Chapter 5 THE HOMELAND OF GESTURE – ART AND CINEMA

While the importance of language for Agamben has become evident throughout this book, it should also be seen as a theory of representation more broadly, one in which a general aesthetic—to which, as we have seen, Agamben often gives the name ‘poetics’—can work to disrupt and arrest the uses of that medium by calling into question the dominant logic that governs it.

And as we have seen from previous chapters, this representation is always done with a focus on ‘the political task of the coming generation’ . From his first book on art and subjectivity, through to his theorisation of advertising and pornography, Agamben has sought to examine the image in various manifestations. In what follows we will trace Agamben’s account of modern aesthetics as a form of atemporal nihilism through to his exploration of ‘gesture’ as the basis of cinema. This movement is made through recourse to the work of Aby Warburg who conceptualised Western art not as ‘images’ but as something like a series of stills in a giant roll of film. From Warburg we will turn to Agamben’s engagement with the cinema of Guy Debord in which we see the potential for a destabilisation of the current spectacular forms of mediatised culture. Of particular importance here is the idea of representation and representability, having the potential to rupture the homogenous narratives of history and to reveal to us instead the potentiality of gesture.

Agamben provides his own understanding of modernity as a point in which there was a fundamental shift in collective practices, knowledges and identities. These shifts are never, however, as radical as they at times appear as in the case of biopolitics which, contra Foucault, was not truly modern, but was instead inherited in the classical form of politics. It was simply in modernity that it took on an accelerated form. In 1970 Agamben published L’Uomo senza contenuto in Italian, which was republished in 1994 in Italian before being translated into English as The Man without Content in 1999. As Agamben’s first published monograph, it provides evidence of the continuity his thought has maintained from this early period. Yet we should also be clear that it is not as fully developed as his later work. Here he posits modernity as a more fundamental rupture or break, one that needs to be overcome and to ‘reacquire’ an original condition. We should therefore be wary as we proceed through a discussion of Agamben on art that the expression of the nihilism of modern art will
be tempered in his later work. It is also important to make a distinction here between nihilism and negativity. When Agamben invokes the term nihilism (a rejection of prevailing moral and religious beliefs) he does, as we will see, in reference to Friedrich Nietzsche. This nihilism should not be confused with the negativity we encountered in Chapter 1 which is clearly more ontological and foundational than the modern nihilism we see here. But for the early Agamben ‘ modern ’ art is constituted of a rupture in the relation between art, the spectator and the artist. The development of the modern notion of ‘ taste ’ , and of aesthetics mediating the relationship between viewer and object, works to obscure the origin of the artwork, and of our ‘ experience ’ of art.

Yet for Agamben the nihilism of modern art provides the condition for art to ‘ reacquire its original stature’, to once again become meaningful in and of itself, instead of acquiring meaning through the limited discourses that prescribe our experience of art. The central problem addressed by Agamben here is the development of modern aesthetics whose gaze has, in attempting to uncover an idea of disinterested beauty (in the tradition of Immanuel Kant attempting to find criteria of judgement in looking at a work of art that can answer the question ‘ is this beautiful? ’), also led to a passionate, deeply interested idea of the work of art, one that is self-reflexively concerned with the position of the artist rather than with the spectator.

