the cinematic mechanisms of producing images and meaning. It points to the film, while the film (re)produces the subsequent novel with utmost fidelity and with rhetorical similitude. In his *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, Gilles Deleuze makes another interesting observation on Durassian cinematography, referring especially to *TAM* and to *Agatha et les lectures illimitées*. According to him, even when they seem to dissociate, in these two films, the verbal and the visual regimes become, in fact, more intricately linked in mutual, chiasmic referentiality:

> In the second stage, then, talking and sound cease to be components of the visual image: the visual and the sound become two autonomous components of an audio-visual image, or, better, two heautonomous[516] images. In this case we can say with Blanchot: "Talking is not seeing." It seems here that talking ceases to see, to make visible and also to be seen. But a preliminary observation is required: talking breaks with its visual links in this way only by giving up its particular habitual or empirical exercise, by managing to turn towards a limit which is at once, as it were, the unspeakable and yet what can only be spoken. [. . .] The same observation is also valid for the visual image: seeing wins a heautonomy only if it is torn from its empirical exercise and is carried to a limit which is at once invisible and yet can only be seen (a kind of clairvoyance, differing from seeing, and passing through any-

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515 Youssef Ishaghpour, "La voix et le miroir, Marguerite Duras," in *Cinéma contemporain; de ce côté du miroir* (Paris: Éditions de la Différence, coll. *Essais*, 1986), 270: "*La reproduction technique délivre un certificat de présence, renforcé par l'illusion du mouvement sur l'écran. Les mots produisent de l'irréel, une virtualité indéfinie, le cinéma les "réalise," comme on dit, en donne une objectivation, une proféfation définitive.*"

516 Deleuze refers to the Kantian concept of "heautonomy" developed in his *Critique of Judgment*, that can be described as "the self-referential normativity of judgment: the reflective dimension of practical deliberation" according to Sabina Vaccarino Bremner, in *Kant and Autonomy as Self-Making*, University of Columbia, 2019, 2, unpublished draft available at https://philosophy.columbia.edu/files/philosophy/content/Vaccarino_Bremner_-_Kant_on_Autonomy_as_Self-Making.pdf, last accessed May 15, 2023.

space-whatevers, empty or disconnected spaces. It is the vision of a blind man, of Tiresias, as speech was that of an aphasic or amnesic.[517]

This visibility that can only be seen, yet is different from seeing is the space in which Duras installs her anthropomorphic figure of absence ("the Atlantic man") and offers it to the viewer in all the invisibility of its loss. In *TAM*, the viewer is trapped on the border between cinema and literature, without the possibility to remain comfortably nested in either one. In this respect, *TAM* tries to open middle ground – or middle waters, if one prefers to remain faithful to the ocean metaphor – between (moving) image and text, between visual arts and verbal arts.

TAM is an intermedial work in its nature: it only becomes accessible by entering two media, by subverting and transgressing them both, and by blending their potentialities into a hybrid[518] created around a human-shaped absence. This first section of our analysis argues, in an oblique way, that *TAM* is a hybrid, multimedial, and intermedial semiotic construct in permanent self-reflexive dialogue with its two media, including their respective materialities and conditions of production. This organic interrelationality and self-reflexivity proves that *TAM* is more than the arithmetic sum of an experimental novel and an experimental film preoccupied with absence. It is rather the dialogue between the two, playing heavily on the relations, associations, and interferences that tie one medium to the other: rhetoric similarities (oxymorons, negations, repetitions, metaphors), interchangeable vocabularies, instruments, and functions, as well as the explicit awareness of the inherent limitations of each medium. Duras's choice of a double medium for her work stems from her intensely affective awareness of the very impossibility of expressing an absence "as absence," seeing that a certain degree of *presentification* is inherent to all material representation and figuration. According to Lessing, faithfully expressing very strong passions (in Deleuzian terms, intensive processes of affects)[519] is another thing that art cannot accomplish. Lessing attributes to Timanthes this idea, initially formulated in relation to the Laocoön's narrative: "to portray a father's agony is beyond the reach of art."[520] Duras's radical use of words and images (or lack thereof) seems to suggest that her longing lamentation is not far from a level of intensity high enough to become unrepresentable.

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517 Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, 259–260.

518 Term inspired by Jean Cléder, "Hybridations cinématographiques," in *Entre littérature et cinéma. Les affinités éléctives* (Paris: Armand Collin, 2012), 175–214.

519 Daniel Smith and John Protevi, "Gilles Deleuze," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/deleuze/, last accessed May 15, 2023.

520 Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, 20.

According to Lourdes Monterrubio, in this case, resistance to representation would be the consequence of a liaison that bears the social stigma of incest. In her words, "the narrative of incest, of irrepresentable nature, is produced by its absence. The *showing* of the irrepresentable is thereby constructed through the correspondences created among the different elements of the visual image and the sound image, all of them defined by absence."[521] Regardless of whether we accept or not the hypothesis of incestuous connotations that obscure the representational potential of this particular love story, Duras's exclusive focus on the male subject (the only character appearing on page and on screen in *TAM*) seems to testify for the great affective charge of this monologue. It also serves to identify the object of this affection with the figure of Yann Andréa, bluntly put on display. The monologue written in the imperative second person, as if for a unique addressee, delves on a mode of intensity that is also far from neutral: there are strong prohibitions in place, every gesture is dictated in the smallest detail, and the dominant voice asserts her power even over the sensations and the perceptions of the filmed object, whose subjectivity is absent and who is not given the right to speak. After being denied its own image, it is also denied all forms of agency.

Understanding and showing that neither film, nor literature are fully able to grasp through and represent the suffering provoked by the absence of a beloved Other, Duras decides to combine the possibilities of both media. However, this incapacity does not pertain to one medium only but is, instead, a transmedial quality of the intensive processes of the affect. By making the film and the literary text share the same verbal content, and by eliminating the image (not entirely, but intermittently) from a medium which is visual *par excellence*, Marguerite Duras offers a dialectical resolution in the form of a chiasmic synthesis entirely discernible only to those who are simultaneously readers and spectators of *TAM*.

3.3.2 Absence and Repetition

Let us now turn from the question of intermediality to the investigation of a literary trope – namely, repetition – that is *used intermedially*, as a structuring strategy, both in the novel and in the film. The monologic utterances from *TAM* return in its verbal flow many times over, with nuanced alterations; their reiteration helps to build a tensed[522] accumulation of echoes:

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521 Lourdes Monterrubio Ibáñez, "*Agatha and the Limitless Readings* by Marguerite Duras. The literary text and its filmic (irre)presentation," *Communication & Society* 30, no. 3 (2017): 58.
522 I use this word here in a twofold meaning: in reference to a tension, but also alluding the temporal framing of a verbal tense.

