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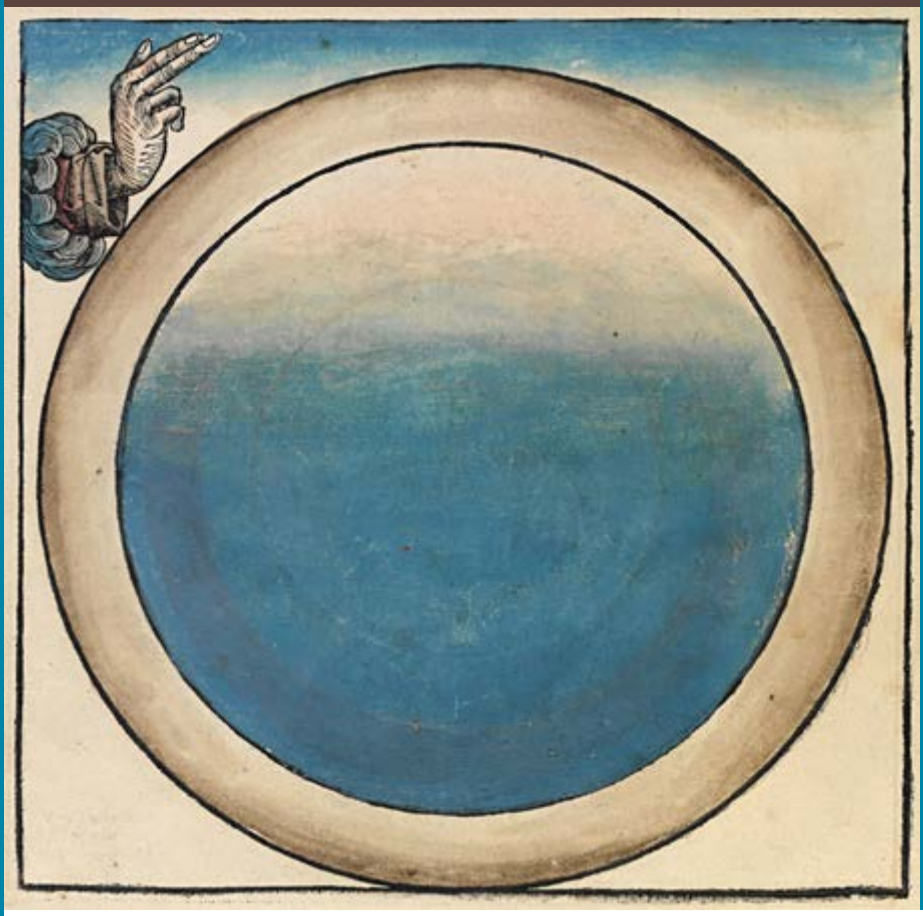

Edited by Babette Hellemans and Alissa Jones Nelson

Images, Improvisations, Sound, and Silence from 1000 to 1800 – Degree Zero

Amsterdam
University
Press

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Knowledge Communities

This series focuses on innovative scholarship in the areas of intellectual history and the history of ideas, particularly as they relate to the communication of knowledge within and among diverse scholarly, literary, religious, and social communities across Western Europe. Interdisciplinary in nature, the series especially encourages new methodological outlooks that draw on the disciplines of philosophy, theology, musicology, anthropology, paleography, and codicology.

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Images, Improvisations, Sound, and Silence from 1000 to 1800 – Degree Zero

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For Peter and Alma

Table of Contents

Sound

Silence

List of Figures

Preface and Acknowledgements

Suppose that the future of the humanities is to be found either in the myth of a full grasp of language and the arts or the desire to have such a grasp, or else in the myth that one may have none – against the privileged claim of possessing the truth and the autonomy of the object in the arts. How would it be possible for future generations of scholars in the humanities to work with artists? Can we find a common ground between the two that does justice to both of their *raisons d'être*? Through the meetings and discussions I organized as the project leader of the research project *Degree Zero of Sound and Image, c. 1000–1800*, I have become more aware of the fragility of these questions – and their importance.

From the very first meetings of this project, I have counted on the encouragement of Rokus de Groot, Bernard Jussen, Jean-Claude Schmitt, Asghar Seyed-Gohrab, and Irene Zwiep, who have always supported my intellectual bravado. Only a few people know how much Burcht Pranger's not-so-silent voice in this volume means: the company of an extraordinary and graceful soul.

The meetings preceding the volume were part of the Internationalization for the Humanities Grant funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). The beautiful surroundings of the dunes and the North Sea at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies in Wassenaar created an ideal place to start the project in 2013. The Groupe d'Anthropologie Historique de l'Occident Médiéval at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris was very hospitable in helping to organize the meeting in 2014. Pierre Monnet, director of the Institut Franco-Allemand/Sciences Historiques et Sociales in Frankfurt, offered us good times and *Gemütlichkeit* at his institute in 2015. The Mediävistenverband in Bonn provided us with the facilities to be able to organize two sessions in the spring of 2017. And finally, the Groningen Research Institute for the Study of Culture (ICOG) supported the *finissage* of the project, held in the fall of 2017

The project benefitted from the generous support of the following institutions: the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies (NIAS), the Royal Academy for the Arts and Sciences in the Netherlands (KNAW), the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris, the Groningen Research Institute for the Study of Culture (ICOG), and the University of Groningen in the Netherlands.

I think back with gratitude on the vivid discussions with the artists and independent scholars who joined us during our meetings. It is my pleasure to have worked with the free spirits in the arts and sciences who – in an age burdened with the pressure to publish – have been the source of renewal in apathetic institutions, seeking to overcome models of tradition and creating yet another 'degree zero' of the many interpretations possible in reading, listening, and looking at the remains of the past.

The editing of this volume has in large part been done by Alissa Jones Nelson, and I am very grateful for her critical and careful eye, tact, and conscientiousness. Shannon Cunningham from Amsterdam University Press has patiently assisted us throughout the process.

