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The Anthropology of Empty Spaces

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Abstract

We would like to tell an anthropologic story about how we see reality and how we feel about it, with no intention to generalize our reflections. Our version of anthropology is intentionally self-reflexive and self-reflective. This text is a narrative study of the feelings of anthropologists out in the field.

The *anthropologic frame of mind* is a certain openness of the mind of the researcher/ observer of social reality (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992). On the one hand, it means the openness to new realities and meanings, and on the other – a constant need to problematize, a refusal to take anything for granted, to treat things as obvious and familiar. The researcher makes use of her or his curiosity, the ability to be surprised by what she or he observes, even if it is „just” the everyday world.

Our explorations concern an experience of space. It aims at investigating the space not belonging to anyone. While „anthropologically” moving around different organizations, we suddenly realized that we were part of stories of the space we were moving in. Areas of poetic emptiness can be experienced, often in the physical sense, on the boundaries and inside of organizations.

Key words

anthropology, space, feelings, stories, sensemaking

Anthropology as a State of Mind

The familiar spaces we are used to moving through teem with domesticated meanings. Other, exotic spaces carry abstract meanings unconnected to our everyday ones. And in between lies the unnoticed, the empty spaces unworthy of consideration. This paper speaks about such unclaimed areas we encounter in our roles of organizational anthropologists as we try to make sense of the spatiality of the field. We do it through narration. The space we perceive through our own feelings and the stories we write become a kind of

„thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) of ourselves in the field. Thus, this text is an attempt of a self-reflective ethnography of organizational space.

There are many ways of writing ethnographies (see e.g. Van Maanen, 1988; 1995). There are different approaches to organizational anthropology (e.g. Burszta, 1996; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992, Wright, 1994). Traditionally, they aim at experiencing and describing places that already exist, that belong to someone, presumably to someone other than the anthropologist studying them — explorations of the Other's space.¹

Our explorations concern a different idea of space. Space, we understand similarly as Michel de Certeau (1984/ 1988) does. While "place" indicates stability, is an instantaneous configuration of positions — "space" is mobile, it is a "practiced place" (p. 117), it "exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables" (p. 116). Our idea of space is also close to that of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1986) when they speak of "smooth space," or a space "marked only by 'traits' that are effaced and displaced with the trajectory" (p. 51) — the space held by the nomad. We aim at investigating the not belonging to anyone. While "anthropologically" moving around different organizations, we suddenly realized that we are able to see invisible things. We encountered many places that were empty, boundaries of the socially useful reality, borders of the domains of the everyday world that normally remain beyond the interest of both the people inhabiting the neighboring realities, and of the researchers.

The *anthropologic frame of mind* is a certain openness of the mind of the researcher/ observer of social reality (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992). On the one hand, it means the openness to new realities and meanings, and on the other — a constant need to problematize, a refusal to take anything for granted, to treat things as obvious and familiar. The researcher makes use of her or his curiosity, the ability to be surprised by what she or he observes, even if it is "just" the everyday world. The anthropologist looks at the mundane and sees things that are engaging, that constitute an intellectual challenge. This is also how Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar (1979/1986) see anthropology when they write about

the importance of bracketing our familiarity with the object of our studies. By this we mean that we regard it as instructive to apprehend as strange those aspects [of the studied phenomenon] which we are readily taken for granted (p.: 29).

Anthropology in the social constructivist version rejects the belief in *episteme* in science and admits that the only thing available to us is *doxa*, which positivists classify as the inferior knowledge. *Episteme* (gr. knowledge, understanding) is traditionally seen as "superior knowledge," i.e. the knowledge about reality "as it really is," its mirror image. *Doxa*, meaning opinion, was perceived as less valuable, being by definition just biased knowledge, and consequently not deserving the exalted title of "science." Constructivists, not insisting

on the necessity to "mirror" the outside reality (Rorty, 1980/ 1994), point out that science is always based on opinions on what reality is like. The opinions of the scientists were traditionally seen as privileged, according to the grand narratives of modernity (Lyotard, 1979/1987) — the scientists were believed to be able to, thanks to the adoption of an adequate methodology, "mirror" reality accurately, without the distortions characteristic of "common opinion."

Recently, among the many interesting tendencies within ethnography, there is a growing predisposition to self-reflexivity, the "ethnography of ethnography" (Van Maanen, 1995). In this vein, we reflect in this paper on our role as anthropologists out in the field, and the emotional dimension of our experience — "the anthropologic state of mind." This is a text about feelings.