As Agamben reminds us the move to the modern idea of disinterested aesthetic judgement is one that would have seemed ridiculous to those in the ancient world. For instance, Plato famously cast the poets and artists out of the city, the supposedly ideal community, as they were considered to have the potential to destroy it. As Agamben states of the ancient, and in particular Platonic, model of art, ‘ the power of art over the soul seemed to him (Plato) so great that he thought it could by itself destroy the very foundations of the city; but nonetheless, while he was forced to banish it he did so reluctantly ’ (MC :4). The ‘ divine terror ’ induced by art for Plato has today been transformed into something quite different. Agamben will go on to suggest that it is now the artist who has the most moving and impassioned experience of art, pouring himself into the object, with it becoming measurable not by aesthetic categories but its relation to the ‘ spiritual health ’ of the artist. While our distance from the Platonic notion of art is exemplified in the complete ineffectualness of art to arouse something like a ‘ divine terror ’, the inability of art to represent a unified image is symptomatic of the modern movement away from the
Agamben turns to the medieval Wunderkammer (literally cabinet of wonder and a distant relation to the 'cabinet of curiosities') as emblematic of a premodern understanding of the work of art. The principle was that paintings were included with a whole range of natural and cultural objects, such as manuscripts, unicorn horns, stuffed birds, canoes, etc. Often these would be the collection of a king that would be placed in the exhibition room, a 'sort of microcosm that reproduced, in its harmonious confusion, the animal, vegetable and mineral macrocosm' in which 'individual objects find their meaning only side by side with others, between the walls of a room in which the scholar could measure at every moment the boundaries of the universe' (MC: 30). These cabinets provided a mirror of the larger, divine concept of the world. Here art is designed to reflect the world, and can do so not as an individual object, but in accordance with a larger, more unified world view. As Agamben notes there is a profound non-relation between this idea of art and that of the modern museum or gallery. As he states, 'the work of art is no longer, at this point, the essential measure of man's dwelling on earth, which, precisely because it builds and makes possible the act of dwelling, has neither an autonomous sphere nor a particular identity, but is a compendium and reflection of the entire human world. On the contrary art has now built its own world for itself' (MC: 33). Art, in having built its own world, is unable to reach out beyond the world of the artist. The two phenomena which define modern art for Agamben, 'aesthetic judgement' and 'artistic subjectivity without content', can be seen as denying these two 'originary elements' of the work of art, namely its ability to communicate without aesthetic judgement and the unity between art and world. These questions with which Agamben begins his study of art are, if silently, concerned with the Romantic idea of art. Romanticism is a response to the philosophical and aesthetic problems raised by the enlightenment. The freedom to engage with art in an 'objective' sense, attempting to apply rational ideas of aesthetic judgement (rather than those infused with religious or political meaning), led to a freedom and autonomy for the artist, feeling no need to provide any justification as they once had. What this unleashed was a process of perpetual self-reflection on exactly what the idea of art meant, and of the artist. Artists now became obsessed with the work and its relation to the self rather than with the world outside of the work of art. This move to a 'Romantic' world view brings about a quest for 'authentic' experience, and a focus on the artist as the person who has the unique ability to still have such experiences. This narrative is rather common in academic practice, but in engaging it, Agamben's broader question is if we can or should want the work of art to 'reacquire its original stature' (MC: 6). Within this question lies
the larger one of Agamben’s relation to Romanticism. The split between on the one hand objective aesthetic criteria, and on the other the self-absorbed world of the artist, through the lens of ‘taste’, becomes a driving tension in Agamben’s account of modern art. The development of taste, as opposed to a visceral and immediate response, is curious, tied, as I mentioned, to the development of enlightenment rationality. Taste becomes a collective measure of a response to art that can be ratified and regulated. Gazing at a work of art becomes an occasion on which the spectator can practise his/her ‘good taste’. This good taste however ends up dovetailing with its opposite. As Agamben asks, ‘how is it possible that our taste is divided between objects as incompatible as Duino Elegies [dense and experimental poetry by the writer Rainer Maria Rilke] and Ian Fleming’s novels?’ (MC: 19). The answer lies in the way in which we no longer respond to something intrinsic in the artwork, but with an eye to collective consumption.

We fail to isolate a kernel in the work of art that contains its qualities. In our world of crass entertainment and spectacle we can see precisely this phenomenon in which the bad taste of us, the viewers, is reflected in the works of art we consume. There is no reason for us to consume these works, and often it is inexplicable, yet we do so as we are not responding to the work, but to the different structures that provide us with the comfort and security of knowing that we share similar (bad) ‘taste’.

