

## The Figure of Two

In a much-discussed remark from the seminar ...*Or Worse*, Jacques Lacan asserts that it is not possible to arrive at 2 when one begins counting with 0 and 1:

"With 0 and 1, if you add them or place one in an exponential relationship with the other, or even place one in an exponential relationship with itself, 2 is never attained. With the number 2, in the sense I have just suggested, the test of being produced from a summation or exponentiation of smaller numbers proves to be negative: there is no 2 that can be produced using 1 and 0."<sup>1</sup>

An unbridgeable gap opens between 1 and 2, and in this way 2 is already infinite. Here, Lacan exemplifies his theory of the other, and underscores that the other can in no way be understood as a "second one," according to the arithmetic operation  $1 + 1$ . Instead, with the other, one is dealing with an irreducibly dual constellation, and is thus compelled to begin counting with 2.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from its subject-theoretical implications, this argument contains a generalizable insight about the nature of all beginning. Two, and not one, is the number of onset. We must *always* start counting with 2. Even Hegel, in *The Science of Logic*, when determining the "absolute beginning" or "ground" (of science), cannot refrain from admitting that this beginning contains two aspects and must be thought of as an ambiguous "unity": "The beginning thus contains both being and nothingness; it is the unity of being and nothingness..."<sup>3</sup> In an entirely different context, this type of ambiguity was also discovered by structural linguistics when Ferdinand de Saussure determined that in a linguistic system there are no "positive terms," but "only differences."<sup>4</sup> Thus, the minimal signifying element in any sign system must already be two-fold. Not "a" alone, but only the dyad "a/not a" can produce "meaning."

In the concrete case of language acquisition in infants, however, it is evident that the structure of such an element is yet more complex. As is well known, an infant's first word is not a single phoneme that emerges from prelingual silence as a significant sound; rather, it sets itself apart from the babble and emerges as a linguistic utterance on the strength of its

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire XIX. ...Ou pire...* (1971–1972), 10. Mai 1972, [http://gaogoa.free.fr/Seminaires\\_HTML/19-OP/OP10051972.htm](http://gaogoa.free.fr/Seminaires_HTML/19-OP/OP10051972.htm)

<sup>2</sup> See Alenka Zupančič: *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two* (Cambridge, MA and London, 2003), 146f. On Lacan's conception of two, see also Alain Badiou, "La scène du deux," in *De l'amour*, ed. École de la cause freudienne (Paris 1999), 177–190; *Conditions* (Paris 1992), 259.

<sup>3</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: *Werke*, vol. 6, *Wissenschaft der Logik I* (Frankfurt am Main 1979), 73.

<sup>4</sup> See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Grundfragen der allgemeinen Sprachwissenschaft*, trans. Herman Lommel, eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye (Berlin and New York 2001), 143.

double structure: "ma-ma." The repetition is crucial. A word only appears when a sound is confirmed as an intentional utterance through repetition.<sup>5</sup> It can also be said—and for the logic of the *figure of two*, this is of greatest importance—that here, a prelingual sound is *retroactively* endowed with meaning. The isolated "ma" *will have been* the 1 from which the infant has arrived at the 2 of the word "ma-ma," but only retroactively does this single sound become a 1 that in a linguistic arithmetic can be added with another 1. In this arithmetic as well, 2 is the first number. Anyone who has experienced an infant beginning to talk knows what this divide that lies between 1 and 2—according to Lacan—means as a concrete phenomenon. It is not a gradual transition, with language-like sounds slowly and ever more clearly separating themselves from babble. The first word seems to break vertically into the plane of prelingual sounds. It is a categorical leap, an *event par excellence*.

This example leads to another important aspect of *two as a figure*—namely, what it is that makes *two* into an entirely specific *figure*. For the first word with the double structure "a-a," it is evidently critical to have *exactly two* sounds come together. If a single "ma" is not yet a word, so "ma-ma-ma" is not a word anymore and has become babble again. Repetition beyond two destroys meaning and causes the material/phonetic aspect of language to begin to separate from the semantic aspect. Correspondingly, the three- or four-fold repetition of a syllable is only to be found in onomatopoeia, which, according to Lévi-Strauss,

"always [harbors] an ambiguity, since it does not clearly indicate whether the speaking subject, when it speaks onomatopoeically, is undertaking to reproduce a sound or to express a meaning. Through duplication, the second unit emphatically underscores the signifying intention, while if the unit had remained alone, one could have doubted whether this intention were present in the first unit."<sup>6</sup>

It could thus also be said that *two as a figure* is strongly set apart both from one and from many. Just as two cannot be attained from the addition of two units, so *two* does not constitute a rudimentary *series*.

