

Seeing Absence

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Absence Experience as Perceptual

Dharmakīrti's view is that what an experience of the absence of an object consists in is an inference to a belief in the object's absence based on the failure to perceive the object in circumstances where the conditions are met for its perceptibility (*pakṣatva*) (*Nyāya-bindu* 43).

But: This doesn't get the phenomenology right: the phenomenology is "not that of the head being occluded by the gymnast's body" but of their head as absent.



Nyāya Realism and Absence Perception

“In fact, positing the sensory perception of absence is correct because there are experiences such as are reported as “I observed the absence of the water-jug on the ground”, which are demonstrably correlated with sensory perception” (*vastuto bhūtale ghaṭo nāstīti mayā dṛṣṭam ity anubhavād indriyasyānanyathāsiddhānvaya-vyatireka-vaśāc cendriya-jan yaṃ pratyakṣam evābhāvasya yuktaṃ*; Mahādeva Puṇatāmakara 1930, 159).

Krishnachandra Bhattacharyya, *The Subject as Freedom* (1930), chapter 4.

- **Two kinds** of absence experience (seeing x as absent in y vs. seeing y as wearing a bare look)
- A **contrast mechanism**, an imagined scene with x present contrasts with the actual scene with x absent
- A **transformation** into states of “conscious non-perception”. Non-deductive restructurings of the field of consciousness



1875-1949

Mental Imagery

A perceptual experience of the book being absent “is with the conscious imagination of the book as found being distinct from it” (1930, §72).

“One may come to imagine the room as with the [book] and then realise [its] absence in reference to this imagined content. To imagine an object in a perceived locus is a special form of imagination in which the present locus is viewed as characterising and not as characterised by the imagined content” (1930, §76).

“To be conscious of a spatial object as perceived is to be conscious of a percept and to be conscious of it as unperceived is to be conscious of an image” (1936b, §1)



Negative Attention

“We know the absence of an object, say of a book on the table by a faculty which is neither perception nor inference. It is not perception, for the absence gives no sensation; and it cannot be inference, for inference must be based on perception. The faculty however being there, it may be helped out by the perception or inference. It is nearest to psychological introspection, though it knows objective non-existence and not subjective existence merely. The non-existence of a book on the table is an objective fact known by negative attention, defined by relation to the facts obtained by positive attention.” (“Some Aspects of Negation,” 1914, §9)

Presence as Gestalt-contexture

A present figure is organised as “a unitary whole of varying degrees of richness in detail, which, by virtue of its intrinsic articulation and structure, possesses coherence and consolidation and, thus, detaches itself as an organized and closed unit from the surrounding field” (Gurwitsch 2010, 139).

An absence lacks any such structure; it is presented as lacking in spatial contours or location: negative attention to absence is “the consciousness of presentness without space-position” (1930, §79).



“Presence-as-absent”

Bhattacharyya writes that “an object may be also directly known to be now absent, to be 'present as absent' in this sense—a paradoxical phrase to be justified presently.” (1930, §68).

“[Sometimes the] theme is evanescent, as in Sartre’s famous example of looking for Pierre in the café, and he is not there. Everywhere in the café what is attended to is Pierre presented as absent against the contextual background of the cafe. It is like searching for the hidden weeds amongst a thick lawn cover. The content in thematic attention is not nothing, it is something. And as soon as the weed presents itself as theme, the previous theme of weed *presented as absent*, an evanescent flickering of thematic content, is replaced by the weed as present” (Arvidson 2006, 72).

