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How to Disappear Completely

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Abstract

This article investigates the paradox of disappearance as both an aesthetic and a political phenomenon. Taking inspiration from Radiohead's song "How to Disappear Completely," it argues that aesthetic representations of disappearance never achieve total erasure; instead, they give rise to new forms of visibility. A true aesthetics of disappearance does not exist. Through case studies such as H.G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* and Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, the article demonstrates that disappearance is always mediated: the invisible man becomes hyper-visible through his clothing, bandages, and mask, while the spectacle conceals marginalized lives only to expose them through mechanisms of institutional control (e.g., prisons, medical facilities, schools—as analyzed in Michel Foucault's work). An investigation of the "novel of the institution" (Campe), especially as it appears in the works of Franz Kafka and Robert Walser, eventually explores the nexus between aesthetic representation and institutionalized forms of coerced visibility. Ultimately, the essay argues that disappearance, as an aesthetic and political event, destabilizes regimes of visibility—not by erasure alone, but by exposing the fragility of appearance itself. The tension between opacity and exposure suggests that resistance lies not in pure absence but in subverting the very mechanisms of representation.

Keywords: aesthetics; appearance; disappearance; institutions; novels of the institution; politics; spectacle; Guy Debord; Michel Foucault; Franz Kafka; Robert Walser; H.G. Wells; Radiohead

The concept of "representation" is complex. On the one hand, representation names the medial reproduction of an empirical phenomenon. In this sense, Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* series serves to represent—well—sunflowers. On the other hand, in the sense of advocacy or intercession, representation is a political act. In this scenario, members of the "House of Representatives" not so much embody mimetic reproductions of their constituents but are mandated to *speak for* the populus in service of political decision-making. Rather than copying the voter, the political representative operates in the constituents' stead, acting on their behalf or even in full identification with them.[1] What unites both the reproductive and political senses of representation is their role in staging presence, enabling something or someone to appear where it otherwise would not. Representation marks the threshold at which an absence shines forth into its perceptible mediation. To the extent that representation circumscribes the field within which phenomena *appear*, the events of appearance and disappearance are therefore structurally entangled with the politico-aesthetic interweaving of representation. I will keep this entanglement in mind as I probe the medial representability of disappearance through music, literature, and theory, surveying a broad spectrum of evidence ranging from the modern novel of the institution to contemporary indie songwriting. In each case, I expound the foundational dilemma of all mediation of disappearance: that it cannot but show its guise, thus belying its representational negativity.

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The title of this article is purloined. As musically inclined readers will certainly have noticed, "How to Disappear Completely" is the name of a song by the British indie rock band Radiohead, released in the year 2000, on the album *Kid A*. I mustn't feel all too self-conscious about the petty theft, however, because the song's name was itself likely lifted from Doug Richmond's 1986 book, *How to Disappear Completely and Never Be Found*. A specimen of the self-help genre, the book guides its reader through the process of losing one's identity. Posing the most urgent questions—*Who disappears? And why?*—its answers do not tarry. According to Richmond, there are various reasons to want to disappear, ranging from the banality of boredom or the sheer lust for adventure to the flight of convicted criminals from the grasp of the law. The main cause of disappearance, however, is something else. A section titled "Why People Disappear" straightforwardly explains that "the prime reason for disappearing is an unhappy marriage. Men and women caught in an unhappy relationship often dream about leaving their partner and everything else behind and starting over in a new town with a new name" (Richmond 1986, p. 9). There are other reasons, to be sure. "Generally speaking," Richmond submits, "deliberate disappearance is a defensive reaction to overwhelming and intolerable social pressures" (Richmond 1986, p. 8).

Keeping the promise of its title, the book goes on meticulously to explain the intricate mechanics of disappearance, offering the most useful advice: avoid sharing your plans with anyone, Richmond recommends, and make sure to set aside a cash reserve because vanishing with little to no money is "most emphatically doing it the hard way" (Richmond 1986, p. 36). Obtain a fake name and fake ID, and remember to set up a confidential mailing address. Don't commit rookie mistakes such as bringing your own car with you when you disappear. Do not leave the country immediately. . . I won't keep going, lest readers get the wrong ideas. Instead, I would like to suggest that Richmond's pragmatic considerations are disclosive of a constitutive complication inherent in the phenomenon of disappearance. Following Richmond's guidance, it is evident that the disappearee, that is, the subject of an event of disappearance, does not disappear simply for the sake of disappearance—rather, she disappears in order to *reappear elsewhere*, under a different guise, with a different identity. Even the disgruntled husband who disappears from his marriage does so in order to "[start] over in a new town with a new name" (Richmond 1986, p. 9). The logic of disappearance is therefore akin to what Jacques Lacan describes as the subject's *fading*: "when the subject appears somewhere as meaning, he is manifested somewhere else as 'fading,' as disappearance," the psychoanalyst writes (Lacan 1998, p. 218). Conversely, we are led to assume, if the subject disappears in one place, it reappears elsewhere in a meaningful way—in a new town, for instance, with a new name, and a new girlfriend.

I wonder if it's at all useful to consider what we can glean from Richmond's crypto-Lacanian conclusions as we put on Radiohead's "How to Disappear Completely." The song ostensibly opens with a disavowal: "That there, that's not me," Thom Yorke's soft voice utters (Radiohead 2000). What kind of statement is this? What does it mean to claim, "That there, that's not me"? Are we simply dealing with a case of mistaken identity, as in: *you've got the wrong person, that over there is someone else, whereas I, in fact, am over here*? Or is the situation implied by the statement more complex, such that the indexed subject ("that there") and the speaker ("me") are indeed the same, namely in the precise sense that the appearance of one is premised upon the other's fading? Rather than expressing an individual or circumstantial predicament, the phrase "that there, that's not me" would thus articulate a truth about the very structure of the subject and its symbolic localizability. The subject can only achieve self-certainty by subjecting itself to the representational vortex of the signifying chain, which is to say, it can only be itself by fundamentally alienating itself from itself. To say "I" is to disappear behind the signifier "I." To say "I am X" is

to use a signifier to represent the subject for another signifier. Behind the insistence that "I am," therefore, lurks the structural truth that "that there, that's not me." Because the cogito's self-certainty is irreparably estranged through the necessity of signification, saying "I" is always an act of disidentification. Within the field of language, I am neither here nor there, because wherever I am, a signifier will already have replaced me, represented me, spoken on my behalf: "I," "I am," "I am not"—all the same. Hence, when Mr. Richmond's disappearees vanish from one place in order to resurface in another—new life, new name, and all—they perform an event that implicitly marks the structure of the subject as such: it fades.

