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Offscreen Space
From Cinema and Sculpture to Photography, Poetry, and Narrative

Thomas Harrison

This essay aims to explore formal limits of artistic idioms and some manners in which they are put to positive semantic use. With the help of a term borrowed from film studies, I will argue that many, if not most, artworks activate relations between spaces directly embodied by their signs (recognizable shapes in the visual arts, for example, or words in written texts) and spaces indirectly conveyed by contexts, associations, or imaginings produced outside the borders of those perceptible forms in the mind of a reader or spectator. Aspects of *offscreen space* are marked by the visual, aural, or conceptual perimeters of what a work actually presents onscreen, amplifying its voice or points of reference and occasionally even making the work seem somewhat partial or incomplete.[1] More concrete offscreen spaces pertain to the cultures of a work's production and reception, subject to variable methodologies of interpretation. In both cases, components of a work's meaning are construed to lie *outside* its formal articulation, beyond its explicitly pictured purview, in questions or matters that it conjures up. Some aspects of the *off* seem primarily semiotic in nature, involving connotations or lacunae in the work's conventions or system of signs; others appear to be functions of the material and cultural *humus* from which and to which a work is addressed. Either way, the offscreen spaces activated by a work of art are as constructive of the significance we attribute to it as the lines and tones and colors and words of which it is composed. Formalist criticism generally concerns itself with the onscreen logic of signs *qua* signs; historicist criticism is more attuned to the signs' offscreen implications—in its world of reference. My own intention lies in between these two—in the co-implications of *on* and *off* space of those systems of signs, and particularly in the cognitive-semiotic play they activate, whether in poetry or film, sculpture or narrative fiction. Configurations and conventions of offscreen space vary greatly from one period and artistic style to another. A trans-medial study of the sort I propose in this short essay is subject to its own formal limitations; it must overlook nuances in the nature of the arts and the cultures by which they are transmitted and circulated. Realism, to take just one example, is less interested in a particular *off* than symbolism, using signs in a less formally charged way. Even so, by beginning to recognize the constitutive role of offscreen spaces in a diverse range of artistic examples, we can put ourselves in a position to appreciate the noetic reach of art at large, better assessing the roles of signs in the texts they shape and of the texts in the cultures on which they act. I begin on the cusp of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and focus most of my attention on the twentieth.

I. An improbable illustration of offscreen space can be drawn from the highest canons of Western art—"improbable" because we are speaking of that veritable epitome of self-contained, artistic embodiment which is solid, three-dimensional, Renaissance sculpture.

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[1] Indeed, in a work calling on some of the same case studies, I propose that offscreen space represents one of four modalities in a rhetoric of aesthetic incompletion: Thomas Harrison, *L'arte dell'incompiuto* (Rome: Castelvecchio, 2017).
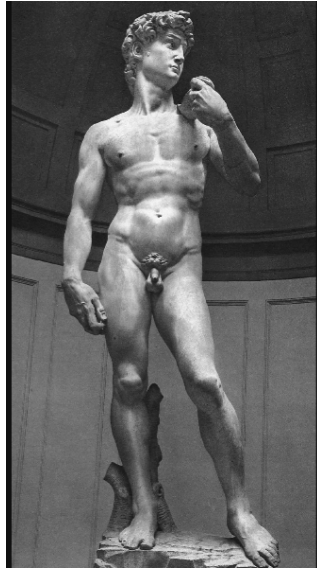
Fig. 1. Michelangelo, *David*, marble, 1501–04, Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence.

Michelangelo's corporeal depiction of this *David* (Fig. 1) is so stunningly lifelike that it is difficult to think of anything outside its amassment of physical beauty and power. Indeed, it is difficult to know how many contemporary viewers even reflect on who that legendary David was in experiencing this statue. Eventually, however, the realization must dawn on many that a crucial component of the marmoreal representation lies beyond it—in that invisible space toward which David directs his energies: the space of the missing Goliath. This space is not only that of a missing contemporaneous circumstance, but also that of an immaterial representation of a time to come—the imminent moment of the battle, of David's appointment with destiny. For all its intensive compactness, Michelangelo's work is distended *spatially* into what is not materially represented, and *temporally* into what stands on the verge of happening. The *David* calls something to mind that is not figured, creating a drama that is missing in the prior sculptural treatments of the topic in models which were obviously present to Michelangelo's mind: those of Donatello and Verrocchio (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Donatello, *David*, bronze, c. 1430s–40s, and Verrocchio, *David*, bronze, 1473–75, both in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence.

Precisely because these *Davids* include the giant in the representation, they lack the tension of Michelangelo's statue. Positioning Goliath's severed head at David's feet, they complete the story, announcing a finality resolved in time. They *show* what Michelangelo obliges us to imagine, compels us to recreate. The later sculptor produces an offscreen space within the frame of his imposing but vulnerable body.

The effects of its extended space are furrowed deep into David's brow and apprehensive eyes (Fig. 3). They are recorded in anxiety, fear, and self-doubt, strangled by resolve and courage.

Fig. 3. Michelangelo, *David* (detail), marble, 1501–04, Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence.

The poise of this body is offset by a spiritual tension and process of deliberation. One can hardly imagine a statue so little self-contained as this self-affirmative figure of Michelangelo's.

Republican Florentines at the very beginning of the 1500s would have found this sculpture bringing additional offscreen material to their attention: the intuition that the looming, invisible Goliath was metaphorical of the threat of political tyranny, which Tuscan Republicans feared more than they loathed; that the vulnerable Florence had to defend its autonomy from the monstrous powers of Milan and of Charles VIII, perhaps even the Medici. None of this needed to be brought explicitly onscreen in Michelangelo's statue of the young liberator.

But Michelangelo's genius looks further than these historical contexts and figurative analogies. It envisions—or makes us envision—something else unsaid, or only implied, in its representation. This work explores another battle not confined to Michelangelo's place and moment in time—the battle of a young spirit within its material body, a battle waged between outer and inner forces, between the seen and its unseen outcome, between an objective circumstance and its subjective pressures, between the embodied and the merely imagined, between the clarity of the now and an unreadable future. David's eloquent physical reality is engulfed by an immaterial, wordless one. This wordless one, too, is also divided between faith in divine backing and an inability to know how well placed that faith is. David's gaze penetrates so far into the unknown that, as Erich Heller has argued in a classic but little visited essay, it prefigures dissociations in human comprehension which will come to fruition one hundred years later in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1599–1602) and Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605–15).[2] For Heller,

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[2] Heller's essay is called "The Artist's Journey into the Interior: A Hegelian Prophecy and Its Fulfillment," in *The Artist's Journey into the Interior and Other Essays* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1965), pp.