You will forget.
You will forget.
You will forget that this is you.
I believe it can be done.
You will also forget about the camera.[523]

Numerous other examples of repetition can be found in the text, yet the reader may notice that they all follow this pattern of imperfect repetition announced from the very first page of the novel and from the first frames of the film. As Pierre Piret rightfully notes when analyzing her theater, the logic of the Durassian repetition testifies for a

> fascination for the acts that seem to repeat themselves automatically, for the intangible scenarios. [. . .] On the other hand, it seems that these scenarios are important only that they open the possibility of a glitch pointing toward the singularity of the subject, in the real which resists and escapes being seized, fixated, or automatized. The creative approach of Marguerite Duras is enriched by its understanding in the context of this fundamental tension.[524]

Therefore, the Durasian repetition is not a simple rhetorical device, as it might seem at a first glance. Instead, it is built upon an oxymoronic play of contraries (between the multiplicity of the repetition and the singularity of the event or of the subject) that enhances the expressive potential of *TAM*. As concluded in the previous section, intermedial exchanges and contaminations are at work in Duras's use of words and images. With every such intermedial exchange, the resulting representation re-actualizes a present that is always lived "for the first time," as Piret suggests right from the title of his article. This creates a link between the functioning of intermediality and the mechanism of repetition. Other critics took notice of the matter:

> Here, speech itself can be seen in the interval opened by Duras's off-screen, observational voices [*les voix* off *et voyeuses*]. Thus is maintained a general system unsettled by a cinematic breakthrough that places the system in danger, while causing speech to be heard against the image. The recourse to the outside, and its overturning, therefore assures a kind

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523 Duras, "The Atlantic Man," 29.
524 Pierre Piret, "Revivre pour la première fois. La logique de la répétition dans le théâtre de Marguerite Duras," in *De mémoire et d'oubli: Marguerite Duras*, edited by Christophe Meurée, Pierre Piret (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2009), 89, my translation. In the original: "[. . .] *une fascination pour les actes qui semblent se répéter automatiquement, pour les scenarios intangibles [. . .]. D'un autre côté, il apparaît que ces scénarios ne comptent à vrai qu'en tant qu'ils ouvrent la possibilité d'un accroc, où pointe la singularité du sujet, dans ce réel qui ne se laisse pas prendre, pas "automatiser." L'itinéraire créateur de Marguerite Duras gagne, me semble-t-il, à être appréhendé dans cette tension fondamentale.*"

of aesthetic counteractualization of an event that sweeps out the system [. . .] to make "present" as a pure operation that is always repeatable and thus perceptible each time.[525]

This stylistic peculiarity becomes insightful when unpacked through the filter of Gilles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition.* This book inaugurates Deleuze's project of a philosophy of "difference without concept,"[526] countering the established theories of difference as conceptual difference. He argues that these theories have developed the account of representation understood as mediation of difference[527] through the structures of identity, analogy, opposition, and resemblance, a mediation which attempts to "save difference by representing it."[528] Deleuze's main argument is that this attempt fails because it ignores the "natural blockages" posed by "differences without concepts" – "the discrete, the alienated, the repressed"[529] – which stay in the way of representation and render it impossible. Continuing a tradition that he traces back to the writings of Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Charles Péguy, Deleuze sees repetition not as one among many laws of generality, but as a transgression which questions (and overturns) precisely these laws. In this transgression, he sees "not only a peculiar power of language and thought and a superior *pathos* and pathology, but also the fundamental category of a philosophy of the future."[530] The mentioning of this "superior pathos" reinforces the need for, and the pertinence of, discussing repetition in the context of affect theory. In this light, the interplay between repetition and the differences it engenders leads to the emergence of new means of expression able to produce "within the work a movement capable of affecting the mind outside of all representation; it is a question of making movement itself a work, without interposition; of substituting direct signs for mediate representations; of inventing vibrations, rotations, whirlings, gravitations, dances or leaps which directly touch the mind."[531]

The immediacy of intense repetition outside the realm of concepts and representations is praised by Deleuze as a realization of the non-representational expression. Opposed to representation, this new regime may recall what later theorists

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525 Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier, "Image or Time? The Thought of the Outside in *The Time-Image* (Deleuze and Blanchot)," in *The Afterimages of Gilles Deleuze's Film Philosophy*, edited by D. N. Rodowick (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 18.
526 The displacement suggested by the preposition "without" may be indicative that this "difference without a concept" could be understood as a figure of absence in its own right.
527 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, translated by Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 10.
528 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 29.
529 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 15.
530 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 5.
531 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 8.

like Philippe Dubois and François Aubral understood through "figuration" in the direct lineage of Jean-François Lyotard (see Chapter 1, section 2). Deleuze exemplifies this with references to Mallarmé's *Book* and Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* – works in which "the identity of the reading subject is dissolved into the decentered circles of possible multiple reading."[532] Elsewhere, in *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, the French theorist refers explicitly to *TAM* and hints at its resistance to representation despite the intermedial approach: "What speech utters is also the invisible that sight sees only through clairvoyance; and what sight sees is the unutterable uttered by speech."[533] In this light, it becomes obvious that *TAM*, in both its written and filmed form, is another example of non-representational expression.

Difference and Repetition was first published in 1968. Thirteen years before the making of the film and fourteen years before the publishing of *TAM*, Deleuze had already discussed, in this book, the "undifferentiated abyss, the black nothingness" of total dissolution and to the white "once more calm surfaces upon which *float*[534] unconnected determinations"[535] as spaces of "indifference." The indifference is, here, the negation of the Aristotelian difference, which is based on a principle of identity. Defying conventions of verbal or visual representation, Duras explores and appropriates new ways of expression, consistent with the metaphysical framework provided by Deleuze. Apart from the repetitive form so clearly manifest in *TAM*,[536] the work hosts surprisingly explicit references to the interplay between difference and repetition. Referring to the darkness of the empty frames in the film, the monologic voice says, in an imperative tone: "You will think that this which is about to take place is not a rehearsal, that this is a first night, just as your life itself is a first night as every second unfolds. That among the millions of men hurling themselves to their death throughout the ages, you are the only one to stand for himself, in my presence, at this very moment of the film that is being made" (*TAM*, 34).

This fragment can be interpreted in the light of another of Deleuze's observations: as opposed to the orders of generality (resemblance and equivalence), repetition can only be the repetition of the singular: "Repetition is a necessary and justified conduct only in relation to that which cannot be replaced. Repetition as a conduct and as a point of view concerns non-exchangeable and non-substitutable

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532 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 69.

533 Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, 260.

534 Coincidently or not, the metaphor of floating resonates with the literal and metaphoric aquatic setting of *TAM*.

535 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 28, my emphasis.

536 "You will look at what you see. But you will look at it absolutely. You will try to look at it absolutely." – Duras, *The Atlantic Man*, 30.

singularities."[537] The addressed *you*, a non-exchangeable and non-substitutable singularity, individualizes itself among "millions of men hurling themselves to their death throughout the ages." The "you will think" imperative is repeated no less than four times in consecutive paragraphs. For reasons of space, I will only discuss two of them:

> You will think about your own self, but in the same way as you think about this wall, this sea that has not yet taken place, that wind and that gull separated for the first time, that lost dog.
>
> You will think the miracle is not in the apparent similarity between each of the particles that make up those millions of men in their continuous hurling, but in the irreducible difference that separates them from each other, that separates men from dogs, dogs from film, sand from the sea, God from the dog or from that tenacious gull struggling against the wind, from the liquid crystal of your eyes, from the sharp crystal of the sands, from the unbreathable foul air in the hall of that hotel after the dazzling light of the beach, from each word, from each sentence, from each line in each book, from each day and each century and each eternity past or future, and from you and from me. (*TAM*, 35–36)

