

Pure Designation. Deleuze's Reading of Hjeltmslev in *The Time-Image*

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In the second chapter of *The Time-Image*, Deleuze addresses the conditions of possibility of a semiology of cinema. These conditions depend on the relations between cinema and language: under what conditions can cinematic images and signs be understood as a language? In other words, (how) can cinematic images and signs be inscribed in the discursive plane of the signifiable? Discussing Christian Metz's semiological approach of cinema, Deleuze argues that the structural conditions of linguistics and of post-Saussurian semiology cannot adequately render intelligible the specificity of cinematic semiosis. Drawing on Louis Hjeltmslev's semiotics, Deleuze redefines the specificity of a relation of designation distinct from a relation of signification (strictly linguistic), a specificity that concerns the fact that the designative relation is *antecedent* and *heterogeneous* to any signifying relation. Put differently, the very *constitution* of the sign is redefined: in opposition to semiology, semiotics becomes the study of images and signs as (1) being independent of language in general and (2) expressing a "non-language material". This article explicates the importance of Hjeltmslev's semiotic theory in *The Time-Image* by offering a detailed account of the constitution of the sign in Hjeltmslev's *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language* and by tracing Deleuze's earlier appreciation of Hjeltmslev in *Anti-Oedipus* and its intricate relation to his appreciation of Jean-François Lyotard's theory of designation in *Discourse Figure*.

1. Introduction

In his two books on cinema Deleuze conceptualizes the image as marked by an essential duality. The image is never merely visible, but also legible: it shows us an object of sensation and gives rise to an idea or a thought. The cinematic image is an intentionally framed, composed set of bodies, characters, parts, aspects, dimensions, distances, etc. that give the image an aboutness, a whatness or as Deleuze puts it, a "content". Through the act of framing, the image becomes a relatively closed system that gives a common standard of

measurement to the things present in it. In this sense the film presents itself as a text, a narration. In order to avoid falling into an empty aestheticism each point of view that a frame gives requires a certain explanation or justification, it must be revealed as normal or regular. All the different composed sets must, to meet this first characteristic of the image, be integrated into a homogeneous continuity, a universe or a plane of principally unlimited content.

It seems to follow from this, that the sequence of images, or even every single image, every single shot, can be assimilated to propositions or rather oral utterances: the shot as the smallest narrative utterance. In his second book on cinema, *The Time-Image*, Deleuze devotes an introductory passage to the semiologist Christian Metz who had dealt, before him, with precisely this relation between cinema and language. Deleuze notes that this passage is not merely a pause between the two books «but an opportunity to deal with the most pressing problem»¹, namely that of the relation between cinema and language. The approach of this relation determines the second characteristic of the image, which is to express a “non-language-material”² that is presupposed by every language system and that is, moreover, *heterogeneous* to it. Contrary to Metz, Deleuze argues that the constitution of the cinematic sign cannot adequately be explained by means of the structural conditions of linguistics and post-Saussurian semiology, because the cinematic image’s legibility, its content, is essentially tied to and *motivated by* the «pre-verbal intelligible content»³ that it expresses. This non-linguistically formed

¹ G. Deleuze, *Cinema 2. L’image-temps*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris 1985, p. 38 / G. Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image* (1985), transl. by H. Tomlinson, R. Galeta, University of Minneapolis Press, Minneapolis 1997, p. 25. Henceforth abbreviated as IT, with French/English page numbers.

² IT, p. 45 / p. 29.

³ G. Deleuze, “Preface to the English edition”, in *Cinema 1. The Movement-Image* (1983), transl. by H. Tomlinson, B. Habberjam, University of Minneapolis Press, Minneapolis 1997, p. iv.

content is said to be a «signaletic material»⁴ that includes sensory (visual and sonic), kinetic, intensive, affective, rhythmic, tonal, and even verbal (oral and written) modulation features. While the act of framing must always limit the expressive and connotative traits of this material, ensuring a certain «deterritorialisation of the image»⁵, the cinematic sign is always constructed upon a simultaneous reinvestment of this «plastic mass» or «a-signifying and a-syntactic material» that is «not formed linguistically even though it is not amorphous and is formed semiotically, aesthetically and pragmatically»⁶. Thus, what Deleuze puts into question in the passage on Metz is the kind of semiotics required for the analysis of cinematic signification. What he calls for is a «pure semiotics»⁷ that considers cinema as a system of pre-linguistic images and signs.

Throughout both books, this project consists in grounding the ontology underlying this dual nature of the image, starting from four commentaries on Bergson, a classification of images and signs inspired by Peirce's semiotics, and finally the theme of the power of the false in Nietzsche's differential thought. Summarizing this in a late interview Deleuze declares having «attempted to make a book of logic, a logic of cinema»⁸ just as much as a history of cinema. This declaration can be taken to designate a logic of signs and images, to the extent that cinema is «a composition of images and signs»⁹. Deleuze's primary sources for this classification of images and signs are undoubtedly Bergson's equation of image and matter in *Matter and Memory* and Peirce's conception of the sign. Yet, one cannot neglect the fact that the

⁴ IT, p. 43 / p. 29.

⁵ G. Deleuze, *Cinema 1. L'image-mouvement*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris 1983, p. 27 / G. Deleuze, *Cinema 1. The Movement-Image* (1983), transl. by H. Tomlinson, B. Habberjam, University of Minneapolis Press, Minneapolis 1997, p. 15. Henceforth abbreviated as IM, with French/English page numbers.

⁶ IT, p. 44 / p. 29.

⁷ IT, p. 50 / p. 34.

⁸ G. Deleuze, «Sur l'image-mouvement», in *Pourparlers*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris 1990, p. 68.