1. In the Guise of Disappearance

Listening carefully to the chorus of "How to Disappear Completely," one encounters a vexing repetition: "I'm not here," the singing voice decries, "this isn't happening/I'm not here, I'm not here" (Radiohead 2000). By now, we are fully equipped to understand that the proposition "I'm not here" forms the logical consequence of the phrase "that there, that's not me." Rather than an attempt to withdraw from the symbolic order, the admission that "I'm not here" discloses the subject's total dependence on the signifier. It "is" only through signification, which is to say: it is "not"—at the very least, it "is" as its own perpetual displacement, which is to say: it is not and never "here."

But even the very event of this displacement is denied when the speaker insists, "this isn't happening." If whatever "is happening" is positively inscribed in reality, thus becoming phenomenologically describable—then the phenomenon of a disappearance marks an extreme case that must structurally elude such description. Derived from the Ancient Greek φαίνεσθαι for "to appear," a phenomenon is, by definition, that which shows itself. Such a showing can become the object of αἴσθησις, that is, sense perception. The event of disappearance is therefore not just any phenomenon among others—it is the limit-phenomenon of sheer de-phenomenalization and thus the very phenomenon that renders its own phenomenality impossible. In this manner, the event of disappearance precisely eludes the grasp of αἴσθησις—offering the senses no information as it recedes into the imperceptible. If disappearance is nonetheless an event that "happens," it would happen as the very event of its own un-happening. Disappearance is the phenomenon of phenomena's de-phenomenalization. It is thus the event of un-eventing, happening as withdrawal, imperceptible performance of un-performance, unforming of form. In other words: "I'm not here, this isn't happening."

Listening closely to Radiohead, one notices, however, that this negativity is not all-consuming. After all, there is still the trace of a voice that ambiguously narrates its own vanishing. More than that, this very process is armed with a certain positing-power that seems to resist, or at least stand at odds with, the narration's insistence on negation. For, in order to be negated, the I must first posit itself: "I'm not here." In fact, the I's positing does not occur just once, but over and over: "I'm not here, this isn't happening/I'm not here, I'm not here" (Radiohead 2000). Not only is the un-eventing un-performance of disappearance connected to, perhaps even contingent upon, the iteratively lasting appearance of a linguistic trace—the subject's linguistic positing occurs repeatedly, thus denying its own denial, forcing its disappearance to become *excessively apparent*. As a matter of fact, considering the Radiohead song as a whole, one notices an overabundant presence of the pronoun "I": "I go," "I please," "I walk," "I float," "I'm not here," "I'll be gone" (Radiohead 2000). The ego's very abnegation, as implied by the event of disappearance, provokes a series of positings that counteracts this denial. To put it another way, the I can disappear only to the degree that it excessively appears and reappears.[2]

This observation moves close to the crux of disappearance, conceived as an aesthetic problem. To the degree that aesthetics, as stated, pertains to that which is perceptible through our senses, disappearance names a phenomenon that eludes the aesthetic realm. Strictly speaking, there can be no aesthetics of disappearance.[3] The aesthetic object must appear in some perceivable form or fashion lest it fail apprehension: it has a shape, a color, it feels a certain way, it makes a sound, emits a scent, etc. Disappearance names the shedding of all these attributes, thus inducing a crisis of aesthetic experience. It puts to the test the artwork's core ability of *making present*. Perhaps it is for this very reason that artists have paid special attention to the problem of disappearance, ingeniously finding ways of presenting the unpresentable, making disappearance appear in the work of art. At the risk of issuing a crude generalization, I believe it can be shown that the setting-to-work of disappearance is one of the most fundamental problems of artistic expression.

The Radiohead song, to which we have paid close attention, bears testimony to this problem. And it discloses a dynamic whose logic can be extended to include various other art forms. As I have shown, this dynamic simultaneously negates and repeatedly reposits the subject, which yields the vexing effect of rendering it all the more visible, the more it disappears. At times, this excess of visibility provoked by the event of disappearance can take on truly grotesque forms. An iconic example is offered in H.G. Wells's *Invisible Man*, whose eponymous hero is one of the most famous disappearees of modern literature. The novel follows Griffin, a brilliant but reclusive scientist who discovers a way to make himself invisible. He arrives in the village of Iping, where his secretive behavior arouses suspicion. When his invisibility is revealed and he is forced to flee, all sorts of havoc ensue.

For the purpose of the current argument, I am less interested in the narrative construction of the novel and the plot's resolution. Rather, I would like to pay attention to the more elementary level of representation and sheer representability, where Wells's language negotiates the impossible task of making the invisible man visible. It turns out that Griffin's first arrival in Iping already confirms the vexing logic I derived from probing Radiohead. Despite the predicament of his imperceptibility, the protagonist phenomenally asserts himself in the most obtrusive fashion. During his first interaction with the innkeeper, named Mrs. Hall, the invisible man "held a white cloth [. . .] over the lower part of his face, so that his mouth and jaws were completely hidden," which gave his voice a muffled sound. "But it was not that which startled Mrs. Hall," Wells continues:

> It was the fact that all the forehead above his blue glasses was covered by a white bandage, and that another covered his ears, leaving not a scrap of his face exposed excepting only his pink, peaked nose. It was bright, pink, and shining [. . .]. He wore a dark brown velvet jacket with a high, black, linen-lined collar turned up about his neck. The thick black hair, escaping as it could below and between the cross bandages, projected in curious tails and horns, giving him the strangest appearance conceivable. This muffled and bandaged head was so unlike what she had anticipated that for a moment [Mrs. Hall] was rigid. (Wells 2017, p. 7)

Beyond its narrative implications, the aesthetic problem with which this passage confronts the reader bears precisely on the impossibility of disappearance. Even though the sequence introduces the eponymous invisible man, it immediately makes clear that this man is not invisible at all—quite the opposite, for his is "the strangest appearance conceivable." The stranger's apparent strangeness is the effect of a paradox, because in order to hide his predicament, the invisible man must invisibilize his invisibility. He therefore dresses most conspicuously, draping himself in bandages that cover every inch of skin. From his face protrudes a peaked, shiny pink nose on which a thick pair of blue glasses is perched. Sticking out from under the bandages about his head are tufts of black hair, while the rest

of the body is covered in dark and heavy clothes. The invisible man most prominently, blatantly, and fragrantly asserts his visibility.

