

V o i d

1 Emptiness in Science and Art - Philosophical Prolegomenon

The concept of emptiness, or the void, is used in various disciplines: from the natural and social sciences (including psychology) to the

fields of theology and philosophy¹; the term has a distinct definition in each area, often with widely disparate connotations. In scholarly texts on the subject, the reader encounters different forms of the void's presence in the structure of existence—crucial ontological and ontic questions are posed: about non-existence and existence and about nothingness and plenitude. One of the first philosophers who undertook to answer them is thought to be Parmenides²—he argued that non-existence does not exist, since the very thought of its possibility converts it into a part of the continuum of what exists.³ Among the ancients, we should also mention Democritus, Plato, and Aristotle; among modern thinkers, we would start with Descartes, Leibniz, and Kant. Since Kant and his *Critique of Judgment*, thought concerning the void has been marked by two distinct aspects, logical (the void as a subject that exists or does not) and methodological (the void as an object, a phenomenon in consciousness, more specifically, a property of space); “Beginning with Kant, it becomes feasible to perceive the void as relative. It was Kant who first explored the possibility of treating space and time as phenomena, and at the same time showed the way toward acknowledging the void within the human being.”⁴ To name all of the philosophers (even European philosophers) who have dealt with the problems of nonexistence and nothingness would take up more space than we have.

¹ The anthologies of articles written from widely differing perspectives by various scholars on the problem of the void testify to the multidisciplinary nature of this category: see *Wszechświat, bezład, pustka* (Universe, Chaos, Void), ed. M. Czapiga, K. Konarska, Wrocław 2014 and *Człowiek i pustka. Problemy wakuumologii* (Man and the Void. Problems of Vacuumology), ed. Z. Hull, W. Tulibacki, Olsztyn 2000. The latter volume contains two articles devoted precisely to the issue of the void's heterogeneity: R. Nazar, “Uwagi w sprawie statusu metodologicznego terminu pustka” and Z. Hull, “Wielowymiarowość pustki.” A very interesting work of popular science on the subject is John Barrow's *The Book of Nothing: Vacuums, Voids, and the Latest Ideas about the Origins of the Universe*, New York 2009.

² See i.e.: L. Leikums, *Pustka jako fenomen filozoficznej świadomości* (The Void as a Phenomenon in Philosophical Consciousness), trans. A. Bastek; V.M. Tirado San Juan, “Myśleć Bycie i ‘nie’ Bycia przez pryzmat inteligencji odczuwającej,” (Thinking Being and „Non” Being Through the Prism of Conscious Intelligence), trans. M. Jagłowski; A. and I. Byczko, “‘Niewidzialna’ natura rzeczywistości w filozofii Grigorija Skoworody” (The “Invisible” Nature of Reality in the Philosophy of Grigorij Skovoroda) in: *Człowiek i pustka*, op. cit.

³ The ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi offered a different interpretation, asserting that posing the question about existence and nonexistence has the effect of actualizing both: “Existence is, non-existence is, that which has not yet become nonexistence is, and so is that which has not yet become that which has not yet become nonexistence.” Many centuries later, yet another take on the question was proposed by the contemporary Russian philosopher A..N. Chanyshv, who in his *Treatise on Nonexistence* writes: “I claim that nonexistence not only exists, but that it is primary and absolute. Existence is relative and secondary in relation to nonexistence.” Chanyshv, *Трактат о небытии*, Moskva 2000.

⁴ See L. Leikums, op. cit.

The ontological understanding of the void is linked with particular belief systems—among other types of beliefs, the division between metaphysical monism and pluralism is crucially relevant here.⁵ For decades, the monistic Western world identified the void with nothingness and negative, destructive nihilism.⁶ In the nontheist philosophy of Buddhism, on the other hand, the void is treated as a positive value,⁷ seen as a permanent feature of all aspects of the world: “everything that is found in the realm of object and subject is void, without essence [...] Consciousness is void, the senses are void, the objects perceived by them are void, time is void, essence is void. Void, too, is everything that would be the negation of those things. Even that which appears to be the Buddhist absolute—nirvana—is void. [...] This is not the negation of something, or no-thing, because being void, they are not something which negation could have claims against [...] It is rather about not grasping onto [...] that which in any case provides no support [...]. The philosophy of the void takes nothing away, but changes our view and indicates a middle path.”⁸ The Buddhist experience of the void thus does not connote a frightening nothingness, but is liberating and joyful in nature, turning into something like an experience of plenitude.

