

## **The In-Between**

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### **Abstract**

A painting, a musical piece, a text and a film have in common an arrangement of distinct elements organized to produce the work and to generate meaning. However, when the focus diverts from what is perceptible in the composition to what is implied, a new dimension can emerge. By concentrating on what is missing, the mind has a different perception of the art. The message is not direct, but suggested, allowing for freedom of interpretation. Utilizing omission rather than addition enables the viewer to recompose the piece and be involved through personal emotions. In this regard, the exploration of the void leans toward inwardness, emphasizing introspection and reflection. A closer look at psychology and its use in the visual arts with the Gestalt theory examines how the human brain tends to close gaps in shapes that are unfinished. This mechanism creates an immersive experience. Additionally, the Japanese concept of Ma utilizes and manipulates the notion of in-between, shifting the center of attention, to enable an intensification of vision. The work can operate on a new level of awareness, where the attributes that are actually absent become quintessential.

**Keywords:** art, film, music, image, empty space, ma

## Introduction

Intervals, gaps and pauses are fundamental constituents of a dimension that exists between the visible elements of a work of art, be it written, played, performed, screened or exhibited. These in-between segments remain generally unnoticed, but a closer examination of their integration in the entire composition reveal significant mechanisms that operate on subtle levels of perception. Their value goes beyond the peculiar and can considerably influence the work in its meaning.

## Painting

As an introduction to the notion of the in-between in artistic expression, painting offers a straightforward and clear background that allows to better understand the uses and implications of white space.

For instance, Canadian artist Agnes Martin's minimal abstract expressionist creations are minimal but subtle and delicate compositions, emphasizing introspection as a mode of interacting with the art (Martin, 1981). Her work been described as an expression of "discretion and inwardness" (Spence, 2015). Empty space can stimulate observation and contemplation.

In an artwork, the relation between elements of structure and emptiness can be explored through the balance of positive and negative spaces. A picture generally includes what can be referred to as foreground against a background. The principles of visual hierarchy, movement and focal point arrange these different constituents to convey an intelligible message. This configuration be can achieved through the contrast of some parts of the image that stand out from the empty space. Positive areas generate shapes and signify active meaning (White, 20119), whereas the common conception is that white space appears passive (White, 2011). But with a different perspective, the background of the image can generate a new way of understanding the work.

In American artist Robert Motherwell's abstract work *Lament for Lorca*, dynamic black ink shapes create a unique relation with the white paper on which it is printed, manipulating and blurring the distinction between figure and ground (1982).

With this in mind, what is not present in the composition appears to carry as much significance as its visible counterpart.

## Design

Psychology and its application in design theory offer significant insights into the processes of seeing images. The Gestalt theory applied to design describes how empty space in an image is perceived and interpreted (Behrens, 1998). The human brain tends to close gaps in shapes that are unfinished in a process termed "Law of closure" (Graham, 2008, p. 7). An ingenious mechanism is at play when some of the components are missing in the visuals. By looking at a picture that contains gaps, the mind will be involved in somehow co-creating the meaning of the image.

## Minimalism

Minimalism, and more precisely, the reduction to the ingredients of an artwork, generates

unique mechanisms of perceiving, understanding and interpreting the piece. The minimalist art movement created a unique aesthetic that influenced a variety of fields, such as architecture, music, design and film. The original idea was that the work should be stripped to its essentials. The concept appeared as an attempt to discover the "essence" of the subject (Schapiro, 1937, p. 84). This approach assigns empty space a fine and predominant position, suggesting that what is invisible requires attention. The viewer is expected to be involved in the creation to appreciate its composition and find a personal interpretation.

As a development, and conceptually close to minimalism, the poor art movement shed light on a new aspect of the creative process. The term "Arte Povera" was coined by art critic Germano Celant to define the use of inexpensive and often raw materials to produce artworks (Celant, 1967, p. 1966). Arte Povera requires the impoverishment of gestures and materials (Christov-Bakargiev, 1999). It can be connected to minimalist concepts and will to divest the artwork from the ingredients that are not absolutely necessary. In doing so, it offers limited structural elements, and lets the spectator recompose the piece through individual experience and a form of creative implication. This mode of relation with the art can operate in diverse contexts.

On that account, Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni stated that he wished to approach filmmaking as a painter with a canvas (Chatman & Duncan, 2004). In *Red Desert*, his technique displays obvious references to painting and minimalist art movement. The aesthetic of the film reflects such concepts: reducing the elements to a simple but rigorously composed image, working with colors, utilizing architecture and nature for their visual attributes (*Red Desert*, 1964). In this mechanism, the organizational elements disappear, leaving an area of emptiness, for the audience to immerse themselves in the cinematic experience.