The French chapters were translated by Peter Cramer, who also provided many insightful comments on the different chapters at an earlier stage of the project and gave invaluable intellectual input during the meetings, for which the authors of this volume would like to express their appreciation. My gratefulness to Peter is beyond words. This book is dedicated to him and to Alma, our daughter. Little Alma, so unforeseen, came in the midst of many lives, some of them deeply rooted in history. Her presence represents a flash of light shattering any sense of control in this world which reminds me often, living alone with her, that love is indeed the greatest gift of all.

Babette Hellemans
January 2018

Ouverture

Degree Zero Between Past and Future

Babette Hellemans

Should we say again that nothing is created out of nothing? Or is creation out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), from the white of the canvas or the silence that precedes sound, the freedom of the work from bondage to a preordained state? Imagining such a disenchanted condition is the triumph of critical realism today – that state of the world without authority or tradition, in which each has to find his or her way, and where nature has collapsed into social structures. The creation out of nothing was very different for modernist artists and thinkers, however, who tried to understand the meaning of form by taking its essence as something existential, which meant that their lives depended on writing, painting, or composing music. Even if the eye is staring down the 'indifference of white paper', to paraphrase Merleau-Ponty's essay on painting, the nature of its virginal blankness has to be imagined too. The modernist experience is at its most intense not in the presence of an image or a sound, but in the reduction of form or its absence, hence the use of the term 'degree zero'. The notion of degree zero is best known in French theory; it is borrowed from Roland Barthes's *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* (published in 1953). This volume uses the phrase 'degree zero' as a hermeneutical tool to grasp sources of creative possibility as they present themselves in artistic objects. All the essays are concerned with the same fundamental question of degree zero as not either historical or personal, but as both at the same time – what I would call the 'and also'. While the notion of *ex nihilo* often functions as a precise point in time, the degree zero tends to be circular and constantly developing. It has a life of its own and is not fully explainable or 'confinable' to a single point in time; it is not an event, but rather a type or a force. It lends significance to the disorder of the present, hence the title of my introduction, 'between past and future'. Degree zero can be considered as a liminal state too and therefore never represents something absolute. This notion of liminality also implies that, ultimately, the meaning of degree zero is not without a sense of border. It represents the dawn of something that is entirely new. Degree zero bears therefore a sense of originality we do not yet fully understand.

Using degree zero as a hermeneutical tool not only provides us with a hugely creative force for scholarship – one that seeks to overcome classical

boundaries between disciplines such as art, music, philosophy and literature – but it also transcends historical periods. In the pre-modern universe, humankind was permanently connected to the supranatural – even in such a way that their understanding of nature was at the same time a world of spiritual reality, with preeminent attention to God.[1] This particular worldview deeply influenced all kinds of articulations, both creative and intellectual, and it manifested itself in word, sound and image. To compare this worldview with the modernist worldview might be a doubtful exercise if the latter is interpreted as merely nihilistic. One of the surprising insights of this volume seems to me that the nihilism which is often attributed to modern society is the source of creation itself – an everlasting *ex nihilo* expressed in the most powerful way. It also suggests the open character of the work, its *opera aperta*, and its integrity. To compare different time spans means exploring the meaning of creativity, articulation, spirituality, mysticism and notions such as presence and absence in an excitingly new way. As Jean-Claude Schmitt indicates in his contribution, the question is not the point of origin, but the immediacy and tangibility of coming into being: 'the deeper roots push down too far to be visible, and in this sense, they have no beginning'.

However, the explicit artistic intentions within modernism might be helpful in understanding the idiosyncrasies of each period and their encounters with the unfamiliar. The modernist universe often seems bereft of any signposts, as in Cézanne's paintings of Montagne Sainte-Victoire in the South of France. Cézanne's oeuvre is often considered a milestone in the history of modern painting. Stripped of any sensation of the mountain's having 'been there', these paintings reveal a substantial knowledge, a dazzling and disenchanted truth. What kind of language do people use when they live in such a universe? Are truth and fiction still valid categories in a disenchanted world? Is the ear still able to translate structures of sound, silence, and echo into a meaningful musical texture?

I believe that these questions reflect the kind of degree zero Roland Barthes was pointing at in his book *Writing Degree Zero*. The translation in English includes an introduction by Susan Sontag who understood the different cultural backgrounds of the French and the Anglo-American intellectual traditions from the inside. It seems she struggled with the difference. Perhaps the translation of the title is telling enough in this respect,

1 The suggestion by Lucien Febvre stating that the *outillage mental* in pre-modern society is inherent to the divine seems still valuable. This thesis is explained in: *Le problème de l'incroyance au XVIe siècle. La religion de Rabelais*, published for the first time in 1947 and reprinted many times afterwards.

since the more ambiguous and sketchy *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* reveals some of the fundamental differences in the ways language and truth are understood and analyzed in the two languages. In any case, *Writing Degree Zero* is considered central to Barthes' thinking on semiotics. The book itself seeks to understand what writing is – and what it is not. There is nothing 'natural' about writing itself, writes Barthes, nor is the notion of style a given fact, since together they constitute the make-up of the writer's biology (body) and biography (past). Writing is a possibility – it is not a destiny.

However, within the sense of possibility, as expressed for instance in the iconic modernist poem *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* by Stéphane Mallarmé (translated into English as 'A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance'), the artistic form becomes crucial. *Un coup de dés* is considered iconic because of the typesetting of the poem, which stretches sentences and words across the spread of the page and uses different kinds of typefaces. The white paper placed between the letters, sometimes with very wide blank spaces, creates impressions of randomness, as Mallarmé himself described in the introduction to the poem (although he preferred the introduction not to be read):

> The paper intervenes every time an image, on its own, ceases or retires on the page, accepting the succession of the others; it is not a question, unlike the usual state of affairs, of regular sound effects or verses – rather of prismatic subdivisions of the idea, of the instant when they appear and during which their cooperation lasts, in some exact mental setting. The text imposes itself in various places, near or far from the latent guiding thread, according to what seems to be the probable sense.[2]

The words in ink and the whiteness of the paper together form a semiotic force without comparison, because the message is to be *re*interpreted each time by the reader. Hence, any possible understanding of the poem – or the book – becomes both a performative and a historical act. The audience needs to make up the message, which is alternating and therefore difficult, perhaps, but in the end not secretive. A book can be a bomb, as Mallarmé said elsewhere, its explosive force depending on the intention(s) of the audience. But in the end, reading words becomes a ritual, in the same sense that 'poetry, accompanied by the idea, becomes music'.[3] We learn that Mallarmé's

2 Mallarmé, 'Preface,' 105. A PDF of the first edition from 1914 is available online at: http://writing.upenn.edu/library/Mallarme-Stephen_Coup_1914.pdf.