The addressee is repeatedly urged to look at the sea, the walls, the wind gull, and the dog. The repetition of these elements of *décor* allows us to speak of a fourfold dispositive meant to be looked at, built upon the coordinates of a landscape anchored on the Atlantic coast. The various instances recurrent throughout *TAM* in which our sight is directed towards this sea/wall/wind gull/dog *installation* – to give it a name borrowed from the vocabulary of contemporary visual arts –, are a good example of how repetition creates difference. At the beginning of the monologue, the four-fold object of sight appears as quite stable, even if the sea is strangely referred to as a word (a signifier) and not as a real body of water (a referent): "You ask me: look at what? I say, well, I say "the sea," yes, this word facing you, these walls facing the sea, [. . .] this dog, [. . .] this bird beneath the Atlantic wind" (*TAM*, 33). Two pages later, the sea, the dog, the bird, and the walls (of the hotel) appear as instances of the "miraculous" irreducible difference that separates them. The image itself is denounced as illusion: "The camera will now capture your reappearance in the mirror parallel to that in which it sees itself" (*TAM*, 48). The illusion is premeditated and inflicted upon the addressee without his being aware of it: "No, I haven't warned you. Yes, it will happen again" (*TAM*, 49). The game of reflections is dangerous if what is reflected is identical to itself; the difference between the reflected and the reflection is necessary because it saves the repeated singularity from generality and it prevents the ontological "blockage": "Now your greatest danger is resembling yourself, resembling the man in that first shot taken an hour ago. Forget more. Forget even more" (*TAM*, 49).

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537 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 1.

What is sought is repetition, not resemblance. What is sought is the differ-
ence, the visible/legible difference that allows the *you* to be at once hidden and
present. What about the insistent imperative to forget and "forget even more"? It
is a repetition in itself, because it echoes another command to submit to oblivion
and, most importantly, to self-oblivion:

> You will not look straight at the camera. Except when you are told to do so.
>
> You will forget.
> You will forget.
>
> You will forget that this is you.
> I believe it can be done.
> You will also forget about the camera. But above all, you will forget that this is you.
> You. (*TAM*, 31).

Deleuze describes oblivion in the present as a way to return to the state of pure
contemplation, "prior to all memory and reflection."[538] His argument also advo-
cates for the loss of the negative connotations of forgetting, just as his entire proj-
ect aims to restore the positive agency of difference. "It is in repetition and by
repetition," he says, "that Forgetting becomes a positive power."[539]

In relation to time, Deleuze advances the hypothesis of three "syntheses,"
each one being able to determine the others: time as *habit*, *pure past*, *or frac-
ture*.[540] The *habit* translates the living present which contracts by means of the
imagination and contains both past retention and future anticipation. The living
present is the only temporal realm in which signs can function – "every sign is a
sign of present"[541] – and it is limited not by a corresponding past or future but by
senses of lack, fatigue, and need. Duras's monologue is a manifestation of all
three: "You have remained in the state of being left. And I have made a film out
of your absence" (*TAM*, 48); "the film will remain as it is. Finished. [. . .] The film
will remain as it is. I have no more images for it" (*TAM*, 53–54).

In *TAM*, the living present drowns in the state of "not knowing," in a general
epistemological indeterminacy that originates in the lack of difference of what could
constitute an object of knowledge. Love, the seasons, inner and outer rhythms and
cycles blend into one another to the point they become indistinguishable, which
leads to a state of general confusion that resists apprehension and comprehension:
"I no longer know where we are, at what end of what love, at the beginning of what

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538 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 71.
539 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 7.
540 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 69.
541 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 77.

other love, in what other story we have lost ourselves [. . .] No one knows if it's still summer or the end of summer, or some deceitful, undecided season, ugly, nameless" (*TAM*, 54–55). In other words, a state of ontological indeterminacy supplemented by epistemological uncertainty: "You do not know this" (*TAM*, 58). Not knowing is a state of living present shared by the *you* and first person narrator.

The second synthesis of time, according to Deleuze, is memory as "pure past."[542] It has a strong performative function, being "that which causes the present to pass."[543] This performative aspect of memory has been acknowledged and pointed at not only by Duras's choice of film (or literature as an art of succession) but also by other explicit textual hints at performativity, theatricality, and repetitive artifice: "and the day returned as usual, in tears, and ready for the performance. And once again, the performance took place" (*TAM*, 44–45). Her entire monologue, after all, is structured as a series of stage directions guiding a blind actor forced to look at himself and at his surroundings, simultaneously recording and forgetting what he sees – a double gesture that replicates the operating principle of the camera.

Finally, the third synthesis of time formulated by Deleuze is the pure and empty form of time: the "fracture," the caesura in which the present is effaced, and the past is merely "a condition of action."[544] The fracture is, as one may recall from the Jean-Pierre Mourey's insights presented in the first chapter, one of the three etymological meanings of the Latin prefix *ab-*, and therefore one more possible figure of absence – a hypothesis Anne Cauquelin validates in her own threefold classification of figures of absence. Returning to Deleuze, he speaks of fracture only in relation to the overarching idea of a totality of time, which "must be understood as follows: the caesura, of whatever kind, must be determined in the image of a unique and tremendous event, an act which is adequate to time as a whole. This image itself is divided, torn into two unequal parts. Nevertheless, it thereby draws together the totality of time."[545] Temporal caesura is, therefore, that significant event which splits time unequally between a before and an after, irreversibly destroying its unity. The repetitions deployed by Duras make possible the identification of an event that separates (unequally, but not without a certain symmetry) the first and the second half of the text.

If the first half begins with an interdiction to look straight at the camera, an imperative absencing of the gaze,[546] the second one begins with a commandment to do precisely that (look at the camera) during the repetition of a gesture (pass-

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542 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 88.

543 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 101.

544 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 90.

545 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 89.

546 "you will not look straight at the camera [. . .] You will forget" (*TAM*, 31).

ing in front of the camera, after a period of passing off-screen): "You will pass once again in front of the camera. This time you will look at it" (*TAM*, 48). The first half is looked at in retrospect and repeated, aware of the danger of resemblance, which it is trying to avoid: "the greatest danger is resembling yourself, resembling the man in the first shot taken an hour ago" (*TAM*, 49). The temporal loop of the text makes a detour to the future in the past: "the camera will have decided what you will have looked at" (*TAM*, 51), only to return in the end to the definitive present of signs: "This is how you stand [. . .]. You do not know this" (*TAM*, 58). The caesura marks the turning point of the repetition. In the graphic arrangement of the text, it is marked by empty lines, inter-paragraph blanks. The hypothesis of a triple relation to temporality (time as *habit*, *pure past*, or *fracture*) is, in conclusion, verifiable at all three levels in Duras's *TAM.* Moreover, it characterizes the complex temporal framing of this hybrid work, as well as its use of repetition which, inevitably, is a figure that needs sequences, and therefore a temporality, in order to unfold. As Duras's uncanny use of verbal tenses suggests, these sequences do not follow a linear logic, but rather the spiraling of traumatic recollection,[547] constantly actualizing a past event into the present and projecting it into a future which in turn is able to modify the past.

From Deleuze's perspective, repetition is able to draw similar temporal loops. He differentiates between three kinds of repetition that cannot be reconciled: *intra-cyclic repetition* (of a singular unit within a cycle), *cyclic repetition* (of an entire sequence), and *the eternal return* (a repetition that occurs not because the same forms are reiterated but because the same field of intensive difference engenders these different forms).[548] In the case of the eternal return, what returns is the pure form of time in the form of intensive difference, assuming different actual expressions.