A "simple" visual example can clarify this. Consider any mirror-symmetric figure:



---

<sup>5</sup> See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologica I: Das Rohe und das Gekochte*, trans. Eva Moldenhauer (Frankfurt am Main 1976), 435.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 435f.

We would not hesitate to say that, in itself, it is constructed through repetition. From an iconic-theoretical perspective, strict symmetry is always inimical to the concept of an image as a *structure of unity* and an *organic whole*. In classical aesthetics, symmetry is seen as mechanical and soulless. The two halves into which it decomposes seem to behave redundantly towards one another. But just as obviously, a mirror-symmetric figure is *not* structured as a series. If we continue in one direction, adding another symmetrically derived part



we have *one and a half* figures,  $1 + \frac{1}{2}$  and not the series  $1 + 1 + 1$ . The mirror-symmetric figure is thus self-enclosed, without being an indivisible unity (to the artistic eye it decomposes all too clearly into *two parts*); but it is also not simply a *multiplicity*. In iconic theory, the *figure of two*, for example as embodied in exact symmetry, must count as a third, which runs counter to the familiar opposition of the *tableau* as a *structure of unity* and the *series*.

The phenomenon of symmetry is associated with a famous philosophical problem, from which the conclusion can be drawn that in the theory of space as well, it is necessary to start with a *figure of two*. Immanuel Kant brings this problem to a head when he asks if it is possible to decide of a "human hand" that exists alone in the world as the "first work of creation" whether it is either a left hand or a right hand.<sup>7</sup> This question is posed inasmuch as it is not immediately clear what the difference between the two hands consists of, since they seem to possess the "same" form, without being exchangeable. One would answer this question by saying that this difference consists in their orientation in space. But how can this orientation be determined, exactly—through a relation between *two* objects, or, as Kant believed, through an absolute, objective structure (a type of Cartesian coordinate system), which space in itself already possesses, so that *one* hand is always already a specific one? While Kant was of this latter opinion, and in his early text *Foundation for the Distinction of Positions in Space* argued for the Newtonian concept of space, in the subsequent discussion

---

<sup>7</sup> See Immanuel Kant, "Von dem ersten Grunde des Unterschiedes der Gegenden im Raume", in *Werkausgabe*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel, vol. II/2, *Vorkritische Schriften bis 1768* (Frankfurt am Main 1977), 999.

that has continued into the present day, it has repeatedly been argued that *two* objects are necessary in order for a single object to achieve a clear sense of direction.<sup>8</sup>

Within this discussion, certain arguments associated with the problems of mathematical topology are of great significance for a theory of *two*. They provide a clearer conception of how paradoxical the "repetition" is that first makes two elements into a *figure of two*. Thus, in connection with the question of whether two "incongruent counterparts," as Kant called them (such as enantiomorphs, or simply the two parts of a mirror-symmetrical pair), possess the same form or not, in order to answer this question in the affirmative, it has been pointed out that there is an operation that enables the two counterparts to be transferred into one another. This is immediately evident when a two-dimensional figure is used as an example:

## Р Я

It is very easy to imagine how a Latin "R" could be taken out of the plane and rotated in three-dimensional space, in order to attain a Cyrillic "Ya." From this idea, August Ferdinand Möbius concluded that it can be generally asserted that an  $n$ -dimensional asymmetrical object can be transferred into its enantiomorphic counterpart via rotation through a space of  $n + 1$  dimensions.<sup>9</sup> This could also be done—if it were only possible—with hands. The impossibility of imagining what it would mean for this actually to occur, not in abstract, mathematical space, but in the phenomenal world of our existence, gives a sense of the *categorical leap* that *separates* the two parts of a *figure of two*, but simultaneously also constitutes their cohesion. We are dealing with a figure that is divided by a radical split or cut, and at the same time held together by it.

When, with Lacan, the *figure of two* is thought of in terms of his concept of the other, this figure—quite surprisingly—does not refer primarily to a theory of intersubjectivity or of the pair relationship at all, but is most productive above all as a model of subject theory. This is one of the points that Alenka Zupančič presents in her study of Nietzsche, which was motivational for us.<sup>10</sup> In this context, based on Freud's conception of the unconscious, the

---

<sup>8</sup> An overview of this discussion can be found in James van Cleve and Robert E. Frederick, *The Philosophy of Right and Left: Incongruent Counterparts and the Nature of Space* (Dordrecht, Boston and London, 1991), The University of Western Ontario Series in Philosophy of Science, vol. 46.