3 Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, 380.

writing, the narrative of *Coup de dés* – which seems to be about a captain at the helm of a ship making a last-ditch effort to survive an unrelenting storm at sea, as some have suggested – is in the end as random as a 'roll of the dice'. The ideological message of the poem, a 'diffusion of the divine', on the other hand, comes through. The private aspect of religion was a hotly debated topic amongst Catholic intellectuals and artists at the time, and Stéphane Mallarmé had his own view of the matter. Like the presence of the Eucharist, a throw of the dice through the words and the blank spaces is fragmented, diffuse, and hovers between memory and expectation: 'The Eucharistic mode of presence is no longer anticipative but becomes the supreme regime of divine being-there'.[4] The degree zero of the Eucharist, one might say, like the diffusion between representation and presentation, was for Mallarmé the ultimate meaning of poetry.

We see from this example that the engagement of the modernist artist with the great crises of History – for Mallarmé, the crisis of the socio-theological implications of prosody in secular France – is fundamental. This is also, according to Barthes, what characterizes modern writers and their *écriture*.[5] It seems to me that Barthes points here to one of the most fundamental issues that lurk in the fragile field of the arts – namely, the merging of the artists' way of life with form, which makes life itself intentionally historical, in the sense that the presence is already lived. This is all perfectly acceptable as a paradigm, as indeed modernist artists have shown, but it also misses the implicit reference to what it seeks to escape. With the myriad possibilities in writing, composing, drawing, and sculpting all culminating in form, modernism changed the meaning of the Word (*logos*) as the symbol that stands at the beginning of creation with God (and the Word *was* God, says the Gospel of John) into a blending of life and form. Restating the cosmological nature of creation as the human condition, without having a common symbol or common past, seems to be one of the challenges of modernism. This is the challenge Mallarmé tried to express.

These examples demonstrate the rootedness of modernism in tradition; therefore, it appears to me that the claim of the ahistorical character of modernism – often made by scholars – is founded on a semantic misunderstanding, suggesting that shape, symbol, and composition would merely reflect an external world. I believe that modernism should not be considered

4 Meillassoux, *The Number and the Siren*, 112; the formulation of the 'diffusion of the divine' is also discussed here.

5 'A language and a style are objects; a mode of writing is a function: it is the relationship between creation and society, the literary language transformed by its social finality, form considered as a human intention and thus linked to the great crises of History'; Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 14.

a functionalist or a stable worldview. In integrating history into the modernist ideology of form, this volume seeks to develop a method that runs against the grain of conceptualized notions of society and culture as isolated metaphors. In contrast, the volume attempts to build up a historical method to trace past cultural codes of creativity that pull off randomness through continuous adjustments, shifts, and fluctuations. One of the rhetorical risks of treating a historical method on the basis of randomness and possibility, as if it had an ambivalent truth-value, is that methodology approximates fiction or a new mythology. Such a practice of rhetorically bracketing the textual, musical, or visual truth would blind the scholar to the fact that Barthes' use of degree zero as a critique of writing is really about the truth and how this is achieved – and not about an arbitrary exploration of different possibilities in artistic expression. Recognizing the state of degree zero in Barthes's sense is, in other words, already history. Hence, if the use of degree zero as a hermeneutical tool is a 'deliberate investigation of the conditions of creation and creativity', as Nicola Suthor defines it in her contribution, then the creative function of managing the project that gave rise to this volume should be given its due. This is as true for the author's interests as it is for the project leader's sense of themes, organization, and consistency. Similarly for Barthes and his critics, the act of directing is 'a *release* rather than an applied strategy or technique', as Sander van Maas observes in this volume. Directing a project on degree zero becomes a form of inspiration. It is fundamentally an improvisation.

For those familiar with the French intellectual tradition, these artistic attempts at framing writing and truth are to be located in structuralism. In particular, the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss and his structural anthropology, in which cultural codes and their modulations reveal the possibilities of expression and translation across different cultures and languages in history, has been an inspiration in framing the method of this volume. As a result, the understanding of the past – like anything else in the field of the humanities – can only be performed through codes of contrasts, because the understanding of history, just like space and time, is not a privilege that grants exclusive access to truth. In other words, historicism comes from within, and time is incarnated in the object at hand. Within the frame of such a heuristic historiography, the 'newness' of a modern *ex nihilo* can be reassessed, since typical modernist concepts such as degree zero will prove helpful in understanding the meaning of mental references to creativity in pre-modern culture. Hence, the introduction of degree zero as an epistemological tool is not an attempt to follow the genealogy of an idea throughout history, nor is it about the reception of an idea in the classical sense of the word. For the modern scholar, the introduction of anachronism

and the challenging of teleology will help to discern how the forming of history *within the object of art* takes place. In other words, the degree zero of history as a certain presence of the past is dynamic and can be intrinsically active in the way the object of art performs in space and time.

The chapter in this volume on the procession of the Cirio of Nazaré, written by Jean-Claude Schmitt, is a good example of this. It shows how the founding miracle of the ritual of the procession is, in fact, pushed back to a more remote past, which, in turn, is composed of several imported traditions. In a sense, the ritual has no real historical beginning. In their participation in the unfolding of the procession, the pilgrims who travel to the event represent the meaning of degree zero, as they actively give shape to the procession and thus explore the possibilities of articulation, interpretation, and meaning in the Virgin's physical presence. We learn from this example how – in spite of the limits of texts and contexts, as put forward by modernists – a more profound historical dynamic in artistic expression is still being unearthed.