In *TAM*, repetition also unfolds at several levels of the discourse with variations in its breadth, functioning as a mechanical obsession or insistence, as a refrain, as an incantation, or as the sign of a permanent approximation. The second half of the text is a repetition of the first; one may think of it as the repetition of a cycle. There are also intracyclical repetitions, at least on two levels – inter- and intra-paragraph. An example of interparagraph repetition (called "anaphoras" in rhetorics) is given by the five consecutive paragraphs that begin with "you will think" (*TAM*, 34–45), or the five that begin with "you will" (*TAM*, 31). Another inter-paragraph repetition is that of certain signs and motifs, as it is the case with the sea-wall-dog-bird installation (the later Deleuze would have probably named it "the Atlantic machine") re-

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547 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), passim.
548 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 90–93.

peatedly subjected to sight. The intra-paragraph repetitions are somewhat less frequent. Perhaps the most poignant is the obsessive repetition of the word *you*. The knowledge of the powerlessness of representation also takes the form of repetition in concentric ripples: "It is only for this film that I know. For the film alone I know, I know, I know that no image, no single image more" (*TAM*, 54). Eventually, the text achieves an "eternal return effect" with every passing paragraph, not in the sense that the paragraphs are repeated identically (they are not), but because they inhabit the same intensive field of differences.

These repetitions achieve more than their rhetorical effect: they recreate, on a textual level, a movement of the incessant return. This movement, monotonous, constantly repetitive, yet not twice identical to itself, can be likened to the movement of the waves seen and heard on the shores of the Atlantic, as well as in the pages and frames of *The Atlantic Man*.

For Marguerite Duras, film and literature are equally powerless (as all representation is) when referring to an absent Other, to a most remote alterity. Be it telling or not of the biographical episode that ties Marguerite Duras to Yann Andréa (which would confirm Lessing's theory of the impossible representation of "strong passions"), the affective intensity of the text, as well as its unconventional artistic treatment may be understood through Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier's interpretation of how Deleuze and Blanchot[549] conceive the possibilities of representing the *outside*: "the outside is never formulated as 'thought' but rather as an 'attraction' that is also a 'passion,' that is, the force of an attraction whose particularity is due to the fact that it strips the subject of all reference to being. [. . .] Blanchot links this strangeness of the outside, provoking fear and vertigo, to a deficiency of time, a lack of present that makes presence impossible."[550] The Durassian "you" (or, rather, its anthropomorphic absence) is characterized by a force of attraction strong enough to fracture time and to empty the present in ceaseless, cyclic repetition that speaks of the traumatic event of separation.

Even when the film becomes rhetorical and, conversely, literature borrows cinematic vocabulary and strategies, the imports are, to a certain degree, able to expand the field of expression but cannot transcend the limits imposed by mimetic representation. For Lourdes Monterrubio, "the showing of the irrepresentable, as a limit expression of the fusion between literature and cinema, is built through the relationships among their different elements, all of them defined by an absence that the author shapes."[551] Incapable of transgression, the work ex-

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549 Especially in *The Space of Literature* and *The Infinite Conversation*.

550 Ropars-Wuilleumier, "Image or Time?," 19.

551 Monterrubio Ibáñez, "Agatha and the Limitless Readings," 41.

poses its own bare mediality: the printed words make room for lengthy, intrusive blanks, while the projection screen is progressively deprived of all image until the cinematic experience is reduced to the blind audition of its soundtrack.

The Atlantic Man is just as productively unpacked through the lens of temporal perception, in its threefold Deleuzian aspects. This reading not only resituates the discussion in the broader context of contemporary (anti-)metaphysics; it also manages to reveal how *TAM does*, in fact, transcend the conventional limits of expression and generality, through difference and repetition. In presentifying the absence of the Other in the dark emptiness of the film frame or in the asemic whiteness of the typographic page, Marguerite Duras's *The Atlantic Man* can be read as a modern rewriting of Dibutade's myth, as an archetypal articulation of absence, desire, and figuration.

3.4 Subjects of Absence

Like the objects of absence explored in Chapter 2, the subjectivized figures of absence in the case studies explored above function as self-reflexive emanations of their medium, stemming from the process of thinking and reconfiguring its own limits. However, this privileged position that sets them apart from other characters comes at the expense of the vagueness and indeterminacy that effaces their own individuality. To sum up Meghan Vicks's argument on "empty" literary characters (in the lineage of Odysseus)[552] and to extend it for their cinematic counterparts, the physical and psychological indeterminacy of these anthropomorphic figures is what provides them with enough versatility to accommodate, simultaneously, a subversive role (troubling existent power structures and relations of authority) and a constitutive function (seeing how their absence of ontological consistency is the *raison d'être* around which the entire work is structured). Maurice Blanchot discusses this aspect in one of his pivotal essays, where he argues about such characters that "they may be imbued with emptiness – but this emptiness is their very meaning."[553]

The lover's absence provides the voice in *The Atlantic Man* with a pretext to assume full control over his (obscured) image, through medium-conscious manipulation of camera movements and the graphic distribution of a text that is punctured, fractured, and scattered by an absence uniquely defined by longing, the affective sum of loss and desire. This newly acquired power of manipulation is

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552 Vicks, *Narratives of Nothing*, 3–5.
553 Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," 368.

hyperaware of the paradox that the lover's presence can only be recuperated in the act of its disappearance. The unnamed "you," to whom the entire monologue is addressed, resists being seen just as it resists being written (or signified verbally, through a name). His absence has no image and no name. For this reason, the screen remains black, and the page is flooded by waves of absent writing, inscribed as typographic blanks.

The absence of the name of the Other turns it into an ungraspable object (in the grammatical sense), impossible to master. Unnamed, it escapes designation – and thus, representation. It also subverts the authority of the voice who pretends to control and orient him. At the same time, however, it is precisely this absence that gives birth to the voice or, rather, to the possibility of language:

> We can't do anything with an object that has no name. Primitive man knows that the possession of words gives him mastery over things, but for him the relationship between words and the world is so close that the manipulation of language is as difficult and as fraught with peril as contact with living beings: the name has not emerged from the thing, it is the inside of the thing which has been dangerously brought out into the open and yet it is still the hidden depths of the thing; the thing has therefore not yet been named. The more closely man becomes attached to a civilization, the more he can manipulate words with innocence and composure. Is it that words have lost all relation to what they designate? But this absence of relation is not a defect, and if it is a defect, this defect is the only thing that gives language its full value, so that of all languages the most perfect is the language of mathematics, which is spoken in a rigorous way and to which no entity corresponds.[554]

At the other end of the naming spectrum, Blanchot's Henri Sorge and Saramago's Senhor José have access to "all the names." Unsurprisingly, this overwhelming excess of nominal designation has, by the force of repetition, the same effacing effect as Duras's complete anonymity when the narrative voice refers to an "I" or to a "you" that remain purely deictic. Senhor José's and Sorge's proximity to huge administrative repositories of a form of writing that indexes the world does not create an effect of presence; on the contrary, the only substantial and consistent presence perceivable to them remains that of the Law they are rebelling against, while being acutely aware of the fact that their very disobedience is, too, prescribed the Law. For Blanchot, this inescapable and paradoxical circle, like a Moebius strip, is precisely what describes the condition of the writer:

> The trouble is that the writer is not only several people in one, but each stage of himself denies all the others, demands everything for itself alone and does not tolerate any conciliation or compromise. The writer must respond to several absolute and absolutely different commands at once, and his morality is made up of the confrontation and opposition of im-