The boundary between void and plenitude has also been effaced in contemporary Polish literature—in a prose work with the revealing title *Nic, czyli wszystko* (Nothing, that is, everything), Tadeusz Różewicz writes: “Our contemporary Nothing is different than the Nothing of the past. The structure of our Nothing is the opposite of nothingness. Our Nothing exists and is aggressive. Our Nothing is not in opposition to the real world, to ‘reality.’ It is reality. That is our Nothing. The Nothing of people in the second half of the twentieth century. It is a constructive and affirmative Nothing. A dynamic and active Nothing. Utterly alien to nihilism, actively opposed to ‘nothingness.’”⁹ This Nothing, then, no longer has much in common with nothingness, nonexistence, the abyss, lack, absence, etc., and takes on diametrically opposed associations—with creative action, movement, strength, and above all with presence.

Examined from an ontological perspective, the void often (though not always) encroaches on other areas of reflection; in my considered opinion, these should be looked at separately, independently of metaphysical connections. The void has been the source of intriguing interpretations

⁵ In the former category, the sense of a cosmological void is a real possibility, in part because the human being is “existence becoming conscious of, on the one hand, the limitlessness and power of the universe, on the other, of the fragility and smallness of oneself,” deepening the impossibility of referencing other types of existence, particularly the Absolute, whereas in pluralistic systems the metaphysical void is essentially impossible. See J. M. Dołęga, “Człowiek i pustka w refleksji filozoficznej i teologicznej” (Man and the Void in Philosophical and Theological Thought) in: *Człowiek i pustka*, op. cit., p. 18

⁶ H. Romanowska-Łakomy, “Pustka jako wartość dodatnia” (The Void as a Positive Value) in: *Człowiek i pustka*, op. cit.

⁷ See two books by Artur Przybysławski, both of which approach the problem from the perspective of Buddhism, the first in a serious and scholarly manner, the second with carefree lightheartedness: *Buddyjska filozofia pustki* (The Buddhist Philosophy of the Void), Wrocław 2009 and *Pustka jest radością, czyli filozofia buddyjska z przymrużeniem (trzeciego) oka* (The Void is Joy, or Buddhist Philosophy with a Wink of the [Third] Eye), Warszawa 2010.

⁸ A. Przybysławski, *Buddyjska filozofia pustki*, p. 254.

⁹ T. Różewicz, “Nic, czyli wszystko”, in: Różewicz, *Proza*, vol. 3, Wrocław 2004, p. 183.

in epistemological,¹⁰ axiological¹¹ and anthropological (in the broad sense of the word) terms, encompassing its philosophical, religious and spiritual, psychological and social aspects.¹² No less interesting are studies of the ramifications of the physical void—whether in terms of experimental physics,¹³ biology,¹⁴ or the study of space. The last category has at least three essential sub-categories—starting with those works that treat the void in geographic-cultural terms; among these, particularly noteworthy are studies of Scandinavia, the Arctic, and Japan.¹⁵ Secondly, there are attempts to grasp the issue in what we may call geographic-metaphorical terms – here, the most important empty spaces, attributed manifold meanings, are the world’s deserts.¹⁶ Thirdly and finally, the notion of the void can refer to abandoned places, old, decrepit ruins where people once lived and whence they decided or were forced by circumstances to leave.¹⁷ In fact, the void has a strong

¹⁰For example: M. Gołębiwska, “Derridy refleksje na temat pustki. Polemika ze strukturalizmem,” (Derrida’s Reflections on the Topic of the Void. A Polemic with Structuralism), in: *Człowiek i pustka*, op. cit., in which the author underscores how Derrida’s works “are closely linked with the negation of the systematization of human knowledge, subordinated to a center organizing reflections (idee, arche, principium), useful and effective knowledge”; *ibid.*, p. 55.

¹¹Cf. H. Romanowska-Łakomy, “Pustka jako wartość dodatnia” (The Void as a Positive Value), J. Barański, “Pustka aksjologiczna – świat wolności ledwie uzasadnionej” (The Axiological Void—the World of Barely Justified Freedom) in: *Człowiek i pustka*, op. cit.

¹²See among other works: A. Leder, “Nieświadomość jako pustka” (Unconsciousness as a Void), Warszawa 2001. J. Trąbka, “Człowiek wobec naturalnej pustki” (Man in Relation to the Natural Void), J. Sauś, “Czy istnieje problem pustki społecznej? Uwagi filozoficzno-socjologiczne” (Does the Problem of the Social Void Exist? Philosophico-Sociological Observations), W. Tulibacki, “Notatki o pustce człowieczej” (Notes on the Human Void), W. Słomski, “Pustka jako kategoria filozoficzna w poglądach Antoniego Kępińskiego” (The Void as a Philosophical Category in the Thought of Antoni Kępiński), in: *Człowiek i pustka*, op. cit.