Hence, the question at the center of this volume is whether the degree zero of modernism – with its concomitant sense of possibility, the 'throwing of dice', and contextualization, all culminating in a commitment to form – does not in fact represent an epiphenomenon of already age-old, existing creative expressions, long-term currents that meander beneath the deep waters of History. The notion of degree zero as the myriad possibilities of artistic expression in the object – through imagination, intention, or improvisation – might represent nothing more and nothing less than realism as a different form. Not the critical form of critical realism but, again, as an existential form. This is the inevitable blurred state of expression before a line, a pattern, or a meaning becomes clear – and this is what constitutes the degree zero of sound and image.

Rather than taking degree zero in the factual sense of time with the logic of causality, all the contributions in this volume have in common their description of the imaginative aftermath of the historical event. But there is something else at stake here too, which makes the interdisciplinary approach of the humanities so terribly complicated – and therefore difficult to defend. The uniqueness and idiosyncrasy of each artist, their daily struggle with the world, going back to the degree zero of the object as an artistic endeavor, also suggests that any academic desire to formulate a genealogy of artists (say, from Manet to Monet to Seurat to Matisse to Miró – or from Mozart to Beethoven to Webern to Mahler) is essentially decadent. Wouldn't any effort to create a genealogy culminate in the end of aesthetics? More generally, I believe that the tendency to formulate categories in the arts is profoundly damaging to the intensity of the artistic experience – by which I mean visual or musical plenitude as well as void or silence.

Deus Artifex: The Fabric of the Artistic Experience

It has been the precept of this volume, even with the assumption that a rational approach to the arts is impossible and raises doubts about any possible co-existence between the rational and the aesthetical-sensual, that the potential benefits of believing in such an approach are so vast as to make any argument which creates possible bridges from reason to sense begin to look like a rational one. In this sense, my guidance of this volume has been a radical thought experiment, carried out by composing a volume in which all sorts of possibilities are explored – like extensions of the subject matter. The only frame used is chronological-historical limitation. Challenging the question of a rational approach to the arts, the volume focuses on the time in history that covers the dawn of academic thinking at the height of monastic intellectual life in the eleventh century up until the moment the supremacy of epistemic proof took over academic debates in the period of the Enlightenment. This argument for framing the history of ideas might be seen as an argument against the secular in art, or even against progress, and therefore – perhaps implicitly – as grounded in the catastrophe that consumes History. To quote Walter Benjamin, the achievements of humankind 'owe their existence not only to the effort of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the enormous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism'.[6] I believe this is very true for the meaning of creativity. In fact, the notion of destruction or disquiet is inherent in making art – a thought that may be lost on those who interpret art only as a thing to be consumed in the interests of irenic quiet, rather than as a product that goes against the grain. As a corollary, creative possibility in medieval and early modern art – its degree zero – has often been remembered as being concentrated on the articulate power of the individual genius. The present volume, however, takes a very different approach. It is not the genius's degree zero that lies at the heart of the method, nor is any form of psychology of the artist relevant. Rather, the focus is on the question of how creative possibility can be understood *from within* the object of art: the patterns, sketches, improvisations, blurriness, and ambiguities that arise from the different artistic materials at hand.

When I try to draw an analogy between the modern degree zero and the fabric of artistic understanding in the pre-modern past, I use this analogy of cultural forms in order to provide a system that gives meaning to experiences

6 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 248.

that cannot be known directly, even though they are lived. These analogies may work on different levels. The chapter by Nicola Suthor, for instance – on improvisation and the skill of drawing a straight line in the drawings of Agostino Carracci, as well as in the work of more famous artists such as Giotto and Michelangelo, and the carrying out of that which is literally 'unforeseen' (from the Latin *improvisus*) – shows how improvisation reveals the unfolding pattern of 'the beginning of the beginning'. In music, on the other hand, any understanding of the artistic fabric should rely on the workings of memory, which is evoked from musical familiarity or from the suggestion of such an experience outside of memory that lies at the center of a fully shaped musical pattern, which is then presented in its complete form and repeated. The workings of this process are the topic of Rokus de Groot's chapter on Johann Sebastian Bach's *Toccata, Adagio and Fugue* and the Hindustani *raga*. We now understand from both examples that the approach to creativity from within the object requires analogous cultural forms – illusions even, if need be – in order to develop a method that is lived. Any other attempt to understand the dynamic fabric of creation would put the process into systems of image and sound, or metaphor or symbol, which would soon develop into an academic argument of 'significance'. This external approach leads to the question of whether Bach or Giotto can really be understood as interested in symbols, rather than in the proliferation and working out of sounds and lines; or to the question of whether performances of medieval poems are presented to suggest what is happening in words, rather than what is happening within the speakers. In other words, is scholarly tradition interested in the psychological background of characters rather than in the way shifts and changes occur in the words that are uttered – and quieted – by these same characters?

These examples give an inkling of how this book seeks to understand whether it is possible to approach the epistemological question of working from both ends differently. It goes against the grain of what is normally processed throughout the standard academic argument(s); in this counter-intuitive understanding lies the true answer. For instance, the academic concentration on the intention of the artist and their individual genius is motivated by the words, sounds, and colors themselves – as if this were the required rational evidence for a 'correct interpretation'. But the most curious aspect of the shifts and tensions between the artistic fabric and the analysis of words used to grasp the creation of the object of art is to say that we have forgotten art's idiosyncrasy and historicity. The problem is that bringing interpretation to a close, we might say, is the coming to terms with endless artistic possibilities that derive from the degree zero of

the object – everything which is the case – and discovering when and how to stop theorizing. This important insight into the misconception of logic, that there is no *a priori* order of language and the world, gave Wittgenstein the peace he needed in his philosophical efforts.[7] Moreover, the idea that philosophy is not a doctrine to be approached dogmatically is one of the most important insights of the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. That Wittgenstein was concerned about the dominance of dogmata against the fragility of language – and within this fragility, his sense of psychology – is well known. His interpretations of aesthetic and religious questions as interwoven with the rest of philosophy, presented mostly in lectures, are less known. In a similar way as Wittgenstein's criticism against philosophy concerns its preoccupation with the form of words rather than the use made of the form of words, he also stresses that the contextualization of works of art permits us to see how the dialogically unfolding artistic 'language-game' of the object of art can unfold itself. Just as we, in our use of language and our attempts to understand each other, do not start with one single word, but rather from a specific context, event or occasion, our aesthetic engagements are activities of a similar kind. If we consider art and beauty as a field of conceptual inquiry, we should not suppose that its 'central task is to analyze the determinant properties that are named by aesthetic predicates', but rather that it is concerned 'with a full-blooded consideration of the activities of aesthetic life'.[8]