Michelangelo's *David* marks a paradigmatic moment in a progression leading straight to the deep, romantic excavations of individual, subjective interiority in the nineteenth century.

II. Michelangelo's *David* is a signal example of the incorporation of offscreen space into what otherwise appears to be a perfectly self-contained representation. It prefigures a strategy that cinema will later activate through an art of multiple and moving images, each of which, through the help of others, suggests something more than itself. What is onscreen in a film is what the camera visualizes for the viewer within its frame. The offscreen, instead, entails actions and spaces that a viewer imagines or adds to a cinematic frame to fill out its significance. An art of montage, stitching one shot together with others to form a story, cinema relies heavily on the figure of synecdoche: it uses bordered, rectangular images to suggest settings surrounding the frame. Unlike an isolated image or ensemble of images in traditional painting, firmly enclosed within the single plane of a painted surface, a cinematic image is perceived to overflow those limits, extending into the spaces around its border.[3] The dramatic action of cinema invokes a continuum (and occasionally pointed discontinuities) extending from what we see on the screen to circumambient spaces, providing in flat two-dimensional pictures an illusion of temporal and spatial amplitude.

There are potentially four dimensions to the offscreen space of a cinematic image, amplifying its synchronous, present-amplifying diegesis. One lies to its left, one to the right, another above it, and another below it (Fig.4).[4]
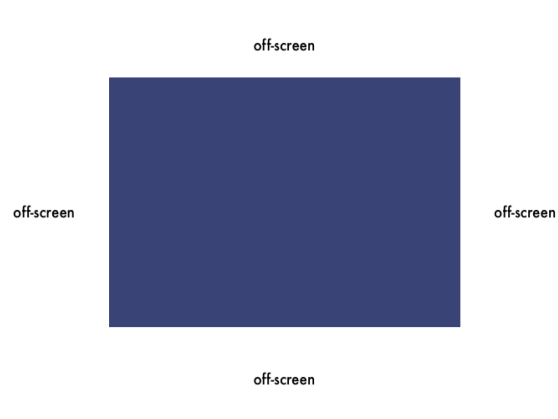
Fig. 4. The Four Dimensions of Offscreen Space (Image by author).

99–170. The link to Shakespeare gives me occasion to reference a rich and rewarding new study of offscreen space which takes precisely *Hamlet*—the "haunting" of this young Dane by an invisible ghost—as representative of the same on and offscreen dynamic that I am exploring in this study. Eyal Peretz's *The Off-Screen: An Investigation of the Cinematic Frame* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017) consists of a detailed reading and highly informed theoretical discussion of inscribed absences in the films of Tarkovsky, Hawkes, Griffith, Chaplin, Riefenstahl, Tarantino, and Lang, as well in the different media of Rembrandt, Bruegel, and Shakespeare. Peretz's work is highly consonant with mine, and I regret having discovered it too late to engage its claims directly.

[3] André Bazin, an early theorizer of cinematic offscreen space, contrasted its frames precisely with those of painting: "The picture frame […] is centripetal, the screen centrifugal." (André Bazin, "Painting and Cinema," in *What Is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967], 1:165).

[4] All diagrams in this essay are by the author.

These are areas into which the screen action can spill, not only through characters' motions in and out of the frame of the image, but even through the positioning of images within a frame's static representation. For example, when we see just the legs of someone sitting in a chair at the edge of the left frame, we construe the remainder of the body to lie offscreen.

Given that the cinematic image is meant to give an impression of three-dimensionality, the screen picture is really read as a rectangular prism or cuboid, and this implies the presence of two additional offscreen spaces. One is construed behind the image, as when a character exits a door at the back of the scene; another lies in front of the image and can be brought into play by a character looking or speaking past the position of the camera, towards a person we cannot see but imagine standing in front of the scene before us.[5] A two-dimensional rectangular film image thus operates in the manner of a cuboid located within a larger, implied, offscreen cuboid or amorphous space invoked by the spilling over of screen action beyond the frame (Fig. 5).

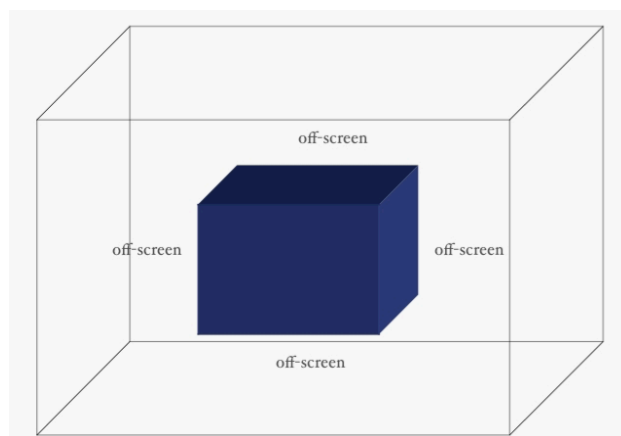

off-screen

off-screen

off-screen

off-screen

Fig. 5. The Cuboid of Offscreen Space (Image by author).

Outside that cuboid there is an additional offscreen space which conventional cinematic representation usually lets us forget as we enjoy the spectacle, and this is the space of the spectator. That space is breached by penetrating the front wall of that larger cuboid, as when, in a Brechtian alienation effect, a character in the film speaks explicitly to someone in the audience (the narrative of Ettore Scola's *C'eravamo tanto amati*, 1974, is constructed this way, with onscreen addresses to the viewer, and with its breaking of the "fourth wall" amply prepared for by the experimental techniques of the French New Wave of the late Fifties and Sixties).[6] Within the Italian tradition, Bernardo Bertolucci is occasionally given to breaking that wall in his films' final scenes. The very last shot in *The Conformist* (1970) shows the protagonist staring straight into the audience's eye.[7] Two years later, as Marlon Brando's character dies on the terrace in *Last Tango in Paris*,[8] the camera recording the scene captures a reflection of Bertolucci's soundman in the French doors. On the occasion of a master class held at the University of

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[5] The definitive discussion of the six visually implied offscreen spaces lies in Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, trans. Helen R. Lane (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973). Similar later analyses can be found in Francesco Casetti and Federico di Chio, *Analisi del film* (Milan: Bompiani, 1990), 130–34; David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 119–30; Jacques Aumont, et al, *Aesthetics of Film*, trans. and rev. Richard Neupert (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 10–18.