¹³See G. Bugajak, “Próżnia – pustka – nicość. Czy wszechświat jest fluktuacją próżni?” (Emptiness, Void, Nothingness. Is the Universe a Fluctuation of Emptiness?) in: *Człowiek i pustka*, op. cit.

¹⁴For example, E. Kośmicki, “Czy zmierzamy do pustki biologicznej? O podstawowych problemach różnorodności biologicznej” (Are We Heading Toward the Biological Void? On Fundamental Problems of Biological Diversity), K. Łastowski, “Człowiek bez innych. Idea pustki gatunkowej w perspektywie teorii ewolucji” (Humans Without Others. The Idea of the Species Void Within the Perspective of the Theory of Evolution), in: *Człowiek i pustka*, op. cit.

¹⁵See W.K. Pessel, “Pustka i wypełnienie. Północ w kulturze i geopolityce” (Void and Fulfillment. The North in Culture and Geopolitics), M. Czapięga, “Iluzje pustki w ‘Spotkaniach na krańcach świata’ Wernera Herzoga” (Illusions of the Void in Werner Herzog’s *Encounters at the End of the World*), in: *Wszechświat, bezład, pustka*, op. cit.; N. Bouvier, “Pustka i pełnia: zapiski z Japonii 1964-1970” (Void and Plenitude: Notes from Japan 1964-1970), ed. with preface by G. Leroy, trans. K. Arustowicz, Warszawa 2005. See S. Jasionowicz, “Woda, deszcz, śnieg, lód – postaci widzialnej pustki” (The Void in Contemporary Poetic Experience), in: Jasionowicz, *Pustka we współczesnym doświadczeniu poetyckim*, Kraków 2009.

¹⁶See Edmond Jabès’ metaphysico-poetic texts, including the extended interview with Jabès: *Z pustyni do księgi: rozmowy z Marcelem Cohenem* (From the Desert to the Void: Conversations with Marcel Cohen), trans. A. Wodnicki, Kraków 2005. See also: A. Bielik-Robson, „Na pustyni”. *Kryptoteologie późnej nowoczesności* („In the Desert.” *Cryptotheology of Late Modernity*), Kraków 2008. See Jasionowicz, “Przestrzeń pustyni” (The Space of the Desert), in: Jasionowicz, *Pustka we współczesnym doświadczeniu poetyckim*, op. cit.

¹⁷D. Majkowska-Szajer, “opuszczone.com” (desolate.com), in: *Inne przestrzenie, inne miejsca. Mapy i terytoria* (Other Spaces, Other Places. Maps and Territories), ed. and with an introduction by D. Czaja, Wołowiec 2013. On the void of identity as a result of forced exile (exemplified by the biography of Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić), see: I. Fiut, “Pusta tożsamość” (Empty Identity), in: *Na pograniczach literatury* (At the Borders of Literature), ed. J. Fazan, K. Zajas, Kraków 2012. Furthermore, on architectural and attitudinal attempts to fill empty spaces (including the void), see: A. Janus, “Zapełnianie pustki. Muzeum i paradoks upamiętniania” (Filling Up the Void. Museums and the Paradox of Commemoration), in: *Inne przestrzenie*, op. cit.

presence in the aesthetic sphere, appearing in architecture,¹⁸ the theatre,¹⁹ film,²⁰ music and the visual arts,²¹ and, last but not least, in literature.²²

The void takes on different shapes in artistic representation, but all of them share one feature – the presence of spectators who, placed in front of diverse manifestations of the void in art are forced to respond somehow, take a position, grasp the possible meanings, remembering that the void does not direct them toward a fixed range of ideas, but rather sets in motion individual, often fleeting experiences of content.²³

2 The Void as an Artistic Choice Let us begin our actual study of the void in art with a simple statement by which I wish to formulate the problem in explicit terms: the void is a **conscious, deliberate semasiological artistic choice** used in all spheres of artistic activity by artists working in the space of various currents and traditions. Focusing on works of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this idea can be considered as operating within three main categories: as a basic concept, a startling interposition, or one of several equal elements in a coherent whole.

The Void as Concept. There are many works in which the void is an essential organizing principle, a crucial device upon which the final effect of the artistic work as a whole depends. The historical and cultural habits of the audience give them the sense that there should be “something” in a certain place; artists, working against the grain of such habits, place “nothing” in that particular place. Not in the sense of eliminating or erasing something that was in fact there before, but in the sense that that expected “something” never existed or existed in a way not directly perceptible to the senses. Some remarkable examples of this were the works presented in London’s Harvard Gallery in 2012 in the exhibit *Invisible: Art about the Unseen 1957-2012*, belonging to the genre of “invisible

¹⁸B. Szady, “Porządek w bezładzie – o koncepcji Formy Otwartej Oskara Hansena” (Order in Chaos – On Oskar Hansen’s Concept of the Open Form), in: *Wszechświat, bezład, pustka*; A. Mielnik, *Piękno w pustce* (Beauty in the Void), https://suw.biblos.pk.edu.pl/resources/i3/i3/i1/r331/MielnikA_PieknoPustce.pdf, dostęp: 09.04.2015.

