

The Name of the Zero: Variations on a Theme

Pourtant cette nouvelle pensée, si ferme et précise dans le procès de l'erreur idéologique, ne se définit pas elle-même sans difficultés, ni sans équivoques. On ne rompt pas d'un coup avec un passé théorique: il faut en tout cas des mots et des concepts pour rompre avec des mots et des concepts, et ce sont souvent les anciens mots qui sont chargés du protocole de la rupture, tout le temps que dure la recherche des nouveaux.

Louis Althusser, *Pour Marx*, 1966, p. 13

[Introduction. "Degree Zero: Drawing at Midcentury"]

About two years ago, an exhibition took place at the New York MoMA entitled «**Degree Zero: Drawing at Midcentury**». On display were a selection of about a hundred works, dating from 1948 to 1961 (Barthes' text was published in 1953). The exhibition, is written the Press Release, "highlights connections between artists working across movements, geographies, and generations [...] who embraced drawing to forge a 'new **visual** language' in the aftermath of World War II".

The exhibition shows how the exhibited artists argued that drawing was the ideal medium to **represent** those years, an immediate and direct **degree zero**, like a kind of *Zeitgeist*. Many used **geometric abstraction** as a language, or a new dimension of language, in which not the aesthetic datum but the ability to determine communication was the true nature of the work of art; an opportunity that was also political: to remake not only the individual, but **society** as a whole. **Abstraction** and **society: degree zero** is achieved by abstracting, a procedure applied here as an instrument of political progress. Of course, the 1950s were a complicated time both politically and economically: Cold War, McCarthyism, the post-war economic boom and the rise of capitalism.

On display are works of the most diverse kind, ranging from abstract expressionism to the ink drawings of Henri Matisse, to something that might seem an intruder: the written correspondence between Georgia O'Keeffe and Yayoi Kusama. A text exhibited in an exhibition of graphic works, not (only) for its visual value; on show are works that can be included in the category of performance, which became increasingly implicitly important within the act of drawing, as in actionism, gesturalism, and so on up to John Cage and Fluxus. Also on show is Claes Oldenburg, who in 1961 said he was in favour "for an art that grows up not knowing it is art at all, an art given the chance of having a starting **point of zero**"¹. It seems that the attitude of Jean-Paul Sartre, who wrote of Alberto Giacometti in 1948 that "we have to start again from scratch", was still relevant for him.

But are all these **degree zero** the **same thing**? Defining **degree zero** as a return to the essence of reality through the sole procedure of **abstraction** does not seem to be what Barthes describes as **degree zero**. Barthes writes, for example, about Albert Camus's *L'Étranger* that "the new neutral writing stands in the midst of these cries and judgements, without participating in any of them; it is made precisely of their absence"²: is this the same thing as **abstraction**?

[Minimalism as a 'degree zero']

As the expression **degree zero** has become increasingly employed in architectural criticism: just a couple of examples, among many that we all have in mind.

Reyner Banham³ spoke of **grade zero** as the **null value** condition of architecture that he saw realised in the bare industrial buildings of industrial architect Albert Kahn; Ignasi de Sola-Morales⁴ spoke about the rarefied minimalism of Mies' spaces as the **degree zero** of architectural form:

"Mies' work does not start with images, but with materials. [...] Reality is, from the outset, the material for the work of architecture, and his calls to understand architecture solely as construction, as *bauen*, are proof that the perceptual conditions created by the materiality of buildings are at the origin of their spiritual meaning. Mies thus appears to us, for the first time, as one who, through an adherence to the *Zeitgeist*, employs a technique in its full meaning as *bauen*, as building in its contingent, social context and not in its **empty form** of a style in the manner of the Beaux-arts."

¹ Claes Oldenburg, "I Am For..." written in 1961 for the catalogue of the "Environments, Situations, Spaces" exhibition at Martha Jackson Gallery

² Roland Barthes, "Degree zero", xxx

³ xxx

⁴ Ignasi de Solà-Morales, Mies van der Rohe e il grado zero, «Lotus» n. 81, 1994, pag. 20-27. Traduzione mia.

