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Why might one want to privilege absence?

## 1. ABSENCE IN POLITICAL THOUGHT

Jean Luc Nancy - The Inoperative Community

In the book, Nancy examines the dream of perfect communion between individuals offered by both communism and its counterpart, humanistic individualism. He is critical of this desire for "immanence" as one that is ultimately a desire for the erasure or death of the self.

"The fully realized person of individualistic or communistic humanism is the dead person."

In place of individuality, or the dream of fused individuals, Nancy proposes the concept of "singularity." A benefit of this concept is that I'm only aware of my own singular nature when I meet another person - I am defined by the limits of where I stop and you begin. As a consequence of this, acknowledging difference constitutes both self and community.

In this way, the absence that traditional communion rushes to fill, the absence of connection between individuals, the void explored by countless artists, is neither aestheticized as it is in the dystopias of existentialism, nor erased as it is in the utopias of romantic love, or to use Nancy's example, Romeo and Juliet.

For Nancy, in finitude, in the end of presence and the beginning of absence, is the passion of being.

## 2. ABSENCE IN COMMUNICATION

These guys offer our discussion a glimpse into how our communication technologies shape, and are shaped by, what we expect from communication with another.

They examine the telephone, the telegraph, early radio and wireless technologies, even speaking tubes, and ask -

"What sort of presence do we long for?" when we use these technologies. How does each form construct a different space and subject at the other end of the line? From where do we borrow these constructions, and what else do they influence?

Peters' idea is that the technologies, and their promise of connection with the distant other, inform our expectations of any kind of communion with another. Miscommunication or misunderstanding is construed as a "bad connection," a failed use of the medium for clear transmission of data. We learn from our telecommunicative tools to approach

language as a transparent medium for transmission of meaning. We also learn to see the other as always potentially present - successful transmission is dependent only on the strength of the signal, not on the nature of the message, its sender, or receiver. We might even examine how in early examples of these technologies, the receiving technology was identical to the sending technology, thus making of the act of telecommunication an act of mirroring.

In this unrealistic dream of perfect tele-communion, it's no wonder we so often fail to connect. But instead of advocating for static in the line, as did the futurist Marinetti in his works for radio, Peters seems to ask for more recognition of absence, where we usually expect only presence.

What if, like Nancy, we don't approach the distance between us as a chasm? What if, like Nancy, we see it as that which constitutes us in the first place as beings? In that case, telecommunication becomes not a dream of erasing or bridging the gap, but of imagining the clearly other during connection.

Peters doesn't go this far, but I'm then curious to know - what kind of telecommunication might offer less utopian metaphors for connecting with the other? What kind of telecommunication doesn't dream of a perfect conduit, but instead encourages imagination of the other, and acknowledgement of the gap? What kind of operator do we need for the Inoperative Community?

### 3 - ABSENCE IN PUBLIC MEMORIALS

Andreas Huyssen - Present Past

In Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial and more literally in the Oklahoma City memorial, we are given the absence of figures where we used to expect the oversized presence of a looming representation.

Someone who has looked closely at this phenomenon, how contemporary monuments deal with loss through recognition of absence, is Andreas Huyssen, in the essays compiled as "Present Past."

Huyssen warns against the rush to fill the literal voids of loss, but also of the danger of fetishizing them through leaving them empty.

His favorite example of a well-functioning memorial that acknowledges absence is Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin.

Here, the broken lines of the building repeatedly intersect a central axis that is an isolated and broken void. Visitors can only glimpse the void in passing, cannot enter it or get a sense of its whole shape.

"The void thus becomes a space nurturing memory and reflection for Jews and for Germans. Its very presence points to an absence that can never be overcome, a rupture that cannot be healed, and the certainly not be filled with museal stuff...The void will always be there in the minds of the spectators crossing the bridges that traverse it as they move through the exhibition space."

Referring also to the arguments for filling or leaving the void of Potsdamer Platz, Huyssen continues:

"There is a danger of romanticizing or naturalizing the voided center of Berlin, just as Libeskind's building may ultimately not avoid the reproach of aestheticizing or monumentalizing the void architecturally. But then the very articulation of this museal space demonstrates the architects awareness of the dangers of monumentality : huge as the expansion is, the spectator can never see or experience it as a whole."

#### 4 - CONCLUSION

The connection of Nancy and Communication Theory is pretty obvious, perhaps the relevance of this work less so. There are a couple reasons why I think it's important though.

-ONE: That if we define absence as an everyday and constant condition, we do risk trivializing absence that is the result of violence against another.

-TWO: That if we fail to identify the role of embodied experience of space in the perception of absence, we risk even more an abstracted and romanticized view.

-THREE: By pairing a discussion of Public Space with an examination of networked space, we invite a deeper analysis of the politics of interaction in a field all too-often understand as spatially neutral.

I want to end with a quote from Gary Snyder, and then describe a new project that just occurred to me while preparing for this panel.

Gary Snyder, in talking about the "Way" as existing off the trail, where there is wilderness, also talks about the necessity of the trail itself. "You first must be on the path, before you can turn and walk into the wild," he writes in his essay, "On the Path, Off the Trail." I wonder if there isn't here too a certain preservation of absence - that our idea of the Wild requires memory of the absence of the trail - we aren't just "In the Wild," but "Off the Trail." There is no rush here to define wilderness as static and ontologically autonomous, but rather is something known only through the act of moving between the wild and the trail.

#### 5 - INOPERATOR

Two friends are given cellphones with GPS capability, and unlimited free calling between them. The phones measure physical distance between the two individuals though, and the signal degrades over time unless renewed through a new union of the two in physical space.