Writing towards absence with Herzog, Barthes and Calvino

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**NANYANG
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SINGAPORE

**WRITING TOWARDS ABSENCE WITH
HERZOG, BARTHES AND CALVINO**

**Pang Ru Yan Jeannette
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES
2020**

Writing Towards Absence with Herzog, Barthes and Calvino

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School of Humanities

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University
in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts

2020

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SUMMARY

Increasingly, we find works whose constructions consist of the negative. A turn away from the material to immaterial, form to formlessness, presence to absence, reflects uneasiness with language, certainty and meaning. We begin to find new vocabularies and modalities of absence that sets up a subject field deserving of its own investigation. This thesis makes a case for absence as a purposeful conduct of writing, which is to say the formalistic and thematic progressions of each work take place or are displaced on to a site in the negative. The films and texts explored in this thesis finds resonance by virtue of their acknowledgement of the absence and silence of writing. We find this resonance articulated through fragments, brevity as form, self-conscious narratives, and self-effacing gestures – features, as I will demonstrate, consolidate a poetics of absence. Its work consists of creating states of absent presences that open to spectral doubles, uncanny encounters and impossible journeys. What underlies these extensions is the logic of the trace, the non-origin, that operates through circulation and postponement. In dialogue with a critical trajectory of silence as an aesthetic, the most prominent voices of which being Ihab Hassan and Susan Sontag, and a tradition of ghosts illustrated by Alice Rayner, this thesis seeks to extend this poetics across other genres where we find a pursuit and writing of absence. This will be explored in relation to Werner Herzog's documentary film *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, Roland Barthes's non-fiction work *Empire of Signs*, and Italo Calvino's novel *Invisible Cities* – works which show how reflecting absence itself speaks to memory, loss and death.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

VLADIMIR: Adieu.

POZZO: Adieu.

[*Silence. No one moves.*]

(Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* 44)

There has been an increasing number of works in recent decades whose constructions consist of the negative. This marks out a turn towards non-representational possibilities, a way to mediate with that which lies outside of representational systems. This thesis considers authors and filmmakers who explore poetic modes that seek to translate this “absence” – the unrepresentable or unaccountable. This not only takes issue with the limitations of representation (anti-mimetic, anti-realist), but marks a shift in its basic mode of construction whereby its work consists in creating states of absence, i.e. the absent present – a condition that holds us in its unfulfilled promise. There is always more to express, always that which cannot be expressed, which compel other recognitions, other findings. This thesis makes a case for absence as a purposeful conduct of writing, which is to look at how the formalistic and thematic progressions of each work take place or are displaced onto a site in the negative, in reflection of a failure of language, certainty, and meaning.

Absence, silence, hidden, emptiness, are terms that encompass a state of lack. They express little in and of themselves, but point to what lies just on the other side, out of view, out of reach. It also involves the work of negation of, for example, language or subjectivity, connoting a state of being away from. In dealing with such abstractions, it is increasingly important to clarify our understanding of “absence” otherwise too readily conferred to ambiguity. How does one write of absence, without writing away from it? I want to begin with the premise that negotiation of absent presences depends on at least the four following

characteristics: fragments, brevity as form, self-conscious narratives, and self-effacing gestures – features, as I will demonstrate, that consolidate a poetics of absence.

Firstly, fragments stand in binary relation to a whole; a type of writing that resists sequential and totalizing narratives. It describes a move in approach of the whole, but maintains it in exclusion, which finally pronounces incompleteness, discontinuity, and lack. Moreover, fragments operate in a circuit of deflection and postponement, always already an echo of something other that sets up the absent present as a persistent feature. This gives rise to a structure of networks and traces, which is in opposition to and in differentiation from sequential or chronological structuring.

Secondly, brevity as form is, as well, a characteristic of fragments, but emphasizes its nuance in relation to time; it underscores a fugitiveness and fleetingness. The length of the text, or the duration of the spectacle, is a significant consideration in this thesis' discussion of a poetics of absence. Absence links to a fugitive passing of time because it pertains to that which cannot quite be grasped – the quality of elusiveness is intrinsic to this poetics. We find images half-glimpsed that remain absent to us in its incompleteness and indecipherability, in which we decipher the sense of an unfilled territory. Furthermore, brevity expresses a resistance to form – an inability or refusal to express – that consigns value to absence (the un-surfaced, the formless) since it points to a region of significations that is not “present”, to the extent of not being present in a definite and tangible form.

This leads to the third feature under discussion: works more self-conscious about their own condition express a tension with its own form – language, image, genre – a resistance as a result of the inadequacy of representation. What we find are texts that reveal their own inner workings on the legible surface of the text; a tentative writing, in deliberation of the way and

means to express. The reiteration of this lack finally comes into assertion of a noncommunicativeness. Finally, in light of this questioning, we come to find self-effacing gestures that work towards the erasure of form itself. In moving beyond the form, the surface, we find an invitation towards spectral figures, absent voices, and other silent writings.

Exploring the traversals between presence and absence, language and silence, opens to the peripheral and marginal trajectories that lies beyond systems of representation. We often find the unsettling of boundary conditions (surface/depth, inside/outside, voice/silence) in a way that brings us to terms with what lies between, what cannot be encompassed within fixed representation. What lies between these binaries comes to be more interesting, more fundamental to how we organize experience. An important consideration to note here is the concept of the “trace” developed most clearly in Derrida’s philosophy. It describes a condition to be between contradictory terms, of never being at ease in either. As Spivak defines: “Derrida’s trace is the mark of the absence of a presence, an always already absent present, of the lack at the origin that is the condition of thought and experience” (“Introduction to *Of Grammatology*” xvii). The meaning of “trace” this study employs is primarily delimited to the sense of the “trace as origin”: “the trace is not only the disappearance of the origin [...] it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin” (Spivak xviii). Derrida’s proposal of the “trace” as supplementary to the lack at the origin, establishes the condition upon which we can come into negotiation with absence. By this logic, what is “absent” is constituted reciprocally in the circulation of the trace – circulations in equivalence of, or as important to, the object’s disappearance. Absent objects cannot be recovered or fixed upon, but continue to proffer mediations with the loss at its “origin” – an “origin” that is “trace”. This logic underlies and

explains the mediations with absence across the texts and films discussed: its circulations pursue the forever absent origin, it marks out the absence of a presence. In doing so, it comes to value the peripheral and marginal trajectories that maintain a relation to the absent object.

In this study, I am interested to explore the ways absence makes its appearance in the literary work. More specifically, to explore the notion of “absence” as trace, that describes a coming-to-be in an economy of circulation. Absence, as I explore in this study, refers not only to the absence of object, context, or materiality, but also to a mode of writing, a writing predicated on the negative, or what Roland Barthes terms the “silence of writing” (*Writing Degree Zero* 75). With this Barthes refers to the metamorphosis of writing which, in view of the breakdown of language and representation, describes a movement towards the absence of language itself, its own vanishing.¹ Ihab Hassan’s *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* maps out this very trajectory of writing, a literary tradition of silence delineated by, though not strictly confined to, authors from Marquis de Sade, Franz Kafka, to Samuel Beckett (248).² This movement towards a poetics of silence reflects a crisis in art, language and consciousness; an impulse that has given shape to various aesthetic developments of the twentieth century. Out of these various approaches, the work provides a consolidating framework: “The force of silence that drives through literature from its modern to postmodern phase will merely flash as personal intuition or fade as critical abstraction unless we allow it the resistance of example” (22-23). Examples include: types of anti-language, language breaks down or is set loose from semantic meaning; anti-form gestures where the subversion of form opens to randomness and chaos; movements toward states of the

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¹ Sontag writes: “The notion of zero-degree, neutral writing colorless writing [...] as one solution to the disintegration of literary language. But this notion of literature’s final solution is only a boundary-concept, generated by this argument. It is the logical extension of the type of rhetoric Barthes uses” (*Writing Degree Zero*, “Preface” xvi-xvii).

² Other authors included in this line of tradition not listed above: Ernest Hemingway, Jean Genet, Gertrude Stein, Jean Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus.

irrational, dreams, nonsense, or madness, that foregrounds its own incomprehensibilities; or the confusion and dissolution of identities/subjectivities (13). Like the language cut-ups of Dada, or Duchamp's signing of the spade, these arts move into more conceptual realms whereby the object before us moves into stages of its own transparency and disappearance.³ "The language of silence," Hassan concludes, "conjoins the need both of autodestruction and self-transcendence" – it is the self-abolishment and self-transcendence of form, language and subjectivity that has been staked out as an important and necessary consideration of the literary art form (12).

Hassan largely contextualizes this tradition of silence within the perimeters of the modernist and postmodernist context. This thesis hopes to extend this task by highlighting its broader resonance, beyond this critical framework. The uneasiness with language and representation does not stand in isolation within any particular tradition of writing. As Sontag in her essay "The Aesthetics of Silence" observes: "Traditionally, it has been through religious vocabulary [...] that the disaffection with language itself has been charted. In particular the antecedents of art's dilemmas and strategies are to be found in the radical wing of the mystical tradition" (308).⁴ Sontag's identification of the bearing that mystical/religious traditions have to the aesthetics of silence is crucial. In their shared aspiration towards language's transcendence, resonances across literary and religious traditions develop more intimately so. Though certainly separate domains, the influence of mystical and religious thinking on literary works is an important line of consideration. Take for instance the haiku poem from Japanese literary traditions – a seventeen-syllabic poem divided over three brief lines in an order of 5-7-5 – the

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³ Hassan also broadly discusses the artistic and intellectual developments of the time: the arts of the avant-garde (Surrealism and Dada) that use blank canvases, random music, found poetry, or silent performances (John Cage's *Silence* (1961)); and the intellectual climate that include the theoretical writings of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Lévi-Strauss, works that strive against the incommunicable (14).

⁴ Sontag, Susan. "The Aesthetics of Silence." *Susan Sontag: Essays of the 1960s & 70s*, edited by David Rieff, The Library of America, 2013, pp. 292-319.

influence of Zen is intrinsic to the poem's aesthetic development, whereby brevity is a conduit for the silence beyond language. The position of silence in Zen Buddhism is a mask for an awareness of the deeper mysteries of existence; in the haiku's retreat to silence, we find a similar inclination towards the obscure and unknown realms of experience. To take another more contemporary example, Shiro Takatani's performance "ST/LL" (2019), in this multimedia performance we find a materialization of silence through its visual choreographies. It creates a meditative space, a space for retreat not unlike the haiku. Though in the haiku, where silence expresses a reluctance to communicate, Takatani's performance offers an illumination of silence, highlights its beauty, as a thing to be observed. In the continuities across this Japanese aesthetic tradition, in regards to the meditative silence of Zen, we can observe how differing treatments of silence offers its own form of communication, its own message.

The centrality of silence and absence in religious/mystical traditions is significant to the consideration of this poetics. In arts of "absence", in their dealings with the hidden or unseen, we find what can be described as a sense of the spiritual, a view towards the otherworldly. The unfinished paintings of Rembrandt, the hidden worlds of Magritte's objects, the silence of John Cage's composition *4'33'*, are works which evoke a sense of that which is imbued beyond the surface – absent. They speak to a disaffection towards form, the desire to find ways to register the unrepresentable and incommunicable facets of experience. This sense of a beyond reverberates in gaps of incompleteness and uncertainty, gesturing to what lies outside its own perimeters, never fully assured. In works with such qualities of absence, we can decipher an almost religious character in their nod towards the unseen.

A poetics of absence also holds currency over a range of disciplines – in particular, feminist theory, history, ethnography, performative traditions – where issues of representation

are at stake. Absence comes to be in designation of the realm of traverses that remain outside and/or incompatible with the prescribed space of representation. To attempt recuperation of marginal discourses, whether that be of history or gender, is to call the very dynamics of representation into question. Absence is not simply a negative, what is “not there”, but accounts for what is underrepresented and unrepresentable. To contextualize this further, I turn to several critical studies that track inflections of absence. Peggy Phelan’s *Unmarked* reevaluates the “unmarked” space as a necessary incursion into the representation of gender: “the male is marked with value; the female unmarked” (*Unmarked* 5-6). In light of the absent “unmarked” of the female – that which is not accounted for within systems of representation – Phelan’s work underscores and revalues this invisibility. She contends: “the reproduction binaries of self/other, possession/dispossession, men/women [...] are increasingly inadequate formulas for representation. These binaries and their institutional upholders fail to account for that which cannot appear between these tight “equations” but which nonetheless inform them” (Ibid. 167). Interrogating the “unmarked” thus poses a challenge to the very economy of representation in its consigning of value to the visible. This echoes the sentiments of other authors in this thesis in their turn away from “marked” spaces towards a consideration of absence.

Michel de Certeau’s *The Writing of History* pursues something different: the absent object of history. “Historians,” as de Certeau asserts, “never apprehend origins, but only successive stages of their loss” (22). Like Phelan, de Certeau questions representational systems that leave out less predictable and determinable forces, which do not fit into the space of writing and language. Speaking of Michel Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization*, de Certeau observes: “As it progresses, the science of history witnesses the enlargement of the silent areas of its lacunae [...] Foucault’s book is a sign of this interrogation. It is expressed through an object lost

by the work of history, an object that is nonetheless impossible to suppress: namely, madness” (39-40). Even though this attempt to “restore to madness its own language” must ultimately fail, it nevertheless confronts one with the “abyss [...] in the form of objects that it winds around without reaching” (40). The absence of the past is at stake in de Certeau’s work, which is also a crucial point of consideration in this thesis. History, as discourse, tends towards narrative consolidation; it attempts the recuperation of objects and events. But this objective is increasingly untenable, thus an urgency to develop new modes of apprehension by which absence and loss can be mediated more competently so.

In performative traditions, we discover a particular phenomenology of absence in its negotiation of “live” bodies. The vanishing presence, material and concrete, taking place in real-time, registers a *perception* of absence as a tangible event. Alice Rayner’s thorough investigation of theatre as a site of “ghosting” animates this discussion, a term defined as “an aspect of theatre as a mode of consciousness in which a fully materialized reality, even a representational reality, is haunted by an appearing not-to-be – that is, by its own negation” (*Ghosts* xvii). It describes a particular condition of theatre wherein we come to terms with the spectral and the absent reality, in other words, what is not there but appears to be. Rayner gives the example of objects on stage which bring into tangible presence the absent sites from which they originate, an “aesthetic of loss as a tactile reality” (Ibid 96). Objects, voices, curtains, chairs found on stage, *present*, not represent, absent forms. It is this mode of showing that that is privileged to the domain of performance. One finds absence *there, as it is*, and this, Rayner contends, is not signified but revealed. Describing the memorial at the World Trade Center titled “Reflecting Absence”, she states: “But remember what? It suggests that what needs remembering is loss itself, loss without further signification, loss without answer. Reflecting Absence is an empty space that is replete

with memory of loss, which is the antidote to the emptiness of the Signifier” (Ibid. 35). This line of thinking clarifies a mode of thinking through absence in the literary form beyond the function of representation. The memorial registers and preserves the unspeakable through the very designation of absence. We mediate with loss, of history or memory, through the evacuation of the signified – a manner of fidelity towards that which can only be ill-defined. A huge part of this study is indebted to Rayner’s thinking of ghosts and absence in terms of its, to put ironically, “concrete” mode of conduct. Her delineation of theatre’s liminal space develops a way of thinking through absence as missed appointments, lost objects, and uncanny returns.

Across these critical frames, we can limn a shift in sensibility in their consideration of the “unmarked”, the “silent areas” of history, “ghosts”, loss, invisibility – notions, which, loosely put, deal with circulations of absence. Having discussed the critical weightage of such a discourse, this thesis seeks the further clarification of absence in the literary work – what it refers to and its means of conduct – which not only carries poetic but ethical significance. Identifying this as a shared sensibility, which partakes of different traditions, gives traction to this “force of silence” as a unique and prevalent mode of conduct (*The Dismemberment of Orpheus* 22). This thesis hopes to establish the possibility of absence as its own poetics, as a condition of writing, or, in other words, its own domain for critical investigation. Nevertheless, establishing a trajectory towards the absence in literature remains a difficult task. Absence in and of the literary work is, in some sense, tautological since language always already proceeds by some degree of exclusion. But what is worth considering is the extent to which our understanding of the relation between language and experience, language and the world, has shaped our articulations of this absence of language. What can be said about so complicated a history, in so brief a space, is the notable distrust towards language as a system of representation we find increasingly prominent

in the twentieth century – language’s absence comes to be more fully acknowledged. The works of Samuel Beckett are exemplary of this, where absence manifests through the breakdown of the system of language, punctuating the void of speech. Words make a noise like wings, like feathers, a rustle or whisper that are but faint allusions to the silence.⁵ In the absence of Beckett’s worlds – shadowy figures, vanishing forms, memory’s echoes – we find only the fundamentals when nothing remains: “I take away all the accidentals because I want to come down to the bedrock of the essentials, the archetypal” (Beckett qtd. in Ben-Zvi 475). The task of how to write and speak of the world, in any meaningful way after this demolishing, becomes a central questioning in contemporary literature. Authors such as Nabokov, Banville, Winterson and Calvino, amongst others, find ways to write out of language in order to more fully register aspects of the world. Out of these endeavors we begin to ascertain more clearly a poetics of absence, what Sontag identifies as a move towards a new “privative” or “impoverished” art:

Once the artist’s task seemed to be simply that of opening up new areas and objects of attention. That task is still acknowledged, but it has become problematic. The very faculty of attention has come into question, and has been subjected to more rigorous standards [...] Perhaps the quality of the attention one brings to bear on something will be better (less contaminated, less distracted), the less one is offered. (“The Aesthetics of Silence” 301)

It is not the case that art comes to offer less of the world, but in its disaffection with its own means and forms of representation, language is clarified, crystallized, even reduced to silence in its dealing with the world. “The notions of silence, emptiness, and reduction,” as Sontag clarifies, “sketch out new prescriptions for looking, hearing, etc.” – absence thus revitalizes how we come to mediate our experience of the world (Ibid. 300).

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⁵ Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting For Godot*. Faber and Faber, 1952.

Navigation towards the absence of language can be delineated through a diverse range of works. In film, works by directors such as Michael Haneke, Ron Fricke, and Hayao Miyazaki bear testimony to the necessity of absence. Stillness, silence, fragmented landscapes, free-floating signs, are characteristics that resonate through the particularity of their works. Other examples worth noting include *Silk* by Alessandra Baricco, a novel composed of a series of brief fragments where gestures and actions communicate in their mute and silent way; Aidan Higgins's *Bornholm Night-Ferry* where "reality" – the space in which the characters' love exists and is given form – is constructed out of a collage of letters beyond the surface of which we find the protraction of absence, the nothing. Across these examples, discontinuity, fragmentation, heightened surfaces, mute gestures, absent narrative voices, are patterns of engagement which instate the absent condition of writing – words suspended over a void.

