

# Perceptual Experiences of (Depicted) Absence

Alberto Voltolini

Università degli Studi di Torino, Italy

**Abstract** In recent philosophy of perception, an important debate has been raised as regards whether one can experientially perceive absences. Three main positions have been discussed: radical perceptualism, cognitivism, and metacognitivism. In this paper, first of all, I want to claim that perceptualism can be maintained in a *moderate* form, once one explains the proper role that the relevant expectations play, as *weakly cognitively penetrating* one's perception of absence in its phenomenal difference from a previous perceptual experience. Moreover, I want to claim that a similar result can be applied to *pictorial* perceptual experiences of absences, once one takes pictorial experience as a genuine yet *sui generis* perceptual seeing-in experience.

**Keywords** Perception of absences. Pictorial absences. Moderate perceptualism. Radical perceptualism. Cognitivism. Metacognitivism.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 The State of the Art. – 3 My Own Account. – 4 Perceptual Experiences of Depicted Absences. – 5 Conclusion.



Edizioni  
Ca'Foscari

## Peer review

Submitted 2024-07-23  
Accepted 2024-10-17  
Published 2024-12-12

## Open access

© 2024 Voltolini | 4.0



**Citation** Voltolini, Alberto (2024). "Perceptual Experiences of (Depicted) Absence". *JoLMA*, 5(2), 459-476.

DOI 10.30687/JoLma/2723-9640/2024/03/008

## 1 Introduction

At least since Sorensen (2008) and Farennikova (2013), an important debate has been occurring in contemporary philosophy of mind as regards whether one can experientially perceive absences. Three main positions have been hitherto presented in the debate:

1. the *radical perceptualist* one, for which one genuinely experientially perceives absences, whether veridically (Farennikova 2013; 2015) or non-veridically (Mumford 2021);
2. the *cognitivist* one, for which grasping absences is a matter, if not of beliefs or other cognitive states (Block 2023, 185), of intellectual seemings (Gow 2021b; see also O'Shaughnessy 2003, 330);
3. the *metacognitivist* one (Martin, Dokic 2013), for which one's experiences are affected by absences at an upper level of cognitive phenomenology, by their being imbued in their mode with a feeling of surprise.

In this paper, first of all, I want to claim that the perceptualist position can be maintained in a *moderate* form (MPP), once one explains the proper role that the relevant expectations play, as *weakly cognitively penetrating* one's perceptual experience of absence in its phenomenal difference from a previous perceptual experience. Indeed, MPP also conforms with the model of *cognitive penetration lite* (Macpherson 2012; 2015). As we will see, a perceptual experience of absence is basically a matter of occlusion removal affecting a change in the non-conceptual content of one's perceptual experience, as matching a change in the overall phenomenal perceptual character of that experience. Moreover, I want to claim that a similar result can be applied to *pictorial* experiences of absence, once one takes pictorial experience as a genuine yet *sui generis* perceptual *seeing-in* twofold experience, as affecting in particular the so-called *recognitional fold* of that experience. Section 1 presents the main *pro* and *cons* of the aforementioned positions. Section 2 elaborates MPP. Section 3 applies this position to the case of depicted absences grasped in a *seeing-in* perceptual experience.

Before starting, a caveat. In this paper, I will only deal with so-called perceptual experiences of absence in the sense of the experiences that something is not out there, *propositional absences*: in the paradigmatic example, one's experience of coming back to a café one was sitting some minutes before and seeing that the laptop one left on one of the café's tables is no longer there (Farennikova 2013). Hence, I will not be concerned with the perceptual experience of objects that can themselves be considered absences, *objectual absences*: e.g. black dark, *qua*

absence of light,<sup>1</sup> or silence, *qua* absence of sound (Sorensen 2008).<sup>2</sup> Since these absences can be conceived as instantiations of properties merely described as negative, undoubtedly, the latter sort of experience is of a genuine perceptual kind, as we will briefly see.

Indeed, suppose that in the *overall phenomenal perceptual character* of a perceptual experience one distinguishes between the monadic *mental oil* or *mere phenomenal character*, i.e., the pure what-it-is-like of an experience, and the relational *mental paint* or *presentational character* (Block 1996; 2003), i.e., the *presentation* that the experience features that constitutes the mere phenomenal character of that experience make of the perceivable worldly properties that are ascribed to the objects of that experience.<sup>3</sup> For example, in perceiving a red object, the reddish feature of a perceptual experience constitutes its mere phenomenal character of that experience, while the fact that such a feature presents the *redness* ascribed to that object constitutes its presentational character. That presentational character makes it the case that the experience is of a perceptual kind. For only having a mere phenomenal character makes an experience sensory, but not perceptual – as is well known, this is the point for Block (1996; 2003) to only ascribe mere mental oil to an experience like orgasm. Now, on the basis of that distinction between mere phenomenal character and presentational character, one may further distinguish between the blackish experience one has when closing one’s eyes, somehow mimicking the condition of a blind person, and the experience one has of the dark black around when one opens one’s eyes in the dark, or even between the deafish experience one has when closing one’s ears, somehow mimicking the condition of a deaf person, and the experience one has of the silence around when one opens one’s ears (as Philipps 2013;<sup>4</sup> Šterbáková 2019; Varzi 2022 also suggest). For although those pairs of experiences respectively coincide in their mere phenomenal character – they are both blackish,