[6] *C'eravamo tanto amati*, directed by Ettore Scola, 1974.

[7] *The Conformist*, directed by Bernardo Bertolucci, 1970.

[8] *Last Tango in Paris*, directed by Bernardo Bertolucci, 1972.

California, Los Angeles on November 12, 2013, Bertolucci claimed to have selected this take of the scene precisely on account of its "flaw": it offered a playful opportunity to bring something onscreen which is normally left off: the production apparatus, the mechanics of the film's making, the "modernist" gesture, again in keeping with a New Wave aesthetics, of commenting on the artwork.

The reverse procedure has an analogous effect, raising the question of what we conventionally expect from onscreen presentation. It occurs when the sight of something important is obstructed. In *The Conformist*, Manganiello sits on a bench in a park as he speaks to an offscreen Marcello. The camera conspicuously moves in such a way as to have the camera's sight of Manganiello hidden by a tree—perhaps like Marcello, who at that moment wishes to block him out? Sometimes there are thematically compelling reasons for rendering an onscreen action "off." At the end of Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003),[9] the entire denouement of the film—which the audience expects to transpire in the final, emotional exchange between the two main characters—is kept out of our hearing by the interference of traffic and circumambient noise. Here, the off-on-screen action, if one can put it in those terms, is due to the absence of its audial signifier, in a strategy which had been asserted by *auteurist* films of the 1960s. Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'avventura* (1960) has an important conversation between police investigating the disappearance of Anna and her father drowned out by the buzzing blades of a helicopter.[10]
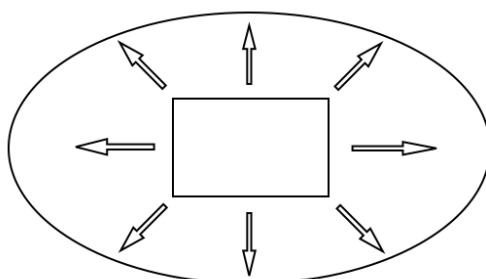

Fig. 6. Circumambient Narrative Space (Image by Author).

III. Not all film activates complex dynamics between on and offscreen space to the point of rendering something onscreen "off." Only exceptionally does it turn cognitive and perceptual dissonance into a structural principle; its "institutional mode of representation," as Noël Burch calls it,[11] goes out of its way to do the opposite, minimizing the tensions between the seen and the unseen, and between the space of the film's diegesis and that of its processing audience. In the very infancy of film, around 1910, Hollywood production companies even published directives enjoining actors never to look directly into the camera in order not to make members of the audience feel that they were not safely outside the story. The only conventionally

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[9] *Lost in Translation*, directed by Sofia Coppola, 2003.

[10] *L'avventura*, directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, 1960. The specialist of offscreen acoustic effects in cinema—which can create even more illusions of the *off* than visual signifiers, supplementing the scene with sounds issuing from out-of-frame events or "cancelling" part of the visual diegesis, as in the above examples from Coppola and Antonioni—is Michel Chion. See his *The Voice in Cinema*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

[11] Noël Burch, *Life to Those Shadows*, trans. Ben Brewster (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 7.

acceptable offscreen space was that of the story's own world of narrative events, which the screen needed not only to establish but also to absorb and incorporate by allowing its *mise-en-scène* to reach out into a fictional circumambient space. In this diagram (Fig. 6), the classical cinematic shot is figured as penetrating the spaces surrounding it. A richly signifying *mise-en-scène* enhances precisely those actions, statements, and gestures, turning the cuboid-impression of the screen into the synecdoche of a larger, living cuboid. As a matter of fact, spectators of a film should not be left with the impression of a "cuboid" at all; the borders of the conventional screen image should not be felt.
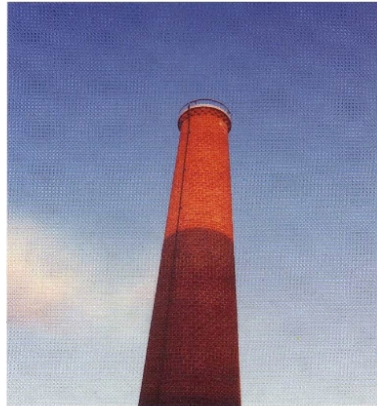

Fig. 7. Aldo Rossi, untitled and undated (probably the City Hall of Borgoricco). Image from *Luigi Ghirri, Aldo Rossi: Things Which Are Only Themselves*, ed. by Paola Costantini (Montréal: CCA; Milan: Electa, 1996), 78.

The presence and operation of offscreen space is most appreciated when this principle is contravened. That is the case where, instead of reaching into surrounding space in a centrifugal way, an image makes an issue of its own distinction. This is easy to experience in the single, static image of a photograph. A polaroid by Aldo Rossi, included in a "requiem" portfolio dedicated to his "lost friend" Luigi Ghirri, plays on this effect by truncating a tower in a manner that makes it impossible to know to which factory or space it belongs (Fig. 7). With the exclusion of this tower's time, context, and function, what lies outside the frame of the photo becomes a palpable absence. The offscreen becomes the *issue itself* in this kind of work.

Fig. 8. Luigi Ghirri, *Cemetery of San Cataldo, Modena; The Great Arcade*, 1987. Image from *Luigi Ghirri, Aldo Rossi: Things Which Are Only Themselves*, ed. by Paola Costantini (Montréal: CCA; Milan: Electa, 1996), 44.

Luigi Ghirri himself engages in the same operation by taking an ostensibly functional structure and transforming it into an abstract, flattened composition (Fig. 8). Aside from alienating its subject matter, the image is formally complete. The perspective on the building's beams is perfectly centered, transmitting symmetrical shadows. The three horizontal segments of the picture are equally proportioned. The middle segment subdivides again into two, one illuminated, one in the shadows. The image is also vertically divided, mathematically. The effect is centripetal rather than centrifugal, not alluding to something outside the image in the manner of the picture of the tower. Instead, but this is part of the same problem, this photo figures its offscreen space *onscreen*—for nothing whatsoever is happening here. One feels the scene's missing "action."

In this way, places are presented as pure settings. Ghirri offers a scene but bans its dramatic development. Divesting it of its narrative substance, he excludes the context-providing signifiers that classical photography more often tries to include in its shots. Even when the image *does* contain a center of dramatic interest, as in the following photograph (Fig. 9), the information that might ground its significance is left offscreen, engulfed in darkness.