¹⁹See D. Wiles, “The Empty Space,” in: D. Wiles, *A Short History of Western Performance Space*, Cambridge 2003.

²⁰For example, see A. Lewicki, “Puste finały. Zakończenie otwarte w literaturze i filmie” (Empty Endings. The Open Ending in Literature and Film), in: *Wszechświat, bezład, pustka*, op. cit.

²¹See E. Bobrowska, “Pustka – wzniosłość – nieskończoność, czyli poszerzanie terytorium sztuki” (The Void, Sublimity, Infinity, or The Expansion of the Territory of Art), in: E. Bobrowska, *Parateoria. Kalifornijska Szkoła z Irvine* (Paratheory. The Californian School with Irvine), Warszawa 2013.

²²The only book devoted entirely to the category of the void within the field of Polish literature studies of which I am aware is the work mentioned above by Stanisław Jasionowicz: *Pustka we współczesnym doświadczeniu poetyckim*, Kraków 2009. There are, however, articles on the subject, for example J. Kurowicki, “Artystyczna i filozoficzna obecność pustki” (The Artistic and Philosophical Presence of the Void), in: *Człowiek i pustka*, op. cit.

²³See: “The word ‘void’ is used vacantly, but at the same time there is no empirical method for determining the characteristics of a void, and therefore of the truth value of statements using the term. If, however, the word ‘void’ does not correspond to any reality in the objective world, then perhaps its subjective meaning should be sought in its figurative or peripheral meanings, or those assembled from concrete considerations.” R. Nazar, *Uwagi w sprawie statusu* (Observations on the Subject of Status), op. cit. p. 10.

art”; let us consider two of the works shown there. Andy Warhol’s 1985 *Invisible Sculpture* presents an ordinary plinth with no decorative elements added—a pedestal without a sculpture, or rather with an invisible sculpture, as the title claims. The consciously planned void that constitutes the heart of the work was strongly marked by the one-time, physical, performative act of the artist standing on the pedestal, bringing into relief its deliberate lack. Another work, Tom Friedman’s *1000 Hours of Staring from 1992-1997*, is a clean square sheet of paper (each side about 82 cm long)—the artist is said to have stared at the paper for a total of one thousand hours over a period of five years. That information, however, does not change the fact that we are looking straight into a blank page, an ordinary if rather large piece of paper, difficult to acknowledge as a finish, or even a begun, work of art; therein precisely lies its meaning.

In literature we find one example of a similar use of the void in Bruno Jasiński’s “Nic” (Nothing) in his 1921 book *But w butonierce* (Shoe in a Buttonhole)—beneath the short but significant title the reader sees merely the empty space of the page. It can be read as a literary game based on an original concept or a futurist, avant-garde mockery of language and the reader, but the text can also be treated completely seriously, perceiving the poet’s voice with reference to the then-existing state of art and culture; the problem is that the text provides no grounds (such as a quotable fragment other than the title) for confirming any interpretative exploration. Years later, the text revisited Polish poetry through intertextuality when Ryszard Krynicki, in the book *Nasze życie rośnie* (Our Life is Growing, 1978) included the poem “Biała plama” (White Spot) with the dedication: “to the memory of Bruno Jasiński.” Besides these words (the title and dedication) the page remains empty, enacting the embodiment of the title, exactly as was the case with “Nic.” This completely decipherable literary allusion becomes more complex if we subject it to further interpretation—Krynicki might be continuing the game, entering into a dialogue not only with Jasiński, but with all poetic convention. “Biała plama” can also be seen as a biographical reference to the circumstances of Jasiński’s death, which was believed to have taken place during his exile to the Siberian Gulag, although we now know that Jasiński, as a victim of the purges, was shot in Moscow. Some also assert that the dedication represented Krynicki’s way of poetically commenting on the rigorous censorship of the 1970s or was reflexive and related to the gradual diminution of the word in his own poetry—the extreme of this reduction would be the poet’s silence, which here existed in a material form.²⁴

Works created using the void as a device can be interpreted in terms of the lack or absence of something which ordinarily should be in a given place: sculptures on a pedestal, lines or colors in a picture, words in a poem or sounds in a musical composition, as for example in John Cage’s *4’33* (1952), also known as *Four and a Half Minutes of Silence*. This path does not lead to any creative discoveries, yet the lack or absence is more a point of departure for further reflection than a destination.