Taste ineffect destroys judgement, making it impossible to look at the work itself, instead seeing it through the collective ideals of others. There are no shortages of examples in our contemporary culture of appreciation through enforced taste. Turn on the television any night of the week to witness the denigrating spectacles that we profess to enjoy. So what happens to the artist in this world of shared bad taste? Agamben suggests that he removes himself from the world of his viewers. As he states: The artist, faced with a spectator who becomes more similar to an evanescent ghost the more refined his taste becomes, moves in an increasingly free and rarefied atmosphere and begins the voyage that will take him from the live tissue of society to the hyperborean no-mans-land of aesthetics. (MC: 16) Agamben’s book will then set itself the task of tracing the figure of the artist through this no-man’s-land, uncovering the ways in which the vocation of the artist has become transformed from one of artisanal creativity to idle emptiness. This emptiness is derived from the split between the creative-formal principle and content. In short the artist has aligned him/herself with the formal pursuit (exploring the medium) over content, and is thus left attempting to find his/her content in the formal
features of the aesthetic: His condition, then, is that of a radical split; and outside of this split, everything is a lie ... The artist is the man without content, who has no other identity than a perpetual emerging out of the nothingness of expression and no other ground than this incomprehensible station on this side of himself. (MC: 55)

The image of the artist as empty, without content, is a potent one, accounting for the Romantic obsession with self-reflexivity, as well as twentieth-century arts drive to annihilate the figure of the artist. This is taken to its logical conclusion in pop-art in which the artist becomes producer, the product reproducible and only through the framing of taste (being put into galleries, winning the Turner Prize, fetching astronomical sums at auction) separable from the detritus of the broader culture. Both can be seen as two sides of the same coin, with both trapped in an image of art where the institutionalised nature of 'taste' and the split between art and world have led art into a state of nihilism. In doing so Agamben will plot the relationship between modern aesthetics and European nihilism. As we saw earlier, nihilism is the name given to a complete emptying out of values, a denial that one perspective or approach can or should be celebrated or shared. This lack of values, this emptying out of criteria of judgement famously, for Friedrich Nietzsche, took two forms—passive and active. The passive form was symptomatised by decline or decadence, a weakness of will that could be identified in modern Christianity. The other form, active nihilism, was characterised by a strengthening of a 'will to power', a vitalism and activity that provide a potential for rejuvenation. In Agamben's reading the first form of modern, passive nihilism needs to be overcome by the second. This overcoming means a nihilism that seeks to shatter and destroy the very institutions of art and aesthetics, to unleash a dynamism that can return art to its originary purpose. These discussions of 'returning' to an 'originary' purpose are clarified to some extent in the conclusion to The Man without Content in which Agamben links an overcoming of art to Walter Benjamin's work on history. As we have previously seen, Benjamin's work is of vital importance in the development of Agamben's oeuvre, and here we witness an early engagement with the messianic. A returning of art to its originary purpose is figured here as something like the advent of messianic time. The destruction of cultural transmissibility, which Benjamin saw as a dominant feature of modernity, has led, in Agamben's reading, to the creation of aesthetics. Art, literature, and culture more generally, are no longer the space in which a culture is able to transmit its own history. The fracturing between the form and content that has led to this lack of transmissibility needs to be sutured in order for mankind to 'appropriate his historical space, the concrete space of his action and knowledge'.
(Agamben MC : 114). Instead Agamben suggests that this is the point at which art must approach the realm of myth, turn history into myth. This will bring art to a point in which the object and the means of transmission are unified. This is importantly not a return to the previous mythic ideal that art had detached itself from in modernity, but to a new ‘poetic process’ in which ‘art succeeds in opening the very space in which he [man] can take the original measure of his dwelling in the present and recover each time the meaning of his action’ (MC : 114).

Art then must be part of a ‘poetic process’, a poetics that provides us with a broader representational form that works to undo the schisms of modernity and prepare the ground for a future community. In the concluding moments of The Man without Content we see the emergence of what will later be reformulated as inoperativity and the ‘poetics’ that will feature in his later work.

