“Into without image”: Paul Celan reading the moving image

Abstract:

Paul Celan’s poetry from the late-1960s writes through scenes and images of political protest, but centers on the insurgent way such politics resist articulating imagery. Celan’s poetic image of politics is, paradoxically, an insurgent movement ‘without image’. In order to identify this movement of images through his poetry, this essay reads Celan inside (and outside) the cinema, plotting his poetics of imagery against developments in theories of the moving image that similarly picture cinema as an apparatus for organizing images’ insurgency. I argue that, in parallel to those theories, Celan stages the legitimizing spaces of images’ movement in poetic space. Reading Celan through a Kantian aesthetics of imagery, and through the mechanics of reading, the essay both identifies the centrality of a space ‘without image’ to Celan’s imaginary of sites of protest, and the politics of insurgency in the moving image.

Keywords: Paul Celan; image; film theory 1945-; Kant; reading

Word count: 9,132

# **Visibility, insurrection, and the moving image**

Visibility is a problem in the representation of insurrectionary politics. Dork Zabunyan, for example, suggests that the insurrectionary actions of the Arab Spring of 2011 are represented by a circulation of “missing images”: images of insurgency (*L’Insistance des luttes*, 28-31). Zabunyan in this sense reprises an argument made in an earlier context by Serge Daney. Writing about visual representations of Tiananmen Square, the Romanian Revolution, and the Gulf War, Daney concludes that “True images are rare” (*La Maison cinéma et le monde*, 784). The world of moving images more often constitutes the “loop” of visibility, the “visual”. How, Daney asks, would a “true image” become visible, if its truth meant that it exited that loop of the visual (327)? Opposing the image to the visual in this way, Daney attaches what we might call a formal insurgency to images of political insurrection. Political uprisings also constitute an uprising in images, an unprecedented visibility that threatens, as Zabunyan’s “missing images” attest, to be merely invisible in their contemporary visual regime.

Political insurrection is in this way not only an insurgency against a political regime, but also against a visual regime. This coincidence – or conflation – of insurgencies occupies Paul Celan’s response both to the cinema and to the various political uprisings of 1960s Paris. Celan’s late poetry will understand politics to consist in a regulation or representation of movement which, in an extreme sense, is both a poetic image and no image at all. Although the relation of Celan’s poetry to visual art is explicit[[1]](#footnote-1) (not least in collaboration with his wife, the graphic artist Gisèle Celan-Lestrange), I think that the problem his poetics share with visual cultures is this problem of images’ movement. This essay will trace the circulation of “no image,” of what a crucial poem, “Aus dem moorboden,” will name “*Ohnebild*” – without-image, no-image, “sans image,” as Pierre Joris puts it (*BIT*, 372|373). [[2]](#footnote-2) The movement of this poetic *Ohnebild* through his late poetry will coordinate Celan’s response to his contemporary (and past) political commitments: most urgently, the student-worker uprisings of May ’68 which took place in the same streets where Celan lived and worked. But we can see ’68 within a longer historical Parisian framework (reaching back not least to the crisis of 1958, the Fifth Republic, and the war in Algeria). And Celan’s meditations on revolutionary politics were much influenced by youthful commitments to socialist politics in the 1930s – as John Felstiner puts it, listing these insurrectionary moments, “Writing in Paris, a victim of the second Great War, Celan could not help facing back” (*Paul Celan*, 82).[[3]](#footnote-3) But this poetic gaze on political circulation – this movement of political movements through his poetry – is also framed by the broader questions of the moving image. These reflections on politics in the late 1960s coordinate through both their different spaces of their representation and with poetry’s contestation, and reflection, of those spaces. The cinema, I will argue here, and in particular the cinema screen-space, will provide one foil of such representation whose obverse side is the space of the street, or the protestor’s moving placard on the street. Writing through such spaces, Celan will scan another kind of movement that wrestles precisely, I will argue, with this insurgent, missing image of such space – the image of insurrection itself, and itself an insurrectionary-image.

The question of the visibility of such space, or indeed its legibility, is one of the major concerns of one of Daney’s primary interlocutors, Raymond Bellour. Describing what he terms an “invasion” of photography into cinema in the 1960s, Bellour focuses on the “still image” in film as a paradoxical condition of images’ movement. Indeed, Bellour’s attention in *Between-the-Images* on the “between” space of images’ circulation focuses on the “passageways” between multiple surfaces, a “many sided place” similar to Celan’s multiple scenes of circulation. This space of passage is “Floating between two still frames and between two screens, between two layers of matter and between two speeds” – an obscure place which is not the cinematic apparatus itself (what Bellour terms its *dispositif*), but rather the “other film” somewhere between projection, screen, and spectator (17). The question of moving between these spaces is also the question of reading: of transposing one kind of image into another, or finding some legibility in the cinematic movement of images. And as for Daney, for Bellour this question both coincides with and interrupts the political. “This is how images now come to us: within the space where we must decide which of them are real images. That is to say a reality of the world, as virtual and abstract as it may be, reality of an image-as-possible-world” (146). The still image, for Bellour, provides leverage for committing such judgments. It constitutes the “absolute limit, the inner body of the film”: it is both what the film circulates and what it cannot represent in circulation. For Bellour, reading the moving image means thus undertaking an impossible task of freezing the film’s movement and somehow reproducing that movement at the same time. One reads, that is to say, “on the condition that one goes outside of the film and the time of its projection” (146).