The general view, as I have attempted to lay out here, is a turn towards a particular condition of writing, what this study will call a writing of absence. The principal investigation of this thesis is to look at a selection of works that hold towards a kind of shared sensibility by virtue of their declaration of absence. This includes Werner Herzog's documentary *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2011), Roland Barthes's *Empire of Signs* (1970) and Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972). The crucial link across this selection is their prioritization of a different mode of writing, one that through a procedure of absenting seeks not so much the representation of the world, but its withdrawal for the sake of generating complexity or, ideally, an unmediated view of the world. Setting up this poetics through different genres of writing (film, non-fiction and fiction) situates its position within a broader framework. As aforementioned, the absence of writing is a condition that holds a stake in various traditions. The works selected in this thesis, thereby, serves as representative of this wider phenomenon. The central dilemma pertains to the

uneasiness with language and forms of representation. More self-conscious about their own condition, of *how* things are framed, we begin to observe similar patterns of engagement that compose a shared aesthetic. What this means is that the formal moves initiated across these works find resonance in their attempt to circumvent formal restrictions, and by which a new poetics begins to take shape. To reiterate the characteristics I find fundamental to this poetics: fragmentation, brevity as form, self-conscious narratives, and self-effacing gestures – features that condition the absence of writing.

In the critical works discussed thus far, we've established how the task remains to find the frames by which absences can come into value. Each of the authors here participates in this task through particular strategies of engagement that initiate a turn towards the unrepresentable. Through a comparative reading, we can begin to observe what form relations of absence might take. In Herzog's documentary of Paleolithic cave paintings, Barthes's invention of a system called "Japan", and Calvino's rewriting of the medieval world, we find the proliferation of signs in view of a historical referent. The impossibility of representing the other, of culture or history, leads to a conferring with the sense of trace as origin. We come to terms with objects and events as sites of absence – not representable in itself, but relation to which is maintained through the circulation of signs. While the treatment of absence in each work certainly differs – Herzog's staging of the documentary encounter, Barthes's evacuation of signs, and Calvino's fictional endeavor – we find a thematic organized through their varied undertakings.

Two important themes to consider are memory and foreign places – concepts predicated upon absent conditions. To write of absence is to participate somehow in the work of memory – loss, gaps, returns, mourning – investigations of which inform this poetics. Rayner's insightful observations into the relation between memory and theatre's "ghosts" underscore an approach to

the past as the absent present, of “seeing what we saw before”:⁶

“The Greek words *aletheia* or *alethes*, which relate to the sense of the “unconcealed” [...] also represent the negative of *lethe*, or “forgetting,” as in Lethe, the river of oblivion in the Greek Hades, and hence are connected to the idea of a remembering that is contingent on forgetting. The “truth” of the practice of ghosting suggests that the actors are in some sense unconcealing and making visible what otherwise is invisible. They are unforgetting the presence of something absent, whether that be called a text or a character, history or the past” (*Ghosts* xvi).

To “un-forget” contains the sense of revealing the absent present of memory. It also underscores the failure of memory, which “contingent on forgetting”, exists in an indefinite time. We remember an event in displaced shapes and forms – a “forgetting” that is intrinsic to memory’s functioning. By extrapolation, a poetics of absence operates in a similar manner in regards to strategies of repetition: the trace constitutes the lost or forgotten origin. The investigation of absence in terms of memory is central to the works under discussion. As we will come to find, strategies of misrecognition and misrepresentation foreground the “unconscious” of the text where things begin to acquire the shape of ghosts or dreams, of things never quite what they are: we begin to see double.

Secondly, absence connotes the sense of that which is infinitely foreign. Encounters of travel, as we will come to find, become emblematic of the writing of absence, which is to be in negotiation with trace as origin. With Herzog’s caves, Barthes’s Japan, Calvino’s cities, one remains on the outside – the other stands foreign, separate, to the one perceiving, in refutation of

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⁶ Here Rayner quotes Herbert Blau: “Blau again: “It is exactly what goes out of sight that we most desperately want to see. That’s why we find ourselves, at the uttermost consummation of performance, in the uncanny position of spectators. It is uncanny because, in some inexplicable way, *we are seeing what we saw before.*”” (*Ghosts* xviii).

one's attempt to know in a comprehensive sense. The foreign intimates absence in its signification of an unbridgeable gap, the unknowable, and incommunicable. As Calvino notes in his writing of cities: "signs form a language, but not the one you think you know" (48) – one's encounter is trapped in a language inherently deceptive, which postulates an experience, but captures something other than the actual or singular. It explains why Barthes's writes out of signs since to write of a foreign place is to be involved in a kind of deception or fraud. To acknowledge this is to confirm the place of absence from which one writes, or as de Certeau puts, to acknowledge that we can only ever apprehend "origins" in "the successive stages of their loss" (*The Writing of History* 22). One writes *with* the origin as absent or trace, figurations that open to collage, dispersal and multiplicity.

In fact, travel is linked in an etymological sense to the notion of trace – a word that implies "track" and "footprint".⁷ In *Counterpath: Travelling with Derrida*, Malabou states: "[T]ravel is difference itself – temporalization, spacing, incessant displacement of the letter and of sense" (12).⁸ The work demonstrates more closely how the concept of *différance* pertains to the notion of travel, whereby the postponement of meaning relates to the absent encounter of the other. She continues: "If travel, the experience of the other, the opening to the world can not [...] rely on a truth or a sense of presence, then it must be shown that what has come to pass, what is coming to pass today, and what can come to pass tomorrow does not derive from any existing or assignable origin or cause [...] draws its resource from a non-place" (61). In dealing with a "non-place" or, in other words, sites of absence, we come to find that "what happens or arrives never reaches its ends" in a place where "mooring points are lacking", precisely because we find

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⁷ Spivak unpacks Derrida's notion of trace, she writes: "But his word is "trace" (the French word carries strong implications of track, footprint, imprint), a word that cannot be a master-word, that presents itself as the mark of an anterior presence, origin, master" (*Preface to Of Grammatology* xv).

⁸ Malabou writes in response to letters of correspondence between her and Derrida on his many travels.

ourselves in an open-ended realm of significations unanchored to any fixed origins (20). This informs the operative in the works under discussion where objects and events remain and persist in the circulation of signs, to no end. We find instead spectral territories where the boundaries between here/elsewhere, inside/outside, self/other are continuously displaced – a shifting and unstable positionality that continuously opens to other avenues of engagement. Language does not come to rest in a definite sense.

Having established a general sense of the various issues at stake in the consideration of absence as a poetics, I now turn to look more specifically at the primary works of this study. The second chapter deals with a consideration of the absent language of images through Herzog's documentary film. *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* presents the landscape of cave paintings as a reality of shifting and ever-receding surfaces. Its due attention to lines of cinematic temporality, and the camera's mechanical objectivity, underscores the filmic image as the absent-now – it exists only in the "present" of film-time. Our relation to the past, the cave paintings of Paleolithic origins, is located within this unspecified temporality; or, more accurately put, in the matrix of a series of temporalities in which the spectacle unfolds and endures. Its depiction of the "past" or "history" in terms of the absent-image reveals not the origin, but trace as a sequential of surfaces behind which there is nothing there. All in all, the film's poetic of images as surface (tactile, material, real-time) finally renders an aesthetics of loss – one that develops how we read language as a surface of signs in the works of Barthes and Calvino. In contrast to the absence of images, language's relation to absence is further complicated by its semantic responsibility. If the image remains silent in Herzog's film, Barthes's writing of Japan dissects its own conflict with language which interminably communicates. *Empire of Signs* offers a utopian envisioning of a system with no signs, beyond a circuit of communication: the possibility of writing language

as absent. The signs of Japan posit “matteness” as Barthes so-calls, a surface to be scrutinized not interpreted, unanchored from a cultural “real” (*Empire of Signs* 74). Setting up this premise, Barthes proceeds to write out of language, towards the evacuation of meaning. His project well-articulates the crisis of representation in its attempt to misdirect language to the possibility of its own semantic absence. In pursuit of this, we begin to approach language as surface, body and materiality; a collation of visual and tactile surfaces (photographs, newspapers and maps) that deflects to the silence of images. Lastly, we come to consider the relation of absence to fiction more closely with Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*. Barthes’s approach to absence, through an emptying out of language, stands in contrast to Calvino’s strategy of multiplicity. Through the interweaving of fiction, Calvino sets language in pursuit of the invisible form: words crafts out the absent present. The work sets up an accumulation of hidden spaces (of the medieval, mythic and modern), impossible journeys and memory’s traces – reflections of the world multiplied, as Calvino sees it, constituting the “poetry of the invisible, the poetry of infinite unpredictable potentialities” (“Lightness” 10). In this way, Herzog’s cave of forgotten dreams and Barthes’s empire of signs finds a strange way into the novelistic space as a kind of writing of invisible cities – reality amounts to a shifting landscape of broken images. But this finally leads to the question of representational truth: what is the status of events and objects if its signs reflect into emptiness? Fiction, as acknowledged by the authors in this thesis, offers a truth beyond representational truth. If Herzog’s and Barthes’s “non-fictional” works remain in approach of “fiction”, for want of a better word, it is because absence deals in one of its basic staples: the figurative. One cannot express the absences of reality literally, but only by means of some present form; what we see or read comes to imply what cannot be seen or read. And it is through the figurative that we come to ascertain other traces at work that are less clear or direct. The

resonance we find across their respective endeavors distinguishes more clearly the outlook of this poetics. In it we recognize a certain undecidability of formal boundaries (fact/fiction, real/imaginary, here/elsewhere) – a fluidity that accommodates for the writing of absence.

To reiterate, the focus of this thesis lies in questions of poetics: how the literary work *shows* absence in its multivalence. Developing this vocabulary seeks to clarify the terms involved in this shift towards non-representational possibilities, before we take into consideration other ideological and ethical implications. It is to first substantiate the value of sites of absence that interpretive criticism tends too often to ignore. As Sontag contends with our interpretive practices: “to understand is to interpret. And to interpret is to restate the phenomenon, in effect to find an equivalent for it” (“Against Interpretation” 13).⁹ The hermeneutical tradition establishes an approach to the literary work that insists on the interpretation of meaning, to “show what it means” as opposed to showing “how it is” (Ibid. 16). As such, to talk about the work’s “absence” seems unproductive relative to the dominant standard of criticism in its implicit suggestion that “it means nothing”. One cannot so much rely on an interpretation of absence, but to show the ways it might make its appearance, to shift from a “prescriptive to descriptive vocabulary” (Ibid. 18-20). Additionally, what has been previously considered of less consequence has to do with the limitations of our approach. But as the arts and criticism begin to develop new interpretive frames, critical language and material, there is an increasing need to apply this inheritance more broadly to our understanding of the literary work.

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⁹ Sontag, Susan. “Against Interpretation.” *Susan Sontag: Essays of the 1960s & 70s*, edited by David Rieff, The Library of America, 2013, pp. 10-20.

CHAPTER TWO: WERNER HERZOG AND FORGOTTEN CAVES

“The world, moreover, is but surfaces on surfaces: however far one penetrates behind the wall, there are only other walls, other slices, and strata beneath strata or faces on faces, indefinite foliation” (Jean-Luc Nancy, “Painting in the Grotto” 76)¹⁰

The stories Werner Herzog tells are of those who live in seclusion, in places like Antarctica or Siberia, of those who live with wild bears or survived a plane crash¹¹ – there is always a strangeness, of something other lurking within his films, as if in the camera’s silent observation of the world, it captures what goes out of sight. Herzog’s aesthetic can be characterized by a quality of absence, whether that is found in the distant past, landscapes or portraits of human figures. We often find a confrontation with the limitations and absurdities of experience, of phenomenon that cannot quite be explained or defined. In his documentaries, we are left with more questions, less assured about our own position in the world. They seldom provide certainty or clarification, offering, instead, partial illuminations that draws a line under the absence in our own experience.

Timothy Corrigan defines Herzog’s documentaries as “essay films”¹², a practice that broadens the field of investigation in film in its interaction with fiction, performance and poetry. He describes:

Herzog’s documentary films are then walks around the deserts, jungles, and mazes of the

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¹⁰ From Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, 76.

¹¹ *Grizzly Man* (2005) documents the story of Timothy Treadwell, a man who lives in the wild with grizzly bears in an Alaskan reserve. Including footage shot by Treadwell himself, of his time in the mountains, we find a revealing portrait of an intrepid and frenzied passion, which, tragically, ends with Treadwell’s death. Other works such as *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007) documents researches living in the desolate landscape of Antarctica; *Happy People: A Year in the Taiga* (2010) shows us the life of those who live solitary in Siberia; or *Wings of Hope* (2000) which stages a woman’s journey back to the South American jungle, the site of a plane crash where she, the sole survivor, is asked to return.

¹² Corrigan states: “Part of the power of the essay, however, lies precisely in its ability to question or redefine these and other representational assumptions [...] Straddling fiction and nonfiction, news reports and confessional autobiography, documentaries and experimental film, they are, first, practices that undo and redo film form” (4).

world in search of a truth found at the crossroads of fantasy and failure [...] Exploring these worlds becomes exploring the limits of experience as the experience of limits and thought, which invariably leads to a kind of failure or collapse: the bombastic collapse of human efforts and gestures before the massive indifference of a hostile world, efforts and gestures only able to call attention to the intense longing for significance. (*The Essay Film* 123)

What we find in Herzog's documentaries, then, is a mode of exploration that provides more than a record, but an "essay" that contends with limits, of language, knowledge and experience. It questions and renders absurd the certainty of knowledge and truth, a "truth" which can only be deciphered within multiplicity, fragmentation and displacement – strategies which lay out a poetics of absence. In light of this, what we find is a poetics that develops across the lines of fantasy/failure, surface/depth, origin/trace, absence/presence, which does not derive truth, but insists on its continuous pursuit.

This "truth", as Herzog has clarified, has to do with a "poetic, ecstatic truth", one that opens to a deeper understanding of the mysterious and elusive traces of experience: "There are deeper strata of truth in cinema, and there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth [...] and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization" ("The Minnesota Declaration" 301).¹³ Herzog remains uneasy with defining his works within the documentary genre, that conventionally relies on factual truth in its forms of accounting. Instead, we find in his works a disposition towards fiction and poetry: "I took a "fact" [...] and played with the "truth" of the situation to reach a more poetic understanding" (*Herzog on Herzog* 253). "Facts" are revealed as an unreliable measure of truth: it is an empty promise of a fixed or stable truth. Therefore, the documentary must accommodate the uncertainty of what is and is not present to the camera, to

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¹³ Cited in Cronin, Paul, editor. *Herzog on Herzog*. Faber and Faber, 2002, pp. 301-302.

move beyond the materials of facticity. There is a stratum of cinema beyond what can be captured, and to be in mediation with these hidden vestiges is what motivates the various poetic gestures in his documentaries. As Norman reports: “[Herzog’s] work seems to draw us into the strange and difficult region where the possibility of literary fiction haunts the so-called truthful, responsible, serious, real testimony as its proper possibility” (219).¹⁴ It is this fracture, between fact and fiction, fantasy and reality, presence and absence, and what it opens up to, that will be explored in Herzog’s documentary.

To shed some light on Herzog’s methodology, I now turn to look at what has been said across his interviews and discussions on film. What we find is a particular sensitivity towards less visible contingencies, in the search for new images with which to reflect the world. Herzog states his aim is to bring to light “unpronounced and unproclaimed images, our collective dreams”, in attenuation to facets of experience less clear or less acknowledged (*Herzog on Herzog* 61). And these images belong to the collective realms of dreams that speak to something beyond our selves. Herzog’s works are notable for their exploration of universal themes: human suffering, futility, hope or loneliness, amongst others. This humanistic approach tends to lead beyond the objective, towards more subjective and introspective explorations. In this trajectory, it is the less predictable, non-representable forces that are pursued. One of the ways by which Herzog facilitates this search is through the withholding of directorial intervention, to the extent that he avoids the interpretation of the phenomenon before the lens. Recalling the shooting of *Fata Morgana* (1971), Herzog recounts: “The mirages [...] of the desert landscape were so much more powerful than any single idea for the film I had previously had, so I junked the story, opened my eyes and ears, and just filmed the mirages of the desert. I did not ask questions, I just

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¹⁴ Here Norman quotes from Jacques Derrida’s *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg, Stanford University Press, 2000.

let it happen” (*Herzog on Herzog* 47). Film captures the world “as it happens”, it “writes itself”, and this degree of non-intervention gives way to a more neutral proceeding. Furthermore, Herzog avoids using storyboards as Prager points out, to avoid “cinema [becoming] something planned on the page, mapped as one might map an excursion, rather than something elusive that is captured, at best unexpectedly” (“Werner Herzog’s Companions” 16). Herzog thus remains opposed to an authoritative or rigidly mediated practice, because, as he suggests, “my cinema is killed stone dead without the outside world to react to [...] room must be given to allow these changes to grow, otherwise the life that is there dies painfully” (*Herzog on Herzog* 104). By and by, this so-called liberated practice opens to a depiction of the world in which objects and events find their own rightful place. It gestures towards leaving them in their silent vocabularies.

Herzog’s non-interventional approach and the camera’s mechanical objectivity are issues we will come to contend with further on. But for now, we turn to the central work of this study, his documentary *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010). The work documents the archaeological finding of cave paintings found in 1994 at Ardèche, France. In it contains one of the earliest discoveries of cave paintings, dated thirty-two thousand years old. Documenting one of the earliest forms of human representation, the work invites us to reflect on the question of origins, of the absence at the origin. What comes to be in Herzog’s documentary primarily investigates the absence of the past – an absence that cannot be represented, but find extension as trace. The work makes appeals to various models, from the scientific and technological to the affective and poetic. Confronted with an object that cannot be retrieved, these practices show the activity that maintains the object in circulation. In interviews, the participants speak repeatedly of the barrier between the past and present: being unable to access parts of the cave due to logistical reasons, scientists who believe in the impossibility of knowing the past that is definitively lost, and others

who speak of how the walls can talk to us, accept or refuse us. The film, then, works to investigate this fracture at the origin where fiction, as Norman previously suggests, is its proper possibility.¹⁵ It sets up a negotiation with loss, with the failure of representation, finding ways by which absence can be framed and reframed. Its aesthetic mediations, thus, finally come to occupy a relation to a spectral becoming, which like the paintings of Chauvet cave, appear from hidden times and places.

Many critical studies have considered the work's archival value. Most notably, how its poetic and affective engagements open to a more complex mediation of the past. Dicker and Lee argue that the film's poetic renderings of scientific truths deepen our understanding of humanity's past ("But the Image Wants Danger"), while Johnson suggests doing so mediates the subjective and objective, scientific and metaphysical ("Science in Three Dimensions" 930). Other studies suggest the work establishes continuities across the prehistoric and modern: Pizzato recognizes the cave paintings as a kind of "prehistoric theatre" ("Cave Rituals and the Brain's Theatre" 117), while Koepnick sees it as a type of "cave cinema", where the interchange across both mediums open to haptic, somatic and synaesthetic possibilities for the cinematic ("Herzog's Cave" 272). These critical studies are less focused on the work's projections of unmarked or absent spaces, offering valuations, instead, on what can be restored and kept as history. What this "archive" entails needs to be more closely examined, especially so in light of the film's declarations of absence in suggestion of the impossibility of the archival.

