

# An Eruption of Fragmentary Impressions: Exploring the Spectral Narrator in Martin Vaughn- James' *The Cage*

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## Abstract

More than an aesthetic depiction of ruins, Martin Vaughn-James' 1975 comic *The Cage* alerts one to the possibility of an urban environment overwhelming a narrative agent. This article draws on *The Cage*'s narratological tactics as well as hauntology in order to read the narrator as a spectral presence. It posits that what this narrator

depicts reflects what Marc Augé describes as “places of memory.” Finally, the article describes how a tear in the spectral narrator's vision points to a crisis in perception. *The Cage*'s unnerving quality resides in how it reveals perception itself to be a cage, a frame that limits one's understanding.

## Prologue

The spread of COVID-19 had accelerated into a pandemic by the time I began revising this paper. I was returning to *The Cage*'s portrayal of abandoned streets at the start of a period of self-isolation. Many countries were promoting “social distancing” measures, whereby neighbours were being dissuaded from associating in public. Residents of countries around the world were having to be antisocial in order to help society. I could not help but think about how these necessary measures were, day by day, changing discourse around public spaces. As the streets of my immediate surroundings were being said to harbour an infectious threat, they were left to become relics of an immediate past, their utilitarian design a reminder that society was once deemed functional. This paper is about the representation of a world without human interlocutors, the sort of world an unalloyed pandemic could leave in its wake. This portrayal, when read in more stable times, seems like a ghost story, its capacity to unnerve mitigated by the unlikeliness of what it depicts, but as I came to complete this essay it seemed to have foreshadowed the current predicament of my locale. Now, *The Cage* itself was like a ghost whose presence had been preparing me for the world which was taking shape.

## What is *The Cage*?

Martin Vaughn-James' 1975 comic *The Cage* is an unsettling narrative told in single panel pages. Its restrained and repetitious page layout presents a diegesis in which materials appear to have agency (headphones fly, a tar like substance floats through the streets menacingly). The material world of the book's diegesis can be characterised as being unpredictable and constantly transforming. The artwork has a grainy but detailed style reminiscent of certain habits from the Franco-Belgian *bandes dessinées* tradition, especially Moebius. That stylistic crossover could encourage one to view *The Cage* as a science fiction or fantasy work, yet the book does not feature many of the key tropes associated with either genre. We see recognisable landmark-types and urban environments, but they are abandoned, unoccupied and devoid of culture (in the anthropocentric sense). In these pages, pyramids and skyscrapers

are transformed into *memento moris*, melancholic reminders that even the most grandiose biological projects come to an end. This is a world dominated by ruins, detritus and debris.

From the first to last page, the narrative paces through an environment which is always changing. The text opens with a double page spread, cropped and presented in two parallel panels. The landscape we see is surreal: the ground is made of rounded points that would be near impossible to walk on, and poles jettison upwards on top of which sit blank, warped panels. Rising from the horizon is what the reader may presume to be clouds. The verbal track, annunciated through text, is always located outside of the panels. This track announces that “the cage stands as before ... unfinished and already decayed as if its construction had been abruptly and inexplicably arrested” (Vaughn-James 20-1). These words do not appear to be referencing anything we can see, and so from the beginning the reader gets the sense that there is something unknowable and inconceivable about the situation.

This essay seeks to explore the mystery of whose perspective *The Cage*'s narrative is focalized through. Following this, I will outline how this narrative recreates the sensation of partaking in an intersubjective relationship with material infrastructure. How the text and images work together can be hard to define; sometimes the text enhances the sensation of what we can see, while at other times, like in the opening two pages, their proximity produces a juxtaposition or contradiction. *The Cage*'s ambiguity, both in terms of genre and what is actually occurring, is a resistance against the logic of preformulated dramatic structures, the types readily available in science fiction or superhero comics. Similar to a piece of music, it instead provides a rhythm and various intensities.