<sup>9</sup> See August Ferdinand Möbius, "Der barycentrische Calcul: Ein neues Hülfsmittel zur analytischen Behandlung der Geometrie", in *Gesammelte Werke*, published at the behest of the Royal Saxon Scientific Society, vol. 1, ed. Richard Baltzer (Leipzig 1885), 170ff.

<sup>10</sup> See Zupančič (as in note 2), especially 133ff.

other can be understood in the first instance as a dimension of the self that consistently evades self-identification—that splits the atomistic, self-enclosed subject as posited in idealist philosophy, thus making the central figure of one into *two*. Idealist philosophy understood the unity of the subject that it posited as a synthesis achieved by way of a process of self-reflection, for which the image of the self that recognizes its reflection in a mirror is a frequently cited example. However, this scenario should be strictly distinguished from the model of the mirror-symmetrical figure outlined here, which is structured around a cut that divides it into *two incongruent parts, which can never be made congruent in the plane in which they exist*.

The problem of the subject necessarily leads us to emphasize another aspect of the *figure of two*, which cannot be appropriately demonstrated in the stasis of a graphic illustration. The *figure of two* is also inscribed with a temporal dynamic. According to Lacan, the subject unfolds in a recursive *movement*; or, it could also be said that the subject is persistently at the heels of the other in the self, without ever being able to overtake it.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the mirror scenario of subjectivity could rather be thought of as Bruce Nauman modeled it in the video installation *Live Taped Video Corridor* (1970). In this work, the viewer sees him or herself in a monitor installed at the end of a long, narrow corridor. The monitor shows an image transmitted in real time by a video camera mounted at the entrance to the hallway. When walking along the path determined by the installation, the viewer looks upon the sight of him- or herself, which not only is being recorded from behind—as if from the viewpoint of the other—but also, the closer the viewer comes to the monitor, the farther away he or she recedes in the image that it displays.

The effect this installation produces has an alienating and terrifying quality. This effect seems always to be produced when the ego encounters itself, as a *Doppelgänger*, in the position of the other—as in Sigmund Freud's report, in his writing on the *uncanny*, about a particular occasion when, standing directly across from his own reflection in a mirror, he was unable to recognize it as such.<sup>12</sup> But as Freud states, the reaction to the confrontation of the ego with itself as a *Doppelgänger* is as a rule not only a case of misrecognition, but is also connected with fear. The root of the Greek word for *two*, *δύο*, is the same as in the word for fear (*δειδω*) and the terrifying (*δεινός*).<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 13ff.

<sup>12</sup> See Sigmund Freud, "Das Unheimliche," in *Studienausgabe*, vol. 4, *Psychologische Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main 1970), 270, note 1.

<sup>13</sup> See Massimo Cacciari, *Gewalt und Harmonie: Geo-Philosophie Europas*, trans. Günter Memmert (Munich and Vienna 1995), 8.

Massimo Cacciari, who makes reference to this fact, localizes the origin of the gesture of philosophical reflection in that moment in which the world (of the Greeks) was permanently divided in two, and the other appeared as a terrifying figure on the horizon, when Persian expansion advanced into the Aegean. For Occidental tradition—which, following this argument, was rooted in a violent confrontation (of the Greeks and the Persians)—it has in any case remained characteristic to assign to the other an absolute difference, which either is regarded with paranoid fascination or else elicits the aggressive endeavor to extinguish it.

Leo Bersani has argued that any attempt to overcome this paranoid relation to the other has to begin with the moment in which a human being becomes a subject, by beginning to differentiate itself as an ego from others. Freud posited an initial autoerotic disposition of the human organism, a primary narcissism, in which the ego, in achieving satisfaction of libidinal drives, experiences itself as autonomous with regard to the outside world. In this stage of psychogenesis, according to Freud, contact with the outside is associated with sensations of displeasure. He thus concluded that the relationship to the world is originally characterized by hatred—that is, by a hatred against which the object libido can only prevail in a later stage, and which remains inscribed in the object libido, and in the relationship to the outside world in general, as a base layer. (This is demonstrated, for example, in the sudden reversal of love into hatred).<sup>14</sup> According to Bersani, a way out of this fate is presented when the object relation is considered in terms of the model of the homosexual libido. In this case, the other does not appear under the sign of an absolute and unfathomable difference, but as the *double* of the ego. Here, however, homosexuality is not understood, with Freud, as a relapse into primary narcissism, as the fictive maintenance of an originary autonomy; rather, it is the agent of an unbounding of the self. Rediscovering the self beyond the ego is a form of losing the self—a "spatial, anonymous narcissism."<sup>15</sup> Bersani's model of homosexuality provides a basis for thinking of the relationship between ego and others as a *figure of two*. The political implications of this conception of the object relationship are far-reaching. A form of subjectivation in which the other comes into play as a *Doppelgänger* ultimately undermines those mechanisms of differentiation and bounding that produce the subject as a self-identical entity. The *figure of two* could thus be made productive for a theory of equality that offers the possibility of a nonidentitarian community.