My focus on the way Celan leaves the cinema (literally, as we shall see), and on the ways he imagines images’ movement outside the cinema – not only in a remediation through poetic writing but in poetry’s confrontation with forms of ‘cinematic’ movement in protests, on streets – offers both a redeployment of Bellour’s analysis of the mediated space of cinema, and a counter space, in poetry, for images’ movement. Reading Celan’s poetry in this way means making another shift in the coordination of imagery: from an “organic” regime to an “inorganic” regime, a shift which for Gilles Deleuze occurs in post-war cinema from the “movement-image” to the “time-image,” a direct presentation of time in film images rather than its simulation in connected movement (*Cinema 2*, 68).[[4]](#footnote-4) This will form an important part of the context of this essay. Indeed, Bellour frames his “stilled” image as another way films might produce time – the time of reading. My sense is that Celan’s conception of art as departing from forms of organic connection might be thought in these same terms, that art is what “steps” “beyond what is human” (*Meridian*, 5). As Theodor Adorno puts it, in Celan we encounter an “inorganic” space “of the dead speaking to stones and to stars”: “Celan transposes into linguistic processes the increasing abstraction of the landscape, progressively approximating it to the inorganic” (*Aesthetic Theory*, 405-6/477). This “transposition” is framed by Adorno’s sense of art’s mimesis of the “world of imagery [*Bilderwelt*]” (285/324-5). Celan’s poetry is mimetic of the world-of-images, *Bilderwelt*, not of an unimaged-world. As Paul Ricœur suggests, the figurative structures of metaphor are dependent upon the organic structures of the world, such that “*Lively* expression is that which expresses existence as *alive*;” i.e., the animation of metaphor expresses (not represents) the animation of organic nature (*Rule of Metaphor*, 39-43). A shift from the organic world to Adorno’s “inorganic landscape” thus also signals a shift in the structure of metaphoric transposition, a changed constitution of images. Reading Celan’s imagery means reading this “inorganic” world-space of the image.

In the rest of this essay, I will pursue this missing image in Celan’s poetics both through its political manifestation and its circulation within an image-economy. I will demonstrate the connection of these two in Celan’s poetry, showing how his move towards inorganic movement in poetic imagery is also a move to insurgency, and indicating the forms of reading which might be attached to this insurgency. The question, finally, adopted from the theories of moving image I read here, is how one reads such an insurgent image. If we are going to read Celan’s *political* poetry, then we have somehow to read this movement. The shared problem with cinema, a problem with which Celan explicitly wrestles in his correspondence and implicitly articulates in his poetics, is the problem of locating a movement and a mobility of images that do not result in the “loop” of determined political outcomes and connected images. Reading this movement of insurgency, for Celan, in the student-worker uprisings of Paris ’68, in Sergei Eisenstein’s October 1917, or in *The Meridian*’s 1789, means reading this “missing image,” this without-image.

In one sense this problem reproduces the mechanical problem of reading itself. The movement of the eye in reading proceeds by “saccadic suppression,” in which the eye tracks from word to word by omitting the space between them in a saccade – a movement between fixed points (Bridgeman et al; Tatler and Trościano). The “space” between words is necessarily excluded from reading in order to let the eye move. There is, in other words, also a missing image of *reading*.Reading images is a political problem, in the sense that the problem of reading the moving image is that the mechanics of reading cannot capture the insurgent image that “rises up” from that circulation. This is problematic because that insurgent movement is the legitimizing mechanism of that circulation. Just so, a politics of imagery threatens to arrest any insurgency by making it into an image, what Daney calls the “loop” of the visual. Celan’s poetics will wrestle with this problem not by trying to find an image of politics, but by creating a space for the movement of precisely this insurgent, imageless-image, “without image,” *Ohnebild*. The politics of Celan’s poetry therefore consist in the ways his poems become spaces for this circulation, countering the street as a scene for the circulation of political images of protest on placards, and the cinematic screen as a scene for the circulation (by montage) of images of revolution. In order to understand Celan’s poetics of politics, and of images, we must attend to the ways he conceives space in his poetry: not as the determining ground for images’ representation, but as itself a dynamic, insurgent site of the circulation of images.

# **“From the moorfloor”: Kantian dynamics and the organic space of reading**

In this section, I will elaborate Celan’s turn to an inorganic poetics by focusing on his thematization of space in “Aus dem Moorboden,” and reading that as, as that poem puts it, “climbing out” of an organic conception of aesthetic space in Kant. Space itself is both fundamental and in question in Celan’s poetic imaginary. Celan compares the place of his birth, Bukowina, “now dropped from history,” split after the war between Soviet Ukraine and Romania, with the space of the poem. We experience both “with detours” (*Collected Prose*, 34). Indeed, this experience establishes an important framework for reading. In an image taken from his reading and translation of Osip Mandelstam, a poem constitutes a “letter in a bottle” in the sense that, always detoured, it must provide space for its own future reading – literally in the sense of a poem’s inscribed space on a page, and hermeneutically in the sense of finding space in a word for the kinds of “open, inhabitable” otherness of “you” who might read it (35). This “detour” space, a space that “turns away,” does so in order to achieve this inhabitability. We read therefore on the condition of a non-manifestation, a non-present. For Michael Levine, Celan’s poetry is thus haunted by a “voided present” of a presence which it cannot make appear (“Silent Wine,” 164). Critics identify the ways his poetry presents, in this structure, a space of conjunction with “otherness,” (Eshel, “Paul Celan’s Other”) or indeed an other’s “presence” (Glazova, “Poetry of Bringing About Presence”). This aspect of Celan’s thinking has frequently been referred to Heideggerian poetic “clearing.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Yet we might also think the ways this space is both tied to actual or present space (including the voided present of Bukowina), and to the future-present experience of reading. Accommodating such complex movements will mean responding to a kind of dynamics of that movement, the ways movement is imagined in Celan’s poetry and the ways its images move.

In *The Meridian* speech – the title itself a meditation on borders, on crossings, passageways – Celan asks “where,” “in what place” poetry moves, and answers – in the intimate, quotidian, yet exilic French of this German language poet – “*la poésie* […] *brûles nos étapes*”: poetry “does hurry ahead of us sometimes” (*Meridian*, 6). Poetry occupies a space “ahead of us.” It reaches towards a “space [*Raum*]” which is not poetry – other space. Celan’s following account of images, then, should be understood in the terms of presenting such space.