TOWARDS GESTURE: AGAMBEN AND WARBURG

If Agamben is willing to turn to positive, that is productive moments, in his critique of art, the critical practice of the German art historian and cultural critic Aby Warburg (1866–1929) provides an image of art history that is not trapped in the reductive logic of modern aesthetics. In 1975 Agamben spent a year scouring the library of the Warburg Institute in London, researching for the book that would later be published as Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture. This research emerged as heterodox to his research on Benjamin, both writers covering uncannily similar terrain at the same crisis point of Western history. In Warburg, Agamben discovered a specifically aesthetic, or image-based, manifestation of what he was to find in the linguistics of Emile Benveniste and in the critical project of Walter Benjamin. We can see Agamben's study of Warburg as providing a break of sorts with his earlier work, namely The Man without Content. While Agamben hardly provides an elaborate and prolonged engagement with Warburg's work, it provides a vital link between his early work on art, discussed above, and his later work on cinema and broader archaeological (or genealogical) method. As Agamben states in a later ‘Postilla’ (in 1983) to his essay on Warburg (1975), ‘what continues to appear as relevant in his work is the decisive gesture with which he withdraws the artwork (and also the image) from the study of the artists conscious and unconscious structures’ (Agamben P : 102). Here the image, which would often be read from a psychological perspective— for instance looking to uncover a latent desire of the artist in the structure of an image— is now read from a historical perspective, as part of a
historical montage rather than as isolated instances, placing images together in order to draw out unusual confluences. Warburg wanted to explore the potential for uncovering an iconographic history of Western art that didn’t pay attention to the auratic and isolated space of the aesthetic object, but instead saw these images as part of a much larger constellation. Instead of examining the psychology of the painter, or the fixity of the image, he attempted to account for the movement between images. He called his science of art history Mnemosyne, the Greek word for memory, with its guiding principle an attempt to ‘map’ European culture, uncovering moments in which the image emerged into something like a memory trace of the past. The method was placing like images next to each other to find both similarities and divergences, to allow different meanings to flicker up as they were gazed upon.

Warburg described this as ‘an art history without text’ and it was comprised of 40 canvases and 1,000 photographs which he arranged according to an idiosyncratic sense of affinity and featured Renaissance masterpieces next to photographs of female golfers and advertisements for a steamship company. It was a similar principle to his organisation of his massive library, based upon the principle of the ‘good neighbour’ in which the solution of a problem was not based in the book you were searching for but in the one next to it (Agamben P : 204n). These principles of organisation helped Agamben develop a generalised theory of the image, moving from seeing the artwork as revealing the emptiness of the self-absorbed artist, to the image as part of a larger historical canvas. The image, when construed not in isolation, but as part of a still from the giant film of history, can work to dislocate and disrupt the empty and predictable narratives of art history. The history of art, like history more generally, is tied to reductive and linear forms of organisation: there is a narrative that details how art changes and develops over different periods, and the role of the art historian is to order. Yet if we recall Benjamin and Agamben on history, this form of creating a continuum limits the possibility of alternate voices being heard, of unusual links being made. An imagistic art-history, in the form outlined by Aby Warburg, would create a far more dynamic and fluid history of art. As Agamben states in ‘Notes on Gesture’: Even the Mona Lisa, even Las Meninas could be seen not as immovable and eternal forms, but as fragments of a gesture or as stills of a lost film wherein only they would regain their true image. And this is so because of a certain kind of litigatio, a paralyzing spell we need to break, its constitution at work in every image; it is as if a silent invocation calling for the liberation of the image into gesture arose from the entire history of art. This is what in ancient Greece was expressed by the legends in which statues break the ties holding them and begin to move … Cinema leads images back to the homeland of gesture. (MwE: 55–6)
Here we can see how an 'imagistic' theory of art leads directly into a reading of cinematic texts. Whereas the schema put in place in The Man without Content attempted to move towards a theory of art history as 'rupture', the imagistic theory of art posits the artwork as always already ruptured, a series of fractured images that conceptualises the history of art that is almost like a long movie, in which the artwork is a still. Phillippe-Alain Michaud has recently demonstrated the cinematic quality of Warburgs thought. The reception and continuation of Warburgs work has been dominated by a traditional examination of the symbolic within the Renaissance. Yet for Michaud the dominant feature of Warburg's thought was movement– the way in which the artwork tried to capture the subject in action. Simultaneously it was also a movement towards the idea of looking at history as a montage. Michaud is therefore able to demonstrate that Warburg's thought is one that ushers in the cinematic moment: 'Warburg opened art history to the observation of bodies in motion at the very moment the first images capable of representing them became diffused.' Michaud goes on to suggest that in nascent cinema, as in Warburg, we see 'the gradual transmission of figures in motion to the animistic reproduction of the living being' (2004: 39). Here the ability of cinema to reproduce the fluidity of the body with difference is key, as is the way in which the eye becomes trained to capture the body in gesture.