Fig. 9. Luigi Ghirri, *Porto Recanati*, 1984. Image from Luigi Ghirri,
Paesaggio Italian/Italian Landscape (Milan: Electa, 1989), 97.

These images disrupt a classical negotiation of on and offscreen in cinema and photography in which what we see either raises no question of what is happening outside it or evokes that outside in the manner of a consubstantial extension.

IV. The offscreen extensions of film are no less temporal than spatial. In the interest of dramatic emphasis or narrative economy, a cinematic plot deliberately excludes relevant events. It may allude to them in what it shows (as when a fade out on a kiss implies erotic development, or when an act of murder is not explicitly shown), or it may try to shield missing information from our attention altogether. Whether suggested or passed over in silence, the discrepancy between on and offscreen events is not usually made contentious. Linked in basic continuity, the representational features of the work are made to seem complete.

When Michelangelo Antonioni performs the equivalent of Ghirri's photographs in his early films of the '60s—unfolding dead time or showing nothing that is palpably happening—he makes us question what can and cannot be brought into a film, whether its images should serve narrative explication or rather operate *only* in the manner of a screen: an observable but not fully

divulging surface. Glossed by Lorenzo Cuccu,[12] the result brings to mind the ontologically constitutive role of vision, or the agency of the camera-eye. This role of vision and understanding is powerfully served by the contrast between on and offscreen space.

One sequence among many renders the idea. The film *L'avventura* is all about the infringements of an unavailable, offscreen, diegetic development on the immediate concerns of its characters. Anna, a friend of Sandro and Claudio, whose intimate *avventura* the film recounts, literally disappears on an island. Her absence proceeds to haunt each one of the two characters' acts for the rest of the film. One sequence in their search for Anna begins the morning after Claudia and Sandro spend the night in a shack on the island where she went missing. The first shot outside of the shack shows a view down onto waves breaking onto a rock in the sea. Slowly the camera pans left, tilting up along the shoreline, in what gives the impression of a point-of-view shot. There is nothing of dramatic interest in this shot, and yet it conveys the feeling of a dramatic offscreen presence, of a subjectivity behind the camera. Surprisingly, however, as the camera reveals previously unseen aspects of the landscape, it comes to frame Sandro, seated in profile and gazing offscreen right into the sea we had been observing. The sequence subverts the conventional order of subjective observation in cinema by way of eyeline-match editing, which first gives us a character and then a record of what he or she is looking at. Here the process is reversed: the camera movement gives a sense of subjective looking *preceding* the introduction of a character. That looking is abstracted and separated from Sandro; it is retroactively associated by the spectator with an anonymous and disembodied outside eye.

The camera rests on Sandro, apparently absorbed by the thought of the absent Anna, who is metaphorically identified with offscreen space throughout the film (like the lost Irma in Antonioni's earlier feature, *Il grido*, 1957).[13] Suddenly Sandro turns to the opposite direction, seeing something offscreen left and getting up to move into that direction. Another figure enters the frame from the left—another offscreen presence and woman—not Anna, but Claudia. To reinforce the tension of these eccentric forces on Sandro, Antonioni cuts to a shot taken from the other side of Sandro and Claudia, crossing the famous 180° line of cinematic perspective. This reverses Sandro's position, showing him in extreme close up staring towards an offscreen Claudia at frame right. This disorientation of vectors doubles the experience of absence, making us wonder how Sandro is registering the effects of these women.

Sandro and Claudia speak as each gazes out of the frame in different directions. Their conversation is then interrupted by the sound of a boat which cannot be seen. The camera scans seeking it, but the boat remains invisible. Returning to frame Sandro and Claudia in a two-shot, the camera then shows us an empty landscape which again seems to be a point-of-view shot of the characters scouring the island, but again we are mistaken. The characters are not seeing this scene, for Claudia steps into its frame and Sandro soon appears in its background. Like the initial shot of the sequence, this one too presents a pseudo-subjective visualized scene *before* a character enters to seek what he or she fails to find. The motif is that of attempting to gain one's bearings in the space we are given, which Claudia and Sandro enter and exit in the most awkward and conspicuous of ways.

This may be the type of filmic technique that inspired philosopher Stanley Cavell's intuition that the experience of a screen is always an experience of displacement—transposing the

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[12] Lorenzo Cuccu, *La visione come problema. Forme e svolgimento del cinema di Antonioni* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1973).

[13] *Il grido*, directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, 1957. On *Il grido* and Antonioni's articulations of space more generally, see Thomas Harrison and Sarah Carey, "The World Outside the Window: Antonioni's Architectonics of Space and Time," *Italian Culture* 29/1 (2011): 37–51.

filmgoer's attention from his or her everyday life to the life represented on that screen—a displacement which films generally make appear as our natural condition.[14] That is to say, cinema displaces our gaze but normally makes that displacement appear natural. Antonioni does not merely thematize this displacement in stories of disoriented human behavior; he denaturalizes it and transfers it onto his audience. He makes the screen itself a cipher of the offscreen, of that *Umwelt* in which we, the players of our lives, attempt to establish our bearings.

V. In cinema, photography, and sculpture, Antonioni, Ghirri, and Michelangelo give iconic shape to a spatio-temporal frame in which characters assume a position. Literature has the advantage of being able to illuminate that frame theoretically. A poem like "L'infinito" by Giacomo Leopardi even suggests that this nexus between on and offscreen realities constitutes a primal scene of human thought:

> Sempre caro mi fu quest'ermo colle,
> E questa siepe, che da tanta parte
> Dell'ultimo orizzonte il guardo esclude.
> Ma sedendo e mirando, interminati
> spazi di là da quella, e sovrumani
> silenzi, e profondissima quiete
> io nel pensier mi fingo; ove per poco
> il cor non si spaura.[14]

> [It was always dear to me, this solitary hill, and this hedge which shuts off the gaze from so large a part of the uttermost horizon. But sitting and looking out, in thought I fashion for myself endless spaces beyond, more-than-human silences, and deepest quiet; where the heart is all but terrified.]

Leopardi's *siepe* invokes that other meaning of *screen*, which is embedded in the Italian word *schermo*: a structure shielding the sight of something else. This particular screen behind which the poet sits, this hedge on the hill, instead of giving something to be seen, as in the movies, brackets off the circumambient landscape. It produces an offscreen experience within the present. By not allowing for a continuous vision from the hill onto the furthest horizon, it makes what is *not* contained in the horizon come forcibly to mind.

