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Ekstasis and Paradoxa

The Miracle as Disruption

“And they were astonished with a great astonishment.” (Mark 5.42)

The following line of reasoning is really quite straightforward: miracles can be regarded as moments of disruption and, precisely as such moments of disruption, they possess the positive quality of initiating redemption, recognition, truth, epiphany, exaltation, or a being-seized (*Ergriffenheit*). In the form of a miracle, disruption is not only a disruption, mistake, or rush but a category of knowledge; in the form of a disruption, a miracle is not merely a category of knowledge, but a problem that simultaneously also marks its own solution to a problem.

Reflecting on miracles almost inevitably places one in the position of having to argue in theological terms or least of having to consider theological discourse. After all, a miracle (whatever its ontological and epistemological status) is a religious event.¹ In what follows, this theological aspect will by no means be denied; however, this chapter focuses in formal logical terms on the miracle as a “*terminus technicus* für eine Form der Irritation” [*terminus technicus* for a form of irritation] (Tyradellis 2011: 17). Miracles will be understood as a specific form of disruption to the expected order, as moments that make the disruption itself part of a religious event. Miracles do not function as miracles in spite of the fact that they disrupt, but *because of* and *by means of* that very disrupting.

1 Anarchy and order

Miracles are questionable and uncertain extraordinary events. They astonish, fascinate, or frighten. They can be described as astonishing intrusions of the im-

Translation from the German by Jason Blake.

¹ In Latin and English, in stark contrast to German, one can easily differentiate between *mirabilia* (natural wonders, profane, relative) and *miracula* (transcendental miracles, sacred, absolute), and between *wonder* (an unusual event) and *miracle* (an unusual, religious event in reference to a transcendent God or some sort of transcendent power). In German no similar difference between “wonder” and “miracle” asserts itself. For a Thomistic viewpoint on this matter, see Matuschek (1991: 70).

possible and of the unexpected that (mostly) suggest the transcendental. Because their epistemological and ontological status is uncertain, they are very much in need of explanation. For the modern observer, miracles generally indicate marginal phenomena that are written off as the mere superstitions of an antiquated, anti-modern religiosity, or as illusions. According to the secularization thesis, and in line with the “linear decline of religion in the form of an increasing secularization, a privatization of religious attitudes and of a rationalization of religious worldviews” (Geppert and Kössler 2011: 18),² miracles should no longer play a structure-forming role; at best, they might function as historical labels for describing bygone eras. But if we examine the secularization thesis more closely, we see that though modernity may have “effectively disenchanting or at least diminished the attractiveness of many traditional worlds of wonder,” it also established its own, modernized worlds of wonder as well as a variety of mutually competing modes for observing those wonders (Geppert and Kössler 2011: 15).³ If we accept this, a research path opens that allows us “to overcome the research-limiting opposition of the terms disenchantment and re-enchantment,” because it brings to light the “changing interaction between miraculous events and miraculous acts within both the religious *and* the secular thought and knowledge systems” of modernity (Geppert and Kössler 2011: 15).⁴ By observing miracles and the questions connected to them – questions such as which social and discourse formations render miracles plausible or implausible, which orders of knowledge assume an ontology of the miracle and which attribute them to superstition, which narrative, rhetorical, performative, pragmatic, institutional and political means make plausible the ontology of miracles and belief in miracles – we can challenge the simple replacement model according to which enlightened modern times used rationality to supplant miracles and belief in miracles. Miracles, thus, are both the object of observation and the moment of observing, since miracles are employed as a medium that makes it possible to describe models of reality, knowledge, and society.

2 “linearen Religionsverfalls in Form einer zunehmenden Entkirchlichung, Privatisierung religiöser Einstellungen sowie einer Rationalisierung religiöser Weltbilder.”

3 “viele überkommene Wunderwelten effektiv entzauberte oder zumindest deren Attraktivität minderte”; “forschungshemmenden Begriffsgegensatz von Ent- und Wiederverzauberung zu überwinden.”

4 “wandelnde Umgang mit wunderhaften Begebenheiten und wundersamen Handeln innerhalb der zugleich religiösen *und* säkularen Denk- und Wissenssysteme” Also Gess contests the dichotomy of “Fortschritt versus Entzauberung” [progress versus disenchantment] (2013: 129).

To put it more pointedly, we can say that it is only through the observation of miracles that the specific modernity of modern times – that is, the simultaneous existence of religious *and* secular orders, the simultaneous existence of enchantment and disenchantment, and the afterlife of the religious (Trembl and Weidner 2007) in modern literature, art and culture – is made visible. This is because modern considerations of the extraordinary can thematize, problematize, and historicize the ordering structures of modern society, “its social constitution, assumptions of normality and the limits of knowledge” (Geppert and Kössler 2011: 15).⁵ It is precisely the marginal and the unusual, the inexplicable and the exorbitant, the disrupting and the disturbing, that sharpen the eye for what is “central” and “normal,” for what is self-understood and usual within a society. It comes down to describing modernity and its literature and culture in terms of its disruptive moments, of its ambivalences and incommensurabilities – not for the sake of the disruptions themselves, but in order to use these disruptions to help us understand the ordering patterns of modernity. As Alexander Geppert and Till Kössler phrase it:

By studying miracles, one can concentrate and connect manifold debates about the limits of perception, cognition and knowledge in the 20th century. Miracles stood in a highly ambivalent relationship to Western, supposedly enlightened societies. As sudden and unexpected intrusions of the inexplicable into existing orders they formed a counterpoint to the established social conceptions which, on the one hand, were characterized precisely by trust in the present and the future calculability and configurability [of nature and the environment], and, on the other hand, by the readability and controllability of nature and the environment. As extreme cases of inexplicable interruptions of normality, as unexpected and awe-inducing transcendences, as “fleeting errors in the system,” they represented challenges for contemporary orders of thinking, pondering and believing that lay beyond the question of whether miracles in fact existed. In the raging debates, fundamental assumptions about reality and epistemology were always open for discussion and always negotiated anew. (2011: 15)⁶

5 “ihre soziale Konstituierung, Normalitätsannahmen und Wissensgrenzen.”

6 “Durch die Untersuchung von Wundern lassen sich die vielfältigen Debatten um die Grenzen von Wahrnehmung, Erkenntnis und Wissen im 20. Jahrhundert bündeln und aufeinander beziehen. Wunder standen in einer höchst ambivalenten Beziehung zu den westlichen, vermeintlich aufgeklärten Gesellschaften. Als plötzliche und unerwartete Einbrüche des Unerklärbaren in gegebene Ordnungen bildeten sie einen Gegenpol zu den etablierten Gesellschaftsvorstellungen, welche gerade von Vertrauen in Plan- und Gestaltbarkeit von Gegenwart und Zukunft einerseits, in Les- und Kontrollierbarkeit von Natur und Umwelt andererseits geprägt waren. Als Extremfälle unerklärlicher Unterbrechungen von Normalität, als unerwartete und Staunen hervorruufende Transzendierungen, als ‘Flüchtige Fehler im System’, stellten sie jenseits der Frage nach ihrer faktischen Existenz Herausforderungen für zeitgenössische Wissens-, Denk- und Glaubensordnungen dar. Immer standen in den schnell aufbrandenden Debatten grundlegende Annah-