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554 Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," 379.

placably hostile rules. [. . .] He must therefore oppose himself, deny himself even as he affirms himself [. . .][555]

Caught in the meanders of this self-cancelling logic and rhetoric, both Henri Sorge and Saramago's archivist turn into fractured subjectivities[556] whose dissolution of the sense of self resonates with the radical absence that is internal to language. It is interesting that both for Blanchot (in the character of Marie) and for Saramago (in the character of the unknown young woman), it is always a female figure that incarnates the gaping separation between representation and referentiality. This anthropomorphized figure of absence is likewise present under a feminine guise in Blanchot's more theoretical writings:

> [. . .] the act of naming is disquieting and marvelous. A word may give me its meaning. but first it suppresses it. For me to be able to say, "This woman" I must somehow take her flesh and blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her. The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being. The word is the absence of that being. its nothingness, what is left of it when it has lost being-the very fact that it does not exist.[557]

Isn't this "disquieting and marvelous" an affective hybrid strangely similar to Heidegger's thinking of the nothing as "an outrage and a phantasm"? Just like the non-anthropomorphic figures of absence explored in Chapter 2, the ones that take the contours of a human embodiment tend to simultaneously trouble established orders (inside or outside their diegetic universe) and elicit a bewildering fascination. Both reactions – the former with negative connotations, the latter with more positive ones – speak of the tension ruling over figures of absence that simultaneously block and stimulate the imagination, that both fuel and sabotage hermeneutic efforts of meaning-making. The absence of the Other in *The Atlantic Man* is frustrating in terms of figurability (the voice-off permanently commands the viewer to look at an empty screen). At the same time, it produces radical, unconventional regimes of expression, which Daniel Heller-Roazen calls "fictions of disappearance:" "Absentees have been known to move in unrulier patterns and less representable rhythms. [. . .] Precisely for this reason, missing persons have always been exemplary subjects for investigation and invention in a field of writing beyond that of legal reasoning. Myth and literature have imagined what can be neither known

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555 Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," 369–370.

556 For Derrida, the experience of absence goes hand in hand with a certain undoing of the self. As he articulates it in *Of Grammatology*, 70: "This deconstruction of presence accomplishes itself through the deconstruction of consciousness."

557 Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," 379.

nor decided. They contain archives of removals that are all their own."[558] The inter-medial play at work in both the film and the novel allows for the creation of a chi-asmus (the film refers to writing, the writing uses the vocabulary of filmmaking) that doubles and re-enacts this tension between image-production and image-cancellation through the perspective of the limits of each medium.

In a similar vein, Blanchot's and Saramago's novels explore absence from the vantage point created by the juncture of this image-text chiasmus. In *The Most High*, Henri Sorge is fascinated by a paradoxical, distant intimacy with a female photographer that indexes identity photos in the service of the State, in other words doing with images the same civil registration work that Sorge does with his writing of records. In *All the Names*, Senhor José illegally breaks into a school and browses through its archive as he lets himself guided by an irrepressible de-sire to find the face of the woman he chases. In both cases, the photographic image functions as an ontological supplement that adds to the information al-ready recorded and indexed in written files. Paradoxically, this visual supplement does not contribute to the creation of a (painfully longed for) *effet de présence*, but rather augments the haunting absences it was meant to compensate for, and aggravates the selflessness[559] of the two writing subjects. By this token, the an-thropomorphic figures of absence discussed here operate in both visual and tex-tual realms – and, perhaps most importantly, at the fertile intersection of the two.

Saramago's Central Registry, Blanchot's State, and Duras's Atlantic beaches are all repositories of anthropomorphized absence. It takes the form of the self-less, recluse writing subject, or of a fascinating, missing Other; in both cases, it is simultaneously longing for representation and obscuring it at every step. The en-counter with these absent subjects (or, in more technical terms, anthropomorphic figures of radical absence) is uncannily endowed with a kind of symbolic vio-lence that readily manifests itself through the cancellation of the image, the si-lencing of the text, or the maddening repetition and fragmentation of both. From an ethical perspective, the Other's only authentic presence is revealed to be in its concealment, unreachable either by means of senses[560] or by means of

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558 Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Absentees: On Variously Missing Persons* (New York: Zone Books, 2021), 35.
559 I use the term in the sense attributed to it by Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego, New York, London: Harvest Books, 1979), 307–335, where she discusses selflessness (*Selbs-tlosigkeit*) as the absolute abnegation and de-personalization of the subjects of a totalitarian regime.
560 Maurice Blanchot, *The Most High*, 225: "I came up against a passive and anonymous thing, since I stood there before nothing, myself empty and stripped of everything, no longer knowing if she was there, feeling that within her someone else was hidden, one of those ferocious beings

language.[561] Even when most intimately close, the Other is ungraspable and threatening.[562] In this sense, alterity is always already an anthropomorphic figure of absence whose encounter shows that, as Allan Stoekl put it in the preface to his translation of *The Most High*, "the most distant, the most foreign, is the most intimate. We can't get away: there is nowhere else to go. Hence our fascination, horror, and desire."[563] Hence, I would add, "the outrage and the phantasm" that spectrally attend to textual or visual representations of radical alterity. Hence, the "disquieting and marvelous" feeling provoked by their encounter.

It is important to mention how – in the case of Senhor José, for example – this alterity may be the by-product of a fractured, schizoid subject, split between self-identity and the experience of an estranged self.[564] In other words, a self that is defined purely by its selflessness may be understood to be its own Other. The fact that Senhor José is always referred to in formal terms, as *Senhor*, not only implies the distance and the impersonality of the formal, administrative discourse he practices and helps to proliferate during his working hours, but also the fact that his social role has impregnated his being with this all-too-common false reverence derived from a position of relative authority and emptied of its meaning through frequent usage. The humbleness of his usual ways is contrasted with the power he has as an *archon* in the Central Registry, where he is able to manipulate the lives of others through simple operations of writing and indexing. Even though the reader has access to Senhor José's most intimate thoughts and recollections, this intimacy is never enough to allow addressing him by his first name. Senhor José remains a stranger even to himself.

This internal schism is equally visible in the contradictory commands proffered by the narrative voice in *TAM* and, on a formal level, in the quasi-symmetrical structure of the text split by a *caesura* in the middle. More than once, the figures of absence external to the subject enter into both fruitful and destabilizing correspondences with its selflessness. After all, the female subject hiding behind the narrative voice in *TAM* is not more present on screen then her absent lover (in

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who assume a recognizable face, but with whom the you and the me come undone in a perpetually illusory dialogue."

561 Blanchot, *The Most High*, 206: "Of course she spoke to me, but only when it was absolutely necessary, and in an impersonal tone of voice, so that once something was said it immediately stopped being said."

562 Blanchot, *The Most High*, 88: "Whenever I see Louise, it's not her that I see but, behind her, other, more and more distant faces, some well-known, others unknown; they stand out as her successive shadows. That's why she harasses me, she doesn't give me a moment of peace; it's a spiral."

