

*The Work of
Giorgio Agamben
Law, Literature, Life*

*Edited by Justin Clemens, Nicholas Heron
and Alex Murray*

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12. Agamben, 'Notes on Gesture', p. 57.
13. Agamben, 'Notes on Gesture', pp. 58–9.
14. Anna Halprin, in 'Yvonne Rainer interviews Anna Halprin', in *Moving Toward Life*, p. 100.
15. Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. K. Attell (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 38; translation amended.
16. See above, note 3.
17. Agamben, 'What Is a Camp?', *Means without End*, p. 39.
18. Agamben, 'What Is a Camp?', p. 39.
19. The author adds the English expression 'still life' to the French one 'nature morte' in order to put an accent on the vital dimension of scenic representation. [NdT]
20. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. Von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyaman, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), pp. 4–6.

Notes on Media and Biopolitics: 'Notes on Gesture'

Deborah Levitt

In 'Notes on Gesture', a brief essay which has appeared in English in three different versions, Giorgio Agamben extends Gilles Deleuze's reflections on the cinematic image and on the image in general, on 'the status of the image in modernity':

Gilles Deleuze has argued that cinema erases the fallacious psychological distinction between image as psychic reality and movement as physical reality. Cinematographic images are neither *poses éternelles* (such as the forms of the classical age) nor *coupes immobiles* of movement, but rather *coupes mobiles*, images themselves in movement, that Deleuze calls movement-images.

It is necessary to extend Deleuze's argument and show how it relates to the status of the image in general within modernity. This implies, however, that the mythical rigidity of the image has been broken and that here, properly speaking, there are no images but only gestures.¹

One of the central characteristics of Deleuze's Bergsonian reading of cinema is the perspective that the boundaries Western philosophy has imposed between subject and object, mind and matter, interior and exterior, are, to use Agamben's term, 'fallacious'. And that the cinema – both in its earlier incarnations as movement-images and its later exhibition of a direct image of time – reveals this in a unique way. Released from the limiting perceptions of a massy anatomical entity, the images of the cinema's machinic eye can produce a new image of thought, returning thought to the difference and creativity of life, and vice versa.

Agamben submits Deleuze's vitalist cinematic image to a critical genealogy of life as the joint production of modern biopolitics and new media technologies.² The cinematic image's breakdown of these boundaries are tied to the specific political *dispositif* we will find in Agamben's conception of the porn star's body as 'camp'. And if

Deleuze has alerted us to the circulation of pre-individual singularities, the affects and percepts that create bodies of all kinds (including, of course, political ones), in 'Notes on Gesture' – as well as in related essays on the work of Guy Debord – Agamben points to how these are linked to imbricated developments in the history of technology, medicine, industry and political economy.

In a manner that parallels his determination of biopolitics as intrinsic to Western politics from antiquity on, and which nonetheless assumes a unique (and uniquely catastrophic) form in modernity, gesture is given a special modern genealogy. 'Notes on Gesture' contains five brief sections whose headings illustrate, telegraphically, the direction of Agamben's analysis. These are as follows:

1. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Western bourgeoisie had definitely lost its gestures.
2. In the cinema, a society that has lost its gestures tries at once to reclaim what it has lost and to record that loss.
3. The element of cinema is gesture and not image.
4. Because cinema has its centre 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).

And, finally, a section heading followed by no text, only the blank whiteness of the essay's conclusion:

5. Politics is the sphere of pure means, of the absolute and complete gesturality of human beings.

GESTURE AND 'CAMP'

Agamben constructs a media history around this figure of gesture, whose vicissitudes run from the proto-cinematic medical imaging techniques of Gilles de la Tourette, Eadweard Muybridge and Etienne-Jules Marey, through silent cinema, to a particular tendency within modernist aesthetics that Agamben links with Rilke, Proust and Isadora Duncan, all the way to the created situations of Debord and the SI. To schematise its complex trajectory: gesture is expropriated by biopower; the former then becomes the focus of an aesthetic attempt to reclaim it; ultimately, in this attempted reclamation, gesture provides an opening to the future, to the coming community as the fulfilment of a non-statist, non-teleological, non-identitarian politics, that is of politics as a pure mediality, means without end. In

revealing the spectacle's 'positive possibility', the site and means of its immanent critique, Agamben's 'gesture' reflects in an instructive way on his conception of biopolitics itself.