Structurally, this is the case because the event of disappearance, should it be registered within the realm of phenomenal experience, can never be absolute. Considering the mode of invisibility, it divests the phenomenon not of *all* its properties but only of the ones that pertain to its *optical* presentation. This is to say that the invisible man still consists of a bodily mass that can move in space and is equipped with various ways to assert himself within the realm of appearances: his body can leave traces in the snow, he speaks with a human voice, and he even interacts with objects. This can cause the uncanniest effects, for example, when the invisible man manipulates his surroundings unseen. In one such instance, "[t]he door slammed violently and was locked. The chair and bed seemed to be executing a dance of triumph for a moment" (Wells 2017, p. 28). The subject-position in these sentences is occupied by objects—"door," "chair," "bed"—that seem enlivened to the onlooker as the invisible man imperceptibly moves them around. Inadvertently, one thinks of Karl Marx's deliberations on the fetish character of commodities, whose secret entails that they "began to dance when the rest of the world appeared to stand still" (Marx 2024, p. 48n27).

As the two examples demonstrate—the song "How to Disappear Completely" by Radiohead and Wells's grotesque novel—the negativity induced by the event of disappearance is essentially connected to an excess of positive content. In Radiohead, this excess is expressed by the subject's panicked hyper-position, whose ego continues rhetorically to assert itself precisely as it proclaims its vanishing. On the other hand, we witness this excess on the literal body of the invisible man, who hysterically hides the nothingness that lurks underneath layers and layers of extra clothing. The very fact of this disappearance from the optical realm triggers various modes of heightened visibility, which, instead of fulfilling the promise of disappearance, render their subject grotesquely apparent. If aesthetics names the sense perception of appearances, an aesthetics of disappearance, rather than lamenting the mere breakdown of appearance, would have to trace all the ways in which disappearance *appears*. As the most extreme form of aesthetic inquiry, it would be an ἀναΐσθησις, a perception without perception, recording, to use Rainer Nägele's poignant formula, *das Erscheinen des Verschwindens* (Nägele 2008).[4]

2. The Visible and the Invisible

I began by introducing the problem of disappearance as at once aesthetic and political. But have the political stakes at all become apparent during the preceding aesthetic considerations? Or has the political dimension disappeared underneath the aesthetic draping of linguistic positings and narrative conceit? The reader will hopefully forgive me if, in response to these questions, I turn to Doug Richmond's curious guidebook one final time. Richmond suggests that the very desire to disappear cannot be divested of political implications, casting the figure of the disappearee as someone driven by sincere disdain for the administrative bureaucracies of modern social life. Many who disappear "have nothing but contempt for the maze of forms and petty regulations used by business and government to control the masses" (Richmond 1986, p. 20).[5] A tongue-in-cheek account, no doubt, yet it offers an important hint toward understanding the politics of disappearance. This hint pertains to the link between, on the one hand, the subject's visibility and, on the other, the politico-administrative mechanisms by which this visibility is managed. Put more succinctly, we are tasked with exploring the nexus between *mediation* and *institution*.

Elucidating this nexus, I turn to an artist with an emphatically political conscience. French filmmaker and theorist Guy Debord, a founding member of the Situationist International, published an essay in 1967 titled *The Society of the Spectacle*. The work develops a

theory of mediation as a form of social control that turns individuals into spectators rather than active participants in life, society, and politics. The book became an important inspiration for the civil unrest that occurred throughout France in the spring of '68, as slogans taken from Debord's writing captioned the unfolding protests. The immediate political applicability of his essay was facilitated by its thetic composition. Written as a series of 221 theses about the political dangers of representation, appearance, and mediation, the text encourages its ideas' swift extraction and circulation.

The titular concept of the "spectacle" names a state of total commodification. This totality is expressed as a collection of images that mediates all social relations among people. The image is the place where these relations become alienated and falsified. Capital in the form of an image, the spectacle links the operations of late-stage capitalism to the inevitable preponderance of appearance: "[t]he spectacle is an *affirmation* of appearances and an identification of all human social life with appearances" (Debord 2021, p. 3). Dialectically, this affirmation negates the possibility of solidarity because the avowal of the spectacle causes a necessary separation of spectators. Losing herself in the image, the consumer becomes disconnected from all other consumers with whom she is nonetheless reunited in the image. This logic turns the spectacle into a mirage of social cohesion, uniting people "in their separateness" (Debord 2021, p. 10).

Replacing the world of concrete social relations with an abstract representation that makes itself appear concrete, the spectacle redefines the parameters of "reality." In fact, "it presents itself as a vast inaccessible reality that can never be questioned. Its sole message is: 'What appears is good; what is good appears'" (Debord 2021, p. 4). The explicit value judgment serves to confirm the ruling class, which invents the spectacle as an ongoing discourse about itself. This discourse aims to exclude everything and everyone standing at odds with the spectacle's world-as-representation. Whatever remains opaque, unseen, not shown, or shunned by the economy of images is therefore not only bad—its badness is itself entirely imagined because whatever fails to appear is simply *not real*. "When the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings" (Debord 2021, p. 5), which is to say that the spectacle's claim to hegemony is ontologically mandated. Being is the totality of representation; whatever fails to appear is nonexistent. It is nothing rather than something.

Alas, ontology sets a trap into which critiques of mediation are prone to fall. For there is certainly a tendency to juxtapose the fake reality of mere appearances with the fantasy of immediate connection, a temptation to which Debord himself is no stranger. In fact, his analysis of the spectacle is swiftly undermined by the promise of a politics of "true being" whose immediate reality would allow us to bypass the pitfalls of mediation entirely.[6] Throughout his essay, Debord believes that retrieving unmediated being from the spectacular vortex is possible and that it would enable us to return to an unalienated state of "directly lived" (Debord 2021, p. 1) social relations. This objective is analytically dissatisfying, not least because it undermines the persuasive potency of his political diagnosis. If being has been transformed into total representation and if this representation proffers the only image of the world we can possibly behold, then the endeavor to retrieve true and unalienated being from the realm of pervasive falsehood is hopeless, for "the true is a moment of the false" (Debord 2021, p. 3).[7] This is not to say that anti-spectacular resistance is doomed to remain futile, but that it must change its ontological perspective. Rather than attempting to disentangle being from representation, thus stumbling into the trap of immediacy, the critic must consider the symbolic nullity of all those who either fail to appear or whose appearance is actively repressed.