And then, what would the images be? | What is perceived and is to be perceived once and always again once, and only here and now. Hence the poem would be the place [*der Ort*] where all tropes and metaphors want to be carried ad absurdum. (10)

This description of a repeated present of images would be apt for the cinematic screen – indeed, for any screen on which images were potentially infinitely reproducible, replayable, looped. To attribute this to poetry is interesting, then, in the sense that it challenges us to read poetry as if it constituted such a screen. While the poem is a historicized “place,” *Ort* (not an abstract “space,” *Raum*) of a persistent present, “only here and now,” this is a present of movement and repetition, where “tropes and metaphors want to be carried ad absurdum.” The poem’s present moves to another space. But that different space is, ad absurdum, only the “here and now” of the poem. This image space is both only “here and now” in the poem and “ahead” of it, other to it. Poetry “burns out our steps,” for art, for images, in the sense of retracing this passage of legibility, this movement from image to word, and then back from word to image.

This passage is literalized in “Aus dem Moorboden” (written in Paris on 17 June 1968 and incorporating Celan’s home address, *Rue Tournefort*, from the center of the May events), as a “climbing” into *Ohnebild* – without-image.

From the moorfloor to

climb into the sans-image,

a hemo

in the gun barrel hope,

the aim, like impatience, of age,

in it.

Village air, rue Tournefort.

Aus dem Moorboden ins

Ohnebild steigen,

ein Häm

im Flintenlauf Hoffnung,

das Ziel, wie Ungeduld mündig,

darin.

Dorfluft, rue Tournefort.

(*BIT*, 372|373)

It is worth pausing on the word *Ohnebild*, and on the way the poem separates the line “Aus dem Moorboden ins” from “Ohnebild steigen.” What connects these lines, this turn across blank space? What is the movement from “Moorboden” (moor-soil, boggy ground) to “Ohnebild,” this “climbing” or “rising”? In a commentary on this poem, Werner Hamacher notes the way this poem “rises up” both in and against its “history.” Its “movements are in a terrain that is not yet occupied by historical facts or events” (*HÄM*, 173). It is historical only in the sense of preserving, in this space, the possibility of “another” history, another future. But this means that in the poem’s present, that future is *Ohnebild*, which for Hamacher “means on the one hand that which is without image; but on the other also the image of a Without [*Ohne*] –: so that the image preserves its negation in itself, image mixed with imageless” (177). It thus positively denotes nothing, constituting an “aporetic syntagm” in which “two mutually exclusive meanings cross [*verschränken*]” (178). We can see how Hamacher’s syntagmatic reconstruction of *Ohnebild* reproduces that *Meridian* “place” of the poem where “all tropes and metaphors” move “ad absurdum.” In this sense, Celan’s poem “aims” to the space of the blank understood, in Hamacher’s reading, as the interruption or opening of history to the future. But it is a future which is not presented. It is instead an “imageless” image of a nonmanifest future. This movement frustrates the image’s mechanism of presentation. And indeed, it thus describes the “ad absurdum” mechanics of turning and returning seen in Celan’s image-space. The poem offers attention to the movement from “*Moor*” to “*Ohnebild*” because, in a sense, it refuses to generate an image of that “*Moor*.” Hamacher’s “historical motive,” the preservation of another future, is thus also the preservation of this space of the image.

I want to add to Hamacher’s reading the question of this movement: to what does the poem “aim,” and how is this mediated by the structure of image “without image”? It seems to me to be an image of the saccade, the blank imageless space between words over which the eye moves in reading. But what is the space of this movement and transposition? We might think of this “aporetic syntagm” putting into question the connection between image, or figure, and ground. If an image is understood to be an image of “something,” then here that connection is interrupted. This “something” is not only “without image,” but in fact a “without-image” itself. In this way, Celan’s “without-image” interrupts the connection that would legitimize its own articulation. The difficulty, here, is of *legibility*: if the mechanics of reading depend on being able to move from figure to ground, from “image” to “something,” from word to thing, then the interruption of that relationship also interrupts reading.

Specifically, Celan’s poem intervenes in a crucial text in the construction of such a legitimizing connection between image and ground in aesthetic experience: Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Kant constructs a model of the correspondence between an image and its reception on organic terms. Indeed, the formal correspondence of natural ground and judging mind is sanctioned precisely by the production of such an “image” of their connection. It is striking, then, that Celan’s own poem would choose to “climb out” of the same image of ground which Kant uses to example this. Kant:

If someone searching through a moorland bog [*Moorbruches*]finds, as sometimes happens, a piece of carved wood, he does not say that it is a product of nature, but of art; the cause that produced it conceived of an end [*einen Zweck*], which the wood has to thank for its form. (182/5:303)

Kant is interested, in his aesthetics, with connecting natural form to the form of judgment. Beauty registers the shared compatibility of natural and cognitive forms, which must be connected but whose connection is not determinable. Art makes this connection legible. Art’s form is organic art in the sense that it seems produced towards some end which is not exterior to it; but unlike natural forms it is recognizably an intentional object. Aesthetic judgment recognizes both these features: its object is purposive, like an organic object, but also an intentional, like an artificial object. But art’s intentionality is seen without reference to exterior intention. Our capacity to judge in this way legitimizes our recognition of a shared, connecting principle between nature and our own forms of thought. Our judgment of art therefore functions to connect our judgments of nature with judgment as such. In this sketch, purposiveness consists both in that the wood is “carved”, and that it becomes visible – to “someone” – in the undifferentiated “moorland bog” (*Moorbruch*,boggy stream). This intentional object stands out, rises up, as it were, from this undifferentiated bog; but the surprise redoubles when one realizes that, in fact, its form corresponds with nature itself, the organic. “In a product of art one must be aware that it is art, and not nature; yet the purposiveness in its form must still seem to be as free from all constraint by arbitrary rules as if it were a mere product of nature”; so that, “Nature was beautiful, if at the same time it looked like art; and art can only be called beautiful if we are aware that it is art and yet it looks to us like nature” (185/5:306). Artistic form makes natural form visibly natural, but does so as something itself not natural. This means that “beautiful art must be **regarded** as nature, although of course one is aware of it as art” (186/5:307). Judgment is “creating, as it were, another nature, out of the material which the real one gives it” (192/5:314). Art shows how nature “can be transformed by us into something entirely different, namely into that which steps beyond nature”: inorganic ideas (192/5:314). Kant’s aesthetic judgment consists in recognizing the form of correspondence between nature and cognition. Art effects this recognition, but it does so as something other to nature. Art is suspended in a nonorganic frame which reserves the possibility of this “surprise” of another nature within nature.