Despite the impossibility of 'summing up' Agamben's difficult and often shifting framework, I want to contextualise his thinking of media within the larger field of his thought. For Agamben, above all, the politico-philosophical history of the West is bound up with thinking – and enacting – a certain distribution of law and life. Sovereignty establishes itself by positioning life, or bare life, outside the polis. Yet this bare life is not something that pre-exists the sovereign decision, but is produced by it. Thus the polis, indeed sovereignty itself, is a function of this constitutive exclusion, which fractures life into *zoé*, or bare life, and *bios*, or qualified, political life. On the basis of this fundamental operation, the dispositions of law and life shift over time, finally reaching a kind of apotheosis in modernity: 'The politicisation of bare life itself', Agamben announces, 'is the decisive event of modernity.'³ (If, in the past, bare life was always inside-outside the polis, it now occupies the very heart of the polis itself.) The figure for this decisive event, what Agamben will call the '*nomos* of the modern', is the concentration camp.

In 'In This Exile', Agamben very clearly describes this zone of indiscernibility between law and life, public and private, that he calls the 'camp':

If one was a Jew in Auschwitz or a Bosnian woman in Omarska, one entered the camp as a result not of a political choice but rather of what was most private and incommunicable in oneself, that is, one's blood, one's biological body. But precisely the latter functions now as a decisive political criterion. In this sense, the camp truly is the inaugural site of modernity: it is the first space in which public and private events, political life and biological life, become rigorously interchangeable. Inasmuch as the inhabitant of the camp has been severed from the political community and has been reduced to naked life (and, moreover, to a 'life that does not deserve to be lived'), he or she is an absolutely private person. And yet there is not one single instant in which he or she might be able to find shelter in the realm of the private, and it is precisely this indiscernibility that constitutes the specific anguish of the camp.⁴

Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* traces the history of this phenomenon of the camp. But here, in 'In this Exile', Agamben indicates that this zone of indistinction between law and life, public and private – body and image – has a much more ubiquitous

and common cultural presence and, in fact, structures the mediasphere as much as it does the putatively separate zone of political detainees and 'extraordinary renditions':

To this slippage of the public into the private corresponds also the spectacular publicisation of the private: are the diva's breast cancer or [the sports star's] death public events or private ones? And how can one touch the porn star's body, since there is not an inch on it that is not public? And yet it is from such a zone of indifference – in which the actions of human experience are being put on sale – that we ought to start today. And if we are calling this opaque zone of indiscernibility 'camp', it is, then, still from the camp that we must begin again.⁵

While we might want, ultimately, to question the effectiveness of calling this *nomos* of the modern world 'camp', Agamben's generalisation of this term summons us, in no uncertain terms, to reflect on the ways in which our mediasphere reproduces – or produces – such spaces. The star's cancer, presidential blow-jobs or rectal polyps, the porn star's in/accessibility, all reveal the collapse of old categories and the alienation of human being in its total exposure. In various places Agamben links porn and advertising in their presentation of a ceaseless progression of images. Even if we agree that the radical interchangeability of porn and advertising bodies exposes a fundamental ontological paradox at the heart of our concepts of singularity – and a paradox whose form of appearance is indisputably historical and contingent, related to our contemporary biopolitical indistinction between public and private, life and law, body and image – and, even further, if we recognise that it is thus always from the 'camp' that we must thus begin, the question then becomes: begin *what*, begin *how*?

THE LOSS OF GESTURE; OR, THE BIOPOLITICISATION OF EXPERIENCE VIA THE IMAGE

The scene of what Agamben describes as the bourgeoisie's dispossession of gesture opens with Gilles de la Tourette's 1886 study of the human gait. In this experiment, a subject whose feet have been coated with iron sesquioxide to colour them rust-red walked the length of a long roll of white paper. Tourette then examined the traces of the subject's footprints, describing in highly specific terms the angle of downward pressure, the length of stride, the coiling motion that raised the foot from the floor. Agamben tells us that what has intervened between Balzac's analogous project, his 1833 *Theory of*

Bearing, and Tourette's study is a particular kind of gaze: 'a gaze that is already a prophecy of what cinematography would later become.' This cinematic gaze has a proper object – the living body – as well as a special mode of analysis and description. Agamben aligns Tourette's method with the famous photographic studies of Jean-Martin Charcot, Muybridge and Marey, thereby linking the bourgeoisie's loss of gesture with these physiological studies of human movement. We might add to Agamben's series Alphonse Bertillon's comparative photographic charts of the physical features of criminals and Frederick Winslow Taylor's famous industrial efficiency studies, all these attempts to discover through photographic analysis any individual expressivity contained in the gestures of factory workers – and to excise it in favour of perfectly homogenous and efficient movements synchronised with the hands of the clock.

Of the figures Agamben cites, Marey is perhaps the most persuasively emblematic. As a number of scholars have noted, social modernity and cultural modernity meet in the figure of Marey, in whose work physiological investigations of human movement, utopian dreams of a pristine and waste-free social hygiene and the impulse to find new imaging technologies converge.⁶ From 1866, Marey held the Chair of Natural History of Organised Bodies at the Collège de France. While this title might lead one to connect him to the gaze of a previous *episteme* in science, Marey's work was very much in the vanguard of scientific method. His positivist optimism is almost unbounded, and he refuses to see interiority or invisibility as obstacles to scientific knowledge. Nothing can elude the type of eye he will turn on it.