Another name for those who disappear from the spectacle would be "the undercommons." As Fred Moten and Stefano Harney explain in their book of the same name: the

subversive disappears—"[s]he disappears into the underground, the downlow lowdown maroon community of [. . .] *the undercommons* [. . .], where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still black, still strong" (Harney and Moten 2013, p. 26). The locution "still black" is deliberately equivocal, as it simultaneously refers to black people and people who are symbolically and medially "blacked out," barred from participation in the spectacle.[8] In a world of total appearance, the possibility of subversion dwells with the disappeared: the invisible struggle whose pain and toil make the spectacle possible in the first place, for the spectacle is premised on the violent suppression of that which allows it to function. Rather than looking for truth in a world that is false, the resistance to spectacle must attune itself to the nothing that pulsates underneath the skins and screens of the spectacular imaginary. Every event of appearance exposes the absence that enables it.[9] The spectacle's destruction does not grant unmediated being—rather, it confronts us with the opacity of the disappeared. Therein lies its political opportunity.

Fleeing the spectacle is perhaps the only viable political act, and maybe cutting off the spectacular tentacles of social media is the first gesture of liberation. However, within the logic of the spectacle, disappearance is usually not a choice made by the disappeared. Rather, the spectacle demands that everything that disturbs the reigning image of the world becomes eclipsed. That this eclipse is not reducible to incorporeal representations but imperils activist, ungrievable, or otherwise inconvenient lives in their concrete reality is painfully obvious during a time in which critical voices are aggressively silenced and protesting, immigrant, or otherwise stigmatized bodies are "being disappeared." However, these bodies vanish from assemblies, demonstrations, and frontlines, from their workplaces and homes, only to reappear in the brightest visibility elsewhere. This visibility is guaranteed, administered, and protected by *the institution*. I use the term "institution" in its capacious abstraction, as it applies to various bureaucratic and governmental infrastructures ranging from prisons and detention centers to educational and medical facilities. The institution gathers the nullities whose image the spectacle deems inadmissible. While these lives may have disappeared from the screens of social representation, the institution guarantees and manages their visibility.

Consider the institutional existence of the common college student. The school tags her with an identification number and issues a NetID. The registrar's office has her portrait on file to ensure recognizability. The college knows her name, age, gender, family background, and financial situation. It knows whether she is hard-working or a slacker, whether she's upright or a cheater. It knows whether she is a carnivore or a vegetarian. Whether she likes sports or music. Whether she owns a car. In other words, the institution both renders her visible and manages her visibility. In addition to the data she surrenders upon entry, new information is incessantly generated: the institution measures, evaluates, grades, and judges her, forming her into the institutional product named "the graduate."

Perhaps the most influential assessment of the institutional manufacture of visibility was carried out by French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault. In his 1975 study *Discipline and Punish,* Foucault analyzes the genealogy of disciplinary power—a form of subjectification that operates through surveillance, normalization, and regulation, subtly and pervasively shaping the bodies and behavior of individuals. While Foucault focuses on the modern prison, his analysis includes an array of other institutions, such as medical, military, and educational means of disciplining. "Disciplinary power," he explains, "is exercised through [. . .] invisibility," while it "at the same time [. . .] imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility." While the seat of power itself remains opaque, "it is the subjects who have to be seen" (Foucault 1995, p. 187). The very possibility of domination is premised on this constant visibility that structurally objectifies the subject. Seen but unable to see, the prisoner, patient, or student "is the object of information,

[but] never a subject in communication"—actor on stage, animal in a cage, the subject is "perfectly individualized and constantly visible" (Foucault 1995, p. 200).

The disciplinary institution, therefore, inverts the logic of the spectacle. Whereas the latter makes the ruling order hyper-obvious while eclipsing the image of the undercommons, the institution deliberately hides the image of power while rendering visible those it dominates. Both the spectacle and the institution are machines that create visibility. Yet what the institution makes obvious are precisely those excluded from the spectacular economy of hegemonic representation. If this is the case, however, has my analysis not reached an inescapable aporia? The subversives obscured from the spectacle and erased into the oblivion of the unimagined and unimaginable are rendered visible by the disciplinary institution, whereas the power that so self-assuredly presents itself as *good* on the spectacle's screens unverifiably conceals itself in the institution's watch towers. What, then, of one's right to opacity?[10] Where lies its last refuge? What is the destiny of subversion and resistance if those who disappear from the spectacle are made to reappear through the bright violence of discipline?

3. Remediating the Institutional Circumstance

At the juncture of such pressing questions, it becomes necessary to braid together the political and aesthetic threads of this inquiry. I have suggested that the aesthetics of disappearance is tied to the paradox of making the invisible, unseen, and vanished somehow visible to guarantee an aesthetic experience. This aesthetic necessity, it turns out, is structurally related to the disciplinary mechanism of rendering institutionally visible all those who have disappeared, or were made to disappear, from the sphere of spectacular representation. Does this not mean that art and power are inevitably complicit? Regardless of whether we approach the issue politically or aesthetically, is visibility, in the end, a trap into which we are fated to fall?

One strategy for navigating this difficult terrain would be to inquire into the ways in which art has responded to the phenomenon of disciplinary power and institutional transparency. If institutions are machines for making visible the spectacularly eclipsed, art may respond by re-mediating the institutional circumstance in order to disclose the very interplay of visibility and invisibility that characterizes the workings of institutional power. One such form of remediation emerged at the beginning of the 20th century as "the novel of the institution." The term was coined by the German literary theorist Rüdiger Campe to name a formal offshoot of the bildungsroman tradition: "'Novel of the institution' is meant to characterize a narrative which remains outside the logic of quest, development, and *Bildung*, and yet has a specific relationship with it" (Campe 2012, p. 215). In this sense, it forms a supplement to the bildungsroman's ambition of holistically unfolding the educational and spiritual development of individual life: while the bildungsroman knew the institution only as the setting of distinct chapters or various insular addenda to the narrative, the novel of the institution inverts this logic such that the institutional episode consumes the entire story: "Novels of the institution start with an arrival; they end with the protagonist's departure or, in other cases, his disappearing and even dying in the depth of the institutional realm" (Campe 2012, p. 216).

