From Image to Gesture: Giorgio Agamben's New Approach to Film Theory

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Abstract: This paper introduces a new approach to visual and cinema studies that redefines the idea of image in its traditional, aesthetical status. Among several philosophers that have got engaged in polemics with Deleuzian film theory, presented in the two-volume book "Cinema 1: The Movement-Image; Cinema 2: The Time-Image," Giorgio Agamben introduced a new theoretical proposition. He suggested replacing the fundamental aesthetical understanding of image with an ethical and political idea of the gesture. By criticizing Deleuzian semiotical taxonomy of images, he entered the discussion on contemporary film theory with a completely fresh approach. In this paper, I will not only present Agamben’s core ideas on film theory studies, but also explore the consequences of his theory on image studies in contemporary culture. Agambenian ideas do not focus only on film theory, but rather reflect specific conditions of society and culture that he has examined throughout his academic career.

Keywords: Cinema, Image, Gesture

Introduction

The two-volume work on the philosophy of film by Gilles Deleuze might be located at the cross of two general philosophical schools without completely falling to any particular one. On the one hand, it contains Structural approach to film studies, characterized by its totalizing ambition, as well as complete evaluation of all the elementary particles of cinematic images. On the other, its emphasis on analyzing images-movement and images-time with the rejection of the category of self-conscious Subject unravels its connections with post-modern thought. Bergsonian in the spirit and at the same time anti-semiological Deleuzian theory is impossible to be placed within one particular, established methodological framework. While one can certainly discern a number of analogies with theoretical trends listed above and draw points of similarities, such strategies do not have an ambition to raise any constructive discussion apart from provoking pure dispute over possible forms of definition. French philosopher derived inspiration from different sources, not just those directly mentioned in the preface of his work. Moreover the importance of his theory is situated in the innovative approach to the cinema not in its genealogy and points of references.

Deleuzian philosophical approach should be referred to a broader perspective of visual studies rather than just limited to one specific theoretical approach. Philosopher in his book seeks the essence of the cinema that could be located within the image. Though his ideas progress to various divisions of the visible by establishing elementary components of the image, his theory bears the hallmarks of essentialist approach. On top of this he proposes rather structured, comprehensive anti-semiological taxonomy of images, that’s fundamental ambition is to reach the heart of the fundamental differences between two separate images. This approach can therefore be regarded as structuralist (modeled on the theory of linguistics by Ferdinand de Saussure), as it is trying to search for the most basic discernible difference between two images, which may constitute their separate signifiers (fr. signifiants).

Agamben on the other hand proposes completely new perspectives to think about cinematic images and practices of looking at films. His basic remarks have been gathered in two short

essays – *Notes on Gesture* and *Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord’s films*. It is hard to form his writings into a complete theory, based on particular methodology or even a patchwork approach that would be focused on a chosen segment of cinematic universe. Agamben takes rather philosophical meta-position: a role of commentator who speaks about cinema in a very general, metaphysical sense as a technological device (an apparatus) that takes part in the process of producing subjects. He is not interested in the artistic practices as such, but the ways in which cinema can restore gestures that have been lost in the era of Modernity. In this sense, Agambenian thoughts about cinema fits into his general philosophical project by bounding with such concepts as: profanity, apparatus-machine relation, forms of life, means without end or above all – potentiality.

Cinema captures the reality and constructs its own presence within the frames of cinematic universe. This somehow obvious and clear relation between the process of registration and projection is never innocent and does not simply reproduce the aesthetic forms that are given to it by technological possibilities and limitations of a movie camera or a projector. The form and content of a cinematic image is a result of divisions and within itself it forms further divisions. In this general formulation one can place two-volume cinema book written by Deleuze, in which the author tries to grasp the object of his philosophy in its elementary components. Anti-semiological taxonomy of images, that is proposed by the French philosopher comes down to a very broad statement that cinema is a form of artistic practice that is foremost based on the image, related to time and movement. Although such a statement may seem to be trivial and of little originality, Deleuze shows that the consequences of it are not so obvious. By breaking down the image into pure movement and pure time he conducts an ontological and epistemological cut at once. This philosophical cut allows him to proceed to further acts of divisions and image allocations.