Marey also produced a study of the gait which appeared fourteen years before that of Tourette. In this early phase of his career, he developed several important medical imaging devices, including the cardiograph (with Auguste Chaveau). These apparatuses all used a technique he called 'mechanical registration': tambours and recording needles were used to write the rhythm of the foot's fall or the heart's beat, at a distance from the body itself. But it is Marey's development of the chronophotographic gun, a high speed camera that could capture a single movement in multiple frames, that establishes him as a central figure in this history of the biopoliticisation of the body via the image – as well as making him the most important figure in the technical pre-history of the cinema. His chronophotographs are famous in this latter regard and often appear, beside those of Muybridge, in most standard histories of cinema.

Mechanical registration as used in analyses of walking only gives a schematic, abstract image of its subject. When the details of movement become important, chronophotography – which images the whole body at each stage of a movement – becomes the ideal tool. It compensates for the very shortcoming of human vision. The faster mechanical eye of the camera freezes the body at moments in a movement that are too quick for the naked eye to perceive. The full movement can then be reconstructed from its fragments. What Marey calls the ‘real character of a movement’ can thus only be known from outside, and with the aid of scientific imaging technologies. When Agamben refers to the ‘loss of gesture’ he points to this shift in the means of knowing the body, the move from an internal, or external but human-scaled, perception of gesture to its capture by scientific-technological analysis.

It’s important to note also the discursive and political contexts for this new scientific method and its technologico-aesthetic tools. As Anson Rabinbach has argued (albeit in somewhat different terms), Marey is a kind of poster child for the special convergence of domains – scientific, aesthetic and (bio)political – that constitute the integrated spectacle of modernity. One of Marey’s students remarked that Marey was ‘never really a physiologist or doctor in the usual sense of those terms, but above all an engineer of life.’⁷ Marey believed that science, and particularly the science of life, could and would solve political and economic problems. His chronophotographic revelations of movement could alert workers, soldiers, gymnasts, etc., to which of their movements were wasteful and which the most effective. Moreover, his analyses could cut down on fatigue and increase productivity in almost all areas of social life. Marey’s statements on health and illness, fatigue and bodily force, strength and skill, logic and truth, encapsulate the utopian dimension of a biopolitical *ratio* that sought to eradicate fatigue and excess in the interests of an unimpeded productivity. As Rabinbach notes, and as Agamben consistently emphasises, this *ratio* does not discriminate between persons or places, operating equally forcefully within and across capitalist democratic and fascist ideologies and state formations.

According to Agamben, these medico-legal-industrial analytics take over what was once the intimate ‘possession’ of the bourgeois individual, namely his gestures. As these postures are broken down and analysed, exposed and taken over by an eye of this kind, the undertakings of the individual and the moving images of expression and communication are exposed, decomposed and re-established.

These alienated artifacts become, in Agamben’s terms, ‘indecipherable’, and the Western world ends up being caught in a crisis of human gesture, in a crisis of the meaning and the interpretation of the human itself. Of course, humans still could – and still can – make ‘gestures’, but Agamben draws our attention to how what once took place in a private world of the bourgeois individual moves into a public domain, while the public domain penetrates and operates within the body. This appropriation of gestures as images, as forms of knowledge deployed in the discipline of bodies, is centrally implicated in the emergence, by the early twentieth century, of a distinctly modern variant of biopolitics – a situation that would reach its horrific apotheosis only a few years later.

The images produced by gestural analyses are emblematic of the increasing encroachments of biopower and of the resulting crisis within the domain of experience. It is not coincidental that cinema and these analytic technologies appear at the same time. While the political (as medical, legal and industrial techniques) penetrates what was once a private interior, the once private domain of gesture expands into the public display of images. As this gestural analytics fragments and disintegrates the body, it brings what was once the private sphere of the individual into the light of day, or, at least, into the public domain via indexical traces, narrative detail or the fill lights of the cameraman: a body, scrutinised, alienated, out-of-control and stripped of the privacy formerly ensured by the human eye’s very limitations (its inability to perceive, to use Walter Benjamin’s terms, ‘what happens during the split second when a person actually takes a step’).⁸