We attempt at crossing the boundary between objectivism and subjectivism in science — a dichotomy which we perceive as restraining. It is clear to us that it is we who speak, and we use our own voices. By doing it we wish to construct a scope of communication, call it intersubjectivity if you like, about something that we see as being "out there" even if we do not reject solipsism (as other interpretivist anthropologists often do, see e.g. Van Maanen, 1988). However, as we are not trying to distance ourselves from the studied field, we believe that through the screen of ourselves we also see the places we are in. We thus sketch an impressionist landscape of our experiences, our private reading of reality. We believe that our experiences would not be the same if we chose to stay at the desktop computer, perhaps only imagining the change of surroundings, or maybe trying to alter our state of mind. Our study is thus narrative about the reflexive anthropology of the field outside of ourselves as a medium for communication between the two of us.

The Field

The anthropologist is a character with a special inclination to be in the Field (Van Maanen, 1988). The field attracts the anthropologist just as the sea charms the seaman of the romantic archetype. The researcher cannot resist the temptation, leaves his or her comfortable corner by the computer and wanders off into the unknown. The unknown does not necessarily have to be the Samoa islands, because the researcher adopting an anthropologic frame of mind is able to

experience the same exoticism visiting the water supply plant in their own city as in some far away alien land. While staying in the field, the anthropologist loses her or his identity, and becomes an immigrant by own wish (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992). Simultaneously it is not to be disregarded that it is through her or his own identity, experiences, and imaginations that the anthropologist sees the field: she or he cannot turn into a *tabula rasa*. The non-participation in the orders of the field allows the researcher to question and problematize the "obvious," to take notice of the implicit assumptions on which the orders are founded. However, we do not claim that not accepting the assumptions of the studied field makes the observer "objective," or "more objective" than the insiders. We do not see it as possible, or desirable.

Narrating Space

Our method is based on the assumption that space has a story (or perhaps *is* a story), but it takes some "work" to tell it. "Every story is a travel story — a spatial practice" writes Michel de Certeau (1984/ 1988, p. 115), explaining that all sayings and stories organize places. According to Bruno Latour (1992), narration is based on association, i.e. a narrative adds episodes sequentially and chronologically (*first* this happened, *and then* happened that), and it operates on the sense of how things hang together. Jerome Bruner (1990) remarks that the temporal order of events is more important in a story than the truth or falsity (which is important in texts based on formal logic). Thus, constructing a narrative is about spatial and temporal contextualization of experience and/or events. In our understanding (as in de Certeau's), space and time are linked together within the narrative. Barbara Czarniawska (1997) lets her field speak in her narrative (she uses drama as an umbrella metaphor). Narration enables her to capture more about the complex and unpredictable (whereas formal logic eradicates and streamlines texts to devoid them of these paradoxical features). Through the narrative composition of our "data," we hope to achieve a similar end, even though our "umbrella metaphor" (or what we would prefer to talk of as "umbrella genre") is poetics.

The narrative approach is mainly used either as a genre for academic writing (e.g. Corvellec, 1997; Czarniawska, 1997), or as a method for the collection of "data" (e.g. Kostera, 1997). In the first sense, the

researcher tells a story about the reality she or he explores. In the second sense, the reality explored, is asked to tell stories (or poems) about itself. Both senses utilize stories in order to capture the context, the sublime, the implied, the emotional. In this text, we use the narrative approach in the both senses, i.e. we try to "evoke" the stories from the field (method) and compose the material in the form of stories (genre).

We were studying "ordinary" organizational fields, and during such observations, we encountered, by accident, a place outside of our "ordinary" anthropologic interest, but one that we found fascinating in itself. Then the same kind of accidental encounters occurred several more times and after that, we found ourselves deliberately, but not in any planned or ordered fashion, looking for other spaces of the same type. We tried to keep an openness of mind while observing those spaces. We kept field notes — about the spaces as such and about the feelings they evoked in us. Then we wrote short stories on the basis of these notes, trying to embrace both the realistically observed and the sublime, which was not so easily expressed. The result are poetic stories, some of which we cite in this paper. All of them are co-authored, that is, we wrote them together, which brought up not just our subjective perceptions, but also the dimension of our shared perception. All the stories concern us moving around in the field; thus, they can be seen as space stories (de Certeau, 1984/ 1988), perhaps an instance of nomadic storytelling, in the Deleuzian tradition (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988/ 1996) involving both a deterritorialization of the empty spaces through our explorations and a reterritorialization of ourselves within these spaces.