While Campe is mainly interested in determining a genealogy of aesthetic forms, it is certainly possible to understand the emergent "novel of the institution" as the literary correlate to the rise of disciplinary power, as described in Foucault's analysis of modern institutional infrastructures. In other words, if the modern institution is a visibility machine, the novel of the institution is a formal device to make visible the institution's very mechanisms of illumination and exposure. Its formal task thus goes beyond a mere renegotiation of the bildungsroman tradition, offering a comprehensive remediation of the

various mediating systems on which the exercise of power relies. Localizing a literary point of resistance to institutional power thus demands a thorough exploration of the ways in which literature itself makes visible institutional forces of visibility.

The canon Campe studies to develop his concept of the institutional novel includes pedagogical narratives such as Robert Walser's *Jakob von Gunten* and James Joyce's *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, as well as Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* for its representation of the medical institution of the sanatorium. What primarily instigated the investigation of the institution as a novelistic form, however, were the works of Franz Kafka, whose bureaucratic-juridical institutional clusters offered modernity's most decisive counterpoint to the bildungsroman. Rather than conceiving of the institution as a station through which individual lives may pass, Kafka posits the institution as that which *institutes* these lives in the first place. Campe can therefore write that the life of Kafka's hero K. "is a single institutional fact," indeed, that "the novel's entire narrative becomes a response to the question of the subject—not, however, as autobiography, but as institutional narrative."[11] To the extent that the novel itself carries out the *institution of life*, it becomes a negotiation, if not the sheer expression, of institutional power.

With respect to Kafka, one could well be tempted to identify as the focus of his critique of visibility his first novel, started in 1911 and translated into English as *The Man Who Disappeared*. Keeping in mind Campe's genealogy of literary forms, however, this New World narrative combines elements of the bildungsroman, picaresque, and adventure novels rather than formulating the institutional response to the question, "Who is Karl Roßmann?"[12] Kafka's idea of the novel encounters its institutional break later, around 1914, with his work on *The Trial*. Emblematic novel of the institution, the story depicts one year in the life of Josef K., a man arrested without explanation, unraveling the alienation of modern institutional power and its opaque bureaucracies that entrap individuals in endless, incomprehensible procedures.

The course of his prosecution puts K. in touch with figures of various proximity to the law, including the court painter Titorelli, a slippery character who lives and works in the attic of a dilapidated building on the outskirts of town. A painter of judges and court officials, Titorelli has a modest role within the juridical complex, though his connection to the judiciary supplies him with the inside scoop. And he is eager to share his knowledge with K., to whom he explains the possible outcomes of his pending case: "There are three possibilities," the painter explains, namely "genuine acquittal, apparent acquittal, and protraction of the proceedings" (Kafka 2009, p. 109). A protraction would require the defendant to stay in permanent contact with his legal representation, keeping the responsible judge well-disposed so as to ensure that "the trial is kept permanently at the lowest stage" (Kafka 2009, p. 114). In this situation, the defendant is never technically free but also never effectively sentenced. An apparent acquittal, on the other hand, means that the defendant is "freed from the charge," but only for the moment—for "it continues to hover over [his] head and can come into effect at once the moment the order comes from on high" (Kafka 2009, p. 113). While an acquittal may have been granted, the case file still exists, and it's the highest court's prerogative to relaunch the investigation at will. Hence, the apparently acquitted runs the perpetual risk of being apprehended and charged anew.

This vexing reality of seemingly impossible exoneration leaves as the most desirable option the first scenario Titorelli mentions: genuine acquittal. What distinguishes it from its apparent counterpart is precisely the matter of *appearance*: "I can tell you the purely outward signs of the difference between real and apparent acquittal as they *appear* in the regulations for the court offices," the painter declares (Kafka 2009, p. 113; my emphasis). "In a case of genuine acquittal, the trial documents are to be completely discarded, they *disappear for good* from the proceedings, not only the charge, the trial and even the acquittal

are destroyed as well, everything's destroyed" (Kafka 2009, p. 113; my emphasis). What differentiates the apparently from the genuinely acquitted case is that the former still appears, whereas the latter disappears completely. While apparent acquittal is beautiful, one might say, genuine acquittal is sublime. Precisely because it eludes the senses, escapes from the empirical realm, and does not manifest in a phenomenologically determinable fashion. The event of genuine acquittal is an occurrence-in-withdrawal. Its disappearance offers an affront to a court system premised on total retention: "No file is ever lost, the court never forgets" (Kafka 2009, p. 113).[13] Titorelli is thus quick to state that he's never heard of any genuine acquittal (cf. Kafka 2009, p. 110)—after all, for a genuine acquittal to be a genuine acquittal, one cannot have heard of it. Its possibility is a mere myth, an enabling fiction stoking the senseless hopes of downtrodden defendants.

Tirotelli's typology of case outcomes offers a meta-analysis of the institution's management of the field of visibility. The reason only protraction and apparent acquittal are considered realistic options is that their appearance is posited and controlled by institutional power. A genuine acquittal would elude such control: according to Titorelli, the trial documents would tracelessly disappear, and with them "the charge, the trial and even the acquittal [...], everything's destroyed" (Kafka 2009, p. 113). This fantasy of total annihilation makes obvious the link between two systems of visibility—the juridical institution of the court within the novel, and the representational system called *The Trial* that renders it apparent. Kafka fully understands the complicity between the aesthetic and political dispositifs of making visible, which is why he installs the fiction of "genuine acquittal" as the vanishing point of all representational politics. This fiction bears not only on the institution depicted *in* the novel, but on the instituting power *of* the novel itself: to the degree that all trial documents are lost, the novel called *The Trial*, as part of Josef K.'s record, is not exempt from the threat of traceless destruction. To achieve genuine acquittal, the novel itself would have to vanish.[14] Kafka's prose, therefore, attunes the reader to oppressive regimes of visibility whose power structure permeates both art and politics, a collusion for which Titorelli's profession as a *painter* is emblematic. To appear at all is to be guilty. Only the innocent may disappear for good.