One of the fundamental claims of Agamben’s argument about the loss of gesture is that this loss takes place *experientially*; it constitutes what amounts to a kind of trauma in the experience of everyday life. It is not something that occurs ‘merely’ in the domain of images, science or politics. These phenomena, these transductive exchanges between media and everyday, affective experience, prove extremely resistant to analysis, even to description. Here Agamben chooses a startling phrase to express the loss of gesture: he asserts that the image analyses of Marey *et al.* produce a ‘generalized catastrophe of the gestural sphere’. He invokes another study produced by Tourette, one year before the study of the gait, of what would come to be called Tourette’s Syndrome: ‘On this occasion, the same distancing that the footprint method had enabled in the case of the most common gesture was applied to the description of an amazing proliferation of tics,

spasmodic jerks and mannerisms – a proliferation that cannot be defined in any way other than as a generalized catastrophe of the sphere of gestures’ (p. 51). Agamben then observes that while ‘thousands’ of these cases were observed soon after the 1885 study, they ‘practically cease to be recorded in the first years of the twentieth century’ (p. 52). He draws a startling conclusion: the *disappearance* of these cases is in fact an indication that this gestural catastrophe has become the norm, ‘that beyond a certain point everybody had lost control of their gestures and were walking and gesticulating frenetically.’ ‘This’, he concludes ‘is the impression, at any rate, one has when watching the films that Marey and Lumière began to shoot exactly in those years’ (pp. 52–3).

CINEMA: AESTHETICS, ETHICS, POLITICS

Although Agamben conceives the cinematic as a cultural medium that extends far beyond the celluloid of early film, this new medium is inextricably bound to the role of the image as such in human history. Humans, Agamben asserts, are the only animals that are interested in images per se. Other animals are only interested to the extent that they mistake them for real things; once they discover an image is ‘counterfeit’, they lose interest altogether. The human being, Agamben thus declares, can in this sense be defined as ‘the moviegoing animal.’⁹ This special relationship means that within human cultures images do an enormous amount of historical work. For Agamben, this is the work of messianic history more than of chronological history, of a history that moves toward both salvation and completion.

When Agamben concludes that ‘the element of cinema is gesture and not image’, he refers this thesis back to the ontological structure of the image, and to the history of Western art. Every image, he says, ‘is animated by an antinomic polarity: on the one hand, images are the reification and obliteration of a gesture (it is the *imago* as death mask or symbol); on the other hand, they preserve the *dynamis* intact (as in Muybridge’s snapshots or in any sports photograph)’ (p. 56). The image as such, Agamben thus argues, vacillates between cessation and stillness and motion and dynamics. (It is important to note here also that the figures he uses – the death mask and the sports photo – map the human body’s own vacillation between states of animation and inanimation. Everywhere the zones of indistinction appear and proliferate.) All images, Agamben continues, can thus be

seen as ‘fragments of a gesture or as stills of a lost film wherein only they would regain their true meaning’ (pp. 56–7). The image is not a completed object but one that is always dynamic. And what is dynamic in it is the gesture, a fragment of motion trapped, as it were, by its enframing:

A certain kind of *litigatio*, a paralyzing power whose spell we need to break, is continuously 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. (p. 57)

The whole of Western history and art history is thus leading to the ‘liberation of the image into gesture’. The figure of the living statue ties Agamben’s formulations regarding the history of the image very directly to his genealogy of biopolitics. But if, in *Homo Sacer*, *homo sacer* itself – in its most extreme form in the figures of the bandit, the Führer and the Muselmann¹⁰ – is imagined as/in relation to a living statue, here the living statue is liberated from its ties, liberated as gesture.

‘Because cinema has its centre in the gesture and not in the image’, Agamben asserts, ‘it belongs essentially to the realm of ethics and politics (and not simply to that of aesthetics).’ As one privileged site of the work of messianic history, the image is properly an ethical and political element rather than ‘merely’ an aesthetic one. But it only fully assumes this messianic task in the cinema, that is, in the era when body and image are no longer distinguishable, and when the body of the porn star has itself become a ‘camp’. Whether or not we want, ourselves, to assume the mantle of this messianic history, Agamben draws our attention to a new power of the image-as-gesture.

Nothing is more misleading for an understanding of gesture, therefore, than representing, on the one hand, a sphere of means as addressing a goal (for example, marching seen as a means of moving the body from point A to point B) and, on the other hand, a separate and superior sphere of gesture as a movement that has its end in itself (for example, dance seen as an aesthetic dimension). 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. But, just as in a pornographic film, people caught in the act of performing a gesture that is simply a means addressed to the end of giving pleasure to others (or to themselves) are kept suspended in and by their own mediality – for the only reason of being shot and exhibited in their mediality – and can become the medium of a new pleasure for the audience (a pleasure that would otherwise be incomprehensible); or, just as in the case of mime, when gestures addressed to the most familiar ends are exhibited as such and are thus kept suspended ‘*entre le désir et l’accomplissement, la perpétration et son souvenir*’ [between desire and fulfilment, perpetration and its recollection] – in what Mallarmé calls a *milieu pur*, so what is relayed to human beings in gestures is not the sphere of an end in itself but rather the sphere of an endless mediality. (p. 58)