Mary Ann Doane complicates the idea of cinema as a "pure record of time", as that which "registers and repeat "that which happens"": "But what is it that is being archived? Once the present as contingency has been seized and stored, it ineluctably becomes the past. Yet this archival artifact becomes strangely immaterial; existing nowhere but in its screening for a

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¹⁵ Norman, 219.

spectator in the present, it becomes the experience of presence” (22-23). With this Doane dissects the temporal levels at work in film: the time of the event, the time of filming, and the time of reception. The representation of time is intrinsic to the archive of film, but what is being stored is not so much a temporality outside itself, but exists in its own present. As Doane elaborates: “Film makes visible not a knowledge of the original but a certain passing temporal configuration [...] an image of time [...] that is not necessary but contingent. This is the pathos of archival desire” (23). Essentially, film deceives in presenting places and events with a solidity and continuity unavailable to other forms of art. It seemingly brings us into contact with the world which comes to produce only a more acute sense of loss, of unfulfilled desire. The cave paintings of Chauvet remains for us a contingent and immaterial image and it is this absence which must be confronted.

Time is not bridged through the film but splintered and fractured. One way this is emphasized is through the staging of a plural time of “seeing” that emphasizes only a lack of vision. Film’s protagonists are usually employed to invite the audience’s participation into their points of view. This is, however, more often than not, short-circuited in Herzog’s film. Sequences where the camera pans slowly over the faces of scientists or crewmembers, staring blankly out to the caves, denaturalize the subject through its silent duration. It alienates, as opposed to embody. In one particular sequence, the protagonists look directly into the camera, at “us”, rendering a heightened awareness of our selves as spectators viewing the film. We do not see what they saw, but only ourselves looking. The illusion is torn apart. Deleuze’s interpretation of the facial close-up further sheds light on this: “The facial close-up is both the face and its effacement [...] that is its relationship in fear to the void or the absence” (*Cinema 1: The Movement Image* 100). Herzog’s film continuously hints towards the very effacement of the

subject. Faces become strange, unnatural, that renders its absence, its nothingness. The blank gaze marks failure, an absence to one's self and the world.

In the film's postscript, we are taken to a tropical biosphere powered by a nuclear powerhouse just twenty miles from the cave. These scenes of a massive industrial plant with albino crocodiles inhabiting marks a jarring shift from the prehistoric world of caves. Time, again, is splintered. We are drawn away from the time of the "prehistoric past", to the present day, the "now", in this image of rampant modernity. But also, a postulated "future" as Herzog comments on how this used to be a landscape of glaciers where now a steaming climate resides, wildly speculating that one day these crocodiles might even enter the Chauvet cave. Time's dissection here reiterates the lines of temporality in film as Doane draws out. There is no time of the "past", but only the present of filming, exposed through these parallel situations. What the camera records are only fleeting incidentals that are not situated to an origin of a "prehistoric world" – there is no "here" in film, only the continual splitting of images. Furthermore, the evolution of the landscape suggests ultimately no lasting continuity. We find ourselves in an ever-shifting space between the "prehistoric" and "modern", and spaces not even travelled to, continuously displacing and unsettling our position in this world.

The camera finally lands on an image of two crocodiles, face to face, creating a seemingly mirrored image in the water tank. When the crocodiles move, the reflection seems to break, to which Herzog voice-overs: "Nothing is real. Nothing is certain. It is hard to decide whether or not these creatures here are dividing into their own doppelgangers. And, do they really meet, or is it just their own imaginary mirror reflection? Are we today possibly the crocodiles that look back into an abyss of time, when we see the paintings of Chauvet Cave?" (1:27:30). The image splinters as the object seemingly strays from its reflection. A broken

symmetry between self/other, here/elsewhere, acknowledges the failure of definition. As an extended metaphor of the film's own images, Herzog suggests that the images we see are only ever spectral and immaterial. They reflect into other shapes and forms, acquiring other presences in its self-transcendence. Dicker and Lee identifies this image as reflective of the film as a "mise en abyme": "Herzog's film becomes a mirror held up to the cave art, just as the cave art reflects the terms of the film [...] Both also refer to time past and an unattainable place. Thus, the truth is also lost in the resulting "hall of mirrors" where we find an infinity of reflections that our eyes can never exhaust" (48). What is reflected remains in a self-enclosed space that does not reflect outward to a reality but only inwards into itself. The object of the past cannot be represented and recuperated, but sustained referentially or allusively in an "infinity of reflections", that is the effort to recover what is lost. This represents the "unmarked" space, as Phelan termed, which falls out of the binary between past/present, prehistoric/modern; and these interchanges which do not necessarily fit into these formulas, nevertheless still inform them (*Unmarked* 165).

How, then, is this hall of mirrors situation effected? One of the ways by which this is achieved is through the disruption of narrative continuity. It aims for the transcendence of form itself towards other realms of experience. Critics have often identified Herzog's image poetics as one based on the affective experience that displaces the documented encounter. Carroll identifies this tendency across Herzog's works: "The event, though narratively motivated, drops out of the web of sense for us, i.e., out of the realm of our habitual expectations concerning action, motive, and purpose. The image, thereby, arrests us through its incongruity" (*Interpreting the Moving Image* 294). Carroll approximates this effect of image-arrest more broadly within the term "presence", that denotes "a quality of experience wherein the percipient encounters a phenomenon that – because it is not readily assimilable via language or the routines of

instrumental reason – evokes a feeling of strangeness or alien-ness that [...] instills a sense of the utter and inexplicable thereness of the object of attention” (Ibid. 285). And to be “there”, simply present, is to designate the surface, there is no beyond. In that sense, the object as object remains absent, beyond the grasp of language and reason; simply there, in its silence.

To illustrate this, I look to how the scientific narrative that motivates the film tends to deviate instead to more irrational encounters, encounters that cannot be explained but there in its own presentation. One of the fascinating archaeological findings we discover is a wall of handprints made by a single man with a crooked little finger. This wall of handprints is the first image presented to us at the beginning of the film, which also is the director’s first sighting of the cave paintings.

Image from *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*

This image returns later on in the film where archaeologist Dominique Baffier reveals at how they were able to attribute a physical reality to this prehistoric figure (his height, his crooked finger), and to follow his movements through the cave with this signature. On that note, we end up following Baffier herself through the cave in the following sequence – an ordinary enough event which becomes strange in the uncanny foreshadowing of it. It is as if we were following the man with the crooked little finger himself. In this narrative staging, “reality” seems to splinter into

two temporalities: who do we follow? Or might we be followed? The evocation of these ghostly presences renders more illusory the documentary encounter, hinting to less visible regions we cannot account for. In a later part of the documentary, Herzog comments on another curious finding of tracks of an eight-year old boy next to those of a wolf: “Did a hungry wolf stalk the boy? Or did they walk together as friends? Or were their tracks made thousands of years apart? We will never know” (59:50). It is this unmappable terrain, where chronology cannot be reconstructed, that the perpetual confusion of identity and reality takes place: “silence de-realizes the world”.¹⁶

Looking more broadly to the film’s other negotiations, we often find playful maneuvers that move away from the rigors of the documentary and science. Putting together a montage of different kinds of footage that don’t quite belong: nuclear power plants, albino crocodiles and even a clip of Fred Astaire’s shadow dance, are juxtaposed with shots of the Chauvet Cave, archival repositories and panoramic landscapes. As Carroll explains, “In general, Herzog [presents] us with events which are causally comprehensible within the narrative but which at the same time so incongruously combine elements that we view the events as images – luminously strange images” (*Interpreting the Moving Image* 293). This is also evident in the film’s frequent detours to less conventional scientific explorations, that perpetually creates incongruity and disturbance so as to present the world in its strangeness. Herzog interviews an experimental archaeologist, a master perfumer who sniffs out cave scents, and comically reenacts the use of prehistoric weaponry. These comical and bizzare depictions intrude into the clinical settings that stage the factual and scientific. For example, documenting Paleolithic instruments, we first see curators in a museum carefully handling an original flute with white gloves. The next sequence shifts to the outside of the cave, to an interview with archaeologist Wulf Hein dressed in a

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¹⁶ Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, 13.

reindeer suit and playing Star-Spangled Banner on a reproduction of the flute. Moving from the inner, clinical environment to an outer, more surrealist landscape produces an altered perception. The object is brought to life, acquiring new imaginative dimensions. And the scene cuts on the still image of Wulf Hein looking directly into the camera. In the lingering gaze and the echo of the flute's hollow tune, the factual seems to hollow out in the sense of its own absence.

Herzog's narrative voice-over also crucially destabilizes the documented world in his own intrusion of it. Akçali and Çakırlar notes, "the filmmaker's voice subverts the documentary setting by dramatizing his subjects' inhabitation of it" ("A Form of Proto-Cinema" 52). As previously discussed, interview subjects take on the role of characters, and likewise, the director himself occupies a role in this staging. Herzog's discussion of philosophical, mythical and existential themes guides the unfolding of the scenes. He becomes a subject in the work, effectively unsettling the relation between subject and object, the one who documents and the documented. Other self-reflexive gestures include: leaving in shots of the drone camera returning, shots of the film crew, microphone sound checks, and deliberate camera movements that makes the camera's presence apparent. These continuous allusions to its own manners of framing dispel the illusion of naturalism. The narrated world comes under interrogation and self-erasure, always in the process of construction, as opposed to being a constructed thing.

In light of the film's withdrawals from narrative continuity, I turn to look more closely at the film's aesthetic features. We find strategies that render the spectrality of the documented encounter – an uncertainty of presence that takes us to the limits of language. The film oscillates between inside and outside, voice and silence, movement and stillness, light and darkness, that stages an unconcealing. It embodies a kind of memory or dream space, as the titular suggests, images belonging to "long forgotten dreams" that straddles the boundary of absence/presence.

The first shot of the cave painting is rendered as a blank image. Little context or information is given to the viewer in this initial sequence. We are presented with an image of seemingly random markings on a wall, out of context, displaced from a web of connections. Furthermore, with the use of a hand held camera, the image shakes and quivers in a way that foregrounds its uncertainty and instability. As the film progresses, we begin to learn more and more about Paleolithic cultures, each new information, each interview, fills the blank image we were first presented with. But the film continuously returns to that image of no-information through its continuous inclusion of slow-panning shots and non-narrative moments. And in these moments of muteness and stillness, we are confronted, once again, with the image's inexplicability. This effect of evacuation is amplified through the recurring movement from the outer, panoramic landscape to the inner, claustrophobic space of the cave. Through these sequential shifts, a sense of the withdrawal of space, or its emptying out, collates our experience of the film.

These aspects of stillness and silence call for further inquiry. Long takes with no narration, slow-panning shots up to the point of a photographic stillness – scenes where “nothing happens” – set up our relation to the image of cave paintings. They call out for signification, fragmented and adrift, or as Carroll suggests, “the phenomenon seems to “hop out of time,” [...] to subsist in an elongated present, disjunct from a continuous sense of its relation to the past or the future” (*Interpreting the Moving Image* 286). In stasis, out of the temporal chain of events, the film presents this “object of history” as beyond the constructions of narrative. Use of language or narrative here would seem only artificial or superfluous; we cannot move beyond the surface. And if movement fills the frame (action, change, speech), then stillness gestures towards its evacuation. It produces a sense of the world hollowed out, space turning void, which, as previously discussed, is a motif within the work. As such, the film moves towards an absenting,

resigned towards the inability to stage meaningful interaction in action or in flux. The paintings of Chauvet Cave begin to emerge on its own terms, beyond signification, simply there.

This pattern of engagement ties in with Herzog's resistance to interpretation of the documented phenomena. The attempt to present the cave paintings *as they are* reveals the aspiration towards non-intervention and non-mediation within the spectacle's unfolding. As suggested in chapter one, absence and silence aims for the transcendence of form and subjectivity. The particularity of the camera's mechanical objectivity facilitates this mode of engagement. As Roland Barthes asserts: "the scene is *there*, captured mechanically, not humanly (the mechanical is here a guarantee of objectivity)" (*Image-Music-Text* 44). Film's instrument, in this regard, avails of degrees of non-interpretation and non-intervention. And shots with minimal directorial intervention gesture towards the subject's own effacement, the withdrawal of meaning and interpretation. Herzog's inclination towards the film aesthetic of New American Cinema coheres with this impetus, described as an aesthetic that "no longer has anything in common with categories such as literature [...]. What is being practiced there is a distillation process of purely filmic means of expression" (qtd. in Harris 130).¹⁷ Herzog's manipulation of images in the film thus proposes a means of expression beyond the system of language intrinsic to forms of literary expression. His images speak the language of silence.

Having said that, "there is no neutral surface" as Sontag reminds us, or as John Cage insists "there is no such thing as silence. Something is always happening that makes a sound" (qtd. in "The Aesthetics of Silence" 298). Instead of pure silence in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, we find the music accompaniment of Ernst Reijseger. What is key to Herzog's choice of composer is the surreal and unsettling atmosphere the music draws out in the world of caves; an

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¹⁷ Harris, Stefanie. "Moving Stills: Herzog and Photography," in *A Companion to Werner Herzog*, edited by Brad Prager, Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, pp.127-148.

aesthetic layer which reinforces the uncertainty of the image spectacle. Reijseger's composition plays a significant role in the overall dream-like and surreal effect of the film. From the fast-moving trepidation of the cello, spikes to a different key, a singular chord, or to moments of silence, the music moves us into the haunting and surreal spaces of the caves through a transposition of reality. As an avant-garde composer, Reijseger adds to the list of characters in Herzog's film. In an interview, we find scenes of the composer lying on the ground whilst playing the cello, or balancing the instrument upside down on his finger as if in a vaudeville act. Here, Herzog elaborates on the working process between film and musical accompaniment, whereby the choreography is set in pursuit of the flow of images.¹⁸ The composer would play along with a sequence of filmic images he had not seen before, undirected, aimless, subject to contingency. And yet what we find is a transposition of visual surfaces where music and image conjoin in a strange procession, transforming and intensifying the reality of perception. In doing so, Herzog sets up a procedural space wherein things unfold in a less certain or direct manner. These formal choices are an invitation into an "unknown", an aimless meandering that permits moves toward "an ever receding horizon of silence".¹⁹

Again, we find an aesthetic of absence in the work's sustained use of shadows and flickering lights. The paintings move within a shadowy and obscure space, and this atmosphere colors the experience of the film. Visibility is premised on a passing of light, a fragile process of emergence that emphasizes the fleetingness and transient nature of the paintings of Chauvet. Herzog employs a crescendo/decrescendo effect of light across the paintings in extended sequences with neither commentary nor movement. They seem to emerge from the dark, for a moment in time, before withdrawing back into hidden corners, into absence. What remains is but

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¹⁸ Herzog, Werner. Interview by The Getty, *YouTube*, uploaded by The Getty, 8 Aug. 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tazCUwpZa1M>.

¹⁹ Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence", 297.

a faint and lingering impression. But in the interplay of light, new contrasts, gradations and tonalities are also revealed. Textures, curvatures, cracks, smudges, or discolorations, find different pronunciations. And through this patterning we discover what has previously remained out of sight. Space is drawn and redrawn, confronting the limits of visibility. More broadly, this depiction also alludes to the very workings of cinema. What stream of light falls onto the camera's retina, and what image configures onto the cinematic screen, depends fundamentally on such fugitive traces. The receding of light draws a line under what is left out, a suggestion that what we discover are contained only within the span of a liminal passing.

In the failure of language and representation, the tactile surface of the caves produces its own site of significance, one that, nevertheless, speaks to an aesthetic of loss. Rayner clarifies this relation to objects, suggesting objects “turn history into a kind of contagion”, that brings one's “living body in contact with a witness that did not just see events but belonged in the materiality of events. The tangibility of the [...] witness brings a distant and imaginary site into sensory presence, as survivors of history's losses [...] They bridge the gap or rupture of written history's intelligibility” (*Ghosts* 79). Herzog's delay of the visibility of the surface can be read in light of Rayner's observation. The surface's vivid texture calls to be touched, inviting the viewer into sensorial participation. And this offers a form of substitution in the failure to recover history – the tactile materiality as loss, as absence that is self-sufficient. In the film's closing scene, an image of a hand in its outline, in the negative, is portrayed. It tempts one to place one's own hand in the absent space, to fill its gap. Koepnick contends that Herzog's frequent reference to handprints is less about its significance as a prototypal signature, but more to do with a “long-forgotten index of a symbiotic relationship between flesh and rock, the human and nonhuman, subject and object” (280). But the image of the negative handprint finally underscores the

untenable nature of this relation: it marks departure, a material loss, that speaks of an absence that cannot be recuperated – a ghostly trace of history that speaks of its own emptiness.

Herzog's texturing of shadows, reflections, and voids, more than simply aesthetic features, serve to complicate our relation to the absent past. In a clip of Fred Astaire dancing with his shadow enlarged on a white wall, we see the shadow moving in and out of time with the dancer. This alludes to the image of white crocodiles we find in the film's postscript that presents a similar dissection. The man moves with its shadow, but the shadow moves away from the man; likewise, the reflection departs from its material referent. This presentation stands as a larger commentary of how circulations of the past come to be only as reflected and shadowy presences, untethered from a fixed point of origin. The world of caves belongs to a shimmering and elusive reality that consists of layers behind layers. Frequent long-panning shots of crystal calcite formed over the surface of paintings, over skeletal bones, further evokes the notion of a layered reality of surfaces. Its chamber holds slices and incongruities of time, which cannot clearly be differentiated in terms of chronology or significance, but nevertheless seem to eliminate time itself.

The film's interest in mapping – shot in three-dimensional to map out spatiality and curvatures – then becomes an ironic means to justify a terrain that is fundamentally unmappable. Map's precisions, made possible by technology, are but entryways to more imaginative realms. This is made clear in a reference to a laser map of the cave's spatial coordinates, every inch of the cave mapped out onto the digital surface. The question, Herzog asks, is what stories are concealed within the map – the dreams and hopes of peoples long forgotten. And here, beyond the maps, beyond the ordered surface of things, we find ourselves in a landscape without fixed mooring points where the flux and chaos of existence resides. The wealth of knowledge that

advances in technology offer, such as the precisions of carbon dating that determine the time of inscription, or the identification of fossilized bones, appear almost as redundant gestures in the face of the void. Clearly, the film doesn't discount the value of scientific and archaeological knowledge, however, it leaves open ambiguities and uncertainties that retains a space for further inhabitations, for other trace-like figurations.

"The painters of the cave," as Herzog narrates, "seem to speak to us from a familiar, yet distant universe" (*Cave of Forgotten Dreams*). This chapter has attempted to draw out the various senses of the uncanny found in the work, through its splitting of time and image that opens up to absent presences. It has argued that the film establishes itself as a site of the uncanny where the boundaries of fact/fiction, absence/presence, here/elsewhere remains on shaky grounds. Two senses of "absence" have been adopted at various points in the work: firstly, the absence of the past; secondly, cinema's absent figurations. We've seen how both aspects of absence have come into close working relation in the documentary's mediations whereby the past and its cinematic representation disclose its own spectrality. Herzog's film asks us to consider the shapes and forms the past acquires – in science, in performance, in our selves – and the other shapes and forms that it might acquire. It leaves us with the suggestion, as mentioned in an interview, that one must go outside the cave in order to find an understanding of it, that is to be away from the place of origin is, at the same time, to return.

