THE AGENCY OF ABSENCE:
A CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING

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PREFACE

ABSENCE: “the non-existent or lack of.” ... 

PRESENCE: “The state or fact of existing, occurring, or being present.” The Oxford Dictionary (2017)
INTRODUCTION

“An absent presence reflects the apparent contradictory binding together of things absent with things present…”

Maddrell (2013: 505)

Absence is given presence through the manifestation of an object which instills recognition, remembrance or reflection. The notion of the absence-presence is most closely associated with immediate passing and the resultant grief left behind, Avril Maddrell (2013). However, is it possible to go beyond the grief of a loved one, and experience the presence of absence in the distant past, through the use of memorials and markers and can this be used as a method to read a place?

The concept of absence and presence is one that has been well researched in terms of memorialisation, memory, grief and culture. This essay aims to apply these theories to a reading of a place, as a method of understanding the essence of that place. In order to read a site that is not immediately or obviously connected to the deceased, devoid of memorialisation, one must look beyond these more immediate markers of the absent and find new ways of establishing this connection. This essay argues that this reading can be achieved through a threefold analysis of absence; that it has spatiality, it has materiality and it has agency (Meyer and Woodthorpe, 2008). In order to focus valuation of absence beyond the superficial traces of the everyday jetsam, erosion, weathering and removal will be the main focus of this exploration.

Through an introduction into many of the key texts surrounding the topic, a methodology has been interpreted from these theories and then applied to two differing sites, to experiment the legitimacy of this method of spatial analysis. The sites; the floor of Bath Abbey and a vacant industrial building on Welsh Back, Bristol, will be assessed in terms of the criteria outlined within the following methodology.

This essay aims to demonstrate that the presence of objects or traces, is immediately linked with an absence of some sort, and that these connections can be broken down into different assessments, through the type of marker present; physical, emotional or practical.

“The absent can have just as much of an effect upon relations as recognisable forms of presence can have. Social relations are performed not only around what is there but sometimes also around the presence of what is not. Indeed the category of absence can have a significance presence in social relations and in material culture.” Hetherington (2004: 159)
METHODOLOGY

Both the Bath Abbey floor and the Welsh Back site were explored and experienced during site visits. The Bath Abbey floor, which formed the initial study site, was visited once. While a vague idea of the subject matter was in mind during this site visit, this methodology and more directed reading of absence and presence have occurred since this occasion and have therefore been applied to this location retrospectively. Whilst this is not ideal in the reading of a space, on this occasion, the understanding of the space and the application of absence-presence has been made possible through the simple application of theory related to memorialisation and remembrance.

In contrast to this, the Welsh Back site was visited on a number of occasions, both before and after the argument was established, but the main recording exercise was conducted with an established method in mind.

As a result of this contrast in the perception of the sites, the Bath Abbey floor will be used as a tool to establish and test out the theoretical standpoint derived from much of the reading around absence-presence in relation to death, memorialisation and remembrance. The location is more in line with much of the reading and by looking specifically at the ledger stones that make up the Abbey floor, this more simplistic reading can be undertaken.

The thinking and ideas developed from the use of the Bath Abbey floor and the broad reading across the theory of absence-presence, will then be applied to the Welsh Back site to determine if the method used at the Bath Abbey can be applied elsewhere as a tool for reading a place, irrespective of the personal connection or ties to grief and remembrance. Findings at both sites have been recorded through the use of photographs, and where necessary, these have been edited to further convey a point. Additional information has been supplied where appropriate.

*They (ruins) contain a still and seemingly quiescent present, and they also suggest forebodings, pointing to future erasure and subsequently, the reproduction of space, thus conveying a sense of the transience of all spaces.*

*Edensor (2005:125)*
THE PRESENCE OF THEORY ON ABSENCE

In order to establish an appropriate reading of a site, it has been necessary to engage the previous research and theoretical stand points surrounding the essence of the absent presence and how this can be materialised or quantified.

Firstly, it is important to gain an understanding of the literature relating to theories of, or linking to, absence-presence. Law (2004) has distinguished between two versions of absence. Manifest absence is the manifestation of absence through presence, the absence that can never be truly absent because it is marked by something. Secondly, Law uses the term “otherness” to define the absence that cannot be placed and cannot be connected to the present through an object. Law (2004: 84) further writes: “Manifest absence goes with presence. It is one of its correlates since presence is incomplete and depends on absence”. Law (2004:84). This notion of splitting absence into different interpretations is important to note as by observing an absence in a place, there must be some element that has triggered this reading. Therefore, it is possible to argue that absence can not truly be absent, and this term “otherness” identifies this problem. Otherness on the other hand is almost impossible to record so would not form a valid justification for the reading of a place.