GESTURE

The notion of gesture is key in mapping Agambens movement from art to cinema, and will also provide us with a clearer understanding of how the movement into biopolitical modernity is linked so intricately with the development of film. This will be of importance as we explore the ways in which Agamben suggests that those mediated forms of advertising and pornography have the potential to usher in the new body of the coming community. The essay 'Notes on Gesture' is of significant importance in Agamben's corpus. It appears in three distinct versions, including a version on Kommerell and another on cinema which will be our focus here. As Deborah Levitt has suggested, the essay provides a genealogy of gesture which has striking parallels to Agambens genealogy of modern biopolitics (2008: 194). The essay presents the movement from the study of the human gait by Gilles de la Tourette in 1886 through to Eadweard Muybridges snapshots of the body in motion, the birth of silent film and the high modernism of Proust and Rilke. As Levitt suggests we can label this period from 1886 to 1933 as the birth of Agamben's biopolitical
modernity in media, the point at which he asserts ‘the Western Bourgeoisie had definitely lost its gestures’.

So what are gestures? It is important here to maintain a distinction between gestures in the plural and the idea of gesture. Gestures designate the previously held sense of cohesion in human motion and movement, a sense of embodiment and communicability. Their decline is the breakdown of psychological interiority through observation and control. We could usefully suggest that the loss of gestures falls into three parts:

1 The loss of the bourgeois subject as whole, coherent. The process of subjectivation that is part of the illusion of identity becomes eroded through the fragmentation of self– desubjectivation brought about by the biopolitical technologies of modernity.

2 The loss of the aura of the image. No longer do we see images as whole and complete, capturing gestures, they are now stills from a fractured film.

3 The loss of the idea of a natural language—something that is whole and complete and intrinsically linked to meaning. We now experience language as expropriated from us.

Yet gesture is in opposition to the false unity that underscores gestures. The ‘ loss ’ of gestures is a loss of false unity and an interrogation of the cracks that emerge is essential in the idea of rethinking the nature of the medium anew. Gesture is the process of making a means visible as such. By this it is the demonstration of mediality and moves beyond aesthetics, language and subjectivity into the realm of ethics and politics.