²⁴See A. Świeściak, *Przemiany poetyki Ryszarda Krynickiego* (Transformations of Ryszard Krynicki’s Poetics), Kraków 2004, pp. 189-190. In the context of this analysis, the chapter entitled “Od poetyki negatywnej do milczenia” (From Negative Poetics to Silence), pp. 125-194, is particularly relevant.

The Void as Interposition. We encounter the void, understood as an attack on a work's integral functioning, an almost violent interposition into its potential wholeness, in such works as Lucio Fontana's series *Concetto spaziale* (1958-1968),²⁵ which can be interpreted as a spatial concept (hence the name for the artistic movement founded by Fontana, Spatialism). The Italian artist would begin with an unpainted or monochrome canvas and would then use a razor or other sharp tools to make incisions in it, sometimes in front of an audience, with the aim of thus overcoming the two-dimensionality of the painted work, introducing a third dimension: a notch, seemingly empty, simultaneously revealing what is hidden behind it, opening access to an "other" sphere of reality. What is more, the initial image, which often lacked not only color but even an undercoat of paint, reveals, thanks to being cut, its primary unity—a unity now violated, but disclosing itself through the physical act of perforation. It thus turns out that only the "destruction" of the work shows its initial coherence, while at the same time forcing us to contemplate its new visual form, inciting us to find in the work and its spaces some kind of peculiar wholeness.

Another example of using the void to interrupt a work's natural continuity is the concept applied by Katarzyna Bazarnik and Zenon Fajfer in their book (*O*)*patrzenie* ([Pro]visions, 2009). This "liberary" text was presented in a white, blank (empty!) brochure-type cover, from which the top right corner was torn off of each copy (and placed in between the pages). In such an uncommon situation, many reactions are possible: bookstores sent their copies back, believing them to be damaged, while in libraries care was taken to glue back the defective top right corner—it was hard for readers, even the professionals, to accept that this "broken" version was the correct one, which is why they tried to "fix" it. The intervention of physically introducing the void into a book stirs readers to action, and also creates a broad field of interpretation—the space created by the removal of a fragment of the white cover reveals the next page, entirely black, such that there is a powerful contrast of colors, foreshadowing the vigorous use of that dynamic in the whole book. The carefully devised title includes a play a words, indicating simultaneously "visions," i.e., looking, and "provisions" (in Polish, the wordplay is more complex, since "opatrzenie" means both making provisions but also becoming disillusioned, no longer feeling attracted to something—T. W.): exploring the texts inside the book activates each of these meanings for the reader. The void of the torn cover, this clear disruption of its unity, introduces a new quality, a new continuity, a new cohesion, but which need to be sought and found on one's own.

The Void as Element (in an artistic whole). It is possible to analyze the examples given above, in illustrating the void as concept or as interposition, in such a way as to find the void an integral part of each work. However, with regard to those works, such a reading represents a particular choice, the result of an interpretative approach to the device of the void, and one of several possible choices or approaches, since in them the void can also be understood to signal otherness. We can also look at some works in which the void represents

²⁵See B. Hess, *Lucio Fontana, 1899-1968. "A New Fact in Sculpture"*, Köln 2006, pp. 30-54. <http://www.fondazioneeluciofontana.it/index.php/en/slashes>, last accessed: 09.04.2015.

a fundamentally indispensable structural element. It does not take up the entirety of the work, but neither is it introduced therein *post factum*—it is simply a crucial part of the whole edifice.

Pamiętam że (*I Remember*, 1978, Polish version 2013, translated by K. Zabłocki) – this little book by Georges Perec consists of 480 very short fragments, written as dispatches or bulletins, mostly beginning with the words “I remember...” and continuing with some reminiscences, usually highly insignificant, from the author’s everyday life experience. In accordance with his instructions, the last few pages of the book are left blank, the first of them containing the familiar “I remember” in order that the reader might note down his own minutiae from the past that have occurred to him after reading the author’s or under their influence. Here, the void urges us to fill it: with private, individual meaning or, on the contrary, something general and universalizing; the choice is for the reader to make, as he becomes a co-author of the work and enters into direct, immediate contact with it. Notably, even physically inscribing one’s own notes in those empty spaces does not nullify their status as void, since theoretically, they make an endless number of similar entries possible.

