

Peter Ablinger

## UNDER ZERO

To each his zero point. Zero point figures, points of no return, limits of language or thinking can be found in philosophers of all times. Ludger Schwarte lists as poststructuralist examples: the "calligram" in Foucault, the "trace" in Derrida, and the "nonsense" in Deleuze.<sup>1</sup> But the thinking of zero, the erection of a wall of the unthinkable is by no means limited to poststructuralism. Immediately Wittgenstein flashes up here, equating the limits of language with the limits of the world. Other candidates could be the zero point of desire, Lacan's 'object a', Adorno's 'illegibility' (of art) or Hegel's 'night of the world'. What they all have in common is that they always deal with language boundaries: Where the philosopher experiences the end of language, he also immediately imagines the end of the world. "Language, without which nothing definite, nothing defined can be shown"<sup>2</sup>, Rancière formulates. But what a crack! cries the musician: in the score of a symphony everything is determined and defined, and none of it by language.

Starting from this thought, the reading of Gilles Deleuze, "Logic of Sense" has served me to re-measure the exact value of "zero", so to speak, in order to find out that either zero is not really zero, or vice versa, that we have to reckon with "temperatures" far below zero.

So start! At zero? But the beginning is not a zero. It is not the unlabeled, but the labeled. The beginning is not the blank canvas, not white, not pure, not innocent, but mixed, complicated, guilty. The 'real' or illusory but necessary beginning, on the other hand, is to paint over or erase, as it were, the mixedness and complicatedness, to go behind, to go under, to pierce, to slit open the canvas of guilty meaning imposed upon us - not to reveal an underlying truth, but to reveal the possibility of inconsistency in the given 'canvas'.

The greatest inconsistencies are obviously found on the canvas of the canvas, in the image we make of the image, in the philosophical estimation of the function or value of the work of art. For Kant, "the value of the work of art" lay (still) "in the psychological state of the viewer," but for

---

<sup>1</sup> Ludger Schwarte, "Denken in Farbe," August Verlag, 2021, p. 318.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Rancière, cit. ibid, p. 297

Hegel (only) "in its meaning."<sup>3</sup> The failure of philosophy vis-à-vis art can hardly be summed up more clearly. Whoever says meaning, means interpretation. It is about installing sovereignty of meaning and placing it above what is meant. It is about exercising power, disciplining and about the monetary value of art. For art itself, meaning has no significance.<sup>4</sup>

Surface and subsurface. The ground, the zero point is for Deleuze the 'non-sens', the non-sense from which the sense stands out. He thinks of this ground as spread out, as surface, and he quotes Paul Valéry ("The deepest, that is the skin")<sup>5</sup>. Playing off the surface against the depth has something emancipatory about it, if the depth stands for something unspoken, even unquestionable, which defends its regime, but the same 'game' amounts to a repression, an exclusion, if the depth does not consist of the unspoken, unspeakable, quasi the secret name of God, but of something functionally non-linguistic, for example an art that successfully eludes interpretation. This evasion, however, does not begin at Deleuze's surface (Valéry's skin), from where it only goes upwards in the one vertical direction of meaning, but at the undersurface (the same skin), from where it goes downwards into ever more differentiating realms of artistic or musical design, all of which evade verbalization in a similar way as the infinite color gradations and transitions in an evening sky.

There from which Deleuze takes off, from 'his' 'non-sens', that is not the ground. Below this 'ground', this 'zero point', it may get cold for the philosopher, but exactly there is that 'deep', 'groundless', 'antarctic' region, on the surface of which the sense sits down lightly - in a T-shirt - thinking that it is sitting on the ground.

Nonsense is not the absence of sense, the senselessness, as in the philosophy of the absurd.<sup>6</sup> Nonsense is that which

---

<sup>3</sup> "Whereas for Kant beautiful art [is] a "mode of conception [that] is purposeful for itself, and, although without purpose, nevertheless promotes the culture of the powers of mind for sociable communication" and therefore "has the reflective power of judgment and not sense sensation as its guide," for Hegel art "realizes itself in the ideal of an individual contemplation of reality with the determination to let the idea appear essentially in itself." While Kant determined the pleasure in the work of art and in the beautiful as disinterested and presupposed for it a mind in "calm contemplation," for Hegel beautiful art had long since been outflanked by thought and reflection, so that it could only be appreciated as past on the side of its highest purpose. The aesthetic present of art was thus for Hegel its past." Armin Zweite, in Gerhard Richter, "Abstraction," Prestel Verlag, 2018, p. 47

<sup>4</sup> Or in other words, "Thinking is painting when painting," Gerhard Richter (ibid).