The starting point for Agamben’s essay is Gilles de la Tourette’s study of the gait, how people walk. Two years before that (1884) Tourette had diagnosed a motor deficiency, now known as Tourette’s syndrome, in which he began to notice the strange array of ticks and ‘spasmodic jerks’ whose proliferation, Agamben noted, had resulted in a ‘generalised catastrophe of the sphere of gestures’ (MwE: 51). The loss of gesture is not, as it might seem, that there was a generalised outburst of strange walking patterns, as if the entire population had lost control of its gestures. On the contrary the loss of gestures is about the loss of grasping the body as an embodied, experienced whole. For Agamben the technologies of the nineteenth and
The twentieth centuries need to be seen as changing the way we perceived our own selves, our bodies. The rise of scientific methods for measuring and observing meant we began to see the human body as minute movements, taking on the gaze of observation. Modernity's observational gaze, the desire to measure, understand, control is tied intrinsically to the rise of film. The German philosopher of technology Friedrich Kittler has demonstrated how the nascent forms of the moving image in the nineteenth century emerged out of the study of anatomy (2003). The cinematic gaze of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries needs to be seen in relation to the scientific observations of modernity. Agamben is hardly suggesting we should want to return to previous forms of 'experiencing' our bodies as whole and unified, but instead to think of the new possibilities of gesture. The structure of 'gesture' is seen as an in-between to the categories of act and production which seeks to render inoperative the false opposition between means and ends. In traditional utilitarian philosophy, there was always a question over whether the ends justified the means. Could one justify violence as a means if the ends were noble enough? Politics is often seen as the sphere in which the means/ends relation is played out. This can be mapped onto Aristotle's distinction in the Nichomachean Ethics between production (poeises) and action (praxis). Agamben turns to the Roman scholar Varro (116–27 BC) who introduces a third concept—gesture. As Agamben states, 'if producing is a means in view of an end and praxis is an end without means, the gesture then breaks with the false alternative between ends and means that paralyzes morality and presents instead means that, as such, evade the orbit of mediality without becoming, for this reason, ends' (MwE: 57).

So gesture is not means moving towards a goal, or a rarefied sphere of pure ends. Instead it shatters both of these: 'Gesture is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such' (italics in original, MwE: 58). Importantly even though Agamben uses 'gesture' in relation to film, he is insistent on the relationship between gesture and language. Whereas the loss of authority in language that marked the destruction of experience is tied to a loss of gestures, 'gesture' in language represents the movement towards demonstrating language as such, language as the communication of a communicability. As Agamben states, 'if we understand the “word” as the means of communication, then to show a word does not mean to have at one's disposal a higher level … it means, rather, to expose the word in its own mediality, in its own being a means without any transcendence' (MwE: 59). So what might a linguistic gesture look like? While we will examine the possibility of using Agamben's work on language for the study of literature in the
following chapter, I will briefly turn to James Joyce’s Ulysses to demonstrate the possibility of thinking language as gesture. In the ‘Circe’ episode Joyce is utilising the form of the play script to examine the possibilities of revitalising language following its disintegration in ‘Oxen of the Sun’. Early in the episode Stephen Dedalus states, ‘So that gesture, not music, not odours, would be a universal language, the gift of tongues rendering visible not the lay sense but the first entelechy, the structural rhythm’, to which Lynch replies, ‘Pornosophical philotheology’ (Joyce 1992: 564). Joyce was very interested in the thinking of gesture as a ‘universal language’ and was reputed to have attended the lectures of Marcel Jousse, the French linguist, who, now largely forgotten, published in 1930 an important book called The Oral Style, along with the posthumously published lectures Anthropology of Gesture (1974). If we think of Stephen’s call for gesture as a universal language being related to a certain physical rhythm that ties into the structural rhythms of oral language, then Lynch’s interjection is something more like gesture as a gag, or an exposure of language in and of itself. The portmanteaus invite the reader to decipher, but are ultimately useless in terms of the meaning they illicit. Instead this presentation of language without meaning is far closer to the exposure of gesture as ‘the word in its own mediality’. But gesture’s radical potentiality is revealed not in any specific or limited area, but as the name for an intersection, a threshold that must be utilised as the basis of rethinking the very foundations of ethics and politics anew.