---

<sup>14</sup> See Sigmund Freud, "Triebe und Triebchicksale", in Freud (as in note 12), vol. 3, *Psychologie des Unbewußten*, 94ff.

<sup>15</sup> See Tim Dean, Hal Foster and Kaja Silverman, "A Conversation with Leo Bersani," in *October* 82 (Autumn 1997): 6. See Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York and Chichester/West Sussex 1986); *Homos* (Cambridge, MA and London 1996); Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge, MA and London 1993); *Caravaggio's Secrets* (Cambridge, MA and London 1998).

The other, totalitarian aspect of a theory of politics which takes the relation between the subject and the other as model was explored by Jacques Derrida in the introductory passages to *The Politics of Friendship*, in reference to ancient political discourse, particularly Plato and Aristotle.<sup>16</sup> Here, two is one reflected; membership in the polis is mainly thought of in terms of descent from a common root (even if this might be a mythological root sunken in the depths of the past)—a root that has divided, ramified, and multiplied itself. Derrida draws on the affinity between ancient political discourse and the classical discourse of friendship. The friend is another I. He is my friend because substantially he is not any different from myself. In my friend, I love myself, as he loves himself in me, because implicitly we are one and the same. These two concepts are at the basis of all fundamentalism and substantialism, be it political or ideological or philosophical: the biologicistic idea of a common root, and the metaphysical idea of a unity that transcends the physical world. They are ancient weapons for leading the figure of the two, irreducible in the modern reading, back to the one, by proving that the two has always already been one. The predominant strain of western politics that has fundamentally committed itself to the universality of its procedures, regulations and legitimizations (from early Christianity to eighteenth century Enlightenment) is inconceivable without these predeterminations.

From this perspective, it seems worthwhile also to devote some thought to the "end of two". Underneath the legitimist binarism of political representation (representer and represented—but who actually represents whom, and above all, how many? Is it a question of the unity of the representers, or of the represented? (Hobbes)), i.e. underneath the official level of the law and codification, Michel Foucault has postulated a cellar level of discipline and bio-politics.<sup>17</sup> On this cellar level (it's a big cellar, as big as the modern world), the primary concern is to synchronize the survival and even the well-being of the individual, in the most efficient ways possible, with the continued existence of society as a whole—to "attune" individual and population with each other. Typically, in bio-politics, this adjustment is not orchestrated in a binary fashion, but makes use of stochastic processes, of probabilities. The two of representation is of no actual relevance when it comes to regulate a multitude—in zoning measures during times of plague in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in immunization campaigns against smallpox or hygiene and sanitation measures in the nineteenth century, or in the theories of human capital in Chicago neo-liberalism. This bio-

---

<sup>16</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Politik der Freundschaft* (Frankfurt am Main 2007).

<sup>17</sup> See Michel Foucault, *Überwachen und Strafen* (Frankfurt am Main 2006); *Sexualität und Wahrheit 1: Der Wille zum Wissen* (Frankfurt am Main 2008); *Sexualität und Wahrheit 2. Der Gebrauch der Lüste* (Frankfurt am Main 2009); *In Verteidigung der Gesellschaft: Vorlesungen am College de France (1975 - 1976)* (Frankfurt am Main 2004).

political recourse to the macro-level of society as a whole corresponds to the self-regulation of the individual, to its self-discipline or will to take care of itself, wash itself, let itself be immunized against the flu, not have unprotected sex, etc. Between the hyper-individualistic one, whose only concern is the own personal life, and the numerous multitude of a population, according to Foucault the sphere of representation and the law, the sphere of the two, is profoundly weakened in the modern era. In fact he regards it as the sphere of political pretence and ideology. Thus the true, deciding battles would take place either above or below the level of the two.

Markus Klammer and Stefan Neuner