It seems that such philosophical practice of division exhausts possibilities for further taxonomic operations and images in Deleuzian theory have reached their smallest points of differentiation. Through the practice of detailed, structural ordering and labeling smallest units within an image Deleuzian work gives the impression of a complete and comprehensive approach. The fundamental principle of dividing cinematic image takes up the aesthetic dimension, giving it a pure, non-subjective form, related only to movement and time and not to the perspective of a spectator. Perhaps those elements – dehumanization of spectator, fluid nature of cinematic images and its pure being that merges with epistemological status caused that Deleuzian theory has been perceived as PostModern or Phenomenological. A spectator who watches a movie in the cinema is completely subjected to the image. An image, formed by time and movement in their merge enables subject to produce thoughts and perception. Thus, the two basic components of the image - time and movement – by forming a complex relationships within an image, in themselves retain their unmediated, pure dimensions.

Agamben suggests to look at the cinema from a different angle. Deriving inspirations from Deleuzian theory (not just the cinematic one) he makes a radical reformulation, while maintaining basic assumptions made by the French philosopher. The fundamental difference between the two authors is drawn primarily in the ways they determine the status of spectator and the position of subjectivity within the field of cinematic experience. For Deleuze cinema contains pure images, idealistically cleared from human interference and containing mixture of movement and time. The historical development of cinematic images appears above all as a shift in progressing dominance of time over movement. Spectator is a secondary instance, totally determined and included in the power of the image that as such does not depend on the external, socio-political factors. The only historical moment that determines cinema according to Deleuze is the moment that divides cinema into two ontological beings. The transition from one element

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into another has occurred due to the exhaustion of sensorial-motoric logic in the classical cinema after the Second World War. As Deleuze takes up predominantly aesthetical studies on images and classifies them according to the visible and perceptible forms, he is not interested in historical (political, social) approach as such.

Agamben strongly opposes to the aesthetic perspective introduced by Deleuze and proposes a radical cut. The fundamental formulation that structures his new approach to cinema is based on the destruction of Modern Western aesthetics and building its new foundations on the new premises. Such an idea requires from him a political and ethical commitment, as the first step towards positive changes must begin with the critical negation of the existing situation. Cinematic images in the Agambenian sense are the effect of the unsuccessful project of Modern aesthetics, interference of power structures that change them into machines. Disappearance of gesture and experience in contemporary times are the most destructive consequences of that process. All of the three factors contribute to the crisis of subjectivity that Agamben wishes to bring back to life in his philosophical project. The project of restoring gesture in his sense does not mean reactionary returning to the state from the past but on the contrary, an act of repetition in the philosophical meaning. The idea is to open up to the potentiality of existence and forms of life that have been obliterated in the processes of enslaving Subjects by sovereign power and machines that serve as its tools.

Agambenian reflections on cinema are therefore a combination of ethical thinking (the possibility of imagining human and new forms of lives, gestures, experiences), political actions (critique of law and apparatuses as the tools that define what life is or can be) and aesthetic approach (analyzing the collapse of Modern aesthetics and introducing new, poetical forms of life). In addition, his critique itself holds an affirmative attitude, by analyzing the existing world in terms of thinking of creating new spaces to introduce the ideas of emancipating life and liberating the figure of potentiality.

Introduction to the New Theory of cinema

In the Notes on Gesture Agamben outlines a new perspective to look at the theory of cinema, which directly results from his earlier arguments on aesthetics, politics and ethics. Although in this short text he does not offer any particular model of theory, he distinguishes certain directions that philosophical thinking about cinema should follow. This direction is defined by the ethical project of rebuilding definitions of human being and liberating it from the clutches of Modern machines, which have contributed to the collapse of gesture and experience. He begins his text with the definition of gesture and outlines a short genealogy of its disappearance in Modern times. By forming a clear diagnosis about the loss of gesture and experience in Modern society, Agamben tries to track down institutions and historical factors responsible for the occurred condition. Analogically to the analysis of the collapse of Modern Art, he establishes a field of knowledge as well as tools that intentionally limited human gesture to the discursive forms.