CHAPTER THREE: ROLAND BARTHES, WRITING THE SURFACE

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes underscores the tension between language and photography: “No writing can give me this certainty. It is the misfortune (but also perhaps the voluptuous pleasure) of language not to be able to authenticate itself [...] language is, by nature, fictional [...] but the Photograph is indifferent to all intermediaries: it does not invent; it is authentication itself” (85-87). In Herzog’s film, we find the certainty of the photograph; its images announce the cave painting’s exists – they *have been so* – a silent witness of history.²⁰ Though the work portrays this image in uncertain terms, it nonetheless offers a depiction of the world, to some extent, *as it was*. Barthes’s desire for this autonomy of the photograph in language, a system free of information, is most fully engaged with in *Empire of Signs* – a work which contains the dream of language in the stillness and silence of the photograph.

Barthes’s preoccupation with semiotics, the internal workings of sign-systems, has led to extended reflections on the functioning of language and its other possibilities. *Empire of Signs* (1970) designates one of this very possibilities, that of language’s absence. What this means is that the text is given as a surface to be displayed; it seeks the retreat of the signified, words that signify nothing. To write on the surface is to frame absence, i.e. there is nothing behind. Barthes does so primarily through: self-referentiality through which the text makes and unmakes itself; aesthetic interplay that foregrounds the body of language; and staging the space of the uncanny in which forms lose their certainty. In this work, we find descriptions of various cultural forms and practices in Japan, a culture read as a landscape of signs. Twenty-six segments, each reflecting some aspect of culture – from cooking, maps, pinball and stationary shops to Bunraku

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²⁰ Though Barthes distinguishes photography and cinema, more thoroughly, as separate domains, this “certainty” of the image still holds across both mediums.

performances, flower arrangement, and theatrical masks – both everyday and artistic practices find their way into the fictional space of language. Amongst these descriptive threads we find photographs, sketches, and handwritten notes, all of which consolidates an aesthetic space composed of visual and written signs. But signs evacuated, emptied out, which ensure the exchange of signifiers beyond appropriation.

Whether or not Barthes truly succeeds in this endeavor is not the primary issue at stake; what is significant is the impetus behind this project, which is in postulation of an absent language. The work exhibits a writing towards the negative, or what Barthes has termed at various points as the “zero degree of writing”, the “silence of writing”, or the “state of *a-language*”.²¹ And this is most fully played out in *Empire of Signs* amongst his other works. The questioning of semiotics is at stake: an interrogation of sign-systems (language in particular), its functions and mechanisms. Sontag, in the preface to *Writing Degree Zero*, clarifies: “That title suggests a rather single-minded manifesto, advocating a stern retrenchment of literature into a desiccated, ascetic noncommunicativeness [...] But this horizon of literature’s final solution is only a boundary-concept, generated by this argument [...] What is essential to Barthes’s position is not its apocalyptic terminus, but the diagnosis of the over-all situation of literature he makes” (xvi-xvii). Literature is tasked with communication, and a language that *says nothing* resists this intrinsic function. Of course, Barthes isn’t simply “saying nothing” in *Empire of Signs*, but in setting this up as a condition of writing, as a conceptual boundary, we are asked to reflect on what language does say. While Barthes’s notion of zero degree writing is certainly far more complex, this study will limit itself to the work’s language and formal mediations that develop absent forms. The concern lies first and foremost with how absence is portrayed, and what this might entail, that is a shift from a theoretical to aesthetic questioning. This does not

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²¹ *Writing Degree Zero* (5; 75); *Empire of Signs* (75).

imply a non-theoretical reading, but one of the aims here is to reposition *Empire of Signs* not just within the theoretical, but whose fictions also partake in the literary.

Having said that, further introduction to the work's theoretical backdrop still remains crucial to our understanding of its aesthetic developments. As one of his later works, published in 1970, the work signals a break away from his earlier writings. Sharp suggests this turn from the structuralism of his earlier writings to poststructuralist approaches can be accredited to his desire to move beyond direct political critique. With *Mythologies* (1968), Barthes came to realize that his aim to demystify the cultural practices of French society served, instead, only a different interpretation of meaning, instating a cultural ideology in place of the old one (Sharp 157).²² As such, with *Empire of Signs* what we find is a different objective, not to reveal hidden meanings, but to seek its evacuation. Barthes's envisioning of a system where meaning is absent, then, takes on a form of resistance to fixed representations. We can see why Barthes's poststructuralism comes to fore in critical discussions, to the neglect of its aesthetic components one might add. Hiddleston reads the work as the "anxiety of theory and the unease of the writing persona on his relationship with language and meaning" ("Displacing Barthes" 178). Sharp claims that the writer's "poststructural position critiques the opposition of Orient and Occident, colonial and postcolonial", that is in the evacuation of the signified from language, it subverts the binary of representation ("Writing Travel" 164). But a number of critics have also pointed out the shift from the theoretical to poetical that *Empire of Signs* marks out. Trifonas claims: "*Empire of Signs* illustrates the shift in Barthes' later works. The text is more poetic than analytical, more reflective than critical"; but even then, Trifonas proceeds to interrogate the work's debunking of

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²² Roland Barthes on *Mythologies*: "[...] arrogant discourse came only from the right when I wrote *Mythologies*, whereas now we can see the growth of arrogance on the left [...] I'm divided between my situation within a political site and the aggressions of discourse coming from this site" (qtd. in Sharp 156).

Western ideology (*Barthes and the Empire of Signs* 17). Whilst the categories of theoretical/aesthetic are less often mutually exclusive in his works, a theoretical focus nonetheless tends to overshadow the work's aesthetic intricacies and nuances. If the silence of writing involves the displacement of a theoretical and ideological positioning, then its very poetics certainly necessitates greater critical attention.

In spite of Barthes's declamations that the work writes of "Japan" – "the author has never, in any sense, photographed Japan" (4) – the binary of East/West that occupies a central positioning in the text has often come under scrutiny, charged as an account that exoticizes and mystifies the Orient. Critical studies to date include: Rolf J. Goebel's "Japan as Western Text", Pamela A. Genova's "Beyond Orientalism", Dalia Kandiyoti's "Exoticism Then and Now: The Travels of Pierre Loti and Roland Barthes in Japan", Diana Knight's "Barthes and Orientalism", and Joanne P. Sharp's "Roland Barthes Detours the Orient", studies which situate *Empire of Signs* within the framework of postcolonial discourse. To briefly sum up the various threads across these readings, some critics take issue with the Orientalist themes underlying the work's portrayal of Japan, as eroticized, infantilized, incomprehensible or interchangeable. Others suggest it subverts representational strategies altogether, therefore functioning as a transgression of Orientalist discourse.²³ But Barthes's positioning of the Eastern/Western binary, as I come to find, has more to do with the treacheries of language (the signified) than a sure sense of the ideological. It is a way of portraying the "absence of Japan", through the "presence of the West", rather than forming a positive assertion or claim of what the East/West "is". Barthes's work continuously trips the reader's expectations: it draws one into the "cultural realities" it describes, before proceeding to undermine this very expectation. Even though this may read too dismissive

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²³ Refer to Sharp, "Writing Travel/Travelling Writing: Roland Barthes Detours the Orient". She argues that instead of debating whether or not Barthes was or was not an Orientalist writer, he does transgress the Orientalist tradition though never fully stepping outside of it. (158).

of the work's real ideological implications, my interest lies in how Barthes's writes out of the political, that is, to write out of language.

In an interview with Barthes in 1975, he indicates his fondness for *Empire of Signs* out of the numerous works in his oeuvre: "Because for me it's a space that's both extremely sensual and extremely aesthetic, an extraordinary lesson in elegant sensuality" (qtd. in Calvet 209). Elsewhere, he recounts: "The pleasure I experienced not just in travelling around Japan but also in writing this text, was intense, total, both raw and subtle at the same time [...] This text represents a rupture with my previous writing since here, perhaps for the first time [...] I entered fully into the play of the signifier" (qtd. in Calvet 181). Barthes first travelled to Japan in May 1966, returning back twice after.²⁴ As indicated across these statements, it is as an aesthetic experience that Barthes speaks of his travels. This comes to inform the writing of *Empire of Signs*, its invented interplay with the signs of, what might be called, aesthetic surfaces. We find here a text where the "voluptuous pleasures"²⁵ of language is, most fully, given free rein, i.e. entering "fully into the play of the signifier".²⁶ And the meaning of this textual pleasure, as I employ in this study, has to do with the aesthetic, as opposed to the semantic, function of language.

Another important point of consideration is that in Barthes's travels, his observations remain on the *outside* of Japan; he reads the cultural landscape from a distance, and, as previously suggested, it is a reading that proceeds across the surface of things. Barthes stakes out this motivation in *Empire of Signs*: "The dream: to know a foreign (alien) language and yet not

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²⁴ For more biographical information, refer to Louis-Jean Calvet, *Roland Barthes: A Biography*, pp. 153-154.

²⁵ *Camera Lucida*, 85. It is this "sensual" aspect of Japan that has provoked accusations over Barthes's eroticization of Japan. However, as seen in *Camera Lucida*, it is the sensuality of language that also fascinates Barthes. For further reading, look to Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text*, where the notion of *jouissance* (bliss) is most fully developed.

²⁶ qtd. in Calvet 181.

to understand it: to perceive the difference in it without that difference ever being recuperated by the superficial sociality of discourse, communication or vulgarity” (6). Untranslatability marks the border where language and representation fails – grounds for the exemption from meaning. The work’s dealings with Japan are predicated on this opacity, a “descend into the untranslatable” that suspends the possibility of an appropriative discourse (*Empire of Signs* 6). And it is this condition which opens to the full “play of the signifier”.²⁷ Like Barthes, the reader is placed on the outside of language, since it no longer posits meaning or depth. As such, a different term of engagement is offered: one remains on the outside – of language, of theatre, of poetry – an estrangement predicated on the condition that the unfamiliar remains unfamiliar.²⁸ But this delineation of a system exempt from meaning, is, as Barthes acknowledges, a “dream”, a utopian envisioning; and the interweaving of this fantasy, the possibility of absence and silence, sustains the following discussion.

WRITING ABOUT WRITING

Movement towards the aesthetic surface has always already been in the workings of modernist and postmodernist literature. The shift from depth to surface, from content to form, can be linked back to postmodernism in its crisis of meaning and representation. In the works of authors such as Vladimir Nabokov, John Banville, and Italo Calvino (whose work we will come to discuss), we can detect a non-realist, anti-representational impulse that informs much of their inventions with the aesthetic form. But even then, the significance of language, apart from its referential function, also occupies an inherent place within the literary tradition. Denis Donoghue traces a line of literature from Shakespeare to T.S. Eliot where he identifies instances of

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²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ The Orient isn’t familiarized, rather this insistence on its unfamiliarity debunks Orientalist critiques.

eloquence, or as he terms, “song-without-words”, that is intrinsic to literature as a work of art (*On Eloquence* 69). Donoghue observes: “But as language developed in complex relation to consciousness, it discovered possibilities beyond reference. Abstractions are among those discoveries [...] In some degree, language becomes autonomous” (Ibid. 1-2). And in Donoghue’s various examples of eloquence – of situation, sequence, image or silence – the words, so to speak, vanish. Eloquence situates the realm of experience outside of language in gestures, actions, or the “auditory imagination”, “since they are in language, but they gain their impetus from the apprehension of things in the world that are not – or not yet – verbal” (Ibid. 49). Language guides us beyond, with the vividness of evocation, elsewhere; it communicates (if it can be said to communicate at all) otherwise.

We can see how the aim in Barthes’s *Empire of Signs* participates in this tradition of writing. The objective – freeing language from its semantic responsibility – remains at stake in his project. But with *Empire of Signs*, this is not simply the case: it is not only a display of a kind of elaborate aesthetic gesture, but stands as a concentrated and extended reflection on language as a system of signs. As such, it is situated in an odd position between fiction and non-fiction, ultimately writing itself out of either category:

If I want to image a fictive nation, I can give it an invented name [...] so as to compromise no real country by my fantasy (though it is then that fantasy itself I compromise by the signs of literature). I can also – though in no way claiming to represent or analyze reality itself [...] isolate somewhere in the world (*faraway*) a certain number of features [...] and out of these features deliberately form a system. It is this system which I shall call Japan. (*Empire of Signs* 3)

In the oscillation between the “real” and “fantasy”, it is the interruption of both that renders

language unstable. Sharp rightly likens this to Margritte's painting of a pipe with the words "ceci n'est pas une pipe", that renders both the image and text invalid in its contradictory appraisal ("Writing Travelling" 158). Taking up issue with the proprieties of language, its rules of engagement, Barthes gestures to the rewriting of language itself – to "unexpress the expressible"²⁹ – through the construction of a system with its own terms of condition. And in this new system, one "without language", or with language as an absent term (i.e. the absence of meaning), we find established a new poetics.

Staking a claim in the realm of fantasy – "to imagine a fictive nation"³⁰ – positions the work within the sphere of "literary fiction" to some extent. It installs its own poetics, the meaning of which is defined by Barthes as "the symbolic capacity of a form; this capacity is valid if it allows the form to "depart" in a very high number of directions and thus to show, potentially, the infinite progression of the symbol, to which we can never assign a final meaning and which is finally always the meaning of a new meaning" (qtd. in Higgins 166). The poetic inclination of the work thus offers a solution to language's fixity of meaning; language does not come to rest, but moves in vacillation by which meaning is postponed. *Empire of Signs* thus sets up a "poetics of absence", as I have called, which offers departures towards a horizon of absence.

To do so, formal and stylistic elements of the text are structured in a way that enacts a continuous folding back of language. One of the primary ways this circling effect is achieved is through the use of the self-conscious narrative – writing on the writing of *Empire of Signs* – that is a crucial feature of this poetics. Across each segment, descriptions of cultural forms describe the very condition of writing in which its enactment takes place. The writing of and into

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²⁹ Culler states: "The task of literature, Barthes writes in the preface to *Essais critiques*, is not, as is often thought, to *express the unexpressible* – this would be a "literature of the soul" as he disdainfully calls it. Literature should attempt, rather, "to unexpress the expressible", to problematize the meanings we automatically confer or assume" (*Roland Barthes* 57).

³⁰ *Empire of Signs*, 3.

emptiness varies across its descriptions of cultural objects and events. Chopsticks enact a gesture of transference and designation, not piercing (of meaning?) (15); the city of Tokyo has an empty center, no church, or office, no marked site (30); its packages, too, wrap an emptiness, since its packaging is the site of significance not the gift (45); even the Japanese dish is said to be arranged to no particular order, no item privileged over the other (22). These events and phenomena unfold out into metaphors of writing and reading. Writing moves inward, not to an outward reality, but is enclosed within a self-referential structure that doesn't seek to represent an "outside" of the text.

John Culbert makes a claim for Barthes's fragmented text as an *atopia*, the site of a "drifting habitation" that permits transports "without object... without place" (260; 299). He states: "To the threat of language as classification and order, Barthes responds with the elusive tactics of drifting, displacement, and atopic neutrality" (263). In this textual atopia, objects and events are continuously fragmented, never fixed in and of themselves but composed of the reflections of other objects and events – an unsettling of language. Culbert asserts: "Paralysis and fragmentation, as opposed to the language of mastery and adventure, nonetheless allow for other forms of transport. The language of absence provides for a space of play, a rhythm of attachment and separation" (*Paralyses* 47). This pulse of attachment and detachment well describes the textual movements of *Empire of Signs*. The slippery nature of Barthes's language, the use of long passages and punctuation as a digressional tactic – an inordinate usage of parenthesis, semi-colons, dashes, and italics – all enact a language in postponement. For instance, describing the preparation of Japanese food, the passage begins:

However, such an order, delicious when it appears is destined to be undone, recomposed according to the very rhythm of eating; which was a motionless tableau at the start

becomes a workbench or chessboard, the space not of seeing but of doing – of praxis or play; [...] eating remains stamped with a kind of work or play which bears less on the transformation of the primary substance (an object proper to the *kitchen* and to the *cuisine*; but Japanese food is rarely cooked, the foodstuffs arrive in their natural state on the tray; the only operation they have actually undergone is to be cut up) then on the shifting and somehow inspired assemblage of elements [...] (*Empire of Signs* 11-12).

The writing goes on for several lines, after the pause of the semi-colon, the detour of the parenthesis, the continuation of the dash – language moves in a circulatory way, it resists the end.

Fragmentation of the text also crucially implicates the subject that is constituted in and through language. Barthes underscores the relation between the emptiness of language and subjectivity through the practice of writing in Zen traditions:

This situation is the very one in which a certain disturbance of the person occurs [...]
Writing is after all, in its way, a *satori*: *satori* (the Zen occurrence) is a more or less powerful seism which causes knowledge, or the subject, to vacillate: it creates an *emptiness of language*. And it is also an emptiness of language which constitutes writing; it is from this emptiness that derive the features with which Zen, in the exemption from all meaning, writes gardens, gestures, houses, flower arrangements, faces, violence.

(*Empire of Signs* 4)

In this circulatory way of writing, a winding down, language appears to perform its own emptying out. The work lays out a void of writing, a *satori*, which Barthes later refers to as “a state of *a-language*”, in other words, a “suspension of language, the blank which effaces within us the reign of codes” (74-75). And in this economy of signs, the subject is dissolved in the

refractory pathways of linguistic and visual material. A writing which hesitates, delays, and repeats, is, as Barthes suggests, “a way of diluting, of hemorrhaging the subject in a fragmented, particled language diffracted to emptiness” (7). The practice of authorship, and also, that of readership, is redefined. Here, subjectivity locates itself along different experiences of space, divided within itself. Whether one follows the order of sequence of the text, or no particular thread, picking up and leaving off at any point in time, the text is open to reconfigurations in time and space. As Barthes evaluates in *S/Z*, “the readerly abhors a vacuum”, that is, the omission of connection and continuity across the text.³¹ Barthes’s strategy, then, is precisely to turn the subject into a “great envelope empty of speech, and not that dense kernel which is supposed to direct our sentences, from outside and from above” (7). It is the suspension of language at work within one’s subjectivity, one that puts a halt to interpretative procedures, that is Barthes’s aim. *Empire of Signs* models this aim: it situates the reader in the vacuum of meaning which is to elude subjective interpellation; and, thereby, to effect its disappearance.

This self-reflexive, fragmented structuring of the text develops Barthes’s language of absence, one that is also characterized by a self-effacing quality. If the problem with interpretive practices of the West is its intention to “pierce meaning”, then what Barthes finds in the haiku (a traditional Japanese form of poetry written in seventeen-syllables) is the way it simply designates, saying “it’s that, it’s thus, [...] it’s so. Or better still: so!” (*Empire of Signs* 83). It is the “apprehension of the thing as event and not as substance; the object is simply there, in a brief space of time (78). An example of a haiku given:

The old pond:

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³¹ Barthes asks in *S/Z*: “[The] readerly abhors a vacuum. What would be the narrative of a journey in which it was said that one stays somewhere without having arrived, that one travels without having departed – in which it was never said that, having departed one arrives or fails to arrive? Such a narrative would be a scandal, the extenuation, by hemorrhage, of readerliness” (105).