563 Allan Stoekl, "Introduction: Death at the End of History," in Blanchot, *The Most High*, viii.

564 This fracture is understood as the by-product of a violent event usually called "trauma" (see Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*) or "accident" (see Catherine Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*).

fact, she does not show herself at all). Ontologically insubstantial, she hardly portrays herself as more than the invisible source of affects and power, in the guise of a firm directorial authority. This gratuitous exercise of power inflicted through contradictory commands and leading to a disorienting absence of signs may remind the reader of Lewis Carroll's nonsense poem *The Hunting of the Snark* in which, as summed up by Robert Martin Adams, "a ship sails now backwards, now forwards, the Bellman gives contradictory orders and for navigation uses a map which, though pleasantly intelligible, is a perfect and absolute blank."[565] Aware of her lack of control and agency over the presence of the Other, Duras becomes a skillful puppeteer of his absence, which she translates into the unfixable, nondescript, and fluid figure of *The Atlantic Man.*

At this point, it becomes obvious that the distinction between "the absence of self" and "the absence of the Other" is rather artificial, as the two anthropomorphic figures of absence are often mutually interdependent. In Daniel Heller-Roazen's view, they are both productive events, triggering literary or visual responses, but also mythological and ritual ones:

> the event of absenting and self-absenting is one of uncovering. The removal clears a space. Vanishing gives way to visitation, and where there was an "I," some No One inexorably appears. In what ways, to what effects, and with what consequences are questions to which every community responds in terms and practices at once legal and literary, mythological, ritual, and imagistic.[566]

Following the ipseity-alterity polarization, absenting and self-absenting have an important methodological value as starting points for the comparison that reaches its conclusion here. Other critics, such as Robert Martin Adams, have also made the distinction between an inner absence and an outer one, in discussing articulations of absence in nineteenth-century literature: "Life is a void to be given content, or rather two voids – that of outward nature, which provides man with no direction or purpose in the form of happiness, that of inward nature which remains apathetic and impenetrable in the absence of motivation."[567] The tension between outside and inside is fertile in the sense that it creates a space in which writing appears and unfolds: "But if there is a void above and a void below, a void within and a void without, he who is intent on escaping void has need of a certain imaginative mobility."[568] In other words, this distinction repeats and confirms the initial

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565 Adams, *Nil*, 96.

566 Heller-Roazen, *Absentees*, 17.

567 Adams, *Nil*, 27.

568 Adams, *Nil*, 33.

hypothesis formulated by Derrida in *Of Grammatology*,[569] according to which the presence of the work is the paradoxical by-product of two absences: of the writing self and of the written referent.

Perhaps one of the most important takeaways from the comparative analysis of these two figures of absence (of the self, of the Other) is their intermedia reach and versatility, expanding beyond the limits of the text or the frames of an image – be it an image in motion or a still. Although it is present in the novels written by Blanchot and Saramago (through the narrative deployment of instruments of visuality, such as mirrors and photographs), this intermedia potential is clearly more poignant in *The Atlantic Man.* Duras makes a film of out the impossibility to *write* absence, and she writes a "novel" (as she calls it) out of the impossibility to *film* it. In this way, her hybrid work highlights in one medium the limitations it encounters in the other. The book is telling as a supplement to the brittleness and the material frailty of the screening, while the film adds an aural component and frustrated visual expectations to the written script that could not fully contain them. Both the film and the text refer transparently (and repeatedly) to their own limitations, but also to one another's frailty and powerlessness.

Moreover, Duras does not content herself with the simple enunciation of this chiasmus. Instead, she instruments it to articulate a wider and deeper failure of language (any language, read as any system of signification) to integrate figures of absence unless they subvert their own power structures and hierarchies, the limitations that define them, and the conventions that rule over their affective regimes and their politics of inclusion or exclusion. Consequently, just as Henri Sorge and Senhor José truly obey the Law only when they begin to disobey it, Duras becomes a faithful writer and director of absences when she deprives her film of imagery and her novel of writing. Both her works are self-reflexively aware of their material and immaterial conditions of existence, and of how these conditions are infringed upon through the radical use of the aesthetics of repetition, fragmentation, displacement, and subtraction.

According to Gilles Deleuze, these rhetorical devices have the ability to overcome the "natural blockages" that usually stay in the way of conventional regimes of representation, unsuitable for the rendering of what is present only in its absence: "the discrete, the alienated, the repressed."[570] Gathered under the umbrella-term of "difference without a concept" (which can in itself be read as a figure of absence given its privative articulation), these categories dissolve the logic of identity and replace it with a logic of movement, fluidity, and difference

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569 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 41.
570 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 15.

that can only be expressed in a non-representational mode. Self-cancelling rhetoric, intermedial chiasmi, self-reflexive circularity, namelessness and facelessness, secrecy, paradoxes and aporias – these are only several of the strategies that we have seen deployed for rendering visible and legible anthropomorphic, as well as non-anthropomorphic figures of absence.

What seems to be particular to the anthropomorphic figures of absence, to subjects of absence as opposed to their object counterparts, is the extent to which they are formative or destructive of the subject that enters a relation with them. Like Senhor José, who eventually decides to take full possession of himself by disappearing into the dark depths of the Archive, Duras's subjects not only thematize absence, but manage to become absent themselves in the very moment of their actualization.

Conclusion: Politics and Poetics of Absence

Figures are not images. They are not forms, structures, and signifying signs, either. Rather, they are internal events constitutive for all of the above. This grants them the ontological instability and indeterminacy that allows them to pair with radical absence, unlike signs and other structures of representation which derive their signifying force from a metaphysics of presence. Radical absence is characterized by an impenetrable thickness that resists predication. Hence, it does not lend itself easily to rendition in language (which is, in Heidegger's words, "a guardian of presencing")[571] or in alternative systems of signification. It is disruptive of – yet fundamental to – any articulation, since articulation, being indispensable for meaning-making, always already implies the existence of an interruption, a gap, a displacement, or a withdrawal exerted upon a primarily amorphous material. For this reason, all creative gestures that shape, frame, outline, or otherwise create a work (therefore, rendering it present and bringing it into the present) are founded upon a process that generates absence along with presence.

The previous chapters have been ebbing and flowing with heterogenous conversations around absence, ranging from ontology and the philosophy of visual or linguistic representation to affective flows and intensities. Looking into works that belong to a variety of media has demonstrated that radical absence is often wrongly regarded as a sterile blockade that impedes textual or visual production. Instead, radical absence reveals its *poietic* function and its vital role in the proliferation of signs and meaning-making systems. The absence of paint on a canvas[572] does not imply the absence of painting. On the contrary, it is an effective rendition of what makes painting possible, as well as an open, outspoken display of the material and immaterial conditions that painting requires. At the same time, it carries with it (though it does so invisibly) all the possible paintings in a state of latency and, above all, the possibility of a never-realized masterpiece. Similarly, the absence of text (be it unwritten, illegible, erased, die cut or cut out, fragmented, lipogramatic, self-cancelling, or otherwise) is not an absence of writing. Quite the opposite: it is a meta-sign that allows writing to unfold in its disappearance, refusing to signify and, instead, pointing to the material and immaterial conditions of its production, as a differential mark inscribed on a previously undifferentiated surface. Bearing this in mind, it is now time to make two important observations.

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571 Heidegger, "The Way to Language," 305.