First of all he mentions the medical discourse and the attempt to provide detailed descriptions of human movements, specifically the methods of walking. Verbal description is however not sufficient to observe the processes of movement, hence the philosopher cites various attempts of transforming gestures to the forms of stable images, static representations. Georges Gilles de la Tourette, a famous French neurologist, made one of the first experiment, that was designed to systematize the process of walking. It consisted of marking human footprints on the piece of white paper which enabled him to measure and analyze them in terms of various parameters. Further experiments dedicated to “freeze the gesture” leads Agamben to the figure of Eadweard Muybridge, who photographed movements frame by frame by using several cameras at the same time. The purpose of this method was to bring out the static images of movement and be able to examine individual phases of it. As a result of using medical discourse and the ability to freeze human movement with the use of technological devices, gesture itself has become
fragmented and submitted to in-depth, detailed analysis. It ceased to be the only everyday casual human activity and has become the subject of knowledge that was divided into static, visible forms of representation.

From the short genealogical analysis Agamben moves directly to the cinematic field. He states at the beginning of the next chapter that “in the cinema, a society that has lost its gestures tries at once to reclaim what it has lost and to record its loss”\textsuperscript{4}. The best proof of this statement may be found in the early stage of the Silent Cinema, which essentially used the idea of movement in order to restore the lost gesture to the field of human activity. This is also the starting point to the way of thinking about the cinematic images for Agamben.

He finds the essence of the image not similarly to Deleuze, in the idea of movement or time, but predominantly in a gesture. Without denying the achievements of the French philosopher, Agamben decides to extend his theory, by bringing it to a different level of argument. Images for Agamben are integral part of Modern aesthetics, their status thus result from the general trend of historical development of art and society. The early beginnings of cinema result from the struggle to restore gestures and place them back to the space of human everyday experience and not directly from introducing new art practices that could be related to technological progress that introduced new forms of visual images. The author states that: “every image, in fact, is animated by an antinomic polarity: on the one hand, images are the reification and obliteration of a gesture (it is the \textit{imago} as death mask or as symbol); on the other hand, they preserve the \textit{dynamis} intact (as in Muybridge's snapshots or in any sports photograph)”\textsuperscript{5}. This is the way cinematic images function – disabling images in static frames in order to set them in motion on the screen. This double meaning of images forms the essence of cinema and functions simultaneously on two levels – the way moving images are transformed into machines as well as the possibilities they open up in order to enable potential, emancipatory practices of cinema.

If neither movement nor time but rather gesture establishes the status of the cinema, Agamben changes the perspective of analyzing images from aesthetical to political and ethical. “Because cinema has its center in the gesture and not in the image, it belongs essentially to the realm of ethics and politics (and not simply to that of aesthetics)”\textsuperscript{6} – he claims. For Agamben the concept of gesture is not equal to every human activity or production in a common sense. What characterizes gesture – he states – “is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported. The gesture, in other words, opens the sphere of ethos as the more proper sphere of that which is human”\textsuperscript{7}. The moment of transition from casual activity [\textit{agere}] to act [\textit{azione}] occurs at the level of effects and aims and not simply the forms they take. By emphasizing active, not directed at established aim, nature of gesture, Agamben returns in his deliberations to the category of “means without end” that he previously defined in relation to the practices of profanations. Gesture is not intended to comply with anything outside itself, while creation and production is always targeted at particular product of their activity. The difference of those concepts have been examined by Aristotle in his \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, where he juxtaposed and analyzed both terms in relation to the category of purpose. “For just as the goodness and performance of a flute player, a sculptor, or any kind of expert, and generally of anyone who fulfills some function or performs some action, are thought to reside in his proper function[\textit{ergon}], so the goodness and performance of man would seem to reside in whatever is his proper function. Is it then possible that while a carpenter and a shoemaker have their own proper function and spheres of action, man as man has none, but was left by nature a good-for-nothing without a function [\textit{argos}]”\textsuperscript{8}. Gesture does not act as an intermediary between the means and an end, nor does it seek to convert possibility to actualization. Its consequence is not placed

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{4} Giorgio Agamben, \textit{Notes on Gesture...}, 53. \\
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 54. \\
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 55. \\
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 56. \\
\textsuperscript{8} Aristotle, \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} (Indianapolis: Liberal Arts Press, 1962), 16.}
in any kind of substantial result or material object. Agamben concludes his understanding of what he means by his definition of gesture on the example of dance as means without end:

“Finality without means is just as alienating as mediality that has meaning only with respect to an end. If dance is gesture, it is so, rather, because it is nothing more than the endurance and the exhibition of the media character of corporal movements. The gesture is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such. It allows the emergence of the being-in-a-medium of human beings and thus it opens the ethical dimension for them”.

**Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord’s Films**

Agambenian concepts and theoretical approach to cinema can be accurately summarized and explained by introducing the poetics of Guy Debord’s films. Agamben analyzes Debord’s works by looking for a practical application to the concepts he outlined in the *Notes on Gesture*. The way he structures his analysis of Debord’s filmography directly derives from his philosophical concepts as well as general methodological approach.

At the beginning of the text *Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord’s films* Agamben establishes his position and critical attitude that will allow him to conduct ethically appropriate analysis. He begins with the statement that he does not consider Debord’s films as complete works and what he is willing to write does not form into any kind of complete monography. He would rather like to write about Debord’s poetics as a certain strategy of resistance and critical attitude that characterizes the French Situationist. Such attitude reflects his deliberations on the status of artist and his relation to the figure of a critic. Following that statement he poses a question, why it was specifically the notion cinema and not any other kind of art that particularly interested Debord. He finds an answer in the relation of cinema and history and the historical aspect of image itself. He makes a following statement: “the image in cinema – and not only in cinema, but in Modern times generally – is no longer something immobile. It is not an archetype, but nor is it something outside history: rather, it is a cut which itself is mobile, an image-movement, charged as such with a dynamic tension”.

In this quotation he brings back – as did Deleuze – the link between cinematic image and historical moment that determines its status. He does not stop though at pointing only one historical factor that conditioned the way cinema has been broken down into separate visible forms. He goes a step further by developing the idea of historically determined perception of images not in their chronological development (as Deleuze did) but in relation to the messianic history that he derives directly from the works of Walter Benjamin. Agamben returns at the same time to his earlier concepts of relation between *sacrum* and *profanum* and Post-secular analysis of politics, culture and society.

Messianic history is characterized by the two basic elements: the salvation and finality. Both elements are interrelated as messianic theology is equal to the expectation of salvation as a final goal of history. Thus, the arrival of the messiah is happening constantly in the contemporary times, due to its unpredictable moment. Not knowing the moment of the end of times makes people be prepared for it every day just as it could happen any time. That is what Agamben means when he says that “The Messiah has always already arrived, he is always already there”.

The above thought is directly transferred into the analysis of Debord’s films and his – according to Agamben – messianic character.

This “messianic situation of cinema” Agamben finds in the specific role of cinematic montage. He firstly defines its conditions of possibilities – Kantian transcendentals – as he defines them. He recognizes them in two figures – repetition and stoppage that are rediscovered by Debord in his radical filmmaking poetics. Agamben summarizes dominant role of montage by basing on those two elements and comparing them to the stylistic practices, typical for the poetics.

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9 Giorgio Agamben, *Notes on Gesture...*, 57.
11 Ibid., 315.
practices of poetry. He finds those practices in the ways Debord captures already existing images and with the use of found footage technique he forms a critical message. First figure that Agamben focuses on and describes in details is repetition.

The philosopher understands it not as the return of the same or re-materialization of some substantial forms that already existed in the past but the return of potentiality that was present (not substantially) in something that has existed. Every actualization that has already been realized is not simply what it is in its material form and meaning. It also contains all unrealized potential that exists in suspension. The return of executed actuality (in case of Debord it would be images) is not restoring previously present forms of existence but bringing back to life the potentiality that it immanently entails.

Agamben illustrates the complexity of the concept of repetition on the example of the functions of memory. Memory is not simply about reverting to the past, because it is impossible to recall the past that existed in substantial form. Consequently, the moment of memorizing never realizes the past but selectively brings back the possibility of the past in its impossibility to exist in a complete, closed, material form. We encounter here the return of the messianic thinking about the images and memory that Agamben borrowed from Benjamin’s works. He emphasizes the relation with theological experience that “Benjamin saw in memory, when he said that memory makes the unfulfilled into the fulfilled, and the fulfilled into the unfulfilled. Memory is, so to speak, the organ of reality’s modalization; it is that which can transform the real into the possible and the possible into the real. If you think about it, that’s also the definition of cinema. Doesn’t cinema always do just that, transform the real into the possible and the possible into the real”?