A frog jumps in:

Oh! the sound of the water. (71)

A brief and insignificant event, a “faint gash inscribed upon time”, is all the poem deigns to show (82). The haiku leaves out, remains in the silence, the outside of speech, aiming not for representation but the “thing-itself”, a “thereness” of the surface. One hears the splash, feels the leap of the frog, a paring back that sharpens the perceptive faculty. Language, strictly speaking, is not the main event of the haiku; what happens after language ends, the echo which “draws a line under the nullity of meaning”, is its proper locus. It is this self-effacing quality – the “haiku’s “absence”” – that Barthes replicates with *Empire of Signs*: “like a decorative loop, the haiku coils back on itself, the wake of the sign which seems to have been traced is erased” (69; 84). Regardless of the statement’s accuracy in its description of the haiku, this self-reflexive statement reveals the work’s aim towards this fundamental structuring: language coils back on itself to its own erasure. Furthermore, Barthes’s description of the haiku spans over four sections, the work’s most extended length on a particular subject matter, emphasizing its crucial significance to the text’s unpacking. Each section on the haiku coils back on the one which preceded, a looping effect which departs from the main digressionary path through individualized sections. Here, the haiku starts again.

Barthes also crucially employs this self-effacing strategy as an overall structuring device. Like the style of writing that relies on repetitions, echoes, or deferrals, the text on the whole functions in a similar way. It enacts the very effacement of writing the haiku performs. Reference to its own structural composition can be found, most prominently, in the description of the haiku as previously indicated. Barthes reflects: “The number and the dispersion of haikus on the one hand, the brevity and closure of each one on the other, seem to divide, to classify the

world to infinity, to constitute a space of fragments, a dust of events which nothing, by a kind of escheat of signification, can or should coagulate, construct, direct, terminate” (*Empire of Signs* 78). Likewise, the structure of *Empire of Signs* – its brevity of form, its twenty-six segments – resembles this classification and division of the world the haiku embodies. We begin to see how this strategy of writing aims towards the dispersion of the world, opposed to a totalizing impulse. Revealing the work’s own functioning, Barthes suggests the haiku opens to a “network of jewels in which each jewel reflects all the other and so on, to infinity, without there ever being a center to grasp, a primary core of irradiation” (78). And within this network, he goes on to say, “we recognize a repetition without origin, an event without cause, a memory without person, a language without moorings” (79). It posits not a world of stability, but further textual traces displaced along a chain of signifiers with no fixed origin. Signs are transferred into a new system of relations, but a system that continuously makes and unmakes itself.

This effect of echoes and loops is one sustained throughout the entire work. Each section carries a trace of other sections creating sphericity to the structure that finally reveals the empty center. In a system with no fixed meaning, the text remains beyond defined perimeters, remaining, instead, in the process of its own writing. As Barthes alludes: “the address not being written, it must establish its own writing” (*Empire of Signs* 36). As discussed previously, each new segment of the text writes on a previous section in a way that gestures to a writing that writes itself: it never arrives at its own establishing. *Empire of Signs* can be described as surfaces on surfaces, in which there is nothing behind. Like the haiku which does not “pierce meaning”, the practice of chopsticks too is perceived as a delicate gesture that does not pierce or wound the food (72; 16). Or like the empty package, a package with no object, in the heart of the city, too, we find an empty center, a subjectivity absented behind the theatrical mask, calligraphy traced

over a void. Writing moves in between these spaces, gesturing towards what came before, or what has yet to come. And in the resonance across poems and chopsticks, gifts and cities, something writes itself.

Barthes often reiterates: significance lies in the framing, not the thing framed, the form and not the content. This is established through the self-reflexive metaphor of the Japanese art of packaging:

Yet, by its very perfection, this envelope often repeated (you can be unwrapping a package forever), postpones the discovery of the object it contains – one which is often insignificant, for it is precisely a specialty of the Japanese package that the triviality of the thing be disproportionate to the luxury of the envelope: a sweet, a bit of sugared bean paste, a vulgar “souvenir” are wrapped with as much sumptuousness as a jewel. It is as if, then, the box were the object of the gift, not what it contains. (*Empire of Signs* 46)

Similarly, the text of *Empire of Signs* is a gesture of wrapping, of folding over surfaces – a continuous folding over, where the “object” (meaning) is no longer important, “emptied out” (46). It frames absence, instead, through the intricate interplay of surfaces. A distancing of envelope from object that works to create absence through the autonomy of the frame. Further allusions are provided: in the art of Japanese flower arrangement, *Ikebana*, the flowers, leaves and branches function in production of the circulation of air – an art not of filling in the spaces between, but its filling out (44); or in an illustration of calligraphy, the quotation accompanying the photograph reads: “Writing, then, [...] divides the support into corridors as though to recall the plural void in which it is achieved” (57).³² It is the ink, the brushstroke, the negative space, substitutes meaning with its own forms. Examples such as these occupy an allusive, metaphorical relation to the text itself – a self-reflexive gesture that speaks to the crucial

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³² Quotation written by Philippe Sollers.

functioning of the text, one which opens to a network of jewels wherein each jewel reflects upon all the others into absence itself.³³

We can thus see why the aesthetic structuring of the text crucially informs how we come to read its significance. The framing of absence generates a site of its own significance. While this fragmented style writing is characteristic to Barthes's other works, what is less familiar in *Empire of Signs* is its "packaging" of the textual space in a deliberate and systematic manner, which determines a system of absence.³⁴ The arrangement of text and image, to reiterate, establishes its own writing, meaning it displaces the work's mediations onto a site beyond language itself. "Text and image," as stated in the epigraph, "seek to ensure the circulation and exchange of these signifiers: body, face, writing; and in them to read the retreat of signs" (*Empire of Signs* xi). This enactment of a free circulation of signs articulates a procedure within Barthes's "unheard-of symbolic system" (Ibid. 3). This exchange, so to speak, constitutes the text's "being" – the surface, not its beyond, is animated. And this also has to do with the destabilization of order: "The text does not "gloss" the images, which do not "illustrate" the text. For me, each has been no more than the onset of a kind of visual uncertainty" (Ibid. xi). What image and text depict is no longer certain, thus undercutting the referential mechanism. As image interrupts text, moving out of continuity with the semantic, significance is derived through its vacillating movements. The next section explores this displacement, where the relation between language and materiality, language and the body is more closely examined. As Barthes writes, "the voice is accompanied by a vast volume of silence, in which are inscribed, with all the more finesse, other features, other writings" (Ibid. 54). In the silence of writing, writing is displaced

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³³ *Empire of Signs*, 78-79.

³⁴ Barthes's fragmented style of writing is a characteristic trait of his works. For example, works like *Mythologies*, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, *Camera Lucida*, *S/Z*, *The Pleasure of the Text*, amongst others, offer brief reflections that gesture to a kind of incompleteness, veering, instead towards a multiplicity of writing.

onto other avenues of significance.

BODY AS SURFACE

Speaking of Frenhofer, Balzac's protagonist in *The Unknown Masterpiece*³⁵, Barthes speaks of the painterly,

[U]nknown masterpiece, as dreamed of by Frenhofer, Balzac's hero who wanted the viewer to be able to pass behind the painted figure, you can move your body into the interstice of its branches, into the space of its stature, not in order to read it but to follow the trajectory of the hand which has written it: a true writing, since it produces a volume and since, forbidding our reading to be the simple decoding of a message, it permits this reading to repeat the course of the writing's labor. (*Empire of Signs* 45)

The space of painting is envisioned as a "true writing", which entails not a reading, but a bodily experience of space, i.e., to "follow the trajectory of the hand". This is linked to Barthes's notion of textual pleasure, which Culler helps clarify: "associating the interest of writing not with continuity, development, structure [...] but with the pleasure of textual fragments, the pleasure readers can get from odd sentences and their images [...]" This textual pleasure, which leads Barthes to write around and about these texts, is linked to the body. A link is posited between writing and corporeal experiences of space and substance" (*Roland Barthes* 44). With *Empire of Signs*, Barthes writes out of language through a fundamental displacement of semantics to the affective, in other words, the pleasure of the text. The text is a space to be inhabited, occupied as bodily sensation, desire, and pleasure. This advocates for a primal engagement rid of concretions of meaning. The body is free to engage, to follow the drifts of desire as Hiddleston suggests, "*L'Empire* explores a utopian relationship with meaning in which the subject himself drifts

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³⁵ A story which reflects on modern art.

freely around the open-ended realm of suggestion” (“Displacing Barthes” 175). Barthes asserts: “The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas – for my body does not have the same ideas I do” (*The Pleasure of the Text* 17). The subject is divided onto two planes of engagement, conscious and unconscious, absent and present; and Barthes’s envisioning of a textual space that is in engagement of the body comes to formulate the silence of writing, an “anti-language”.³⁶

The relation of language to the body is crucial to this poetics since it postulates a surface to be displayed and not spoken for. Rayner clarifies: “The corporeality of language, its body, is found in its formal figures, its poetic devices, and its rhetorical turns that encrypt what it cannot otherwise say” (*Ghosts* 47). Language’s semantic functioning is displaced onto the site of aesthetic functioning, that restores an experiential mode of communication. This disposition is clearly articulated in *Empire of Signs* which promotes the subjectivity’s inhabitation of space: “This city can be known only by an activity of an ethnographic kind: you must orient yourself in it not by book, by address, but by walking, by sight, by habit, by experience; here every discovery is intense and fragile, it can be repeated or recovered only by the memory of the trace it has left in you: to visit a place for the first time is thereby to begin to write it” (36). Writing begins from the “first” encounter, oriented not by “book” or “address”, i.e. language and meaning, but from the physical experience of space. This underscores the fact that the body encrypts vestiges of experience that may or may not be legible. In positing the textual as a space to be inhabited, Barthes negotiates the very absence of language. It attempts to recuperate the space between writing and walking, writing and place, to situate the experience of reading within the intimate spaces of the body that offers a level of engagement beyond language.

This explains the ethnographic impulse that informs *Empire of Signs*, which unfolds as

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³⁶ Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, 13.

observations and descriptions derived from one's walk around a cultural landscape. Higgins reads *Empire of Signs* within the context of the ethnographical: "interpreting (i.e. translating) a culture can be abandoned in favor of transcribing. What is transcribed is the spectacle now taking place, and whether that spectacle is intelligible or not is no longer the point" ("Barthes's Imaginary Voyages" 166). A writing that takes place in the manner of transcription, not translation, is one that moves on the outside of language, unanchored to a fixed meaning. And this "failure" of translation, as Higgins asserts, opens to the "possibility of writing without representing" (Ibid. 165). It is a mode which relies on the observational and descriptive, avoiding the ascription of meaning; one occupied with noting down, "transcribing" what one comes across. It is why Barthes associates writing with a form of labor: "labor replaces genius as a value" (*Writing Degree Zero* 63). The writer is one who *crafts* his form, out of a collection of materials, thus replacing the traditional notion of the author as individual genius. Debaene describes this ethnological style as reflecting "a scattered subject that is not a source of discourses but, on the contrary, produced by discourses, not an origin, but the result of a weaving together of multiple heterogeneous discourse" ("Roland Barthes' Ethnological Temptation" 11). The projected absence of subjectivity postulates a writing that writes itself, it is not written. It unsettles the autonomy of the subject, one produced through an influx of consciousness as a discursive and perceptual space – the subject/object binary is displaced.

By and by, this sheds light on Barthes's employment of an ethnological genre of writing, defined as an "encyclopedia, noting and classing all reality, even the most futile, the most sensual" (*Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* 84).³⁷ We can observe the adoption of this mode of

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³⁷ "This is because the ethnological book has all the powers of the beloved book: it is an encyclopedia, noting and classifying all of reality, even the most trivial, the most sensual aspects; this encyclopedia does not adulterate the Other by reducing it to the Same; appropriation diminishes, the Self's certitude grows lighter" (*Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* 84).

writing in *Empire of Signs*, which notes and classifies scenes of the ordinary and everyday life.

Barthes's engagement with Japan as transcriber also has to do with the peculiarity of surfaces he finds in Japan:

Now it happens that in this country (Japan) the empire of signifiers is so immense [...]

that the exchange of signs remains of a fascinating richness, mobility, and subtlety,

despite the opacity of the language, sometimes even as a consequence of that opacity.

The reason for this is that in Japan the body exists, acts, shows itself, gives itself [...]

It is not the voice [...] which communicates [...] but the whole body (eyes, smile, hair,

gestures, clothing). (*Empire of Signs* 9-10)

As previously discussed, it is the incomprehensible quality of a foreign language and territory that motivates the writing of *Empire of Signs*. This gives way to the emergence of the “body”, not “voice”, as Barthes comes to find, it remains outside of an appropriative discourse. In the bubble of opacity of language – the absence of meaning – the body shows itself, it displays “its own narrative, its own text”, meaning it reveals itself in the language of rhythms, textures, expressions, colors (10). For instance, in Bunraku the costumes, actors, and movements, are illuminated in the opacity of plot and narrative. Similarly, it is the recitation of the haiku that means something, “spoken twice, in echo”; not what is said, but the condition of its musicality (76). The opaqueness of the surface resists the violence of interpretation, offering, instead, a surface of rhythms, movements and tonalities: it does not signify, but shows – there is no behind.

The text functions, then, as a site of collision across different material scraps and fragments. A collage of photographs, maps, handwritten notes, and textual reflections, the work appears not so much as a writing of Japan, but a collection of different materials that sets up an experience of space. This coincides with the avant-garde experimentations, in particular, the use

of found materials – a practice developed in modernist visual art, from Cubism to Dada and Surrealism. Mina Loy, who dabbled with found materials in her own poetry and art, offers a characterization of this tendency: “Modernism has democratized the subject matter [...] through cubism the newspaper has assumed an aesthetic quality, through Cezanne a plate has become more than something to put an apple upon, Brancusi has given an evangelistic import to eggs, and Gertrude Stein has given us the Word, in and for itself” (“Mina Loy, Gertrude Stein” 437).³⁸ The democratization of material, in Loy’s account of modernism, poses a challenge to the tradition of high art. Barthes’s turn to everyday forms and gestures, likewise, poses an attack to the authorities of form and language. The logic behind this also pertains to a destabilization of authorial control. The inclusion of concrete materials works towards the incorporation of diverse textures, of emphasizing the tactile surface as its textual fabric.

Turning to look closer at the use of found materials, we come to find that Barthes’s engagement with the body also has to do with its disappearance. The material navigation draws attention to the immaterial, defining the absence of the surface. Photographs paradoxically reveal the body and its absence, or its relation to death. It transforms the “subject into object”, supporting and maintaining the “body in its passage to immobility” (*Camera Lucida* 13). Barthes’s use of his own self-portraiture in the work signals his being in Japan, but also the author’s own death, his objectification. We find the author photographed in a news clipping from a Japanese publication, an article which features Barthes’s visit to Japan on the occasion of a lecture series.³⁹ It signifies “Barthes was there”, writing from a place he once was. However, this curious insertion of the author’s own “presence” into his work also serves to destabilize the

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³⁸ Loy, Mina. “Mina Loy, Modern Poetry.” *Modernism: An Anthology*. Ed. Lawrence Rainey.

³⁹ Translation of Japanese text credited to article by Lynn A. Higgins, “Barthes’s Imaginary Voyages” (166-167). Higgins reads this incursion as a redefining of the author’s own subjectivity to the extent that Barthes, in the accompanying note, describes how his features have been Japanized.

ontology of the text. He claims not to write about Japan, and yet gives tangible evidence of so; it unsettles the text's "being". Furthermore, Barthes writes on the experience of being photographed in *Camera Lucida*: "I feel that the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it" (11). The photograph is related to the author's own death, "beneath which we see the dead" (*Camera Lucida* 32).

Barthes writes on the photograph as a medium that offers a form of hallucination, a false perception: "Now, in the Photograph, what I posit is not only the absence of the object; it is also [...] the fact that this object has indeed existed and that it has been there [...]. The Photograph then becomes a bizzare *medium*, a new form of hallucination [...] (on the one hand "it is not there," on the other "but it has indeed been")" (115). The photograph multiplies lines of temporality producing a pluralizing vision, one that opens to a fractured space. In the interspace of "absence-as-presence", we are here and elsewhere at once, there and not there, amidst the circulation of the actual and spectral (106). In a photograph of a General and his wife, photographed the day before they were to commit suicide,⁴⁰ the caption reads: "They are going to die, they know it, and this is not seen" (92-93). Barthes reads the photograph as a body devoid of all expressivity, "there was to be no "mention" of [death]" (94). What is absent from the photograph is death, but the photograph marks a return of the dead – unblinking eyes, frozen gestures, in each hand, a glove, a fan, they become other to themselves, expressing what cannot be said or seen in the interim space of their dwelling.

Other photographs are also used to create a navigation of the textual space. The positioning of the visual and textual materials becomes important structural elements. Semantic continuity is displaced, opening instead to a visual orientation. We find a photograph of actor Kazuo Funaki inserted at the beginning and the end of the text: the first shows the actor with an

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⁴⁰ *Hara-Kiri*, a ceremonial suicide performed, in this instance, for the death of the Emperor.

expression of seriousness; in the latter, he smiles. The photograph moves. The accompanying notation reads: “Uncentered, space is also reversible: you can turn the Shikidai gallery upside down and nothing would happen, except an inconsequential inversion of top and bottom, of left and right [...] there is nothing to grasp” (110). And yet, we find a photo of the Shikidai gallery right in the middle of the book, at its “center” (50-51). But Barthes reminds us that like the haiku, the package, or the city of Tokyo, it is an empty center. There is nothing to grasp in a space without clear distinction. Moving backwards and forwards, from the inside out, the text, too, can be turned upside down to no consequence. It folds back on itself only to foreground the formlessness of space, the emptiness of language, where textual elements move fluidly precisely because it designates nothing. In the end we return to the beginning, but the photograph of the actor is different, it shifts to a smile. We find ourselves looking into a distant familiarity; or we hallucinate.

Beyond photographs, we find other images of handwritten notes, calligraphy, drawings and sketches. The handwritten text differs significantly from the printed text and functions on two levels. Firstly, the use of drafts reveals the instabilities that underlie all writing, its raw and fragmentary beginnings. This works to destabilize the authority of the text that maintains its self as an unfinished product. Secondly, it evokes the material, the author’s own body as revealed through his signature. Language is perceived as a physical, material feature that underscores its opacity. In line with this, it also marks out the time of writing in a particularly distinctive way. We seem to find a work “in writing”, not a work “written”, as the interval between the act of writing and the written is mediated. All in all, the work’s inclusion of these different types of writing brings its own constitution into stark preview. Writing takes place on different temporal and spatial planes continuously foregrounding its own borders.

