



NOMADIC THINKING AND ITS TENTS OF NEARNESS

The Pains of Abstraction

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“At the outermost point of computerised time the pain of missing, of deprivation of need, grows. The emptiness of the present time becomes nearly unbearable.”

Dietmar Kamper

Axes into the open spaces

One of the last seminars given by Dietmar Kamper before his death was called: “The Pains of Abstraction”¹. The background to this seminar is the object of this text. Prior to the seminar “The Pains of Abstraction”, Kamper had published a paper and held another seminar entitled “A Move into the Open”². The move into the open, according to Kamper, was:

A direction taken by the human being while growing individually and collectively older: from the cave (inside the belly), via the cradle, the room, the house, the yard, the marketplace, the town, the country, the seas, the globe into outer space etc. This direction has a certain inevitability to it, forming a chain whose individual links form a singular, delaying culture.³

¹ The seminar „The Pains of Abstraction“ was held over three semesters from the summer semester of 2000 to the summer semester of 2001 by Dietmar Kamper and Bernd Ternes at the Free University of Berlin’s Institute of Sociology.

² Dietmar Kamper, “Umzug ins Offene: vier Versuche über den Raum”; Springer Wien, New York 2000

³ Dietmar Kamper, Catalogue of the Free University, Berlin, summer semester 2000, p. 28





In Kamper's thinking this description of the process of becoming human is connected to an inquiry into the course's "reversal". This "reversal" is one of the most difficult notions ever formulated by Kamper. On no account, according to this thesis, may it be understood as a "back to" but rather as a "towards".

This turn proceeds, as do all "turns", via the metaphor of the organisation of the human senses, i.e. the duality of the frontal perspective of the sense of sight. Though the implications inherent in this turn and thereby in the non-appearance of the "back" (which is turned away, not visible, not thought), a divergence between the movement's direction and its "being directed"⁴, as an imposition upon thinking, is inevitable. Kamper's (socio-) genetic reasoning can therefore only be viewed within the context of a field of interference between the direction of movement and "being directed". A reversal is therefore not a directional about-face, but must rather refer to the complexity of the relationships between the direction of movement and "being directed".

The concept of the "reversal" is however by no means exhausted by this difference, but must also be viewed within the context of at least a second polarity field: that of time. The movement does not take place outside of time. Time is connected to the extended imposition, namely that of the difference between process (genesis) and dynamics, which cannot be overlooked. Dynamics can be distinguished via the Virillean diagramme of acceleration and deceleration (temporal escape and realisation/"Vergegenwärtigung"). The process itself however, and this is the main difference, is not a uniform one, nor can it be subsumed under the paradigms of dynamics, direction of movement or of "being directed". The process is the relational

⁴ The concept of „being directed“ is of course part of the complex of the „trajectory of the inquiry into the human being.“ (Foucault)





continuum of the “anthropological quadrilateral”, which can be imagined as contracting and expanding, without itself being seen as uniform.

Behind these seeming polarities of direction of movement and “being directed” and of acceleration and deceleration therefore, lies a four-dimensional axiomatic system, within which we must trace the notion of a “reversal” of the world’s condition, having reached the point of “raging standstill”, where a reversal of all axes can be apprehended.

Openness is not the verdict formulated at the close of 1968: Power to the imagination...

The Anthropological Quadrilateral

In the ninth chapter of “The Order of Things”⁵ Michel Foucault describes the anthropological quadrilateral as a organisational disposition of the knowledge of a historically conceived constitution of civilisation (“singularity”/Deleuze), within which one figure appears: that of man. The four corners of the anthropological quadrilateral are, according to Foucault: 1. the analytic of finitude, 2. the empirical and the transcendental, 3. the cogito and the unthought as well as 4. the return of the origin and its retreat. These points are not conceived of as loose or free-floating. They organise clusters of relational fields around themselves. To name some of these fields: 1. sociological: the person, the subject, the unconscious and the self, 2. economical: capital, labour, commodity and money, 3. civilisational: the body, the image, language/writing and time.

The anthropological quadrilateral and its figure, man, made its appearance at the moment when, at the end of the eighteenth century, the disposition of classical thought began to falter and when, according to Foucault, up with the transformation towards

⁵ Michel Foucault, the order of things, Routledge classics London New York 2002





modernity, the shape of representation as the historical form of knowledge began to break. Man as the figure of a constitution of civilisation is for Foucault merely a historical phenomenon within the dispositions of knowledge, not an unchanging figure, nor a universal constant, nor a meta-historical shape. The human form merely represents the transitional form between the god form and the superhuman form⁶ and Foucault sees this disappearance as already taking place “like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” (p. 386).

According to Kamper, from a condition which manoeuvres within the “cracks in the world-building of reason which can no longer be overlooked”⁷, thought is now able to do no more than follow those events which undermine the anthropological quadrilateral. Enlightenment, according to Kamper, has become blind to itself and now requires an “enlightenment of enlightenment”⁸. That which can be thought does not lie outside of enlightenment but rather within it, within its “cracks”.

The fractured anthropological quadrilateral is already infused with structures of the superhuman. The image of the anthropological quadrilateral is no longer that of a square, it no longer really has corners. It is fissured with a variety of distortions, displacements and fractures, which themselves already form the new disposition of knowledge: the rhizome.