In this passage, Agamben hits almost all of the tenets of his theory of gesture. Gesture is neither a means to an end (getting from point A to B), nor a movement conceived as an end in itself (a kind of pure aesthetics). The latter is ‘just as alienating’ as the former. Such would, as he explains elsewhere, entail the separation of aesthetics and politics, art and life. Once he has elaborated what gesture is not, he explains what it, in fact, is: gesture is an exhibition, a process of making visible, a revelation device, and what it makes visible is the *medium*, the *milieu* of human beings. Such a *milieu* refers not only to the medium that human beings are *in*, but equally to the medium that human being *is*. When he asserts that this revelation of human mediality also ‘opens the ethical dimension’ for human beings, he posits ethics as bound to this revelation of a mediality without end, that is to the sphere of human being as without an original or final source in a vocation, destiny or identity. To open the proper sphere of ethics is thus to bring about not so much an awareness – this would be too rooted in consciousness – but, rather, an *experience* of this endlessness.

Agamben locates these experiences in the sphere of spectacle, here with direct reference to porn films and mime. These examples are instructive, even if they demand considerable extension. The mime suggests the rather familiar formula of an *avant garde* estrangement. The mime’s gestures, torn from their home in the everyday (or even the theatrical) situation, are severed from normal ends and thus appear in relief, as it were, against a blank background or blue screen. Agamben echoes Benjamin’s reading of the *gestus* in Brecht, where Benjamin asserts that “‘Making gestures quotable” is one of the signal achievements of the epic theater. An actor must be able to space

his gestures the way a typesetter spaces type.’¹¹ It is interesting to note, however, that whereas Benjamin stresses technics and interruption, Agamben puts the emphasis on the kind of ontological suspension suggested by Mallarmé’s *milieu pur*. In the porn film the mechanism of mediality is different. Here, gestures are not so much radically estranged as so completely at home that they never refer outside their medial situation. The porn star’s direct stare at the camera at once reveals that the audience, rather than her partner, is her gestures’ addressee, and that both audience and actors dwell in a milieu in which there is always more to be seen, an endless progression of images behind the image. It is between these two manifestations of image-as-gesture that ‘the ethics and politics of cinema come into play.’¹²

Gesture – as an enduring and supporting, as what Agamben describes as a third kind of action that dissolves the means-ends structure – opens this experience of mediality as the ethical dimension of human beings. This is the sense, as I suggested above, in which it is always spectacle that opens onto the coming community. But this revelation of mediality is only the first part of a theory of gesture that would indicate a meaningful direction for media studies in the age of biopolitics and the ascendance of affect. Agamben is trying to get at something else here too, something that he gestures toward but that is not yet fully articulated. If mediality is the essential – if also historical – condition of human being, gesture is as close as Agamben will come to considering what kind of pragmatics might issue from this scenario of ontological alienation-revelation.

WORLD THEATRE (OR, REFLECTION WITHOUT END)

While ‘Notes on Gesture’ illuminates our current conjugations of biopolitical and media culture (insofar as it even makes sense to continue to treat these as two separate domains), it does this through focusing on a pre-history of the present, and particularly on a moment when the loss of gesture was new and not yet naturalised (or second-naturalised) and was thus cause of both shock and obsession:

An age that has lost its gestures is, for this reason, obsessed by them. For human beings who have lost every sense of naturalness, each single gesture becomes a destiny. And the more gestures lose their ease under the action of invisible powers, the more life becomes indecipherable . . . Thus *Spake Zarathustra* is the ballet of a humankind that has lost its gestures . . . The dance of Isadora

Duncan and Serghei Diaghilev, the novel of Proust, the great *Jugendstil* poetry from Pascoli to Rilke, and, finally and most exemplarily, the silent movie, trace the magic circle in which humanity tried for the last time to evoke what was slipping through their fingers forever. (pp. 53–4)

In this passage, Agamben is concerned with the fate of a human body caught between a biopolitical dispossession and an aesthetic redemption. He thus marks out the beginning – and the end – of an era which begins in the 1880s and ends before the coming of sound in film (not to mention the events of the 1930s that would end in the camp as such). Here, Agamben highlights a kind of long fin-de-siècle aesthetic sequence, which spans the rigour of Nietzsche's 'ballet' and the kitsch gesture of the tale of Duncan's demise: strangled by her exaggerated scarf caught in a wheel of the moving car in which she is a passenger. These are the chroniclers of a transitional period, whose deaths signal and coincide with the biopoliticisation of experience. Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* would be the chronicle of these chroniclers, with its reading of Nietzsche's modernity, its focus on health, illness and medicine, and its backward gaze at the hollowed gestures of old Europe.