⁹ G. Deleuze, «Préface to the English edition», cit., p. iv.

mentioned passage on the relation between cinema and language is critical of Peirce, and that from this point on all reference to the father of pragmatism disappears. Deleuze declares to «take the term “sign” in a completely different way from Peirce»¹⁰ and ascribes to the Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev the important innovation of having integrated non-linguistically formed matter or sense (“purport”) into semiotic analysis. It seems to us that an orthodox reading of Peirce cannot offer a profound, comprehensive understanding of Deleuze’s account of the constitution of cinematic signs. A paper dealing with Deleuze’s cinema books as a semiotics of images and signs, should rather turn to Hjelmslev’s semiotic theory, which is capable of appreciating the deictic, connotative and demonstrative dimension of signs and its *autonomy* with regard to their signifying and symbolizing powers.

Through the lens of Hjelmslev’s semiotics, Deleuze’s regime of cinematic images and signs will become clearly distinguishable from a *signifying* regime satisfying the structural conditions of linguistics and post-Saussurian semiology. It is this distinction, concerning the constitution of the cinematic and linguistic sign, which this article explicates. It will do so proceeding in two steps. We will begin by offering a detailed account of the constitution of the linguistic sign in Hjelmslev’s *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*. Subsequently, its conceptual importance in *The Time-Image* will be traced back to Deleuze’s earlier appreciation of Hjelmslev in *Anti-Oedipus*, where his linguistics is staged together with Lyotard’s *Discourse Figure* as the general paradigm for a post-structuralist theory of a-signifying, “pure designation”.

2. Hjelmslev’s semiotic net

To consider cinema as a system of signs seems an evident proposition. What to understand by *sign*, however, is dependent on the theory in

¹⁰ IT, p. 48 / p. 32.

question. The traditional realist definition tells us that a sign – or to anticipate a distinction that will be introduced further on, *the expression of a sign* – is first of all a sign of something else. A sign is in this sense defined as a function: it signifies, designates, functions. As opposed to a non-sign, a sign is a carrier of signification.

From a linguistic point of view a first error to be avoided is to conceive the sign as an expression of a content that is *exterior* to the sign itself. This traditional, realist conception of the sign is from a linguistic point of view untenable. Modern linguists such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Louis Hjelmslev conceive the sign rather as a *whole* consisting of content and expression¹¹. In Saussurian terms, the sign consists of a *signified* (content) and a *signifier* (expression). The linguistic sign does not signify a content that is external to it, but it is constituted by an interaction or isomorphic relation between a (conceptual) content plane and a (phonic) expression plane. The semiotic “function”, which is the sign or “sign function”, must thus be considered as a function that is “contracted” between two planes or “functives” that can be characterized as thought and speech, or concept and sound. Essential to this conception of the sign is that both “sides” can *only* be defined “reciprocally”, in relation to one another:

The semiotic function is in itself a solidarity. Expression and content are solidary – they necessarily presuppose each other. An expression is expression only by virtue of being an expression of a content, and a content is content only by virtue of being a content of an expression. Therefore – except by an artificial isolation – there can be no content without an expression, or expressionless content; neither can there be an expression without a content, or content-less expression. If we think without speaking, the thought is not a linguistic content and not a functive for a sign function. If we speak without thinking, and in the form of series of sounds to which no

¹¹ Cfr. L. Hjelmslev, *Prolégomènes à une théorie du langage* (1943), transl. by U. Canger, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris 1971, pp. 65-79 / L. Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language* (1943), transl. by F.J. Whitfield, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 1963, pp. 47-60. Henceforth abbreviated as PTL, with French/English page numbers. See also: F. de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, Ch. Bally & Alb. Sechehaye (ed.), Payot, Paris 1964, pp. 97-103.

content can be attached by any listener, such speech is an abracadabra, not a linguistic expression and not a function for a sign function.¹²

What interests Deleuze in Hjelmslev's linguistics is a second differentiation he makes, viz. between form, substance and what he calls "sense" or "purport": both content and expression can be further analyzed into form, substance and purport. On this second level of abstraction, the interaction between content and expression, that's to say, the emergence of signs, is considered not only in relation to thought and sound but in relation to that which is thought of and expressed. Hjelmslev introduces this second differentiation in his critical commentary of the following passage in de Saussure's *Courses* on «language as organized thought coupled with phonic matter»:

To prove that language is only a system of pure values, it is enough to consider the two elements involved in its functioning: ideas and sounds. Psychologically our thought – apart from its expression in words – is only a shapeless and indistinct mass. Philosophers and linguists have always agreed on the fact that without the help of signs we would be unable to make a clear-cut, consistent distinction between two ideas. Taken in itself, without language, thought is like a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language. (...) The phonic substance is neither more fixed nor more rigid than thought; it is not a mold into which thought must of necessity fit but a plastic substance divided in turn into distinct parts to furnish the signifiers that thought requires. We can therefore represent (...) language as a series of contiguous subdivisions marked off on both the indefinite plane of confused ideas (A) and the equally vague plane of sounds (B); (...) language works out its units while taking shape between two shapeless masses (...); *their combination produces a form, not a substance.*¹³

These Saussurian relations between signified, signifier, substance and form can be summarized schematically as follows:

¹² PTL, pp. 66-67 / pp. 48-49.

¹³ F. de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, cit., pp. 155-157 (my translation). Cfr. PTL, pp. 67-68 / pp. 49-50.