Leopardi intends this hedged enclosure to allude to the conditions enabling poetic contemplation. Vague, indefinable notions flood in on the seated poet on account of his inability to see outside a circumscribed frame: unbordered intuitions, interminable spaces and superhuman silences. Precisely because this hedge interrupts a continuum that would otherwise extend naturally out onto the horizon, the here and now spills over into *interminati spazi di là da quella*—spaces beyond, not only this enclosure, but the historical horizon in which it lies (Fig. 10).

[14] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (New York: Viking, 1971), as cited in *Film Theory: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Baudry and Marshall Cohen (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 344.
[15] Giacomo Leopardi, "L'infinito," in *Canti*, ed. Niccolò Gallo and Cesare Gàrboli (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), 105–06, vv. 1–8. Translation by the author.
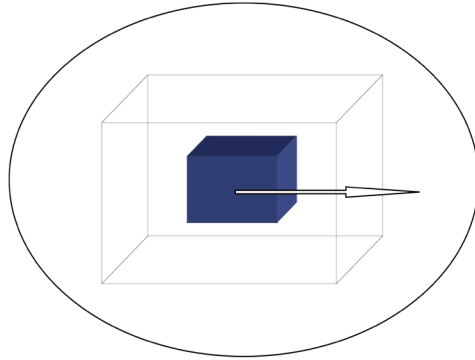
Fig. 10. From Enclosure to Historical Horizon and Beyond (Image by Author).

The specificity and delimitation of the onscreen scene (on the near side of the hedge) evokes offscreen ideas eluding all shape and form, a sea of immensity engulfing the specificities of thought. "L'infinito" suggests that just such a space, detached from its consubstantial surroundings, is the place of poetry, articulating the recesses circumscribing—but lacking expression in—the here and now.

Only a restricting enclosure makes the measureless topics of poetry accessible: this is the paradox of the poem. Yet these measureless topics of poetry are *immanently inscribed* in the finite arena that seems to exclude them, for it is only they—the indistinguishable "elsewheres" of verses 4–7—that enable the poet to take stock of where he actually is. The offscreen space of which he becomes aware establishes the grounds for a relationship, a comparison (*vo comparando*) between the infinite silence and the sound of the wind now rushing through the plants.

> … E come il vento
> odo stormir tra queste piante, io quello
> infinito silenzio a questa voce
> vo comparando: e mi sovvien l'eterno,
> e le morte stagioni, e la presente
> e viva, e il suon di lei. Così tra questa
> immensità s'annega il pensier mio:
> e il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare.[15]

> [And as I hear the wind rustling among these plants, I go on and compare this voice
> to that infinite silence: and I recall the eternal, and the dead seasons, and the present,
> living one and her sound. So in this immensity my thoughts drown: and shipwreck is
> sweet to me in this sea.]

Thanks to the formless transcendence of time and space, the poet is able to actually register the sound of the season he currently occupies (*la presente e viva, e il suon di lei*).

In an initial schematization, the ontological distinction would seem to suggest a split screen conjoining the timeless dead seasons to the one present and alive (Fig. 11).

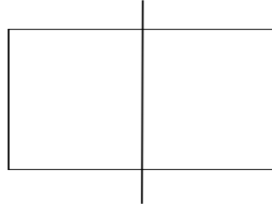[16] Leopardi, "L'infinito," vv. 8–15.

Fig. 11. The Split Screen of *L'infinito* (Image by Author).

But this is too Parmenidean, too Platonic, a scheme—as though true, sublime Being were one thing, and the particulars of the here and now another. In Leopardi, the relationship is more dynamically interrelated. The scene of the hill-and-hedge is, to begin with, *engulfed* by formless infinity, of which it is no more than a part (Fig. 12).
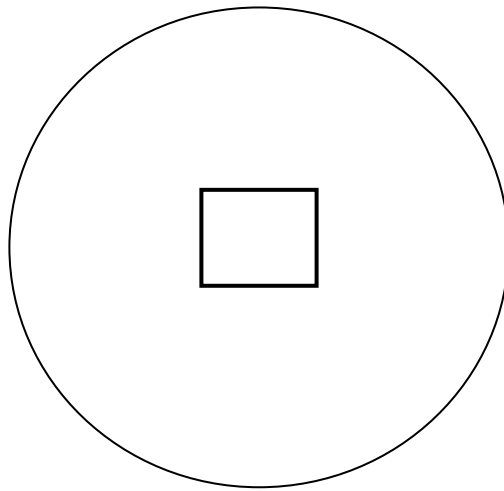

Fig. 12. The Engulfed *Siepe* (Image by Author).

In addition, only *out of* the inner, circumscribed place do the interminable spaces of engulfment open up, as though through a window or hole looking out:
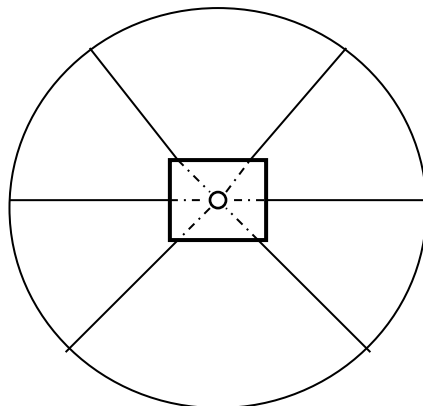

Fig. 13. Looking Into the Spaces of Engulfment (Image by Author).

This epistemology of the poem, so to speak, owes its genesis to an encounter *between* on and offscreen spaces, each revealed as enmeshed with the other, components of a single picture. That is why the many *this*es and *that*s originally particularizing the poet's concrete setting

(*quest'ermo colle, questa siepe, quella, queste piante, questa voce*) transcend their locality to indicate ideas offscreen to their purview (*quello infinito silenzio, questa immensità, questo mare*), pointing to a formless infinity in which everyday thought drowns. Thus Leopardi circles the square.

This relationship between the *on* and the *off* is consistent with literary theory crystalized by the Russian formalists, if not already the romantics, according to which poetry articulates imaginative visions literally off limits to the self-evident referents of everyday prose.[16] In that view, poetic language shapes meanings absent from the screens of ordinary language. The poet goes linguistically offscreen in order to bring more indeterminate significance *on*, coercing it into language. The expressive capacities of our common conceptions are thereby enriched, their screens yoked to what lies *off* and what is not ordinarily ordered upon them.