Another example of a work in which the void forms a fundamental component of the whole (and in this case, the void itself, rather than its potential filling-in, is where meaning comes) is Ignacy Karpowicz’s *Sonka* (Sonka, 2014). The eponymous heroine begins a narration of her experiences during the war; just before the story’s bleakest moment, we read the following sentence: “And then everything happened so fast,” repeated on the next, largely blank page as “So fast”; the following two pages remain entirely blank (pp. 152-155). Only after this visibly marked pause does the story continue, very dramatically as expected. This interposition plays an indispensable role in the structure of the text; although it interrupts it on one level, it does not disrupt the narrative, but rather, intensifies its enunciation more than any word could. It is true that the passage can also simply be read without attention to the blank pages, since the flow (syntactic and narrative) of the story continues naturally before and after them, so for the void to appear the reader must stop for a moment and experience its penetrating truth. The empty pages’ position in the story is not random—they appear at the moment when things have not turned bad, when there was still some shadow of hope that they might not turn bad after all. The author highlights the importance of this moment “between”: good and evil, emotion and reaction, decision and result, lack of understanding and its consequences – which in real life lasts a fraction of a second, but here is substantially prolonged by the use of these pages. The reader thus acquires time to become truly intimate with the book. This conceptual framing allows us to create a definition of the void as: an intentional and semasiological artistic device applied in the work’s space or its material form, of a non-linguistic nature, but apparent to the senses, that is, perceivable (by sight, touch, or sound) as a deliberate lack, loss, rupture, interruption, etc. This perceived disturbance of expected continuity, which can be understood as a structural concept, a deliberate interposition, or an element of the whole— is not accompanied by any clear demarcations of exact value; whether the void is a sign of the work’s disintegration or coherence, or whether such a reading enters into the discussion, depends on the interpreter.

An encounter with the device of the void in a work of art may generate at least two kinds of reaction from the spectator: 1) a passive ascertainment of absence, generally linking the void

with nothingness, the bitterness of existence, and other negative connotations, or 2) active perception of absence (of the void in the individual fact of its own existence!), opening up new meanings that summon him/her toward building creative interpretations. The spectator may choose the first option, but should not be limited to it—that would mean descending into banality by condemning the device to facile one-dimensionality. The void encourages the spectator to live through it, to experience it, and the experience of art or the void in art means instead of passive association with its manifestations, something more active—in Simon Critchley’s words: “Experience is not sheer passivity. Rather, ethical experience is an action whereby new objects emerge for a subject involved in the process of their creation²⁶.”

3 The Void and Related Conceptual Frameworks The category of the void embodied in an artistic work is not a particular phenomenon separate from others: quite the contrary, in close proximity to it a great number of potential contexts and contiguities are revealed, that cannot be overlooked here.

One closely related concept consists of Ingarden’s **places of indeterminateness**, which – understood as moments not precisely defined due to the artist’s inability to capture every detail of the world in his depiction of it, to create a flawless description – are not identical with the concept of the void, since it is not their absence that creates meaning, but the individual manner of each one’s creation. Places of indeterminateness therefore constitute a lacuna by necessity, not from the artist’s conscious choice, and that is a relevant argument for not interpreting them as a kind of void. In connection with them, we should consider the concept of the **open work**²⁷ proposed by Umberto Eco. He argues that every cultural text – including those that are structurally closed and complete – is in a certain sense open, because many justifiable **interpretations of it can be made**²⁸; here again, we are not talking about the void, but about a subjective (because it combines the reader’s knowledge, predilections or prejudices) actualization of a series of undefined impulses whose absence is typical for almost all works (of literature especially).²⁹ That further suggests an analogy with the phenomenon of the interpretative after-image.³⁰ In the context of the reception of a work of art, the after-image—in optics, a momentary visually perceptible remainder in the retina, arising under the influence of a previously seen image or shape—is a projection of personal images, expectations, or reminiscences on the work. In a physiological

²⁶S. Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, London 2007, p. 14.

²⁷Arkadiusz Lewicki refers precisely to this theoretical proposition, in connection with the void, in the article previously mentioned above, “Puste finały. Zakończenie otwarte w literaturze i filmie” (from the volume: *Wszechświat, bezład, pustka* (Universe, Chaos, Void) op. cit. He deals primarily with the idea of a work’s openness understood as its deliberately unfinished state, however, and does not in fact conceptualize the void as such, leaving the reader with only the adroit metaphor of “empty endings,” that is, endings that are suspended, such as we find in literary classics including Prus’s *Lalka* (The Doll) and also in certain TV series.

²⁸Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni, Cambridge 1989.

²⁹At one point in Eco’s reflections, his concept of the open work gets dizzying close to the void – in the context of a discussion of French Symbolism. Eco notes: “Blank space surrounding a word, typographical adjustments, and spatial composition in the page setting of the poetic text – all contribute to create a halo of indefiniteness and to make the text pregnant with infinite suggestive possibilities.” Eco, op. cit., pp. 7-8. This observation is, however, marginal with regard to his main concept, which is why I have relegated it to a footnote.