Null value, empty form.

By shifting this *null value* towards primarily rational domains, the result does not change much; to give just one example, a critic such as Yehuda Safran, some 30 years ago, described the assignment of the design of the new Tate Modern in Bankside London in precisely these terms, describing it as a possible **grade zero**, not because of a supposed generic minimalism of the designers, but because “working at the edge of a conceptual grasp of reality and the limits of perception, Herzog and de Meuron have a sense of geometry as visible as it is invisible. The result is to achieve what one might call a ‘**degree zero**’ of architecture with buildings conceived through rigour and radical choices, which obviates the need for historical rhetoric and modern formulae. This procedure is not to be confused with a Minimalist style but is rather a renewed faith in rational insight and the ability to make things and to build.”⁵

[Kenneth Frampton]

A **degree zero** that also resonates in the words of Kenneth Frampton⁶ when describing Adolf **Loos** and the crisis of cultures: “The typological issue posited by Loos was how to combine the propriety of Platonic mass with the convenience of irregular volume”. Proving that it is never so obvious neither simple to separate content from form, it is again Frampton who describes **Mies** as follows:

“Although Mies, like Kahn with his tetrahedral obsessions, was preoccupied, however unconsciously, with the creation of an ‘architecture **degree zero**’ (his famous *beinahe nichts*, ‘almost nothing’) he was at the same time cognizant of the monumental imperative to the effect.”⁷

And “Thus **Kahn**’s first take on monumentality in his opening essay on the topic in 1944 was to predicate his **zero degree** of an **autonomous** modernist architecture on the latest advances in building technology rather than on any form of rationalized typology”⁸, thus and again making it a problem of language: the language of engineering opposed to the language of architecture, i.e. the same dialectic between the aesthetics of engineering and architecture with which Le Corbusier opened the **purist polemic** in “Towards a New Architecture” as early as 1923⁹.

But Frampton had already used this same concept in 1971 in the article, “Industrialization and the crises in Architecture”¹⁰, which appeared in the first issue of «Oppositions», where he describes how kitsch in architecture was the crisis that burst the bubble of styles within which the bourgeoisie had constructed for itself the image of a meaningful culture¹¹. Frampton describes this architecture emptied of its cultural significance as “an architecture **degree zero**”¹², a time when a ‘cultural break’ occurred [...] in which the traditional culture system is totally vitiated, resulting in a ‘black hole’, so to speak within which an unforeseen sociocultural complex begins to accrete”.¹³

[Back to Barthes. to introduce Eisenman]

On the political side, it is true that Barthes’ text is clearly dedicated to analysing the illusions of contemporary **bourgeois** culture, and in particular the **bourgeois** denial of the opaque nature of language. Challenging its assumptions, he argues that **writing** creates or presupposes a reality, which is always linked to social forms, and therefore does not **describe** independent realities, but carries within itself reality.

But it is then on the theoretical level that Barthes’ intellectual goals in pursuit of **degree zero** show its utopian character: to escape the ultimate meaning, to diminish the institution of social meanings, to overcome the barriers of designation: this linguistic fascination with the **neutral** is utopian precisely because it institutes the third term, **degree zero**, as the only neutralising way out of the signifying opposition.

[Peter Eisenman]

It is also on these issues that Peter **Eisenman**’s attempt to arrive at a **degree zero** is played out, on the edge of ambiguity. In the mid-1980s, on the assumption of definitions borrowed from Derrida¹⁴, When questioning

⁵ Yehuda Safran, “The Tate Gallery: Architecture’s Degree Zero”, The Art Newspaper, 1 April 1995.

⁶ Kenneth Frampton, “Modern Architecture. A Critical History”, Thames & Hudson, London 1980, p. 95.

⁷ Kenneth Frampton, “Review of ‘Modern Architecture: Representation and Reality’ by Neil Levine”, Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Vol. 71, No. 4, Special Issue on Architectural Representations 2, December 2012, pp. 552-555.