At this point we can see how Agamben finds the definition of the cinema itself. The conclusion of how he understands the nature of cinema with cohesion to the theological experience is contained in the following thought: “One can define the already-seen as the fact of perceiving something present as though it had already been, and its converse as the fact of perceiving something that has already been as present. Cinema takes place in this zone of indifference. We then understand why work with images can have such a historical and messianic importance, because they are a way of projecting power and possibility toward that which is impossible by definition, toward the past. Thus cinema does the opposite of the media. What is always given in the media is the fact, what was, without its possibility, its power: we are given a fact before which we are powerless. The media prefer a citizen who is in dignant, but powerless. That’s exactly the goal of the TV news. It’s the bad form of memory, the kind of memory that produces the man of ressentiment”.13

Debord in his films uses a technique that is exactly opposite to the one used by contemporary new media and TV news programs. His strategy is all about restoring to the repeated image its potential nature and opening the sphere of indeterminacy between what is real and what is possible (potential). He does so by implementing the practical use of the philosophical concept of repetition in the similar meaning as it was understood in the philosophical tradition by Agamben, Deleuze, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard or Heidegger.

The second condition of possibility in regard to montage is stoppage. Agamben calls it “a revolutionary break” and once again he refers to the work of Benjamin. The very practice of stoppage Agamben compares to the poetry and its specific distinction from the nature of prose. The elements that define the universe of poetry and that are similar to the ways the montage functions are: caesura and enjambment. Both stylistic techniques are based on introducing the cut; a specific suspension in the flow of words. Whereas caesura divides the verses and rhythm of the poem, enjambment disrupts the syntaxes by moving a word or a phrase to another part of the verse. The result of such procedure is to introduce a rupture to the structure of syntax and intonation and thus cause a short-circuit between the word (its meaning) and the voice (spoken

12 Ibid., 316.
13 Ibid.
sound). This is exactly the same process that Deleuze has described when he referred to the “stuttering effect” of Godard’s voice in his television programs. He understood it as being a foreigner in your own language. At that stuttering effect, there are discrepancies between what is said and what one wishes to express and can never actualize in language. The meaning of it is to point out that moment where language cannot be identified with words and the only possible truth of language (or image) is to express its communicability (or lack of it). This is also what caesura and enjambment suppose to express.

The poetics of Debord’s films functions in a similar way. His method of image stoppage together with a constant flow of voiceover comments indicates a specific gap that appears between the image and its potential meanings. As Agamben describes it, “it is not merely a matter of a chronological pause, but rather a power of stoppage that works on the image itself, that pulls it away from the narrative power to exhibit it as such”14.

Repetition and stoppage act in Debord’s films in the inseparable structure, complementing one another and formulating the conditions of possibilities for montage techniques. These two constitutive elements of found footage technique are set on the antipodes, between which the image emerges. On the one hand repetition is an infinite process of multiplying unrealized images, manifesting its unlimited potential, on the other stoppage is a “zero point” that allows to eradicate image from its contextual moment that is realized basing on the logics of spectacle. Both practices involve an act of profanation in Agambenian sense and seek to restore the liquidity of activity and recover potentiality that has been captured by the mechanisms of Modern spectacle. The very basic rules of Debord’s filmic strategy can be observed in his first film, Howls for Sade (1952) where he forms its visual layer with only two images – black and white. The first image refers here to the figure of repetition, too many images within an image that one cannot possibly perceive. The white image is, on the contrary, a stoppage, a zero point that refers to the lack of image within an image; a moment of nothingness or elementary particle, similar to that represented in the paintings of Malevich. Both practices are inseparably connected to the Agambenian idea of profanation as an act of emancipation that’s role is to restore gestures in Modern society and return the figure of potentiality into everyday life.

14 Ibid., 317.
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