Gesture therefore works as inoperativity:

*Gesture is the name of this intersection between life and art, act and power, general and particular, text and execution. It is a moment of life subtracted from the context of individual biography as well as a moment of art subtracted from the neutrality of aesthetics: it is pure praxis*. The gesture is neither use value nor exchange value, neither biographic experience nor impersonal event: it is the other side of the commodity that lets the ‘crystals of their common social substance’ sink into the situation. (MwE: 80)

This idea of subtraction from the false wholeness of identity or the falseness of the image as unity is the key to gesture. In biopolitical modernity forms of subtractions are routinely performed on us by media technologies and governmentality. Gesture is the name for the harnessing of the collapse of subjectivity and aesthetics, and cinema is the aesthetic space in which this is most possible.
AGAMBEN ON CINEMA

Agamben’s work on cinema is on one hand a response to the theory of cinema put forward by Gilles Deleuze, and on the other an exploration of Guy Debord’s theorisation of the ‘society of the spectacle’ along with his experimental cinematic works. Gilles Deleuze (1925–95) was an influential French philosopher and a regular interlocutor for Agamben on a series of philosophical questions. His work on cinema has been very influential, arguing that cinema offers us new ways of ‘seeing’ by creating images that are not dependent on the human eye. More importantly, in Deleuze’s theorisation of the ‘time-image’, cinema becomes the space in which we can see time presented, while in the ‘movement-image’ cinema is the space in which through cinematic effect (camera angles, etc.) human life is seen anew. For Deleuze it was necessary to propose a new theory of the image that was able to think through cinematographic concepts. As Deleuze states, ‘the cinema seems to us to be a composition of images and of signs, that is pre-verbal intelligible content (pure semiotics) whilst semiology of a linguistic inspiration abolishes the image and tends to dispense with the sign’ (2008: xi).

While I don’t have the space to enter into Deleuze’s attempt to explore ‘cinematographic concepts’, Agamben, in ‘Notes on Gesture’, attempts to distance himself from Deleuze, suggesting that Deleuze’s theory of the ‘movement-image’ relies too heavily on a mythical archetype of the image, one which Agamben claims misses the fundamental fractured nature of the image in Modernity. Deleuze’s image is too idealised and too complete, lacking the sense of rupture and dislocation that for Agamben is the essence of the imagistic.

