

INVESTIGATING IMAGE AND GESTURE:
CINEMA AND AGAMBEN:
ETHICS, BIOPOLITICS AND THE MOVING IMAGE

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Henrik Gustafsson, Asbjorn Gronstad (eds). New York and London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014, 264 pp.
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Emerging in 1970 with his first publication, *L'uomo senza contenuto* (*The Man Without Content*) Giorgio Agamben has become one of the most respected philosophers of a generation including the likes of Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou and fellow Italian Antonio Negri. In these past four decades, discussion pertaining to Agamben's contribution to contemporary philosophy is usually relegated to strictly political and ethical spheres, mostly in reference to his 1995 work *Homo Sacer: Il potere sovrano e la vita nuda* (*Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*). In this collection of articles released by Bloomsbury however, the contributors wish to escape the dominant trends of writing with respect to Agamben's oeuvre, and instead utilise his work in an engagement with the cinema.

Gustafsson and Gronstad's introduction to *Cinema and Agamben: Ethics, Biopolitics and the Moving Image* is notable, in the sense that it reads more like an academic clarion call than merely an introduction to a text. In two short paragraphs, Gustafsson and Gronstad comment upon what they perceive as an area of academia which lacks active engagement and research, that is, the area of intersection between film studies and philosophy. Citing Deleuze and Cavell as paradigmatic writers of a new mode of interaction between the two disciplines, Gustafsson and Gronstad remark that although both Cavell and Deleuze are highly (and rightly) praised for their articulations of cinematic philosophy, the lesson which they had seemed to impart (that one might apply a categorically philosophical framework upon the edifice of cinema, thereby highlighting new connections and uncovering new concepts), hasn't been as influential as one might have expected. There are of course exceptions to the rule, and the authors cite the establishment of various

journals and organizations which solely concern themselves with this interdisciplinary field as evidence. But, as they state clearly, “the epistemological potential of this engagement certainly seems far from exhausted” (1).

By publishing this collection, the “first book of original scholarship on the nexus between its two titular subjects” (2), Gustafsson and Gronstad seek to draw attention to the enormous potential that exists in combining an extant body of work by a philosopher with an investigation into either general questions concerning cinema as a whole (it's conceptual themes, mechanical processes, aesthetic qualities etc) or more localized questions regarding only one film. That Agamben's writing hasn't already been examined in depth *vis a vis* cinema is certainly a surprise, given the degree to which his oeuvre is interspersed with visual concerns. This concern is evident in the opening articles of *Cinema and Agamben*, written by the Italian philosopher himself, which, according to the book's blurb, are seen here for the first time translated into English: 'For an Ethics of the Cinema' and 'Cinema and History: On Jean-Luc Godard'. Due to their enormous impact on the other articles, we should briefly outline the core arguments of Agamben's texts.

The first is a succinct glance at the transformation undergone by the actor, passing from the era of live theatre into the era of cinema and beyond. Agamben categorises live theatrical actors under the heading of “Persona,” for their method is one of transformative withdrawal, a mode of relinquishing their own identity in order to wear the mask (*persona*) of another – usually a more recognizable individual, a Hamlet or Oedipus. Cinema's actors, on the other hand, are categorised under the heading “Divo” (or “star”), for their identity, by way of contrast, supercedes the chosen role – Gary Cooper is never not Gary Cooper, no matter the character he is inhabiting on screen. Thus a remake of a film (think of the recent *Spiderman* reboot) is not the same film as its originator, but a totally new film, in a way that is incomparable to two separate productions of *King Lear*. In addition to this clever reversal, Agamben complexifies the star's individuality by noting that, when we refer to “Gary Cooper” or “Marlene Dietrich” we are not truly referring to the individual, but rather to “something that set theory would describe as classes containing only a single element (singletons) or belonging to themselves” (22). The star of the cinema is therefore an entity that obscures the boundaries between the individual and his/her collective image, or between individuation and serialisation.