4. The Desert of the Real

Remediating the institutional circumstance, Kafka's novel offers an inquiry not only into institutional power but also into the ways in which the novel form participates in this power to the extent that it institutes the life of Josef K. This still leaves open the question as to whether the novel of the institution can determine points of resistance to systems of coercive visibility. Is the novel's effort reducible to a formal complicity with power? To get a sense of the extent to which this question is answerable at all, a broader inquiry into the novel of the institution is necessary, one that traces its unfolding from the early 1900s to the beginning of the new millennium. Following Campe's lead, one potential starting point of such an inquiry is Robert Walser's novel *Jakob von Gunten*, the story of the eponymous Jakob who renounces his upper-class background to enter a boarding school for servants. The Swiss author was five years older than Kafka, who, by the time he started working on *The Trial*, had already familiarized himself with Walser's work. "I know *Jakob von Gunten*," Kafka laconically submits in 1909, "a good book."[15]

While Walser's novel unfolds as a meditation on the pedagogical and Kafka's offers a juridical elucidation, it is obvious that the two works diverge thematically. Their convergence takes place on the formal plane on which the novel of the institution constitutes itself as a genre. Both authors concur that this novel form is implicitly guided by the question, "How to disappear completely?" In fact, this query is posed much more audibly in Walser, who probes the possibility of the institution's utter destruction. Whereas Kafka's courts are

dilapidated but never demolished, Walser's boarding school, the peculiar Benjamenta Institute, undergoes a decadent process of disintegration that culminates in its utter collapse. In the novel's final pages, all students have left, except Jakob, entreated by the school's patriarch to join him in escaping both the ruins of the institution and the narrative it encapsulates: "I don't want to educate and teach you anymore," Herr Benjamenta implores the pupil, "I want to live and, living, to shoulder some burden, carry it, and do something" (Walser 1999, p. 171). Jakob sleeps on the plea, and a dream of desert adventures prompts him to consent: "We shall travel" (Walser 1999, p. 176).

At this moment, the moment of touching its outer limit, the novel of the institution flips into one of de-institutionalization, as not only the Benjamenta Institute itself crumbles to ruin, but the very novel form that institutes its narrative exhausts its representational capacity: "The pupils, my friends, are scattered in all kinds of jobs. And if I am smashed to pieces and go to ruin, what is being smashed and ruined? A zero. The individual me is only a zero. But now I'll throw away my pen! Away with the life of thought! I'm going with Herr Benjamenta into the desert" (Walser 1999, p. 176). The novel's very possibility of aesthetic resistance against the coercive powers of visibility, appearance, and representation depends on how one understands this resolution. In Campe's paranoid reading, the promised wilderness is but a hoax, for Jakob is fated to remain trapped in a quagmire of institutional immanence: "The ending of the novel of the institution inscribes it in a loop of repetition: the ending of one institutional novel is already the start of another—the Jewish novel of the law and its foundation."[16] Jakob's foray into the desert thus marks the end of civilization as much as its restarting, reviving the image of the Biblical Jacob, grandson of Abraham and Sarah, who took his descendants to Egypt. It's without a doubt, writes Campe, that Benjamenta and Gunten go into the desert, "to found Israel again and anew."[17] There is, then, no outside of the novel of the institution—at least from Walser's vantage. The annihilating force that levels the Benjamenta Institute regenerates itself into the foundational violence that re-posits the law, as if for the first time.

However, as the reader faces the prospect of endless repetition, does it not matter that the story of Jakob's desert sojourn remains essentially untold? Not just untold—I would go so far as to call it *untellable*, impossible to represent, which Jakob certainly recognizes when he decides to discard his writing instrument: "But now I'll throw away my pen!" (Walser 1999, p. 176). When he set out to renounce his family name, to become a servant instead, he did so with the declared goal of becoming a zero, a nullity. Such nullification, however, not only bears upon his social station within the novel's world, but also, and more importantly, on his very representability as a character, a figure, a name. To become a zero means to enter the undercommons, thus eluding the spectacular economy of mediated appearance: "And if I am smashed to pieces and go to ruin, what is being smashed and ruined? A zero" (Walser 1999, p. 176). Walser keenly understands that Jakob's disappearance can succeed not only if the institutional dispositif is torn down, but if the very stratum of mediation through which institutional power literally *takes shape* is torn asunder. Capitulating before the ineffability of Jakob's disappearance, the novel renounces its own representational faculty.

Jakob's fantasy of the desert and its Jewish codification are figments of a dream that still belongs to the representational logic of Walser's novel of the institution. Yet, as the institutional control of visibility undergoes a crisis and the institutional structure collapses, this logic is opened up to something else: not the desert of endlessly re-instituting the law, but the desert of the real, where all symbolic representation is eclipsed and all stories withhold their telling (cf. Baudrillard 1994, p. 1). Ingeniously, Walser solved the problem of disappearance not by representing its phenomenon, thus rendering it apparent, but by venturing to the outer limit of mediation itself. Jakob's desert marks the extreme point of all aesthetics of disappearance, the point where the very means of making-apparent

themselves give up the ghost. The pupil's gesture of throwing away the pen signals that his disappearance cannot be inscribed, shown, or in any way mediated; its representation is negative, vanishing into the void beyond the diary page.[18] The novel is exposed as the mere preamble to a disappearance whose event it cannot register.

As I conclude, I can only hint at the work of analysis that remains to be performed regarding the event of disappearance and its resistance to representation.[19] That Walser's resolution is no singular accomplishment but has, indeed, set down a paradigm for the novel of the institution and its genealogy, can be seen in a recent example. In her 2015 novel *Eileen*, American writer Ottessa Moshfegh precisely echoes Walser's desire for opacity. Grimy offshoot of the Jakob archetype, Moshfegh's Eileen works as a secretary in a juvenile detention center in New England. But the institutional circumstance merely serves as the basis for a narrative of entirely different import: "In a week," the first chapter predicts, "I would run away from home and never go back. This is the story of how I disappeared" (Moshfegh 2015, p. 12). However, as in Walser, the novel can only *prepare* this disappearance, rather than directly report on it. Speaking from the future, the protagonist anticipates her own disappearance, channeling Radiohead (2000): "In a little while/I'll be gone."[20] The detention center offers the representational frame within which Eileen is both an aesthetic and political subject whose story is tellable, yet the very event for which the novel strives can only be presented negatively. The novel's plot is thus taken up not by Eileen's disappearance but by her quasi-romantic entanglement with a co-worker, a romance whose calamitous unfolding affords the narrative event, such as it is. "Eileen" is therefore as much a proper name as it is the name for a novel form that proleptically reaches for Eileen's disappearance. To make Eileen disappear, the novel, so-called, must make itself disappear. Moshfegh's reach for opacity thus extends through the institution toward the very edge of the novel, where Eileen, too, becomes a zero. This nullification lies as much beyond the institution's grasp as it occurs beneath the spectacle's screens. More importantly, however, it lies beyond the novel's scope. "I sank into the passenger seat and drank and looked out the fogged-up window," Eileen explains her subversion of the image. "I watched that old world go by, away and away, gone gone gone, until, like me, it disappeared" (Moshfegh 2015, p. 260). Opacity is redeemed when the very means of making apparent are themselves made to disappear.