The very claim that an event is inexplicable or impossible is a fundamental epistemological statement, which depends on historical, socio-structural, cultural, and epistemological variables. In the Middle Ages the possibility or impossibility of miracles differed from in modernity because the conceptions of reality were not the same. That these conceptions of reality varied, and how they varied, can be read succinctly in the concept of the miracle. In the Middle Ages laws of nature were not yet as binding as they would come to be, so there was more room for the impossible than in modernity, since in the Middle Ages and into the Baroque “the order of nature appeared fundamentally violable” (Blumenberg 2009: 19).⁷ Thus, the extraordinary could, fundamentally, always penetrate into an uncertain, unknown, and uncontrollable nature (albeit still as an exception), because miracles always stood above nature as evidence of the transcendent or the omnipotence of God. Moreover, because the Reformation, with its desire to explain miracles rationally, had not yet taken place, the Middle Ages were more receptive to the inexplicable, and miracles (albeit still as exceptions) were the order of the day. Only after the Middle Ages does this change, when the “idea of a nature that follows immanent laws” appears (Offen 2011: 25).⁸ Nature then becomes more and more transparent, and discursively and technically controllable (at least according to the scheme of a discursively-negotiated world, which starts in the Renaissance and is consummated in the Enlightenment).⁹ With that change, modernity’s historical upheavals of basic epistemological assumptions become more pronounced. The inexplicable and the impossible are used as labels to help zoom in on the historical, socio-structural, epistemological, and culturally-conditioned delineations of the normal and the exceptional, of the discursive and the monstrous, of language and the world, of perception and the world, of the sensible and the intelligible, of nature and spirit (Daston and Park 1998). The idea is that the “miraculous” in particular can be used to observe and explain assumptions about reality and about social formations.¹⁰

men über Realität und Epistemologie zur Disposition und wurden stets wieder aufs Neue verhandelt.”

7 “Naturordnung grundsätzlich als durchbrechbar erschien.”

8 “Idee einer immanenten Gesetzen folgenden Natur.”

9 On the transition from a dangerous, through a manageable, to an enjoyable nature, see Bege-mann (1987); on the transition to a scientific world view, see Frye (2011: 36–37).

10 Though the difference between “miracle” and “wonder” is more pronounced in English than in German, I nevertheless emphasize that in this paper “miraculous” designates something that is closely linked to a religiously coded miracle, rather than a merely “wonderful” or “fantastic” occurrence.

In a roundabout way, the miraculous reveals that social, epistemic, pragmatic, and institutional models of reality, which have become routine, are in fact disruptable and thus negotiable and even fragile constructs. Reading miracles as figures of uncertain existence, as figures of disruption, serves to undermine social and epistemic orders, but it also serves to reorganize them. The miracle:

is capable [...] of offering phantasmatic “explanations” and “justifications” and precisely therein of assuming cultural orientation functions. But it is also capable of creating confusion in habits of thought and in what is supposedly self-understood, or of rendering visible the culturally contradictory. (Begemann, Herrmann and Neumeyer 2008: 9–10)¹¹

This perspective can be correlated to a contemporary definition of miracles:

Believed to be impossible, miracles are transgressions of existing knowledge and thought limits which, for that reason, give rise to awe-inducing alternative concepts of order, and which are often interpreted as manifestations of the transcendent. (Geppert and Kössler 2011: 38)¹²

Hence, social and epistemic orders are not established in opposition to questionable figures, but in explicit confrontation with them. That which is questionable and ambiguous about miracles is not merely ordered away, and furthermore order does not come into being merely in spite of the miracle’s uncertainty but because of it. It is on the ambiguous, phantasmatic, and transgressive aspects of the miracle – those moments that constitute its disruptive potential – that the stability of an order can be tested and subverted, engendering new or-

11 “vermag es, [...] phantasmatische ‘Erklärungen’ und ‘Begründungen’ zu bieten und gerade darin kulturelle Orientierungsleistungen zu übernehmen. Er vermag es aber auch, Verwirrung in Denkgewohnheiten und vermeintlichen Selbstverständlichkeiten zu stiften oder kulturell Widersprüchliches sichtbar zu machen.” – The authors ascribe this ability to order and to confuse at one and the same time to the figure of the vampire. However, in my view this function can also be ascribed to the miraculous. Vampires and miracles are *figures of questionable existence* which, in spite of their many specific differences, are formally and syntactically analogous at a higher level of abstraction. Moreover, Begemann’s essay “Die Metaphysik der Vampire” very convincingly shows that there are extremely close relationships of equivalence and correspondence between vampires and Christian religious codes.

12 “Wunder sind für unmöglich gehaltene und daher Staunen erregende Transgressionen existierender Wissens- und Denkgrenzen, die alternative Ordnungsentwürfe aufscheinen lassen und häufig als Manifestationen von Transzendenz gedeutet werden.”

ders that encourage another way of dealing with the ambiguous, the impossible, and the phantasmatic.¹³

Daniel Weidner shows, referring specifically to the Enlightenment, that “not only is the miraculous central for Enlightenment knowledge, it is no less important for knowledge *about* the Enlightenment” (Weidner 2010: 123).¹⁴ In other words, miracles allow us not only to observe especially keenly a society’s assumptions of normality, and thus also of alterity, but they also illuminate the shifts, transgressions, and structural uncertainties of social, epistemic, and symbolic orders, as well as the limits of their knowledge and discourse.¹⁵ Alexander Geppert and Till Kössler speak of a “potenziell anarchischen Qualität” [potentially anarchic quality] of miracles on which new orders, new forms of knowledge, can be established, which hold out the prospect of more possibilities (2011: 38).¹⁶ But in the confrontation with this anarchy old patterns can also be confirmed, for just as miracles can destabilize (discontinuity), so, too, can they stabilize or even “contribute to the restoration or restoring of a world that has come out of joint” (continuity) (Geppert and Kössler 2011: 38).¹⁷

2 ἔκστασις and παράδοξα

But what can be designated a “miracle”? A major initial problem can be observed if we go back to the history of the Greek terms. In the Greek of the New Testament there is no superordinate term for a miracle. In terms of form and genre theory – and in contrast, for example, to the homogeneous use of

13 Orsi is entirely in line with my perspective when he speaks of miracles and the sacred as being of a fundamental ambivalence: “The ‘sacred’ [...] is the space of activity, engagement, ambivalence, and doubleness” (1997: 12).

14 “Wunder [...] nicht nur zentral für das Wissen der Aufklärung, sondern nicht weniger wichtig für das Wissen *von* der Aufklärung.” Weidner shows that in miracles not only knowledge and an amorphous non-knowledge are condensed, but that various forms of non-knowledge can be identified (2010: 123). Thus, miracles serve to produce order in that which lies beyond order.

15 Tyradellis speaks analogously of the miracle as a “Wunde” [wound], as an “Öffnung in der Welt” [opening in the world] which, in exceeding the expected, “Mehr an Möglichkeiten verspricht” [promises more possibilities]; the metaphor of the wound is well-chosen, since it (especially in a religious framework) is always doubly encoded: as a wound that irritates and hurts, and as a wound that serves as a medium for finding salvation (as in stigmata or the Passion of Christ) (2011: 13).

16 The authors are referring to Orsi’s “Everyday Miracles.” See also Kahl’s instructive essay “Neutestamentliche Wunder als Verfahren des In-Ordnung-Bringens.”