**1** For the difference between the latter and the former kind of experience, cf. also Gow 2021a. Yet instead of discussing the perceptual experience of dark black, Gow discusses the case of experientially perceiving an empty space. But perceiving an empty space is not perceiving an objectual absence. For an empty space is just a space with admittedly no things inside that is however surrounded by other things (say, a wall), which are fully given to a perceptual experience.

**2** To say nothing of holes as (bound) absences of matter (Casati, Varzi 1994).

**3** This distinction between mere phenomenal character and presentational character is related to but is different from Fish’s (2009) analogous distinction. Unlike Fish, for me, first, mere phenomenal character is monadic, not relational, and second, presentational character is a relation between experiential properties and perceivable worldly properties, not the right-hand side *relatum* of that relation.

**4** However, Phillips captures this phenomenological distinction differently (and erroneously, for me); namely, as a distinction between failing to hear and having mere phenomenal awareness (2013, 346).

both deafish – they differ in their respectively not having vs. having a presentational character. So, the latter are perceptual experiences, while the former are experiences missing a perceptual character. Indeed, the latter respectively present the dark black and the silence *all around*, taken as perceivable worldly properties that are instantiated and are merely described as negative: one’s blackish experience presents *darkness*, which can be described as absence of light, as instantiated all around; one’s deafish experience presents *silenceness*, which can be described as absence of sound, as instantiated all around. Hence, the latter experiences of each pair – experiencing the dark black, experiencing silence – are undoubtedly of a perceptual kind.<sup>5</sup> For since they have not only a mere phenomenal character but also a presentational character, they respectively differ from the former experiences of each pair in their having an *overall phenomenal perceptual character*.<sup>6</sup>

## 2 The State of the Art

If one looks at the main positions in the debate on the issue of the so-called perceptual experiences of absence, none of them seems to be really satisfying. Let me start with the most implausible account, the cognitivist one. As I said in the Introduction, according to this account grasping absences is a matter, if not of beliefs, of intellectual seemings. On the one hand, the *traditional* cognitivist position, which holds that a so-called perceptual experience of absence is just a matter of belief in the absence of something, is clearly untenable. For it does not account for the fact that one’s grasping absences conspicuously affects one’s phenomenology, as the reaction in discovering that something that was out there is no longer out there clearly shows. For this reaction corresponds to one’s enjoying an ‘Aha’-experience; namely, an experience in which one realizes how things stand (Mulligan 1988). So on the other hand, the *amended* cognitivist position, which makes so-called perceptual experiences of absence a matter of intellectual seemings (Gow 2021b), is better than the traditional one. For it acknowledges that so-called perceptual experiences of absence have some sort of phenomenal character, though

---

<sup>5</sup> O’Shaughnessy (2003, 329 fn. 29) claims that only the first experience is perceptual. Indeed for him, there is a dark look, but not a silence look. This is curious, since the experience of silence can occur as an interval between the experiences of sounds, just as the experience of dark black can occur while switching the light off and on.

<sup>6</sup> This way of putting things may explain why two perceptual experiences of numerically different silences are phenomenally identical (Šterbáková 2019, 42): they have not only the same mere phenomenal character, but also the same presentational character pointing to the same worldly property of *silenceness* (as instantiated twice all around).

of a cognitive kind. Yet to ascribe a cognitive phenomenal character to *all* such experiences is not enough. For while undoubtedly some of these experiences are merely cognitive, some others, especially the paradigmatic ones like the one involving the missing laptop, are really perceptual. As the difference between the following two cases, one clearly cognitive and the other clearly perceptual, should be able to show.

Consider first the case in which one realizes that a certain sign which is tokened along the wall at any of the other floors of one's house – say, a 'no smoking' sign – is not there at the top floor. Here clearly, one merely experientially enjoys a cognitive realization of the fact that one's contrary expectation, generated via one's perceiving that sign's tokens at the other floors, is not fulfilled at the top floor. One has no clear idea of the exact dimensions, form, and size of the supposedly missing sign. Yet second, consider the case in which, on coming back to the car one had left parked some minutes before, one no longer sees one of the car's rear windows, for some thieves broke it in order to steal what stood on the car's back seat. Here the situation sounds completely different. One's astonished realization of the rear window's absence is not only induced by one's contrary expectation's being unfulfilled, but also grounded in the changed perceptual experience of something involving the car. The car seems now weird in a way the wall was not. As when one no longer sees the keys one had left few minutes before on the small table near the house's door. "How funny", one would say in reacting to this weird situation.