<sup>5</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Logic of Sense," Edition Suhrkamp, 2017, p. 26

<sup>6</sup> Deleuze clearly distances himself: "Camus no.", p. 97

creates, or makes possible, an unmanageable surplus. For Deleuze, nonsense is that which "performs the making of sense"<sup>7</sup>. He thus recognizes the sense-making of nonsense. But when Deleuze recognizes nonsense as surplus, he reduces surplus exclusively to the surplus of sense, thus conceiving of nonsense as always already linguistic. ("And this is precisely what one has to understand by non-sens").<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps like this: 'surplus' is all right. But not of sense. Rather surplus of pre-sense, not-sense, non-linguistic articulation, non-language, surplus of non-linguistically articulable experience, surplus of sound, surplus of colors, surplus of tastes, surplus of shapes, surplus of forms, surplus of structure, surplus of clouds, surplus of (non-linguistic) textures, surplus of illegibility, surplus of palimpsests, surplus of hatchings, surplus of scribbles, surplus of blurring, surplus of transitions and in-between areas, surplus of experiential differences that can be shaped but not named.

Something of more or less all of these surpluses can be found in Antonin Artaud. Deleuze devotes a chapter to him and to schizophrenia.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the study of Artaud forces him to take a step towards the "abysses of nonsense"<sup>10</sup> and - for once - to discover something 'under' the surface: something uncanny, the terrible "depth" of Artaud. And he lets Artaud himself have his say, speaking of a sense that comes "from horror". It must not have been easy for Deleuze to accept Artaud's very harsh, dismissive reckoning with Lewis Carroll, in a book in which Carroll is something of a *cantus firmus* from beginning to end, and the prime example of surface and 'non-sens'. But Deleuze is honest enough, in dealing with Artaud and schizophrenia, to diagnose the "collapse of the surface" in which "the word as a whole loses its meaning"<sup>11</sup>. Yes, he even discovers the "Untersinn"<sup>12</sup>, which remains to be distinguished from the surface nonsense". The analysis of the language of the schizophrenic thus takes Deleuze right to the edge of a logic of nonsense, something that would lead to a radical counter-plan in terms of the general course of his book. But Artaud's glimpse into the abyss has no further consequences in 'Logic of Sense'. The chapter ends with a retreat, or delegation of the problem to the future, writing of Artaud: "He explored the infrasense, which is still unknown today."<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> S. 98

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> P. 110 ff

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> P. 116

<sup>12</sup> in orig. German, p. 120

<sup>13</sup> P. 124

From the undersense to the *Ungrund*. The retreat is resolutely continued. While the undersense apparently belongs to a region under 'zero,' the *Ungrund* of philosophy leads back to the comparatively homely regions of the surface, or that "skin" which demarcates sense below, thus to the regions of the zero figures or boundaries of language. It is to this *Ungrund* that Deleuze turns a few pages after the fleeting contact with the undersense<sup>14</sup>. The unground of philosophy, then, by no means leads to the 'Antarctic' region under zero. This region is not the night of the world, not formless, not blind, not an 'undifferentiated abyss'<sup>15</sup>. The 'Antarctic' region is cold even only for language, which flatly denigrates a differentiation it cannot grasp as "undifferentiated." Language here must be described not only as coldness, but also as blindness, as constitutive not wanting to see. For all other systems of observation, perception, experience, our region is anything but blind and cold: on the contrary, the apparent 'Antarctica' proves to a non-linguistic system of observation to be warm, hot, hard, soft, angular, cloudy, homogeneous, fissured - as the case may be. It can be looked at or heard, touched or eaten, in parts it is countable, even partially linguistically describable - whereby every attempt at description must at the same time demonstrate its own insufficiency.