17 “zur Restauration oder Erneuerung einer gefährdeten oder aus den Fugen geratenen Welt beitragen.”

the term parable (*parabole*) – “miracle” is used inconsistently and heterogeneously. Instead of a single term we find different semantic fields. First, there is the Greek τὸ τέρας (*to téras*; τὰ τέρατα [*ta térata*] = miracle, sign, token) which, in combination with σημεῖον (*sēmeion*), became the catchphrase “signs and wonders” (σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα; *sēmeia kai terata*), but this combination appears only sixteen times in the New Testament.¹⁸ Of primary significance is that *ta térata* indicates a moment of *amplificatio*, it is a matter of exaggeration, of something sensational that, precisely for that reason, points to the extraordinary and the exorbitant; and yet the use of *amplificatio* does not seem particularly well suited for characterizing an act of Jesus, since these acts surpass the sensational and the exorbitant.¹⁹ Jesus’s miracles may indeed be sensational, which is why the people are beside themselves, astonished beyond measure (see below), but precisely because such events surpass the sensational, no lexical label is homogeneously and consistently used to designate them. Furthermore, things become lexically problematic when *ta térata* and *ta sēmeia* are used to designate false wonders.²⁰ The Synoptic tradition invariably uses the combination σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα when referring, critically, to “false Christs and false prophets” (e.g. Mk 13.22). In the Gospel according to John, however, the compound is divided, and “miracle” (*ta sēmeia*) (without *ta térata*) now refers to the miracles of Jesus (see, for example, Jn 2.11, 4.54, 6.2, 6.14, 9, 16, 11.47,

18 See Zimmermann (2011: 98; 2013: 19–20). See also the entry “Semeion” at *Bible Study Tool* <<http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/semiion.html>>; for an analysis of terms in the primary sources, see Weiß (1995). Weiß shows that the pair forms a “*terminus technicus* der Missionssprache” [*terminus technicus* of mission language] and points to the “Funktionsträger, nicht aber auf konkrete Handlungen wie Heilungen” [the function holders, but not to concrete acts such as healing] (Weiß 1995: 144–145). (Zimmermann 2013: 20); on this mission thesis, see Weiß’s exhaustive argument in *Zeichen und Wunder* (1995: 94–115).

19 This is why the term *ta térata* appears so infrequently and why Jesus’s acts are not designated as “τέρατέϊαι (*terateiai*)” (Zimmermann 2013: 20). On the especially drastic aspect of miracles in the Gospel of John, see Welck (1994: 61–62). – Unless otherwise stated, the Greek bible passages and are taken from the *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Nestle-Aland 2013). The corresponding quotations in English are from the King James Version, the German from the Einheitsübersetzung and the Luther Bible.

20 An example: “For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; inasmuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect” (Mt 24.24; my emphasis); “ἐγερθήσονται γὰρ ψευδόχριστοι καὶ ψευδοπροφῆται, καὶ δώσουσιν σημεῖα μεγάλα καὶ τέρατα ὥστε πλανῆσαι, εἰ δυνατόν, καὶ τοὺς ἐκλεκτούς” (my emphasis). Positive use of the compound “signs and wonders” is, in contrast, found primarily in Paul (see Weiß 1995: 41–72); on “signs and lying wonders” (2 Thes 2.9), see Weiß (1995: 139–141).

12.37 and 20.30).²¹ Thus, in John we can speak of a reasonably uniform use of the term *ta sēmeia* for referring to the miracles of Jesus.²²

Since in the New Testament miracles are usually aimed at expressing the power of God, the terms ἔργον (*ergon*; works, e. g. Jn 10.25–38) and δύναμις (*dynamis*; mighty works, e. g. Mk 6.2, Lk 10.13, 19.37) appear. In referring to the terminological vagueness and doubt about the status of Jesus's acts, one can speak of a "contentiousness that is inherent to the phenomenon of miracles" (Zimmermann 2011: 100).²³ Crucial here is that this conceptual inconsistency in referring to miracles is redirected to the level of observation. As Ruben Zimmermann notes,

Instead of a fixed *terminus technicus* and an accompanying text type we more frequently encounter verbal constructions that describe the reaction of people to the acts of Jesus with the verb *thaumazein*: they "wonder" (see Lk 11.14) and "are amazed." (Zimmermann 2011: 99)²⁴

Evidently the contentiousness of the miracle phenomenon is difficult to clarify at the object level. The terms used make it clear that the key question is not "What is a miracle?" but "What effect do the miracles of Jesus have on the observers?" Accordingly, as Zimmermann determines, the Greek noun designating a miracle "τὸ θαύμασον (*pl. ta thaumasia ta thaumasia*) [...]" is used not at all, [while] the nominalized adjective θαυμάσιον (*thaumasion*) is encountered only once (Mt 21.15)" (2013: 22).²⁵ In contrast, the verb "θαυμῶ (*thaumazō* – to be amazed, as-

21 In John 4.48, meanwhile, the composition is used again, though with a negative tinge. Jesus criticizes the people for their lack of belief: "Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe." Zimmermann points out that in the Synoptics, in stark contrast to John, "σημεῖον niemals auf Handlungen bezogen wird, die der irdische Jesu vollbracht hat. Stattdessen werden damit künftige Zeichen (Mk 13,4; 16,17–20; Mt 26,48) benannt oder von Jesus erwartete Zeichen." [σημεῖον never refers to acts that the earthly Jesus has completed. Rather, it designates future signs (Mk 13,4, 16,17–20, Mt 26,48) or signs expected from Jesus] (2013: 21).

22 On the systematic use of the term σημεῖον in the Gospel of John, see Welck (1994: esp. 49–58).

23 "Umstrittenheit, die dem Wunderphänomen selbst anhaftet."

24 "Statt eines festen *Terminus technicus* und einer dazugehörigen Textsorte treffen wir häufiger verbale Konstruktionen an, die die Reaktion von Menschen auf das Wirken Jesu mit dem Verb *thaumazein* beschreiben: sie 'staunen' und 'wundern sich' (see Lk 11,14)." Lk 11.14 reads "And he was casting out a devil, and it was dumb. And it came to pass, when the devil was gone out, the dumb spake; and the people wondered."

25 "τὸ θαύμασον (*pl. ta thaumasia ta thaumasia*) [...]" [ist] kein einziges Mal verwendet, [und] das substantivierte Adjektiv θαυμάσιον (*thaumasion*) begegnet nur einmal (Mt 21,15)." Zimmermann's claim should be qualified however, since "τα θαυμάσια ta thaumasia" does indeed ap-

tonished) [appears] 43 times, 31 times in the Gospels, and the adjective *θαυμαστος* (*thaumastos*) is encountered a further 6 times” (Zimmermann 2013: 22).²⁶ Here, miracles are described as a phenomenon of effect. One observes the miraculous by observing the people experiencing or witnessing the unusual event. With that, the focus is shifted because, although miracles are acts testifying to Jesus being the Son of God, they primarily serve to illustrate the performative and rhetorical impact of the divine. Underlining the astonishment – that is, emphasizing the observing and not the observed – makes it evident that a miracle’s decisive aspect lies not its ontological status but in the sensory recognition that arises from being seized by awe. The point is to experience Jesus as the Son of God through sensory recognition. Because the people are entirely seized in their physical being, the miracles of Jesus are an entirely corporeal, polysensory, and multimedial experience: Jesus speaks (Jn 11.42: “And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth”) or Jesus touches someone and applies bodily fluids (Mk 7.33: “And he took [the deaf-mute] aside from the multitude, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spit, and touched his tongue.” Mk 8.23: “And he took the blind man by the hand [...] and when he had spit on his eyes, and put his hands upon him, he asked him if he saw ought”²⁷). In terms of religious history this of course is a matter of “Kraftübertragung” (Ueberschaer 2013: 326), the transfer of power through healing gestures and touching, but it also presents the “Ganzkörperlichkeit” of Jesus, the fact this it is a total-body experience – one which includes words and gesture but also bodily contact, and one which finds its counterpart in the fact that the observers are entirely seized. After the passage in which Jesus cures the deaf-dumb,

pear in the Bible, namely, in the Gospel according to Matthew: “ἰδόντες δὲ οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ γραμματεῖς τὰ **θαυμάσια** ἃ ἐποίησεν καὶ τοὺς παῖδας τοὺς κρίζοντας ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ καὶ λέγοντας, Ὅσαννὰ τῷ υἱῷ Δαβὶδ, ἡγανάκτησαν.” “And when the chief priests and scribes saw the **wonderful things** that he did, and the children crying in the temple, and saying, Hosanna to the Son of David; they were sore displeased” (Mt 21.15). Not the nominalized adjective but *θαυμάσια* (= neutral plural of the adjective *θαυμασιος*, *ον*) is used.