Here enters the second approach, the metacognitivist one. Right, its defenders will say, that sort of astonished realization that characterizes the paradigmatic cases of so-called perceptual experiences of absence is not a mere cognitive experience of realizing that something is missing. For it is rather a metacognitive feeling of surprise. If one wants to compare this feeling with an 'Aha'-experience, it is not the sort of smart experience that one enjoys while demonstrating a theorem's conclusion, but the sort of uncanny experience that popped up into the poor Oedipus' mind when realizing that Jocasta is the same as Mummy; the feeling of surprise is imbued with a sense of disorientation.

Yet, appealing to feeling of absence does not provide sufficient conditions for a so-called perceptual experience of absence.<sup>7</sup> For, as Martin and Dokic (2013, 119) seemingly acknowledge, that feeling may occur both when one experiences that a certain thing is no longer there and in the opposite case of *experience of presence*; namely, when one experiences that a *new thing* has popped up in the perceived scene.

---

<sup>7</sup> For reasons why this metacognitive feeling is not even a necessary condition of perceptual experience of absence, cf. Cavedon-Taylor 2017, 362-3.

Consider the following scenario. A subject is sitting in a café in front of an empty table and then her fiancé asks her to close her eyes. Once she opens her eyes again, a laptop is on the table (say, it is her unexpected fiancé's gift). Once again, a feeling of surprise arises. Yet this time is prompted by the *presence* of the laptop, not by its absence.<sup>8</sup>

Now comes the third account, the *radical perceptualist* one. According to this account, one genuinely experiences absences perceptually. The account comes in two variants: a *veridicalist* one, according to which one's genuine perceptual experience of absence is veridical (Farennikova 2013; 2015), and the *non-veridicalist* one, according to which one's genuine perceptual experience of absence is a form of illusion (Mumford 2021). Yet it seems to me that such theories must face a dilemma – either perceptual experiences of absence are cognitively penetrated, or they fail to be such – neither of whose horns is particularly pleasant. Let me explain.

Here is the first horn of the dilemma, along with its unpleasantness. According to this horn, the account must admit that perceptual experiences of absence are cognitively penetrated by one's expectations, as indeed Farennikova (2015) does.<sup>9</sup> If in the paradigmatic case one did not expect the laptop to be there, one could hardly perceptually experience the laptop not to be there. But then the account must convincingly explain how such expectations cognitively *penetrate* the alleged perceptual experiences of absence instead of merely accompanying it. Yet it is hard to provide this explanation. For if cognitive penetration were at work, the perceptual experience of a certain scene enjoyed by a subject having certain expectations should be different from a perceptual experience of the same scene enjoyed by another subject failing to have those expectations. Yet, as Farennikova herself stresses (2013, 432), here the problem of *phenomenal collapse* immediately arises: one's expectation-driven perceptual experience of a certain absence-involving scene seems to be phenomenally indistinguishable from the perceptual experience of that scene enjoyed by another subject (or even the same subject in different circumstances) failing to have such expectations. How can a subject phenomenally distinguish between the perceptual experience she

<sup>8</sup> According to Varzi (2022, 226-7), the absence surprise is phenomenally distinguishable from than the presence surprise, as some empirical studies based on infants' reactions seemingly show. Possibly, it depends on the kind of objects involved. One may anecdotally remember *2001 Space Odyssey's* cult scene in which a group of hominids frantically reacts to the sudden presence of the black monolith.

<sup>9</sup> As regards the position that perceptual experiences are cognitively penetrated, I do not take that position as claiming that so-called late perception is such – modularists on perceptual experiences well concede this claim, see Pylyshyn 2003; Raftopoulos 2009 – but as claiming the more substantive thesis that perceptual experiences as such are so penetrated, as e.g. McDowell (1994) maintains.

has of the café's table when erroneously expecting that the laptop is still there and the unprecedented perceptual experience that another subject has of that empty table?

As regards this horn of the dilemma, *qua* veridicalist Farennikova (2013) ultimately admits that expectations are not decisive. For what counts for the perceptual character of the absence experience is the imaginative production of a localizing template that is straightforwardly mismatched by the perceptual scene not only in most cases, namely the paradigmatic ones – e.g., when one perceptually experiences that there is no laptop on the café's table, contrary to one's expectations – but also in some other cases, when expectations are fulfilled and yet the mental image of the missing thing is not matched by the things that are there – e.g., when one perceptually experiences that there are no trees in a desert, as one would expect (Farennikova 2013, 441, 446-7; 2015, 628-9). This imaginative production is performed in mental imagery, say in imagining-seeing, not in mere imagination, if the latter is taken as falling in the same basket as propositional supposition – as Farennikova says, “a visual template of object O will refer to a representation of O in visual format” (2013, 441; italics added). So, if top-down influences on perception occur via mental imagery, as some maintain (e.g. Nanay 2023), in support of Farennikova's position one may say that perceptual experiences of absence are genuinely cognitively penetrated.