⁸ xxx

⁹ Le Corbusier, “Vers une Architecture”, 1923.

¹⁰ Kenneth Frampton, “Industrialization and the crises in Architecture”, Oppositions, 1, September 1971, pp. 57-82.

¹¹ Jorge Otero-Pailos, “Architecture’s Historical Turn. Phenomenology and the Rise of Postmodernism”, University of Minnesota Press, 2010, p. 232.

¹² Kenneth Frampton, “Industrialization and the crises in Architecture”, cit., pp. 70.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Maintenant l’architecture”, in Gabriella Belli e Franco Rella, “La città e le forme”, Mazzotta, Milano 1987, atti del convegno «Città: forma e significato», organizzato dal Museo Provinciale di Trento, tenuto al Palazzo delle Albere a Trento nel dicembre 1985.

whether a city no longer determined by its centre and by being together can still be defined as a city, Eisenman's goal of achieving a **degree zero** of architecture in its delimitations, in which the presence of man determines its scale, takes shape, and he uses the technique of *scaling* which is his attempt to overcome anthropocentrism, implemented along three ways: recursiveness, discontinuity and self-similarity. The scale invariance of the fractal is the characteristic that allows him to annul all reference to human scale as a privileged moment in the project; eliminating all reference to human proportion is an operation that Eisenman undertakes as a transvaluation of the values of architecture that is all **Nietzschean**, in which he abolishes the privilege to the human domain¹⁵.

And it is Barthes who is also Derrida's benchmark on this issue, when he continues:

"What is architecture that no longer adjusts to any of those invariables [...]? Why call it architecture, if not for a disputable convention of terms? And this architecture, which one might better call anti-architecture, or **degree zero** of architecture, what does it really consist of? [...] that architecture, which in order to produce itself had to explain itself polemically, and material, economic, concrete, with powers, political, economic, financial".¹⁶

Issues that he will not fail to point out, with a certain harshness, in the letter he wrote to Eisenman in 1989¹⁷. But, albeit on a different theoretical basis, these have been Eisenman's typical themes since the beginning of his intellectual career; as early as 1971 he endowed his Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies with a journal, to which he gave the name «Oppositions»; as Joan Ockman notes this very name "can be interpreted in three different ways: as "positions", as "oppositions" or as "zero positions", the latter not as the absence of positions but as **degree zero**, a name that naturally recalls both Roland Barthes' project and the magazines of the avant-garde of modernism, in an attempt to bring the American architectural debate back from the arid positions in which it found itself towards the rediscovery of the pioneering and **reformist** role of architecture."¹⁸

[Agrest & Gandelsonas]

In the same early 1970s, and in the same cultural *milieu*, heavily inspired by Barthes' later writings, critics such as Diana Agrest and Mario Gandelsonas wrote, and exerted, their influence; to analyse their approach, let us take as an example their presentation at the first congress of the «International Association for Semiotic Studies» held in Milan in June 1974. They refer, here, to the syntactic contents of the text, to the dynamics and mechanisms of meaning production; an approach that emphasises the need to analyse, in what they call the production of 'design' (i.e. architecture), the semiotic exchange with the given cultural system, on the lines of what Barthes does in the field of literature. The attempt to paraphrase in architecture the distinction made by Barthes between the French literature he analyses and the **degree zero** of writing is evident right from the start; in Agrest's terms, a distinction between 'design' and 'non-design', i.e. between the Marxian 'ideology' and the utopia of the non-ideological, i.e., precisely, the **degree zero**. A vertiginous approach, this, which will lead them to attempt to define a non-ideological scientific theory, capable at the same time of producing knowledge in the discipline of architecture and dismantling the ideology on which the reproduction of cultural devices is based: that is, a **degree zero**.

A discourse that brings this transposition of semiotically derived concepts into the discipline of architecture, to be criticised in its very opportunities, possibilities and effectiveness, in the consideration that semiotics constrains the assumption of architecture as a discourse endowed with meaning or, at least, as a discipline that resolves itself in the use of linguistic techniques.