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The Sphere of Attention

Context and Margin

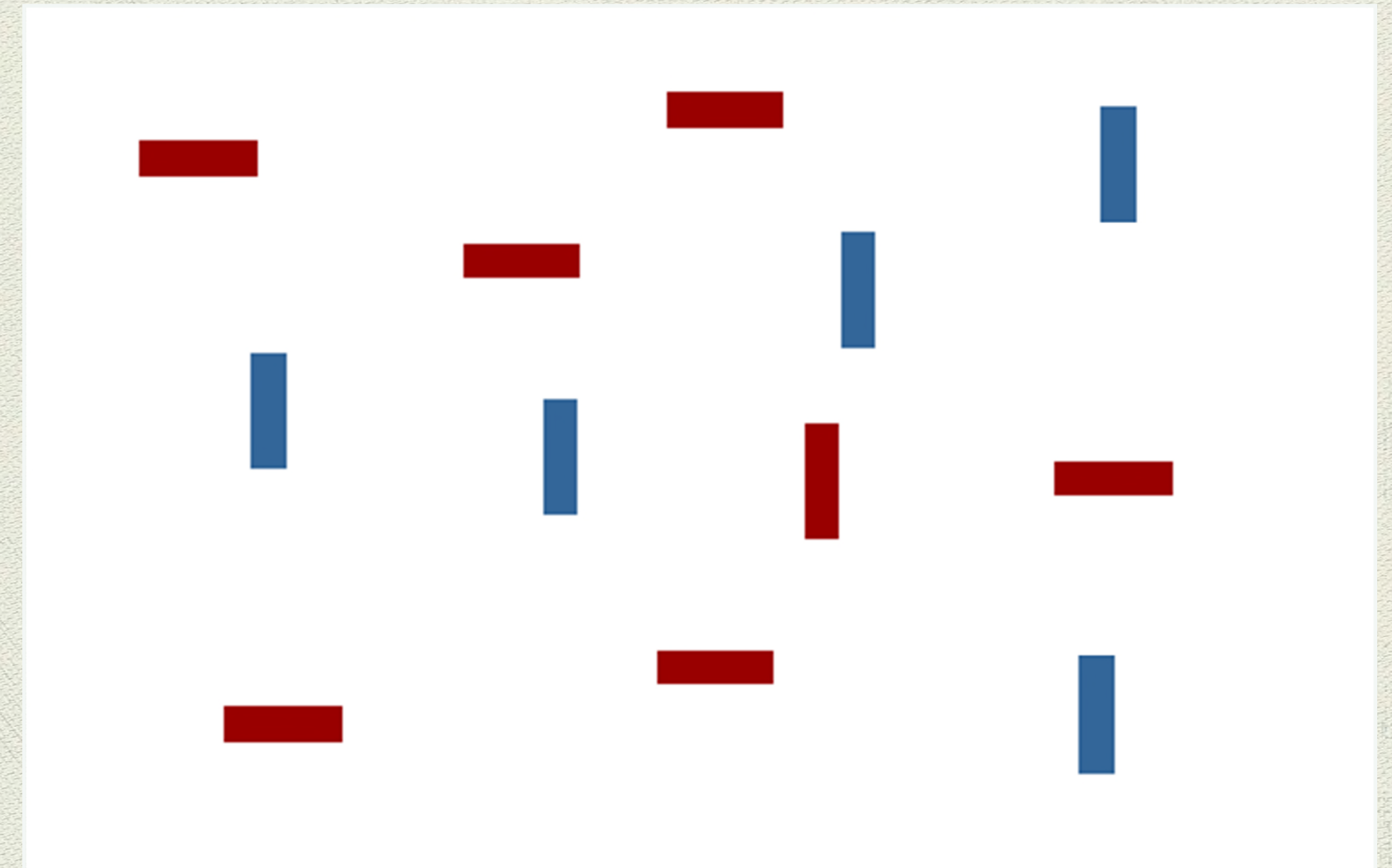


CONTRIBUTIONS TO PHENOMENOLOGY

The Window of Attention

“Two different analogies have been used to describe attention. The spotlight metaphor for spatial attention implies increased activation of objects in the attended location. An alternative metaphor—the attention window—implies the exclusion of items not currently in the attended location. These metaphors assume different default states for unattended objects. The spotlight analogy leaves unattended features registered in their separate modules but not further analysed, while attention actively binds the selected features together. On this view, illusory conjunctions arise if the spotlight is poorly focused and selects a feature from the wrong location. The window analogy, on the other hand, implies that irrelevant features are actively excluded or suppressed, perhaps because, without attention, random conjunctions of the features present are unconsciously formed” (Triesman 2003, 102).