In a segment titled “no address”, we find little sketches of maps that appear to be mementos from Barthes’s own visit to Japan.⁴¹ Again, the author inscribes his own presence into the text, presenting materials that bear witness to actual visits. In Rayner’s discussion of the souvenir object as previously laid out, “the preservation of objects [...] turns history into an intimate relation for touching the past, marking as well the intimacy of loss. The tangibility of the witness brings a distant and imaginary site into an objective presence” (82). But Barthes’s “object”, contrary to a marking of place, resists specificity and designation, marking out, instead, a non-place. Japan, he describes, is a city where streets have no names, no address. To give directions or to exchange address, one would sketch on a scrap of paper landmarks, canals, shop signs, to which Barthes comments: “the address not being written, it must establish its own writing” (36). These maps become meaningless outside of the event, designating anywhere if one is no longer in the right place, the right position. What it underscores is the distance between the actual and representation, place does not and cannot exist in representation. The tangibility of the map, contradictorily, presents its own lack of objectivity, the absence of place that cannot be written, that is beyond representation. Likewise, *Empire of Signs* writes the failure of writing, a writing that must write itself.

Several English translations of Japanese words are also found dispersed through the work. These are handwritten, scribbled down, most likely by the author himself. How this relates back to the general notion of translation is of particular interest. We follow the hand in writing, like the gesture of exchanging addresses, as previously mentioned, which turns it into a “delicate communication in which a life of the body, an art of the graphic gesture recurs”, and, as Barthes reflects, “from each occasion when someone has given me an address in this way, I retain the gesture of my interlocutor reversing his pencil to rub out, with the eraser at its other end, the

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⁴¹ A sign marks out the place of the “conference” in English (35).

excessive curve of an avenue” (*Empire of Signs* 34). The act of writing in the handwritten note is one to be followed, traced, where the “body” of the event recurs. And translation, as found in these notes, no longer indicates only the interpretation of meaning, but becomes an aesthetic gesture in its own right. It reveals a manner of “transcription” not “translation”⁴² as Higgins affirms, where words are copied down in reflection of meaning, but moves on its own terms. Similar to calligraphy, the painted sign, it is the pulse of writing that is followed: “the brush can slide, twist, lift off, the stroke being made, so to speak, in the volume of the air, it has the carnal, lubricated flexibility of the hand” (Ibid. 86). Following this thread, the work’s arrangement in space, its graphic features, its tactile surfaces, its navigations, invigorates the trajectory of the body, to which Barthes asks: “Where does the writing begin? Where does the painting begin?” (Ibid. 21).

THE UNCONSCIOUS OF WRITING

Having alluded to the notion of an unconscious of the text, by which I mean its silent areas, we now come to explore the further significance of this in Barthes’s poetics of absence. Though this term risks positing a depth, or beyond, what is primarily referred to by the “unconscious” is the realm that lies beyond what language cannot say – the uncanny presentation of surfaces that gestures to its own vanishing. As Herzog stages the uncanny in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, likewise, Barthes’s employs this sense of strange returns as we have seen. These disquieting moves reflect uneasiness with language and representation, always in the attempt to move elsewhere. It opens to the text as an absent space by continuously placing it under erasure through its layering. Barthes creates “an emptiness of language” in order to write a language unknown, unheard of, so that someday we might “write the history of our own

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⁴² “Barthes’s Imaginary Voyages” 166

obscurity” (*Empire of Signs* 4). Likewise, Herzog’s seeking of “unproclaimed images”⁴³ is similar to this pursuit. Both seek the unconscious of writing by which we might come to terms with the unspoken for and the unseen.

The idea of a collective unconscious is one both Herzog and Barthes alludes to. Herzog’s search for images belonging to our “collective dreams” resonates with the idea of “anamnesis” Barthes describes:

This sound of the place is that of history; for the signifying name here is not a memory but an anamnesis, as if all Ueno, all Asakusa came to me from this old haiku (written by Basho in the seventeenth century):

A cloud of blossoming cherry trees:

The bell. —Ueno’s?

Asakusa’s? (Empire of Signs 42)

The significance of this, to the works’ other features, is that it conducts a space in which forms lose their distinction. It draws us into that strange region between the familiar and unfamiliar: we might find the station of Ueno familiar – its trains, its underground, its travelers – but it also doubles back into an unfamiliar region of poetry and the unconscious. The name of “Ueno” does not point to a fixed place and time, but belongs to other places and times, or to the collective realm of poetry. Barthes’s suggestion here is that memory is fixed in chronology, it has a beginning and end, whereas anamnesis, the recalling of things past, stretches beyond fixed markers of time. It has an unconscious beginning, meaning we cannot ascribe a cause or origin, in which, like the haiku, “we recognize a repetition without origin, an event without cause, a memory without person, a language without moorings” (79).

The disappearance of subjectivity, writing from a non-place, defines Barthes’s poetics of

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⁴³ Herzog on Herzog, 61.

absence. This condition is described in *The Rustle of Language*: “the reader of the Text might be compared to an idle subject [...] this fairly empty subject strolls [...] what he perceives is multiple, irreducible, issuing from heterogeneous, detached substances and levels: lights, colors, vegetation, heat, air, tenuous explosions of sound, tiny cries of birds [...] all these incidents are half identifiable” (60). The reader moves through the vague impressions of a writing that refuses to settle, that comes from an unknown source. One “strolls” leisurely through the “vast stereophony”⁴⁴ of *Empire of Signs*, in which its citations, memories, and voices remain half-identifiable, untraceable. Phelan remarks: “This is the project of Roland Barthes in [...] *Empire of Signs* [...] he takes the memory of a city in which he no longer is, a city from which he disappears, as the motivation for the search for a disappearing performative writing. The trace left by that script is the meeting point of a mutual disappearance” (*Unmarked* 148). Phelan rightly locates Barthes’s work in not one, but several points of disappearance. It reveals the intersections within absence itself that paradoxically cannot be located, but observed in its vanishing.

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⁴⁴ *The Rustle of Language*, 60.

CHAPTER FOUR: HIDDEN SPACES AND ITALO CALVINO

In the previous two chapters, we've seen reflections of absent landscapes, but in discussion of "real" places and objects. Calvino's *Invisible Cities* begins in fiction. It envisages a world of cities in continuity, cities comprised of highly invented and elaborate landscapes. If absence in the works of Herzog and Barthes is set in relation to evacuation, Calvino's work deals more so in the multiplication of absent spaces. This is not to say Barthes does not invent the space of "Japan", but to suggest that Calvino's work does something wholly different in its portrayal of a world unanchored to any real time and place. For the purposes of this thesis, I look to how a poetics of absence develops across these different genres in order to establish a more robust sense of this tendency in writing. Here we explore how fragmentation, non-linear narratives, and network-structures operate in the space of fiction, giving to impressions of absent presences. This chapter makes the claim that Calvino employs absence mainly in the sense of lightness, myth and memory, by which he designates the trace of writing.

Before looking to *Invisible Cities*, it is first important to address the author's proclivities of writing that makes him central to this study's poetics of absence. As a writer committed to the quality of "lightness" as a crucial value to the literary work, his writings often proceed through dimmed and half-veiled illuminations. The notion of "lightness", as Calvino employs, underscores a different term of engagement, one that has to do with a strategy of absenting: "[M]y working method has more often than not involved the subtraction of weight. I have tried to remove weight, sometimes from people, sometimes from heavenly bodies, sometimes from cities; above all I have tried to remove weight from the structure of stories and from language" ("Lightness" 3). The concept of lightness has been taken up by critical studies in various ways. A

number of critics have found evidence for lightness in Calvino's use of abstract or mathematical concepts,⁴⁵ structuring devices that work as a strategy of diminishment; others suggest it has to do with the use of postmodern techniques – for example, mise-en-abyme, intertextuality, or self-reflexive narratives – that reflect a turn away from content (social/political message) to the aesthetic form. Of particular interest is Modena's claim against the assumption of lightness as "disengagement", as reflective of the author's turn away from politics: "[S]cholars have understood lightness as the death knell of Calvino's political activism, the theorization of a poetics of postmodern disillusionment" (5-6).⁴⁶ Instead, she argues that lightness must be read within the historical and social context, for example, in reflection of an architectural trend towards visionary design.

What stands out, however, in Calvino's explication of "Lightness" found in *Six Memos*, is that lightness describes a state of withdrawal in specific relation to poetical features. Passages from Ovid, Cavalcanti, Shakespeare and Kafka are used to illustrate this concept. Calvino conceives of lightness as paradoxical, poised on a heaviness ("Lightness" 8). This is exemplified most clearly through the myth of Perseus, a story telling of his defeat of Medusa, in which Calvino finds images that illuminate this condition of writing. The first of which is an image of delicate coral growing on the head of the Gorgon, read as an enigmatic symbol of those "tiny, luminous traces that counterpoint the dark catastrophe" (7). It is the lyrical treatment of "darkness" or "heaviness", conveyed through a subtle and fragile arrangement of word and image, that underlies Calvino's valuation of "lightness". The second being the image of reflection: Perseus defeats Medusa by looking at the Gorgon's head through the reflection on his

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⁴⁵ Refer to Ileana Moreno-Viqueira "Invisible Mathematics in Italo Calvino's *Le città invisibili*" and Letizia Modena's "Italo Calvino's Architecture of Lightness" (5-6).

⁴⁶ Calvino, reflecting on the anticommunist uprisings in Hungary in 1956, states: "those events estranged me from politics, in the sense that politics has since occupied in me a much smaller space than before" (qtd. in Modena 5).

shield – it is the lightness of reflection, but a reflection of horror. Perseus’ mastery of the horror by “keeping it hidden”, by “refusing to look directly while not denying the reality of the world”, articulates a particular disposition to the world (6). It promotes a way of seeing the world indirectly – in reflection or trace – the value of which is derived from a looking, or being away.

This thesis takes up the sense of “lightness” as a poetic methodology, and claims that it reveals Calvino’s positioning of writing towards absence. Language is set in pursuit of the hidden or invisible, as a surface that contains absence in the lightness of its reflections. As Calvino asserts: “[W]e are always hunting something that is hidden or merely possible or hypothetical, something whose tracks we follow as we find them on the surface” (“Exactitude” 94). And this absent thing is both desired and feared:

Words connect the visible track to the invisible thing, the absent thing, the thing that is desired or feared, like a fragile makeshift bridge cast across the void. For this reason, the proper use of language, to me, is one that helps us approach things (present or absent) with discretion, attention and caution, and with respect for what these things (present or absent) can tell us without words. (“Exactitude” 94)

In this passage, the “absent thing” is that which resists appropriation or remains unavailable to language – words gesture to the incommunicable. But desire, as Calvino suggests, proceeds towards this loss. In pursuit of the absent thing, language proceeds towards its own vanishing since it leads outside itself. The aim to reach beyond language, to approach what cannot be found in language, is ironically achieved via language as means. In this regard, Calvino designates a negative condition of writing: words function as a fragile web over the void, characterized by its own absence. Another important point of consideration we find in Calvino’s statement is the advocacy of a writing with silence and discretion, so as to allow for things, absent or present, to

come by its own telling.

But how does one come by absent things? Calvino's departures into mathematics, science, folklore, classics, visual arts, so on and so forth, becomes his means to do so. It is to "fly like Perseus into some other space" in order to find reflections of the world that might subtract weight from it ("Lightness" 8). Calvino's attention to diverse disciplinary subjects are well documented, demonstrating his own seeking of reflections. On the classical and mythology, "Cybernetics and Ghosts", "Why Read the Classics?", "Ovid and Universal Contiguity", and "The Odysseys Within the Odyssey", are essays that extensively deal with the value of classical texts.⁴⁷ Other mythological analogies are also found throughout his fictional and critical writings. On science and mathematics, he references reputable figures such as Galileo, Copernicus and Gassendi.⁴⁸ And topics such as symmetries, vectors, numbers, combinatorics, are also found as leitmotifs in his fictional works. Even the esoteric traditions have made its way into his writings, evidently so in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* that employs tarot cards as a structuring device.

In these employments, it is the lightness of numbers, the balance of universal forces, the shape-shifting of myths, or images of light and shadows that Calvino largely explores. Drawn to more abstract and partial shapes, it is no surprise that his writing unfolds with a kind of reticence. This inclination is evident in his discussions of art and literature. Speaking of the paintings of Leonardo, Calvino describes his use of light: "And matter, objects, men, towns were not representable through the continuous precise lines of their contours but could only be evoked by the constant fading of surfaces" (*Collection of Sand* 116). It is an aesthetic characterized by a certain imprecision that Calvino finds value in. Or in an essay on artist Domenico Gnoli, titled "The Painter of Absence," Calvino's ekphrastic pieces on Gnoli's paintings of shirts, shoes,

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⁴⁷ Essays from *The Literature Machine: Italo Calvino*, edited by Giulio Einaudi, translated by Patrick Creagh.

⁴⁸ Found in "Lightness" and "Two Interviews on Science and Literature".

buttons, pillows, demonstrates his attention to the negligible or incidental events. As Calvino describes of the silence and stillness of the painting, “this is the hour when a regained sense of certainty might compensate the button for this loss of shifting and beguiling splendors” (282).⁴⁹ But beyond art and literature, his travel writings are also motivated by a similar inclination. In his visits to different cities and architectures, it is the sites of emptiness that he draws our attention to. After a visit to a fourteenth-century Mihrab, the architecture of which has the quality of hollow and absent spaces, Calvino comes to the conclusion: “the most important things in the world are the empty spaces” (198).⁵⁰ In his writings on Japan too we find a similar view: “The wooden temple reaches its perfection the more the space that welcomes you is bare and unadorned” (168). All in all, these examples trace out a portrait of the author’s proclivity towards absent conditions.

A poetics of lightness and darkness, presence and absence, is that which formulates Calvino’s response to the heaviness of reality. This chapter investigates Calvino’s notion of “words across the void” within *Invisible Cities*, and argues that this not only becomes a central theme, but a significant structuring principle that finally develops a poetics of absence. Cities seem to rise from the dark, appearing in fragile or imperceptible shapes that are mere evocations of absence. It is perhaps why Calvino places such emphasis on the section “thin cities”:

As one reader among others, I may say that in Chapter Five, which in the heart of the book develops a theme of lightness that is strangely associated with the theme of the city, there are some of the pages I consider the best as visionary evidence; and perhaps these

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⁴⁹ This piece appears in *Image, Eye and Art in Calvino* edited by Birgitte Grundtvig, Martin McLaughlin and Lene Waage Petersen. pp. 278-284.

⁵⁰ In “The Mihrab” Calvino describes the architecture as follows: “It has a vault composed of so many little cavities like a honeycomb, little cells without a floor which lie on top of each other in layers. It is as if the mihrab, by subdividing its own limited and composed space into a multiplicity of ever smaller mihrabs, was opening up the only possible way for it to reach the limitless [...] It is something that is revealed not to be there at the end of the mihrab” (198).

more “slender” parts, the *Thin Cities* or others, are the most luminous areas in the book.

There is no more I can say. (*Invisible Cities* 182)

Cities transparent, cities made of ropes suspended over the void, cities that rise above ground, cities made of the fragile network of spider webs, unfold metaphors of absence that speaks volumes. But what is key to note is that absence is not simply a null or void, rather, it is the absence of the trace, mythic, of memory and desire, that is found in *Invisible Cities*.

But resistance to the void – the void of being, of speech – must also prevail. Even if order is abstract, fictive or illusory, one needs to erect structures against the chaos of existence. Maps, chapter indexes, classifications are used as indications of such artifices of order in Calvino’s work. They become important symbols because they specify a navigational function, acting as a bridge to the realm of “absences” where the most important things happen. A delicate web of order that fades in view of the invisible, even if all that is revealed is nothing at all. Turning to look first at the ways in which the novel crafts out empty spaces, its use of Marco Polo’s *Il Milione*, mythologies, and modern cityscapes, are shown only to be “presences” that reverse into their own absence. Next, in laying out an invisible network of signs, where signs repeat in different shapes and configurations, it is the impossible journey that is undertaken – one where the distinctions between here and elsewhere, now and then, lose meaning. We find a hall of mirrors situation where each city reflects other cities, reflecting, thereby, their own absence. And finally, the theme of memory and desire in the work is suggestive that what underpins these broader movements is that of the uncanny return. It opens to a space of memory where the absence of forgetting comes to light.

HIDDEN SPACES

A central feature of Calvino's novel is its use of fragmentation. Like Barthes's *Empire of Signs*, Calvino's writing of invisible cities seems also to note and classify "realities", employing a similar fragmented and encyclopedic proceeding.⁵¹ It enacts the process of telling and retelling, of signs resignifying other signs. A novel, a novella, or a series of prose poems, the work straddles the boundary of the novelistic genre – in reflection of a desire to move beyond the literary space. Perhaps the best way to describe the work is as an image, of fragments spread out over a void. Short descriptions of city come one after the next, discontinuous but framed by a central dialogue where Marco Polo tells Kublai Khan the stories of his travels. Its organization can be found in the pages of content: divided into nine sections, fifty-five cities, grouped under eleven different headings, it alludes to the underpinnings of an intricate design. This precise, numerical index is set in contradiction to the seemingly random arrangement of cities. It creates tension between fragment and whole, order and disorder, a contrapuntal rhythm that characterizes the work's other movements.

Critical studies have dealt with this structuring in several ways, ranging from the historical to postmodern, to philosophical and mathematical theorems: Vinit Mukhija deconstructs the design of the novel to show how the novel is "neither free-flowing nor flexible" but of a highly symmetrical design (807); Ileana Moreno-Viqueria examines the way in which the structure is mathematically designed; while Sambit Panigrahi investigates its non-chronological temporality and how it aligns with models of postmodern theories on time. Critic Letizia Modena views it as a case study of urban design, reflecting the trend towards dematerialization (4). The novel's intricate and highly allusive design has preoccupied critical attention. But in Calvino's pursuit of invisible things, less inclined towards fixed definition, it

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⁵¹ Refer to *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (84) for Barthes's definition.

would perhaps be more fitting to view such principles and concepts as a reflection out of many: a mirror held up to reality in which we see other reflections, other absent presences.

In the context of postmodern fiction, McHale makes a case for the work's ever-expanding structural horizon. He defines the novel as a heterotopic space,⁵² where different kinds of discontinuous and incommensurable spaces collide (44). To take this further, I argue that this horizon of space takes as its precedent a vanishing into absence, in its leading away to other scenes, other spaces, that moves in the negative. Or as Nicholas Royle aptly describes as the "phantom text":

It is a question then of phantom texts – textual phantoms which do not necessarily have the solidity or objectivity of a quotation, an intertext or explicit, acknowledged presence and which do not in fact come to rest anywhere. Phantom texts are fleeting, continually moving on, leading us away, like Hamlet's Ghost, to some other scene or scenes which we, as readers, cannot anticipate. (*The Uncanny* 280)

Invisible Cities is an example of such a phantom text. Calvino's framing of the work through references to other literary and non-literary spaces occupies a flimsy relation to the text. They appear in translucent shapes, opening to other spaces and scenes, like "thin cities" that are insubstantial structures balancing over the void. Undertaking a series of steps towards the negative, the work brings forward a sense of the landscape as conditioned by an invisible one. It sets up a design of "invisible" spaces, which, as we've seen, is an architectural trait that appealed to Calvino.⁵³ In *Zaira*, the structure of its city consists of the "relationships between the measurements of its space" (10). Or in *Isaura*, its borders bring to fore the outline of the buried

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⁵² McHale writes in view of Foucault's concept of heterotopia, which Foucault describes as: "There is a worse kind of disorder than that of the *incongruous*, the linking together of things that are inappropriate; I mean the disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry" (qtd. in McHale 44).