It is Eisenman's compositional method that is used, by his critics, as a paradigm of what is by now a theoretical impasse (at least in the discourse of Agrest and Gandelsonas), an impasse caused by the fact that this is a method in which linguistic relations are acquired as a compositional basis, but in which any evaluation of the fact that the nature of grammar is to be an instrument for standardising language, not to produce it, is absent. The effect of such semiological-linguistic drifts will, therefore, only be measurable as a reduction of the critical complexity imposed on architecture: that is, one does not arrive at **degree zero** just by forcing the concept of **architecture's disciplinary autonomy**. But this opens up other discourses that would take me off-topic.

[Bernard Tschumi]

¹⁵ Peter Eisenman, "The End of the Classical: The End of the Beginning, the End of the End", in «Perspecta», n. 21, 1984, pp. 154-173.

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, cit, p. 103.

¹⁷ xxx

¹⁸ Joan Ockman, "Resurrecting the Avant-gard. The History and Program of Oppositions", in Beatriz Colomina, "Architectureproduction", Princeton Architectural Press, New York, NY 1988, pp. 180-199.

Another *engagé* architect of the same generation, Bernard Tschumi, uses as the first image in his retrospective exhibition «After the Event» held at the Centre Pompidou in 2014, an image of the *Maison Dom-ino* (1914), generative paradigm of modernist space, a space that was in fact the **degree zero** of Corbusian space, leading to what Le Corbusier would call *l'espace indicible*. In the *Maison Dom-ino* this reality is exposed in a **degree zero** of architectural form identified in the supporting structure. As has already been noted, here the *tabula rasa* of industrial production has finally conquered domestic space, effectively destroying any sense of interiority and opening up the building to any interpretation¹⁹.

It was then in the winning design for the *Parc de la Villette* that Tschumi sought to create a “**monument of degree zero**”, as proposed by Jacques Derrida²⁰, a point where thought and reason break away, turning *La Villette* into a horizontal response to Roland Barthes' example of **degree zero** monumentality, the Eiffel Tower²¹. The Eiffel Tower is “utterly useless”, as it is neither refuge nor **monument**, but a pure sign of industrialisation and technology for its own sake. Freed from any other mandate, the Eiffel Tower has become the inescapable icon of Paris itself: frivolity married to engineering.

But from the very beginning of his writings, Tschumi formulated an essential conjecture about the theoretical role inherent in the construction²²: “architecture is the materialisation of concepts”, that is why from his earliest design notations the **degree zero** is so congenial to his work. Although, to be fully consistent with his interest in the Derridean concept of ‘event’ (from which the title of his exhibition), it will be necessary for the drawings, or notations, to become a real building.

[Manfredo Tafuri]

And it is real buildings that Tafuri is concerned with. When in 1974, in the third issue of «Oppositions», he mentions **grade zero**, it became the source of many of his misunderstandings. Peter Eisenman's interest in Tafuri, an architect who had realised very few buildings, was entirely personal and despite Eisenman's efforts to attract him into his exclusive *entourage*, Tafuri was one of the few who resisted him, until the break-up in 1980; despite that, Eisenman continued to follow the ghost of Tafuri even after his death, until the article published in 2000²³, in which he dissimulates Tafuri's arguments on the **autonomy** of history and criticism from practice in order to justify his own vision of a discipline that is **autonomous** from everything else.

It is precisely in the lecture later published in the third issue of «Oppositions», the very famous “L'Architecture dans le Boudoir: The language of criticism and the criticism of language”, that on the very first page Tafuri outlines the critical objectives, a passage often misunderstood as a manifesto for architects disenchanted by marketisation to retreat into a neutral and **autonomous** sphere for design²⁴. Here, Tafuri is mainly concerned with the role of criticism with respect to architecture in which language was seen as a purely technical neutrality, one that understands itself as a manifestation of the dissolution of language. In the article, he writes that the observer of modern architecture “is forced to reduce to **degree zero** every ideology, every dream of social function, every utopian residue”.²⁵

Quite interestingly, in the title, Tafuri refers to both the Marquis de Sade's “Philosophie dans le Boudoir” (1795) and René Magritte's painting “La Philosophie dans le Boudoir” (1947), an animated dress and a pair of shoes in an extraneous space, a dress simulating life, in reality an ideological corpse, a metaphor for architecture.