Yet, as regards this horn of the dilemma, appealing to the imaginative production of a localizing template in order to save the idea that perceptual experiences of absence are cognitively penetrated is not decisive either. For that production may take place both in cases of experiences of absence that seem to be genuinely perceptual, the paradigmatic ones, and in cases that do not seem to be such, e.g. when one feels that the beloved that left one is not around not only in the very city in which the couple lived together, but also in any of the rooms of the house one shared with her in that city. Once again, neither the partnerless city nor the partnerless rooms seems weird in the way the laptopless table seemingly is.

So, one may revert to the second horn of the dilemma: the perceptualist account must deny that the relevant experience is cognitively penetrated, by going non-veridicalist and assimilating perceptual experiences of absence to cases of illusory perceptual experiences. In unconsciously drawing an inference from what is present to what is absent in a perceptual scene, one merely erroneously takes the original perceptual experience of that scene as if it were an experience of absence, as Mumford (2021) claims. Notoriously, illusory perceptual experiences are in general not cognitively penetrated, as optical illusions show. Consider the famous Müller-Lyer illusion (Fodor 1983). Even if one knows that the segments of the two geometrical figures one faces have the same length, one sees the segment embedded into



**Figure 1**  
Chiara Ferragni's  
illusory nude-look.  
Author's photo, 2024

converging wedges as shorter than the segment flanked by diverting wedges. So, in their being illusory experiences, also perceptual experiences of absence are not so penetrated.

Yet first, the non-veridicalist must convincingly explain how the absence experience can work as a perceptual illusion, since in its case expectations supposedly play a role that do not play in standard illusions. Second and more relevantly, the non-veridicalist can hardly explain the difference between ordinary experiences of absence and *genuinely illusory* experiences of absence. To see the point, compare an ordinary case in which one sees a naked body when one expected to see a clothed one with a genuinely illusory case in which one sees a clothed body that one however erroneously takes as naked, e.g. because the person in question wears a dress that merely simulates nudity, as in this photo of the famous Italian influencer Chiara Ferragni wearing an illusory nude-look dress [fig. 1] (for other cases of genuine “illusions of absence”, cf. Block 2023, 182-3; Varzi 2022, 236).<sup>10</sup>

At this point, an obvious question arises. If none of the main positions really satisfactorily accounts for so-called perceptual experiences of absence, how can they be explained?

### 3 My Own Account

Here comes my own moderate perceptualist proposal (MPP). For MPP, the relevant expectations only *weakly penetrate*, in conformity with the model of *cognitive penetration lite* (Macpherson 2012; 2015), the relevant perceptual experiences.

---

<sup>10</sup> Varzi (2022, 234) discusses another case in which one experientially perceives that someone is absent while that someone is instead present, but she is unrecognizably disguised. This case can also be assimilated to a case of a genuinely illusory perceptual experience of absence.



On the one hand, as in any case of weak cognitive penetration, the (failed) conceptualized expectations penetrate the latter primarily with respect to the *overall perceptual phenomenal character*, not to the content, of such experiences. For such expectations merely prompt a certain subject to experience that such a character changes from time  $t$ , when she perceptually experiences a scene including an item, to time  $t'$ , when she perceptually experiences a scene that sounds *overall phenomenally differently*. Indeed, since that very item is no longer present, *further details of the original scene that such an item previously occluded are now perceptually experienced*. To put it in Noë's (2004, 61) terms, what was originally perceived to be present as absent is now perceived as fully present. Thus, in this situation one is facing a case of phenomenal contrast between two intrasubjective experiences, the contrasting and the target experience (Siegel 2011), which one reads as a perceptual phenomenal contrast that can further be taken as involving a difference in the *non-conceptual* content of such experiences. Indeed, such a difference may hold only for a subject that can note it, as triggered by the failure of conceptualized expectations related to a *previous* perceptual experience stored in her working memory.<sup>11</sup> In actual fact,  $t$  and  $t'$  may be temporally separate or even occur one after the other. Simply, one's (failed) conceptualized expectations prompt one to perceive the relevant phenomenal difference between such experiences. To repeat, this is a difference in their overall phenomenal perceptual character further taken as a difference in their non-conceptual content.