⁵³ See Kathryn Hume's "Observing the Invisible" for further discussion on Calvino's empty spaces, 142.

lake – the visible landscape as conditioned by the invisible one (20). Or again, the city of Esmeralda is shaped out of the invisible and hidden routes of its many illicit processions (88-89). Repeatedly, we come to discover that it is the invisible forces – of memory, desire, or the tangle of human lives – that gives shape to its cities.

What, then, are the invisible spaces that give shape to the novel? To discuss the three most distinct worlds, which I find to be the medieval, classical mythology and the modern city, the work spans over different times and places seeking continuity amongst the chaos. Firstly, the novel sets up a relation to an absent text: the travelogue of Marco Polo.⁵⁴ Calvino, elsewhere, describes the work as a “rewriting of Marco Polo’s *Il Milione* all made up of brief descriptions of imaginary cities” (“Lettere 1089”).⁵⁵ The choice of this text has to do with the absent status of this thirteenth-century travelogue. The version of *Il Milione* we’ve inherited today is one composed of fragments of manuscript, pages dotted with lacunae and errors.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the stories in the work are of a second-order account, penned not by Marco Polo himself but by Rusticello, a writer of romance.⁵⁷ These circumstantial factors render the text “absent” or “missing”: a loss origin. Like *Il Milione*, *Invisible Cities* takes on the shape of fragments. It also deals with imaginary cities and missing dialogues, a characteristic we will come to explore. These aspects adopt, more so, the precarious nature of the original travelogue, less to do with any substantial representation. As Calvino makes clear, *Il Milione* provides an “imaginary continent in which other literary works find space for their own particular worlds” (“On “Invisible Cities”” 17). And as an “imaginary continent”, *Il Milione* exemplifies the fracture at the origin, a text set

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⁵⁴ This relation has less to do with a serious engagement, meaning it is less concerned with its thematic but employs its world as a setting for his staging of *Invisible Cities*.

⁵⁵ Qtd. in McLaughlin “Calvino’s Rewriting of Marco Polo”, 190.

⁵⁶ For a more detailed look at the various editions of the travelogue, refer to the introduction to “The Travels of Marco Polo” by E. Denison Ross, x-xvii.

⁵⁷ Rusticello was imprisoned with Marco Polo during the battle of Genoa.

loose from actual events, characterized instead by the quality of absence. This locus of the absent text, then, produces a sense of receding space in *Invisible Cities*, as if in movement into the ghostly continent of history.

One of the key characteristics of the dialogue between Polo and Khan is the sense of the illusory, in which the voices we hear seem to echo things that could have been said, or that could have taken place, posed in the conditional. This ghostly dialogue comes to appear as comment on the intangible mode of storytelling that troubles the source text. In their exchange, doubt is raised as to whether the characters have spoken, are speaking, or merely imagining: “At this point Kublai Khan interrupted him or imagined interrupting him, or Marco Polo imagined himself interrupted [...] All this so that Marco Polo could explain or imagine explaining or be imagined explaining” – the locus of speech is destabilized. It presents the conundrum of “who is imagining who?”, one that questions the boundary of reality and illusion that is rendered uncertain (28). In doing so, the characters are also reduced to apparitional figures belonging to an uncertain subjectivity. Do we see Polo imagining Khan? Or Khan imagining Polo? Or perhaps, it is a matter of who is writing whom: does Calvino write the characters Polo and Khan, similar to how Rusticello is said to be the author of *Il Milione*? Or is Marco Polo, the historical traveller, the author of his tales? Ultimately, this questioning of authorship works to foreground the fictional status of the text. The “author” can only be attributed to a dispersed subjectivity, to traces of voices. All in all, it creates an effect of an echo chamber of voices that contains other histories, other spoken or unspoken words.

The instability of the fictional world is articulated elsewhere:

KUBLAI: I, too, am not sure I am here, strolling among the porphyry fountains, listening to the plashing echo, and not riding, caked with sweat and blood, at the head of my army

[....]

POLO: Perhaps this garden exists only in the shadow of our lowered eyelids, and we have never stopped: you, from raising dust on the fields of battle; and I, from bargaining for sacks of pepper in distant bazaars. But each time we half-close our eyes, in the midst of the din and the throng, we are allowed to withdraw here, dressed in silk kimonos, to ponder what we are seeing and living. (*Invisible Cities* 103-104)

The novel, likewise, interweaves a plurality of spaces which shift in and out of view. The shape of its “realities”, its “cities”, transpire in the gesture of turning a page leaf, in half-closing our eyes. And each time we withdraw into a different space, we turn back to contemplate who spoke, who they are, where they were, or where we are – questions the novel asks us to ponder. The illusory quality of the “real” accommodates other movements, other evanescences, that finally reflects on its own absence.

Moving on, we find another modality of invisible space in the use of mythological presences. This also pertains to the notion of rewriting since the mythological world is essentially, at least as Calvino sees it, a “universe in which the forms densely pack the allotted space, constantly exchanging qualities and dimensions, and the flux of time is filled with a proliferation of stories and cycles of stories” (“Ovid and Universal Contiguity” 147). Calvino, here, speaks of the value he finds in Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, where stories which “flow in every direction” present “no partial design, but rather a living multiplicity that excludes no god known or unknown” (Ibid. 152). Myths are stories which are told and retold, where each retelling presents a new facet or aspect of its own world. Calvino celebrates the intrinsic power of storytelling as that which moves with the flux and chaos of the universe, it tracks the “hidden” or

“absent thing”.⁵⁸ In “Cybernetics and Ghosts”, we also find that Calvino construes the mythic in terms of the unconscious: as a “buried” or “repetitive force” hidden within stories, a “language vacuum that draws words up into its vortex” (19). What has been expelled from consciousness, i.e. language, calls for its own redemption. It compels us to write, to rewrite, in order to restore those regions lost to language, that might come in a “terrible revelation: a myth, which must be recited in secret, and in a secret place” (22). We thus see the significance of the mythic in relation to absence, which has to do with an “unconcealing” or “unforgetting”⁵⁹ what has been lost to language and time.

The structure of *Invisible Cities* resembles this mode of mythic storytelling. In it we find the cycle of stories, a notion which we will be explored further on, stories moving in a number of directions, stories with no beginning or end. This is not to suggest the novel takes on, strictly speaking, the shape of a mythic structure, rather it is in reflection of it, one reflection out of the many. In Lévi-Strauss’s structural study of myths, he demonstrates how myths exist in a network of stories with no beginning or end, whereby affinities across myths from wholly different times and places emerge in inexplicable ways.⁶⁰ The mythic structure is therefore one that is “anaclastic” that involves the “study of both reflected rays and broken rays” (“The Raw and the Cooked” 5). And this idea comes to bear on our investigation of Calvino’s work, his own pursuit of reflections which trace out an invisible network of relations. *Invisible Cities* can be said to operate in the manner of refraction. The function of storytelling is crucial to the novel whereby each story told by Polo marks a change in direction; it depicts a shift in angle that opens to a

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⁵⁸ “Exactitude” 94.

⁵⁹ Rayner, Ghosts, xvi.

⁶⁰ Lévi-Strauss’s study of myth is a work that seeks to order the chaos of the mythic world with scientific rigor and precision. Myths are broken down into units (theme, variation, content, etc.) and classified into bundles of relations, in other words, an investigation into the underlying principles that organize the mythic world.

kaleidoscopic envisioning of the world. And what is crucial is that these stories seem to emerge from nowhere – no origin – crafting out instead an interrelated web of stories that is in the vicinity of the mythic world.

Turning to look closer at Calvino's "mythologies", we find references within the novel that continuously allude to its positioning within a mythological world. Martin McLaughlin's study is particularly insightful in its identification of classical elements within the work, its historical referents. He notes how the cities, Lalage, Ottavia, Ersilia, and Baucis evoke names from Greek and Roman histories. Of particular interest is "the city of Baucis [...] which is also the central tale of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*", a myth that has haunted Calvino's imagining (*Italo Calvino* 104).⁶¹ Its centrality to *Metamorphoses*, as McLaughlin points out, has to do with it being the point in the story where things slow down, where action and speed withdraws in place of a minutiae of details (*Ibid.* 106). The significance of the city of Baucis in *Invisible Cities* also has to do with a sense of vanishing. The inhabitants live above ground, looking down on earth "with spyglasses and telescopes [...] examining it, leaf by leaf, stone by stone, ant by ant, contemplating with fascination their own absence" (77). It is as if looking into Baucis, we arrive at a point of withdrawal. By extension, the land of myth is characterized by its own absence, a place where the traveller "directed toward Baucis cannot see the city and yet he has arrived" (77). This paradox asks us to consider in which spaces we might observe our own absent positioning, in myth or otherwise; there in Baucis, but also, somehow, not there. Myth as the unconscious force of the narrative, at work in its absence.

Hence, the novel's use of mythology works to establish a sense of place within an invisible landscape. Elsewhere we find quests to find a mystical sage, or characters like tattooed

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⁶¹ McLaughlin states: "Calvino was haunted by the Baucis myth, which had been present in his very first novel (where Pin visits the old rural couple in Chapter XI), and it receives particular attention from the author in his introductory essay to an Italian edition of the *Metamorphoses*" (105).

giants, dwarfs, and water nymphs. Tales of greed and unfulfilled wishes, in Zobeide where men organize the streets of the city to trap a woman they've collectively dreamt of; or other stock narratives of a queen's illegitimate son or the wise hermit also appear (45; 10; 144). The work's vague and intermittent allusions to the mythic, in a way that resist development or continuity, further enforces a straying sense of the mythic that appears in secret time and places. What they can tell us is less clear, but their "thereness" remains. In the vortex of storytelling, we find ourselves in transaction with spaces of invisibility that flicker in and out of view.

In juxtaposition with these elements of the medieval and classical worlds, the experience of the modern metropolis also constitutes an important element in its framing. Setting up different zones (McHale's "heterotopia"), cities of the ancient and modern world intermingle resulting in the blurring of precise contours. As Modena's research into the historical context of the work shows, the portrayal of cities in the novel does not simply have to do with a play of infinite textuality, but is linked to conditions of the urban contemporary. For instance, she finds that the dematerialization of cities in the novel are linked to imageries developed by visionary architects of the 1960s: the affinities between the weightless sculptures of Fausto Melotti with cities suspended in the sky, balanced on stilts or pyramids; and Walter Jonas's imagining of funnel cities to Calvino's underground cities (*Italo Calvino's Architecture of Lightness* 176-184).

Walter Jonas, *Intrapolis*, 1970, a funnel city.

Beville also suggests that the landscape of *Invisible Cities* belongs to that of the modern metropolis, though in her analysis this has to do with the experience of the cityscape as a “zone of uncanny spectrality”, as a site of spectralised interaction between the individual and the crowd (“Zones of Uncanny Spectrality” 603). The idea of the spectral city, where here is also elsewhere, will be explored further on. What is crucial to the work’s relation to the modern metropolis lies in how it constitutes one of the many reflections found in the novel – a stratum in which we find layers of layers, stretching on indefinitely.

The intrusion of the mythical into hyperreal landscapes ultimately consigns each element to trace-like figurations. This is evident in the city of Eusapia where the inhabitants construct an identical city underground where the dead are transported. Day after day, the city of the living begins to resemble the city of the dead, and the dead moves up to the city of the living, such that “in the twin cities there is no longer any way of knowing who is alive and who is dead” (*Invisible Cities* 110). This strange hyperreal, science-fictional landscape nevertheless contains echoes of ancient civilizations. Described as a “necropolis”, “crowded with big-game hunters,

mezzosopranos, bankers, duchesses, courtesans, generals” and a “confraternity of hooded brothers” – a repertoire of characters that recall medieval or mythological stories – the landscape belongs as much to the imaginary world of Marco Polo’s travelogue as it does to our modern contemporary time (Ibid. 109). Worlds intrinsically different move together, but this disturbance stems not so much from their incompatibility, but in their dedifferentiation. We find names of modern day cities, New York, Los Angeles, Kyōto-Ōsaka, but also names of ancient cities, Carthage, Troy (Ibid. 138-139). Or objects like refrigerators, radios, roller coasters, planes, found alongside objects such as astrolabes, precious metals, tanned hides, statues and shields (Ibid. 114; 128). Things that don’t belong together, places of incongruous times, produces bizzare landscapes that always seem to hint towards a realm of other inhabitations.

IMPOSSIBLE JOURNEYS

Amidst this landscape of fragmented and hidden spaces, we embark upon impossible journeys. To revisit Culbert’s notion on the paralysis of transport, the “impossible arrival” or “non-arrival” allows for other modes of transport through contestation of the boundary limits (48). Implicit in this line of thinking is Derrida’s notion of *non-arrivé*: “What arrives would always arrive *at the border*. Affecting the border. But by remaining there: by not arriving” (qtd. in Culbert 48). In *Counterpath: Travelling with Derrida*, as discussed in chapter one, the event of Derrida’s travels become the occasion for investigating this paradox of arrival. Malabou describes:

All types of travel narratives [...] obey a law that decrees that the truth of travel amounts to unveiling a sense of the foreign [...] Against such assurances, Derrida stakes a claim for a voyage without truth [...] Such a voyage would stand rather in the imminence of a

catastrophe that “tears no veil.” Derrida travels in the twilight of that imminence, perpetually missing his appointment with Ulysses.⁶² (*Counterpath: Travelling with Derrida* 28)

A journey that remains in the imminence of the end (catastrophe⁶³ signifying the end or dénouement) is key. Likewise, Calvino contests the notion of arrival and departure in *Invisible Cities*. We find a continuous spacing of here and elsewhere, in which we never truly arrive at a destination, but move in a kind of aimless wandering. Doing so, the work emphasizes the unbridgeable gap that can never be fulfilled but continues to provoke.

The journey across invisible cities in the novel is also a journey through nowhere. This has to do with the repetition of signs: the exchange of signs where differences are removed between cities presents not arrival, but return and repetition. It designates a space of suspension where here is, at once, elsewhere. Like the atopic space as defined in Barthes’s *Empire of Signs*, we find something similar here where cities resemble other cities. Cities unfold as an exchange of signs in the novel, a notion revealed in Polo’s exchange with Khan: “Marco Polo could express himself only with gestures, leaps [...] or with objects [...] one city was depicted by the leap of a fish escaping [...] another city by a naked man running through fire unscorched; a third by a skull [...] The Great Khan deciphered the signs, but the connection between them and the places visited remained uncertain” (*Invisible Cities* 22). Each city takes on the appearance of a crystallized object, or a single emblem, whose relation to reality remains obscure and uncertain. And Khan soon begins to realize that the cities Polo described resembled one another, “as if the

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⁶² The Odysseyan paradigm, Malabou states, is tied to the essence of place, of a “home” at the end of the world. This missed encounter, then, suggests one remains at the border of unveiling, never reaching the thing behind (7-8).

⁶³ Malabou states: “The Greek word *katastrophē* signifies first the *end* (the end of a life, or the dénouement of a dramatic plot and the end of the play), and second, a reversal or upset, the tragic and unforeseeable event that brings about the ruin of the established order. As a result, catastrophe refers as much to the *truth*, the accomplishment of a play or a life” (*Counterpath* 4).

passage from one to another involved not a journey but a change of elements” (43). The journeys Polo claims he took unfold as an exchange of words; its intrinsic nature bound up within language’s deceptions. And this foregrounds the emptiness of language that represents not objects and events; it underscores language’s allusive relation to the world.

If signs repeat only other signs, then we can only ever remain on the surface of its becoming. One cannot truly discover the city of Tamara, concealed beneath its “thick coating of signs”: “Your gaze scans the streets as if they were written pages: the city says everything you must think, makes you repeat her discourse, and while you believe you are visiting Tamara you are only recording the names with which she defines herself and all her parts” (*Invisible Cities* 14). Each city is constructed of and through its signs, signs of language. The “real” Tamara lies beyond this system, in the void of words. To find what exists beyond the surface of language, to see past the signs we already know and recognize, is what Calvino aims to do. Failure to do so risks homogeneity, an imprisonment of perception. As it is in the city of Trude where its signs never change, we find the “world is covered by a sole Trude”, because leaving the city we come to arrive only in another city that repeats the same Trude (128). It depicts the failure of a journey towards an object that remains ever out of reach, a writing towards the world to be found nowhere in writing.

But somewhat ironically, Calvino suggests it is through the repetition of signs that we might escape this condition of immobility; but a repetition that expresses “contiguity” where “stories may resemble one another, but they never repeat one another” (“Ovid and Universal Contiguity” 160). Cities are same yet different, a “presence” that is always in expression of an absent presence. Signs, in their endless repetition, come to signify not just one thing, but echoes of significations unsurfaced. To this regard, the impossibility of arrival, the imminence of the

end, creates a space for the imminence of other voyages. As previously explored, Calvino initiates a proliferation of signs through its enclaves of hidden worlds (the medieval, mythic and modern). Likewise, the exchange of signs (or “cities”) foregrounds an invisible network of relations – an obscurity that resists fixed designation. At one point in the work, Khan, in frustration, tells Polo, “your cities do not exist”, to which Polo replies: “This is the aim of my explorations [...] If you want to know how much darkness there is around you, you must sharpen your eyes, peering at the faint lights in the distance” (*Invisible Cities* 59).⁶⁴ To trace the void, one needs to seek out lightness and luminosity – a poetics of contrast that speaks to the way the novel continuously seeks out images of lightness in order for recognition of the darkness to surface. Travel takes place in this twilight zone, between here and elsewhere, sameness and difference, through which we might obtain glimpses of light.

One of the ways in which the work opens to this sense of wandering is through the destabilization of a concrete sense of time and place. Taking away a linear narrative (a structure employed in realist fiction that reflects the linear progression of time) – beginning-middle-end – time here is seemingly erased. This is also tied to the experience of reading the novel itself that opens to its own reconfigurations. In a self-reflexive comment, Calvino suggests a way to read the novel: “The descriptions of cities Marco Polo visited had this virtue: you could wander through them in thought, become lost, stop and enjoy the cool air, or run off” (38). Reading the work, one can begin at any point, or skip a few pages, as one desires. Movement via loops, repetitions and cycles, over linear progression, is to multiply the points of entry and exit. Things play out in a twilight zone with no beginning and end. Even the characters remain empty, apparitional as previously discussed, because they do not develop in time, but in postponement, refuse or are unable to take shape. Furthermore, clear temporal and spatial markers (within each

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⁶⁴ The empire’s decay is also an important issue here, one which is linked to the crisis of the Empire.

city) are hardly given. This diminishes a clear sense of movement from one place to another, one point to the next. While each city is given a name and distinctive characteristics, the time-stamp of each account isn't clear. The "past", "present" or "future" of the accounts are not specified. Cities are arranged according to no perceivable temporal logic other than the compulsory order of print. Even the markers of place – landmarks or vectors – remain vague and ambiguous. The narrator begins his account of a city with statements such as: "Never in all my travels had I ventured as far as Adelma"; or, "When you have forded the river... crossed the mountain pass, you suddenly find before you the city of Moriana"; or again, "From there, after six days and seven nights, you arrive at Zobeide" (*Invisible Cities* 94; 105; 45). The obscure geographical positionings function to create the effect of cities transpiring from a void of time and place. Through the porous texturing of space, ghostly appearances occur.

