

Elina Gertsman. *The Absent Image: Lacunae in Medieval Books*. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021. 265 p. ISBN: 9780271087849. Hardcover: \$ 124.95

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From the author's first writings on the *dance macabre* to more recent works on the performative nuances of visual cultures and abstraction, Prof. Elina Gertsman has had the chance to explore Medieval Art from many perspectives. For her contributions to knowledge dissemination and professorship, she is no stranger to fellowships, grants, and awards; *The Absent Image* is yet another example of that.<sup>1</sup>

*The Absent Image* takes the reader on a path of discovery around four perspectives from which to observe *lacunae* in medieval books. In the first chapter, absence<sup>2</sup> is described through the lenses of medieval texts. Using examples from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the concept(s) of nothingness in natural philosophy and theology are explored, using images that represent the cosmic void and pre-Creation to demonstrate the complexity of the debates that were taking place. The second chapter moves further in time and substance. From the mathematical abstraction of the number zero, now to invisible images, intellect, and memory. This movement towards clarifying the many aspects of visual absence is done here with representations that elicited viewers' imagination and performance. Another kind of emptiness appears to have had deep roots in late-medieval ways of engaging with images: chapter three presents devotional manuscripts where wear and tear have impacted the painted surfaces and questions the meaning of the absences left behind. The fourth chapter, in a way, closes a cycle by going back to "raw" absence, the conceptual void represented by the physical void, which is sometimes an act of apprehension or intervention to create meaning, as is the case of the "Sacred Heart pierced by the Holy Lance" found in a fifteenth-century manuscript of prayers, and of the "Thott Hours" by Jean Poyet, analysed in length in this chapter. To conclude this comprehensive book on *lacunae*, Prof. Elina Gertsman directs the light towards a broader future exploitation of the fluctuant meanings, intellectual inquiries, and perceptive experiences that have been relevant since the Middle Ages.

This is an endeavour that was needed, and the author has found the narrative and the examples to deliver it superbly. On top of that, Gertsman's literary methodology and, in it, her descriptions of the images under observation, seem driven by her awareness of what it

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<sup>1</sup> 2022 Charles Rufus Morey Book Award of the College of Arts Association of America.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this review, I have opted for a rather free use of words equivalent to "nothing/ness", such as absence or void; the author of this book is not, obviously, as careless.

takes to analyse visual discourses and how to lead viewers to an understanding of medieval conceptual discussions through images.

The introduction gives the reader an overview of how empty spaces have been conceptualised in literature, art, and historical research in the last century, to which the author later returns to. It then presents how the subjects will be construed along the four following chapters, ending with a summary of why the inquiry about empty spaces should take us further back to the Late Middle Ages, a time immediately associated with the *horror vacui* by the broader public. Right from the start, readers and viewers are led to see the disruptiveness of the visual nothing, which seems quite an anachronic expression to start with. Seeing emptiness means being able to make a distinction between the visible and something different (though not necessarily invisible, as we will see). When one sees an image and comes to acknowledge an empty space, it is because there is a material supporting that emptiness (the medium) and because there are visible things around it. The more so when it is found in places where there are many things to distinguish it from, like in the first figure shown, a heavily illuminated initial depicting Creation from the Kaisheim Bible created in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. But how can nothing be something? Gertsman takes the reader through a journey of image compositions and their contexts (including their materiality), where a multitude of nothings become prolific carriers of meaning before one's eyes. When she writes about "absence as a generative presence", she opens the door to a view of empty spaces as triggers for thought, memory, senses, and actions.

In "Imaginary Realms" (chapter one), there is a focus on the first nothing, the *nihil*, understood as the moment and place before Creation. Once there was a conflict to resolve regarding pre-Creation, namely about the nature of the void, its material impossibility grounded on Aristotle's natural philosophy *versus* the omnipotence of God to create all things from nothing - visible and invisible, there was also a necessity to question the place of un-representability in images, and this was done empirically, by experimenting with signifiers, blank spaces, colour, framing, contrast, inviting the viewer to imagine what populates each empty space and what it can give birth to. In this sense, the image of the Creator from the Holkham Bible (14<sup>th</sup> c., fol. 2r) is, in part, a necessarily abstract visualisation of the "fullness" of the primordial void, which reflects the relationship between nothing and the potential it entails, as it is filled with God. The concept of zero was, conversely, the most extended discussion of the relationship between idea and image that emerged at the beginning of the Late Middle Ages. Combining mathematical and cosmological works with scholastic views of creation and infinity, this chapter is rich in examples where nothingness was a matter of debate; at the same time, it also highlights a *crescendo* in the dissemination of ideas, and imagery blossomed in all depths of shapes in which empty realms could and were being imagined.