26 “*θαυμιζω* (*thaumazō* – sich wundern, staunen) 43 mal, davon in den Evangelien 31-mal auf, das Adjektiv *θαυμαστος* (*thaumastos*) begegnet noch 6-mal.” Also mentioned at *BibleStudyTool* is that *thaumazō* appears 46 times and *thaumastos* 7 times (<<http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/thaumazo.html>>; <<http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/thaumastos.html>>). – A suitable example: “And he departed, and began to publish in Decapolis how great things Jesus had done for him: and all men did marvel.” (Mk 5.20) “Da ging der Mann weg und verkündete in der ganzen Dekapolis, was Jesus für ihn getan hatte, und alle staunten” (Einheitsübersetzung); in Luther: “und jedermann verwunderte sich.”

27 It is for good reason that Ueberschaer’s essay is entitled “Mit allen Sinnen leben!” (zur Heilung des Taubstummen in Mk 7,31–37).” She writes of the dominance of “Gesten und Berührungen” [gestures and touching] (2013: 324).

for example, one reads: “And [they] were beyond measure astonished, saying, He hath done all things well: he maketh both the deaf to hear, and the dumb to speak” (Mk 7.37). The observers are astonished “beyond measure,”²⁸ which implies not only an astonishment of thought but a polysensoral apprehension. For this purpose the word ἐκπλήσσω (*ekpléssō*) is used: to strike out, to be utterly amazed, dumbfounded, to be left at a loss from witnessing the incredible, but also astonishment (see also Lk 9.43).²⁹ However, it must be emphasized that only in Mk 7.37 and Luke 9.43 does *ekpléssō* refer to the miracles of Jesus, since otherwise the people are amazed and astonished at Jesus’s words as he proclaims his doctrine (e.g. Mt 7.28, 13.54, 19.25, 22.33, Mk 1.22, 11.18, Lk 4.32).³⁰ This, however, implies that Jesus’s words are not only understood and interpreted but also, above all, experienced and ingested in sensory terms. Jesus’s words are therefore more than words; they always also entail a seizing and grabbing hold of the entire, sensory and intelligible individual. They are directed not only at the body *and* the mind, but also at initiating understanding of the message *qua* and through the body.

The decisive element in the miraculous is not the existence of the miracle but the experiencing of the miracle through the observers. Indeed, an existential transformation occurs in them: “at the end of 7.37 Mark wants to show that the encounter with Jesus existentially changes and fills the people with astonishment and wonder. They proclaim Jesus to be the one who gives life a new quality” (Ueberschaer 2013: 329).³¹ Interesting for our purposes is not the theological dimension of salvation but the media-theory argument that miracles address all the senses and that the key to interpreting miracles lies not in the ontology of miracles but in this: the miracle is a total-body experience that seizes the observer multimedially. In terms of media theory, here the salvation history functions not as a proclamation of God’s word but as an “Epiphanie göttlicher Kraft” [epiphany of divine power] (Weiß 1995: 117). In such a way, miracles are not to be

28 Luther’s translation is in harmony with the King James Version: “Und sie wunderten sich über die Maßen”.

29 English, of course, allows also the sonorous translation: “to strike one out of self-possession” (<<http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/ekplesso.html>>).

30 Further terms radically expressing the astounding, gripping, shocking, or estranging effects of Jesus’s miracles and words are ἐθαμβήθησαν (*ethambēthēsan*, to be amazed and astonished; Mk 1.27, 10.24, 10.32) or, even stronger, ἐφοβήθησαν (*ephobēthēsan*, to be horrified, shocked, afraid (Mk 5.15, Lk 8.35, Lk 5.26) and φόβω (*phobō*) or φόβου (*phobou*), see also Zimmermann (2013: 14–15).

31 “Mit dem Chorschluss in 7,37 möchte Markus zeigen, dass die Begegnung mit Jesus existenziell verändert und den Menschen in Erstaunen und Verwunderung versetzt. Sie verkündigen Jesus als denjenigen, der dem Leben eine neue Qualität schenkt.”

interpreted, but lived and experienced. That said, the experience should not rest at the level of being seized and astonished. Rather, by being seized and enchanted people should gain insight into the truth of the kerygma (Weiß 1995). Epiphany, being seized, being astonished, and being enchanted do not stand in opposition to insight and understanding, since the former gives rise to the latter. This emphasis on sensory knowledge makes miracles (also) aesthetic phenomena because, firstly, it is not a matter of observing the object, but of the sensory relationship to this object. And, since sensory knowledge can never be immediate, it is, second, a matter of medial employment and the media-induced potential of miracles to effect action. It therefore comes as no surprise when categories come into play that smack of aesthetics, for example, when one reads that ultimately “not the action [object level] but the appearance [effect and observer level] of divine *dynamis* [...] is raised to the decisive criterion” (Weiß 1995: 119).³² And neither is it surprising when miracle discussion is replete with metaphors evoking theatre:

The religious miracle is, in addition to its existential function as emergency aid, a “show-piece” made for the senses, a divine rhetorical device for arousing attention and amazement, a brilliant proof of his omnipotence and it leads via amazement to conversion of the doubters. (Schierz 2007: 13)³³

With this shift to the rhetorical and the aesthetic, however, ambivalence also necessarily comes into play. Wolfgang Weiß points out that with the emphasis on the “phenomenon” it is not the message that legitimizes the miracle, but the miracle that legitimizes the message (Weiß 1995: 119, note 293).

Christian Welck, meanwhile, shows that the Gospel according to John has formal and narratological ruptures and inconsistencies precisely when it comes to miracles. The narration of miracles (*histoire*) is reflected in the mode of narration (*discours*), and through “insertions, accentuations and additions [...] the representation of the miracles is *compromised in its linearity*, it [...] *negatively* affects the miracle in its linearity, negating its single-stranded nature” (Welck

32 “nicht die Tat [Objektebene], sondern die Erscheinung [Wirk- und Beobachterebene] göttlicher Dynamis [...] zum entscheidenden Kriterium erhoben wird.”

33 “Das religiöse Wunder ist, neben seiner existentiellen Funktion als Nothilfe, ein ‘Schausstück’, für die Sinne gemacht, ist rhetorisches Mittel Gottes zur Erregung von Aufmerksamkeit und Staunen, ist glanzvoller Ausweis seiner Allmacht und führt über das Staunen zur Bekehrung der Zweifler.” In connection with this, Schierz speaks further of a “menschlichen Bedürfnis der Verifikation durch sinnliche Erfahrung” [human need for verification through sensory experience] (2007: 13).

1994: 62–63).³⁴ The ambiguity of a miracle forces an ambiguous narrating of the same. Further, Christian Welck speaks of the broken nature of the narrative structure and especially of the fact that this brokenness is to be interpreted as having a calculated effect on the reader (1994: 250–254). For Welck this ambivalence, disruption and brokenness is theologically productive. The reader who is repeatedly disturbed by the fractured narrative structure becomes a more careful, a more accurate reader,

which enables him to identify the disruptive as an element of an innovative, peculiar literary context beyond the expected, through which a new, peculiar divine bearing towards people is made evident. From the narratively surprising factors, the reader can and should arrive at what is *for him* a surprising insight into the *universality* and thus also the *current relevance* of what has been represented. (Welck 1994: 253)³⁵

Once again it is not the theological argument itself that is of interest, but the literary-theoretical and media-theoretical figure of argumentation: first, these permeate through the moments of ambivalence, uncertainty, disruption and fracture, and, second, these moments permeate the polysensory and multimedial-rhetorical sense of being seized. And it becomes apparent that the miraculous is not observable through rationalization and discourse, but through enduring its astonishing ambiguity.