[Rem Koolhaas]

But, funny enough, next to Tafuri's article, there is Koolhaas', which opposes Tafuri's notion of modern architecture as an empty residue of past values, and reinterprets Magritte's painting by juxtaposing it with the image of the masked skyscraper suits at the 1931 ball. In this masquerade ball, “Fête Moderne”, Manhattan architects disguised themselves as the skyscrapers they had built: “becoming their skyscrapers”, Koolhaas writes, they would perform a ballet: ‘The Skyline of New York’.²⁶

And it is precisely in this pursuit of an ineradicable, ineliminable rhetorical level that Ingrid Bock, in her “Six Canonical Projects by Rem Koolhaas”, defines ‘Junkspace’ as the end of the typical and the generic, writing: “**Zero-degree** architecture represents ‘the level without qualities’ because it has, like the male protagonist in

¹⁹ Pier Vottiro Aureli, “The Theology Of Tabula Rasa: Walter Benjamin And Architecture” in “The Age of Precarity Author(s)”, “Log”, N. 27, 2013, pp. 111-127.

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Point de folie - Maintenant l'architecture”, in Bernard Tschumi, “La Case vide: La Villette”, London, Architectural Association, 1986, p. 11.

²¹ Still Life, After Death Author(s): Paula Young Lee Source: Log, No. 20, Curating Architecture (Fall 2010), pp. 133-140 Published by: Anyone Corporation

²² Jeffrey Kipnis, “Our Chances. How Bernard Tschumi's retrospective quietly reaffirmed the case for architectural conjecture during the summer of fundamentalism”, in “Log”, n. 32, 2014, pp. 31-38.

²³ Peter Eisenman, “The Wicked Critic,” ANY 25-26 (2000), p.70.

²⁴ Si veda in “Manfredo Tafuri and Architecture Theory in the U.S., 1970-2000” Diane Y. Ghirardo, in *Perspecta*, Vol. 33, Mining Autonomy (2002), pp. 38-47, The MIT Press on behalf of *Perspecta*

²⁵ xxx

²⁶ “The Skyline of New York 1931, “Fete Moderne: A Fantasie in Flame and Silver,” in “New York Herald Tribune”, January 18, 1931. In Rem Koolhaas, “Delirious New York”, p. 128.

Robert Musil's novel «The Man Without Qualities», no unique qualities". Similarly, Koolhaas' expression 'generic city' means 'city without (unique) qualities'.²⁷

Though connected to twentieth-century European literature, the 'level without qualities' is a typical American invention. Referring to a dualism between Europe and America, the typical plan is the essence of the New World; it represents "the discovery and subsequent mastery of a new architecture"²⁸. Hence, he formulates a theory that negotiates with the conceptual qualities of the unplanned, claiming that "it is 'zero-degree' architecture, architecture stripped of all traces of uniqueness and specificity. It belongs to the New World".²⁹ But even before, as we all know, Koolhaas was using the concept to describe the "The Manhattan Skyscraper as Utopia **Zero Degree**", quoting Bock: "Although there is no seemingly more banal and blatant mythology, it has become an inevitable sign of everything that is modern [...]. Infinite in scope of meaning, it is a **degree zero** of monuments."³⁰

[Adorno. Greenberg Jameson]

When **Barthes** wrote his first book in 1953, he intended to demonstrate that if writing was deprived of any meaning outside itself, it could become radical and revolutionary.