## **A Spectral Narrative**

A cage is a structure which limits your potential for physical movement. The term ‘cage’ can also invoke the feeling of being ‘caged in’ by circumstances, or the ways that infrastructure can encourage particular behaviours. Both resonances imply the sensation of being restricted to the point where one is unable to act liberally. In this sense, there are

various types of cages depicted throughout *The Cage*, from a pyramid (27) to a barbed wire fence (78-9) to the high rises of a modern city (154-5). A sense of restriction is created through *The Cage*'s form. While its panels do vary in size, nothing seen within the visual track ever 'breaks' its frame, and the panels never exceed one page. In fact, sometimes it is the diegesis which exceeds the panels and we get a vision of a space cut across two panels over two pages (134-5). This reveals a limitation to the narrator's line of sight. The reader may presume that there is a world beyond the frames, an expansive and lively diegesis with its own physics and history, but the narrative very explicitly restrains what it is one can see. Nor are we ever granted a bird's eye view of the terrain. The panel itself is a narrative cage which entraps the reader and brackets the limits of our knowledge about the world we are reading of. There is thus a triple enclosure within *The Cage*, first an entrapment of the narrator, then of what this narrator can see, and, finally, how what they can see is depicted.

But through whose vision are we seeing this particular story and its sites of destruction and abandonment? The interplay between *The Cage*'s various narrative tracks produces the sense of being overwhelmed by something undefinable. It makes sense to consider that all three of the comic's tracks (verbal, visual and spatial) are directed by one narrator rather than by three cooperators. What is said, what is depicted and how everything is arranged on the page is the production of one narrative agent. Perhaps though, through the application of animism onto the structures or objects on display, one of the non-human elements could be said to be narrating, but deciding which one would be a difficult task. After all, the tone of voice of the text is consistent, while what appears in the visual track is continuously changing.

That the text is placed outside of the panels suggests that the narrative is being spun by someone or something that is disconnected from the events on display. They are also imperceptible, their agency lies in being able to tell the story, but as a character they have no influence on the storyline. From the opening salvo, where the reader is told that "the cage stands as before" (20), the verbal track points away from itself and towards the visual track. Later on the verbal track tells us, somewhat

incoherently, that the cage “remains an empty analogy a vacuous stale and airless bag of words of words words words stale airless words abruptly overtaken by some eruption some alien logic” (153). This text, reminiscent of stream of consciousness prose, is well partnered with the visual track’s surrealist qualities. Both surrealism and stream of consciousness are modes of artistic production which came to the fore in the early twentieth century and are often seen as ways for artists and authors to explore the subconscious. That *The Cage* calls to mind these two artistic trends reveals that what we are perceiving is very much a subjective remediation of an experience. *The Cage* makes no pretence to being a work of realism. I want to suggest that *The Cage* is a stream of consciousness from a ghostly figure, and to do this I will employ insights from studies into spectral metaphors.

Hauntology is a conceptual framework which has travelled between various disciplines. The metaphor was generated in the 1990s by Jacques Derrida, whose *Specters of Marx* sought to trace the remnants, or ‘ghosts,’ of communist thought in a period which had been dubbed ‘the end of history,’ an innuendo for the end of radical (political) difference. Mark Fisher popularised the term in his critical analyses of sonic trends in contemporary music in the mid 2000s (“London After the Rave”). For Fisher, hauntology’s ghost is a lost future which repeats in the present as a form of nostalgia. Like Derrida, Fisher imagines the ghost as an idea which can be summoned through remediation, such as an audio sample in an electronic music track. Esther Peeren, in her book *The Spectral Metaphor*, suggests that a ghost is a physical entity which, rather than being from the past, is of the present but has a “lack of social visibility, unobtrusiveness, enigmatic abilities” (5). In her estimation, a ghost is a marginal figure with reduced agency whose Other perspective offers a peripheral vision which complicates our understanding of the present.

*The Cage* affords the possibility that its narrative can be considered the subjective perspective of such a peripheral vision. “The frame itself,” its text announces, speaking of the picture frames within the panel as well as the frame of the panel, “hovers (like a spectre) in the darkness... a phosphorescent image of the archaeological desolation” (162). Alongside the fact that the text explicitly alerts us to a spectral

metaphor, the idea that the panel is hovering strengthens the notion that the panels present the focalization of a ghostly figure. The frame within the panel is floating like a ghost, as is the frame of the panel (the representation of the narrator's subjectivity). As the panel is 'like a spectre,' it is presenting a ghostly subjectivity. The narrative in *The Cage* is told through the perspective of a figure that cannot be seen yet is present, a figure that is, to use Peeren's terminology, both unobtrusive and enigmatic. The reader can imagine that the visual track's gliding march through the environment, as I described it above, is a ghostly drifting in an uncanny landscape. Much like Peeren's anthropomorphic ghost, which is a conscious figure, *The Cage's* narrative is aware of its own detachment and lack of agency. Here, "the frame itself" is a disembodied awareness of "I."