To sharpen the argument, we can turn our attention to a much-discussed Bible passage – much-discussed because in this passage, more than anywhere else, the object level and the observer level correlate so closely, and because the observers are amazed and gripped to the point of fear. This is an *amplificatio* that concentrates and distills the previous considerations of miracles. In Luke 5.17–26 Jesus heals a paralytic and one reads:

And they were all amazed, and they glorified God, and were filled with *f e a r*, saying, We have seen **strange things** to day. (LK 5.26; my emphasis).

καὶ ἔκστασις ἔλαβεν ἅπαντας καὶ ἐδόξαζον τὸν θεόν, καὶ ἐπλήσθησαν φόβου λέγοντες ὅτι Εἶδομεν **παράδοξα** σήμερον.³⁶

34 “Einschübe, Akzentuierungen und Nachträge wird [...] die Darstellung des Wunders in seiner *Geradlinigkeit* beeinträchtigt, die Einsträngigkeit aufgehoben.”

35 “das es ihm erlaubt, das Störende als Element eines neuartigen, eigentümlichen literarischen Zusammenhangs jenseits des erwarteten zu erkennen, durch welchen ihm ein neuartiges, eigentümliches Handeln Gottes gegenüber den Menschen vor Augen geführt wird. An erzählerisch überraschenden Zügen kann und soll der Leser zu der *für ihn* überraschenden Einsicht in die *Universalität* und so auch *Aktualität* des Dargestellten kommen.”

36 “Da *gerieten alle außer sich*; sie priesen Gott und sagten voller *F u r c h t*: Heute haben wir **etwas Unglaubliches** gesehen.” (LK 5.26).

Significant here is, first of all, that we have a new term at the observer level, namely: ἔκστασις (*ekstasis*, ecstasy, to be beyond oneself, be utterly amazed, or even in a “trance”). This term appears in the Greek New Testament seven times and marks a significant increase over θαυμάζω (*thaumazō*), ἐθαμβήθησαν (*ethambēthēsan*) and also over ἐκπλήσσω (*ekplēssō*). *Ekstasis* is used, in addition to Luke 5.26, once again, this time with the striking translation “And they were astonished with a great astonishment” (Mk 5.42).³⁷ And yet, there is still greater *amplificatio*, as (*ekstasis*) is later increased to φόβου (*phobou*, fear). At the observer level, thus, there is a complete, exorbitantly increased wonder, which is particularly emphasized through the doubling of the observer reaction. In Luke, the central position of being seized is a condition for the topic of forgiveness of sins, one that is so crucial for this story (Roose 2013: 563–564). Only in this extreme state and through this extreme state can the message of forgiveness of sins be conveyed.

Striking in Luke 5.26, however, is the emergence of the concept τὸ παράδοξον (*to paradoxon*; pl. τὰ παράδοξα [*ta paradoxa*]). This does not mark the observers’ reaction but that to which they are reacting. We find ourselves at the object level; this is something that is “unerwartet bis ‘unglaublich, unvernünftig, paradox’” [unexpected, implausible, irrational, paradoxical] (Nanko 2001: 386). Karl-Heinrich Bieritz translates *parádoxa* with “Wunderdinge” [marvels] and Zimmermann opts for “Wundertaten” [miracles] (Bieritz 2007: 290; Zimmermann 2013: 19). In the King James Version it is “strange things,” in the Einheitsübersetzung it is “etwas Unglaubliches” [something incredible] in Luther “seltsame Dinge” [unusual things], and in the Elberfelder Bibel “außerordentliche Dinge” [extraordinary things].³⁸ As with the use of the word τὰ παράδοξα in the New Testament, this forced merging of the observer and object levels is unique, appearing but once, namely, in the above description of healing the paralytic (Lk 5.26).

The lexical ambiguity of the miracle concept described here should not be read as a mere history of terms and definitions. Rather, this ambiguity makes

³⁷ This is from the miracle story about Jairus’s daughter and the bleeding woman. At Bible Study Tool there is, for ἔκστασις, also the lovely translation “a throwing of the mind out of its normal state, alienation of mind.” (<<http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/ekstasis.html>>). – In the Acts of the Apostles, meanwhile, *ekstasis* is translated three times as “trance” (10.10, 11.5, 22.17); in both the Einheitsübersetzung and in Luther it is translated as “Verzückung”).

³⁸ In addition to the “strange things” of the King James Version, other English translations of τὰ παράδοξα are things that are “remarkable,” “unimaginable,” “extraordinary,” “wonderful,” “marvellous,” “incredible,” “amazing” and “unusual.”

it evident how unusual events call for discourse, how unusual events give rise to religious and epistemological upheavals, and how, all told, the always precarious theoretical relationship between the observer and the object level is negotiable. The difficulty of placing the concept of the miracle into a clear category points to epistemological, theological, and disciplinary fault lines. We must also consider whether this difficulty is not linked with the fact that here we have to discuss the fundamental problem of which theoretical and discursive means are available to us when we are faced with phenomena that, because of their exceptionality, seem to undermine theory and discourse alike. The problems that the concept of the miracle imposes on balancing the observer and object levels go together in such a way that the concept of the miraculous fundamentally deconstructs the distinction between the object and observer levels, and thus also calls into question the distinctions between discourse and that which is beyond discourse.

3 Non-explanations of the non-explainable

For a long time the theology of miracles, which here primarily means the Protestant direction that was stamped by the enlightened rationalist eighteenth century, was an explanatory theology. The inexplicable, the supernatural, and the miraculous were collectively explained away through reason, examples being “accommodation theory” (Johann Salomo Semler [1725–91]), demythologizing (Johann Gottfried Eichhorn [1753–1827], Johann Philipp Gabler [1753–1826], David Friedrich Strauss [1808–1874] or Rudolf Bultmann [1884–1976]), form-critical analysis (Gerd Theisse [*1943]), or the redaction criticism approach (Udo Schnelle [*1952]).³⁹ All of these approaches have one thing in common: they explain away the inexplicable of that which cannot be explained; they use reason to domesticate the exceptionality and the impossibility of miracles. Referring to such miracle text exegeses, Zimmermann speaks pointedly of an “Ent-Wunderung,” a doing away with the miraculous (Zimmermann 2013: 12). Especially in the past two decades, however, there has been a growing trend to once again take miracles seriously as miracles, and to regard the rhetorically and narratively staged inexplicable in miracle *texts* as a category of knowledge. It is to this trend that I now turn my attention.

³⁹ See Zimmermann (2011) and Alkier’s: “Jenseits von Enthmythologisierung und Rehistorisierung” (1998).