To get the point of this difference, in the paradigmatic case of the laptopless table, at  $t'$  a certain subject perceptually experiences non-conceptual details of the table (primarily, certain colors, if not also shapes) that at  $t$  she could not perceptually experience, since they were occluded by the laptop that is now no longer out there. Thus, although her perceptual experience of the scene at  $t'$  is phenomenally indistinguishable from the perceptual experience *another* subject lacking the expectation of *a laptop out there* may have of that scene, as phenomenal collapse stresses, this occlusion removal makes that experience phenomenally distinguishable from the perceptual experience *she* had at  $t$  of the original scene. In my previous terms, not only the mere phenomenal character, but also the presentational

---

<sup>11</sup> Clearly, also Farennikova thinks that her templates are stored in working memory (2013, 441). Yet since for her productive imagination – actually, mental imagery – is involved in such templates, for her working memory must be directly prompted by internal, not by external, stimulation (which is instead for working memory its paradigmatic way of functioning: Nanay 2023, 51), as I on the contrary suppose that it is the case as regards genuine cases of perceptual experiences of absence. As Nanay (2023) stresses, what distinguishes mental imagery from genuine perception is this difference in stimulation.

character of that experience changes. Indeed, the new experience's features present new worldly properties characterizing the non-conceptual content of the resulting perceptual experience, e.g. the color of the portion of the table that was previously occluded by the laptop, and fail to present old ones, e.g. the color of the laptop itself.

Hence, the target experience with its own non-conceptual content, mainly determined by colors and shapes, is merely *conceptually described* as a perceptual experience of absence. In perceiving the color and the shape of the portion of the table that was previously occluded by the laptop, *one says* that one sees the laptop's absence. Yet properly speaking, in having that perceptual experience whose content is non-conceptual, one is not having the so-called epistemic propositional state that is described by saying *that* one sees that the laptop is absent. That state would indeed have a conceptualized content, but if it occurred, it would occur at most post-perceptually, not perceptually. As I said, the target experience is merely prompted by the (failed) expectation that the laptop is out there. Hence, it is merely *weakly* cognitively penetrated (Macpherson 2012): concepts do not determine the content of that experience, which is genuinely non-conceptual; they merely enable one to have that experience with its specific overall phenomenal character.<sup>12</sup>

Here the situation is structurally like the situation one encounters in the following case of a 'lighting up' configuration [fig. 2]. After having been for a long time the mere experience of certain black-and-white spots, a perceptual experience whose overall phenomenal perceptual character is noted to change at a later time is also discovered at that time to be an experience whose non-conceptual content is now that of some horsish silhouettes on a background, which is merely *conceptually described* as a perceptual experience of horses. In actually coming to see those silhouettes, one *says* that one sees what one faces as horses. Again, this phenomenal change is weakly cognitively penetrated. For the relevant concepts merely prompt it (suppose somebody asks the perceiver, "don't you see the *horses* there"?).

On the other hand, failure of expectations is *not necessary* for having the relevant perceptual phenomenal change, as the model of *cognitive penetration lite* (Macpherson 2015) predicts. According to this model, it may be the case that there are two such experiences sharing the same overall phenomenal perceptual character, one that is prompted by a top-down conceptual influence and another that is not

<sup>12</sup> I agree with Varzi (2022, 230-4) in distinguishing the perceptual experience that something is absent, e.g. that a white sheet of paper is not out there, from the perceptual experience of something as an absence, e.g. the perceptual experience of a white sheet of paper as an absence of text. Yet properly speaking, both such experiences are post-perceptual, that is, they do not correspond to what is really perceived in a perceptual experience of absence.



Figure 2 Horses. By courtesy of Paola Tosti, 2015

so prompted. In actual fact, that perceptual phenomenal change may occur also in other cases, in which what one experientially perceives *now* as different with respect to what one experientially perceived *before* is precisely what one expects. Consider an example provided by Cavedon-Taylor (2017) that involves a tactile perceptual experience. After a dental operation, *in accordance with one's expectations* one may experientially perceive in a tactile mode that the extracted tooth is no longer there, in a certain part of one's mouth. For MPP, what one now enjoys as phenomenally different from one's previous perceptual experience of that part of one's mouth is the tactile perceptual experience of the lateral surfaces of the teeth that flanked the extracted tooth, which were previously occluded by that tooth.<sup>13</sup>

Putting things in this way is immediately advantageous. Since absence does not really figure in the content of the target experience, my account does not face the problem – assuming for argument's sake that it is a problem – of appealing to a weird notion of causality (Sorensen 2008; Farennikova 2013) to explain how one can experientially perceive (propositional) absences; namely, negative facts to the effect that something is not out there. For one's target perceptual experience is instead caused by the perceived object along with its non-conceptually grasped properties; e.g., the color of the table in its no longer occluded part.

But there is more than that. If one compares MPP with the other proposals on the market, it turns out that MMP is better than them.

---

<sup>13</sup> This explanation is better than Cavedon-Taylor's one. For, in its *not* appealing to a specific mismatch between one's body schema and tactual stimulation, as Cavedon-Taylor instead does (2017, 363-5), it conforms to a general explanatory model.

To begin with, on the one hand, unlike the best cognitivist approach that appeals to intellectual seemings, MPP claims that *some* cases of the so-called perceptual experiences of absences are indeed *perceptual* experiences of phenomenal changes having to do with occlusion removals that are merely *described* as perceptual experiences of absences (e.g., the perceptual experience of the absent laptop). Moreover, on the other hand, also the reverse holds. Unlike the radical perceptualist position, MPP claims that *some* cases of so-called perceptual experiences of absences are indeed *cognitive* experiences in which one mentally imagines something absent from the perceptual scene (e.g., the experiential imaginings of the absent ex-partner).

