

Fragment, Axiom, Diagram: A Review of *Dag Nacht*

1. Introduction: a book that refuses its own form

Dag Nacht: De axiomatisatie van het digitale (2021) by René Oto is a deliberately unstable object. It presents itself as an essay, yet undermines the continuity traditionally associated with philosophical prose; it invokes axioms, yet persistently sabotages the very idea of a closed formal system; it combines dense theoretical reflection with a sequence of sparse, hand-drawn images that neither illustrate nor clarify the text, but rather place it under further strain. The book is best understood not as a treatise about the digital, but as an attempt to think from within the conditions of digitality—fragmentation, discreteness, iteration, standardisation, and abstraction—while simultaneously resisting their totalising logic.

The title *Dag Nacht* (“Day Night”) already announces a non-synthetic duality. This is not the dialectical opposition of day and night culminating in a higher unity, but a continuous oscillation, a blinking or stroboscopic alternation. Throughout the text, Oto mobilises figures from German Idealism, Critical Theory, post-structuralism, media theory, and speculative philosophy (Hegel, Benjamin, Adorno, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, Badiou, Critchley, Land), not in order to construct a system, but to stage what might be called a *philosophy of breakdown*: breakdown of totality, of communication, of system, of representation.

The book’s subtitle, *De axiomatisatie van het digitale*, is therefore deeply ironic. What is axiomatised here is not the digital as a coherent structure, but the impossibility of grounding it in axioms without remainder. The digital appears less as a technical domain than as a metaphysical condition that shapes language, memory, space, number, and subjectivity.

2. Fragmentarisch materialisme and the refusal of totality

One of the central motifs of *Dag Nacht* is the fragment. Oto explicitly aligns himself with a lineage that includes Walter Benjamin’s *Einbahnstraße*, Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, and the Frühromantik fascination with fragmentary writing

. The fragment is not treated as an incomplete piece awaiting completion, but as a form that actively resists closure. Oto’s reflections on the fragment repeatedly return to a paradox: the fragment presupposes the whole it negates, yet the whole is never accessible except as a fiction.

This tension is articulated through a dialogue between Hegel and Adorno. Hegel’s dictum “Das Wahre ist das Ganze” is juxtaposed with Adorno’s inversion: “Das Ganze ist das Unwahre.” Rather than choosing one side, Oto keeps both in play, suggesting that the fragment is co-present with the whole as its internal contradiction. What emerges is a position one might call *fragmentarisch materialisme*: a materialism without dialectical reconciliation, in

which fragments proliferate without converging into a synthesis.

This stance has consequences for method. The book repeatedly undermines systematic ambition. Oto cites Nietzsche’s suspicion of system-builders and echoes Adorno’s failure to complete a fully non-identitarian philosophy. Even the invocation of axiomatics—most explicitly in the speculative “H-axioma’s”—is framed as provisional, performative, and ultimately doomed by Gödelian incompleteness. No formal system can contain all truths; therefore, any attempt to axiomatically ground the digital is necessarily partial and self-undermining.

3. Memory theatre, language, and excommunication

A second major axis of the book concerns memory, language, and communication. Drawing on Simon Critchley’s *Memory Theatre* and Frances Yates’s work on the art of memory, Oto develops a conception of memory not as storage (Gedächtnis) but as internalisation (Erinnerung) in the Hegelian sense

. Memory is dynamic, recursive, and haunted by repetition-with-difference.

Against this background, the book offers a sustained meditation on the limits of communication. Influenced by Galloway, Thacker, and Wark’s *Excommunication*, Oto treats communication not as a neutral exchange of information but as a field structured by exclusion, noise, and breakdown. Xenocommunication—communication with the strange, the inhuman, or the unintelligible—becomes a key concept. Silence, noise, and distortion are not failures of communication but constitutive conditions.

Language, in this context, appears as both necessity and threat. Echoing Barthes’s claim that language is fascist and Deleuze and Guattari’s assertion that language issues orders, Oto portrays language as a machine that imposes form on life. Strategies of resistance include fragmentation, nonsense, concrete poetry, and “gestoorde teksten”—texts whose disruption signals both aggression and vulnerability. The schizophrenic fragment (schizofragment) occupies a privileged place here: suspended between sense and nonsense, communication and excommunication.

This emphasis on breakdown resonates strongly with the digital. Machine memory, software, RAM and ROM are contrasted with embodied memory; digital language processes without understanding, without experience. The digital thus radicalises the separation between sign and sense, between storage and meaning. *Dag Nacht* does not mourn this condition nostalgically, but neither does it celebrate it. The tone is ambivalent, often pessimistic, occasionally apocalyptic.

4. Number, axiom, and hexasofie

One of the most idiosyncratic and provocative sections of the book concerns number and what Oto calls “hexasofie.” Numbers, far from being neutral tools, are presented as metaphysical forces that structure reality and drive subjects toward abstraction and madness. References to biblical numerology, the number of the beast, Badiou’s “count-as-one,” and Nick Land’s numerological excesses converge in a critique of modern calculative rationality

The speculative H-axioma’s—linking logical symbols, the human hand, and binary notation—are emblematic of Oto’s approach. They are not offered as rigorous formalism, but as symbolic gestures that expose the anthropomorphic and historical residues embedded in supposedly abstract systems. The digital, grounded in binary logic and standardised measurement (SI units, ASCII, Unicode), is revealed as contingent rather than necessary.

Here, Oto’s critique intersects with broader concerns about capitalism, quantification, and bureaucratic abstraction. The reduction of human life to numbers—accounts, metrics, credits—is treated as a form of ontological violence. Against this, Oto gestures toward gift economies, mutual aid, and even speculative telepathy as counter-images, though these remain explicitly utopian and unresolved.