The Empty Spaces

Our idea of space is close to that of poetics as compared with rhetorics. Heather Höpfl (1995) reminds of the Aristotelian distinction between rhetorics and poetics in the context of organization studies. Poetics is based on ambivalence which is concealed by the mask of words and regulated by the text. Rhetorics is the open sketch of the text, the Leitmotif, consisting of the attempt at controlling the ambivalence, the limiting of it. Rhetorics is persuasion, argumentation, throwing bridges over chaos. Poetics lends voice to chaos, it is always ambivalent. It exists through the resonance with the elusiveness and indefiniteness of experience.

In the struggle over meaning in organizations the dominant voice is given to rhetorics. Poetics symbolizes everything that is subversive, rebellious, that cannot be managed entirely. We believe, though, that this distinction is not quite as functional – rhetorics can also be used for overthrowing existing structures, negating the embraced assumptions, and not necessarily proposing new meanings in the place of the ones questioned. Poetics can exist by the side of the defined concepts, ambivalent but not always demolishing the order – social order is based upon the ignoring and marginalizing of chaos, not on the elimination of it. Poetics displays the ambivalent chaos not by forcing the reader to perceive it – the persuasive role remains within rhetorics, while poetics aims at inviting the reader toward reading, interpreting and co-authoring the text.

According to Heather Höpfl, poetics brings into the first plan what is traditionally seen as the background: the silence, the emptiness. In poetry, the silence speaks through metaphors, through the indefiniteness of the statements, also through the construction itself of the poem, consisting both of the words and of the exposed blanks. The obsessive filling in of the blanks, the blotting out of white pages witnesses of the lack of tolerance to ambivalence, of the greed to order impressions and reality. Actually, we see the process of elimination of the blanks more as that of erasing than of filling – filling implies gain, while what we often witness is actually the loss of emptiness. In the same vein, by filling in the white spots on maps, people not only gained valuable information about the previously unknown lands, but also destroyed a whole host of legends that could exist only because of the white spots. The emptiness which cannot be erased can simply be ignored, thrown outside the brackets of the perceived reality, made invisible, and safely forgotten. If something is meaningless, it is imperceptible.

Yet reality is intransparent (Schütz, 1967), meaningless in itself. It is people who endow it with a meaning. In order to make some sense of the reality we live in, we have to be able to recognize things. In the process of socialization people are being offered symbols telling them what they see, what they should see, and what it means when they do. Symbols are something like frozen layers of experience, made of people's biographies, through which they perceive what they encounter in their lives and move on in their private histories. Symbolization is the definition of

ambivalence. Every time people choose (consciously or not) one interpretation – which is also one of the possible versions of memory – over other ones, they give up many other potential realities. Symbolization is then something of a rendering to a few dimensions of an infinitely multidimensional reality, the projecting of reality onto a map that can reasonably be made sense of. According to Schütz memory does not comprise of occurrences but of symbols (reconstructed every time they are evoked). Pure perception does not exist, because the internal being (or becoming) is assigned a memory. People always see the world through their memory. Meaning is the tension between what becomes and what is passing (Schütz, 1967; 1982).

Reality is socially constructed on chaos, the order is frail and uncertain, the fear of ambivalence is understandable and a mighty motive behind many human attempts at limiting it: science is such an attempt, but so is totalitarianism. Ordering shuts our eyes on what is dazzlingly surprising and may be beautiful, it protects us from fear but maybe also from happiness. Feelings are chaotic. The lack of order is a necessary requisite for creation and expression. The pseudo-order mimics a final state, where change can only worsen the situation, whereas emptiness allows for creativity, for including the own visions and existing views, and for the construction of entirely new approaches.

Ordering is a continuous process, and not a singular event of arranging the perceived reality into an easily understandable construct. Social orders are constructed as palimpsests – people add further fragments of text to existing discourses, they make small corrections and amendments. In the end, the chaos of reality, while not eliminated, is sufficiently buried under the discourses accumulated through generations as to be non-obvious, and therefore easily dismissed as non-existent. Science is an instance of such a socially legitimized ordering of knowledge, constructed upon chaos (cf. Bauman, 1995). It does not make a complete whole if we believe in what T.S. Kuhn (1964) said about its development (and we like this idea). The united theory of everything still remains only within the domain of pompous declarations and superficial popular science (Feyerabend, 1975/ 1994). Change is achieved not because some people have "better eyesight" than others, and "discover" what has been hidden before. Radical change is created through a more and more widespread writing down of a new

discourse beside existing discourses, not necessarily by the use of a new language. However, if the language stays the same or is a deviate of the old ones, the use of the language is new and so is the context (Feyerabend, 1975/ 1994; 1987/ 1994). Change in science, then, is possible rather thanks to emptiness, more than through the use or the perfection of already existing constructs. Of course, this emptiness has first to be perceived, in some relation to what has been perceived by the person before. But the inscribing of it is more of a creative than re-creative process. At the boundaries of different scientific theories there often remain areas of dis coherence, empty spaces that can be approached and entered.