As we have seen in the story about Jesus healing the paralytic, the witnesses to the miracle are beyond themselves with fear and astonishment. They marvel, because they have been utterly surprised by the unexpected event. This gives rise to moments of fascination and moments of terror, fear, or of an anxiety without directionality. There is, in the face of the miraculous a sense of “Schauder,” of shuddering awe (Geppert and Kössler 2011: 62). As the Catholic priest and theologian Romano Guardini writes, “A miracle is a process that draws attention to the unusual. This unusualness, however, [is] meant in a radical sense: as something that stands out from everything that is of this world, something other than all that is earthly and natural” (1959: 12).⁴⁰ The miracle arouses terror because it is “completely different,” and its occurrence is something “that we cannot even begin to understand” (Englisch 2006: 44).⁴¹ For Rudolf Otto, miracles are an “‘indirektes Ausdrucksmittel’ und Bestandteil des Numinosen” [“indirect modes” and “elements of the numinous”] (Geppert and Kössler 2011: 16, note 15),⁴² and the numinous, as a shapeless divine presence, is severed from any connection to language, reality, and human sense. It can neither be proven nor disproven. Only in the mode of *Mysterium tremendum* (awe, fear) or of *Mysterium fascinans* (attraction) can the miraculous be experienced, can it be lived. As Otto writes, the miracle gives rise to this experiencing because:

Nothing can be found in all the world of “natural” feelings bearing so immediate an analogy [...] to the religious consciousness of ineffable, unutterable mystery, the “absolute other,” as the incomprehensible, unwonted, enigmatic thing, in whatever place or guise it may confront us. (Otto 1958: 63)⁴³

As a result, the individual is transcended by means of the overwhelming formless divine that is not understood. Crucial is that the numinous, being an incom-

⁴⁰ “Wunder ist ein Vorgang, der auf Ungewöhnliches aufmerksam macht. Diese Ungewöhnlichkeit aber [ist] in einem radikalen Sinn gemeint: als etwas, das sich aus allem Welthaften heraushebt; anders ist, als alles Irdisch-Natürliche.” In Guardini this “completely other” is God, who is independent of the world (i.e. “der Welt gegenüber unabhängig[] Gott[]”) (1959: 12). Experiencing a miracle leads one to a “überweltliche Wirklichkeit” [transcendent reality] (Guardini 1959: 17).

⁴¹ “die wir nicht einmal im Ansatz verstehen können.”

⁴² The English translation is taken from John W. Harvey’s translation of Otto’s *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*.

⁴³ “Denn Nichts kann im natürlichen Bereiche der Gefühle gefunden werden was zu dem religiösen Gefühle des Unsagbaren Unaussprechlichen schlechthin Anders Geheimnisvollen eine so unmittelbare [...] Entsprechung hat wie das Unverständene Ungewohnte Rätselhafte, wo und wie es uns immer aufstoßen mag.” (Otto 2004: 83).

measurably completely other, constitutively poses the question of discourse in recognizing and theorizing the numinous. That is why the theologian Karl-Heinrich Bieritz binds the matter of miracles to the distinction sense/nonsense or meaning/non-meaning. For him, incommensurable events, precisely because they are designated as miracles, become a part of the interpreted world, since otherwise they would be beyond perception. As Bieritz writes, “no miracle, however strange, however powerful it may be, can truly save, can truly heal, can truly redeem. Miracles are signs that point to the mysterious. They are not the mysterious itself” (Bieritz 2007: 299).⁴⁴ By understanding the miracle as the semiotization of something that fundamentally cannot be semiotized, Bieritz adds yet another level to those of object and observer. With that, however, the miracle is not rendered impotent by being made into a sign, a visible referential moment. Rather, visible in the referential power of the miracle is not only the reference but also that which is invisible, the mysteriousness to which the miracle can, by definition, only inadequately refer. That is why Bieritz understands miracles as phenomena of power. One experiences their completely strange power (in spite of the semiotization) and, in the mode of the inexplicable, permanently careens – without being able to opt for either side – between sense and non-sense, between meaning and non-meaning. Miracles are therefore “border phenomena”: “Their location is neither in this or that world, but, as it were, on the border itself, a border that they both mark and cross” (2007: 291).⁴⁵ Ulrich Nanko puts forth a very similar argument when he writes, “the high information value of the ‘unexpected’ makes [the miracle] a convenient signifier for various types of signifieds, thus, an ideal ‘sign’” (Nanko 2001: 386).⁴⁶ Crucial in this context is that the signifier will never cover the signified and that the miracle will always live by constitutively perpetuating the difference between the signifier and the signified. In this sense, a miracle could be read as a permanent deferral because the power behind it – the numinous, God, the Holy Spirit – can be marked as the

44 “Kein Wunder, und sei es noch so fremd, noch so gewaltig, kann wirklich erretten, kann wirklich heilen, kann wirklich erlösen. Wunder sind Zeichen, die auf das Geheimnis weisen. Das Geheimnis selbst sind sie nicht.” The very language Bieritz employs points to the difference between “miracle” as a term or designation and miracle as a “ganz und gar fremden Welt” [an utterly strange world], that is, as unnamable concept (2007: 294).

45 “Ihren Ort haben sie nicht in dieser oder jener Welt, sondern gleichsam auf der Grenze selbst, einer Grenze, die sie zugleich markieren wie überschreiten.” Consequently, miracles have metaleptic characteristics. See also Bieritz (2007: 301).

46 “Der hohe Informationswert des ‘Unerwarteten’ macht es [das Wunder] zum geeigneten Bedeutungsträger für Signifikate verschiedenster Art, also zum idealen ‘Zeichen.’”

difference between meaning and non-meaning, and can never be reduced to either a specific strange message or to kerygmatic message.

The distinction between meaning and non-meaning, however, is not so easy to contain. Indeed, one can, in the manner of Niklas Luhmann, apprehend this distinction by arguing that non-meaning must always be meaningful. As Urs Stäheli writes in a commentary on Luhmann, “The negation of meaning can only be, in turn, a sensible operation and it thus reproduces the meaning it negates” (2000: 69).⁴⁷ Luhmann himself states, “Any attempt to negate meaning on the whole would presuppose meaning. [...] A muddle of objects is never meaningless. A pile of rubble, for example, is immediately recognizable as such [...]” (1995: 62).⁴⁸ Rather than deconstructing meaning, the sensible negation of meaning increases the complexity of systems, thereby increasing the complexity of meaning (Stäheli 2000: 73). Although Luhmann also observes moments of non-meaning, these moments are always overarched by meaning or quickly extinguished:

But everything that can be perceived and processed in the world of meaning systems must assume the form of meaning; otherwise, it remains a momentary impulse, an obscure mood, or even a crude shock without connectivity, communicability, or effect within the system. (Luhmann 1995: 63)⁴⁹

Stäheli, in contrast, attempts in his deconstructive reading of systems theory to comprehend seriously the “crude shock” as a moment of non-meaning in theoretical terms, while also saving it as a moment of the incomprehensible. He conceives of non-meaning as a “transgression that has freed itself from the dialectic sublation and does not keep or potentialize the exceeded, but removes and displaces the meaning” (Stäheli 2000: 76).⁵⁰ However, this in no way entails a “neg-

⁴⁷ “Die Negation von Sinn kann nur eine wiederum sinnvolle Operation sein und reproduziert so den von ihr negierten Sinn.”

⁴⁸ Translated by John Bednarz, Jr. and Dirk Baecker. The original reads: “Jeder Anlauf zur Negation von Sinn überhaupt würde also Sinn wieder voraussetzen. [...] Ein Durcheinanderbringen von Objekten ist niemals sinnlos, ein Trümmerhaufen zum Beispiel ist sofort als solcher erkennbar.” (Luhmann 1984: 96–97).

⁴⁹ “Aber alles, was in der Welt der Sinnsysteme rezipiert und bearbeitet werden kann, muß diese Form von Sinn annehmen; sonst bleibt es momenthafter Impuls, dunkle Stimmung oder auch greller Schreck ohne Verknüpfbarkeit, ohne Kommunikabilität, ohne Effekt im System.” (Luhmann 1984: 98) See also Luhmann (2013: 1–35) for a conceptual consideration that is specifically connected to religion.