While Agamben asserts that cinema is the most exemplary site for this attempt to repossess and redeem gesture, 'cinema' here is not equivalent to the technical-social scene of the moving picture, but is rather a kind of impersonal eye, a perceptual modality, a kinesthetic sense, a social *milieu*. This cinematic gestural catastrophe appears, in fact, to be more visible in other media, in theatre, for instance, or in the philosophical text or novel. In this passage we can also hear echoes of Benjamin's conception of gesture, particularly as he develops it through a reading of Kafka; it is almost impossible to imagine that Agamben, who prepared the Italian edition of Walter Benjamin's collected works, did not have Benjamin's conception of gesture in mind.

Benjamin confronts what Agamben calls the 'loss of gesture' in a 1934 essay on Kafka, and points, in a way we have not yet encountered, to the redemption that may issue from gesture's loss, or, at least, its 'positive possibility'. For Kafka, Benjamin explains, it is precisely this loss which provides a platform for experimentation, and an opening onto the future – even onto heaven. We find that Kafka's lost *gestus* has its mirror image in an experience emanating directly from technics, and in a particular experiment in which the subject is directly submitted to an experience of alienation and disorientation:

The invention of motion pictures and the phonograph came in an age of maximum alienation of men from one another, of unpredictably intervening relationships which have become their only ones. Experiments have proved that a man does not recognize his own gait on film or his own voice on the phonograph. The situation of the subject in such experiments is Kafka's situation; this is what leads him to study, where he may encounter fragments of his own existence – fragments that are still within the context of the role. He might catch hold of the lost *gestus* the way that Peter Schlemihl caught hold of the shadow he had sold. He might understand himself, but what an enormous effort would be required!¹³

The inventions of film and phonography are preceded by a cultural scenario of 'maximum alienation' and unpredictable relationships. But these technologies usher in another dimension of alienation, that of man from himself or, at least, from the fragments of his existence denoted by the term 'gesture'. Film and phonography – which produce the most exact replications of the 'objective' world – are like funhouse mirrors where one's own reflection is at stake, returning it amid so much distortion that it becomes unrecognisable. Everyday experience affirms the sense of these studies, even if initial surprise is followed by reluctant recognition. Like the image in Jacques Lacan's famous scenario of the mirror stage, the reflection returned is not a true one, but, unlike the vision of false plenitude and cohesion found by Lacan's subject, Kafka/Benjamin's subject finds only a fragment – a distorted and, even more strikingly, a decontextualised experience of self.

It is this experience of surprise at the strangeness and estrangement of one's own being that Benjamin sees as the engine of Kafka's world – where one might awake one morning to find oneself transformed into vermin, or to find one's hands transformed into machines: 'On many occasions, and often for strange reasons, Kafka's figures clap their hands. Once, the casual remark is made that these are "really steam hammers"' (p. 795).¹⁴ In this world, study is the experience of piecing oneself together from fragments, performing a kind of reconstitution of alienated objects. Kafka, Benjamin shows us, attempts this reconstitution on a broad scale within his work. If what is lost and found are the gait and the voice, these are rediscovered in the text, become an event, a fate, with each alienated instant, each movement or syllable uttered: 'What Kafka could fathom least of all was the *gestus*. Each gesture is an event – one might even say a drama – in itself. The stage on which this drama takes place is the World Theater, which

opens up toward heaven' (p. 802). The *gestus* as alienated object, as fragment and as mystery becomes the source of his composition. Having 'divest[ed] human gesture of its traditional supports, [Kafka] then has a subject for reflection without end' (p. 802).

THE SITUATION

Agamben's 'coming community' will unfurl from a gestural politics that does not find its origin or destiny in a vocation or an identity, that is from the exposition of the being-in-a-medium of humans. Before now, before the alienation of linguistic being in spectacle, before the loss of gesture and the becoming-image of capital, this true (absence of) ontological foundation was not visible in a world where words were consonant with the things they expressed, where images were still bound by the *litigatio* into their frames, where life at least appeared to find a true home in the household which, except in extreme and exemplary circumstances, was perceived to exist outside the claims of the polis.¹⁵ This is not to say that before now people could not philosophise, but that today this lack of destiny has become a common experience, and thus can – as in Kafka – become a platform for experimentation, an opening onto the future.

In the modern bipolitical regime of the integrated spectacle, the breaking-down, the atomisation of both bodies and images produces a positive possibility whereby the image-as-gesture is no longer necessarily linked to a 'whole', to a scenario within which it gains its meaning. Gesture is thus liberated from the scene. It is the element which – within the modern zones of indetermination between law and life, body and image, public and private – rises to visibility and gains a new kind of potency.