This odd predicament is enacted in Marco's travels, generating a sense of aimless purposiveness. In a seemingly endless and futile search of the city of Cecilia, Marco meets a passing herdsman who tells him that he is, and has always been, in Cecilia: "That cannot be! [...]. But how have I managed to arrive where you say, when I was in another city, far far away from Cecilia, and I have not yet left it?" (*Invisible Cities* 153). The herdsman replies: "The places have mingled [...]. Cecilia is everywhere" (153). This paradoxical predicament of arrival without departure, of the here-and-now as the there-and-then, is central to the experience of the novel itself. The status of Venice – Polo's hometown ("point of origin") – is crucial here in the investigation of this trace-structure:

"Sire, now I have told you about all the cities I know."

"There is still one of which you never speak."

Marco Polo bowed his head.

“Venice,” the Khan said.

Marco smiled. “What else do you believe I have been talking to you about?”

...

“Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice.”

(Invisible Cities 86)

Venice is the city Marco is always speaking of, to which all cities refer. Marco’s voyage away from home is, at once, a return. This is repeated elsewhere: “perhaps I have already spoken of Irene under other names; perhaps I have spoken only of Irene” (125). Space is void, journeys that took place are rendered spectral in the eradication of difference, in the removal of fixed mooring points. Venice always remains in abeyance, between Cecilia, Irene, between cities we cannot speak of – the impossibility of arrival, or a missed encounter, as if to arrive in Venice is to always arrive in a suspended time that acknowledges an irreconcilable void.

In these postponements, the lines between here/elsewhere, beginning/end, reality/imaginary are increasingly blurred. We find ourselves in a landscape of absent presences where cities are always inhabited, and constituted, by traces of other cities. For example, the image of two cities, the original and the copy, both existing simultaneously, recurs. The traveller who arrives at Valdrada finds two cities, one above the lake, the other reflected upside-down: “At times the mirror increases a thing’s value, at times denies it” – it is only through its reflection that the city acquires value (53). The city Sophronia is also made of two half-cities, a world of carnivals and the other of marble. And in Eusapia, the inhabitants construct an identical copy of the city underground for the dead to continue their former activities (109). These resonances stage a sense of uncanny returns, as if each city contained the skeletal remains of another. But here reflections move, acquiring a different life. Another way this effect of

repetition is achieved is through the novel's categorizations. Sections titled *desires* interrelate, piecing together a series of varying manifestations: in Zenobia, desires erase the city; in Zemrude, the form of the city is shaped by subjective moods; in Fedora, we find little globes of cities that correspond to each inhabitant's desire (35; 66; 32). The work's other sections *signs*, *memory*, *eyes*, *names*, *thin*, so on and so forth, also set up a similar network of relations. Arriving in cities we've departed from, we find only the failure to arrive, the sense that we've been here before. But this failure maintains the absence of "cities", that holds the link to the impossible "city", the impossible object.

MEMORY AND DESIRE

The function of memory in *Invisible Cities* is its disclosure of absent bearings, absent because contingent on unconscious dwellings. Calvino links the unconscious in relation to language's manifestations: "The unconscious is the ocean of the unsayable, of what has been expelled from the land of language [...] The unconscious speaks – in dreams, in verbal slips, in sudden associations – with borrowed words, stolen symbols, linguistic contraband, until literature redeems these territories and annexes them to the language of the waking world" ("Cybernetics and Ghosts" 19). The novel enacts and comments on this stumbling procession of the unconscious in the effort to redeem the absent or forgotten thing. Language is conscious; silence, unconscious. And to reach the silence, to break through the surface of language comes by way of displacement or, so to speak, theft. But to write memory also comes at the risk of oblivion: "Memory's images, once they are fixed in words, are erased" (*Invisible Cities* 87). It is why Polo does not speak of Venice, because to construct Venice in words is to immobilize memory, that is its death. This tension between writing and silence, between redemption and

loss, informs the absence of writing; it aims for the fluidity of rewriting and retelling, as opposed to fixed designations.

Cities transpire in the spacing of memory and the unconscious. Polo's wistful longing for his childhood home, Venice, Khan's searching for a lost Empire, its Edenic origins, are narrative tropes that suggest its journeys forward, through cities all over the world, are contained within a desire to return to the past. This notion is revealed several times across the novel: when Kublai asks Polo, "does your journey take place only in the past?", or "[...] so then, yours is truly a journey through memory!" (*Invisible Cities* 28; 98). This reinforces the sense of recurrence we find, signifying repetition as uncanny return. Moments of misrecognition occur throughout the work, emphasizing how the unconscious of the past arrives through misplacement of objects and things – "stolen symbols" and "borrowed words"⁶⁵ – that come to intermingle with traces of other memories, other events. In Eudoxia, "you recognize the street you were seeking in a crimson or indigo or magenta thread" because of the "mysterious bond between two objects so dissimilar as the carpet and the city" (Ibid. 96-97). One finds the image one seeks in other images, other misshapen forms, whose connections cannot be deciphered but nonetheless hold resonance. It illustrates a way of writing that comes by absence, meaning one writes a version or approximation of so in the absence of the thing itself. As Calvino asserts, "rarely does the eye light on a thing, and then only when it has recognized that thing as the sign of another thing", thus reiterating the sure sense of displacement by which we come to recognize the "thing" in its absent presence (Ibid. 13).

The writing of the past, de Certeau states, posits "a death", where "the object circulating in it is only the absent" (*The Writing of History* 46). Calvino, too, illustrates the past in figures of the dead. In the sections of cities and the dead, the underlying motif is the resemblance and

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⁶⁵ "Cybernetics and Ghosts", 19.

indistinguishability of the living from the dead, past from present. Calvino's pronouncement is that death is immobility, a failure to perceive sameness. In Eusapia, "there is no longer any way of knowing who is alive and who is dead" (110); in Laudomia, the living find their names written on tombstones, they are already dead (140); or in Argia, where the dead city is one which is inert (126). The city of Adelma is one where faces of the dead are recycled on those who are living: "An old man was loading a basket of sea urchins on a cart; I thought I recognized him; when I turned, he had disappeared down an alley, but I realized that he looked like a fisherman who, already old when I was a child, could no longer be among the living" (*Invisible Cities* 94). The narrator concludes, "on every new face you encounter, it prints the old forms, for each one it finds the most suitable mask" (Ibid. 95). Faces as masks of other faces, the living masks of the dead. What this implies is that the present is but a version or construction of the past, just as how cities are but versions of one city: of "Venice" that belongs to Polo's past. But recognition of this is what is redemptive, as the narrator declares: "This means I, too, am dead" (Ibid. 95). Desire moves towards absences, "it repeats signs so that the city can begin to exist" – the past, though conditioned on repetition, can come to be through other recognitions (Ibid. 19). To write, as de Certeau posits, reiterates "the myths built upon a murder of an originary death and fashions out of language the forever-remnant trace of a beginning that is as impossible to recover as to forget" (47). And in cities that are living memorials for the dead, we continue to head towards the thing forbidden, to find traces of a beginning concealed in what we fail to forget.

Past, present, and future lose distinction as fixed temporal markers. As previously discussed, the non-linear, non-chronological arrangement of the novel allows for reconfiguration. This model of temporality is contested in its organization of experience within prescribed boundaries, into distinct units of events. And fixing in time, or in words, leads to erasure, as

Calvino clarifies: “the jam of past, present, future that blocks existences calcified in the illusion of movement” (99). Existence is “calcified” in a model of linear progression. Memory consigns things and events to the past which is only an illusion since the past exists in the intimate spaces of the present. Employing a different mode of temporal organization – loops and networks – then opens to a more fluid structuring of consciousness and, thereby, existence:

[W]hat he sought was always something lying ahead, and even if it was a matter of the past it was a past that changed gradually as he advanced on his journey, because the traveler’s past changes according to the route he has followed [...] Arriving at each new city, the traveler finds again a past of his that he did not know he had: the foreignness of what you no longer are or no longer possess lies in wait for you in foreign, unpossessed places. (*Invisible Cities* 29)

The past moves in time, reconfiguring in each new discovery. It is an absence – because of its foreign, distant nature – towards which we move, as opposed to something we’ve left behind. Words are spread out across the void of memory that is always already embedded from one moment to the next. As it is in the city of Olinda where the past (the first Olinda) grows with and into future Olindas like the concentric circles of tree trunks; or in Berenice, where “all the future Berenices are already present in this instant, wrapped one within the other, confined, crammed, inextricable” (Ibid. 163). Cities as images of time’s interlocking articulate, once more, the importance of mobility and relativity; it harks to the reconstruction of memory’s rooms.

But whose memory? Across the work, we detect shifts in the status of the voice who narrates the story in its employment of first, second and third person. The instability of the narrative consigns its words to a plural and heterogeneous discourse, belonging not to a single, but diffused subjectivity. It is why memory in Calvino’s cities can be “traded”: “[A]t each word

that one man says – such as “wolf,” “sister,” “hidden treasure,” “battle,” “scabbies,” “lovers” – the others tell, each one, his tale of wolves, sisters, treasures [...] [When] you start summoning up your memories one by one, your wolf will have become another wolf, your sister a different sister, your battle another battle” (*Invisible Cities* 37). Memory is depicted as a collective where our “past” morphs into other’s “pasts” not truly our own. While, on one hand, it underscores the unreliability of memory, on the other, it posits a liminal space in which we find a flux of perspectives, the transcendence of our own subjectivity. And this is what Calvino aspires for, “a work to be conceived beyond the self, a work that allowed us to escape the limited perspective of the individual ego, not only in order to enter other similar selves but to give voice to that which cannot speak” (“Multiplicity” 151-152). One might say it belongs to the empty subject that Barthes constitutes, one “diffracted to emptiness” in a “fragmented, particled language” by which things write themselves (*Empire of Signs* 7). The emptying out of subjectivity opens to silence, a type of ascetic silence, so to speak, in which one finds an opening unto other worlds. As suggested in the novel: “But what enhanced for Kublai every event or piece of news reported by his inarticulate informer was the space that remained around it, a void not filled with words” (*Invisible Cities* 38). It is why they often remain “silent and immobile”⁶⁶ because in the silence of language one finds a writing, as Barthes would say, that “writes itself”, or as Calvino puts, “what these things (present or absent) can tell us without words”.⁶⁷

The quality of absence or silence are persistent features in *Invisible Cities*; everything is turned into a reflected surface upon which glimmerings of other worlds might be gleaned. The novel is a journey through other spaces – of imagination, memory and desire – that posits an absence of becoming: it comes to be only through its vanishing. If in Calvino’s works we find

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⁶⁶ *Invisible Cities*, 39.

⁶⁷ “Exactitude”, 94.

lightness, it is because heaviness and immobility is death. We find not a statement of renunciation and disengagement, or rather renunciation and disengagement comes to mean something different: it is a continuous withdrawal in order to see the darkness better. Its kaleidoscopic movements producing images of light and darkness, form and formlessness, florescence and decay, demonstrate a strategy that is always at variance. One does not come to rest in absence, but along with absence as an ever-receding horizon.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The authors as discussed in this thesis offer a declaration of a poetics in which absence is at stake, or a choice one might even suggest. Having examined works in which we find a negative momentum – the tending towards a vanishing form – begins the task of establishing absence as a category of the literary work. In developing this poetic framework, through works where we find this declaration more pronounced, helps clarify and consolidate the features of this poetics – fragments, brevity as form, self-conscious narrative and self-effacing gestures – that is to ensure its viability. The features as here listed help organize the patterns of engagement we find resonant across these works, though they do not provide an exhaustive definition of this poetics by any means. Instead, from the convergence of these strategies, we might glean a certain procedural by which absence unfolds. As discussed, the lack of critical attention to absence in the literary work is partly due to the failure of interpretative strategies to account for less definitive trajectories. However, the sample of works in this thesis have shown, in their privileging of the negative, that we must begin to shift our priorities in the scope of interpretation. Taking this poetics into consideration, its strategies and methodologies, thus develops the vocabulary through which we might speak of absences.

Absence is not simply a negative value, as I have established, but a condition of image, language, or other representational forms. What is left out, not there – the unrepresentable or incommunicable – exerts its secret necessity. Herzog's uncanny encounter with the prehistoric world of caves brings into stark preview the fracture at the origin; the past is written in the space of this fracture. The film's spectral rendering of "the real", its dissection of cinema's multiple temporalities, and its self-reflexive intrusions, underscore the image as trace. What this means is

that the images of cave paintings do not locate an origin of the past, despite its visible configuration, but excavates the circulation of the trace, that is it marks out the absence of history in its presence. Likewise, Barthes's envisioning of a system with no signs establishes a writing of and with the trace, in other words, a displaced center. It is and is not Japan at once – the encounter with the foreign, the “other”, takes place from this displaced position. Writing out of language that seeks to contain thus opens to the possibility of the other's absence in language. It takes into regard its infinite foreignness, the possibility of its silent heterogeneous discourse. On the end of fiction, Calvino's rewriting and retelling of stories sets up a trace-structure in which language's fixations are unsettled. If Barthes rewrites language to its abolishment, Calvino writes a new language in his rewrite: to find new words, new poetic images that might uncover the hidden or absent thing. Language is set in pursuit of the invisible. But often times, this endeavor recoils back to the silence. The ghostly dialogue of history between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan takes place in the twilight of uncertainty: “it happened”, but what?

But this open-ended possibility is what makes, for some, absence the most deviant of serious ethical or political work, as renunciation or a refusal to engage. Sontag's contention with this, as raised in chapter three, in its seeming advocacy of “a stern retrenchment of literature into a desiccated, ascetic noncommunicativeness”, underscores the dilemma in one's resistance to language (*Writing Degree Zero* xvii). While acknowledging the potential drawback of such a discourse, we have to come to see, in the works discussed, postulations of absence that function as a positive force. What appears as “noncommunicativeness” or renunciation stems not from a position of disavowal, but a desire to engage more fully, more faithfully, to the losses of history or culture. It is to reveal the assumptions of an appropriative discourse that seeks to contain the other within a narrative of linearity and continuity. This, then, is to acknowledge the failure and

limitation that comprise our position in relation to the other. Writing in a language of absence is to write with the contingencies, the strange or unexplainable, that which posits its necessary absence. Through network structures, spectral displacements, and vanishing forms, we come in approach of absence as an ever-receding horizon. Objects and events unfold outward in the absence of becoming, resisting a fixation in time; it continues in writing, as trace. The restless time of narrative thus accommodates other voices, other writings, destabilizing a fixed sense of the here/elsewhere, which opens to reconfigurations in time. Absence leaves us with the promise of revision.

Absence, to say the least, is that which cannot be signified. Jean-Luc Nancy states: “[I]t is then the silence of all painting, of all music, the silence of the form, of this form that neither signifies nor flatters but that shows: the rhythm, or the schema, the line or the cadence” (*The Muses* 73). It is the function of the poetic to show “how it is”⁶⁸, acting as a supplementary to signification. The poetic marks a shift from an interpretive approach, to the extent that concerns with form take precedence over interpretation of meaning. The silence of paintings, photographs, and invisible landscapes that we’ve come to establish in the works of Herzog, Barthes and Calvino, demonstrates this *showing* – how absence is. And specifying the absence of form is to investigate, first and foremost, that which lies beyond meaning and signification. Herzog’s film does not offer an interpretation of the cave paintings, rather, it suggests the possibility of meaning within the context of art, history and science. We are asked to make sense of this image, with no definite signification, on our own terms. The fragmentation of image where things are never quite what they seem, the intrusions into the diegetic frame that destabilizes the ontological stability of its “world”, and the film’s departure into the stillness of the photograph,

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⁶⁸ Sontag, Susan. “Against Interpretation.” *Susan Sontag: Essays of the 1960s & 70s*, edited by David Rieff, The Library of America, 2013, pp. 10-20.

all encrypts the absence of the past through a fundamental questioning of film's encounter with the world. Barthes similarly questions and interrogates his encounter with Japan in *Empire of Signs*, though the work's response to this seeks the displacement of the foreign entirely within an "unheard-of system" (3). Inventing a "foreign" system, a "foreign" language, it is the absence of the other that is most fully registered in terms of the unfamiliar. One cannot recognize Japan in a language that continuously marks out its own emptiness, its own meaninglessness. The text leads nowhere, or towards its own erasure, entering fully into the mode of the self-conscious narrative that destabilizes any sense of its own coherence. As a narrative which folds back on itself, unfolding only as fragmented surfaces, we fail to locate the text in any definite sense without a fixed beginning and end. Meaning is postponed since it ensures the impossibility of closure. Calvino's work, on the other hand, acknowledges the absence of experience through its continuous pursuit in language. This is developed through the intricacies of fiction which sets up multiple, impossible worlds; but worlds under erasure, that opens to the absence of its own internal form. Calvino abandons the straightforward, linear narrative mode in favor of a narrative of fragments: it does not seek a representation of reality, but to illuminate aspects of reality through hidden emblems. It foregrounds a sense of hidden significations never fully revealed.

But beyond these justifications, there is value to simply maintaining alcoves of silence in the literary work. We might take comfort in a work which says little, or says nothing, like the haiku, a "faint gash inscribed upon time" (*Empire of Signs* 82). This in no way reduces its significance, but restores to literature the art of silence itself. As Tanizaki in his praise of shadows suggests:

I would call back at least for literature this world of shadows we are losing. In the mansion called literature, I would have the eaves deep and the walls dark, I would push

back into the shadows the things that come forward too clearly [...] I do not ask that this be done everywhere, but perhaps we may be allowed at least one mansion where we can turn off the electric lights and see what it is like without them. (*In Praise of Shadows* 42)

To make room for shadows, silences, or absences, as an inclusion in the literary work, certainly occupies aesthetic significance. And perhaps our own interpretative approaches can follow suit. A silent observation of the world that leaves its mysteries be, in its inexplicabilities, that is its own endless reserve. This is not the same as keeping silent – a “noncommunicativeness” – but a gesture to silence that does not seek its exposure to light.

Across these frameworks, it is the absent locale that opens to the broader circulation of material. Through a poetics of absence, we come to trace out an elusive network of connections that lies beyond fixed representational frameworks. Absence has been defined at various points through the spectral, figurative and trace – it is a force which undermines the stability of form. In making a claim for the absence of writing in the works of these filmmakers and authors, we’ve come to see the value of this poetics in its turn away from the materiality of presence.

Admittedly, the poetics as I have tried to establish through the works of these authors and filmmakers is selective. In other works we can certainly find similar outlooks, similar strategies. Samuel Beckett first comes to mind. But what I have tried to shown here, with this brief ensemble coming from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, is the way this poetics has developed across a select group of writings in which we find the persistent speculation of absence. This thesis is an attempt to identify and clarify this resonance. It hopes to at least begin the task of setting up absence and silence as a kind of shared category, as its own possibility for interpretation. And moving on, to find other types of writings, films and arts, that can be read in terms of their vanishings and uncertainties.

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