### **An Avalanche of Signs**

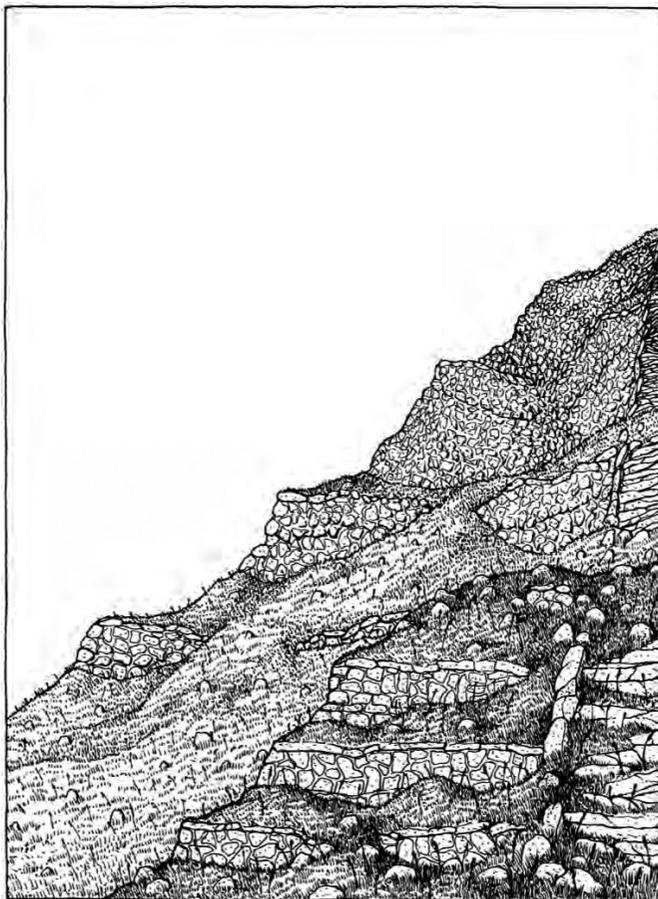
As Brian Larkin's notion of "infrastructure's political address" (333) reminds us, structures address their audience. Each instance of a civilisation's material infrastructure is an ideological utterance that is produced through the systems of power which have been able to generate the capital and resources to build them. *The Cage* refers to structures having the power to address a subject when it describes the morphing pyramid in its opening sequence as "a vacuous [...] bag of words" (32). The contradiction in this description is that the structure is both devoid and full of meaning. Or, maybe it is its meaning which is ultimately empty, a vacuum in which the narrator finds a reflection of their own subjectivity. This second interpretation fits the visual aspect of the pictorial sequence it is paired with, in which the pyramid undergoes various aesthetic transformations (25-35). This persistent change of what is perceived is even more disorientating due to the fact that the visual track is viewed at an angle, giving the sensation that the ground of the diegesis is in a state of flux. On one page there is a framed picture of a pyramid, similar to the one we see earlier in the book, situated on a wall in a decaying city whose windows are shattered. The text enigmatically tells us: "...forced by blind momentum, an avalanche of signs and emblems

devouring the stone...” (169). But what does it mean when a place made of materials is overwhelmed, indeed devoured, by immaterial signs? Marc Augé’s anthropology of non-places provides an answer.

In the 1990s, Augé began to explore places that are nothing other than a collection of signs which reinforce neoliberal dogma. He terms the hotels and airports of the contemporary, postindustrial world non-places. These “non-places” tend to be liminal spaces in which various migratory activities (of both people and capital) can flow freely. These spaces are not interested in a ‘here,’ insofar as they are more concerned with the ease of global finance than localism. With the arrival of non-places, earlier places (such as historical city centres) are “promoted to the status of ‘places of memory’” (78). *The Cage* does not portray post-modern non-places, but what Augé terms places of memory. Neither the place of memory nor the non-place cultivate an organic, lively culture. They are both dominated by signs; while the historical monument signifies the past, the airport signifies the future. Caught within the friction between the two, the present is destabilised.