If Kant’s account of judgment can be seen to outline the parameters of a kind of reading, by identifying the compatibility of cognition with art as an object which rises up from natural space, then Celan’s re-writing of this moorspace seems to enact a reorientation of that regime of aesthetic judgment. Kant’s “wood” takes form teleologically in the judgment which differentiates it from the “moor.” Celan’s poem asks us to “aim,” rather, for a “without-image” of the “moorfloor.” His moor is not realized in differentiated but purposive organic form, as Kant’s is here by carved wood. There is no result of climbing. In this overturned telos, the poem emerges in both the space of the image and the space of the street. The poem climbs to Paris, to a place, the *rue Tournefort* (in the Latin Quarter, where Celan lived during the protests of ’68), the actual space where, paradoxically, images are turned – on the streets on placards and in the street-name (“strong turn”), the German *Ort* embedded in the French *T****o****u****r****nef****ort***, punning from *D****or****fluf****t***, climbing out of it into the street.But this reflection of “*Dorfluft*” in “*Tournefort*” is a repetition ad absurdum, the space of the mere sounding “or” of *Moor* and *Ort*.

Celan’s poem thus returns us to the terrain of Kant’s judgment without offering its realization in organic form as an “image” that would connect terrain to experience. Instead, there is no image but the transposition of the “moorfloor” into the space of the street as another space of exchange. The moorfloor thus becomes a site of transposition, and a site of protest, turning into a street, without organic resolution: an insurgent space. This insurgency consists in the way Celan recasts Kant’s movement of transposition. We read Celan “out” of Kant. Celan finds a nonorganic image *in* Kant’s organic form of aesthetic judgment. “Reading” Kant means identifying this point of dynamic movement, rather than organic formalization, between ground and image, nature and art.

If the organic consists in teleologically connecting the future with the present (seeing, for example, that the end, “*Zweck”*, of a leaf is the total organism of the tree), we can thus see Celan’s conception of poetry’s future revising Kantian aesthetic teleology – and with it the structure of reading which that teleology legitimizes. Celan’s poem opens up a possible critique – and reformulation – of Kant’s theory of form. The way images “climb” from the “moorfloor” in Celan’s poem revises the form of this connection by altering the space in which they are related. “Without image,” the “moor” becomes a space of sonic turning. More specifically, then, Celan’s poem is revising the dynamics of space by which Kant connects images through organic teleology. Kant’s dynamics turn upon the relation between impenetrable objects and the penetrable space in which they are related, a dynamics of penetrability which can be mapped onto the dynamics of reading. For Rae Langton, Kant’s account of space yields a “blueprint that enables us to represent the real dynamical relations of a causally interactive world. But it is a blueprint that captures only relations” (*Kantian Humility*, 139). Kant thus upholds the impenetrability of “things in themselves” by claiming knowledge only of the relations between them. Space denotes the ideal, or virtual, relationality of actual objects’ relations. Lucy Allais agrees that “our grasp of what an object is at the level of experience requires understanding how it relates to other things, and how its state of motion will be changed by and will change other things” (*Manifest Reality*, 223). But Allais also argues that “matter, as appearance, consists only of relations or forces” (225). Indeed, “Kant explains the space-filling property of matter, impenetrability, in terms of opposed forces rather than solidity, saying that attractive and repulsive forces constitute the essence of matter” (227).[[6]](#footnote-6) What thus emerges is a picture of space as a dynamic “ideal” set of relations generated, however, by the material movements it sanctions. The ideal space in which objects are related – those “attractive and repulsive forces” – constitutes the horizon of objects’ materiality. The penetrability of Kantian space is realized in the relationality and movement – the dynamics – of objects in it. This is important for our purposes here because the kind of space imagined by Kant for aesthetic judgment, the “moorland bog,” analogizes reading by registering the terms and limits of penetrability: the surprising encounter with “carved wood” which *stands out*, rises up, from its boggy surface. The form of reading gleaned from this consists in a movement between a manifest form (writing) and its legitimizing but nonmanifest future discovery (reading). Reading thus consists in a movement across “penetrable” space, in which words “stand out” while at the same time manifesting their context. It is their dynamic relation which constitutes space. Reading images in this sense, as dynamically and openly related “movements,” means reading them, in Celan’s sense, “without image”: without, that is to say, the sense of images’ organic form attributed to them by Kant.

Celan’s “*Ohnebild*” works through Kantian space by plotting its relations and then leaving them teleologically open to the dynamics of that non-manifestation. *Rue Tournefort*, the “gunbarrel,” “hope,” “aiming”, *Ziel* for *Zweck* – these do not teleologically make sense of the “moorfloor” space of the poem. The poem instead becomes an image-space – indeed, a *screen*, in the sense that it presents images of connection without sponsoring or enforcing those connections. The moor thus emerges “without image”. The poem, accordingly, transposes through a series of exchanges which do not resolve – the “or” of *Moor* turning into a final repetition of *Ort* in the last line. The *Ohnebild* into which readers “climb” is the space of no image, then, in the sense that it yields no form, in Kant’s sense of correspondence. It is rather an image of the dynamics of exchange which in Kant legitimize form. The screen is a useful paradigm for this space in the sense of being legitimizing space of moving images without being itself “imagined” in filmic movement: the screen is what cannot be seen, the site of images’ insurrection, a “missing image”. Just so, the moor in Celan is not Kant’s natural scene resolved into organic form by art, but rather produces *no image*, it is *without image* in the poem, which is a movement – climbing – to this missing image. And just so, reading is legitimized by a movement between words which is necessarily suppressed by that movement: saccadic suppression; but also the future of reading which words make possible without being able to present. That is to say, reading “moves” across words in the sense of anticipating both an interruption of words (the blank space between them) and the interruption of a poem by its reading in the future. In order to read this movement, this space of the passage of reading, this transition and transposition from “moor” to *Ohnebild*,it is necessary to read inorganically: not with the future outcome teleologically inscribed in the present, but with the future as a ‘voided present’ which takes space and makes room in the poem without being manifest there.