At this point, one may obviously wonder what makes it the case that a so-called perceptual experience of absence is cognitive or perceptual. But MPP has an answer to this worry. All depends on whether a previous perceptual experience is stored in working memory for a phenomenal comparison. If this is the case, the experience of absence is perceptual; if not, cognitive.

Consider the following two cases. First, I get to the beach and I realize that a person over there is naked. Since in my working memory I have stored no previous perception of that person as clothed, the experience that she is unclothed is cognitive. The situation is just the same as when one gets to a nursery and sees a lot of naked newborn babies; one would not assume that one sees them as unclothed. Second, I am already at the beach and I realize that my freshly met partner, who was previously clothed, is now naked. Since in my working memory I have stored a previous perception of that partner on that beach as clothed, the experience that she is unclothed is perceptual. I now see some colors and shapes of her body that I did not see before, as hidden by her clothes. I am not only surprised, but also (pleasantly or not) shocked, by what I see, just as if I were attending to a strip-tease in a nightclub.

Curiously enough, this cognitive/perceptual distinction also holds for the cases of a perceptual experience of *the absence of an absence* (Varzi 2022, 228-9). If one returns to the Louvre after having been told that *Mona Lisa* has been stolen and instead re-sees it in Salon Carré, since it has been hung there again after its recovery, one does not experientially *perceive* the absence of an absence, but merely *cognitively* revises one's expectations. For one's perceptual experience matches in its overall phenomenal perceptual character the perceptual experience one originally had while entering the Salon. Yet if one touches with one's tongue that part of one's mouth that has been filled with an implant after having touched it after a certain tooth's extraction, one does experientially *perceive* the absence of an absence, i.e., the absence of the post-extraction cavity. For one's perception of the implant has an overall phenomenal perceptual character different from the character of one's previous perception of the

cavity, since one now feels the surfaces of the surrounding teeth as occluded by the shape of the new implant.

Finally, as regards the aforementioned problem of sufficiency failure encountered by the metacognitivist approach, MPP can explain why a metacognitivist feeling of surprise occurs both in the case of a perceptual experience of absence and in the case of a perceptual experience of presence. For the mechanism at play is exactly the same. In both cases, one experientially perceives an overall phenomenal difference between two perceptual experiences prompted by the failure of one's expectations. Simply, while in the experience of absence one sees something that is no longer occluded – the occlusion removal concerns the visual scene's *background* – in the experience of presence one sees something that now occludes other things – the occlusion appearance concerns that scene's *foreground*. To put it again in Noë's (2004) terms, while in the former case one now perceives as fully present what one originally perceived to be present as absent, in the latter case one now perceives to be present as absent what one originally perceived as fully present.

Let us go back to a previous example. Suppose that at  $t$  a subject experientially perceives a completely empty table. Then she closes her eyes and once she opens them again at  $t'$ , contrary to her expectations a laptop is out there! The overall phenomenal perceptual character of her experience has changed, since one now sees some portions of the table that were openly in view for her as occluded by the laptop's colors and shapes.

#### 4 Perceptual Experiences of Depicted Absences

Once I have explained how things go as regards ordinary perceptual experiences of absence, I can find a solution to the problem of *pictorial* experiences of absences, a case that Farennikova herself (2019) answers in the affirmative.

To begin with, I must clarify what I mean by pictorial experiences in general. By following Wollheim,<sup>14</sup> I will here stick with the claim that pictorial experience is a genuine yet *sui generis* twofold perceptual experience of *seeing-in*, in which one simultaneously perceives both the picture's *vehicle*, i.e., the physical basis of the picture, in the *configurational fold* (CF) of that experience, and the picture's *subject*, i.e., what the picture presents, in the *recognitional fold* (RF) of that experience.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Wollheim 1980; 1987; 1998; 2003a; 2003b.

<sup>15</sup> One may account for this supposition by taking the second fold as a knowingly illusory perception of the vehicle as the subject (Voltolini 2015), but of course other accounts are available.

This said, I am not interested here in discussing the *general* phenomenon Wollheim focused of how one can perceive in a picture a presented subject that is not there, as when in facing Leonardo's *La Gioconda* one sees an enigmatic smiling woman on the background of a typical Italian landscape. Someone describes this phenomenon affecting pictorial perceptual experience in general as another yet different case in which one sees something present as absent (Noë 2012, 85). Nor am I interested in discussing the *specific* phenomenon of seeing depicted *objectual* absences, as when one sees a shadow in a photo, taken as absence of light (Pettersson 2017). Instead, I am interested in discussing the *other* specific phenomenon of seeing depicted *propositional* absences, of which a pictorial version of Farennikova's original example may constitute the paradigmatic case. On coming back to the café and realizing that her laptop is no longer there on a certain table of that café, one takes a picture of that table, which allegedly presents the absence of that laptop again.<sup>16</sup>