	SUBSTANCE	FORM
SIGNIFIED (content)	indefinite plane of confused ideas; unformed thought mass	determined plane of ideas; conceptual order
SIGNIFIER (expression)	indeterminate plane of sounds	determined plane of sounds; phonic order

Table 1: de Saussure's *signified-signifier* distinction

Language's function consists for Saussure not in creating a material, phonic means for the expression of pre-existing ideas, but to serve as an intermediary between thought and phonic expression, in such a way that their union enables reciprocal delimitations of unities. In other words, one should not conceive language as a materialization of preformed thoughts or a spiritualization of sounds, but rather language (*"la pensée-son"*) elaborates its unities in constituting itself between two amorphous masses. What strikes Hjelmslev in this passage is the way in which Saussure considers the "content-substance" (thought taken "in itself", "chaotic by nature") and "expression-substance" (indistinct phonic chain) *before* the apparition of language. By having these two planes "in themselves" *precede* the apparition of language, whether chronologically or hierarchically, Saussure considers the expression and content planes separately from their linguistic form function. Hjelmslev points out that if one follows Saussure's own intuitions, one must account for the fact that substance depends *exclusively* on form. Accordingly, one cannot attribute any independent existence to substance, independent of language: «In a science that avoids unnecessary postulates there is no basis for the assumption that content-substance (thought) or expression-substance (sound-chain) precede language in time or hierarchical order, or *vice versa*»¹⁴.

¹⁴ PTL, p. 68 / p. 50.

What is legitimate, on the other hand, is to compare different languages and to extract a factor that is common to all of them while abstracting from the structural principle of signification itself, which is the linguistic function. «This common factor», Hjelmslev writes, «will be *defined* only by its having function to the structural principle of language and to all the factors that make languages different from one another»¹⁵. Hjelmslev calls this common factor “purport” (“*sens*”). Since this concept designates something that falls outside of the structure of signification itself, this means in reverse that it can only be *defined* in terms of its linguistic function. Let us consider this point in more detail.

Within the content plane, purport refers to unformed and unanalyzed thought: «an amorphous mass, an unanalyzed entity»¹⁶. Hjelmslev explains the notion as that factor of the content of a sign that is common to different languages: it can be seen as a type of sense that can be taken as a basis for comparing different signs in different languages. He gives the following example¹⁷:

- | | |
|---------------------|-----------|
| a. jeg véd det ikke | (Danish) |
| b. I do not know | (English) |
| c. je ne sais pas | (French) |
| d. en tiedä | (Finnish) |
| e. naluvara | (Eskimo) |

¹⁵ *Ibidem* (my italics).

¹⁶ PTL, p. 69 / p. 50. Miriam Taverniers notes in a detailed, instructive reading of Hjelmslev’s *Prolegomena* that content-purport corresponds to the Kantian noumenon or “Ding an sich”. She refers for this point to P.J. Thibault, *Re-reading Saussure. The Dynamics of Signs in Social Life*. Routledge, London 1997, p. 168. For Husserl’s phenomenological re-interpretation of Kant’s noumenon we are referred to: K. Willems, *Sprache, Sprachreflexion und Erkenntniskritik. Versuch einer transzendental-phänomenologischen Klärung der Bedeutungsfrage*. Gunter Narr, Tübingen 1994, pp. 40-50. Cfr. M. Taverniers, “Hjelmslev’s semiotic model of language: An exegesis”, *Semiotica*, 171 (2008), p. 37.

¹⁷ PTL, p. 69 / p. 50.

The content-purport in these expressions is the meaning factor they have in common, i.e. “the thought itself” or the “sense” of the proposition. To analyze and define it, for example from a psychological or logical point of view, one must articulate it, form it in a specific way, bound to a specific language. Accordingly, the sense or the thought itself must be analyzed differently according to the particular way it is articulated. Hjelmslev repeatedly emphasizes this point: it is possible to “extract” an unformed purport from the different expressions, but this purport *itself* cannot be labeled. As soon as we attempt to do so, the purport is being *formed* in one way or another, and then we regard it from the perspective of a particular language, or in Hjelmslev’s terms: as a content-substance. Moreover, the “unformed sense” that can be extracted from the linguistic chains takes form in each language in a different way. Each language puts up its territorial boundaries on the “amorphous thought mass” in a different way and in doing so it *values or qualifies it differently*:

Each language lays down its own boundaries within the amorphous “thought-mass” and stresses different factors in it in different arrangements, puts the centers of gravity in different places and gives them different emphases. It is like one and the same handful of sand that is formed in quite different patterns, or like the cloud in the heavens that changes shape in Hamlet’s view from minute to minute. Just as the same sand can be put into different molds, and the same cloud take on ever new shapes, so also the same purport is formed or structured differently in different languages. What determines its form is solely the functions of the language, the sign function and the functions deducible therefrom. Purport remains, each time, substance for a new form, and has no possible existence except through being substance for one form or another.¹⁸

We can see clearly that the linguistically formed content or “content-form”, the process of signifying something in a certain form, is *independent* of the *sense* or *content-purport*. The linguistic content relates to sense in an *arbitrary* way and transforms it into a *content-substance*. In other words: from the point of view of the purport, a

¹⁸ PTL, p. 70 / p. 52.

content-form is arbitrary. Hjelmslev illustrates this linguistic relativity also by referring to the color spectrum, as is often done in modern linguistics (and more broadly in cognitive sciences): the English *green*, French *vert* and Welsh *glas* have as a content-purport the color “itself” which the three languages designate by means of different words. The error to avoid is to think of the content-purport as one pre-existing object that is referred to in a structurally similar way by different languages. On the contrary: differences between languages do not rest on different realizations of a type of substance, but on different realizations of a principle of formation, or in other words, on a different form in the face of an identical but amorphous purport¹⁹. Content-purport only appears as an area of purport that is formed as content-substance and this appearing depends on the specific way in which a particular language carves up this purport. This carving up or “forming” process in a language refers to the semantic dimension of language, which concerns the conditions under which phrases can refer to something outside themselves, designate something extra-linguistic. This semantic feature of language is dependent on an arbitrary forming process rather than sense itself. Hjelmslev emphasizes this by defining content-substance *in relation to* content-form: «the substance depends on the form to such a degree that it lives exclusively by its favor and can in no sense be said to have independent existence»²⁰.