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Notes

1 For a comprehensive study of this logic of political substitution and the ways in which literature has responded to it, see Trüstedt (2022).

2 Another permutation of the disappearance motif in indie music can be found on Lana Del Rey's 2019 album *Norman Fucking Rockwell!* Titled "How to Disappear," her song offers a noteworthy contrast to Radiohead, construing disappearance not as a split within the fading subject, but as a relation between ego and other: "All of the guys tell me lies but you don't/You just crack another beer/And pretend that you're still here/This is how to disappear" (Del Rey 2019). The disavowal I discerned in Radiohead ("This isn't happening") here morphs into the unstable pretense of presence ("And pretend that you're still here"), with the distinct difference, however, that in Del Rey's case, an observer precisely clocks *what's happening*. This observer, the

song's narrator, speaks from a markedly gendered vantage, portraying the male love interests who variously *disappear on her*. This specularity renders the position of the I even more precarious than Radiohead's song, for the speaker's very power to assert her own ego seems contingent on a vanishing male presence. While the singing voice remains nameless throughout, her masculine counterparts are assigned proper names, even though "John" and "Joe" are so generic that through a subtle consonant shift, they become John Doe: not so much the name of an individual than the cipher for the absence of all individuality. This logic of namelessness is sustained even through the song's resolution: "I'm always going to be right here/No one's going anywhere" (Del Rey 2019). While the assertion of stationary being seeks to put an end to the dialectic of disappearances that structures the narrative, the singer fails to assert a recognizable ego even now—calling herself "no one" in the very moment she proclaims her reliable presence.

[3] It is therefore easy to misunderstand the title of Paul Virilio's 1980 study. Rather than insisting on the possibility of making disappearance appear, Virilio's *Aesthetics of Disappearance* argues that the entire operation of conscious perception is punctuated by various "lapses," "absences," "departures," "arrests," "interruptions," and "breaks," which condition the very possibility of consciousness while remaining themselves imperceivable (Virilio 2009, p. 19). There is a constitutively unseen absence that underpins the very production of appearance (cf. note 9 below).

[4] "Das Erscheinen des Verschwindens" serves as the subtitle of Nägele's study on representability; it means as much as "the appearance of disappearance."

[5] In the introduction to his book, Richmond (1986, p. 2) recounts how he "hand[ed] out printed cards all over the San Francisco Bay Area inviting people with first-hand knowledge of identity changing to call me." He thus set up his own make-shift bureaucracy to track down those filled with contempt for the maze of forms. This also means that the project titled *How to Disappear Completely and Never Be Found* takes shape precisely because even the most committed disappearees could not fully vanish. Perhaps they even wanted to be found. In any case, their willingness to "identify" themselves suggests a resistance to erasure—the lingering urge to re-enter discourse. Richmond acknowledges, and even invites, this recursive visibility: "If one of the disappearees I quote recognizes himself I'd rather like to hear from him . . ." (Richmond 1986, p. 3).

[6] If the spectacle posits the totality of representation, this totality must comprise both the aesthetic and the political meaning of the concept of "representation." Debord moves precisely in this direction when he supplements his critique of spectacular mediation with a history of the working class and its political representation. Concluding that this history has consistently failed the proletariat, he proposes the abolition of all representational structures in favor of what I would call a *politics of immediacy*. The hierarchized strata of political representation impede, he claims, the emergence of class consciousness, for the proletariat can only recognize itself by "the righting of the absolute wrong of being excluded from any *real life*" (Debord 2021, p. 66; my emphasis). This immediate self-actualization of the revolutionary subject would take the form of council communism: "workers councils [. . .] assume all decision-making and executive powers and [. . .] federate with each other by means of delegates who are answerable to their base and revocable at any moment" (Debord 2021, p. 67). In its immediacy, the council no longer claims "to represent the working class"; rather, it "embod[ies] a radical separation from the world of separation" (Debord 2021, p. 69). In other words, the sheer *presence* of the council's deliberation, whose decisions happen in real-time and whose delegates are "revocable at any moment," serves to negate the spectacle's very power of negation—thus liberating the working class into an unalienated existence of pure self-actualization and "real life." I will not have been the first to point out that this fantasy of immediation makes itself vulnerable to a number of attacks. For one, the relationship between delegates and base within the council still implies a representational structure, however flat it may be. More importantly, however, Debord neglects to consider the one form of mediation on which even the most immediate assembly of revolutionary bodies must rely: language. The council's deliberation, its swift positing and revocation of decisions, rely on the indispensable basis of linguistic alienation. Even the *realest* of lives are linguistically mediated. For a sustained critique of the politico-aesthetic temptation of immediacy, see Kornbluh (2023; an explicit reference to "the society of the spectacle" is made on p. 56). An earlier critique of immediation can be found in Baudrillard, who convincingly concludes that the totality of spectacular imaging leaves no place for the unironic proclamation of *real life*. The image's representational function masks the denaturing and omission of the profound reality to which it supposedly refers—until, finally, the image "has no relation to any reality whatsoever" (Baudrillard 1994, p. 6).

[7] Debord's sentence is reminiscent of another thetic composition, namely Theodor W. Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, first published in 1951, whose 18th aphorism ends with the famous sentence: "There is no right life in the wrong one" (see Adorno 2005, p. 39; translation modified). For an in-depth analysis of Adorno's proposition, its rhetorical pitfalls, and difficulty to translate, see Richter (2019, pp. 150–54).

[8] This ambiguity recalls yet another invisible character: Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel shares the titular denotation *Invisible Man* with its science fiction predecessor, yet the invisibility it explores greatly differs from Wells's. "I am an invisible man," Ellison's prologue commences, "I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (Ellison 1994, p. 3). Unlike Wells's scientist, Ellison's protagonist has no agency over his visibility—his black skin becomes a screen through which the onlooker projects a racist fantasy, "the construction of their *inner* eyes," as Ellison (1994, p. 3) calls it. He is invisible, not so much to himself but to the beholder, and

this lack of legitimation *in and through the other* engenders a pervasive kind of ontological vertigo. Interestingly, traces of the racist fantasy are visible already in Wells's text, which records a conversation between two townspeople of Iping who caught a glance of Griffin's invisible skin through a hole in his clothes: "The chap you're speaking of [. . .]. Well—he's black. Leastways his legs are" (Wells 2017, p. 18). The two passages correspond to each other according to a logic of inversion: while Griffin's invisible skin gives space to the racist fantasy, this very fantasy blots out and invisibilizes the black skin of Ellison's unnamed narrator. Interestingly, there are not many comparative studies of Wells's and Ellison's two *invisible men*, one exception being Fleissner (1992, p. 349), who sees Ellison "as almost an abbreviated or cockney 'son of 'ells,' so to speak."