Surface and membrane. The 'Antarctic' region of non-linguistic articulations is thus cold only for language, but not only that, it is also deep only for language. Deleuze discusses the Stoic or Zen Buddhist motif of surface, describing Stoic laughter, as "disempowering the height and the depth in favor of the surface," and Zen as turned "against the Brahmanic depths and the Buddhist heights."<sup>16</sup> And it is precisely this that allows us to think of the surface now in a different way from that of the zero point from which meaning is lifted. Non-linguistic and differentiated articulations appear to language deep because unfathomable, they appear to it not as ground but groundless. In contrast, for the non-linguistic actors and 'passers-by' - as those receptive to the non-linguistic - things look quite different. For the Deleuzean image of the 'surface' proves to be unsuitable here: the flatness of the surface disturbs the image. In contrast, if we now appropriate the surface for our part as a skin, but this time do not think of it solely as a boundary, as something uncrossable, but as space, as that which encloses a many-membered body, like the crust of the earth, including oceans, mountains and megacities, like the heterogeneous materials, of which contemporary art makes use, like the air vibrations, decipherable only to the ear, of any

---

<sup>14</sup> p. 139 ff

<sup>15</sup> p. 140

<sup>16</sup> p. 172

sound formations, including those we call music - so if the surface is not something spread out, rolled smooth, ironed flat, but something that is always potentially in motion, always in vibration, always excited and exciting membrane, then ...

So it is language that sets itself as the ground, as the beginning, and thus everything that could place itself 'in front' of this beginning must be shifted into the underground, which then alternately seems to threaten language, or, in order to master the threat, is negated, in-existed by language.

At one point in the book, the pretty image of the two soothsayers smiling at each other appears<sup>17</sup>. Deleuze is still concerned with the image of the (Stoicist) surface. And I think to myself, the two soothsayers could also be two artists. Or not only 'could', they 'are' two artists. They know that what touched their audience, 'deeply' grounded and impregnated with much meaning, grasped like a voodoo spell, is based on something that for the artists is always also a game, pure 'superficiality', most precise superficiality, most exact observation of the surface, its nonsensical lines and crossings out, the nothing signifying scribble, meticulous protocol of the traces of purely nothing, encyclopedic records of the meaningless.

A membrane always has two sides, it swings up and down, or inward and outward - that depends again on the observation tool. In contrast, the philosophical speaking knows only one side, or is a constant (an)ihilation of everything that could corrupt (go behind, go under, pierce, slit) this side in any way: "What separates the sounds and the bodies makes the elements for a language out of the sounds. What separates speech and food makes speech possible, what separates sentences and things makes sentences possible" formulates Deleuze<sup>18</sup>. However, this is exactly what would have to be reformulated. We have to turn the stocking inside out, and "enable" all that has been separated (*membra disjecta*), that has fallen under the table, i.e. the bodies, the food, the things. Accordingly, this time it should be 'what separates the sounds and the bodies makes the bodies possible, what separates language and food makes the food possible, what separates the sentences and the things makes the things possible'. Language itself is not an enabler, but constitutively that which makes impossible. It is the stocking that transforms what was formerly spread out in the surface into a visible outside and an invisible inside. If it

---

<sup>17</sup> P. 180

<sup>18</sup> P. 231

is possible to turn the stocking inside out and let the invisible appear ...

Or let's think of it this way: language as complement, language as complement-enabler - by targeting exactly what should actually be made impossible: the sweaty smell of the body, the smacking sound of chewing, the silent and insistent evidence of things.

Shortly before the end, another true linguistic flourish by Deleuze: he speaks of "pre-sens"<sup>19</sup>, the present here becomes pre-sense, not-yet-sense - even un-sense? Non-sens and pre-sens: a constellation of stars, a conjunction.

In contrast to such a sudden illumination then something like the 'final sentence' of the book, at least a sentence in the last main chapter: "Nonsense is like the zero point of thinking"<sup>20</sup> - and this as the sum of the "logic of sense" - how disappointing! We are, it seems, not one step beyond the very first beginning. Or maybe we are, if we only stop attributing a primary truth content to the conclusions.

(2022)

*english translation*  
*edited by Gabriel Santander*

---

<sup>19</sup> p. 240

<sup>20</sup> p. 298