The semiotic function or sign function is to add a form to a content, to constitute a content-form which, from the point of view of purport, is arbitrary, and which can only be explained by looking at its semiotic function, its sign function, that’s to say: the “solidary” interaction between a content and an expression²¹. In other words, a

¹⁹ PTL, p. 99 / p. 77.

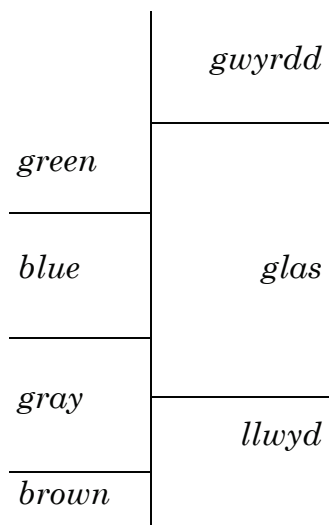
²⁰ PTL, p. 68 / p. 50.

²¹ This feature of language which makes it independent of motivation is also called the structural fact of double articulation, meaning that the signifying terms refer themselves to combinations of minimal, non-signifying elements (“phonemes”, which Hjelmslev calls “figures”) which don’t have any unity or value but distinctively.

sign in a language is constituted by a unit consisting of a content-form that functions together with an expression-form – this function does not *depend* on purport but refers to it, again: in an arbitrary way. Hjelmslev’s color example illustrates this nicely:

In Welsh, ‘green’ is in part *gwyrdd* or *glas*, ‘blue’ is *glas*, ‘gray’ is *glas* or *llwyd*, ‘brown’ is *llwyd*. That’s to say, the part of the spectrum that is covered by our word *green* is intersected in Welsh by a line that assigns a part of it to the same area as our word *blue* while the English boundary between *green* and *blue* is not found in Welsh. Moreover, Welsh lacks the English boundary between *blue* and *gray*, and likewise the English boundary between *gray* and *brown*. On the other hand, the area that is covered by English *gray* is intersected in Welsh so that half of it is referred to the same area as our *blue* and half to the same area as our *brown*.²²

Hjelmslev gives the following schematic confrontation²³ to illustrate the lack of coincidence between the boundaries:



Let us now, before moving on to the relation between cinema and linguistic signification, briefly consider the differentiation between form, substance and purport within the expression plane, i.e. in the

²² PTL, p. 71 / pp. 52-53.

²³ *Ibidem*.

phonic order of semiosis. Hjelmslev defines expression-purport as an amorphous, unanalyzed sequence of sounds, which we can disclose by subtracting from a comparison of languages zones in the phonetic sphere, which are subdivided differently in different languages. Expression-purport is «a phonetico-physiological sphere of movement, which can of course be represented as spatialized in several dimensions, and which can be presented as an unanalyzed but analyzable continuum»²⁴. Different languages graft in an arbitrary way a different yet essentially limited number of phonemes (“figures”) out of this amorphous zone. That this is done differently and arbitrarily can be understood through the example of the continuum made by the median profile of the roof of the mouth, from the pharynx to the lips. While for instance languages familiar to English mostly divide this zone into three areas, a back *k*-area, a middle *i*-area, and a front *p*-area, Eskimo and Lettish (among others) distinguish two *k*-areas whose lines of division do not coincide in the two languages.

The constitution of a linguistic sign requires from the point of view of expression that the expression-purport be formed into an expression-substance, which it can do only through the existence of an expression-form. An expression-substance is a sound-sequence pronounced in a particular language, by an individual person, hic et nunc, for example the sound [bwa]. Such a particular pronunciation only exists *qua* substance by virtue of its relationship to an expression-form, i.e. by being the substance for a form. The latter, the expression-form, then, is a sound-sequence, which is interpreted within a particular language in terms of phonemes by which this language carves up and selects from the complete range of possible human vocalizations. As Taverniers explains: «The phonemic

²⁴ PTL, p. 73 / p. 54. Note that from a linguistic point of view expression-purport is analyzable only as formed expression-substance, not as a pure, pre-signifying phonetico-physiological sphere of movement “in itself”.

(formal) nature of sound is in turn determined by its being linked to a content. In other words, also in the expression plane, “form” is characterized in relation to the sign function: an *expression*-form is defined by forming a connection with a *content*-form and in this way constituting a sign»²⁵.

Taverniers summarizes Hjelmslev’s characterization of the form-substance-purport triad within the two semiotic planes of content and expression in the following table²⁶:

	Purport (Matter/sense/BwO)	Substance (Formed Matter)	Form
Content Plane	<i>Content-purport:</i>	<i>Content-substance:</i>	<i>Content-form:</i>
(thought) (<i>signified</i>)	amorphous, unformed thought mass	the ‘meaning’ of a sign in a particular context <i>semantics</i>	aspects of content defined in relation to other elements with- in one language, and in relation to an ex- pression plane
Expression Plane	<i>Expression-purport:</i>	<i>Expression-substance:</i>	<i>Expression-form:</i>
(speech, sound) (<i>signifier</i>)	amorphous, unformed sound sequence	the pronunciation of a sound sequence by a par- ticular person, <i>hic et nunc</i> <i>phonetics</i>	phonemes: sound- expressions defined in relation to ther sound-expressions within one language, and in relation ti a content plane <i>phonology</i>

Table 2: The form-substance-purport triad in relation to the content and expression planes of a semiotic sign

To conclude this first section on the *Prolegomena*, we should underline the paradoxical intuition essential to modern linguistics that the sign is not only a sign for a content-substance but also for an expression-

²⁵ M. Taverniers, “Hjelmslev’s semiotic model of language: An exegesis”, cit., p. 18.