In his lectures, Wittgenstein regularly uses the example of a drawing of a face and the expressiveness of the face. He explains how the differences between live performances (dancing, singing, speech) and representations of expressivity (drawing, sculpting, poetry) call into question what is considered a *derivative* expressiveness of autonomous artworks which do not 'own' the natural expressiveness of a living human body. He then goes on to explain how, as in philosophy, a dualistic picture of language stands behind the *thought* of the drawing of the face. Asking for any expression to be given without the face is deeply troubling, because the causal status of language, drawing and expression is misleading. For the expression is not an *effect* of the face. Any sense of dualism, whether in terms of causality or in terms of the materiality and expressiveness that make up the material work of art, is out of place. Throughout his lectures, Wittgenstein gives many examples of the struggle within the pictures, each in their own way illustrating an unfolding 'language-game'. One (perhaps) hidden intention of this volume

7 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §§ 108–133.

8 The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, by Garry Hagberg, gives a good account of Wittgenstein's aesthetics; see: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wittgenstein-aesthetics/.

has been to see whether Wittgenstein was right – as I believe he was – with the additional aim of defending the complexity of art. The first step for the humanities is to take back autonomy (in particular from the natural sciences or *Naturwisschenschaften*). For Wittgenstein, an appreciation of the aesthetic requires an immediacy that is much larger and more diverse than any causal-mechanistic model could accommodate. It is what he calls the 'click' when everything falls into place.[9] Using degree zero as a hermeneutical tool in this volume can be described as a Wittgensteinian attempt to create a click – one that resonates from cover to cover – in order to give aesthetics back to the realm of silence, whether supranatural or supralinguistic, as in the famous last sentence of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent'.

It will now be helpful to rethink some of the modernist attitudes towards art, such as in Mallarmé. As with most of his work, the interpretation of *Coup de dés* is very difficult, and there is no common opinion amongst scholars on the meaning of the poem, let alone its artistic intention. But we have the fabric of the poem, and between brackets, it might well have been the aim of the work to leave the question of artistic intention open. The poem is about the undoing of any sense – to end a curse, to find redemption. But the message Mallarmé is seeking to express is very difficult to understand because he wants us to experience a breakdown through disintegrating language in order to give language back to the world. A similar process can be found in the work of another iconic writer of modernity: Samuel Beckett. Writing about Beckett's play *Endgame*, Stanley Cavell noted the difficulties in understanding this text, which is not about the lack of meaning.[10] Nor is it about, to put it in Cavell's words, 'marketing subjectivity, popularizing *angst* and thereby excusing us with pictures of our own psychopathology: he is outlining the facts – of mind, of community – which shows why they have become our pastimes. The discovery of *Endgame*, both in topic and technique, is not the failure of meaning (if that means lack of meaning) but its total, even totalitarian, success – our inability *not* to mean what we are given to mean'.[11] Language is also the curse of humankind, who have to learn to understand the shape of their birth, to figure out why they must die, and that they are neither gods nor beasts – all this in order to understand their own lives as fabric being woven from one state to the other, the hanging state of degree zero. I will come back to this liminal state as degree zero at

9 Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations*, 19.

10 Beckett, *Endgame. A Play in one Act, followed by Act Without Words: A Mime for one Player.*

11 Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 117.

the very end of this introduction, since Burcht Pranger's contribution deals with this theme. For now, it will suffice to keep in mind that any sense of epistemic truth will not emerge in *Coup de dés* or *Endgame* – this truth being morphologically similar to the Christian faith, so dominant in pre-modern society – in the sense that there is no plot that can be understood from any human point of view, and hence, there is no solution. The texts ultimate aim is to 'defeat meaning, of word and deed'.[12] In the process of innovation towards something entirely new and different, creative works that are juxtaposed are not standing in for each other as historical realities; rather, a new reality arises out of the debris of the past and is created by artists and the public simultaneously. This process is described by Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood as 'anachronic art', underlining what art *does* so that we can distinguish the performativity of the object from a mere anachronism in search of witnesses to its own times. The anachronic, however, defeats meanings of custom and tradition in order to establish an agency, giving the work of art a quality that does not cut time into a 'before' or an 'after'.[13]

To defeat meaning is also what Wittgenstein meant when he stated that the world is everything which is the case, that language stops where life announces itself, in such a way that speaking is philosophically no longer possible. Does Wittgenstein here state a mystical-religious proposition, where the end of human creation announces the divine, as is sometimes suggested? The question is very oblique. It is certainly oblique in the worldview of the pre-modern period, on which this volume focuses. When the world is everything which is the case – for God created everything in the world – then the unspeakable belongs to the realm of the divine love that redeems nature. It would be *here* that we would find the defeat of language – in the culmination of the aesthetic moment (we may call it epiphany) resulting from the relation of belief to art. It is from this point of view – whether in Cézanne's paintings of Montagne Sainte-Victoire, the typesetting of Mallarmé's poetry, or the void in Beckett's play *Endgame*, with their simultaneous breakdown of language and form – that we can start to reinterpret the understanding of the sacrifice again. If mythology prevails, we continue to live in a realm of magic, and redemption will not be possible. The connection between suffering and redemption can only be made through love for God, as expressed not so much in words, but as in, say, the oeuvre of Bach, who composed new pieces of music through such a love his whole life long.

12 Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 148.

13 See the introduction 'Plural Temporality of the Work of Art', in: Nagel and Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, here: 14-15.