# **Without image: exchange and insurrection**

Celan’s reimagination of the space of the poem on these dynamic terms of the image-space can be made sense of through his writing of the screen space of the cinema. Indeed, I have argued in the previous section that in Celan’s conception poetic space is always in this sense stepping towards ‘other’ space rather than organically corresponding with itself. We might thus read this space within those Bellourian ‘passageways’ identified in the first section. So where Hamacher’s essay goes on to suggest that Celan’s “‘Ohnebild’ speaks *with* the interval […] speaks in the *medium* of word-intervals and speaks *out* of them as their only medium” (178), we can also see Deleuze in *Cinema 2* describing the “interstice” as the “cut” image which repeatedly revises the filmic whole (179), Bellour describing the “stilled image” as an “interstice” (131), and Daney the “freeze frame” as an “image held in reserve” (321) which legitimizes the future appearance of more images, the movement from present to future image which is the formal condition of film. In other words, Celan’s poetic image-space seems to occupy the same topos as this cinematic image – but it is important to qualify this by noting that that means the occupation of a “between” space, a space of movement or a “step”. In this section, reading Celan’s poetry more directly out of his description of watching a film and then leaving the cinema, I will characterize this as a site of exchange rather than organic growth; the historicized “place” where the abstract dynamics of the previous section frame the “missing image” of politics. I will frame this entrance into politics both by reading Celan in the cinema and on the streets, before turning to his poems. Reading this passage from cinematic space to poetic or political space, reading in this “interstice,” will mean seeing how spaces are transformed or exchanged in these movements. The poems to which I will turn exchange the ‘moor’ space for cinematic screen space or insurrectionary street space. And the final question of this essay is how this exchange indicates a legibility to that “missing image” of politics.

As I have suggested already, the present space of Paris is politically significant for Celan.[[7]](#footnote-7) I have described Paris as a contested space. From the protests surrounding the Algerian war for independence in 1958 to the student-worker uprisings of May ’68, Paris was a site of political confrontation, uprising and insurrection. Celan’s past was socialist, but his poetics historicize that commitment in ways which, again, are put under pressure by their “haunted present” of non-manifestation, non-presentation, “without image”. In Celan’s exilic situation – as Yves Bonnefoy recalls, for Celan “*you* (meaning French or Western poets) *are at home, inside your reference points and language. But I’m outside*” (11), outside not only Paris but, as a German speaking Jew, outside language, both French and German – moving in and out of spaces is not only a question of politics but poetics – of how images are connected. Being “outside the cinema” is Bellour’s condition for “reading” its circulation of images.

Indeed, in a letter of 22 August 1965 (§267) written to his wife, Gisèle Celan-Lestrange, Celan describes his experience of seeing Sergei Eisenstein’s *October* in the shared terms of poetic and political insurrection:

So, alone, I watched Petersburg, the workers, the sailors of the Aurora. It was very moving, recalling at moments “The Battleship Potemkin”, recalling to me the thoughts and dreams of my youth, my thoughts today and always, Poetry-always-true-always-faithful, I saw my placards, in number, those which, not so long ago, I evoked in the poem I sent to you – ‘Dunstbänder-, Spruchbänder-Aufstand [*Vapourband-, Banderole-uprising*]’, I saw the October Revolution, its men, its flags, I saw Hope always on the way, brother of Poetry, I saw…

(*Correspondence*, 294)

Then something changes: the sentence cuts off and a new paragraph begins.

Then, at a certain moment, at the moment the insurgents invest [*insurgés investissent*]the Winter Palace, it began to leave Poetry and to become Cinema, camera shots, tendentious and exaggerated, the intertexts turned to propaganda – everything of History and its Figures was, from the outset, by the by, and what was less convincing, the role of the Left Social-Revolutionaries ~~and Anarchists~~ was wholly excised –, so the heart unclutched, searching for silences (gains, losses, regains), encircled itself and led me outside, alone, as I had entered, passing the line of young cinephiles and young girls ‘mit tupierter Frisur’,[[8]](#footnote-8) over-rouged, in trousers, sixteenth-arrondissement leftists, spineless and indecisive. – But there were, surely, some among them who knew, taking on, even there, the terrible eclipses.

(295)

The confrontation between his own experience of the film and the crowd’s experience is replayed by the film’s own portrayal of revolution. Revolution is turned into an image: the crowd which becomes a “camera shot,” the insurrection by insurgents becoming the “insurgency” of film images over poetic images. The screens of placards which bring back a past hope, “Hope always on the way” to poetry, turn into images of the cinematic screen itself. Indeed, there is movement throughout this description: the movement from gaze to film; the movements of History and Poetry; the movement on the film of protest; and the movement of the poet outside, into Parisian (not Russian) crowds. And this movement is all coordinated by both the letter, sent in hope to his wife, and by the image: the cinematic “image” of the crowd obscuring Celan’s memory, and the letter’s “image” of the crowd of youths outside, all surface and makeup, in Celan’s quite snide description. But the interesting thing, here, is the way this letter is indeed a kind of coordination of images, a montage, with its elaborate cut at “Then” marking the different shifts and configurations in the letter itself. Montage, indeed, is figured as the insurrection of the image – its ‘terrible eclipses’ – while at the same time controlling the letter’s own presentation. What happens at this ‘then’, the point at which Celan turns his back on the screen and leaves the cinema?

This letter recalls another letter written to Gisèle of 4 August 1965 (§235), in which Paul sends his wife the poem mentioned in the letter above, and in which again he describes the “insurrection” of images. The poem

is, you well know, insurrectional and glacial at once. Uprising of placards, redder than red, under the – astonished? – eyes of seals. Uprising of other matters too, of geology, of scripture, of the heart.