²⁶ Taken from M. Taverniers, “Hjelmslev’s semiotic model of language: An exegesis”, cit., p. 19, with slight alterations to match our Deleuzian context.

substance. The sound sequence [bwa], pronounced *hic et nunc*, is an entity of expression-substance which, by virtue of the sign and only by virtue thereof, is ordered to an expression-form and classified under it together with various other entities of expression-substance (other possible pronunciations, by other persons or on other occasions, of the same sign). This brings with it, as Hjelmslev puts it, that the sign is a two-sided entity with effect in two respects: “outwards” toward the expression substance and “inwards” toward the content-substance²⁷. The word *sign* must from a linguistic point of view be used always as the unit consisting of content-form and expression-form and established by the solidarity that is called the sign function. The *sign* may *not* be used as the name for the expression or signifier *only* because this leads to the risk of favoring the widespread misconception according to which a language is simply a nomenclature or a stock of labels intended to be fastened on pre-existent things. As Saussure puts it:

The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image. The latter is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the representation that is given to us by the evidence of our senses. The sound-image is sensory, and if I happen to call it “material”, this is only in that sense, and in opposition to the other term of the association, the concept, which is generally more abstract.²⁸

3. Between things and words

For Deleuze the fundamental starting point of semiotics lies in Hjelmslev’s distinction between matter and substance. As we have seen, substance is formed matter or formed sense, it concerns only the objects that have a linguistic form. The passage to language always involves a transcoding, a transformation of initial characteristics of matter. Content-substance and expression-substance only exist and appear by virtue of forms being projected on to the purport, «just as an

²⁷ PTL, p. 77 / p. 58.

²⁸ F. de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, cit., p. 98 (my translation).

open net casts its shadow down on an undivided surface»²⁹. Unlike Saussure's contra-intuitive opposition between unformed and formed substance, Hjelmslev's more abstract structure allows to distinguish purport as non-linguistically formed matter that is formed from physical, biological and phenomenological points of view³⁰. For Hjelmslev the Saussurian distinction between substance and form is only legitimate from the point of view of the structural study of linguistic signification, whereas purport or *sense* itself must be studied by other disciplines in different ways.

This fundamental methodological distinction is also one of the main motives guiding Deleuze's hypotheses on the bio-physical origin of language in *The Logic of Sense*. Deleuze distinguishes here a primary, dynamic genesis of noematic sense from a secondary, static genesis of propositional meaning. At the primary, emotive level of sense, the phonemic nature of sound cannot yet be analyzed in terms of a psychic imprint or signified content, but only in terms of a pre-signifying, purely expressive function. Before signifying, phonemes designate for Deleuze a libidinal movement of the body. Their sense designates what he calls with Artaud a de-personalized, dis-unified experience of the body as "a body-without-organs". Deleuze conceives this as the first in a series of orientational positions that a child's psyche goes through during the first years of life. At this dynamic level of sense formation, a phoneme's expression presupposes no mastery of language and still less a possession of writing³¹. In a similar sense, Deleuze and Guattari will later write in *Anti-Oedipus* that Hjelmslev's linguistics enables a conception of phonemes as not merely effects of a

²⁹ PTL, p. 76 / p. 57.

³⁰ PTL, p. 100 / pp. 77-78.

³¹ G. Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris 1969, p. 269 / G. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (1969), transl. by M. Lester & C. Stivale, The Athlone Press, London 1990, p. 230.

signifier, but «schizzes, points-signs, or flows-breaks that collapse the wall of the signifier, pass through, and continue on beyond»³².

From a linguistic point of view, however, a sign is only a sign for an expression-substance and a content-substance, not for sense or purport itself. Thus Hjelmslev argues that if we want to uphold the intuitive, traditional sense in which a sign is a sign for something, we must *reverse the sign-orientation*: the linguistic sign is not a sign for something outside the sign itself – for example the Artaudean body-without-organs – but for something that it can designate *only* by virtue of having interiorized it. For example, the word *ring* is a sign for that definite thing on my finger, but that thing itself, its sense, does not enter into the sign itself – as in the traditional, realist sense. That thing on my finger is from a linguistic point of view merely an entity of content-substance, which, through the sign, is ordered to a content-form and is arranged under it together with various other entities of content-substance (e.g., the sound that comes from my telephone). That the word *ring* is a sign for that thing on my finger means that the content-form of the sign can subsume that thing as content-substance.

This distinction between the coded, logical conditions of linguistic signification and a form of pre-signifying expression is what is at stake in Deleuze's discussion of the relations between cinema and language in *The Time-Image*. For Deleuze cinema, as all art in general, should induce a violent shock experience in which our experience becomes momentarily impersonal and dis-unified, similar to the child's experience of the world prior to the formation of linguistic consciousness. Cinema must make language tend towards the "a-signifying" as a general condition for the circulation of affects. Yet, this does not mean a total abolishment of the textual order of expression

³² G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie 1. L'anti-Oedipe*, Minuit, Paris 1972/1973, p. 292 / G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia 1. Anti-Oedipus* (1972/1973), transl. by R. Hurley, M. Seem, H.R. Lane, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2000, p. 242. Henceforth abbreviated as A-O, with French/English page numbers.

and of its regulated, coded axes. Rather, Deleuze speaks of a simultaneous “reinvestment” of the material upon which language establishes its coded distinctions and unities: an energetic recharging of the expressive and connotative traits of this material that would make possible an opening of the “said” and of the “perceived” upon a *seeing* that would just as well be the “Outside” of language, as Deleuze puts it with Blanchot³³.