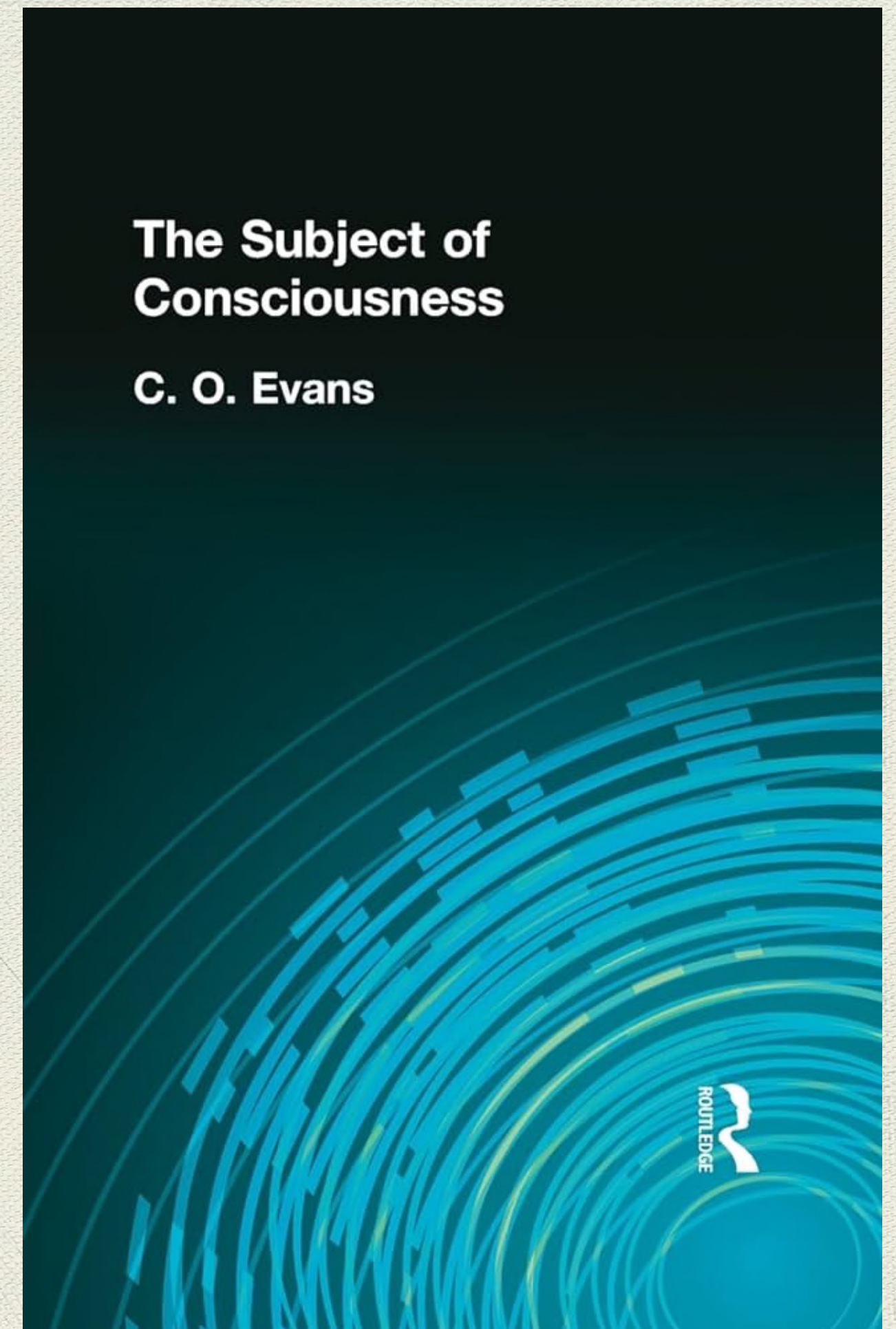
Visual Conjunction Search: Search for ‘Blue Horizontal’



Role of Mental Imagery as “Guiding Idea”

“To be conscious of a spatial object as perceived is to be conscious of a percept and to be conscious of it as unperceived is to be conscious of an image” (Bhattacharyya, “Objective Interpretation of Percept and Image,” 1936b, §1)

Evans: image as guide: “We may look upon a guiding idea as a partial filter that lets through those ‘noticings’ that are germane to the search, and that at the same time keeps down the number of extraneous ‘noticings’ [...but...] this guiding idea cannot itself be conceived of as the object of attention during the search. Were it to become so, instead of prosecuting the search the attender would at best be engaged in planning a search, and at worst he would be merely distracted by an idea.” (1970, 109).



Farrennikova's Model

“Visual experience of O's absence consists in an object-level mismatch between O's template generated by visual working memory and a percept of the observed stimulus” (2013, 444).

“You are certain that you had brought your keys into the house, you look and look, but the keys are nowhere to be found. Here is the breakdown of the process. Prior to searching, you generate a visual template of the keys in your working memory. [...] Next, you project this template and match it against the places where you typically leave your keys [...where...] in projection, you attend to the template of your keys for the purpose of comparing it with the world. An experience of absence of your keys will involve a mismatch between their template and the places viewed during search.” (2013, 441).

Incongruity and Surprise are Inessential to the Experience of Absence

“The phenomenology of absence,” Farennikova writes, “is the experience of incongruity” (2013, 445).

But this is just a metaperceptual feeling: “We do not see absences, but we may feel surprised when there is an absence of seeing”, a feeling whose function is “to help the subject to avoid or reduce epistemic inconsistency” (Martin and Dokic 2013, 123-4).

No such feeling is essential to absence experience: “The gap is not merely perceived as an empty space between two objects, i.e. the teeth that mark the boundaries of the gap. Rather, it is tactually perceived as a location at which a tooth is now *missing*. Something once experienced as present within your mouth is now experienced as lacking” (Cavendon-Taylor 2017, 355).