(274)

The glacial, insurrectional – crystal, as Deleuze might say – place of the poem, and the gaze, this time, of seals – nonhuman, amphibious, hybrid siren-creatures, animals astonished into synecdochic gazes, mere eyes of spectators: uprising and insurrection are framed by this hybridization of “gazes” which produce them. The poem legitimizes this astonishing transformation of different matters, and indeed the “heart” which in the above letter is “encircled,” as if staging a procession of placards in a protest – or an “uprising,” the emergence of ‘matters’ as if up from stones, as if up from writing, geological and scriptural. The rising here, rising up to gazes, imagines reading: the way something emerges (astonishingly, as in Kant’s analogy of discovery) to be read. But characterizing reading as the “uprising” of images introduces a tension to the heart of Celan’s poetics. On the one hand, poetry functions by legitimizing such insurrections, by opening in the space of its words a space of insurrection where “other things,” other matters might take place, other futures of reading. But on the other hand, poetry’s brotherhood with cinema, its familiarity, seems to be revoked by cinema’s insurgency, its insurrection, its displacement and translation of this space by visible images. Poetry offers a space of the alternation of the image in which images are insurrectional – a space, that is, much like the blank cinema screen. But at the same time, its blankness refuses the “insurrections” of images into its space. It is a site of both exchange and non-exchange, the movement “ad absurdum” of “tropes and metaphors,” both introducing and revoking the images it presents.

That “investment” of the Winter Palace by the insurgents signals the multiple movements and crossings at work in Celan’s thinking here. *Investir* means both to “invest” financially, to “credit” something, and to “besiege” or “surround” something – an ambivalence that carries into English (in its sense of “clothing,” “surrounding,” and granting power, as well as putting money into assets). But it also connects the language of exchange with the language of politics and insurgency: *investir* means to “cordon off” an area in response to a protest. *Investir* therefore denotes both the insurgent movement of invasion and the delimitation of space in response. Celan’s word signals this doubling ambivalence of “investment” of a “credit-image,” in the sense that its revolutionary promise is necessarily taken in credit from a future it cannot present. The screen thus stands in debt to this image, and to the revolution it would try to announce. The form of exchange on the screen is an insurgency of a blank space “without image” of the screen, but it is also the delimitation of a certain space for that exchange. And its insurgency refers directly to the decade of protest in Parisian streets in the 1960s, the “sixteenth arrondissement” leftists outside the cinematic space as well as the cinema.[[9]](#footnote-9) The movement from cinema screen to streets is therefore a syntagmatic movement, the movement of *Ohbebild* itself, between image and space which does not, quite, “leave” the cinema but rather encounters the cinematic space of the exchange of images in an exchange of spaces. The poetic space of “crossing” images denotes this space of movement between cinema and streets in which the image does not leave.

This movement from one kind of image-space to another transposes the movement from organic to nonorganic dynamics outlined in section two into the terms of cinematic montage. For Eisenstein himself, montage applies “*the same guiding principles* to both the cell and the total organism of a film as a whole” (*Selected Works*, 199). This organization is organic in the sense that those cells (shots) are not individual but collective, a collectivity which merges with the “social organism” in which “the basic cell, the prerequisite nucleus, is undoubtedly *the group of people* – not the ‘human unit *per se*’” (201). In cinema’s “organic” “system” (145), montage details “must be the very flesh and blood” of the “event or phenomenon it represents” (150). Yet “In cinema the movement is not actual, but is *an image of movement*” (145). Organic systematicity is arranged by the “image” of movement which indicates – indexes – the actual virtually. But this virtuality, as Deleuze suggests in revision, cannot itself be “imaged”. The camera cannot shoot itself (*Cinema 2*, 77). This organic systematicity, this organization by wholes, cannot represent the “insurrection” of space by filming which legitimizes it. It must take space, but that space cannot be imaged because it is always exchanged for images.

In this way, we might see cinema passing from an organic space of the organization of images into an inorganic space. For Peter Szendy, this is again a form of “investment”. *The Supermarket of the Visible* characterizes the cinematic exchange of images as an *iconomy*, a production of value by gazes, by “credit or debt images” (27-40).[[10]](#footnote-10) In this “market” space there is a “valorization of iconomic capital: The gaze at work creates surplus-value – *surplus-view*, we might say – to the precise extent to which it constitutes supplemental work, without either exchange or equivalent” (75). Like capital, images circulate by producing the terms of their own exchange: gazes. But in an amplified sense, capital is shown to move like images: the production of surplus value is like the “gaze” of the image which moves and exchanges itself – like the general visual equivalent of the camera – without production, only with debt or credit to other images. Szendy, indeed, takes his formulation of money and its “obverse,” the image, from Deleuze, for whom “there is not, and there never will be, equivalence or equality in the mutual camera-money exchange” (*Cinema 2*, 77). Cinema is a system of equivalence or exchange, rather than movement or connection, in which there is no “equivalence” for that mechanism itself. There is thus a constitutive imbalance between time (money) and the image (77-8). The cinematic apparatus generates gazes without being able to include those gazes in its apparatus. Reading the circulation or movement of images would require Deleuze’s impossible time-equivalence, impossible because the exchange of the image, like that C-M-C of capital – as Szendy also shows – is dissymmetrical.

Read on these terms, what is ‘without image’ in a cinematic *iconomy* is the mechanism that allows for the exchange of images themselves. Celan’s intervention into thinking cinema would consist in his attempt to imagine this space poetically. And we might now suggest that the exchange of natural form for subjective form in Kant’s organic aesthetic is similarly the production of a “surplus” (in Kant’s case, a surplus of determination) which makes that exchange itself possible. Form denotes this surplus. This exchange is the condition of aesthetic experience. Its surplus of determinacy, beauty, is invested in something like Szendy’s *iconomy* in which the mimetic relationship between judgment and object becomes a dynamic circulation. There, the beautiful object is always exchanged for its judgment in form. Form is thus always in debt to the object which it cannot determine. It is like Szendy’s image, which “is never simply present but is henceforth always exchangeable, ready to be substituted for by another image, including a copy of itself” (*Supermarket of the Visible*, 19). Celan’s “voided present,” the space which I have been arguing is opened in the poem for “you” to inhabit in reading, in this sense denotes the blank space which is the equivalence for the mechanism of reading. Celan’s poetic climbing to *Ohnebild* is a rising to this blank space itself. It is both what enables the movement of poetry and, as cordoned off space, what poetry is not able to present. The space of insurgency which enables the “rising” of images, as from a moorland bog, is not itself part of the poetic economy.