In the previous Section, we have seen that perceptual experience of absence is basically a matter of occlusion removal. Now in the RF of a seeing-in experience, one can certainly perceive occlusions. For the picture's subject amounts to a scene (Nanay 2022), in which one perceives certain items as standing in front of other items; e.g., "a woman in a hat standing in front of a clump of trees" (Wollheim 2003a, 3). Hence, by so standing, the first items can partially occlude the second ones and be seen as such occluders.<sup>17</sup>

But if one can perceive occlusions in the RF, one can also perceive absences in it. Yet the constraint for such an experience is the same as that affecting ordinary perceptual experience; namely, one can perceive absences in the RF of seeing-in experiences, provided that such absences are the outcome of overall phenomenal perceptual changes in one's seeing-in experience, notably in its RF, having to do with occlusion removals. Such changes are typically prompted by the failure of one's previous expectations entertained in accordance with originally having that experience.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Pettersson (2012, 257) provides another example having to do with a photo of Manhattan's skyline taken after September 11, 2011, seemingly including the absent Twin Towers.

<sup>17</sup> Cases of photos in which one sees not a whole solar eclipse, but the Moon's shadow as covering a great part of the Sun, while leaving manifest its flaming corona (Pettersson 2012), do mobilize depicted occlusions. For clearer cases of depicted occlusions with paintings, see again Pettersson (2011, 283, 293).

<sup>18</sup> Is this appeal to a change in the overall phenomenal character of the RF of the seeing-in experience compatible with the idea that the RF is cognitively penetrated, so as to have a *conceptual* content (Voltolini 2015)? Yes, for the conceptual change that affects the RF's content, as grounded in its overall phenomenal perceptual character, does not concern absences *qua* absences. In the example I now provide, the relevant conceptual change involves passing from seeing the protagonist's body as *veiled* to seeing it as displaying *her breast* (and possibly *her pubis* as well).



Figure 3 Artemisia Gentileschi, *The Allegory of Inclination* (1615-1616). Artstor

An example may clarify matters. Only one who knows by means of subsequent seeing-in experiences of Artemisia Gentileschi's masterpiece *Allegory of Inclination* that such a masterpiece has been restored by removing the veils that Il Volterrano painted in order to cover the depicted body of its female protagonist, in now grasping in the new seeing-in experience of that picture her depicted torso as no longer clothed, as one instead grasped it in the previous seeing-in experience of that picture, one can perceive the absence of those veils. For in its RF one now grasps the bodily colors and shapes that were previously occluded by the colors and shapes of such veils. As the following figure, showing the picture before and after the restoration, clearly shows [fig. 3].<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> So, *pace* Pettersson (2012, 262), from a *perceptual* point of view there may be a difference between a photo presenting the absence of something (say, a collapsed rock) that was presented in a previous photo of roughly the same scene, and a photo allegedly presenting the absence of something else (say, a criminal) that was *not* presented in a previous photo of roughly the same scene.



## 5 Conclusion

Let me take stock. In this paper, I have defended the idea that one can have perceptual experiences of absence. Yet not only such experiences occur only in certain limited cases; namely, those in which a previous perceptual experience of a certain scene is stored in working memory for a phenomenal comparison with a later perceptual experience of that scene suitably modified, as corresponding to a change in the overall phenomenal perceptual character of the respective experiences. But also, properly speaking the later experience is not a perception of a (propositional) absence, is only *described as such*. For in actual fact, it is a perceptual experience of a scene perceptually modified, by means of occlusion removal, as regards some of the low-level properties of the scene's objects now available to the perceiver. Such properties are grasped in the new non-conceptual content of that experience corresponding to that phenomenal change. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same situation holds in the genuinely perceptual twofold pictorial experience of a depicted absence.<sup>20</sup>

## Bibliography

- Block, N. (1996). "Mental Paint and Mental Latex". *Philosophical Issues*, 7, 19-49. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1522889>.
- Block, N. (2003). "Mental Paint". Hahn, M.; Ramberg, B. (eds), *Reflections and Replies: Essays on the Philosophy of Tyler Burge*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 165-200. <https://doi.org/10.1515/sats.2004.161>
- Block, N. (2023). *The Borders Between Seeing and Thinking*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Casati, R.; Varzi, A.C. (1994). *Holes and Other Superficialities*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197622223.001.0001>
- Cavedon-Taylor, D. (2017). "Touching Voids: On the Varieties of Absence Perception". *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 8, 355-66. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/3555.001.0001>.
- Farennikova, A. (2013). "Seeing Absence". *Philosophical Studies*, 166, 429-54. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-012-0045-y>.
- Farennikova, A. (2015). "Perception of Absence and Penetration from Expectation". *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 6, 621-40. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-014-0188-1>.
- Farennikova, A. (2019). "Would You Buy Absence Art?". Shottenkirk, D.; Curado, M.; Gouveia, S.S. (eds), *Perception, Cognition and Aesthetics*. London: Routledge, 255-78. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429462658-14>

---

<sup>20</sup> This paper has been elaborated within the PRIN National Research Project Higher-Order Perceivable Properties (HOPP), Prot 2022YXBJWX. It has been originally presented at the workshops ESA Conference 2024, Università L'Orientale Napoli, June 6-8 2024, Naples; Bildtheorie Group, University of Hull, Jul 9-11 2024, Hull. I thank Elvira Di Bona and Sofia Sgarbi for their comments to previous versions of it.