## Music and Sound

Further to the consideration of empty space, it seems meaningful to examine its equivalent in music and sound works: rests and silence. In musical composition, pauses and gaps between notes tend to influence the pace of the piece, and often generate a reflective atmosphere.

For instance, the minimal compositions of Estonian musician Arvo Pärt utilize slow tempo and prolonged notes, offering time to concentrate on the duration of each sound, in an experience that likens itself to a meditative mood (Pärt, 1976).

According to musicologist Zofia Lissa, silence in compositions "fulfills various functions both in the listener's response to a musical work and in the work's construction" (Lissa, 1964). Structure, in this perspective, is based on intervals, as an architecture for the music to be built.

Besides, silent gaps in a musical piece can change the perception of tempo in a song. This correlation is primarily based on the removal of some of the constituents, approaching musical arrangement with absence.

A parallel with sound art can be drawn: John Cage's *4'33"* demonstrates that surrounding noise can be considered music (Cage, 1952). But it is not actual silence; it is the absence of recognizable sounds that can be interpreted (Cage, 2011). In addition, with *Empty Words*, the artist uses missing parts of a text, omitting words: part I omits sentences, part II omits phrases, part III omits words, and part IV omits syllables (Cage, 1981). Here, a poetic dimension emerges from the removal of sound. The invisible segments of the original work transcend meaning and generate a one-of-a-kind audio performance. Absence is transformed into an

interface, and what is missing becomes prominent in the creation, pointing to a new dimension of the piece.

Intermediary gaps exist in relation to the perception of the audience. Hiatus do influence the experience of the musical piece in regard to the perception of flow, where tension is still perceived during rests in the middle of a musical composition (Juslin & Sloboda, 2010). Rests play a significant role in the tone of the work: they influence how their audible counterparts are received and the way they connect to the overall configuration. They carry an important meaning for creating patterns, standing as pillars between segments: in this aspect, silence can become the basis of the music, on which the sound layout can manifest itself.

## Film

As a first step into the examination of cinema, a look at literature seems necessary. It is primarily because, in most cases, a written piece – the script – precedes filmmaking. It is also because, in both disciplines, time has a crucial function in composition. And most importantly, narrative has similar aspects of construction in text and film.

With the notion of temporal development of a story, Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* offers an essential background for the study. Presenting storytelling as tied to the “extended duration between a beginning and an ending” (Ricoeur, 1990, p. 38), the study is rooted in the examination of the elements of a plot as they originate from one to another, and therefore, must be encountered in time (Dowling, 2011, p. 8). In this configuration, time appears as a frame in which the story develops. In this perspective, it is a structure, generated by events. But what happens between these events is not shown: it stands outside of the narrative. These gaps represent an invisible part of the story, as a raw element: the “fabula”—the story as it is before being told (Cobley, 2013).

Further to the notion of in-betweenness on the surface of an image, the use of empty space and the sense of equilibrium it generates can be applied to the pictures of a film, with the manipulation of depth of field, image composition and contrast, to achieve dynamic balance. This practice and parallel with painting echoes the practice of artist Stan Brakhage in his non-narrative experimental films with painting on celluloid (Brakhage, 1987).

In addition, the publication *Cinema II* by philosopher Gilles Deleuze, with the concept of “time-image”, offered a valuable understanding of cinema and film narrative (Deleuze, 1989, p. 34). The author describes how a picture is perceived on screen and states that an image is infused with time and can therefore establish connections with points that are external to the story (Deleuze, 1989).

For instance, in David Lynch's film *Lost Highway*, non-linearity takes a leading role in the plot, to an extent where the audience becomes disconnected with the logic of the story, but immerse in its narrative delivery, creating an engaging and truly unorthodox film (*Lost Highway*, 2001). The segments of the film emerge as out-of-context pieces, as if they were extracted from another storyline. Developing his technique from surrealism, the director displays a singular artist approach – similar to painting – by using time as purely subjective, infusing dream-like mechanisms in the production. In this regard, the scenes operate as intervals, which eventually generate an uncommon experience.

On that note, the juxtaposition of scenes in a film can create meaning through contemplation, replacing the different segments in the specific context of the story, with the use of gaps in the

composition of the narrative. This method can modify the perception of the film structure. The concentration is re-positioned to empty gaps in the plot. These intervals do not necessarily require to be filled with action or dialogues. They emerge as in-between moments of the story. But they convey a subtle message, related to tonality and emotional perception. With this method, it is a sensuous experience of the movie that is at play.

Further to this notion, the meaning of a scene in a film results from the connections between the different shots and their arrangement. Sense is generated by the editing of a sequence of images that are not necessarily originally connected in their meaning, as demonstrated in the “Kuleshov Effect” (Mobbs, Weiskopf, Lau, Featherstone, Dolan, R. J., & Frith, 2006, p. 95). Context modifies the understanding of what is on screen. As a consequence, working with hiatuses as segments of the film repositions the essence of the original subject and generates a new level of experiencing the cinematic narrative.