“And then, what would the images be?”: this is Celan asking the question of montage, and of circulation: “And then”. “Then”. Cinema and poetry share a problem with reading, which is the problem of this movement of exchange: reading functions by exchanging the blank space, the saccade, which it cannot read, for the image or word. Reading (and aesthetic judgment), the poetic image, and cinematic representation thus share the problem of the space “without image”. Celan’s writing “without image” indicates a dynamics of this space (rather than its replacement, as in Kant, by organic form). In Szendy’s sense, the poetic image inhabits that virtual space of “surplus-view,” the space of images’ exchange which cannot itself be imaged. I have been arguing that this is is the space reading also occupies: the blank space of the page which is the condition of legibility, but which must be covered by writing to achieve legibility; the blank space the eye moves across between words which cannot itself be seen. Celan’s “Aus dem Moorboden,” with its “climbing” to “without image” and to streets imagines sites of a kind of sonic exchange of the moor which turns and returns “ad absurdum”. Moreover, this “surplus” is figured into his late poetry through the movement of that “image-space” of the moor itself which, in a series of sonic displacements, moves, changes places, and at the same time imagines different spaces. In a series of poems, this image moves as if across a series of different screens. The site of this poetic screen is the street, now itself a cinematic space of the exchange of images.The street is haunted by the space of the “moor” which cannot be presented or exchanged, in which space is the site of transposition to a different space.

In “Imagine” (“*Denk dir*”), the mass suicide of Jews in resistance to Rome in Masada, 73-74 (excavated 1963-1965), returns as an imaginary encounter of the “Moorsoldat”, moor soldier, from a bog in the context of the Six Day War (5-10 June 1967). Celan wrote this poem on 7 June 1967, after participating in a protest in support of Israel at the *Place de la Concorde* on 6 June 1967. These different scales of resistance are figured into the poem, but curiously as an unimaginable figure. Rising from the “bog” of forgotten history, the poem instructs us to “think” (*denk dir*), ironically, something that can only be “imagined”: not this dead soldier, “unburied,” but rather *our* openness to receive it. The poem thus images the movement of this soldier from the bog.

Imagine: your

own hand

has held once

more this

into life re-

suffered piece of

inhabitable earth.

Imagine:

that came toward me,

awake to name, awake to the hand,

forever,

from what cannot be buried.

(*BIT*, 220|221)

The process of “thinking” and “imagining” turn into each other here: “thinking” the unthinkable, already dead soldier as if its insurgency was transparent in the context of protest in support of Israel in 1967; “imagining” the unimaginable emergence of this body which offers no substance to image apart from the openness, “forever,” of what simply comes (as if to the hand). The soldier “rises up” from the moor “once more”. This soldier “cannot be buried,” ambiguously both because he returns to the imagination now, and because there is an absence of the past in the poem’s present, a “void” of “inhabitable earth”. The difficulty here lies with the difference in force between the “Moorsoldat,” whose return is “inextinguishable [*unauslöschlichste*],” and an instruction, to us readers, to “imagine,” to make of this an image. How are you, with your hand, to make use of this gift which seems also to take? “You” are in the position of resistance, here, not the Moorsoldat. He is not extinguished, but in fact *un*extinguished, undeleted. And from the moor emerges apparently “inhabitable earth”: from burying to inhabiting, from death to life, inanimation to animation, the inorganic to the organic – this is surely mirroring, reversing, a theory of metaphor as the animation of difference, turning metaphor to the inanimate, towards its own inanimate frame, whereby the metaphor shows us the moor, not the wood?

The ambiguity centers on this “un-burying” activity of the poem. The “Moorsoldat” is again un-buried by the way resistance can be figured and reproduced in different contexts, as an “image,” in uncanny animation. We are enjoined to welcome this return, but what we are to do with it is not clear. Unburied, this image cannot be buried again. In this movement, the image is unexchangeable for different settings or spaces: the image is “unburied” “forever” and cannot be reburied or returned to that moor from which it rises. Like the image and money in Deleuze and Szendy, this image of the soldier does not present the *obverse* which enables it: the space of the moor.Yet the moor returns, again, “changing lanes,” in another of Celan’s poems from May ‘68.

The Runic one too changes lanes:

amidst

the arrest-squad

he scrapes him-

self, arresting-arrested, red,

carrot, sister,

with your peels

plant me, the moory one, free

from his

Tomorrow,

Auch der Runige wechselt die Fahrbahn:

mitten

im Greiftrupp

schabt er

sich Greifend-Gegriffenen rot

Mohrrübe, Schwester,

mit deinen Schalen

pflanz mich Moorigen los

aus seinem

Morgen,

(*BIT*, 352-4|353-5)