[9] This statement is in conversation with an essay by Anne Carson (2013, p. 4), which, in turn, is written in response to a statement by John Cage: "Each something is a celebration of the nothing that supports it" (see Cage 1973, p. 139). I thank Emily Trujillo, not only for bringing these sources to my attention, but for brilliantly illuminating them.

[10] I borrow this formulation from Édouard Glissant, who repeatedly demands "the right to opacity" (Glissant 1997, p. 189). What I call "visibility," Glissant sees as part of a broader tendency within Western thought to reduce difference and opacity to quantifiable *transparency*: "In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with the grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce" (Glissant 1997, p. 190). While the project of transparency produces individuals as discrete entities that can be evaluated and appraised against an ideal scale, the right to opacity would salvage what Glissant calls *relation*, the "subsistence within an irreducible singularity. Opacities can coexist, converge, weaving fabrics" (Glissant 1997, p. 190). A politics of opacity would speak from and for those interstitial spaces that neither find representation in the spectacle, nor are they institutionally monitored, and thus reduced and rendered transparent in this reduction.

[11] Original: "Das zeigt, daß K.'s Leben ein einziges institutionelles Faktum ist" (Campe 2004, p. 198; my translation). "Insofern wird [. . .] wirklich die gesamte Erzählung des Romans zur Antwort auf die Frage nach dem Subjekt—aber nicht als autobiographische, sondern institutionelle Erzählung" (Campe 2004, p. 199; my translation).

[12] While Roßmann's state of absence is uncertain at best, his story is certainly marked by the formal paradoxes of disappearance, as Daniel Heller-Roazen suggests: "Each time, Kafka's obscurely 'missing person' confirms his place by being driven from it, if not by secretly renouncing it himself" (Heller-Roazen 2021, p. 51). Precisely his "lost" or "errant" state, then, renders Kafka's hero recognizable, both within his intradiegetic surroundings as well as to the reader.

[13] Titorelli's description of Kafka's court comes eerily close to how Sigmund Freud understood the unconscious: "Indeed," he writes, "it is a prominent feature of unconscious processes that they are indestructible. In the unconscious nothing can be brought to an end, nothing is past or forgotten" (Freud 1958, p. 577f).

[14] Among those who, in the wake of Kafka, most seriously confronted the problem of disappearance, Samuel Beckett is perhaps the author who went furthest with the attempt of making the novel form itself vanish. While the three novels *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* gradually dismantle and reduce the formal requirements of story, narrative event, and character development, his late prose text *Worstward Ho* went so far as to make language itself disappear. But even this most radical linguistic nullification must remain only approximate: "Worse less. By no stretch more. Worse for want of better less. Less best. No. Naught best. Best worse. No. Not best worse. Naught not best worse. Less best worse. No. Least. Least best worse. Least never to be naught. Never to naught be brought. Never by naught be nulled. Unnullable least. Say that best worse. With leastening words say least best worse. For want of worser worst. Unlessenable least best worse" (Beckett 2014, p. 90f). The phrase "never to naught be brought" not only demonstrates that even the most diminished language can still poeticize, more than that, it poignantly encapsulates the crux of all aesthetics of disappearance: the medium—in Beckett's case, the medium of language—may engage in an intensifying *lessening* of presentation, but it can never entirely eclipse all appearance. The "unnullable least" is that which must appear to bear testimony to the very disappearance that cannot show itself.

[15] Original: "'Jakob von Gunten' kenne ich, ein gutes Buch" (Kafka 1999, p. 115; my translation).

[16] Original: "Dieses Ende des Institutionenromans schreibt ihn ein in eine Art von Wiederholungsschleife: Das Endes des Institutionenromans ist schon der Beginn eines anderen, des jüdischen Romans von Gesetz und Gründung" (Campe 2005, p. 250; my translation).

[17] Original: "Zweifellos um Israel noch einmal und wieder zu gründen" (Campe 2005, p. 249; my translation).

[18] The concept of "negative presentation" is borrowed from Kant, who summarizes the effect of the sublime on the subject by stating: "for the imagination, although it certainly finds nothing beyond the sensible to which it can attach itself, nevertheless feels itself to be unbounded precisely because of this elimination of the limits of sensibility; and that separation is thus a presentation of the infinite, which for that very reason can never be anything other than a *merely negative presentation*, which nevertheless expands the soul" (Kant 2002, p. 156; my emphasis). The elimination of its ties to the sensible elicits for the imagination a new sensation, though one that is, paradoxically, no longer tied to the senses. This sensation-beyond-sensation points to the infinite, which the imagination, lacking all sensibility, can only represent negatively. If "sensibility" means as much as the subject's ability to register empirical phenomena, the parallel to Walser's poetics lies in the novel's failure to register the event of Jakob's disappearance. This event can only happen negatively—in the novel-beyond-the-novel, the very void into which Jakob throws his pen. Relevant

to Campe's resolution of Walser's novel is also the way Kant continues: "Perhaps there is no more sublime passage in the Jewish Book of the Law than the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image, nor any likeness either of that which is in heaven, or on the earth, or yet under the earth, etc." (Kant 2002, p. 156). Rather than desiring to restart the novel of the institution again and anew, Walser's conjuring of the desert of the real submits to the injunction against representation. The event of Jakob's disappearance is sublime because it defies the registers of representational mediation.

[19] To consider the novel of the institution is only one among countless approaches to the nexus between the politics and aesthetics of disappearance. If scholarly writing can serve either a paradigmatic function—establishing a definitive position—or a problematic one—seeking to unsettle received frameworks and open new lines of inquiry—then the present article aligns with the latter, advancing a programmatic engagement that aims to initiate future research into the problem of disappearance.

[20] For an investigation of the *preparatory* nature of novel writing, see Barthes (2010).

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