For example, the movie *Chungking Express* by Wong Kar-Wai illustrates this approach: the characters’ names are never pronounced; instead, it is numbers that are used. This choice adds to the mystery and ambiguity of the story; it blurs the atmosphere (*Chungking Express*, 1994). In addition, it ends without resolution, leaving the audience to find a personal interpretation. The work is not only based on telling, but allows for guessing and finding relations between the different events, characters, stories and the themes that emerge from the film.

Cinema can utilize minimal style to create tone, but in essence, it is a form of storytelling that is often explored in external aspects, such as isolated moments in the timeline – with B-rolls for instance – or as an aesthetic. It is in fact rarely the substance of the movie. Empty moments in the timeline disrupt the continuity of the plot, or interrupt its pace. But they also have the capacity to generate meaning.

With respect to this idea, the film *Koyaanisqatsi* by Godfrey Reggio is a visual poem with an abstract narrative that is built on audiovisual rhythm in an increasing intensity (*Koyaanisqatsi*, 1982). The film alternates time-lapse and slow-motion sequences to deliver its message of environmental awareness. There are no dialogues and no narrative per se, but the images and sound carry the story with a strong sense of visual and thematic consistency, and unity. Some segments appear to be outside of the narrative, as external parts of the story. But they participate in creating a unique film atmosphere. The element that allows the story to stay intelligible and coherent is the use of music and the pace it creates.

Additionally, Gilles Deleuze, in his examination of cinema through the discipline of philosophy, states that intervals in film carry as much significance as action (Deleuze, 1989).

## Literature

*How It Is*, by Irish author Samuel Beckett is an original piece of writing that contains no punctuation (Beckett, 1994). The reader can interpret the sentences in different ways by recreating what has been removed through imagination: it can entirely modify the understanding of the story (Williams, 2012). Simplifying or impoverishing the writing generates a personal response – it relates to freedom of interpretation, where no precise direction is imposed to the reader. In this format, the anatomy of the text is entirely transfigured by absence. The characters of typography that generally indicate the end, the beginning, or the pivotal point of a sentence become invisible components of the work, but with a dynamic role. In this approach, the reader relates to the narrative through imagination.

## Poetry

Japanese haiku are short, seemingly basic poems, which appear simple in structure, but are in reality extremely precise and subtle. The configuration presents three phases, relatively enigmatic, therefore open to interpretation. The short compositions illustrate natural phenomena by referencing them directly, but alluding to more profound matters. They employ meticulously devised lines of text, described as “pure and simple” (Morgan, 1961, p. 187). Punctuation plays the crucial role of creating a separation between the distinct parts of the work, allowing for rhythm to emerge naturally. In this design, the words inspire reflection, using metaphors to suggest, as opposed to signify.

## In-Between

The Japanese concept of Ma describes how the space between two parts enables an intensity of vision, creating an immersive and unexpected experience (Arata, 1979). It is used in a variety of artistic expression.

Ma (間) can be translated to the space between two structural parts (Standaert, 2015). The earlier and primary meaning originate from the moonlight peeking through a door, suggesting an interstice: gate (門) through which the moonshine (月) peeps in.

In Japanese language, the character “ma” is one of the components of the word “duration” or “period” of time (Merriam-Webster's Japanese-English dictionary, 2010). In the arts, it designates the “space” or “pause” between two parts (Arata, 1979, p. 70). Present in a variety of forms in Japanese culture, it is also defined as the state of “non-action” or the position of “in-between” (Standaert, 2015, p. 91).

An extension of this idea can be found in Japanese philosophy, with the word “Mu” (無), which can be translated to “not have” or “without” (Merriam-Webster's Japanese-English dictionary, 2010).

As an echo to this concept, the idea of an “aesthetic of absence” is brought forward by scholar Jana J. Haeckel (2015, p. 45). The author describes the technique of creating images in film that appear as uninhabited spaces: with emptiness, the audience can project personal thinking and feelings (Haeckel, 2015).

## Conclusion

The manifestation of emptiness in an artwork emerges essentially from the recognition of its contrasting opposites: the structural parts – shapes and lines in painting, characters in literature, scenes in film, notes in music.

The in-between ingredients have several functions: linking, separating, causing interference, or modifying sense. In every scenario, gaps primarily appear as secondary – or invisible, but they play a fundamental role in giving the composition its form, tone and meaning. This approach to creative expression reveals itself through observation and contemplation: it requires attentiveness, focus and time.

By focusing on what is absent, implied, or invisible in the configuration of the art, perception becomes immersive, sensuous, and closely related to personal experience. The message is not

direct, but implied, allowing for freedom of interpretation, emotional connection and intense but subtle involvement with the work.

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