Adorno³¹ Adorno argued for the total **autonomy** of the work of art as the only way in which art can avoid fetishisation: **autonomy** is the exclusion of all 'culinary delights' that seek to be consumed and are subject to commodification (a kind of prophecy about post-modernism). This exclusion is only possible by working through the internal laws and techniques of the work of art, in a way in which the act of reworking these laws becomes the means and the end of the work, freeing it from any aesthetic pretension. Clement **Greenberg** followed a similar path, stating that "to restore the identity of an artwork it is necessary to emphasise the opacity of its medium".³²

In his text, **Barthes** continues **Adorno** and **Greenberg**'s discourse of **autonomy**. For Barthes, **degree zero** writing is a form of discourse that achieves an ideal and utopian absence of style: the social and mythical characters of a language are abolished in favour of a neutral state of form. Like **Adorno**, **Barthes** seeks the purity of the work of art in the exclusion of the subjectivity of meaning. Of course, **Barthes** differs from **Adorno** in that he recognises that even this exclusion inevitably perverts: society degrades writing to mere manner, making the writer a prisoner of his own myths.³³

And we have an interesting comparison operated on that by Fredric **Jameson**, who compares **Barthes**' operations with those of **Tafuri** and **Adorno**. These embody "the practice of a peculiar, condensed, allusive discursive form, a kind of textual genre, still exceedingly rare, which I will call dialectical history". Each succeeds not only in producing a representation of history, but produces a dialectical history of its own discipline. A totalising historiography, in which the operations of its author inevitably undermine the very foundations of the discipline. Jameson identifies the respective situations in need of solutions: **Adorno**'s discussion of the history of music culminates in Schoenberg's 'solution' of the twelve-tone system; **Barthes**' 'zero-degree writing' culminates in the well-known idea of 'white writing' as an equally impossible solution to a dilemma; and in Tafuri it is the "asphyxiating sense of the futility of any kind of architectural or urbanistic innovation on this side of that equally inconceivable watershed, a total social revolution".³⁴

[Conclusions]

The first translation of "Le **Degré zéro** de l'écriture" into English was in 1967, 14 years later the first edition in France, followed the next year by the first US edition, with an additional introduction by Susan **Sontag**, where she pointed out that the cultural reception by the American culture of this revolutionary text would have encountered difficulties, linked to the very non-zero degree nature of the American writing.

A very important part of what bothered her was the American unfamiliarity with French literature, and specifically with literary criticism, also due to the well-known mutual diffidence, a long history, from Tocqueville to Celine, and up to Sartre: when Barthes writes 'literature', he refers to the French tradition of classical literature dating back to the 17th century.

But the nature of literature, Barthes points out, is to provide knowledge and education and, again, therefore it is never a neutral mode of writing. This relationship between culture and writing is so true that it is traditionally claimed that the Enlightenment produced the French Revolution, although some argue the

²⁷ Ingrid Bock, xxx

²⁸ xxx

²⁹ Ingrid Bock, "Six Canonical Projects by Rem Koolhaas", p. 214.

³⁰ xxx

³¹ Theodor Adorno, "On the Fetish Character of Music and Regressive Listening,"

³² xxx

³³ The Boudoir in The Expanded Field Author(s): Ana María León Source: Log, No. 11 (Winter 2008), pp. 63-82 Published by: Anyone Corporation

³⁴ Jameson, "Architecture and the Critique of Ideology," 446, 458. Interestingly, Jameson also draws a comparison between Schoenberg's twelve-tone system and Le Corbusier's urbanism, asserting that both strive toward a sort of "unified field theory" of the macro and the micro."

opposite, such as Roger Chartier³⁵, quoted by Sylvia Lavin, who wrote that

“In affirming that it was the Enlightenment that produced the Revolution, the classical interpretation perhaps inverts logical order: should we not consider instead that it was the Revolution that invented the Enlightenment by attempting to root its legitimacy in a corpus of texts and founding authors reconciled and united, beyond their extreme differences, by their preparation of a rupture with the old world? When they brought together (not without debate) a pantheon of ancestors including Voltaire, Rousseau, Mably and Raynal, when they assigned a radically critical function to philosophy, the revolutionaries constructed a continuity that was primarily a process of justification and a search for paternity.”³⁶

Thus, even in the theoretical-disciplinary architectural literature, it has happened that figures such as **Eisenman** or **Tschumi** have often been considered more important than the sources of their insights, in a reversal that has culminated in the museification/anthologisation of theoretical texts that have had effects on architecture.