Much of the argument for this essay is that absence is made present through indicators in the current environment, regardless of the emotional ties connected with remembrance of a person, experience or memory. This idea of indicators or markers was first touched on by Derrida, through a philosophical approach into absence and presence in metaphysics. Derrida states that, “the mark of the absence of a presence, an always already absent present, of the lack at the origin that is the condition of thought and experience” (Derrida, 1967). Through this approach, Derrida develops the idea that absence leaves a ‘trace’. As highlighted by Law (2004), the issues of using absence as a tool to read a place, is that nothing can be truly absent, as it is the presence of a “thing” that highlights us to what is missing in the first place. It is this notion of something existing but that isn’t immediately identifiable, that Derrida is describing. “The concept of the trace is incompatible with the concept of retention of the becoming past of what has been present.” Derrida (1982:21)

Continuing on from this idea that absence leaves a marker, Meyer and Woodthorpe (2008) use two contrasting case studies; a cemetery and a museum, to demonstrate that there is similarity between the two spaces in the way that absence is materialised into the presence. Although the journal is only an expression of early research into the study area, it outlines a threefold approach of identifying absence, without dwelling heavily on the death and memorialisation aspect. These three aspects used to physically place absence include; spatial awareness, materiality or agency (Meyer and Woodthorpe, 2008).

“First that absence can be spatially located; second, that absence can have some kind of materiality (some kind of ‘stuff’); and, lastly, that absence can have agency (it ‘acts’ or ‘does’ things).” Meyer and Woodthorpe (2008:11)

This concept of “agency” is arguably the most interesting, in that the authors allocate this to absence by defining it as it, “...’acts’ or ‘does’ things.”. It is this notion of “agency” that will form the main argument of this essay, in that while absence cannot be truly absent, it is this “agency” of a presence, that creates this connection with absence. One of the shortfalls of this paper is that as it is an outline of early research, it fails to demonstrate how this theory can be applied practically, with clear examples of what it is they are using to define their terms.

Whilst this idea that absence has an identifiable, spatial quality forms the basis of an effective method of analysis,
“Marks, scars, signs, tokens and inscriptions that form the material traces through which past gestures reside in the present can be assigned meanings, but they cannot fully recover what has already gone – the distance between ‘now’ and ‘then’ ‘can only be filled by the leap of interpretation” (Sheringham 1993: 313–14).

This is a point that is also touched on by Edensor (2005) whereby the method we use for the selection of artifacts often disguises the actual meaning or essence of a place. Although this is a crucial point to make in the reading of a space in terms of the authentic and factual response to this, I would argue that it is the presence of these objects themselves, not the reading or interpretation of what they might indicate that is important to the identification of absence.

“Objects maintain tensions between physical presence and the threat of disintegration and absence.”
— Hallam and Hockey (2001:63)

On entering the Abbey, one is immediately aware of a ledger stone, visually protruding from those encircling it. This instantaneous recognition and awareness, I would argue, is the spatial locality of absence outlined by Meyer and Woodthorpe.

“The material of the stone is effectively fused with (or closely linked to) the living bodily trace of the departed, thus establishing the headstone as a distinctive physical presence that ‘lives’:” Hallam and Hockey (2001:162).

Whilst the ledger stone is present and has a physical presence, it is also a marker for an absence. The immediacy and obviousness of this particular stone, distracts from the surrounding absences associated with the much older, more eroded ledger stones.

This immediacy is created through the definition of the engraving, the crispness of the stone and its central position within the aisle. This, along with the actual stone itself, demonstrates the second aspect of the Meyer and Woodthorpe theory, that absence has materiality. This is a difficult point to define, as technically absence or being absent is the state of not existing, but it is
this present materiality that forms the trace or marker of what is absent. This is a new stone; a memorial to the Benefactors, “Mr and Mrs Roper”. Mr Roper, who passed away in 2014, donated significantly to the Abbey throughout his lifetime and was well known within the city. This ledger stone bares significance to those who experienced a relationship with Mr Roper, but also to visitors of the abbey, who previously knew nothing of his existence. Unlike the surrounding stones within the floor of the Abbey, this stone is a symbol of remembrance, rather than a marker of a grave, and yet, this new stone and the presence it creates is strong enough to guide visitors off the desired route straight down the aisle, so as not to walk on it – instead opting to walk around it on the older less defined stones. Thus, the third element of the approach to absence; that absence has agency, “it does things”. (Meyer and Woodthorpe, 2008). Does this phenomenological experience suggest that those stones that are eroded through the reoccurring presence of the living, have diminished presence within the demographic of the present?

