



Absence

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Engaging the surrealist landscapes of René Magritte is an equivocal endeavor. *Les Charmes du Paysage* (The Charms of Landscape; fig. 1) is an invitation into the plurality of absence. Through an explicit presentation of the absence of landscape, however that may be understood, we find ourselves in the presence of our own conjuring. The trace left by Magritte speaks to us in a manifold manner, an exemplification of absence's ontological power. It is a divergent opportunity found through the circumstantial constellation of *what is not* that indulges a (re)thinking of what has been and what may be. In an epoch characterized by its losses—mass extinction, environmental degradation, Indigenous livelihoods—I propose taking seriously the affective force of absence to accommodate a politics more attuned to the ethical affordances they bring about. This attentiveness to that which we do not or cannot completely know poses a methodological interjection which, at its heart, speaks to the fragility of the earth itself and all of its inhabitants.

Absence is not synonymous with loss. It speaks to much more: what is *not anymore* and what is *not yet*, what may never be and what never has been. By speaking to and being spoken to, these ghosts of disjunct pasts and futures help construct an ethics for the present. The environmental humanities may engage this provocation on geologic and evolutionary timescales, facilitating ways of understanding and translating the world that acknowledge the presence of absence. Absences are the disjunctures of geographies and histories, profoundly marked by the traces they leave, as one can only begin to speak in terms of an absence through presumption, reconstruction, or fantasy. And as argued by Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx*, these disjunctures are the very possibilities of *an other ontology*.¹

Absences are not immaterial. Hauntings materialize through their inseparability from pre-existing material conditions,² their anachrony realized through the forging of

1. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*.

2. Barad, "No Small Matter."



Figure 1. René Magritte, *Les Charmes du Paysage*, 1928.

new relations in response. Humans and nonhumans leave their traces on the world alike,³ with unequal endurances and influences in the present, both markings of lost pasts and lost futures.⁴ Thinking through traces is an act of foregrounding that which is absent, the being-there of the not-there. The interpretational haziness of what Derrida means by *trace* is, to some extent, lost in translation.⁵ Trace is not only that which is inferred from its nonpresence but also a deliberate reference to the marking of tracks, to the material and inerasable imprinting of action and event upon material medium. Although evolution has sited humans amongst the ghosts of nonhumans, we have only ever known them through representations of their presence—dinosaurs, trilobites, mammoths—not to mention the contemporary platforming of extinction as a legacy of European imperialism. These absences are founded through their very trace-ability, their susceptibility to be *written*, through text, memory, imagery, genetic marking, material remains.

3. Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*.

4. Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*.

5. See the translator's introduction to Derrida's *Of Grammatology*.

The ontological “presence-ing” of absence enriches us with ghosts, whom we should engage and allow to speak through their markings on the world. Only through learning to make sense of absences of not-there-anymore can we think through the absences of the future to come, of the not-there-yet. And this is thoroughly intertwined within an ethics and politics of the worlds in which we coinhabit, the ways we act in the present. These absences come in a variety of forms and contexts, but perhaps those more familiar to those interested in the environmental humanities relate to the loss of nonhuman difference, of which I focus on the materializations of extinction. The cultural prominence of extinct nonhumans is extraordinary, from their commercialization as adverts for environmentalism, their iconic reworkings in science fiction, or their cybernetic personalities often utilized as proxy-realities in educational and documentary filmmaking. These ghosts of extinction are prone to a playful speculation with the virtual, the absences of lost ecologies. Virtuality lends itself to a dexterity or sensitivity that articulates as the being-affected by apparitions of the inapparent,⁶ an unsettling of subject which holds implications for conservation and the multiple relationships that flourish between ourselves and nature.⁷

Visual artist Brandon Jacob Hudson (re)engages the photography of extinct animals through a process of material hybridization, where the wet ink of old photographs is malformed and disfigured with acrylic. His 2017 series *Animal Existence* manipulates and distorts their imageries, personalizing and making intimate the novel relations formed with these ways of remembering.⁸ The bucardo, an extinct ibex from the Pyrenees that has been central to my own research, was interpreted by Hudson in this series (fig. 2).