VI. Can prose fiction do something similar? In a style that has become normative since the nineteenth-century realist novel, narrative reaches into the offscreen spaces of history as though they were not fundamentally discontinuous with the represented world of the fiction. It also takes account of the fictional offscreen syntagmatically, in a manner also practiced by classical cinema (cultivating ellipsis, narrative suspense, and montage construction).[17] In the novel, another offscreen space is often embodied by storytellers, who make themselves felt, commenting on the action they recount, supplementing it with reflection, discursive analysis and explanation. Diagrammatically pictured, they give us an image of screen action permeated by an outside made up of authorial commentary (Fig. 14).
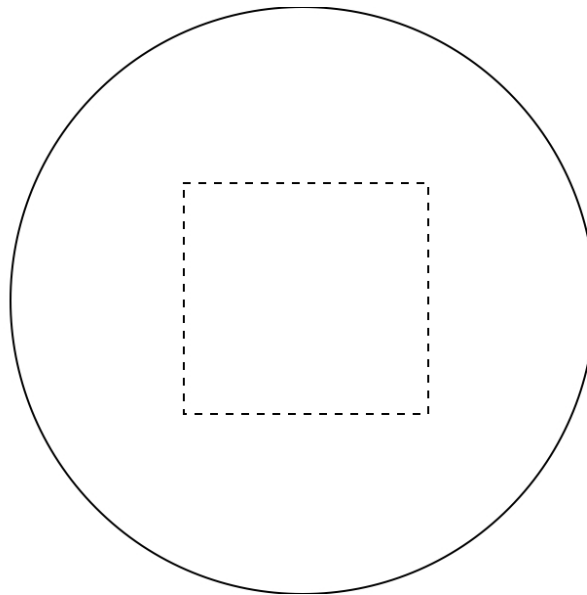

Fig. 14. Narrated Action Circumscribed by Authorial Comment (Image by Author).

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[17] Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. and trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 3-24.
[18] A grammar of these narrative techniques, varying from one medium to another, is provided by Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978).

Accordingly, at the beginning of Chapter 19 of *I promessi sposi*,[18] Alessandro Manzoni's narrator steps in to comment on the dramatic interaction between the honorable count and Father Provincial:
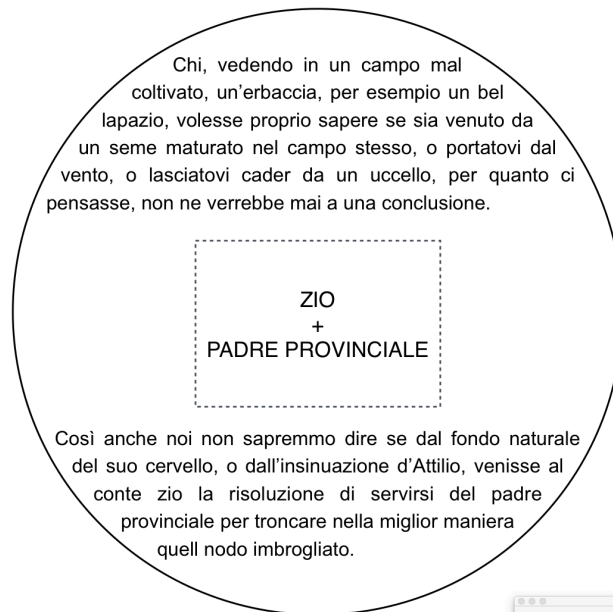

Fig. 15. Diagram of the Narrator's Intervention (Image by Author).

While this may be normative practice for many types of novel (and received many of its most interesting elaborations in the eighteenth century), it is no less true, as Walter Benjamin contends, that it is "half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation." [19] The very substance of the heard tale—its ultimate noetic content—is "intelligence coming from afar,"[20] bringing something out-of-reach of everyday experience to the mind of its auditors. By recommending that the narrator *not* explain or elucidate this exotic information, Benjamin stresses the interest of its offscreen implications. The listener of the story recognizes: something in this order of events is evading my comprehension.

In the Italian twentieth century, conspicuous techniques of non-explanation were devised by Tommaso Landolfi, Alberto Savinio, Antonio Delfini, and Anna Maria Ortese. Benjamin's lessons were also fully assimilated by one of Italy's most effective narrators today, Gianni Celati. One of his stories is about a man called Baratto who, in the tradition of Melville's Bartleby, and for reasons never properly explained, decides one day to quit speaking. The story is all composed

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[19] Alessandro Manzoni, *I promessi sposi*, ed. Tommaso Di Salvo (1827; repr. Bologna: Zanichelli, 1987), 385. The English translation reads as follows: "Anyone who saw a weed—a fine sorrel, for instance—growing in an untilled field, and really wanted to know if it came from a seed ripened in the field itself, or from a seed borne there by the wind, or dropped by a bird, would never come to any conclusion, however long he pondered over the matter. So we, too, cannot tell if the old count's decision to make use of the Father Provincial to cut the tangled knot in the most satisfactory way sprang naturally from his own brain, or from Attilio's insinuation." The English translation, slightly revised, is from Manzoni, *The Betrothed*, trans. Archibald Colquhoun (New York: Dutton, 1968), 255.

[20] Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 89.

[21] Ibid.

of descriptions like the following, where the mute man steps into his apartment one evening and closes the door:

> Il tavolo del soggiorno è apparecchiato, l'apparecchia ogni giorno sua moglie prima di uscire. Negli ultimi tempi sua moglie torna tardi alla sera e forse ha un altro uomo, ma Baratto non glielo ha chiesto perché la cosa non gli interessa. Lui ogni sera prepara il cibo e lo mangia in piedi nel cucinotto, e prima di andare a letto sparecchia la tavola perché sua moglie non creda sia successo qualcosa di insolito.[22]

> [The table in the living room is set, his wife sets it every day before going out. Lately his wife has been coming back late in the evening and maybe has another man, but Baratto hasn't asked her because it doesn't interest him. Every evening he prepares the food and eats standing in the little kitchen, and before going to bed clears the table so that his wife won't think something odd has happened.][23]

But of course, something odd has happened, and happens at every turn of Celati's narratives (even when the character acts *in order that* nothing odd, or *insolito*, should strike the eye). Yet the narrator presents these events to the reader with virtually no comment, as though the logic of their turns were clear and perfectly normal. Is Baratto really not interested in whether his wife has another man? Why not? The story makes us want to know but gives no indication. It opens up a space for hermeneusis, calling for interpretation.