In such a case, there is no feeling of surprise. As Cavendon-Taylor puts it, “the phenomenology of surprise is not central to any analysis of absence perception” (2017, 362). “Farennikova is wrong about incongruity constituting the phenomenology of absence perception” (Cavendon-Taylor 2017, 361)

Absential Looks: Absence Experiences without Expectation or Search

“Instead of the expected signature at the end of a letter you see blank white paper: you say, ‘I saw that there was no name.’ This reports an experience of absence, which is not to be confused with affective experiences like surprise which frequently attend it. The experience happened as you saw, and registered the presence of, a pure expanse of white. [...] You say: ‘In seeing the white, I saw there was no signature,’ thereby timing the experience and internally linking it to the seeing of white. What can be the nature of this link? What sort of ‘in seeing’ is this? [...] I submit that [...] the experience of seeing the absence of X is [...] a cognitive experience such that we experience the visual object as a presence endowed with a negative property. For example, we see the pure expanse of white as an unsigned-upon white expanse, and (so to say) bereft in a certain regard.” (O’Shaughnessy 2002, 329–30).

Bhattacharyya on Absential Looks

“A field, for example, was observed in the past with a tree standing on it, which might or might not have been particularly noticed at the time. The observer comes to the place when the tree has been removed and finds **a new bare look** about the place. He may not know that it is the absence of the tree that makes the difference but he notices the difference, bareness or absence.[...] [T]he absence of the tree is known as a character of the locus, the perceived field where the tree stood. The tree may not be definitely remembered but if remembered it is recognised to be the specification of the absence that continues to be known, **the place not ceasing to wear the bare look** because of the definite memory. As the place is perceived, absence as a character of the place may also be claimed to be perceived. There is, however, a distinction between the sense in which absence is a character and that in which a quality like colour is a character of the place. The place in being perceived with the bareness or absence is, if not perceived, then at least imagined as what need not have the character, **being presented as with a new look** or, in other words, as distinct from what it might be. But to perceive the place with a colour is not necessarily to imagine that it might be without it. **The perceived locus of absence being imagined in the very perception of it as without the absence, the absence is only a floating adjective that unlike colour is felt to be dissociated from the locus....**The perception [of the absence] may be called aesthetic or imaginative perception to distinguish it from ordinary perception.”
(1930, §70, 71)

Absential Looks and Solicitations

“The field **looks bare**” - an absential look (cf. “the field **looks green**”)

“Affordance”: a term introduced by J. J. Gibson, is used “to describe objective features of the world in terms of their meaning to the creatures that use them. Thus a hole *affords* hiding to a rabbit but not to an elephant. To us floors afford walking on, apples afford eating, etc.” Dreyfus notes that the Gestaltists were “unhappy with the term ‘affordance’. They were interested not in our perception of objective features of the world but in how such features are related to the needs and interests of perceivers. So they introduced the term *solicitations*. For Gibson an apple *affords* eating, i.e. is edible, whether anyone is hungry or not, but the Gestaltists add that only when one is hungry does an apple *solicit* eating, i.e. **look delicious**” (Dreyfus 2013: 37, n.12).

*McClelland, Tom. 2020. “The mental affordance hypothesis,” *Mind* 129: 401–27.

Absence Experience as “Aesthetic” Experience

- One project is to satisfy our “visual interest or curiosity about an object present to the senses” (1980, 148), Wollheim’s term for which is seeing **face-to-face**.
- Another project, however, is “to have perceptual experiences of things that are not present to the senses: that is to say, both of things that are absent and also of things that are non-existent” (1980, 145).
- The hallmark of such cultivated visual experience, which Wollheim calls “**seeing-in**”, is an “indifference to” or “dissociation from” the details of the thing present, because the spectator’s “essential concern is with the further visual experience” of that which is absent.
- A better way to formulate the fundamental distinction is as between the role of perception in the presentation of things as present, and the role of perception in the presentation of things as absent.

Absence Experience as “Aesthetic” Perception

[1] Wollheim writes, pictorial experiences are “perceptual experiences of things that are not present to the senses: that is to say, both of things that are absent and also of things that are non-existent” (1980, 145).

[2] “Told of a painting that it represents, say, a young woman, we might ask, Which young woman? Now for some pictures like the Ingres portrait, there is an answer to this question even if the actual person we ask turns out not to know it. In such cases the picture represents a particular object. However for other pictures such as the genre picture by Manet, there is no answer to the question, and asking the question shows only that we have misunderstood what we have been told. In such cases, the painting represents merely an object or an event of a particular kind.” (1987, 69).

Aniconic Representation: “The Empty Throne”



The Empty Throne,
Kanaganahalli, 1st-3rd c.CE