Similar areas of emptiness can be experienced, often in the physical sense, on the boundaries and inside of organizations. They are in places to which no meaning is ascribed. They do not have to be physically cut off by fences or barriers. These are not prohibited places, but empty spaces, inaccessible because of their invisibility. In the case of science and organizations – which are different aspects of the process of social ordering, or different versions of symbolization – the experience of emptiness was similar. Nevertheless, the empty spaces vary at least as much as the domesticated constructs. The following stories are not supposed to represent all the aspects of the empty spaces that can be experienced, nor even a cross-section of the ones we have encountered, but just one possible ethnography.

Field Study

A huge, looming building, punctured by a network of winding corridors, laid out according to the intention of some visionary architect, completely baffling to the profane. The walls radiate the glamour of classical serenity, it is obvious that everything is arranged according to some higher order that is just not easy to figure out – this building is definitely a carefully planned and designed work of some educated follower of reason, and not a materialized dream of a madman. Similarly, the organization nesting in these halls is calm, stately, stern, conscious of its traditions, and definitely not prone to abandoning them in favour of any avant-garde ideas. A steady glow embodying the concepts of "logic" and "rationality" seems to emanate from every door, every wall, every corridor and room. STRUCTURE. We do not, however, try to understand the nature of the order contained in this

building. Wandering through the corridors, lost and seemingly aimless, we ourselves do not know what we are looking for. And suddenly there it is, a staircase that, at a first glance, looks just like all the ones we have seen here before. Here, however, the stairs lead not only upwards, but also downwards, where everything, the whole reality that surrounds us, changes quite abruptly, transforms, mutates. After a short while, we find ourselves no more in the basement, but in some sort of a dungeon with flaking walls and rows of heavy doors guarding the entrances to dark, damp cells. Most of the doors are closed, only a few allow us to enter the dark and empty rooms beyond them. Faint, yellowish light serves only to emphasize the darkness and gloom of these corridors. Rusting pipes and assorted cables crawl along the walls, unpredictable, chaotic, intensifying the already everpresent impression of alienness and otherworldliness. Most of the time these dungeons are empty, only rarely do we encounter any people, mostly workers, who ask what we are doing here, yet readily accept the explanation that we are just looking for an exit. We realize that such an underground does not belong in this building, that it derives from some entirely different reality. Indeed, for the ordinary participants of this organization it does not exist, there is nothing below the ground level. The basement is not a restricted area, and neither is it an ugly underside of the otherwise flawless structure. It simply does not exist. Only the visiting outsiders and the people who are not involved in the organizational order stand any chance if discovering it. An oddity, architectonic curiosity? None of the kind. We know only what we see, but we see only what we know as well.

A change of setting. The Palace of Culture,² the highest floor accessible to the visitors. Shabby panorama terrace; the grayish clouds hanging over the dirty, run-down townscape. Beside the important-looking tourist lift entrance, an inconspicuous door leads to a staircase. It is open. On our descent, we pass over thirty floors worth of doors leading to various organizations – firms, foundations, scientific institutes. The stairs, however, remain unchanged all this time, seemingly unheeding of all the surrounding, organizations-imposed realities. The doors alone reveal the individual nature of each floor we pass. There is nobody but us around, all the people keep to their safe, domesticated areas and to the lifts leading there, antiseptically delivering their passengers through the realities they

consider indifferent or hostile. Nevertheless, this is no simple emergency stairway, its monumentality and the aura of grandeur rules out the exclusiveness of such a trivial and auxiliary function. What are they, then? A bridge over the gap between the realities? Possibly, and yet, as all the bridges of this kind, they remain outside the area perceived by the participants and co-creators of these realities.