He gives the example of Jean-Luc Godard’s formula on the usage of color in *Week-end*: «it’s not blood, it’s red»³⁴. Color in the image no longer refers to a particular object but it fulfills an «almost carnivorous, devouring, destructive, absorbent function», it absorbs all that it can: «it is the power which seizes all that happens within its range, or the quality common to completely different objects»³⁵. Our imaginary representations then *de-metaphorize* and *de-figurate*, not only to bodily intensity, but to pure matter. Although Deleuze still calls this a symbolism of colors, this does not consist in a correspondence between a color and an affect, as in the classic Kantian example of the white lily, which is not merely related to the concepts of color and of flower, but also awakens the idea of pure innocence. For Godard, the color *is* “the affect itself”: rather than inducing the spiritual calm of subjective self-reflection, the color prevents such distancing and works *directly* onto the nervous system. What can, indeed, be more materialist than the pure sensation of color, to that extent that Deleuze can state that the most immaterial of all arts, namely music, can only be re-incarnated through the subtle reintroduction of colors, through «a rudimentary and refined system of correspondence between sounds and colors», as with the composer Olivier Messiaen³⁶.

³³ See: IT, p. 228 / p. 175.

³⁴ IM, p. 166 / p. 118, IT, p. 238 / p. 182.

³⁵ IM, p. 166 / p. 118.

³⁶ G. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon. Logique de la sensation* (1981), Paris: Éditions du Seuil 2002, p. 56.

At the heart of this problematic lies the question whether or not the film's shot can be considered as a minimal unit of meaning whose denotation is subject to linguistic analysis. Deleuze argues that although linguistic codes undeniably interfere with cinema's narrativity, the cinematic image or sign cannot be *reduced* to a representation or signified because the shot cannot be considered an arbitrary sign: there is a motivated relation between the image and its sense. If one departs from the linguistic term as an unmotivated sign, this referential relation remains semiotically obscure: sense is only relevant in linguistics insofar as it is substance for a form. Thus, if we suppose the cinematic sign to render visible (or more generally: render sensible) that to which it refers, it cannot be considered as a linguistic sign function, because its value of being a sign depends entirely on being motivated. Let us take a closer look therefore at how Deleuze conceives the semiotic configuration of this motivated relation.

4. Pure designation

In *Anti-Oedipus* Hjelmslev's «linguistics of flows»³⁷ is staged in stark opposition to the structural conditions of Saussurian linguistics and post-Saussurian semiology. A second important appreciation of Hjelmslev appears in the third plateau of *A Thousand Plateaus*, where Hjelmslev's form-substance-purport triad is explicitly valued. Deleuze and Guattari stage this distinction in their own terms as that between the Artaudean “body without organs” that is «permeated by unformed, unstable matters, by flows in all directions, by free intensities or nomadic singularities, by mad or transitory particles» and a “coding” or “territorializing” process of “stratification” that consists of «giving form to matters, of imprisoning intensities or locking singularities into

³⁷ A-O, pp. 291-292 / pp. 241-242.

systems of resonance and redundancy»³⁸. In the context of *Cinema 2*, the passage in *Anti-Oedipus* is most valuable.

Deleuze and Guattari's appreciation of Hjelmslev in 1973 is still brief and programmatic. Hjelmslev's "linguistics of flows" is valued for proposing «a purely immanent theory of language» that causes «form and substance, content and expression to flow according to the flows of desire; and that breaks these flows according to points-signs and figures-schizzes»³⁹. Unlike Saussure's privileged role of the transcendent signifier, Hjelmslev's linguistics is said to imply «the concerted destruction of the signifier», constituting "a decoded theory of language»⁴⁰. This "destruction" and "decoding" of the signifier is enacted by the attraction of motivation that prevents the structural fact of double articulation to establish itself. As we have seen, for the signifying terms to constitute themselves, these terms must refer only to combinations of minimal, non-signifying elements (phonemes) that themselves only have unity and value through distinction. It is only this structural organization – the arbitrary relation between the sign and purport – that isolates the linguistic sign from its referent, assuring its autonomy with regard to all motivation and making it independent of the temporality of the speaker and the situation⁴¹. If, on the contrary, the smallest unit of language were motivated, then signifying would not be distinguishable from expressing: content and expression would coincide and the structural condition of double articulation would collapse. The configuration of the signifier would then not be detachable from the situation in which the sign was produced: for example a cry, a rush of breath or a chanted melody.

³⁸ G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2. Mille Plateaux*, Minuit, Paris 1987, pp. 53, 54, 58 / G. Deleuze & F. Guattari, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia 2. A Thousand Plateaus*, transl. by B. Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis-London 2005 (1987), pp. 40, 43.

³⁹ A-O, pp. 291-292 / pp. 242-243.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ Cfr. A-O, p. 248 / p. 207.

Yet, it is one thing to stage this attraction of motivation as a decoding or destruction of the linguistic sign, but thereby this kind of *excess* of sense with regard to the organized significations of discourse has not itself been illuminated. In other words, the difficulty remains of inquiring the semiotic configuration of such excess. If, indeed, it is not intelligible in the categories of Saussurian linguistics, then how should we grasp its power of semiosis? To approach this difficulty Deleuze and Guattari turn to Jean-François Lyotard's theory of pure designation in *Discourse Figure*, which they stage immediately after the passage on Hjelmslev as the first generalized critique of the signifier:

The extreme importance of J.-F. Lyotard's recent book is due to its position as the first generalized critique of the signifier. In his most general position, in fact, he shows that the signifier is overtaken towards the outside by figurative images, just as it is overtaken toward the inside by the pure figures that compose it – or, more decisively, by “the figural” that comes to short-circuit the signifier's coded gaps, inserting itself between them, and working under the conditions of identity of their elements. In language and in writing itself, sometimes the letters as breaks, as shattered partial objects – and sometimes the words as undivided flows, as nondecomposable blocks, or full bodies having a tonic value – constitute assignifying signs that deliver themselves over to the order of desire: rushes of breath and cries.⁴²

To distinguish this order of a-signifying signs, which they also call «an order of connotation»⁴³, from the signifying order fulfilling the structural conditions of post-Saussurian semiology, they follow Lyotard's hypothesis of a libidinal order of pre-signifying signs that always “works” *within* each signifying order and that only rises to the surface when signification is problematized. Discussing the Hegelian theory of symbolism, Lyotard had begun *Discourse Figure* by arguing that there is *an antecedence and heterogeneity* between language's referentiality – its designative force – and its signifying acts. As he writes:

⁴² A-O, p. 292 / p. 243. Cfr. A-O, pp. 244-245 / pp. 203-204.