572 Here I use the canvas as a metonymy for any space of representation.

Firstly, the figures of radical absence are a function of the systems (including the media) they arise in; a function that is simultaneously constitutive and destructive for each system and whose balance between the two roles allows the system to exist as such. Paradoxical as it may sound, there is a radical absence in the core of every conceivable system. As Laclau postulated, among others, radical absence is the very condition of the systematicity of the system. Examples include the zero in the decimal system, the silent phoneme in linguistics, the free-floating concept of *mana* in cosmological systems, the empty set in mathematics, the vanishing point in perspective painting, the idea of a masterpiece in the arts, The Book or the blank page in writing, the empty signifier in semiotics, the figural void in figuration, the black or white frame in cinema, the incorporeal in conceptual art, and so on. This absolute mobility and versatility of figures of absence is due to its fundamental lack of determinacy, to an absolute loss of identity and meaning achieved through the collapse (for Laclau, the "pure cancellation")[573] of their internal system of differences. Binaries and oppositions are dissolved, contraries are reconciled, opposing forces keep one another in an untroubled (yet troubling) equilibrium. In their absolute meaninglessness, resisting the attribution of all meaning, these figures are all strangely coherent amongst themselves, as manifestations of a single, overarching radical absence (a transcendental signified?[574] The nothing?) whose ever-deferred and ever-receding presence allows for the existence of all beings and all signs of being. Since radical absence occupies the privileged position that is at once one of most remote liminality and innermost centrality, it is the only part of the system able to assert and abolish its own singularity. Even if this position proves to be at once too difficult and too simple to be rendered aesthetically, it remains a *locus* of major significance (though nonsignifying in itself) from an ethical and political perspective, because it challenges the simplicity of the distinction between identity and alterity through an overlapping of the areas governed by a logic of equivalency and those subjected to a logic of difference. Therefore, one could describe "radical absence" in the same way J. Hillis Miller explained the idea of "zero": as "something without ground or substance that nevertheless has the power to make something happen. Its efficacy makes it dangerous, a force perhaps for good, perhaps for ill."[575] This essential indeterminacy is the source of its ethical ambiguity, visible in its political usage for either positive or negative ends.

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573 Laclau, "Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?," 38.

574 Unsurprisingly, this rhetoric is very much reminiscent of the grounding principle behind mystical and apophatic speech manifest in a variety of spiritual traditions.

575 J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 77.

The second observation is a direct consequence of this paradoxical double positionality of radical absence within a system. It concerns the fact that these figures act like a mirror for the material contingency, as well as the immaterial norms and conventions that govern over the respective system. Throughout the book, I referred to this function in terms of self-reflexivity of the medium, a hypothesis that has been verified in relation to both anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic figures of radical absence. A surprisingly accurate fictional depiction of this auto-reflexive function can be found in the encounter of two narratives that are deeply haunted by absence: Melville's *Moby Dick* and Perec's *The Void.* In a tangential remark, Perec stops to remind his readers how Ahab's harpoon, aimed at the ever-elusive white whale, fails to reach its target and, by a strange entanglement of the line, comes back to kill the one who launched it: "Although, in a last spasm of fury, Ahab slung his harpoon in midair, to his horror, its cord, twisting back, spun about his own body."[576] Just like Ahab's raging attack, the attempts to define, stabilize, and control radical absence are doomed to failure if what is sought is immobilizing an object or a subject. However, it is successful in achieving a different goal: reflecting back upon the system of signification from which the force of the initial "attack" emerged. Continuing the allegory, the attack stands for a quest for meaning, intelligibility, and discursive mastery.

This self-reflexive fold is in fact one of the characteristics of the figural, as Philippe Dubois has shown.[577] It occurs after an initial shock: none other than an uncanny affective intensity caused by the irruption of the figural as an image event, from within the image, acting upon the image. Self-reflexivity opens a cleavage that makes the image or the text turn onto itself. The turn has a double effect, pertaining to the realm of affects, and not to the realm of intelligibility and reason. It triggers a sense of estrangement (*altérité*) and a sense of alteration (*alteration*) that challenges the already unstable differences between identity and alterity, self and Other, both within the work defined by this self-reflection and for the subjectivities that create or receive it. The work of art becomes an ethical space shaped by politics of exclusion and inclusion.

Last but not least, after the initial shock and the self-reflexive folding, the figural bestows upon the image the consistency of an intensive presence, derived from the interstices of absence that fill its structural discontinuities. In the light of Wolfgang Iser's theory of narrative gaps [*Leerstellen*] that explains the necessary and unavoidable incompleteness of all storytelling, all narratives are shown to be functional on the premise that the reader's imagination would fill in the

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576 Perec, *A Void*, 81.

577 Dubois, "La Question du figural," 61–64.

gaps of what remains unsaid, thus restoring to the plot a coherency that would otherwise remain unachievable.[578] This "filling of the gaps" involuntarily performed by the reader makes up for a phantasmatic double of the writing, whose spectral existence is located at once inside the text (where it has a graphic equivalent in the whiteness of the page and the spacing that allows for legibility) and outside of it, in the imagination of each reader. While this absence can accommodate an infinite number of individual "fillings," given its indeterminacy, it also resists all definitive attribution of meaning and remains forever open to further interpretation. This is consistent with the hypothesis (maintained by Heidegger, Blanchot, and Derrida, among others) that writing is, as all creative or signifying gesture, always already a gesture of nihilation,[579] a proliferation of absence.

As already stated in the conclusions to the first chapter, the figures of absence identified by Marc Vernet, the contributions to Jean-Pierre Mourey's volume, and Anne Cauquelin's theories revisiting the Stoic void in the context of the dematerialization of the work of art are not mutually exclusive figures. With one exception (Vernet), they are not medium-specific either. Blanchot's absence of the book and Belting's invisible masterpiece can easily be extrapolated as abstract models that remain just as valid in other systems of signification, outside of literature and the visual arts. Discussing these figures together, as symptoms of the same radical phenomenon of empty expression, has proven fruitful: various disciplinary perspectives illuminated and complemented one another. To give but one example, reading Laclau's empty signifier as a figure of radical absence through the lens of post-Lyotardian figural thinking preserves its political implications, while additionally investing it with figural potential and adding the vocabulary of affects, flows, intensities, and forces to its explanatory power. Conversely, discussing figural voids through the semiotic grid implied by the empty signifiers illuminates the relation these voids hold with the signifying system they belong to, with the norms and conventions governing over their medium, as well as to more political issues like power dynamics, identity and alterity, laws of inclusion and exclusion, or discourses of authority.

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578 Wolfgang Iser, *Die Appellstruktur der Texte: Unbestimmtheit als Wirkungsbedingung literarischer Prosa.* (Konstanz: Universitätsverlag Konstanz, 1970), 14–23. An English translation of the theory can be found in Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading. A Theory of Aesthetic Response.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978. For more recent developments, see for example H. Porter Abbott's "How Do We Read What Isn't There to be Read? Shadow Stories and Permanent Gaps," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies*, edited by Lisa Zunshine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 104–119.

579 In the sense conferred by Heidegger in "What Is Metaphysics?," namely the repelling force of the nothing fueling the deferral of being and its existence in this deferral. For Derrida, this deferral becomes the *différance.*

All these figures can be understood as attempts to grasp absence, coming from fleeting viewpoints that, even though attached to specific disciplines of inquiry, elaborate on a radical understanding of absence in a way that exceeds the boundaries of a single work, medium, or discipline. Adding them to my provisional inventory made me become increasingly aware of the fact that aiming to create an exhaustive taxonomy of such figures is nothing short of a utopian endeavor, due to the unmasterable fluidity and versatility that allow them to travel within, among, and across media to reveal the constitutive core of absence at the heart of every presence. Ultimately, what shapes the figures of radical absence is precisely this boundless transmedia versatility, unpacked in its multifaceted aesthetic, political, and affective potential. My hope is that this will attract even more critical attention to the study of absence than it has already had.