In Benjamin's view, stories kept free from explanation achieve an amplitude that information of the type given in news reporting, aiming at full clarification, lacks. Information tolerates no offscreen space; it "phagocytizes" that space, streaming out into and consuming it. Philosophy does something analogous, unless it is exceptionally gnomic; it aims at a complete deployment of understanding, furnishing offscreen reasons for the *on*. Celati, like his friend Ghirri, transmits offscreen space by *not* configuring it, refusing to provide facts with deep or latent meanings. The reader is kept firmly outside the text, in the offscreen space of reading, dislocated as from a film that does not draw us fully into its diegesis. The story is a veil stretched over a hole.

According to certain Celatian characters, this approaches something like the final function of words. A young woman in the third story of *Quattro novelle sulle apparenze* has the impression that written words are "come voci che spuntavano da una porta che si apriva sulle tenebre" ["like voices emerging from a door opened on to the darkness"] (80). It is as when certain streets, houses, and shadows "vogliono dire per noi chissà cosa" ["mean something or other"], but we cannot say what (84). Could it be, the young woman wonders, that vehicles of verbal meaning cause trepidation precisely "perché non sono niente" ["because they are nothing at all"] (84)—signs with nothing whatsoever behind them, mere surfaces, screens over nothing? They would be screens that you see and you see right through, to suspect at last "che il mondo non ha sostanza al di fuori dei racconti che ne facciamo" ["that the world has no substance

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[22] Gianni Celati, "Baratto," in *Quattro novelle sulle apparenze* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1989), 11.

[23] Gianni Celati, *Appearances*, trans. Stuart Hood (London: Serpent's Tail, 1991), 11. As the page numbers are equivalent in English and Italian, both editions will henceforth be parenthetically referenced together.

outside of the tales we tell of it"].[24] Celati's concretely narrated present is not perforated, like that of Leopardi's poem; it is diaphanous.

Celatian narrative surfaces are contrasted by the fixation on depth of his contemporary Antonio Tabucchi. Tabucchi's narratives allude explicitly to meanings that escape the eye, invoking doublings and triplings of sense. The actions occurring in his stories imply others outside our ken, creating holes in the fabric of what is reported. *Piccoli equivoci senza importanza*,[25] his most philosophical collection of stories, speaks of writing as an effort to fill those gaps in consciousness, dispersed as it is over the course of temporal experience, in order to compensate for the shortcomings of reason and causal explanation. Character after character in *Piccoli equivoci* recognizes that fundamental motivators of their behavior lie buried deep in the recess of their minds, in inaccessible regions of the past, in traumas, coincidences, and illegible mandates of fate. Offscreen spaces seem to harbor the truth of the orders in which these characters live. Here, too, intelligence of the scenarios comes from afar, twirling along "quella girandola di sotterfugi, di rimandi, di imbrogli che fu quella storia" ["the pinwheel of subterfuges, postponements, and confusions which go to make up the whole story"].[26]

A writer a generation older than Tabucchi and Celati, Anna Maria Ortese, had a comparable way of accounting for the purposes and origins of narrative prose. Many of her stories, she claims, are efforts to convey dreams—not everyday dreams, which are "riproduttivi delle vicende e degli oggetti mentali" ["reproductions of mental events and objects"],[27] but rather dreams that are "stranieri agli oggetti e alle vicende mentali" ["alien to such objects and events"],

> quei sogni venuti dall'esterno, il perduto all'uomo, cioè il suo passato, il tempo che non è più, e che pare talvolta rechino notizie di una terra ignoto, dove quell passato sarebbe approdato, e parrebbe aprire alla filosofia una qualche speranza di una realtà effettiva, che la ragione, come visto dianzi, ha recisamente negata.

> [dreams which come from outside, from the parts of ourselves we have lost, meaning our past, the time that no longer exists: dreams which sometimes seem to bring us news of an unknown land where that past would appear to have gone, thus encouraging philosophy's hopes for a true and effective reality which reason, as evidence, most energetically denies.][28]

This contrast between a screen of comprehensible happenings and a broader, more perplexing backdrop calling their credibility into question is what generates the literary and structural tensions of her work. Her fictions seek to bring into the reader's consciousness those vaguely perceived spaces to which dreams "costituiscono una specie di ponte" ["constitute a sort

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[24] Celati, "Robert Walser, lezione di scandalo," 11, as cited in Carla Benedetti, "Celati e le poetiche della grazia," *Rassegna europea di letteratura italiana* 1 (1993): 39.

[25] Antonio Tabucchi, *Piccoli equivoci senza importanza* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1985).

[26] Ibid., 80. The translation is from Antonio Tabucchi, *Little Misunderstandings of No Importance*, trans. Frances Frenaye (New York: New Directions, 1987), 69.

[27] Anna Maria Ortese, "Il continente sommerso," in *In sonno e in veglia* (Milan: Adelphi, 1987), 115. The English is "The Submerged Continent," in *A Music Behind the Wall: Selected Stories*, trans. Henry Martin, 2 vols. (Kingston, NY: McPherson & Company, 1994–98), 1:14.

[28] Ortese, "Il continente submerso," 121; "The Submerged Continent," 1:21.

of bridge"],[29] whose murmurings she seeks to make audible within the forms of everyday perception.

Ortese shares that much in common with Tabucchi, but the younger writer enlists conceptual tools to bridge the expanse. His characters and narrators measure gaps between seen and unseen by way of cogitation, rumination, and conjecture—in short, by discursive understanding. They apply conventional processes of reflection to dimensions of experience outside their reach. Ortese, showing more skepticism toward conceptual thought, exits those frameworks to unfold her meanings. "Il continente sommerso," from which the above quotations are taken, documents her mode of passage. The composition begins as an essay in empirical, materialist philosophy but quickly gets twisted into a fantastic account of interaction between living persons and immaterial, unreachable souls, contradicting the claims of the foregoing philosophy. As you can see, says Ortese to her reader as she makes this unorthodox move, "Io ragiono benissimo, ma poi, di colpo, smetto di ragionare e traggo illazioni da fatti così lievi, cari, deliranti, sinistri" ["I can reason quite clearly; but then, suddenly, I abandon reasoning and spin off speculations from such frail, cherished, delirious, and sinister facts"].[30]

What often begins as a concrete exposition of an existentially recognizable here and now glides effortlessly into an elsewhere, into imponderable zones hovering outside the frame of facts. Ortese considers the border between commonsensical observation and the realms of the possible, fantastic, and surreal to be permeable and open to passage, which is not quite so clearly the case in Tabucchi. Both writers affirm a radical divergence between on and offscreen comprehension, but the ways in which they negotiate the divergence have little in common. The woman passes through walls like a phantom, the man imagines the other side without succeeding in breaching the barrier. Still, both bodies of work remain committed to that other side.