This erosion over time, as referred to by Bundock, is apparent for the majority of the remaining ledger stones. Over 900 stones were laid in place in 1600’s to the early 1800’s, commonly marking the date and location of burial. At this time, these memorial stones would have been the object of remembrance for grieving loved ones. In the present, the memorials have been eroded and are now mostly illegible or have been broken up through Scott’s work on the floor in 1860-70. Subsequently and inevitably, the memories of those that were laid to rest beneath the abbey floor have too been eroded.

“Memories fade, just as actual memorials erode over time” (C. Bundock, 2016)

However, it could be argued that the absence of what is missing from those most eroded, almost blank stones, those stones so fragmented only a single letter remains, is somewhat greater than those that are more intact. Even within the Abbey floor, this concept moves beyond just the memorialisation of the ledger stones. There is a footprint permanently cast into repair works in the floor by the gift shop. The owner or history of this footprint may not be traceable, but that factual history of the object is almost irrelevant. Seeming, the greater number of questions unanswered about the absent person in some way creates greater presence. The trace or essence of that person is still present, although we cannot begin to know them. This is the agency of absence.
MORPHOLOGY OF THE SITE THROUGH COLLAGING

THE WELSH BACK SITE
THE APPLICATION OF ABSENCE-PRESENCE

“Historical sites... “remain essential bridges between then and now. They confirm or deny what we think of it, symbolise or memorialise communal links over time, and provide archaeological metaphors that illuminate the process of history and memory.” (Lowenthal, 1985: xxiii)

From this first application of the theoretical position applied to the floor of the Bath Abbey, the principles discussed will now be applied to the Welsh Back site. While the Abbey tied in to the outlining theory that absence-presence is most closely linked to and experienced through grief and memorialisation, the Welsh Back site does not have any immediate or obvious connection to remembrance. This study will use a combination of researched history and photographs taken on site visits, alongside the application of the theory to test the appropriateness of the application that absence has agency, and this can be found and used to read ‘place’, not just through loss.

The Welsh Back site consists of one buildings mass, which is made up of two different structures, the oldest of which, the southern block, features original elements that date from around 1883. The northern block has remained in a largely unaltered form since the 1930’s. The building exists in its current state as a vacant warehouse, but was used as a storage shed for grain during the 1900’s, for deliveries made by boat along the Floating Harbour. On visiting the site, it is immediately obvious that the building is made up of a collage of varied materials from different times.

From the 1910 map of the site (right), it is visible that the context surrounding the building has changed dramatically, including the building itself, yet this absence of the past context would not be identifiable through the site today, without the use of historic maps or old photographs.

“...The application of hierarchical forms of knowledge from without (media, TV, Internet) removes the sensual, situated transmission through which places, events and people are remembered.” Edensor (205:129)

The building and its surrounding context raises immediate thoughts relating to absence-presence. This industrial building has been somewhat frozen in time, as if to “form a gap which reveals where something was in contradistinction to spaces of memorialisation,” Lowenthal, D. (1985:172). In other words, while the surrounding buildings of the same time period have been converted or demolished to make was for new interpretations, the building on the Welsh Back site has remained true to its origins, as if preserved to freeze the memory of the place.

Whilst the context and the building itself raises many questions in relation to absence-presence, the application of the theory will focus on objects, and more specifically, objects as markers or traces of absence. Objects play a substantial role in the essence of place.

“Various objects constitute the basis of an ‘imagined presence’, carrying that imagined presence across the members of a local community. Places also carry traces of the memories of different social groups who have lived in or passed through that place.”

The first and most obvious demonstration of this at the Welsh Back site is the application of the discussed theory to the use of signage and graffiti on the site. In many ways, signage resembles the traces of a memorial or marker headstone. Whilst it does not provide the emotional connection, the presence of a sign is to draw your attention to something. The use of “No Parking” signage on the site in its current state is excessive, but it is the occurrences in places where the traces of a past sign can be observed even though the object has been removed. This loss of information is of more interest than the overly repetitive, somewhat distracting signs, which distract the eye from the markers of absence. This could be linked to the immediate observation of the Benefactor stone in the Abbey.