A productive study of absence, one that does not get stuck in the negation of presence, is one that requires understanding absence not as a negative ontological regime, but as a state of pure indeterminacy. Presence and absence are not reducible to being only each other's negation – they maintain a relation of mutual implication and dependency, similar to the one between shadow and light: "everyday opinion sees in the shadow merely the absence of light, if not the complete denial. But, in truth, the shadow is the manifest, through impenetrable testimony of hidden illumination."[580] Along these lines, I argue for thinking of absence not as a counterconcept for presence, but as an event of interruption, fracturing, withdrawal, displacement, receding or undoing of presence; an indeterminate spacing and deferral whose radical form remains ungraspable. Despite its resistance to predication, to language, imagery, and rigorous epistemological inquiry (all inherently anchored in a metaphysics of presence), radical absence can be effectively approached through the mediation of affects (as Heidegger suggested, albeit using a different terminology), as well as through its reflexive function. The latter opens up spaces of an absolute neutrality that make the work fold onto itself, exposing, reflecting upon, reinforcing, or challenging the material and immaterial configurations of its creation and reception. As Rita Rieger noted in regard to cultural expressions of speechlessness, the writing of silence "bears an autoreferential turn" and indicates "the conditions of language" exposing its "autocritic poetics."[581]

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580 Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," 85.
581 Rita Rieger, "The Writing of Silence, Absence, and Ineffability. An Introduction," in *Texts with No Words: The Communication of Speechlessness,* edited by Eva Gillhuber and Rita Rieger, PhiN Beiheft 15/2018, 2–3. http://web.fu-berlin.de/phin/beiheft15/b15t01.pdf, last accessed May 15, 2023.

Figures of radical absence are generally characterized by an emphasis on fragmentariness, structural discontinuities, or the indeterminacy of an unmarked surface. Instead of operating syntagmatically or paradigmatically, they operate in depth and intensity, through the subject's conscious or unconscious desire for a never actualized Other: "To be adored or punished, to be welcomed, dreaded, or expelled, the image of the absentee is each time 'wanted,' after the manner of its wanting subject."[582] Didi-Huberman's distinction between a *figured* figure and a *figuring* figure may function as a matrix for my distinction between non-anthropomorphic (objective) and anthropomorphic (subjective) figures of absence. While the former are manifest as *figured* figures in literary, visual, or conceptual artefacts, the latter are fictional characters that work as agents of textual or visual inscription (sometimes both) and embody the outrage and the phantasm of radical absence in constructions and de-constructions of alterity and the self. Both categories tend to trouble established regimes (of authority and of representation), to challenge and transgress their conventions and hierarchies of power, both inside and outside their diegetic universe. While referring to a different literary corpus, Daniel Heller-Roazen also identifies this political and ontological transgression in his discussion of the paradoxical legal status of absentees:

> Substituting for someone who has vanished, the category of the absentee allows certain rights to be respected only if they may be applied to the artifact that is the missing person as if it were their proper subject. Defying any classical logic, the concept of the absentee thus demands that beyond the apparently exclusive opposition between being a person and not being a person, a third possibility be granted. It is the possibility of an intensely personal nonperson: that of someone – or something – nonhuman to which human beings alone, in absenting themselves, give rise.[583]

Given their conflicting legal and ontological status, missing persons elicit a bewildering fascination that fuels and, at the same time, sabotages hermeneutic efforts of meaning-making.

Hence, the fictional and the meta-fictional encounters with the human-shaped figures of absence are uncannily endowed with a kind of symbolic violence that becomes immediately apparent through rhetorical effects, such as the cancellation of the image, the silencing of the text, or the puzzling repetition and fragmentation of both. The only authentic presence of the self and of the Other is revealed in their withdrawal, in their distancing that seems to be simultaneously longing for representation and obscuring it at every step. Relationality is likewise troubled: the most intimate becomes the most foreign (in Blanchot's *The Most High* and in Duras's *The*

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582 Heller-Roazen, *Absentees*, 73.
583 Heller-Roazen, *Absentees*, 78.

Atlantic Man), while the subject finds itself deeply split by the irreversible absence of a complete stranger (in Saramago's *All the Names*). Inner and external absences swap places and permeate each other, replacing the logic of identity with a movement of affective intensities rendered in a non-representational mode, through self-cancelling rhetoric, text-image chiasmi, and self-reflexive circularity captive in repetition and fragmentation. Meanwhile, the tensions between the absence of the inscribing self and the absence of the inscribed referent dissolve and resurge in a strange kind of writing and (diaristic or filmic) recording that become absent in the very moment of their actualization.

After having navigated a minefield of textual and visual figures of radical absence, the ending of this book leaves open many possible directions for further inquiry. Could Wolfgang Iser's narrative gaps, described in reader-response theory, or Gilles Deleuze's concept of "difference without a concept" be explored as theoretical figures of radical absence? Or, following a suggestion made by Matt Tierney,[584] could we conceive radical absence as a medium in itself?[585] Other questions arise from acknowledging the historical and cultural limitations of our study: one may wonder under what regimes did the figuration of absence function before the advent of modernity. Or, rather, how are the figures of radical absence identified in this study active outside of the Western canon, if at all, and what additional figures emerge in other traditions of thought? Does the affective-imaginative model of "an outrage and a phantasm" still remain valid for all of them? Are they instrumented or received under different ethical, aesthetical, political, or affective regimes? What other artistic and literary practices related to absence have so far escaped theorization? What new strategies do contemporary works adopt in the figuration of absence, with the advent of digital media and new technologies?

This book does not propose an exhaustive and systematic taxonomy of the figures of radical absence. Instead, it hopes to have shown that even if the deceiving simplicity of these figures may initially indicate that there is very little, if anything at all, to investigate in such liminal phenomena of expression, a second look

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584 Matt Tierney, "Void as Medium" in *What Lies Between*, 107–164.

585 Tierney, *What Lies Between*, 109: "[. . .] this would mean defining *medium* neither as the frame containing an object's identity nor as the modernist idea of the object's ideal use. What if medium could name the social or political capacity of the artwork? What if it were the difference between what an object is and what it "ought" to be if it made full use of its materials? Neither the ontological notion nor the practical (i.e., modernist) notion of the object, medium would principally name a formation of knowledge: the idea of what an object might do, trafficking between the ontological and the practical, as the epistemological division of the object from itself. Is this, then, where to find the void as the limit to knowledge about an object? Perhaps even as a medium that is contingent, social, material, and perhaps above all political?"

at their emptiness and indeterminacy, through the theoretical lenses listed above, may prove surprisingly illuminating. I will conclude by restating this observation in slightly less abstract imagery: what this book calls "radical absence" is, like Melville's conceptual whale, a "dumb blankness full of meaning."[586] It shows itself as a spectral being without confines and contours, self-reflexive and productive in relation to both the medium specificity of works, and to their observing subject. Anthropomorphic or non-anthropomorphic, the figures of radical absence remain elusive and hypnotic, outrageous and phantasmatic.

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586 Herman Melville, Chapter 42, *Moby Dick*, Project Gutenberg edition, no page number: "Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color; and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning [. . .]".

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