Augé states that in spaces designed by modernism, such as the metropolis in *The Cage*, we experience the “presence of the past in a present that supersedes it but still lays claim to it” (75). The city environment *The Cage* depicts is indeed this sort of place. More than that, it has been abandoned and left, like the pyramid, to history. None of the spaces depicted in *The Cage* have an anthropocentric present or future. They are “an avalanche of signs” (Vaughn-James 169) left, the reader presumes, by previous occupants. The quotidian city street, apartment block interior, or site of spirituality has been transformed into a cage which holds a subject in place in an unsettled present. The result of this hold is the depiction of a slanted world which lacks stability and defies logic. The focalizer is trapped by uncertainty. Whereas readers may more often find a subject recounting their transitions while moving through their world, in *The Cage* we find a narrator who shows no signs of being able to affect the world they are passing through. *The Cage*’s narrator is a spectral presence being directed and affected by their environment. This is because non-places, and places of memory alike, are authoritarian: they are spaces which direct your activity and whose

an empty analogy ... a vacuous, stale and airless bag of words ...



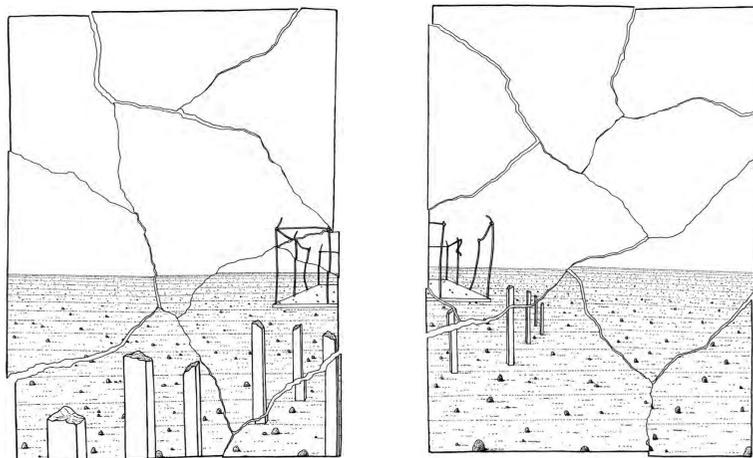
**Image 1.** Martin Vaughn-James. “vacuous [...] bag of words,” 2013. Image used with permission from Coach House Books.

affective qualities can be overwhelming. To give credibility to the idea that (abandoned) infrastructure, the sort depicted in *The Cage*, has the potential to move a subject, I will draw on Susan Buck-Morss' discussion of Walter Benjamin's writings on art and Paris.

## Fragmentary Impressions

At three points in *The Cage*, the vision of the narrator becomes fractured over two-page spreads. In each instance, a two panel, two page spread of a barbed wire cage in a desolate environment is shown. In the first case, a tear interferes with the two panels (102-03), but over two further spreads the panels become gradually more torn until they are fractured (124-5, 150-1). This change is not permanent, however, as at the end we are returned to a depiction of the wire mesh cage captured within panels that are untampered with (186-7). The moments where the panels are interfered with are another reminder that the panel is not a static meta element but very much engaged in producing what it is we see. The panel is not only a frame, in the way a frame around a painting in a gallery is. Its outline is a visual demarcation of a subjective viewpoint. When this outline is tampered with we must presume that the subjectivity of the narrator has been altered. These moments of panel interference are moments when we are forced to be aware of the effects of the material diegesis upon the spectral narrator.