- Fish, W. (2009). *Perception, Hallucination, and Illusion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195381344.001.0001>.
- Fodor, J.A. (1983). *The Modularity of the Mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/4737.001.0001>
- Gow, L. (2021a). "Empty Space, Silence, and Absence". *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 51, 496-507. <https://doi.org/10.1017/can.2022.9>.
- Gow, L. (2021b). "A New Theory of Absence Experience". *European Journal of Philosophy*, 29, 168-81. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12577>.
- Macpherson, F. (2012). "Cognitive Penetration of Colour Experience: Rethinking the Issue in Light of an Indirect Mechanism". *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 84, 24-62. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2010.00481.x>.
- Macpherson, F. (2015). "Cognitive Penetration and Nonconceptual Content". Raftopoulos, A.; Zeimbekis, J. (eds), *The Cognitive Penetrability of Perception: New Philosophical Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 331-58. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198738916.003.0014>.
- Martin, J-R.; Dokic, J. (2013). "Seeing Absence or Absence of Seeing?". *Thought*, 2, 117-25. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tht3.72>.
- McDowell, J. (1994). *Mind and World*. Harvard: Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0029-4624.00099>.
- Mulligan, K. (1988). "Seeing as and Assimilative Perception". *Brentano Studies*, 1, 129-52.
- Mumford, S. (2021). *Absence and Nothing: The Philosophy of What There Is Not*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198831532.001.0001>.
- Nanay, B. (2022). "What Do We See in Pictures? The Sensory Individuals of Picture Perception". *Philosophical Studies*, 179, 3729-46. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-022-01864-9>.
- Nanay, B. (2023). *Mental Imagery*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198809500.001.0001>.
- Noë, A. (2004). *Action in Perception*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674063013>.
- Noë, A. (2012). *Varieties of Presence*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- O'Shaughnessy, B. (2003). *Consciousness and the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0031819102110291>.
- Pettersson, M. (2011). "Seeing What Is Not There: Pictorial Experience, Imagination and Non-localization". *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 51, 279-94.
- Pettersson, M. (2012). "Shot in the Dark. Notes on Photography, Causality, and Content". *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 62, 759-76. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9213.2012.00073.x>.
- Pettersson, M. (2017). "Capturing Shadows: On Photography, Causation, and Absences". *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 95, 256-69. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2016.1197957>.
- Phillips, I. (2013). "Hearing and Hallucinating Silence". Macpherson, F.; Platchias, D. (eds), *Hallucination*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 333-60. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262019200.003.0015>.
- Pylyshyn, Z. (2003). *Seeing and Visualizing*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/6137.001.0001>.
- Raftopoulos, A. (2009). *Cognition and Perception*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/8297.001.0001>.

- Siegel, S. (2011). *The Contents of Visual Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195305296.001.0001>.
- Sorensen, R. (2008). *Seeing Dark Things: The Philosophy of Shadows*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195326574.001.0001>.
- Sorensen, R. (2009). "Hearing Silence: The Perception and Introspection of Absences". Nudds, M.; O'Callaghan, C. (eds), *Sounds and Perception: New Philosophical Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 126-45. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199282968.003.0007>.
- Šterbáková, D. (2019). "Can We Hear Silence?". *Philosophia*, 48, 33-53. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-019-00076-6>.
- Varzi, A. (2022). "On Perceiving Absences". *Gestalt Theory*, 44, 213-42. <https://doi.org/10.2478/gth-2022-0022>.
- Voltolini, A. (2015). *A Syncretistic Theory of Depiction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137263292>.
- Wollheim, R. (1980). "Seeing-as, Seeing-in, and Pictorial Representation". Wollheim, R., *Art and Its Objects*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 205-26. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781316286777.009>.
- Wollheim, R. (1987). *Painting as an Art*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.114746>.
- Wollheim, R. (1998). "On Pictorial Representation". *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 56, 217-26. <https://doi.org/10.2307/432361>.
- Wollheim, R. (2003a). "In Defense of Seeing-in". Hecht, H.; Schwartz, R.; Atherton, M. (eds), *Looking into Pictures*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 3-15. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/4337.003.0004>.
- Wollheim, R. (2003b). "What Makes Representational Painting Truly Visual?". *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 77, 131-47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8349.00106>.