How does the figure of God the craftsman, the *deus artifex*, fit into this? Isn't the world 'ordered in measure and number and weight', as the Wisdom of Solomon 11:12 has it – the fabric of the artistic experience itself, and thus the ontological proof of its *being* a work of art? Is not the religious worldview – Jewish, Christian, Islamic – which is said to be anthropologically predominant in the period at hand, pointing to a similar problem as that which modernist artists tried to express? As long as humankind stays in history – that is, in time – we will not step out of the responsibility of participating in creation. The bridging of the gap between humankind and God through creation was amongst the key themes of thirteenth-century scholasticism – questioning ontology ('What is the character of God and Creation?'), epistemology ('How can we know anything about God through Creation?'), and language ('What do the words we use from Creation to describe God mean?'). From these questions, we perceive the gap between God's eternity and the infinity of geometry, as in the Pythagorean tradition, and the limits of human articulation in time. It was Augustine who solved the semantic confusion with time, by pointing out the difference between 'made' and 'created', stating that 'we take "made" to denote that which, if not made, would not at all be, and "create" to fashion or form something out of that which already was'.[14] We see here how the idea of creativity is supple, taking on different meanings. However, the shifting from the *deus artifex* to the *homo secundus deus* – or the *homo creator* – is not easily resolved by that particular moment when God created the earth. The inner speech – the poetic silence – of writing before the beginning of creation, the creation in which everything would be the case, is trembling in the Hebrew scribe before his empty scroll, as we read in Irene Zwiep's chapter. The scribe's first line is perched on the brink of '*dieser Abgrund einer heiligen Sprache*' ('this abyss of a sacred language'), as Gershom Scholem had it. This is perhaps why, theologically speaking, the *ex nihilo* does not occur in the Bible.

Before turning to this collection of chapters in more detail, I would like to make one final remark – to emphasize that, if the fabric of artistic possibility in the historical object belongs to the redemptive character of its culture, it cannot be left up to us alone to interpret. On the other hand, there can be no suggestion – not even in the metaphorical representation of the figure of the crucified Christ – that we can take it up only through redemption or mysticism and think that everything has been resolved. The imagination desires concrete, final solutions, but is the methodological tool of degree zero – as in the *deus artifex* figure who understands that the

14 Augustinus, *Contra adversarium legis et prophetarum*, 1:43.

world is everything which is the case – not an alternative redemption, an attempt to express a symbol that embodies hope?

Finding the Audience: Introducing the Chapters

The twelve chapters that follow this introduction do not compose a book in which one contribution will find resonance in another – an absence of relation very much in the spirit of degree zero as a hermeneutical tool. The relations between the chapters and the themes brought up by the writers do not aim at one single purpose, since the process of writing and composing this volume has been the defense of the subtlety and fragility of the arts. The fabric of the artistic experience in the chapters is, I think – perhaps thanks to their refinement – surprisingly overlapping. Common themes include the acknowledgement of language, its breakdown, and the return of commitment to language as a symbol (and its refusal); the tension between the inner world of the object and the audience; the transgression of morality through formlessness and the regaining of form; the several meaning of silences, ranging from tyranny to poetics; and the entwinement of the ordinary and the sacred. All the contributions dealing with the modernity of writing and viewing pre-modern art come together in the question: What is the audience? How is the volume to be described? In case a reader pretends indifference to this question, I want to raise another: What is thinking about art? How is it to be written? How should it be taught? These questions will hopefully be answered in what follows – they are an attempt to defend complexity.
The volume is divided into four clusters, entitled 'Images', 'Improvisations', 'Sound', and 'Silence'. Each comprises three chapters. Since the academic background of the authors is very diverse, it makes sense that they are involving themselves in their subjects differently, and the ways in which they apply the hermeneutical tool of degree zero also differ. However, they all have in common the fact that their approach to art – music, literature, letter-writing, rhetoric, poetry, and visual art – is not to objectify it, but to understand art as a degree zero of continual making. As a consequence, the authors have approached their subject matter as a different way of seeing and writing, sometimes challenging standard academic conventions.

In the cluster on 'Images', Jean-Claude Schmitt's contribution describes with precision the great procession of the Cirio of Nazaré that takes place in Belém, the city on the mouth of the Amazon, in October each year. We see the unfolding of an image through the active participation of the pilgrims. As I have described above, the chapter shows an understanding of degree

zero that is fundamental to the integration of history and modernity. Schmitt does not start from the observation of a fixed, iconic image of the Virgin, the way we know her in the history of Christian culture. Providing the reader with an anthropological account, he presents the unfolding history of the Virgin's procession, the origins of which remain unclear, to the point that the founding miracle – whether the miraculous salvation of a knight in the Middle Ages, or the 'invention' of the statue in 1700, or the new beginning of a 'second' degree zero in 1966 – is no longer visible according to traditional historical interpretations. In a sense, the procession has no real beginning, and as such, the crowd of pilgrims represents a permanent state of degree zero, as they give meaning to the Virgin's physical presence. Far from remaining aloof as a scholar, Schmitt allows himself to be drawn into the historical as he gives shape to the Virgin's procession – the degree zero which constitutes the theme of this volume.

Andrea von Hülschen-Esch's chapter is of a very different spirit, and her way of dealing with the degree zero of the image is more defined. At the centre of the contribution lies a three-sided *triciput*, housed in the Bavarian National Museum in Munich. The sculpture depicts three male heads at three different ages. Without departing from the historical frame within which the object was made – after all, its very theme is time, age, and historicity – Von Hülschen-Esch shows how the image reinvents itself out of its circumstances and raises the circumstantial to a staged performance. The historical purpose of the *triciput* is very unclear: Is it a cane handle for ceremonial use? The top of a throne-like armchair? In any case, the design of this *triciput* raises the question of the specific meaning and contextualization of the depiction of the three ages of man in this circular arrangement. As such, the dynamics of age that the object embodies create a permanent suspense that is constituted by the audience again and again.