When what lies on that side *can* be configured or represented, as in Ortese, it comes onscreen. Yet even this screen, like every screen, leaves something off—if only the eye, or camera, or the "projector" conveying the vision. Occasionally, however, even that unrepresented source of the vision comes into focus, as in this early poem by Eugenio Montale:

> Forse un mattino andando in un'aria di vetro,
> arida, rivolgendomi, vedrò compirsi il miracolo:
> il nulla alle mie spalle, il vuoto dietro
> di me, con un terrore di ubriaco.
>
> Poi come s'uno schermo, s'accamperanno di gitto
> alberi case colli per l'inganno consueto.
> Ma sarà troppo tardi; ed io me n'andrò zitto
> tra gli uomini che non si voltano, col mio segreto.[31]
>
> [Maybe one morning, walking in air
> of dry glass, I'll turn and see the miracle occur—
> nothingness at my shoulders, the void

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[29] Ortese, "Il continente submerso," 115; "The Submerged Continent," 1:21.

[30] Ortese, "Il continente submerso," 122; "The Submerged Continent," 1:22.

[31] Eugenio Montale, "Forse un mattina andando in un'aria di vetro," with facing translation, in *Cuttlefish Bones: 1920–1927*, trans. William Arrowsmith (New York: Norton, 1992), 66–67.

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behind me—with a drunkard's terror.

Then, as on a screen, the usual illusion:
hills houses trees will suddenly reassemble,
but too late, and I'll quietly go my way,
with my secret, among men who don't look back.]

Montale's poem enacts more concisely than any of the previous examples the relation between a perceptual scene and what it excludes. As Italo Calvino notes in his commentary on this poem, this may represent the first literary use in Italian of the word *schermo* in the cinematic sense of a canvas on which images are projected.[32] Yet who can fail to be struck by the irony with which Montale uses this new art of cinema as a metaphor for *non-artistic knowledge*, or non-knowledge *tout court*? The hills and houses and trees that normally appear on the speaker's "screen" of lived experience make up only the "usual illusion": the canvas of common, everyday sight. On any particular morning, such a screen may go blank. The poet is not interested in this screen at all, but rather in what subtends it. At any moment he may be cast into another, offscreen space, detached from what stands in front of his eyes, forced to reconsider what he holds to be real.

Loss of faith in the screen of everyday perception, comments Calvino, amounts to an experience "nè più nè meno che della irrealtà del mondo" ["neither more nor less than of the world's unreality"].[33] It is a Janus-faced experience that lies at the very foundation "di religioni filosofie letterature" ["of religion, philosophy, and literature"].[34] At the moment that reality loses its coordinates it invites the discovery of new ones. Without explaining it in so many words, Montale's poem impugns the aspiration to reaffirm the referents of quotidian awareness by way of a realist aesthetic. A more fundamental type of art, instead, provides a "second sight": a paradoxical, miraculous glimpse of what eyes do not ordinarily look to see.[35] Even so, poetry issuing from this other, perplexing perspective does not aim to imagine or represent an offscreen thought or image, no more than it settles for onscreen referents. It ultimately confronts an aporia: the in-credibility of every possible screen of representation. What matters now is neither the screen nor its potential meanings, even those not represented, but the very process of screening: its reasons, causes, and modes of articulation. Could this be an inevitable, dramatic historical conclusion to the split between the seen and unseen in Michelangelo's *David*? It broadly coincides with the aesthetics of twentieth-century modernism. The ultimate offscreen is not what lies in the mind's eye, but the eye itself, its constitution, on which meaning, disclosure, and revelation rely.

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[32] Italo Calvino, "Forse un mattino," in *Letture montaliane. In occasione dell'80° compleanno del Poeta*, ed. Sylvia Luzzatto (Genoa: Bozzi, 1977), p. 44. The English translation is provided in Montale, *Cuttlefish Bones*, 220.

[33] Calvino, "Forse," 29; *Cuttlefish Bones*, 216.

[34] Calvino, "Forse," 29; *Cuttlefish Bones*, 216.

[35] The thesis of art as a second sight is presented in Eugenio Montale, "Il fascismo e letteratura," in *Auto da fé. Cronache in due tempi* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1966), 23. The English translation is Eugenio Montale, "Fascism and Literature," in *The Second Life of Art: Selected Essays of Eugenio Montale*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Galassi (New York: Ecco Press, 1982), 16.

VII. Offscreen space, an absence inscribed in a work's structure of significance, can be posited by a statue, photograph, film, poem, or story. Some works point to what is omitted from a scene of representation, others thematize, reflect upon, or configure it in complex ways. Do such artworks bear implications for others that have no apparent concern at all for offscreen space? Is it not true that most works incorporate the greater bulk of their meanings *within* their field of representation? Not necessarily, and Montale's poem helps us see why. It allows us to glean the consequences of Cavell's observation that every experience of a screen is already an experience of displacement—a displacement that ordinary perception neutralizes, making it appear as our natural condition. All art removes us from the naturalized narratives of everyday life, focusing our attention on matters that do not concern us directly. It draws us into a theater of reflection. No novel meanings or understandings, no "screen experiences," take place except within such a space—within and surrounding the screen, compelling us to contrast our reading of the natural-historical scenes we have left behind with the one we have before us. It may even be that the more numerous the associations an artwork establishes in such a space of reception, the more meaningful it proves to be. Even when thoroughly engrossing and self-contained, aesthetic screens transmit cognitive power only by establishing a productive relation with the representations we are used to beholding. Even the effects of perfectly lifelike artworks prove significant only because they are icons, analogues, or alternatives to experience as we know it, referring the mind back to our lives and to the interpretive codes by which we operate. This places us in an offscreen space of relational reading. Over and beyond the mimetic and diegetic spaces of a statue, film, photograph, or literary text lies the ground of such spaces in the cognitive activity of art, which both creates and distinguishes, separating and bridging, on and offscreen space. A great interest of art lies in how it highlights and negotiates the difference between them.

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