Perhaps the most useful direction for thinking gesture indicated by Agamben himself lies in the link he establishes between gesture and the Situationists' 'created situation'. You may recall Debord's description of the task of the SI:

Our central idea is the construction of situations, that is to say, the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation of a superior passional quality. We must develop a systematic intervention based on the complex factors of two components in perpetual interaction: the material environment of life and the behaviours which it gives rise to and which radically transform it.¹⁶

The situation is designed to transform experience directly, rather than through consciousness and contemplation. It reforms affective

experience, or 'passional quality', in the interplay between different environments and the sensations, perceptions and behaviours to which they give rise. Agamben places gesture at the heart of his reading of the constructed situation, which he describes in the following way:

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 this common social substance' sink into the situation.¹⁷

Agamben names the pure praxis of the Situation 'gesture'. Just as gesture appears in its modern form in the zone of indiscernibility between life and law, public and private, body and image, it is also neither life nor art but something that appears in-between the two, and appears as 'the crystals of this common social substance', that is labour, re-emerging on the other side of the commodity. This Situationist utopia, as Agamben emphasises, always takes its place precisely within what it seeks to overthrow.

(TOWARD A) MEDIA ETHOLOGY

Agamben's gesture opens the way to a reflective pragmatics, to a means of exploring media objects of all kinds in terms of the ways in which they materialise biopolitical relations; the ways they affirm and contest such relations; and how they enact, provoke and deploy new affects. To conjure some Deleuzian terms, it sends us toward an onto-ethological approach to media. And, in fact, if Agamben begins his own analysis with Deleuze's theory of the image, we can extend Agamben's nascent pragmatics by re-engaging Deleuze.

The next step would then be to read – from within Agamben's descriptions of mime, porn star, silent cinema and the created situation – the following passages from Deleuze's seminar on Spinoza of 21 December 1980, entitled '*Ontologie-Ethique*':

In an ethics . . . you do not judge. In a certain manner, you say: whatever you do, you will only ever have what you deserve. Somebody says or does something, you do not relate it to values. You ask yourself how is that possible? How is this possible in an internal way? In other words, you relate the thing or the statement

to the mode of existence that it implies, that it envelops in itself. How must it be in order to say that? Which manner of Being does this imply? You seek the enveloped modes of existence, and not the transcendent values. It is the operation of immanence . . .

The point of view of an ethics is: of what are you capable, what can you do? Hence a return to this sort of cry of Spinoza's: what can a body do? We never know in advance what a body can do. We never know how we're organized and how the modes of existence are enveloped in somebody.¹⁸

Agamben and Deleuze provide important correctives to, and extensions of, one another's thought. Agamben submits Deleuze's vitalism to a critical genealogy of 'life' as the cultural object *par excellence*. And we can confront Agamben's pure mediality and gesturality – which, despite the potentiality they enfold, threaten to end in the stasis of a kind of metaphysical experience – with the onto-ethological, onto-genetic force of Deleuze's Spinozist question: what can a body do? And, more specifically, for media studies, what do bodies do? What affects are contained or freed in the gestures of cinema in its most expanded sense?

While a case study is beyond the scope of this essay, I would like to end with a kind of dialectical image. Whisking Agamben's long fin-de-siècle moment a few years ahead to the eve of the Second World War, we find that film-making of all kinds is preoccupied with new forms of human movement and human gesture. On both sides of the Atlantic, one of the burgeoning fields within medical film is the neurological (at that time, neuro-psychiatric) documentary, as doctors seek – in hospitals, clinics and patients' backyards – to catalogue and classify the tics, tremors and torsions of gestural disorders. Meanwhile, in Hollywood, the Busby Berkeley musical is coming into its own in the *Gold Diggers* films. Here, Berkeley constructs a perfect optical girl machine: a mass ornament where legs and arms swing in perfect tandem, mirrored to infinity and amplified by the dazzling geometry of his crane shots. Each of these is the optical unconscious of the other, and, in between – between the tics, tremors and torsions of gestural disorder and the compensatory drama of the girl machine – we can read the onto-ethology of this era's gestural media. What separates a media-ethological reading of this kind of dialectical image from previous approaches is an attention to very specific, even literal-minded, description on the one side, and an attention to political manifestations on the other. But – and here, I think, is the rub – without collapsing one into the other. The political and biopolitical dimension of these texts is immediately

apparent: the most exhaustive neurological film is made by Ellis Island's Neuro-Psychiatric Service; *42nd Street* is advertised as the 'New Deal in American Entertainment'; and Goebbels urges UFA to make Berkeley-style revue films. At the same time, however, the movements and the affective reverberations that these films produce and release – whether these are related to new revelations of stuttering, stammering, trembling, spasming, jerking, convulsing and seizing, or novel modes of linking, rotating, swooping, diving, swimming, gliding and spinning – are not exhausted by these specific political materialisations and may in fact, as Agamben suggests, open as the positive possibility of contemporary biopolitics itself.