The suspense between the responsiveness of the audience and the image is also the topic of the next chapter. At this point, Pierre-Olivier Dittmar's contribution proves vital. It shows how the austerity of the written word can be addressed by the artist, who needs to invent a new image, and how that adapted image responds in the public sphere. Together, the text and the image create a new message with its own semiotics – not unlike the typographic message held in the words and spaces in the *Coup de dés*. Dittmar skilfully shows how a compassionate reading of the work of the artist can uncover the existence of 'mistakes', which are not simple errors of understanding or execution (of an illumination, for example), but developments of the given sense, departures from it, or comments on it – sometimes humorous, sometimes with far-reaching implications, and sometimes even substantive

variations on an iconographical theme. Like Schmitt's contribution, Dittmar bases his analysis on the discovery that not everything functions in strict obedience to the aetiology of society. The nature of truth and falsehood in history and its images is a case in point, for the interpretation made by the historian or art historian may be the right one, but it is nevertheless an interpretation of the artist's interpretation, which can be very much 'in the eye of the beholder'. The claim to truth in iconography is problematic because it depends on the assumption of norms that tend to label interpretations as mere errors, without taking the angle of vision of the artist into account. This can lead to serious gaps in the understanding of the past. Dittmar pleads for a more generous, more open, and therefore more accurate view of images as they appear in history. This openness also represents the degree zero of writing art history.

The second cluster, entitled 'Improvisations', takes up the degree zero of variation, this time as it appears within the improvised process of creating images. As I mentioned earlier in this introduction, Nicola Suthor's contribution shows how the literally unforeseen character of improvisation is formed by the degree zero of drawing the right line on white paper. This question of the unforeseen is a *topos* amongst all great artists, from Giotto to Michelangelo. Yet her case study traverses the sheets of the seventeenth-century painter Agostino Carracci, a lesser-known artist. From these examples, Suthor gives us the experience of a rhythmic and improvised following of the lines in the process of drawing. She has to look and look again at – and even imaginatively repeat – the lines he draws and the rhythms of his hand, as if he is doing them from scratch. The shakiness of the first sketch is slowly developed in a steadier hand. Closely comparing the delineations of the various drawings, Suthor demonstrates how different options for directing the line's path are worked out in the drawing's unfolding, in the degree zero of its movement from unforeseen to ultimate impression. This interplay of lines – the rhythm built up between trembling, thin lines and straighter, thicker lines – creates the final outline of what will ultimately appear to the beholder's gaze.

From the visual arts, we move to an understanding of improvisation in medieval literature from the point of view of bodily, sensual experience. Irit Kleiman explores what she calls a 'choreographed improvisation' around the theme of touch. Her literary renditions of several famous examples, such as Perceval in Chrétien de Troyes' *Le Conte du Graal*, show how the hero's awareness of the unknown and unforeseen, the degree zero of his physical memory, goes through a process of awakening the senses. Kleiman reminds us that, if improvisation is the degree zero of surprise, then the pattern must be anticipated, and preferably a certain gratification promised. But

that is also the path to complacency in the hero's psyche, and eliminates the question to the audience of whether we might have made a mistake in our interpretation of what we thought we saw. This chapter astutely shows how the artist (in this case, the narrator) must remind us that we do not comprehend the physical memory of the hero's psychology and makes evident the integrity – an impregnable wholeness – of the particular degree zero of memory originating in the physical-sensual, in touch, with which the audience's will-to-know is confronted. More importantly perhaps, the chapter by Kleiman reminds us that the difference between the writer's biology and biography, as stated by Barthes, forces us to rethink again possible interpretations of the metaphor, not as a historical devise but, rather, as an existential feature that connects form and content.

The themes of integrity, wholeness, morality, possibility, and their effects on the audience culminate in Asghar Seyed-Gohrab's contribution on the enlivened nature of poetry. Taking his examples from medieval Persian culture, Seyed-Gohrab shows how the poet's capacity for improvisation, as he performs the poem, is vital to successfully communicating with his audience. Adapting the same story to different audiences, the poet changes certain elements by adding long episodes, emphasizing certain themes, or removing controversial passages. This performativity provides an excellent example of how the audience gives shape to the ongoing reinterpretation of poetry through the poet's improvisation. Similarly to the motifs and observations we have encountered in some of the previous chapters, the audience constitutes the degree zero of the work. The poet's talent for improvisation and change tests the power and the effect of the poetry on the audience.
From this discovery of the degree zero of the audience and the requirement that it be drawn into a story or a painting through a process of improvisation, we move on to the third cluster on 'Sound'. Here we will take the meaning of improvisation one step further, by including the question of the intention of art. The chapter by Rokus de Groot shows how the notion of anticipating the attention of the listener as he or she listens to a performance becomes part of a process in which the attentive ear is already present in the musical composition. The meaning of the word intention resonates in the very nature of degree zero; thus De Groot explains how 'intention' ranges from tension or attention to will or purpose, up to the Latin meaning of the word *tendere*, 'to tune'. By taking Bach's *Toccata, Adagio and Fugue in C* (BWV 564) and the classical Hindustani *raga* as examples of two opposite approaches in musical composition, the one starting *in mediis rebus* and the other out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), De Groot demonstrates the workings of musical beginnings – how Bach's music, with didactic skill, incorporates the possible beginning and

(also) an actual beginning of a musical composition in the midst of an ongoing musical theme, suggesting reminiscences of an earlier beginning; and how the *ex nihilo* nature of the *raga* represents a kind of musical genesis, a process of creation, from elementary forms towards increasing degrees of ordering and structuring. As we have observed in the previous cluster on 'Improvisations', in the performing arts, such as music, composers have to deal with the task of conducting the listeners – as well as themselves – from the degree zero of non-musical time into the temporal structure ordered by music. Or, as de Groot puts it: '"Being composed" is also, at the same time, a way of "composing"'.