Agamben's latter article is even shorter than 'For an Ethics of the Cinema', yet is utterly fascinating. 'Cinema and History: On Jean-Luc Godard' teases the reader with an insight

into a potentially new ontology of cinema, as rich and diverse as that of Deleuze's, as though we were glimpsing something wonderful through a key hole, with only enough time to sketch its form before it vanishes. Drawing most explicitly on Deleuze and Walter Benjamin, Agamben investigates the "constitutive link between history and cinema" manifested in Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinema* (1988-98) (25). The history implicated in Godard's seminal work is, according to Agamben, "a very particular history, a messianic history" (25). This history is non-chronological, the word "messianic" referring instead to a process of exposure and renewal in Godard's work, within which an eidetic property of the cinema is "saved" by the French filmmaker. What the property is, is simple: it is nothing less than the image. And how does the image become messianic? That answer too, is simple: through montage. In Agamben's eyes montage is a means by which the image resurfaces, by which it challenges anew. The conditions of the possibility of montage are named by Agamben as "repetition" and "stoppage". Repetition is characterized as the return of the possible, *qua* Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and, of course, Deleuze. In this way cinema is differentiated from the media, which only produces a content without its concomitant possibility-to-be-otherwise: cinema is analogous to memory, but a memory of that which never happened, whereas the media is a blanket, a unigeneric tool of tyranny, that makes the public powerless to imagine what *else* is/was possible. Stoppage is characterized as "revolutionary interruption", *qua* Benjamin (26). In this sense Agamben likens cinema to poetry, which, unlike prose, is also capable of producing ellipses, caesura and enjambents, or in other words, cinema and poetry share a capacity to upset the normative relation between a sensible construct and its meaning, by arresting the movement from signifier to signified. By means of montage, and its dual operation of repetition and stoppage, cinema can truly become a site of resistance, whereby the filmmaker can "decreate" otherwise tyrannical and omnipotent facts.

The introduction and opening two essays are both conceptually rigorous and intriguing, a genuine pleasure to read. The ensuing collection of eleven articles are, at first glance, relatively disparate, and yet on closer inspection one can see that they are broadly split (though not exclusively) into three categories; those that are mostly concerned with "gesture" (Chapters 1-3 and 6); those pertain to neurology/biopolitics (Chapters 4 and 5); and those that discuss "the archive" with relation to the Holocaust (Chapters 9 and 10).

There is a wealth of novel ideas and strongly argued positions contained within these chapters. However, unfortunately for the reader, on occasion we are subjected to less than

consistent critical reasoning. Such instances are rare – hence we mention them in the beginning, so that we might move through them quickly and spend more time on the positive aspects of this compelling collection.

The very first article following Agamben's work is one of those that seems to assert far more than it justifies intellectually. To be fair, James S. Williams' 'Silence, Gesture, Revelation: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Montage in Godard and Agamben' begins with a sense of promise: the author's intention to investigate the provocative meaning of the "messianic" potential of cinema, by examining Godard's *Soigne ta droite* (*Une place sur la terre*) (*Keep Your Right Up*, 1987) is an intriguing premise for an article. When he starts to discuss *Soigne ta droite* in depth, however, we encounter problems. Of one image, that of a sunset seen through a half-open window, where the window (cast in shadow) juxtaposes with the brightly lit cirrus clouds of the sky, Williams comments that "[i]t gleams with possibility: all is still to play for in this ultimate return to something approximating photography or silent cinema since all is still to be heard" (41). Mere sentences later, Williams states of the entire film that "we're left with the continuum of *light as sound* – the unquenchable hope of the recovery and redemption of love and innocence" (42). Over the page, of a horse galloping in stop-motion, Williams writes "the horse carries no-one on its back and is thus free of the burden of death or of any other type of symbol" (43). It is not the content of the claims which trouble us (they are indeed stimulating), but the rapidity with which Williams moves from one thought to another. We are too frequently forced to ask questions such as "Why is a horse, depicted riderless, immune to symbolization?" without receiving an answer. As though he were suddenly aware of a consistent absence of reasoning, at one point in the text Williams writes

as I have shown elsewhere, 'horizontal' moments of confluence, contiguity, conjunction and coincidence, which resist the vertical pull of [Godard's] characteristically dense, rhetorical and aggressively intellectual manoeuvres, constitute a kind of counter movement in the videographic montage... (44)

To refer to one's work prior to the current essay is perfectly acceptable, but this is not the first time Williams does so, nor is the above quote an insignificant step in the essay. As such to displace the argumentative grounding of Godard's "horizontal moments" onto another text presents a difficulty to the reader. However, though imprecise at times,

Williams' essay is eloquent and vivid. Such clarity is not always present in the other chapters. Take, for instance, this summary of Michael Haneke's *Caché* (2005), in Garret Stewart's article 'Counterfactual, Potential, Virtual: Towards a Philosophical Cinematics':