⁴³ A-O, p. 244 / p. 203.

The exteriority of the object of which one speaks does not depend on signification, but on designation; it belongs to an experience that has no place in the system, but that is that of the speaker; it follows from a rupture, from a division that is the price to pay for the system of language to be utilizable. This exteriority is opened up by seeing and by desiring, in a retreat of sense that is just as old as every experience and every spoken word. (...) All signifying takes place in a space of designation that is both that of intentionality and that of distance (...), a profound exteriority that resides at the limit of discourse (...).⁴⁴

Just like Deleuze in *The Logic of Sense*, Lyotard calls this *pre-signifying* designation of sense “expression”, as opposed to linguistic signification. The subordination of the phonic substance to the advantage of signification and transparent communication in the daily, pragmatic usage of language is in Lyotard’s view a neutralization and *repression* of this libidinal order of pre-signifying sense.⁴⁵ This means that although it certainly still implicitly works within pragmatic language use, it is not experienced as such, remaining unexpressed, beneath the surface. Its explicit expression is for Lyotard exemplarily encountered in visual arts such as painting and sculpture, and arises through language itself when its regulated order is disturbed (eg. in poetry or in the free association of words in psychoanalytic practice)⁴⁶. To distinguish these two kinds of expression or pre-signifying designation (visual and discursive), Lyotard reserves the terms “figure-image” and “figure-form”: «In the face of discourse, there is the figure-image; in discourse itself, there is the figure-form»⁴⁷.

The figure-form is said to be «the presence of non-language in language»⁴⁸. It is something of another order that resides and works *in* discourse and confers upon it its expressivity. Like Hjelmslev, Lyotard gives a color example:

⁴⁴ J.-F. Lyotard, *Discours figure* (1971), Éditions Klincksieck, Paris 1978, p. 50 (my translation).

⁴⁵ Deleuze and Guattari write in a similar sense that the signifier is “deterritorialized” with regard to its surface of inscription: the signifier is a sign that can only refer to other deterritorialized signs and that has lost its designative power, thereby cutting the user off from the flows of desiring production.

⁴⁶ J.-F. Lyotard, *Discours figure* (1971), cit., pp. 379-385.

⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 51 (my translation).

⁴⁸ *Ibidem* (my translation).

One may say that the tree is green, but one will not have put the color in the phrase. The color is sense. The negativity of signification escapes that of designation (...), the space of designation effectively inhabits discourse, but lies beyond what it signifies, in its expression. For now I call it the space of designation because its properties seem analogical to those of that spatiality, and contradict those of linguistic spatiality. Their common trait is the figure, we will call it the figural space.⁴⁹

This first phenomenological thesis of a sensory excess or “profound exteriority” that discourse always lacks in its signifying – because in order to do so it must interiorize it into its own (logical, coded) order – is further elaborated in the third chapter of *Discourse Figure* on the nature of the linguistic sign. In line with Hjelmslev’s thesis on the undeterminability of purport or sense itself and Deleuze’s comments on Godard’s color use, Lyotard writes that «that “something” that must correspond to each enunciation is exactly not graspable, monopolizable»⁵⁰ from a linguistic point of view. It is always posited by the act of the spoken word, but posited beyond it, in a space created by an originary spatialization (“*espacement*”). To conceptualize how this non-linguistically formed sense can be expressed, Lyotard proposes a form of “pure designation” that must be distinguished both from the relation of signification (strictly linguistic) and from the relation of symbolization (rendering sensible an absent thing). He relies thereby on a hypothesis of the anthropologist André Leroi-Gourhan on the origin of language. Leroi-Gourhan considered the most primitive language as a pre-signifying instrument of expression: he considered signs originating in an emotive situation and conceived them as originally motivated. Given the central importance of this passage on the designative power of signs, we will cite it here at length:

One should rather credit the strongly developed hypothesis of A. Leroi-Gourhan: the most ancient language had a sacred function, the first meaningful, spoken unities were uttered by a narrator, who simultaneously designated by means of gestures the painted, corresponding figures during ceremonial processions that were followed

⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 52 (my translation).

⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 74 (my translation).

by the tribe in temples-caverns. This is a very satisfying hypothesis because it captures the function of designation in all its force and specificity. The latter concerns two decisive traits: the word is not uttered in the absence of the designated thing, but *in its presence*; the designated thing is not a thing but a symbol, of which it is legitimate to state that it is right from the beginning opaque. This double trait of the situation in which the referential function is exercised permits us to isolate it precisely and to distinguish it from the symbolic. Instead of the word placing itself in front of the thing and putting up a screen in front of it, the word erases itself in order to manifest the thing. It is not a substitute that hides the thing, it is not itself a symbol that would re-present it by its proper substance or form, it is only in the experience of the speaker an opening to thing, a line of sight that makes the thing visible. There is thus certainly a distance from the word to that thing, from the utterance to its object in general, but that distance is not a depth to be traversed; much rather it is a depth in which the gesture indicates its object, it is the depth of the atmospheric spatiality, it presupposes light as the milieu in which visibility unfolds itself.⁵¹