Another set of stairs, this one ends abruptly by running into a ceiling. A low-set landing, home to an assortment of miscellaneous objects of mysterious shapes and uses. Dusty chests containing absurd items. A collection of metal tools suggesting the work of a mad constructivist. Shreds of paper, scraps of unidentified materials. Grayish-brown dust melding into the deep, creeping shadows. The steps above the landing are covered with a layer of whitish grime. This is a dead end of a corridor connecting the offices of the institution's employees. Behind the doors, a hum of voices witnesses of the existence of another reality – the one where objects have clearly defined uses, where the stairs actually lead somewhere. This recess is groundless, devoid of reason; perhaps nobody has been here since long, and even if they have, it was by accident, or just to leave another useless object that did not even meet the criteria of a piece of garbage. There is no passage nor perspective; space is standing still here. A fragment of being for its own sake – with no depth.

The next scene finds us in a classroom at the university, at the lecture in the *Anthropology of the processes of organizing*. This is the surrounding we know by heart, we have been here innumerable times. This time, however, it is different. We talk about exploring the empty spaces: one of us standing on a table, the other one sitting on the floor beside a chair. Out of the well-known room we have torn the fragments of space that allow us to change our usual perspective. From the floor one can see mostly the legs of the people and the grayness clinging to the floor. It is hard to make one's voice sound important from down here. It is hard to gesture. Up on the table, the situation is reversed – this is the perfect place for gesturing, for raising one's voice, for the depersonalized preaching of the grand truths. We do not, however, have any grand truths to proclaim, only our perceptions, impressions, feelings. Our message conflicts with the space, redefined from above and below, showing emptiness, allowing for at least a momentary glimpse of the reality outside the

organization, outside the usual boundaries of the classroom. The lecture comes to an end, the people leave the room, and the empty space once again turns into nothingness, even if a few more people realize its existence.

At a different point of our explorations, our quest for the empty space has led us to a suburban fragment of the city. There are no real streets out there, only large asphalt roads and passages between almost identical apartment buildings. In the light of the setting sun this part of town becomes for us a space beyond the social paths, a place to lose oneself in. We consciously forfeit the sense of direction and let ourselves be claimed by the emergent area of unknowability and meaninglessness, where whole fragments reappear at the least expected moment, and looking back does not guarantee seeing the place we have recently passed. At first slowly and uncertainly, the neighborhood transcends into a strange sphere where the streets remain nameless, then the process of transformation accelerates and outpaces the awareness of authorship – we truly do not know where we are. Time changes, too; like space it ceases to carry the meaning we are used to. This is not an empty space in the sense the ones we have encountered before were – it exists rooted solidly in the material realities of all the people living here; it is explored, tamed, safe. For us, however, it remains the wondrous source of otherworldly amazement, ever changing, ever ambiguous. What does, then set us apart from all these other people? The passage into this other time-space is a state of mind – the abandonment of purpose, the willingness of stepping into irrationality, outside the bonds of "normal" space, into emptiness.

A Passage in Space

The empty space is a part of reality, including organizational reality; it is, however, reality intentionally misread. The empty space is a deconstruction of social space: empowering the silence to speak for itself, concentration on the marginalized elements. Instead of reading the written text, we read the blank background. This change of perspective is similar to the well known picture showing alternately a young or an old woman – depending on how one looks at it. The space we explored lies beyond the familiar orders, it does not belong to anyone. In our reading we construct a space out of the anti-space – a reflection

of our own state of mind. We became conscious of the existence of the empty spaces and the ambiguity they carry, and we accepted the chaos — the poetic — as the integral part of our reality, not trying to eradicate it in the obsessed chase after the grand, total, univocal, mystical, and unattainable Order.

A Study in Emptiness

The social space one inhabits is a collection of aims and roads, a map of everyday reality. One's own everyday life world is always the most boring. Alien worlds that people visit once in a while (foreign countries, unfamiliar organizations, etc.) can be interesting and exotic, but nonetheless for most people come down to a collection of aims and roads — only touristic ones. Between the everyday reality and boredom, and tourism and exoticism there is an empty space, not belonging to anyone in particular. It is imperceptible for the inhabitants and the visitors alike, it lies beyond the sphere of interest of people who do not actively look for the unconventional in ordinary places. Emptiness remains, however, the integral part of every ordered space, the invisible conjunction between its different aspects. It is in these empty spaces that possibilities for change are hidden, beyond the rational designs for development and transformation.