³⁰In theoretical studies of art and the ways it is perceived, this term has been used by, among others, Władysław Strzemiński, who presented the problem of the after-image in his *Teorii widzenia* (Theory of Seeing), written in the late 1940s and published posthumously in 1958.

sense, the after-image represents the filling of the “microvoid” that could arise as a result of moving one’s gaze from one place to another; similarly, the interpretative after-image does not allow the possibility of a void in a work of art to spontaneously exist, other than as the artist’s concept. If, however, the device of the void has been directly introduced into the work, then one reaction to that fact can be a more or less conscious personal interpretation through the after-image.

A very important concept, often cited in discussions of the void, is **negative poetics**.³¹ If, following Hugo Friedrich,³² we designate as negative categories such formal features as: non-linearity, fragmentation, or a lack of coherence, the concept becomes close enough to that of the void that we can apply the idea of the void to the interpretation of non-linear, fragmentary, or non-cohesive, seemingly incoherent works. We can, but we are not obligated to – as I mentioned, the void can just as well be understood as signifying plenitude, a new space, or a qualitative change, not necessarily demonstrating a lack of cohesion. Negative poetics, however, present a considerably broader problem. For example, Erazm Kuźma develops it not only in epistemological and axiological contexts, but also ontological ones³³—all spheres in which the void is equally relevant. Particularly with regard to ontology—relating to the question of existence and nonexistence, as well as the problem of nothingness, initially taken straight from apophatic theology and later addressed by philosophers such as Heidegger and Sartre³⁴—negative categories and the void, understood broadly, are essentially identical. However, accepting my proposed definition means that the void evades such simple identification; only **reticence** and **silence**, considered to be additional expressions of negative poetics, are found to be closely comparable. Alina Świeściak places Krynicky’s poem “White Spot” (mentioned above) within the category of the poetics of silence, arguing that “The specific nature of literary silence, which of necessity cannot be total silence, would seem to rule out aphasia. Krynicky nonetheless managed to reach the aphasic border of language. The proof is ‘White Spot.’”³⁵ Świeściak refers to the two works connected by allusion, Krynicky’s and Jasiński’s, as “non-speaking poems,” although in fact they do “speak” – the titles, as inseparable elements of the text, constitute the true “voice,” and in the case of “White Spot” there is also the resonant dedication, launching its many connotative interpretative threads. I therefore do not agree with her thesis about the silence, much less aphasia of those literary works—to me, the category of the void seems much more appropriate here, as it does not negate the existence of their titles; on the contrary, those titles enable the void’s actual presence to emerge and the structural “emptiness” to be accentuated through contrast, intensifying its dynamic energy. Another example of a linkage between silence and the void involves the effort to formulate the connection between the two in terms of sadness, grief, and the crisis of language and representation.³⁶ Weronika Parfianowicz-Vertun has devoted a study to the work of the Czech artists known as the poets of “quiet, time, and death” (F. Halas, V. Holan, J.

³¹Or vice versa: the problem of negative poetics often includes in its orbit of discussion the idea of the void.

³²H. Friedrich, *The Structure of Modern Poetry*, translated by J. Neugroschel, Evanston 1974..

³³E. Kuźma, “O poetyce negatywnej. Od poetyki do poetologii, od poetologii do metapoetyki” (On Negative Poetics. From Poetics to Poetology, From Poetology to Metapoetics), in: *Poetyka bez granic* (Poetics Without Borders), ed. W. Bolecki, W. Tomasiak, Warszawa 1995.

³⁴See M. Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?” in Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, ed. and trans. William McNeill, Cambridge 1998; J.P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Estella Barnes, New York 1992; Z. Andersone, *Niebyt i byt* (Nonexistence and Existence), op. cit., M. Gołaszewska, “Sartre’a filozofia niebytu” (Sartre’s Philosophy of Nonexistence), in: *Człowiek i pustka*, op. cit.

³⁵A. Świeściak, *Przemiany...*, op. cit., p. 189.

³⁶W. Parfianowicz-Vertun, “Opętani tym smutnym smutkiem. Czeska awangarda wobec kryzysu reprezentacji” (Possessed By This Sorrowful Sorrow. The Czech Avant-Garde in Relation to the Crisis of Representation) in: *Wszechświat, bezład, pustka*, op. cit.

Zahradniček)—it concerns three books produced by these writers in 1930, viewed by Parfianowicz-Vertun through the lens of the poetics of silence and negative aesthetics; she justifiably invokes St. Jan Nepomucen, who according to legend was condemned to be drowned in the Vltava River for silence, as the patron saint of this current.³⁷ Parfianowicz-Vertun’s analysis does not conceptualize the void in a theoretical context, however, and can be understood as simply the omnipresent (“The whole world is enclosed in the void”) result of a pessimistic diagnosis of the human condition;³⁸ at the same time, it is an interpretative category rather than a formal one. In relation to the device of the void, silence has a similar function to the fascinating category of **transparency**.³⁹ Both silence and transparency present the possibility of embodying the void, its imaginative and interpretative incarnation, although they are even more elusive and subjective categories.