Caché (2005) opens famously with a node of what we might call counterfactuality degree zero: representation per se, a virtual counterspace held to the rectilineation of the image plane itself. We think we are watching a movie, but we are watching an inexplicable video within it. And this is an optical planarity disclosed, only after the fact, to be under observation by others than us, and at one remove from the manifest scene – namely, scanned by a French couple in voice-over watching a mysterious tape of their apartment exterior, onto whose street they then emerge (in front of the “primary” camera) in real time, only to appear next before the monitor by whose playback the inaugural image of the same house front has been activated as mysterious purview. (170)

As one can see, only the second sentence in this linguistic warren is particularly communicative. The obfuscation is a shame, as Stewart's text is thoughtful. He seeks to refine the discussion of Agamben *vis a vis* cinema to two pedagogically fruitful dimensions: 'narrative' on the one hand and the 'materiality of film' on the other.

These (prominent) issues aside, there is much to be lauded in this book. Janet Harbord's article 'Gesture, Time, Movement: David Claerbout meets Giorgio Agamben on the *Boulevard du Temple*' is an excellent treatise on how the movement of time is represented in the artist's work, and the theoretical means by which Claerbout's film installations interact with Agamben's conception of temporality, which, as Harbord deftly shows, is heavily indebted to Benjamin's notion of *kairological* time. Both Benjamin Noys' article 'Film-of-Life: Agamben's Profanation of the Image' and Silvia Casini's 'Engaging Hand to Hand with the Moving Image: Serra, Viola and Grandrieux's Radical Gestures' eloquently illustrate the subtleties of gesture in Agamben's writings, with illuminating references to cinema. Noys perhaps deserves more praise than Casini, as her didactic interplay is relatively straightforward: she investigates gesture in three artist's films, whereas Noys' analysis initially handles a comparison between Agamben's philosophy and the fiction of Franz Kafka, before using the consequences of such a collision to write engagingly on films as various as George Romero's *Living Dead* trilogy (1968-2010) and

Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). Pasi Väliäho's article 'Biopolitics of Gesture: Cinema and the Neurological Body' provides an admirable platform for the interaction of contemporary aesthetics with a historically-informed discussion of neurology and biology. Finally, and unsurprisingly, editor Henrik Gustafsson's essay 'Remnants of Palestine, or, Archaeology after Auschwitz' rounds off the book with an intricate, thoughtful critique of Godard and Claude Lanzmann, apropos of their interest in the Middle East and Nazi concentration camps. To begin this far-reaching task, Gustafsson utilises the fact that a young Agamben appeared as an extra in Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (*The Gospel According to Matthew*, 1964) to highlight the pair's intertwining "vocabularies and genealogies of thinking that underpin their respective projects" (208). In so doing Gustafsson emphasises the importance that notions of place and homeland have in both men's oeuvre, segueing smoothly into a discussion about archaeology – both the historical kind and the philosophical. In the case of philosophical archaeology Gustafsson claims, referencing Agamben's *Signatura rerum. Sul Metodo* (*The Signature of All Things: On Method*, 2008), that the goal in such an endeavour is not to recover an artifact which would actualize a history of ownership, or of origin, but rather to uncover something far more profound: that the place of origination itself never was, but has only been retroactively constructed over time. Utilizing this inverse dynamic of origin-after-event, Gustafsson carries the reader into a discussion about the meaningfulness of testimony, allowing the full weight of that word to resonate (primarily) with Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) and Godard's *Film socialisme* (2010), though other works by the two are also embroiled in the discussion. Gustafsson's work is clearly the product of an enormous amount of labour, and the dedication to his wide-ranging topic is embedded in every thought-provoking paragraph.

In summary, *Cinema and Agamben: Ethics, Biopolitics and the Moving Image* is a significant, urgent book. It offers excellent content, that is only rarely undermined by over-enthusiasm (a failing which we may easily forgive). For those of you interested in the confluence of Agamben and cinema, there is plenty here to come to grips with, not least in the articles we criticised. And as a whole, this collection makes a statement that feels contemporary and necessary, i.e. that film studies and philosophy are categories of scholarship, which, if synthesized, can provide valuable, invigorating results. I look forward to reading more such publications, taking steps down the same road. I just hope that they, whatever they are, can pull off such research with slightly more consistency.