⁵⁰ “Transgression [zu denken], die sich von der dialektischen Aufhebung befreit hat und das Überschriftene nicht beibehält oder potentialisiert, sondern den Sinn entrückt und verrückt.”

ativer Essentialismus des Nicht-Sinns” [a negative essentialism of non-meaning] and there is no location of non-meaning, no form of non-meaning, no substance of non-meaning; rather, moments of non-meaning surface whenever they are “(mis)understood” in their own “impossibility” (Stäheli 2000: 74).⁵¹ The relationship between meaning and non-meaning can only be detected through a misreading and therefore, in Derrida’s phrasing, the “nonmeaning [...] keeps itself beyond the opposition of the positive and the negative” (Derrida 2001: 345).

I would now like to read miracles – which can also be interpreted with a “crude shock,” as a crude disruption and as sudden interruptions of the impossible into systems of knowledge and meaning – as paradigmatic moments for negotiating meaning and non-meaning. I approach this in a strictly *formal-syntactic* sense, since miracles assume this paradigmatic function *regardless of whether one believes in them or not*, whether one sees them as an evocation of the numinous (*miracula*), whether one considers them as a natural wonder (*mirabilia*), or whether one argues along Catholic or Protestant lines. Because miracles, as ambiguous moments, radically arouse wonder and astonishment, because they radically confuse, put forth disrupting and inexplicable events, they transgress existing orders. Their “anarchic quality” radically confuses the well-honed relations between meaning and non-meaning, between the object level and the metalevel, between event and discourse, between experience and language. As anarchic moments they are border phenomena that have no antonym but, instead, mark, move, and cross the very border. Also, as anarchic moments, they can undermine orders in the service of laying bare structural conditions, while also bringing about new orders. I read miracles as paradigmatic moments that epitomize the break (the non-meaning) *and* the ordering and merging (the meaning).

It is mainly thanks to Ruben Zimmermann that the miraculous in wonders and marvels can again receive its due. In his works he emphasizes that “we may once again wonder,” that it is not the explicability of the miraculous but the potential for wonder, those moments of being astonished beyond measure, and the inexplicable that should be the focus of the miraculous.⁵² Zimmermann provides no ontological arguments in this regard, for he is not concerned with the issue of whether or not miracles are possible. Instead, as surprising as it may be for a theologian, he adopts what he explicitly calls a literary studies position. In a philological reading it becomes evident that the early Christian mira-

51 “Sinn muss in Beziehung zu seiner eigenen Unmöglichkeit (miß-)verstanden werden werden [...]” (Stäheli 2000: 74).

52 See especially Zimmermann (2012, 2013: 12–18 and 30–49) In the following section I argue along the lines of Zimmerman and I do not cite every single argument inspired by his work.

cle stories linguistically and performatively correlate extraordinary events (the acts of Jesus) with astonishment, being seized, terror, and the sensory. There is a staging, a putting on display of the immense and moving effect the miracles have on the observers. This especially intensive experiential effect, which is experienced also physically, is the focal point of the texts. The point of these texts is not to accommodate Jesus's miracles to the daily reality and the world view of the observers, and neither is it to use *logos* to bring them closer to the doctrine of Jesus or to present the miracle worker Jesus with the help of unusual events; the point is to place the observers in an extreme state, to evoke an intense experience that then, precisely on account of its intensity, can be the basis for the healing power of miracles, and at least hold out the prospect of an existential experience. The mode of radical sensory intensity (ἐκστασις), which is increased to the point of dread (φόβου), receives another *amplificatio* in the foregrounding of "touching." Touching correlates to the intensive sensory aspects of astonishment and terror, and this correlation marks the nucleus of the New Testament miracle stories: "According to this thesis, the text should be understood as a miracle text insofar as it represents an action or an event as perceivable through the senses and concrete, while emphasizing the breaching of normality and of the expectable. (Zimmermann 2013: 12–13)⁵³ The textual intention of the miracle story is, thus, not mediation but disruption or disturbance. The "abnormal" events astonish the observers beyond measure, and it is here that the textually intentional vanishing point lies. Zimmermann's examples are Mark 2.12 ("We never saw it on this fashion") and Matthew 9.33 ("and the multitudes marvelled, saying, It was never so seen in Israel"). Luke 5.26, as we have seen, has them "amazed" by things previously unseen ("strange things"; παράδοξα). By converging extreme, hopeless situations (being sick, possessed, dead) with exorbitant reactions ("beyond measure" or "beside oneself") and incredible acts (healing, etc.), the texts reinforce the miraculous, notes Zimmermann. Amplification of effect is the goal of these narrative elements:

Considered narratologically, this involves retarding elements that, though they deliberately slow down and even disrupt the course of action, are nevertheless effective: readers should grasp that something is being told that breaches normality. Clearly, these texts should have "hair-raisingly miraculous" and "sensational" effects. (Zimmermann 2013: 13)⁵⁴

53 "Der Text möchte, so die These, als Wundertext insofern verstanden werden, als er eine Handlung bzw. ein Ereignis als sinnlich wahrnehmbar und konkret darstellt und dabei das Durchbrechen der Normalität und des Erwartbaren betont."

54 "Narratologisch betrachtet geht es hierbei um retardierende Elemente, die ganz bewusst den Handlungsablauf verzögern und sogar Stören, aber damit ihre Wirkung nicht verfehlen: Die Leser und Leserinnen sollen begreifen, dass hier etwas erzählt wird, das die Normalität durch-

The miracle texts, therefore, fundamentally concern themselves with effects and act out the various possibilities of sensational-sensory experience. The divine message is, so to speak, so exorbitant that it cannot simply be explained, announced or reported, which is why an exceptional bodily and intellectual state must be created so that God's exorbitance and Christ's holiness can, rather than being understood, be experienced in a moment of intensity. It is also for this reason that in some stories there is even an amplification of the miraculous (from amazement, to astonishment "beyond measure," to fear). Nevertheless, astonishment and fear do not lead to a blinded staring, for, rather than being a simple arresting of sense and understanding, here astonishment, being beside oneself and fear combine to serve as a juncture for combining sensory aspects and sense; the meaning of miracles lies in the sensory aspect of experiencing them. When the sensory is involved, it is not only a matter of divine presence but also a paradoxical situation: the divine message should nevertheless be, for all the astonishment and awe, "understood" through this disruption. Here, sense and sensory aspects, meaning and presence, do not stand in opposition; rather, the adequate mode for relating revelatory knowledge is through the senses.⁵⁵ This paradoxical aspect is not always necessary – after all, the vast majority of the New Testament does not consist of miracle stories – and yet, again and again, it becomes necessary. In this sense I follow Vanessa Offen in interpreting the miraculous as a junction of two "theologies." On the one hand there is the idea of grounding faith in *logos* (and here Offen refers to Benedict XVI's exegeses of John and Paul); on the other, Offen brings Alain Badiou into play, who reads Paul completely differently, namely, through the lens of experience as "pure event" (Otten 2011: 28): "One has to start from the event as such, which is acosmic and illegal, refusing integration into any totality and signaling nothing."⁵⁶ And if we, additionally, address this referring to *logos* and "nothing"

bricht. Offenbar sollen diese Texte gerade 'haarsträubend miraculös' und 'sensationell' [...] wirken."

55 Similarly, Matuschek: "The goal is not to overcome the initial amazement, for then one would know how it conducts itself; rather [the goal is] to increase astonishment as devotion to human reason before the inexplicable. The intensity of the *admiration* becomes a measure for recognition in so far as it measures how much of God's greatness one is able to see." ("Das Ziel ist nicht die Überwindung anfänglicher Verwunderung, weil man dann wüßte, wie es sich verhält, sondern die Steigerung des Staunens als Devotion der menschlichen Vernunft vor dem Unerklärlichen. Die Intensität der *admiratio* wird zum Maß der Erkenntnis, insofern sich diese dadurch bemißt, wieviel von der Größe Gottes man zu sehen fähig ist.") (Matuschek 1991: 64).

