

Orientation around Absence

by Martin Karcher

Text for Philipp Farra's solo exhibition TCDD 1963–1975

This train don't stop there anymore.

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One of the most far-reaching consequences of the positivism dispute¹ and the triumph of scientism is that today only measurable and visible knowledge can still claim the authority to define the real, which is thereby reduced, identified, and rendered into an administrable quantity.

This regime of the real is the product of historical, power-political, and epistemic constellations, and it structures who or what can have a voice and is granted a hearing.² That which cannot be grasped appears as disturbance or noise. As a consequence, the remainder that is not positively apprehensible shrinks — it is pathologized, displaced into metaphysics, or violently overwritten through technological apparatuses, while overlooking the fact that what is present constitutes only a small, intensively managed and regulated segment of reality.

Absence, in turn, is not simply that which is not there; it is a constitutive part of reality, for which neither the unfathomable depths of the ocean nor the vastness of outer space need be invoked.³ Absence is an active state, a formative condition of late modernity, and an immediate experience; for instance, in waiting for something that does not arrive.

If this critique of scientism's regime of the real is taken seriously, the view of and the status of absence shift: it is a relational structure that shapes relationships without being fixed to a clearly determinable object. As a structure it demands and evokes forms of orientation.⁴

Precisely for this reason, it is necessary to take the diversity of relationships to absence seriously and to shape them accordingly, in the knowledge that this depends on how determined or indeterminate particular absences are.⁵

1) The Positivism Dispute (Positivismusstreit) was an intellectual controversy in 1960s West Germany between critical theorists of the Frankfurt School and proponents of critical rationalism, most prominently Karl Popper and Theodor W. Adorno. At stake was whether the methods of the "natural sciences" could serve as a model for the social sciences, or whether social reality required a fundamentally different, critical and historically reflexive mode of inquiry.

2) Vgl. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

3) Desire, longing, nostalgia, melancholy, heartbreak, farewell, deprivation, abandonment, precarity, poverty. Absence becomes particularly painful against the backdrop of what is actually possible (i.e. a good life in dignity for all): as an experience of loss and, at the same time, as a confrontation with other people's sense of reality.

4) Added to this is the erosion of formerly orientation-providing institutions — religious, social, and family structures, and traditions — that for a long time structured the conduct of life. From their disintegration follows the pressure to repeatedly give one's own life form and direction: fragile ways of living, fragile attachments, and the experience that orientation is no longer transmitted, and must therefore be continually produced anew.

5) The concept of determinate negation, in Hegel, refers to a negation that sublates the negated content in a transformed form and thereby brings forth a new determination. Negation appears here as a productive difference through which something emerges as something determinate. Slavoj Žižek frequently illustrates this with the following example: coffee without milk is not the same as coffee without sugar. In both cases one gets black coffee, yet the meaning differs because in each case something different is absent. Negation thus determines what something is. Applied to absence, this means: meaning arises from how an absence is determined — or whether it remains indeterminate.

Sara Ahmed understands orientation as the spatial and embodied alignment of bodies with objects and others, through which it is decided what appears near, accessible, or significant. Orientation is not a mere movement of the gaze; it names the constitution of relations that structure perception and action. Ahmed distinguishes between two analytical movements: *toward* designates a direct turning toward an object that allows other elements to recede into the background; *around* refers to the structural organization of such turnings, in which the object functions as a point of reference without being fixed or definitively grasped. Orientation is thus both a direction toward something and an arrangement of proximity and distance that shapes our relation to the world.⁶

Orientation emerges through gazes and intentionality. It takes shape within fields of vision and modes of addressing that produce differences — for example, in the simple assertion: “that over there is not me.” An approach to the absent, if it is not forcibly closed, can only take place as a multiperspectival circling, as an approach without an identifying gaze.

In photography, this logic of orientation through fields of vision becomes especially palpable. Since it is technically and medially bound to a field of vision, absence is inevitably tied to the question of what can enter the frame at all. What is not present within the field of vision becomes the precondition for delimitation and, at the same time, the site at which absence takes hold.

Of course, this is not a distinctive feature of photography alone. In *The Absence of the Book*, Maurice Blanchot notes that every text contains deictic references to what is absent.⁷ Reading thus means following traces that do not converge toward a closed totality.⁸ Here, absence appears as a double outside: an outside of language that eludes all symbolization, and an outside of language in the form of its laws, grammar, and orthodoxies — that which cannot be integrated into the existing regime of language.

From this perspective, photography appears as a medium that operates at the threshold of these two outsides: it is bound to the visible and yet surrounded by that which withdraws from visibility, a practice at the limit of what can be shown.

The point of departure for Philipp Farra’s works in the *exhibition TCDD 1963–1975* is the railway line, the colonial infrastructure project of the Berlin–Baghdad Railway, the train. In the photographs, this centre appears scarcely or not at all. Instead, landscapes, skies, vistas, and architectural traces are shown, the surroundings of an object that itself remains invisible. The train thus becomes a structurally absent centre: it is the condition of vision and perspective (the view from the moving train), but not the object of the image, an infrastructure that is effective without being visible.

6) Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

7) Maurice Blanchot, “The Absence of the Book,” in *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

8) An example of this is Kleist’s em-dash — “Here — he met ...” — which functions as a paradigmatic omission: it indicates that something happens without bringing it into language. (Heinrich von Kleist, “The Marquise of O—,” in *The Marquise of O—, and Other Stories*, trans. David Luke (Harmondsworth; New York: Penguin Books, 1978).)

The images circle what the train passes through. At times, motion blur becomes an index of the journey. Absence is therefore not fixed; it is produced through perspective, selection, and indexicality, and becomes operative as a constitutive principle of representation.

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Every act of selection draws a boundary and leaves something behind. What is shown is always surrounded by the unseen, by images that could have been, and by images that are missing. Of 350 negatives, only six are shown in Berlin and six in Paris. The author of the photographs is unknown; the negatives were acquired by Farra in 2024 in Bomonti, Istanbul. It is an anonymous archive whose authorship remains absent. What becomes visible is a fragment of a larger family/work archive; each individual image stands in the shadow of absent images.

The images on display make no claims. They circle *around* the question of the conditions under which an object comes into appearance within a visual field in the first place.

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The works can be read as ghostly apparitions: visible, material and yet permeated by uncertainty, gaps, and non-knowledge. The unknown photographer, the absent train, the incomplete archive, the fragmentary exhibition situation in Berlin and Paris, all of this generates a realm of images that does not stabilize, reduce, or fix — but one that haunts. Absence becomes a meaning-making machine for orienting oneself in the world.