These torn panels are reminiscent of what Buck-Morss describes as Benjamin's "fragmentary impressions" of Paris at the turn of the twentieth century ("The City" 8). Through an analysis of the city's increasingly unfashionable arcades, Benjamin writes about sensorially experiencing a city being transformed by the spectacle of advertising and gentrification (at this point in time Europe's historical city centres were already becoming places of memory and, eventually, non-places, liminal zones dominated by a sedentary past, good for tourists and little else). Buck-Morss defines the simultaneous "overstimulation and numbness that is characteristic of the new organization of the human sensorium"—inherent to the postindustrial, spectacular city—as "the form of *anaesthetics*" ("The City" 8, italics in original). Buck-Morss



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**Image 2.** Martin Vaughn-James. The panel being interfered with, 2013. Image used with permission from Coach House Books.

writes that Benjamin wanted us to be open to *aisthesis*, “a form of cognition, achieved through [...] the whole corporeal sensorium” (“Aesthetics” 6). Aisthesis is devised as a way to avoid a “crisis in perception” (“Aesthetics” 22) that results from being overstimulated by “techno-aesthetics” which have “the effect of anaesthetizing the organism, not through numbing, but through flooding the senses” (“Aesthetics” 22). *The Cage*’s diegesis, featuring flying media, ruptured infrastructure, and characterised by its shapeshifting abilities, floods the narrator’s, and thus the reader’s, senses.

*The Cage* does not provide us with an emancipation from techno-aesthetics; its narrator does not seem to know of or embrace aesthetic awareness of their environment in order to emancipate themselves. *The Cage* does, however, provide a good depiction of a crisis in perception. This is perhaps where the book’s disturbing qualities reside. The reader may presume that the rip in the panels is a depiction of the narrator’s sight being temporarily ruptured by some external force: what they see

and feel. The text describes these two pages as depicting “the defaced image of the cage...” (103) This seems to describe the defacement of the image of the wire mesh, but one can also interpret this as a defacement of the spectral narrator’s perception. This is possible because, as Augé reminds us, “the body is a composite and hierarchized space which can be invaded from the outside” (61). Such a defacement demonstrates that the perception of the narrator of *The Cage* is being altered by what they are perceiving. The fractured panels are a visualization of an embodied experience of external stimuli that results in a crisis in perception.

Through this violence upon the narrator’s sight, the reader becomes aware that it is not only the walls of the pyramids or high rises in the visual track which could be considered types of cages, but also the two dimensional walls of the panels on the page. What if the “airless bag of words” (Vaughn-James 153) is not only what is being told of, but also the teller? Taking this proposition at face value, the comics panel can be seen as a metaphor for how perception itself is a sort of cage. *The Cage* is about the material cages of civilizations, and how these can overwhelm you when you are not in a position to effect or alter them, but it is also about the cage of our experience, the barriers to knowing every aspect of the world around us. Being placed into the subjective position of *The Cage*’s spectral narrator is disquieting because this narrator seems so unable to interact with its world, in the way that the ghosts of contemporary society, that Peeren discusses, have restricted agency in the material situations they find themselves in. *The Cage*’s agency is non-existent, and this is counterintuitive to our expectations of a narrative agent. As *The Cage*’s narrative passes through a morphing world, that world penetrates and attacks. It forces upon the reader the notion that infrastructure has its own potential to effect, and those three spreads where the panels are torn are moments when that invasion from the outside becomes impossible to ignore.

## **Epilogue: A City Transformed**

More than an aesthetic depiction of ruins, *The Cage* is a metaphor for how infrastructure is seen and felt, and how this affect is part of an embodied experience. It alerts us to the possibility of an urban environment making an impact on, and to varying degrees, overwhelming, a narrative agent. Cities have not turned into ruins during the COVID-19 crisis, but they have been emptied of quotidian activities and put on pause until some undefinable point in the future. During the pandemic, the commercially oriented urban planning of modern cities has transitioned from inspiring the sort of individuality associated with consumerism to a deeper type of individuality, one in which Others are suspect because they are potential carriers of a biological threat. During days dominated by solitude and anxiety, the material infrastructure of public spaces, inhospitable during such a crisis, appear more imposing than usual. Evacuated, the city is reduced to signs, translated into a place of memory. Perhaps, as it is no longer a place to stay in but to move through, the city has transcended its historical roots and become a non-place. While passing through the city in relative silence, the cage of my frame of mind begins to buckle. As if there is a tear in my perception, a rip caused by the city's inability to function, the bars that have bracketed presumptions of stability bend and become less certain. All of a sudden, where I am seems unnervingly alien.

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## Biography

Nicholas Burman is a British writer currently completing the Comparative Cultural Analysis MA at the University of Amsterdam.

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