Continuing in the compassionate field of listening and its fragility, Sander van Maas' contribution is of the essence, as he deals with the historical nature of sound's degree zero as 'spiraling listening'. Referring to Barthes' mode of aural metahistory, wherein Barthes introduces the idea of listening by means of the trope of the spiral, Van Maas proposes an alternative history of listening altogether. As he writes, one of the criticisms of Barthes could be precisely that a lack of compassion in listening, 'the phantasm of its sovereign ipseity, might suggest the fatal attraction of the "theological" circle of the absolute' – and, I would add, listening is shattered by any lack of historical sensitivity. Van Maas shows us what this failure of compassion is like through the story of an intently listening king, borrowed from Italo Calvino: 'From his position on the throne, the king's ear (arguably a singular ear, *monaural*) hears, overhears, and listens to every sound within his sovereign aural-territorial domain'. The theme of aural sovereignty is then creatively linked to the commission of Handel's *Water Music* by King George I; the circumstances, political and otherwise, of the genesis of this music are shown to be an example of spiralling listening. Handel composed melodies and rhythms that he knew had never previously been heard by the listener. The King's listening will not be a listening to music in any stable sense; the sound, '[h]alf blown away across the water and into the wind, [...] will force [the King's] ear to fill in the gaps'. This instability of listening as degree zero reflects the shaky lines of the drawings in Suthor's chapter. Ultimately, the integration of music, wind, and water culminate in the silence of compassionate listening.

From the sound of winds and waters, we gradually move towards the beginning of all beginnings: the book of Genesis. Irene Zwiep describes the nature of the perplexity in degree zero's implications: 'Where Sound and Meaning Part'. As I mentioned above, this inner perplexity trembles between sound and silence. It is the shaky scribe in front of his empty scroll or the cantor facing his perplexed congregation. We read in the Bible how, on the first day, the world was saturated with speech, and God filled the earth with creative sound. Then humankind entered the scene, and man

mixed his voice into the cosmic harmony in the Garden of Eden, in search of a mate. For the rabbis, the language Adam uttered must have been Hebrew, 'the pre-existent tool of creation'. This is the world of human being and society; but how, asks Zwiep, did the poets and scribes manage to combine their private lives with the smooth surface of aesthetics in creation? What happened 'in the solitary moment just before the act of *poiesis*'? Would God be compassionate as his poet trembles? In taking an excerpt from a sixth-century poem by Yannai, Zwiep suggests that poets took great pains to please the divine ear. The consolation for the poet's private life lies, Zwiep suggests, 'in the very image of the dry, wasted shoot', for 'God provided solace in the wilderness and could make the desert blossom as the rose'. Thus we learn that the understanding of degree zero does not represent the horizontal line of a *tabula rasa*, or the beginning of Genesis and the Garden of Eden, but rather the perplexity when sound and meaning part, within the dryness of the wasted shoot as a semiotic incision.

From these images of solitary *poiesis*, the incision between sound and meaning, and a king turning his head away from the audience, we now turn to the realm of 'Silence'. Cédric Giraud's contribution describes how silence in the twelfth-century monastery was not merely an obligation prescribed by the Rule of Saint Benedict. As part of what Giraud calls 'biblical reality', the understanding of silence was loose and open, even polysemous. The chapter demonstrates – without entering into a historiographical debate, however – that if silence is only thought of negatively, it is often seen as a sign of privation. Giraud argues, in the same vein of the arguments in the section on 'Improvisation', that the purpose of 'silent writing' is teaching and thus transforming its audience. The hermeneutical principle of degree zero can also be a tool enabling a more profound understanding of the role played by silence in the monastic mind. The shape of silence as a figure of degree zero has a reflective quality, which helped medieval monks ruminate and reflect on their own experiences as writers and artists, creating new books, in quest of innovative ideas.

The next chapter keeps us within the walls of the monastic world, where silence has different shapes. Hence Theo Lap presents us with yet another kind of monastic silence – one that withholds information. Taking the collection of letters written by Anselm of Canterbury as a case study, Lap shows how the omission of information, or sometimes the removal of entire letters from the collection, belongs among the paradoxes of monastic politics. Taking the notion of the 'macro-text'– narratives transcending the arrangements of separate texts – as degree zero, Lap argues that Anselm's letters artfully make of him a figure which idealizes silence. He goes so

far as to suggest that 'letter collections harboured essential aspects of the interplay between the act of keeping silent and the virtue of silence in their forms and contents'. This would lead to a double-sided image of Anselm, balanced between the inner world of monasticism and the outer world of ecclesiastical leadership. The degree zero nature of the letter collection thus 'closes the circle of silence'.

We now turn to the last chapter in this volume. I mentioned above how Burcht Pranger proposes to interpret the nature of degree zero as the liminality of the human condition. We are back in vintage modernist territory. Taking the intellectual understanding of degree zero in its purest form – and here form becomes crucial – Pranger sets three 'images of liminal silence' next to each other: we have Anselm standing next to Bernard of Clairvaux and Barack Obama. In line with the spirit of degree zero as a hermeneutical tool, according to the principles of modernism, as Pranger argues, these three images cannot be said to resonate, yet they share common ground in their articulation – creating a singular silence – where words and gaps fall into a new *Coup de dés*. Borrowing the term from the anthropologist Victor Turner, Pranger suggests 'a realm of pure possibility'. Within this possibility, the discursive speech of memory does not allow the poet or the orator access to the wholeness of time. Like in music 'the sound experience of the psalm or hymn as such remains, [and can be,] both overwhelmingly present and mute'. This being so, as Pranger further argues, 'the full effect of silence, its white spaces between words, can only be achieved if we do away with both the constraints of melodious successiveness and the well-ordered expectations of subjectivity'. Taking the phrase from the book of Revelation, '*Et factum est silentium in caelo quasi dimidia hora*' ('And, for about half an hour, there was silence in heaven'), as the red thread woven throughout his contribution, Pranger shows how his degree zero is ultimately turned into a song of redemption. The random roll of the dice, from Anselm to Bernard, ricochets towards Obama singing 'Amazing Grace', trying to find the pitch of that silent rhythm incorporating the history of suffering and slavery. In this stretching of silence, *quasi dimidia hora*, the degree zero of liminality with its notion of the unforeseen, enters into new a form, *de silentio*.

I will now leave the floor to the authors and am moved to say that I have learned more from them than I ever anticipated. The several forms of degree zero that arise in this volume are part of my own artistic intention with this volume. My perception is that each contribution provides – in thinking about art, history, and time – a more generous language for and against academic tradition, a language that takes an interest in the unknown. Often, the first step towards a new approach is being interested in the unfamiliar and the

strange, without doubt also overcoming a certain strangeness in oneself. This volume proves that such a pitch of tone, silence, and language can be found.

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