Agamben’s notion of cinema as rupture is given its most complete exposition in a short lecture about the cinema of Guy Debord. Debord’s films are made up of largely sampled (or, to use his French term détourned) images, taken from advertisements, films and news footage. Placed in random order, these clips are accompanied by Debord’s voice-overs, readings of his own theoretical works. The goal here is to create a fractured cinema in which the images of the mediated world are ripped from their context and placed in a montage, with the idea that unusual constellations can emerge. In this short essay on Debord’s cinema, Agamben identifies two ‘transcendental conditions of montage’: stoppage and repetition. Repetition is linked here to memory and to a particular form of historical awareness. Agamben suggests that the media attempt to take images and control their narrative uses, imbuings them
with a meaning that leaves us, the viewers, impotent: ‘we are given a fact before which we are powerless. The media prefer a citizen who is indignant but powerless. That is exactly the goal of the TV news. It is the bad form of memory’ (Agamben ‘DR’:316). Repetition on the other hand presents images with a sense of possibility and potentiality. The process of being repeated means that they become freed from their meaning. A piece of TV footage repeated in a different context is no longer given a circumscribed meaning, instead it becomes possible to ask questions of how this meaning was possible in the first place, and of whether any other meaning can emerge. The image thus becomes imbued with life, and we as spectators must undertake the role of construction, or reconstruction, which frees it, and us, restoring ‘possibility’. Stoppage, the second condition, is the power to interrupt. Agamben suggests that this links cinema to poetry as opposed to prose, with which its narrative style is often compared. As we will see later in our discussion of literature, poetry is differentiated from prose by enjambment, which is the carry-over to a following line in which rhythm and content can become destabilised. Poetry is then, for Agamben, a ‘hesitation between sound and meaning’, and Debords cinema evinces a similar disruption of meaning. In poetry the form (rhythm, poetic technique) can be placed at odds with the ‘meaning’, analogously. Agamben will describe ‘cinema, or at least a certain sort of cinema’, as ‘a prolonged hesitation between image and meaning’ (Agamben ‘DR’:317). However, it is important to note that Debords cinema is not completely removed from the world of contemporary media that is both the source of its images and the object of its critique. Agamben describes the effect of Debords cinema as one in which the means, the medium, is made visible. Here the illusion, the suspension of reality asked for in the viewer by cinema, is removed (we may want to think here of Bertolt Brecht’s Epic Theatre in an analogous fashion in which the acting, set design, etc., all work to destroy the empathy inherent in the tragic model of theatre). This sense of cinemas ultimate task being to expose its own illusory nature is repeated again in a fragment from Profanations entitled ‘The Six Most Beautiful Minutes in the History of Cinema’. The clip that Agamben refers to is a relatively unknown extract from Orson Welles ‘incompleteml’ of Don Quixote. In this version Don Quixote and Sancho Panza find themselves in modern America (1950s). The scene Agamben refers to takes place in a cinema in which Sancho Panza is watching a film with a young girl, while Don Quixote stands to the side. Once the film begins Don Quixote, roused into action by the violence in front of him, feels compelled to perform his Quixotic duty and attacks the cinema scene, slashing at it until there is a gaping hole in the screen and we can see the frame upon which the screen is hung. Quixote’s attack on the screen is of course a chivalric attempt to
protect a young lady, revealing a gap between image and reality that Quixote cannot see. But it is hardly as if Agamben is suggesting that Quixote's attack is a metaphor for how we should destroy the illusion of cinema. Agamben asks the question, following his account of the scene, 'What are we to do with our Imaginations?' (Pr: 93). For Agamben we must realise that the young girl we hope to save, Quixotic in our imaginings, can never love us. Our imagination must be exposed as 'empty and unfulfilled' in order that we can begin to reconstruct a new form of image, a new poetics that denies imagination as a distortion of the here and now, as cinema so often is. Agamben provides one contentious instance in which he gives an example of this shattering of illusion. He cites the moment in Bergman's film Monika when the movie star suddenly stares directly into the camera, that is, directly at us. Agamben points out that this technique is now perfectly banal as we have become so used to it from pornography and advertising. What pornography and the fashion model in advertising show us is that there are always more images behind each image, hence their emptiness, and Agamben returns to the image of the pornstar staring into the camera on a number of occasions as encapsulating what we will explore later as profanation. Agamben claims that pornography is now unprofanable and it is the task of cinema to attempt the profaning of the unprofanable. Agamben in The Coming Community offers us an image of the body in these forms as one which can lead us to a new way of regarding the self: What was technologized was not the body, but its image. Thus the glorious body of advertising has become the mask behind which the fragile, slight human body continues its precarious existence ... Advertising and pornography, which escort the commodity to the grave like hired mourners, are the unknowing midwives of this new body of humanity. (CC: 50) Agamben here is echoing Benjamin who, in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproduction', identified cinema as the space in which cinematic effects could give birth to a new way of seeing the human body: 'evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye— if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man' (Benjamin 1968: 239). What advertising and pornography do is to empty out media images, to show them in their falseness and emptiness, however unwittingly. We are constantly exposed to the frailty of the human body as the mask created by the image of the spectacular body is further separated from the reality. On the other hand Debord's cinema takes the image and presents it as an image, allowing us to see the medium, to stop the illusion of cinema, and of art, in its tracks. It is in this process that we can begin to see cinema as both a political and ethical medium, rather than as an aesthetic one.
SUMMARY

Agambens work on art began as an attempt to chart a form of modern nihilism whereby art had lost its power to move, as well as its ability to create a relationship to the world around it. He isolated the development of modern taste, along with the increasingly solipsistic nature of the artist, as indicative of arts nihilism and emptiness, and called, however obliquely, for art to become tied once again to human history. In turning to the work of Aby Warburg in the 1970s he refined his take on aesthetics by developing a theory of the image which turned away from any psychologising tendency, along with the analysis of art images in isolation, to look instead at human culture as one long reel of film. In turning to cinema he developed this idea of the image by examining the way in which cinema, through stoppage and repetition, forces us to look at the medium of film, interrupting its usual narrative function.