⁶ Gilles Deleuze, Foucault, S.189

⁷ Dietmar Kamper, Zur Geschichte der Einbildungskraft, Rowohlt Haburg 1990, p. 7

⁸ “It is no longer possible to think in our day other than in the void left by man's disappearance. For this void does not create a deficiency; it does not constitute a lacuna that must be filled. It is nothing more, and nothing less, than the unfolding of a space in which it is once more possible to think.” (p. 341)





The pains of abstraction

“Beneath the known history of Europe there runs a *subterranean* one. It consists of the fate of the human instincts and passions repressed and distorted by civilization. (...) Most mutilated of all is the relationship to the body. (...) Only culture treats the body as a thing that can be owned, only in culture has it been distinguished from mind, the quintessence of power and command, as the object, the dead thing, the *corpus*.”⁹

The seminar “The Pains of Abstraction” intended to investigate one particular crack, the clearly visible faultline between the “body” and the conditions that reign in the ultimate forms of society (the process of abstraction).

The “body” is one of the central concepts in Kamper’s thought. It is introduced in opposition to the cartesian understanding of a distinction between the “res extensa” (object) and the “res cogitans” (subject) as a dimension of consciousness: “the body is not only the biological foundation of the human being but also part of his subjectivity.”¹⁰ As such, it is precisely that painfully missing part of the present which is the “impossible present”. The body is connected discursively to the moment of realisation and is in no part an idea of the cult of the body.

The seminar “The Pains of Abstraction” was situated within this framework, the faultline between the body and abstraction. The “liquidation of the body”, which Kamper referred to as a “pre-arranged matter”, and the “pains of abstraction” formed a crack which Kamper explained with reference in particular to a lecture given by Vilém Flusser,

⁹ Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Frankfurt 1988, pp 192-93

¹⁰ Dietmar Kamper, *Körper-Abstraktionen*, S.24





who saw the “supposed progress of the human race as a regression”¹¹. “The slow and painful cultural progress of mankind”, according to Flusser, “can be seen as a step by step retreat from the lifeworld, as an incremental increase in alienation.”

Flusser summarises this retreat in four steps:

1. “With the first step away from the lifeworld – away from the context of those things concerning human beings – we become treaters, and the resulting practice is the production of instruments.
2. With the second step back – this time from the three-dimensionality of treated things – we become observers, and the resulting practice is the creation of images.
3. With the third step back - this time from the two-dimensionality of the imagination – we become describers, and the resulting practice is the production of texts.
4. With the fourth step back - this time from the one-dimensionality of of alphabetical writing – we become calculators, and the resulting practice is modern technology. This fourth step towards total abstraction - towards zero-dimensionality – was taken by the Renaissance and has been, to the present, consummated. A further step back towards abstraction is not feasible: There cannot be less than nothing.”¹²

Kamper and Flusser both assumed that this process of abstraction cannot be continued after reaching zero-dimensionality and that a reversal towards the lifeworld must therefore be approached. Zero-dimensionality is the “outermost point of computerised time” cited in the beginning.¹³

¹¹ Regarding the metaphors of this criticism of progress Walter Benjamin’s image of the Angelus Novus in particular can be drawn upon for comparison.

¹² Vilém Flusser, *From Subject to Project: Becoming Human*, Frankfurt 1998, p. 21 f.

¹³ The abstractions of the body install themselves in the history of civilisation as an incremental distancing of the bodies, from plenitude to emptiness, from the multidimensional





Kamper extends the anthropological quadrilateral as genesis of abstraction from the sensual “being-in-the world” by one more dimension, which can be depicted as follows:

non-dimensional	three-dimensional	two-dimensional	one-dimensional	zero-dimensional
“Leib”	body	image	writing	computer
feeling	hearing/speaking	seeing	writing/reading	calculating
skin	ear/voice	eye	eye/hand	brain
time-space	space	area	line	point/impossible present

Time and Kamper

Dietmar Kamper’s nomadic thinking never avoided openness. His thinking took place within the open spaces, it even sought them out. The genesis of the “retreat from the lifeworld” depicted here describes the transformation of the anthropological quadrilateral as a contraction into a single point: the zero-dimensionality of zero and one.

This compression (to compute = to cringe) is not to be understood as essentialist, but rather, as stated in the introduction, as a prospective diagnosis and a dramatisation of loss, the loss of paradise (“paradise exists only as lost”): the impossible present.

Kamper critically emphasises culture’s loss of realisation in the civilisational process of abstraction. The faultline between body and abstraction causes pain, the “pain

lifeworld to the ice-desert of abstraction, down to zero, or rather down to calculations with zero, or rather down to calculations with zero/one. This de-escalation is inevitable and irreversible. .”
Dietmar Kamper, Körper-Abstraktionen - Das anthropologische Viereck von Raum, Fläche, Linie, Punkt, Walther König, Köln 1999, p.24





over the emptiness of the present". In contrast to Flusser, his main objective was to observe and point out the dangers inherent in recent changes within the civilisational modes of formation. He realised that the shrinking of zero-dimensionality would continue and that it is a point with an infinite circumference: the point as the ice-desert of abstraction. In this ice-desert, his objective was to seek out and uncover connections: to pitch tents, meaning to cultivate existence.

"Reversal" must therefore be understood as a counterpoint. The move into the open, means - in its diagnostic sense - to break down the roofs of the old orders, the islands that carry human beings, in its cultural sense it means - and that is the counterpoint - to create inhabitable regions within the ice-desert, to form new islands.

The same traces were followed by Bernd Ternes' extensive attempt - within the genealogical civilisation-project that embraces and grips the world - to pitch the tents of nearness: technogenic nearness.

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