These traces, although arguably present in their current state, provide the ability to apply the basic principles of spatiality, materiality and agency of the absent signage. However, it becomes difficult to distinguish the difference between spatiality and materiality, as in terms of analysis, they often for the same argument. It is not the absence of the signs themselves that is of interest, but more what was displayed on them, why they were taken down, who took them down, or even who put them up in the first place.
“...One person’s sacred memorial can be another’s litter or vandalism visited upon the landscape,”

(Maddrell 2013: 510)

Accompanying the signage along the face of the building, is a scattering of graffiti, some of which has been painted over or washed off, leaving the trace of its presence, but rendering the tag absent. This conflict between the person who created the graffiti, and the individual who had to remove it, comes into play, through this spatial marker and trace of these colliding views, even though I, as the interpreter have no prior knowledge or memory of this.

This highlights one of the potential issues of using absence-presence as a method for analysing a site, in that although it has been previously stated that the presence of a trace is enough justification of an absence, there is often very little additional information to inform the investigation, leading to the observer making assumptions or their own interpretations.

“Memories that surface, whether in the form of a person’s writings or other material fragments of a life, are traces of the past that demand reflection.”

Hallam and Hockey (2001:105)
After testing the appropriateness of the theoretical underpinning by recording the more obvious markers of missing signs, a more thorough investigation of the site was undertaken. This involved searching and recording evidence of erosion or erasure. This category of traces is much more relevant to the previous study of the Abbey, as it is a consistent across both sites.

“...The undesigned (erasure, the cutting and repositioning of ledger stones, the missing inscriptions) becomes considered not as a form of dirt but as the positive traces of on-going occupation.” Littlefield (2016:21).

The presence of erosion or erasure is one of the most consistent and clear traces for signifying absence, in that something or someone must have interacted with the site in order for this current set of conditions of this given day to occur.

In terms of the theoretical position, erosion/erasure can be spatially located, often leaving a void or depression which identifies a deeper reading of the site. There is also some degree of the materiality of absence, although this is better associated with erosion rather than erasure. The agency created by these traces is arguably much more impressionable than that of the missing signs.
The concept that greater agency is created through less obvious, but more profound traces is key to the application of this approach.

EMOTIONAL TRACES

“Material markers may claim a ‘static’ form, such as the stone monument or they may become meaningful through use, being self-consciously reanimated in practice.”
Hallam and Hockey (2001:91)

By undertaking the threefold approach to reading a site, it became apparent that there are objects or markers on, or that make up a part of the Welsh Back site that exude agency, but are very much present. These markers represent the more personal inquiries about the users of the site past and present.

The bend in the railing raises questions about whether it was done intentionally, who it was that did it, what was there reason for doing so. These are all questions created by the absence of information, which have arisen from the presence of something unexpected or out of the ordinary. The new locks on the old industrial doors give the impression that the building is in regular use,
but the building is vacant. Likewise, the numbers on the key pad of the lock are worn in places, showing the trace of regular use.

The nail placed on the steel gable support stands out because it is out of the ordinary, implying that it has been put there on purpose by someone. Similarly, the one paving slab that has slipped out of position, while all those surrounding it are predominately aligned, suggests that it might have been moved deliberately or as a necessity. It is also possible to establish that this displacement must have happened some time ago, as the earth and vegetation around the slab had grown to fill in the void created.

Agency and subjectivity are not just about calculation and interpretation. They may also have to do with emotion. Callon and Law (2004:8)

The essay has discussed the theory of absence-presence through agency. By using a threefold approach outlined by Meyer and Woodthorpe, a reading of the Bath Abbey site and the Welsh Back site was undertaken.

Through this study, the focus of data collection was based on the presence of absences, looking specifically for spatial locality, materiality and agency (Meyer and Woodthorpe (2008). Whilst on the surface it was relatively simple to observe the connections between these components and the traces used to identify them, it became difficult to ascertain where to draw the line of what is actually relevant. This then raised questions of authenticity and the selection process, but by remaining focused on pure absence-presence has lead to the development of different grouping of traces.

It has become a fundamental underpinning of the reading undertaken as part of this research that, although absences exist everywhere, these can only really come into play through the presence of an object, marker or trace.

In terms of using this thinking to read a site, it produces an interesting and unique viewpoint, focused on what is or what is not essential to the sites make-up, rather than the accuracy, factual or authentic understanding of every aspect of the sites lifespan. However, this also means that everything is open to interpretation, or requires further research into why some of these traces have become present, which is not always feasible.

In order to develop this understanding further, a framework of traces could be developed to justify or quantify the overall value of each of these occurrences.

To summarise, it is possible to read a site using absence-presence theory, and that this is brought into focus or materialised through traces. In all of the instances, it was then possible to assess the spatial qualities, materiality and agency of each of these traces, albeit often a loose connection.

“The absent has a geography – a surrounding that implies both presence and present” (Hetherington, 2003: 1941).