Before moving to another prominent theme in medieval art - death and the absence it encompasses, Gertsman includes a sub-chapter titled "Dissimulation and *Virtus imaginativa* in Later Middle Ages". In it, the author provides a glimpse into concepts and texts that greatly influenced man's knowledge of himself. Being able to perceive and memorise

various aspects of reality, man's faculty of imagination was a hot topic in studies of the mind, connecting vision science with the capacity for deliberation of the intellect. Imagination acts upon what is known to create new things: with *imaginatio*, one summons memory; with *phantasia*, one invents. Images created to illustrate the faculties of the intellect become common in late-medieval books, and the empty skull is filled with defined spaces with defined functions.

Capturing this relationship between imagination and emptiness, in the second chapter, "Phantoms of Emptiness", Gertsman explores and describes framed empty spaces. These stand for things which are not representable, and they often communicate assertively with the reader. Framed empty spaces engage with viewers semantically, requiring them to conjure the "power of *fantasia*" to come to some form of knowledge over what is absent. By describing absences and framed blanks from fourteenth-century manuscripts – and with detail, Eustache Deschamps' *Le double lay de la fragilité humaine* manuscript (BnF, fr. 20029), the author highlights that these imaginative faculties are excited by images where nothing is represented, in the most various ways. The interplay between the visual codes used, such as shape or colour, and the narratives in which they are found is introduced progressively as the chapter moves towards the "phenomenological impossibility" (68) that is death. The encounter between the living and the dead is a moral story akin to medieval popular taste, as is the Dance of Death, and it emphasises the void between the two.

Chapter 3, "Traces of Touch", is dedicated to active emptiness, the voids left by human interaction with the medium. Many of these voids are found in devotional works; here, Gertsman explores the status of images, their critics and mystics of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Finally, in "Penetrating the Parchment", the focus shifts to physical intervention located within the act of giving form to empty spaces, no longer in two dimensions, but in space and time too.

In the Thott Hours (France, c. 1490–1500. Copenhagen, KB, Thott 541), some folios have a rhombus-shaped hole at the centre of the text frame. As pages are turned, the superimposed holes of the folios make the progression of time visible at the same time as they create a spatial focus on the final folio that is not cut, but underneath, as a revelation or conclusion. The fourth chapter also analyses the materiality of the parchment as a tool to engage with emptiness, either by appropriation, such as in prior perforation in the skin used to make the book, that become included in the discourse of the page layout; or by intentionally cutting the parchment to augment the power of imagination through simulation. Emptiness as a visual experience can also be seen in another geometrical shape, the circle, especially the eye, the eye of God and the eye of the beholder, and in the conversation between infinity and imperfect reality, that "allows the beholder to *see through*, not just *look at*" (160).

*The Absent Image* is a book that excites the reader also by the simple fact that voids and emptiness still strike us today. Visual *lacunae* communicate the absence of what is not present (but sometimes hinted to) and of what is not representable but imaginable, giving it a shape or a medium for interpretation. In writing this book, Prof. Elina Gertsman has

dramatically added to our understanding of emptiness in medieval visual communication while aggregating arguments from many disciplines and sources, from influential thinkers and generalised practices. This work is also a reference for the perfect balance between presenting images that cannot be ignored (such as “The Creator with the Compass”) and images that have been ignored or less studied in the past, thus contributing to the advancement of knowledge by building a broader availability of resources at the same time as providing scholarly transmission about original witnesses.

Prof. Elina has recently been involved with the “Abstraction Before the Age of Abstract Art” project, which challenges the conception of Abstract Art as something born from modernity. The team (professors and doctoral students) publishes regular updates, news, and events on their online *carnet de recherche* “Before Abstraction”,<sup>3</sup> and one can already start anticipating the impact of the forthcoming works being prepared with Prof. Vincent Debiais.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://preabstract.hypotheses.org/about-this-blog>