An inhabited space is anonymous, especially a crowded one, such as big cities and companies. People have their paths of passage between the "villages" of sensible life among others. These others function similarly. People can avoid anonymity by moving around the space unclaimed by themselves in groups, surrounded by a movable village. It is also possible to construct something of a tunnel of passage — a tunnel of waiting; in the bus, in the car, in the elevator. These tunnels are tight spheres of spaces where most people concentrate on some other, already tamed slices of space and time, or construct own slices of this kind by reading a newspaper, listening to music. The space without the villages becomes an entirely different environment, devoid of sense, as if the person were suddenly dislocated into a void, pulled out of the context of the known reality, familiar interpretations, forced to redefine one's surroundings by every step he or she takes, because of an excessive multitude of new impressions demanding interpretation. Our explorations have led us into such an unknown territory, outside of the order associated with the

villages of sense.

The emptiness we have experienced there, and the lack of predetermined choices or results it seems to carry, as well as its setting outside the structures of power, makes us think of freedom. According to Zygmunt Bauman (1995), freedom through privacy is expensive: it costs money to buy a private space where one is free from the intrusion of other people; it also costs in terms of resigning from social needs, it is paid for through loneliness. Our empty spaces are freedom beyond these expenses. In financial terms they cost nothing; we were experiencing them for free. Even if they asked for some experience of loneliness, in our case it could be shared loneliness; we had a very strong feeling of separation from the usual social reality, yet we both felt we shared the same experience of emptiness. We agree with Bauman (1995) when he claims that the desire for freedom is tied to ambivalence: people long for freedom, but fear loneliness. The kind of loneliness we have experienced in the empty spaces was not unpleasant. Empty spaces can be a kind of meditative freedom. This is not to say that experiencing them does not cost absolutely anything — in order to see them, we had to abandon the illusion of order usually imposed on the perceived realities. We do not mourn the loss, however, as it offers the possibility of altering the perception, as the ensuing chaos allows the freedom of creation, or the freedom of wonder.

This takes us back to our reflection on poetics, rhetorics, and the experience of emptiness. Karl Weick (1995) writes about the substance of sensemaking: words and vocabularies. "Sense is generated by words that are combined into the sentences of conversation to convey something about our ongoing experience" (p. 106). People pull from different vocabularies: these of society, of organizations, of occupations and professions, of coping, of predecessors, of sequence and experience. However,

all of these words that matter invariably come up short. They impose discrete labels on subject matter that is continuous. There is always slippage between words and what they refer to. Words approximate the territory; they never map it perfectly (p. 107).

In our process of sensemaking of the empty spaces we refrained from using any of the rhetorical vocabularies, relying on a poetical one, not aiming at exclusion of ambiguity or the slippage between words and what they refer to. If we agree with Weick that sensemaking is an act of patterning, comprehending, redressing

surprise, and creating meaning, our experience of the empty spaces does not include sensemaking. If, on the other hand, we concentrate on his suggestion that sensemaking is about authoring *and* reading the text, our explorations are that, although of a different kind. What we were doing can perhaps be seen as *misreading* and *misauthoring*. We were not looking for one sense but for a multitude of them. We can be seen as constructing and subsequently reading a text, albeit a poetical one, where no single meaning needs to (or should) emerge in the process of creation or interpretation.

Emptiness does not exist. It is an anti-frame of reference, becoming pertinent only in some scientific theories, such as the theory of black holes, or in some legends, such as the story about the Bermuda Triangle. In philosophy and theology it symbolizes the speculation about what happens when the subject is no more, a version of hell for the less folkloristically minded thinkers about death. Emptiness is generally associated with death or non-existence. Thus it serves the role of the other side, the contradiction of life, or its only meaningful form – social life. Emptiness as such does not exist, it can only be defined negatively, as the opposition to what it is not. Through its indefiniteness and undescribability it gains supernatural aspects, becomes like God, who, according to some, can be described through the use of words like: void, loneliness, silence, absence (Eco, 1986/87), expressions which refer to emptiness in the first place. Emptiness is infinite, as a form of time and as a form of space. It is not defined by any target points, any cognitive structures, habits, expectations. It is everywhere and nowhere.

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Endnotes

¹ A classical position should be acknowledged here: Emile Durkheim (1960/ 1964) suggested, for example, that the space occupied by a society — a trait of the external form should be studied in order to understand the social structure and its functions. Elsewhere (1960), he reflected on the consequences of the degree in which space is occupied for the social division of labor.

It may be also relevant to note that Michel de Certeau (1975) in his musings on ethnography (ethno-graphy) spoke of communication as the space of the Other.

² The Palace of Culture and Science, originally the Palace of Joseph Stalin, is a giant construction in pompous social-realist style, offered to the city of Warsaw by the Soviet Union in the early 50.