5. Space, technicity, and the night splint

The later prose section of *Dag Nacht* turns toward space and technicity, culminating in the striking metaphor of the “nachtsplank” (night splint). Space, Oto suggests, is always already technical; “technische ruimte” is a pleonasm. Drawing loosely on Cartesian and post-Cartesian debates about space, substance, and void, he imagines the universe as held together by a splint that stabilises the primordial split between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*

The philosopher’s task, in this quasi-surreal conclusion, is not to open spaces for discussion (contra Žižek or Sloterdijk), but to remove the splint—to let the universe collapse, to abolish space itself. This anti-space gesture is both comic and radical, oscillating between metaphysical speculation and bodily anecdote (the hospital, the night brace, plantar fasciitis). It encapsulates the book’s tone: earnest and ironic, theoretical and absurd, visionary and self-undermining.

6. The drawings: description without illustration

From page 22 onward, *Dag Nacht* presents a sequence of hand-drawn images, one per page, typically consisting of a thin vertical line (a stem) topped by a cluster, shape, or sign, all framed by the page’s margins and surrounded by darkness

. These drawings are often superficially reminiscent of flowers, antennas, trees, lollipops, or diagrams, yet none of these readings fully stabilises them.

Crucially, the drawings do not illustrate specific arguments from the text. There is no caption, no explicit reference, no explanatory link. Instead, they operate as parallel gestures, repeating a structural problem rather than representing an object. This is where a hermeneutical approach becomes necessary.

7. Hermeneutical account: diagram, repetition, and the axis

Hermeneutically, the drawings can be understood as **diagrams rather than images**. In the Deleuzian sense, a diagram does not depict a thing but maps a relation or a force. The recurring vertical line functions as an axis: connection, transmission, grounding, or support. The cluster at the top varies—chaotic scribbles, geometric lattices, spirals, radiating lines, cancelled symbols, textual fragments—yet always occupies the same position.

This repetition-with-variation mirrors the book’s philosophical structure. Just as the text returns obsessively to fragments, axioms, numbers, language, and breakdown without resolving them, the drawings return to a single compositional schema without closure. Each drawing is a failed attempt to stabilise meaning at the top of the axis.

Several hermeneutical readings can be layered:

- Signal and noise:**
The stem resembles an antenna or transmission line; the head becomes a site where signal dissolves into noise. This resonates with the book’s meditation on communication, xenocommunication, and excommunication.
- Axiom and corruption:**
The vertical line can be read as an axiom, a foundational postulate. The proliferating forms at the top represent the inevitable corruption, excess, or inconsistency that arises once the axiom is put to work.
- Memory theatre:**
Each drawing functions like a mnemonic locus: a place where something is stored, distorted, or overwritten. Yet unlike classical memory theatres, these loci do not stabilise recall; they destabilise it.
- Growth and failure:**
The quasi-botanical appearance of some drawings suggests growth, but this growth is malformed, constrained, or aborted. There is no organic harmony, only iterative deformation.
- Digital abstraction:**
The stark contrast between black and white, the reduction to line and cluster, echoes the binary logic

of the digital. Yet the hand-drawn irregularity resists computational smoothness.

Importantly, the drawings are not progressive. They do not develop toward a final form. There is no narrative arc. This refusal of progression aligns with Oto's anti-teleological stance. The reader is invited not to decode the images, but to dwell in their unresolved tension.

8. Text and image as a single apparatus

Taken together, the text and drawings form what might be called a **single speculative apparatus**. The prose theorises fragmentation, breakdown, and the impossibility of totalisation; the drawings enact it visually. Neither component is complete on its own. The drawings would risk aesthetic triviality without the text; the text would risk abstraction without the drawings' mute resistance.

In this sense, *Dag Nacht* belongs to a tradition of philosophical works that integrate visual elements not as decoration but as epistemic interventions (one might think of Wittgenstein's diagrams, Benjamin's montages, or even Malevich's Black Square, which Oto explicitly references). The craquelé of Malevich's square—its cracks and decay—serves as an apt metaphor: meaning appears not in purity, but in fracture.

9. Critical evaluation: strengths and limits

The strengths of *Dag Nacht* lie in its ambition and consistency. Oto is uncompromising in his refusal of easy synthesis. The book is intellectually generous, drawing on a wide range of thinkers without collapsing into mere citation. Its pessimism is reflective rather than cynical; its provocations are often productive.

At the same time, the book's weaknesses are inseparable from its strengths. The density of references can verge on overload; readers unfamiliar with the philosophical background may find themselves excluded. The speculative leaps—particularly around number mysticism and telepathy—risk appearing arbitrary or indulgent. The drawings, while conceptually resonant, may strike some readers as repetitive to the point of exhaustion.

Yet these risks seem knowingly embraced. *Dag Nacht* is not a book that seeks consensus or accessibility. It is a book that tests the reader's tolerance for ambiguity, frustration, and unresolved thought.

10. Conclusion: day/night without synthesis

In the end, *Dag Nacht* offers neither a theory of the digital nor a programme for resistance. Instead, it offers a sustained meditation on what it means to think under conditions where system, language, number, and communication are both indispensable and

destructive. The alternation of day and night remains unresolved; there is no dawn.

The value of the book lies precisely in this refusal. By staging fragmentation rather than overcoming it, by pairing dense prose with mute diagrams, Oto produces a work that does not merely describe the digital condition but performs it—critically, anxiously, and without consolation.