“Most of these anthologies dampen the impact of texts by authors such as Michel Foucault or Jürgen Habermas, even though these authors can be said to have had the deepest transformative effects on architectural discourse. Instead, there is wide agreement among the anthologizers that Peter Eisenman and Manfredo Tafuri are the most prominent figures of recent debate, with Bernard Tschumi and Anthony Vidler of almost equal influence. Hence, one of the more interesting effects of the anthological museum is to make already architectural that which was previously seen as alien and thus to claim forms of continuity.”³⁷

As a collective object, the discipline of architecture has created its own **degrees zero**: **Eisenman** uses the same Barthesian interpretative schemes of both **degree zero** and ‘author function’ to found his Conceptual Architecture, a rational theory of the discipline’s **autonomy**; **Tschumi** uses the main practices of the recent past as subjects of his critique, an attempt to extend the deterministic relationship between form and function with a relationship of conformity between function and sign (“The endlessly repeated grids of skyscrapers were associated with a new ‘**degree zero**’ of meaning: perfect functionalism”³⁸), Reima **Pietilä** used the same concept in his 1968 exhibition «Vyöhyke» (The Zone), Kengo **Kuma**³⁹ uses it, without naming it, to oppose the concept of the architect’s authorship, especially as a form of the arrogance of the human ego against nature and a derived context of the Modern Movement, Fredric **Jameson**⁴⁰ directly compares “Progetto e Utopia” to Barthes’ text.

This is indeed a new *Weltanschauung*. But there are many other occasions when the derivatives of the **zero degree** concept are used. Wanting to understand Racine’s function, Barthes argues that the greatness of the history of literature lies in its ability to help us describe the collective mentality (following Lucien Febvre’s studies in the “Annales”: critical activity should “amputate literature from the individual”, and in fact Eisenman uses this very sense when talking about his House III to show the processes of production and the devices of representation as part of the project content.⁴¹

As in “In the Name of the Rose”, the controversy can be traced back to the disputes over the value of universals that occurred in medieval scholasticism between nominalists and realists, and in modern times, it is at least from Mallarmé onwards that language is defined as a condition of possibility, not just a tool, revealing its possible **degree zero**.

However, it seems that, despite Barthes’ monumental and fundamental work to define an objective **degree zero** of writing, many have ended up defining their own system of Cartesian axes in which the origin, the **zero** in which the axes intersect, remains subjective; an impossibility, perhaps, inherent in the very nature of language not being, at its very core, manipulable: we are spoken (and written) by it.

³⁵ Roger Chartier, “The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution”, Duke University Press Books, Durham, NC 1991, p. 5.

³⁶ Sylvia Lavin, “Theory into History; Or, the Will to Anthology”, in “Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians”, n. 3, 1999, pp. 494-499.

³⁷ xxx

³⁸ xxx

³⁹ Kengo Kuma, “Anti-object: the Dissolution and Disintegration of Architecture”, AA Publications, London 2008, but see even “Good-Bye Postmodern—11 American Architects”, a book published by Tankobon Hardcover in Japanese in 1989, never translated in English: 11 interviews made while being in Columbia as a Research Fellow, funded by the Asian Cultural Council.

⁴⁰ Fredric Jameson, “Architecture and the Criticism of Ideology” (1985), in “The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971–1986”, vol. 2, “The Syntax of History”, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN 1988.

⁴¹ And quite unintentionally – like the audience of the film – the owner has been alienated from its environment. In this sense, when the owner first enters “their house” they are an intruder; they must begin to regain possession – to occupy a foreign container. In the process of taking possession the owner begins to destroy, albeit in a positive sense, the initial unity and completeness of the architectural structure.”