56 This is Ray Brassier's translation (Badiou 2003: 42) of the sentence Offen quotes. We will recall that Ulrich Nanko explained the miraculous on the basis of the "high information value of

in miracle *stories*, miracle *texts*, miracles, and *literature*, then we are always concerned with the media-induced presentation of “pure events” which, in their presentation, become moments that must also be interpreted exactly because they have been read *and* seen.

Precisely in this respect, too, is it important to take Zimmermann’s philologically observations seriously. It is significant that the narrative strategy – since his is a narratological argument – proceeds not through sober reporting. Rather, “the narrated amazement at the story-level in the act of reading jumps over to the reader” (Zimmermann 2013: 14).⁵⁷ Fear beyond measure, astonishment and terror are made double, *histoire* and *discours* are so closely related to each other that also those reading can marvel utterly; thereby the extraordinary, in its enigmatic essence, is presented as something inescapably miraculous and thus an inexplicable event. Readers cannot assume discursive distance, for they too are drawn into the miraculous occurrence.

This constellation is dependent on the parameters of narrating and not on the ontological question of whether or not miracles can exist. Miracle stories tell, they do not lay out an argument, and the sensory knowledge miracles kindle is therefore conditioned by the textual constellations of the narration. It has no text-independent, and thus also no media-independent, no immediate, “being” in the world. As Zimmermann summarizes:

What is narrated here should not be accommodated, made rationally plausible or palpably *relativized* in terms of history of religion. It should trigger fear and terror, give rise to irritations and questions also in the reader [...]. It should call into question precisely the known, the rational and the plausible. This uncertainty and fear must in no way be downplayed or rendered exegetically docile. But neither is this a fear that lames or makes one doubt. It is productive and effective and ultimately leads to knowledge. It calls for a “heuristics of fear” (Zimmermann 2013: 15)⁵⁸

And a few pages later:

the ‘unexpected’”, meaning that a miracle becomes a “convenient signifier for various types of signifieds, thus, an ideal ‘sign’” – now as a “sign of nothing,” now as a “sign of everything.”
 57 “die erzählte Verwunderung von der Ebene der story im Akt des Lesens auf den Lesenden überspring[en].”

58 “Was hier erzählt wird, soll nicht religionsgeschichtlich angepasst, rational plausibilisiert oder bildlich *relativiert* werden. Es soll Furcht und Schrecken auslösen, beim Lesenden selbst Irritationen und Fragen hervorrufen [...]. Es soll gerade Bekanntes, Rationales und Plausibles in Frage gestellt werden. Diese Verunsicherung und Furcht darf keineswegs heruntergespielt oder exegetisch gefügig gemacht werden. Sie ist aber auch keine Furcht, die lähmt oder verzweifeln lässt. Sie ist produktiv und wirksam und führt letztlich zur Erkenntnis. Sie befördert eine ‘Heuristik der Furcht’.”

the narrative [is] targeted at action and reception and it fulfils a specific function for the *recipient*, which includes both cognitive and affective aspects [...]: Those reading are incorporated into a process that begins with irritation and uncertainty and can entail a change in knowledge and behavior. In any case, through the process of a refigured reading, they are invited to acquire a (new) “narrative identity” (Ricer [...]). (Zimmermann 2013: 32)⁵⁹

Zimmermann’s philological theology of miracles provides us with the crucial background for our perspectives, since it shows that miracle stories are intentionally ambiguous, that they deliberately irritate, disrupt, disturb, and unsettle, thereby calling into question concepts of the world. Also, because astonishment, terror, and the incredible events are left ambivalent, they implement an epistemological mode that, instead of the cultural technology of logocentric comprehension, holds forth the cultural technology of ambiguous and sensory recognition.⁶⁰ Miracle stories deliver miracles to us that should be *experienced* as incomprehensible moments and *understood* as incomprehensible moments. In such a way, miracles function like art or, vice versa, art functions like miracles. Art and miracles correlate in moments of sensory recognition, intensity of experience, ambiguity, irritation, astonishment and terrors as media of experience and of understanding as well as – and because of this – in the tearing down of old orders, and showing of new possibilities of order, in trying out alternative, hard-to-integrate models of reality.⁶¹ And yet art and literature are not miracles, just as miracles are not art or literature!

And in that case miracles cannot be interpreted in the surprising way that Michel de Certeau reads the miraculous, namely as an “act of showing” that merely reinforces “the Church representation” (Certeau 1995: 87). Reinforces because, as an “act of showing,” the miracle is “a real modification of man’s expe-

59 “die Erzählung [ist] auf Wirkung und Rezeption ausgerichtet und erfüllt eine spezifische Funktion für den *Rezipienten*, die kognitive wie auch affektive Aspekte einschließt [...]: Die Lesenden werden in einen Prozess hineingenommen, der mit Irritation und Verunsicherung beginnt und zu einer Erkenntnis- oder Verhaltensänderung gelangen kann. In jedem Fall aber werden sie im Prozess des refigurierenden Lesens eingeladen, eine (neue) ‘narrative Identität’ ([...]) zu erlangen.” That miracle stories are written into the New Testament text as “Irritationen, Abweichungen” [irritations, deviations] and “Brüche” [ruptures] is Alkier’s argument (1998: 30, see also 38).

60 In the context of Medieval miracle *narratives*, Spangenberg speaks of an “ambivalent alterity of the texts” as well as of “leaps and paradoxes” “Sprünge und Paradoxien” (1987: 9). It appears that the narrative and logical structure of texts that relate miracles have a tendency towards leaps and paradoxes precisely because they are reporting miracles, that is, ambiguous moments.

61 Tyradellis has established similar correlations between miracles and art (2011: 18), as have Schierz (2007) and Schawelka (2007).

rience: vision slowly invaded the previous domain of touch or of hearing” (Certeau 1995: 89).⁶² As we have seen, touch plays a crucial role in miracles, just as the entire polysensory apparatus and the entire narratological constellation plays a crucial role, which entails that by no means can one relegate miracles to being facile instruments of Church representation. The Church may well be tempted to put them to such use, but the aesthetic and epistemological ambiguity of the miracle (at both the object and the observer levels) can never be controlled. The miracle simultaneously reinforces and weakens Church representation. It reinforces representation when miracles are interpreted as acts of a transcendent God, but it weakens representation because affects (astonishment, awe, and fear) and media (miracle stories and reports of miracles) are beyond what can be controlled.⁶³

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⁶² Here de Certeau is writing about the period 1350–1450, for which his statement may be valid in terms of painting, optics and cartography; however, the miracle’s ambivalent position cannot be adequately grasped.

⁶³ For an argument similar only in its approach, see Tyradellis’s “Pfingsten und Babel” (2011: 64–65). See also Pfaller (2011: 237), who provides a specific, albeit a very generalizing, counter-argument to de Certeau: “The more institutionalized religions are, and the more they are based on extensive apparatuses – with professional functionaries in established hierarchies – the more they require regular processes, orderly official channels and reliable ‘liturgical’ forms of enforcement. In that case, miracles have a destabilizing and disruptive effect. [...] A religion that is dependent on miracles, has, just like an economy that requires miracles, found itself in a deep crisis.” (“Je institutionalisierter Religionen sind, je mehr sie auf umfangreichen Apparaten beruhen – mit professionellen Funktionären in festgelegten Hierarchien –, desto mehr benötigen sie auch regelmäßige Abläufe, geordnete Amtswege und verlässliche ‘liturgische’ Vollzugsformen. Wunder wirken da meist destabilisierend und Störend. [...] Eine Religion, die auf Wunder angewiesen ist, befindet sich, genau wie einer Wirtschaft, die Wunder braucht, in einer tiefen Krise.”)

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