The dissonance evoked by this pictorial disjunction, particularly with an animal I have come to know profoundly through the traces of its absence, is remarkable. It elicits the opposite response to Magritte’s *paysage*, through its disturbing imposition of presence rather than absence, whilst concurrently signifying an earthly absence to which we must make amends. Both artworks are provocations of a hauntology: a paradoxical identity in unsettled temporalities.⁹ As recent scholarship within extinction studies has shown,¹⁰ species absences shape the future for all in multispecies assemblages, through trophic cascades and drastic changes in ecological relations. A material “bringing to presence” of the not there.¹¹ The bucardo’s extinction was obscured with a liminality owing to its preemptive cryopreservation and attempted de-extinction via cloning.¹²

6. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*; Latour, “How to Talk About the Body.”

7. Wylie, “The Spectral Geographies of W. G. Sebald”; McCorrine and Adams, “Ghost Species.”

8. Hudson, *Animal Existence*, 2017. I implore you to engage this body of work for yourself at www.brandonjacobhudson.com/animal-existence.

9. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*; Wylie, “The Spectral Geographies of W. G. Sebald.”

10. van Dooren, *Flight Ways*; van Dooren, “Life at the Edge of Extinction”; Rose, van Dooren, and Chrulew, *Extinction Studies*.

11. Wylie, “Landscape, Absence, and the Geographies of Love.”

12. Searle, “Anabiosis and the Liminal Geographies of De/extinction.”



Figure 2. Brandon Jacob Hudson, *Pyrenean Ibex*, 2017. Reproduced courtesy of the artist; from the collection *Animal Existence*.

This emotion is revisited through Hudson's piece at the complex and paradoxical interplay of presence/absence. The failure to resurrect the bucardo questions the idea of absence as pure potentiality: some absences return, whilst others do not.¹³

Meandering through a description of absence has exemplified its definitional difficulty. Perhaps we should think of this understanding of absence less as a definition and more as a methodological provocation, a means of tracing their being in the world through an openness to the multifaceted manner in which they emerge. Absences take a plethora of forms, and as such demand an ontology irreducible to practices of representation, haunted themselves by their unknowability.¹⁴ These spectral encounters not only expose us to the heterogeneity of our worlds and multiple modes of knowledge,¹⁵ they also encourage a receptivity toward the multiplicities of more-than-human histories and futures. In a consideration of our worldly inheritance—appreciating the existence of a meaningful world pre-enlightenment¹⁶ and acknowledging the inevitability of worlds to come *after* us—¹⁷we are beckoned into a conversation with specters. “One

13. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this observation.

14. McCormack, “Remotely Sensing Affective Afterlives.”

15. Barua, “Encounter.”

16. A theme best expressed by Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?”

17. Weisman, *The World without Us*; Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*.

never inherits without coming to terms with [s'expliquer avec] some spectre, and therefore with more than one spectre," writes Derrida, highlighting the conspicuousness of absences.¹⁸

Absences are confrontations of both hope and desolation. There is an important differentiation to be made here, however, which extinction serves to illustrate. With the bucardo, for example, absence invites us to critique the ways in which anthropogenic action has inhibited the presence of these nonhumans, or their ability to presence themselves. This articulation of absence is not only an encompassing of how the actions of a select few (bourgeois hunters) contributed to a loss of many but also a synchronous retaliation, one that seeks to prevent such courses being repeated.

The being-there of the not-there. "They are always *there*, spectres, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet."¹⁹ A vernacularizing of the absences left by past traces should account for those traces left by ideas and imaginaries of the future. The being-there of the not-there-yet, that too holds deep potential for environmentalism, and offers a mode of thinking accounting for the hopeful and desolate. These absences are immediate and fleeting engagements of the future as well as the past, both of which we may awkwardly encounter through the ways we act in the present.

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