Lyotard breaks here not only with the Saussurian sign (unmotivated signification) but just as well with the Saussurian conception of the symbol (rendering sensible an absent thing), which is the classical alternative to the unmotivated character of the linguistic sign. Following Leroi-Gourhan's surprising hypothesis, the word is neither conceived as a linguistic sign, nor as a symbol for an absent thing: the designative relation is not understood as if it would connect the sign-symbol to the designated thing in its absence. Much rather, *the sign-orientation is exactly reversed*: the indicative, referential force of the word derives from the fact that it is not a sign referring to something while representing it, as though the designated were absent, but the referential force of the word derives from the fact that it turns the thing itself into a symbol by designating it *in its presence*: a sign-thing. The designative force consists in making things sensible *in their inaccessibility*, in their *opacity*. The expressed phonemes of the narrator do not function as the basis for linguistic signification, they do not direct us at the "psychological imprint" of that sound, the representation that is given to us by the evidence of our senses, as in Saussure's model, but once there is an expression, the designated itself

⁵¹ Ivi, p. 82 (my translation).

becomes an “a-signifying”, opaque sign. Signification, then, is thought as a *secondary* process that always takes place on the basis of this primary, designative relation. Deleuze and Guattari describe this in *Anti-Oedipus* as follows:

Jean-François Lyotard has attempted to describe such a system [of connotation] in another context, where the word has only a designating function but does not of itself constitute the sign; what becomes a sign is rather the thing or body designated as such, insofar as it reveals an unknown facet described on it, traced by the graphism that responds to the word. The gap between the two elements is bridged by the eye, which “sees” the word without reading it, inasmuch as it appraises the pain emanating from the graphism applied to the flesh itself: the eye jumps. (...) Lyotard re-establishes the overly neglected rights of a theory of pure designation. He shows the irreducible gap between the word and the thing in the relationship of designation that connotes them. By virtue of this gap, it is the thing designated that becomes the sign by revealing an unknown facet as a hidden content. (Words are not themselves signs, but they transform into signs the things or bodies they designate.) At the same time it is the designating word that becomes *visible*, independently of any writing-reading, by revealing a strange ability to be seen, not read.⁵²

5. Conclusion

A final remark will reveal how this reading of Lyotard informs Deleuze’s appreciation of Hjelmslev in *Cinema 2*. The essence of Lyotard’s theory of designation lies for Deleuze and Guattari in the independence or heterogeneity between the order of the visual (graphic expression) and the vocal, phonic expression. The graphic elements are not subordinated to a codifying process of signification – as the morphemes are in the constitution of the linguistic sign – but they reveal an “unknown facet”, namely their opacity and irreducible distance to the order of signification⁵³. This opacity, in turn, is rendered visible and sensible due to the fact that the phonic expression

⁵² A-O, p. 245 / p. 204.

⁵³ Recounting an expression used by Merleau-Ponty, Jean Hyppolite speaks in a similar context of an impression given by art of “an ineffable which would be sense without speech, and in relation to which we could say, in a paradoxical form, that speech is itself mute.” See: J. Hyppolite, *Logique et existence* (1953), P.U.F., Paris 1991, p. 29 / J. Hyppolite, *Logic and Existence* (1953), transl. by L.L. Lawlor and A. Sen, State University of New York Press, New York 1997, pp. 24-25.

remains heterogeneous to the graphic elements, thereby upholding its purely connotative, deictic force of designation. This emotive force is not neutralized or de-territorialized by syntagmatic and paradigmatic coding, but rather it is presented in its heterogeneity to these signifying structures. Whence Deleuze and Guattari's wording of «a pain emanating from the graphism applied to the flesh itself»⁵⁴.

It is in exactly the same sense that *The Time-Image* repeatedly puts forward «purely optical and sound situations» that become established through a so called «any-space-whatever» (“*espace quelconque*”), which designates a form of sense that is qualified *while* being “disconnected” and “emptied” of clearly attributable content⁵⁵. Thus, in Deleuze's terms cinematic semiosis is constructed upon a fundamental duality between two *autonomous, heterogeneous* planes of expression: a visual plane of pure, pre-linguistic images on the one hand and a phonic plane of pure, pre-signifying signs on the other hand⁵⁶. Together, these two planes constitute what Deleuze calls «the utterable of a language system», which corresponds to Hjelmslev's non-linguistically formed sense (“purport”)⁵⁷. Whilst every language system works through form and substance, cutting linguistic signification off from the pre-linguistically formed matter that makes up its raw material, cinema “reinvests” this material in images and signs. Such reinvestment consists essentially in a disturbance of signification that makes corporeal, rhythmic, affective sensorial features resurface as estranging symptoms. Using an expression of the psychopathologist Ludwig Binswanger, Deleuze writes that instead of prolonging itself into a speculative or pragmatic action (as in normal perception), cinema's purely optical and sound situations induce a depersonalized experience in which the perceiver is «inhaled by the world»⁵⁸. That

⁵⁴ A-O, p. 245 / p. 204.

⁵⁵ IT, pp. 13, 27 / pp. 5, 16.

⁵⁶ Cfr. IT, pp. 329-341 / pp. 252-261.

⁵⁷ IT, p. 342 / p. 262.

⁵⁸ IT, p. 81, note 17/ p. 291, note 19.

such symptoms are estranging and incomprehensible does not mean that they are illusory, senseless, deprived of any content. Rather, they isolate a field of non-linguistically formed sense, which *every* intentional process of meaning constitution is projected upon, and which functions as a paradoxical immemorial condition that escapes that meaning itself:

What the past is to time, sense is to language and idea to thought. Sense as past of language is the form of its pre-existence, that which we place ourselves in at once in order to understand images of sentences, to distinguish the images of words and even phonemes that we hear.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ IT, p. 131 / p. 99.