Changing lanes, arresting-arrested – the problem of movement is its self-arrest, as well as its slipperiness, its exchangeability. The image, indeed, sarcastically “changes lanes” with apparent ease. The image of the protestor discloses an ambiguous violence: he is “arresting-arrested,” his “arrest” hard to distinguish in the crude “CRS=SS” slogan that would collapse two histories into one image of equivalence. The protestor transforms into the image of the “runic” SS he would apparently resist precisely because of the way that protest collapses historical distinctions into one image. The poem interrupts this imaginative suspension by imagining its interruptions. Its insurrection is, in this sense, insurrectionary-of-insurrection, another arresting-arrested movement, and not a simple counter-protest. In a more complex sense, the poem substitutes what *The Meridian* terms, from Büchner’s representation of the 1789 revolution in *Dantons Tod*, a “counter-word,” a “step” (*Meridian*, 3); understood, however, not as a reactionary “arrest” of movement but rather as the introduction of a crossing space. Celan notes how protestors “ironically” simulate Nazi salutes “behind the ~~red and~~ black flag” (*BIT*, n.590). The socialist “red” (the “redder than red” of the second letter: glacial and insurrectionary “at once”) is in the grip, here, of a more sinister Nazi “black,” red under the image of its own erasure. The “moor soldier” interrupts this elision: the “red” turns into the “carrot [*Mohrrübe*],” rhyming now as an aural image into “*Moorigen*” and “*Morgen*”. The “forever” “un-buried” moor soldier is un-buried again by this collapse of imagery, this time into the “morning” of the future. The poem, in this way, discloses through images the history that images otherwise might conceal. In turning his poem into a site of the movement and exchange of images, rather than their resolution, Celan is addressing the ways a circulation of images of insurrection – on the street or in the cinematic representation of revolution – threatens to arrest their own insurgency. His poetic play with images on an apparently formal level (the “ad absurdum” play from *The Meridian*) enables for a political insurgency not by presenting it, but by opening a play precisely in the ground or terrain of circulation and movement. Celan’s poems become like screens, then, but like screens unconstrained by the terms of visibility. The movement of that moor figure (as mere sound) is a movement *Ohnebild* – without image – in the sense that it is not referred to a ground in the way Kant’s organic image, as we saw in section two, is. Read through the mechanics of the “runic one,” the “arresting-arrested” images of protest that despite themselves suspend insurrectionary movement, Celan’s poems attempt to find in mere formal play the form of an unfrozen, dynamic, insurgent play of images themselves. Celan’s political poetics do not consist in imagining a future in the present, but in finding a present insurgent space “without image” where a yet undetermined – indeed indeterminate – future is preserved: “*Moorigen los | aus seinem | Morgen*”.

At issue here is the legibility of these images. The question is not only how one reads something that is “without image,” something like political insurgency, but how reading itself might function “without image”. If reading functions by saccadic suppression, then it proceeds by coordinating a series of blank spaces. Celan ties this movement of coordination, sequencing, and suppression to the function of the image in montage. The movement of images in his poetry describes the eye tracking in reading. And this movement of eye tracking is mapped onto the space of the cinema screen, the blank screen without image upon which images move, where surplus value is created by gazes which cannot themselves be imaged. Imagining his poetry as a cinematic space, therefore, means also leaving that space. And reading in such a space means allowing for an insurgency of this without-image, allowing for the space of no image. Reading Celan’s images, in the streets of protest, means reading as if upon a cinema screen in the sense of reading images *in the space of no image*, in the space without image of the screen, which those images necessarily suppress by being projected there. Reading the moving image means reading movement and not the image: the dynamics of space of which there is no image. And this means, in Celan’s astringent and yet hopeful poetics, reading the nonorganic space of exchange in which images move, reading the unexchangeable no-image which is that space, for which the images are not ever equivalents. This image without equivalence, this space without image, is in Celan’s poetics the space of reading and the space of the future: that nonorganic, nonteleological “aim” of reading as transposition, exchange, “Dorfluft, Rue Tournefort”, which is also, understood on these constraining terms, the image of their history.

Reading between different kinds of image – poetic and cinematic – involves its own suppressions. That is to say, I am not concerned only with the transmedial image, with the possible correspondence between the poetic and the moving image, but also with the image of transmediality which legitimizes reading between poem and film, text and screen, poetic and visual, word and image. Reading Celan requires us to move between these spaces. And this should trouble us – as it troubles Daney. The risk of the image is that it is not seen, invisibility, that it is without image because it does not enter a regime of visibility, of Kantian form. The risk of Celan’s poetics is illegibility. In challenging the connecting space between image and ground, Celan’s poetics challenge not only artistic form but the form of correspondence that makes art legible to a reader, and thereby politically effective at all. That is to say, the challenge posed to reading here is not that reading accommodate a blind spot, an invisibility, but rather that it recognize in its own processes its constitutive suppressions and non-manifestations. This is not, however, in my eyes disabling of reading. On the contrary, opening poetic, cinematic, and protest space – making them “inhabitable” – opens reading to the kinds of openness of futurity which constitute Celan’s otherness, while at the same time recognizing the stricture of non-manifestation which allows that future to be presented. And the interesting result of this reorientation of reading by a future it cannot manifest is that we are left not with images of protest, with possible points of exit from present politics, but rather with an insurrection of that regime of imagery that would ask for their presentation.

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1. See Julian Johannes Immanuel Koch, ‘The Image in Celan’s Poetics’, for a positive account of this relationship. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. References to Joris’s collected translations of Celan’s later poetry, *Breathturn into Timestead,* will be cited *BIT*, with English and German given on facing pages. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Felstiner connects one of Celan’s shibboleths, ‘*No pasarán*’: ‘From February 1934, when a Viennese workers’ uprising was suppressed, to February 1936, when Spain’s Popular Front was elected (and supported by students in [Celan’s home city] Czernowitz), to February 1939 at the battle for Madrid, where banners proclaimed “No pasarán”’. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Central here is Deleuze’s conception of a turn, after the war, from the ‘moving’ to the ‘time’ image, which is understood as an intensification of movement in images such that they present time itself (xii). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Poetry as Experience*, is the classic reading. See also James K. Lyon, *Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Compare Jill Vance Buroker, *Space and Incongruence*, 7-23; and see Daniel Warren, ‘Kant’s Dynamics’, and *Reality and Impenetrability in Kant’s Philosophy of Nature*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See also Ivanovic, “Auch du…”, for an account of the city in Celan. On this context see Szondi (*Celan Studies*, 85-9), who in parallel to my argument (and Deleuze) describes the ‘crystallization’ of actual-referent to virtual-image in ‘Eis, Eden’. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A back-combed hairstyle. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *La Cinémathèque Française*, at this time housed at the *Palais de Chaillot* in the 16th arrondissement, would become in ’68 a focus of unrest itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See also Beller, ‘Cinema, Capital of the Twentieth Century’, and *The Cinematic Mode of Production*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)