

Review: Justin Remes, *Absence in Cinema: The Art of Showing Nothing*

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Absence in Cinema: The Art of Showing Nothing

By Justin Remes

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Shortly before losing his mind, King Lear chides his daughter: “Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again!” It can indeed be maddening to attempt to say anything productive or meaningful about something that, by definition, is not there. Yet thanks to an admirably light touch and a tolerance for paradox, taking an approach that is often “autobiographical and anecdotal” (25), Justin Remes manages to find a great deal worth saying about nothing in this thought-provoking and readable monograph.

A catalogue of absences might either be infinitely long, or else comically brief. Thankfully, Remes uses an introductory chapter to articulate his criteria for inclusion, which, ironically, revolve around overt exclusions. For an absence to be understood, he argues, one must be able to imagine what *might* have been present. What is left out or removed is contiguous with what remains, and each must necessarily be approached through the other. The chapter surveys an impressive range of these “structured absences” (19) in visual art, music and literature, before turning to a brief survey of cinematic examples (supplemented by an extensive and amusingly annotated filmography). Besides the most famous cases – the likes of John Cage’s *4’33”*, Samuel Beckett’s literary experiments with absence, or Nam June Paik’s *Zen for Film* (1962-4) – Remes moves nimbly through an impressive number of “nothings.” Crucially, each successive example furthers his exploratory framing of what makes a meaningful absence, setting up an interconnectedness between them and the subsequent case studies that presents them all less as “isolated curios” (26) than as part of a century-spanning conversation among avant-garde circles and across media.

Chapter One (“Walter Ruttmann and the Blind Film”) uses its case study – Walter Ruttmann’s *Weekend* (1930), an “imageless” film featuring an urban soundscape – to take up those questions of absence and intermediality. Sometimes described as a radio-play or a piece of *musique concrète* created *avant la lettre*, *Weekend* was recorded using an optical sound-on-film process but omitting the visual element. Characteristically, Remes makes ontological play of the historical and possible conditions of exhibition for this film: is it the same “absence” if a blank image is actually projected as when the audio recording is played in a darkened room? Should it be stored on celluloid or vinyl? CD or DVD? *Wochenende.mp3* or *Wochenende.mp4*? Juxtaposing Ruttmann’s work with the roughly contemporaneous Soviet “Statement on Sound,” Remes finds new possibilities in those familiar considerations of the relationship between sound and image, as the complex dynamics of presence and absence of the “blind film” *Weekend* point towards revealing contrasts, conversations and convergences between the senses.

Reversing that sensory dynamic, Chapter Two (“Stan Brakhage and the Birth of Silence”) takes up the issue of images unaccompanied by sound. Focusing particularly on one of Brakhage’s many soundless films – *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959), in which the cries of a woman giving birth and the screams of the new-born child are seen but not (literally) heard – Remes traces a lineage that combines the soundless films of the German ‘absolute film’ movement with the American avant-garde of which Brakhage was to be a part, and, further, takes in perhaps the most famous purveyor of silences, the composer John Cage. Alongside the taboo-breaking visual content of the film, Remes finds in the absolute silence of the intimate images an equally radical gesture of omission, prompting the viewer to supply their own imagined soundtrack. Elucidating Brakhage’s own comments on the “sound sense” sometimes present in images, Remes articulates the “musicality of vision” that emerges through the rhythms of editing and the movement of objects. Again, avoiding excessive abstractions, his “thought

experiments” about different ways *Window Water Baby Moving* might be shown (and heard) are grounded in anecdotes and wry observations.

Chapter Three, “Naomi Uman and the Peekaboo Principle,” moves from sensory absences to an aesthetic of removal. Beginning with Robert Rauschenberg’s *Erased De Kooning Drawing* (1953), Remes again takes an intermedia perspective on the nature of erasure, making a nuanced distinction between the creation or utilisation of empty space, and the product of acts of deliberate elimination or deletion. He argues that “one of the most forceful articulations of subtraction in cinema” (98) appears in Mexican and American filmmaker Naomi Uman’s *removed* (1999), a 16mm piece in which the actresses from a 1970s German pornographic film have been manually removed from the celluloid, using bleach and nail polish, leaving only “amorphous, palpitating white holes” (98) accompanied by lascivious dialogue. With reference to the “peekaboo principle” described by neuroscientist Vilayanur Subramanian Ramachandran, in Remes’ reading and according to Uman’s own perspective of the film, *removed* is “not a critique of pornography or a feminist treatise on the male gaze” (107) but an examination of “the paradox of censorship” (113). In this, it seems to articulate the opposite trajectory to that described by Claire Henry elsewhere in this issue regarding Sari Braithwaite’s *[CENSORED]* (2018). Henry recounts how, for Braithwaite, what might have been a joyful “liberation” of sexualised footage removed by Australian censors instead became a profoundly disheartening, even traumatic experience. But while Braithwaite’s act of restoration failed to reclaim the sensuality of the material from the censor’s prurient, disapproving gaze, Uman’s act of removal instead makes witty play of the dialectic of exposure and concealment fundamental to striptease, and makes a work that, subversively, through its very absences, is “far more erotic” (112) than its explicitly pornographic source. In common with the other case studies, Remes’ reading of *removed* highlights how absences are experienced as anything but

empty voids, in this case producing an effect even more potent than the supposedly complete original.

Moving from an aesthetic of erasure to one of disappearance, the final extended case study appears in Chapter Five (“Martin Arnold’s Disappearing Act”). Where Uman’s erasures left visible gaps, Austrian filmmaker Martin Arnold’s digital erasures and manipulations may be more insidious, even uncanny. Taking Arnold’s *Deanimated* (2002), which gradually erases dialogue, characters and finally all human presences from the 1941 B-movie *Invisible Ghost*, starring Bela Lugosi, Remes finds in the film’s progressive emptiness “a series of interlocking voids, including silence, emptiness and blackness” (127). As elsewhere, Remes proceeds not through dense abstract theorisation, but through connections and comparisons, moving in the space of a few pages from cross-media examples in poetry and painting to the Zen Buddhist concept of *sunyata*, sometimes simply translated as “the Void” but better understood as something like “positive emptiness,” or as the dialectic between absence and presence which runs throughout this book. More focused and weighty approaches to the conditions and implications of nothingness certainly exist, but Remes’ light touch serves admirably to move the discussion away from teeth-gnashing nihilism and existential dread and towards finding a space in the void for freedom, creativity, multiplicity and play.

Absence in Cinema ultimately makes an enjoyable and thought-provoking tour of a subject that might risk obscurity or abstruseness in other hands. One may well wish that Remes had extended the scope of this work beyond his focus on the avant-garde. Personally, I would like to have seen Chapter Two’s discussion of the “sound sense” in silent images extended further. While Remes notes the contrast between the absolute silence deployed by Brakhage and the various accompaniment practices of the silent era, Brakhage himself noted the visual musicality, even noisiness, of certain “silent” films. Given the use of found footage by Uman and Arnold, archival scholars might well also find much to stimulate further work here, and

indeed, within this issue, Lennaart Van Oldenborgh, May Chew, Maryam Muliaee and Claire Henry all explore ways to approach particular absences and erasures. In all, Remes finds an effective riposte to Lear's outburst: not only can much be made of nothing, but there remain many more nothings still to be explored.