The last problem I wish to address here, the concept of **“non-existing” texts**, is connected in a less immediately obvious fashion with the void. Here we deal not so much with the void inside the text, as the void of the text itself, that is, the absence of the work, of which the reader is—if not at the level of perception, then at least intellectually—aware. This is clearly a different type of void than what I have been proposing we consider, partly because here the void is not an intentional device in the same way as in the works discussed above.⁴⁰ I refer to books that have been lost, are illegible, unfinished or never begun,⁴¹ but in any case are non-existent. Polish literature furnishes many examples of this phenomenon, such as the famous thesis written by Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński about a nonexistent English poet, or Stanisław Lem’s *Doskonała próżnia* (A Perfect Vacuum, 1999), a collection of reviews of non-existent books. Another fascinating and inspiring example is *Widmowa biblioteka. Leksykon książek urojonych* (The Phantom Library. A Lexicon of Imaginary Books) by Paweł Dunin-Wąsowicz (Warszawa 1997)⁴², about books described in other books purely for the purposes of literary fiction.

These examples unequivocally prove that the void has a firm place among related artistic concepts, and does not represent an isolated category. Nevertheless, when attempting to grasp and highlight it within that rich range of formal and interpretative devices, it’s crucial to conceptualize as precisely as possible. My effort, which I believe has achieved some degree of coherence, has been guided by that goal; I am aware, however, that sooner or later art will offer new interpretations, which will necessitate that my no longer cohesive concept be revised.

³⁷To be precise, for refusing to betray to King Wenceslaus IV the secret of his wife Sophia of Bavaria’s confession.

³⁸W. Parfianowicz-Vertun, *Possessed...*, pp. 91-92.

³⁹The problem of transparency is too vast and complex to be dealt with in depth here, but I direct readers to the following important texts: I. Calvino, “Visibility” in Calvino, *Six Memos for the New Millennium*, trans. Patrick Creagh, Cambridge 1988; M. Bieńczyk, *Przezroczystość* (Transparency), Kraków 2007; S. Jasionowicz, “Ku przezroczystości” (Toward Transparency), in: *Pustka we współczesnym doświadczeniu...*, op.cit.

⁴⁰An exception that proves the rule could be Stanisław Rosiek’s *[nienapisane]* [unwritten] (Gdańsk 2008), which includes a variety of fragmentary works, generally left unfinished for various reasons.

⁴¹An extensive and absorbing study of this entire genre is Stuart Kelly’s *The Book of Lost Books*, New York 2006.

⁴²Dunin-Wąsowicz’s book (as well as works by Brian Quinette, Enrique Villa-Matas, Jean Yves Jouannais and others who have catalogued fictional books) gave rise to Agnieszka Kurant’s installation, *Widmowa biblioteka* (The Phantom Library, 2011), consisting of 400 physically manufactured books with fictional titles and the names of fictitious authors printed on their covers and spines, equipped with ISBN numbers and bar codes. Another result of Dunin-Wąsowicza’s book was a session organized in 2008 by Adam Mickiewicz University’s Polish Studies department which led to an issue of *Podteksty* (Subtexts, 2008, 2) entitled “The Phantom Library—footnotes to a lexicon of imaginary books.”

KEYWORDS:

invisible art

t r a n s p a r e n c y

SPATIALISM

VOID

n o n - e x i s t i n g t e x t

ABSTRACT:

This text constitutes an attempt to describe the category of the void, understood as a specific artistic tactic used in European and particularly Polish cultural texts of the 20th and 21st centuries. In the first part (The Void in science and art – philosophical prolegomenon) the author completes a short survey of earlier ways of understanding the void in various areas of thought and scholarship. The second part (the Void as an artistic procedure) presents the author's proposal for a conceptualization of contemporary manifestations of the category in question, based on an analysis of various works from the realms of the literary and visual arts. The tactic is divided into: concept, intervention and element, allowing for the creation of a new definition of the void. The final part (the Void and related conceptualizations) is devoted to selected theoretical and philosophical contexts relating to the void, but not identical with it, e.g. places of indefiniteness, negative poetics (keeping) silence, and non-existing texts.

o p e n w o r k

NOTHING

negative poetics

places of indefinition

liberature

SILENCE

empty page

Georges Perec

nothingness

Lucio Fontana

Ignacy Karpowicz

lipidity

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Interpretative after-image |