Notes

1. Giorgio Agamben, 'Notes on Gesture', *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 55. Further references to this work are given in parentheses in the text.
2. In 'Absolute Immanence,' Agamben submits Deleuze's concept of life to a more detailed interrogation. At stake there, however, is the same question: to what extent does Deleuze's philosophy – as a vitalism and even a biophilosophy – share tacit assumptions with the cultural conception of life which grounds biopolitical logic, and to what extent does it shift such assumptions? See Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 220–39.
3. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 4.
4. Agamben, 'In This Exile (Italian Diary 1992–1994)', in *Means Without End*, p. 122.
5. Agamben, 'In this Exile', p. 123.
6. Virgilio Tosi, 'Etienne-Jules Marey and the Origins of Cinema', in *Marey: Pionnier de la Synthèse du Mouvement* (Beaune, France: Musée Marey, 1995); Marta Braun, 'Movement and Modernism: the Work of Etienne-Jules Marey', in *Marey: Pionnier de la Synthèse du Mouvement and Picturing Time: The Work of Etienne-Jules Marey (1830–1904)* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Anson Rabinbach, 'Time and Motion: Etienne-Jules Marey and the Mechanics of the Body', in *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990).
7. See Rabinbach, *The Human Motor*, p. 90.
8. Walter Benjamin. 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)', *Selected Writings, Volume 4:*

- 1938–1940, trans. Edmund Jephcott and others, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 266.
9. Giorgio Agamben, 'Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord's Films', in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2002), p. 314.
 10. See *Homo Sacer*, p. 99 and p. 183 and ff. Agamben's use of this unusual figure deserves a commentary of its own.
 11. Benjamin, 'What is Epic Theater? (II)', *Selected Writings, Volume 4*, p. 305.
 12. In 'Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord's Films', Agamben suggests that there are two ways of showing the image as such, the image as pure means. He also refers to this condition as 'imagelessness': 'One is pornography and advertising, which act as though there were always something more to be seen, more images behind the images; while the other way is to exhibit the image as image and thus to allow the appearance of "imagelessness," which, as Benjamin said, is the refuge of all images. It is here, in this difference, that the ethics and the politics of cinema come into play' (p. 319).
 13. Walter Benjamin, 'Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death', in *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927–1934*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and others, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 814.
 14. This 'casual comment' is drawn from Kafka's miniature tale 'In the Gallery', which, with its circus spectacle, its consumptive equestrienne, her horse, her master and her alienated spectator, can be read as Kafka's most incisive preview of gesture in the age of biopolitics. See Franz Kafka, 'In the Gallery', in *Stories 1904–1924*, trans. J.A. Underwood, foreword Jorge Luis Borges (London: Abacus Time Warner, 2002), pp. 189–90.
 15. Agamben positions this power of gesture in the sphere of the emptying out, the alienation, of the linguistic being of humans that is the spectacle: 'It is evident, after all, that the spectacle is language, the very communicativity and linguistic being of humans . . . what we encounter in the spectacle is our linguistic nature inverted', 'Marginal Notes on *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*', *Means Without End*, p. 82. He explains that it is because language loses its power to produce a common medium for human beings in the society of the spectacle that gesture, which exhibits what cannot be said, at once reveals this alienation and, in a new way, opens a common medium. It would be instructive to compare Agamben's formulation of the new relations of images and language to that of Wlad Godzich:

The problem is that a dissonance is now manifesting itself: images are scrambling the functioning of language, which must operate out of the imaginary

- in order to function optimally. Images are parasitical noises upon language at first – and then they supplant it: it must be recalled that the technology of images operates at the speed of light, as does the world. Language could slow down the world, thanks to its tremendous negative capability, but it cannot slow down images, for they operate out of the very imaginary that language would have to be able to organize in the first place. Indeed, the question for us is one of dissonance: can language bring the speed of images under control, that is, turn images into a kind of language (but the failure of the various visual semiotics is not reassuring on this score), or are we to see a world, images of this world, all traveling at the speed of light in a universe without *logos*, as a logical universe? Such would seem to be the postmodern predicament. ('Images, Language, and the Postmodern Predicament', *Materialities of Communication*, ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 370)
16. Guy Debord, 'Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action', June 1957, trans. Ken Knabb, Situationist International Archive, at: <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/report.html>.
 17. Agamben, 'Marginal Notes on *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*', *Means Without End*, p. 80.
 18. Gilles Deleuze, 'DELEUZE/SPINOZA, *Cours Vincennes: Ontologie-Ethique*', 21 December 1980, at: <http://www.webdeleuze.com/php/texte.php?cle=190&groupe=Spinoza&langue=2>.