

## Gesture, Time, Movement: David Claerbout meets Giorgio Agamben on the *Boulevard du Temple*

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Across the corpus of Giorgio Agamben's work lie scattered a number of speculative propositions on what may be said to define or characterize the species of the human. One of the most forceful of these speculations occurs in the introduction to the English translation of the work *Infancy and History*, a prologue that Agamben wrote fifteen years after the original publication of the book in Italian in 1978. In this introduction he notes that *Infancy and History* itself is but a prologue to an unwritten work, which remains "stubbornly unwritten" and yet has a title, *The Human Voice*. One of the pages of this work, he writes, would contain the following questions: "Is there a human voice, a voice that is the voice of man as the chirp is the voice of the cricket or the bray of the donkey? And, if it exists, is this voice language?"<sup>1</sup> The question of language is related to the question of what it means to be human, yet the voice that may be language is not simply that which is spoken or written. Language is a term encompassing all that is unsaid as a presupposition upon which language may take place. This relation, in which the spoken is the broken cast around the absent unsaid, he gives the name in-fans. When he writes that there has been but "one train of thought," which is this question, "what is the meaning of 'there is language'," and what is more, "what is the meaning of 'I speak?'," we are referred to the experience of language *as such*.

This train of thought is manifest in many different ways across his writings, and perhaps most vigorously as a question of humanity in, *The Open: Man and Animal* (2002/2004). *The Open* stages a critique of the evolutionary construction of humanity as the animal that becomes human through the expulsion of his own animality. The acquisition of language is retrospectively organized as the locus of a strategic difference or capacity distinguishing man from animal.<sup>2</sup> Language provides a constitutive component of what he names the anthropological

machine, an apparatus that not only distinguishes the species but privileges human kind over all others; moreover, the relation of man to animal is one that is both drawn on as an affinity embraced (the qualities of passion for example), and also a resonance repudiated and expelled (the “animality” of violence). The book begins with a description of this paradox in illustrations from a thirteenth-century Hebrew bible of man on the Day of Judgment as a creature bearing the head of an animal. That Agamben makes use at times of Lévi-Strauss in his engagement with language<sup>3</sup> should not however confuse his focus with the project of grammatology in Derrida’s work. For Agamben, Derrida misdiagnoses the problem of metaphysics; the vital question of language, for Agamben, is not the infinite deferral of meaning and play of difference between signifier and signified (repudiating the hierarchy of speech as presence and writing as absence). Instead, the question is within the order of the ethical, of what it means for the human to be *the living being that has language*.

It may come as something of a surprise then to find a definition of the human in relation to images rather than language in (what might appear to be) the margins of his work.<sup>4</sup> Here is Agamben speaking in memorium for his friend Guy Debord, at a lecture in 1995<sup>5</sup>:

Now man is an animal who is interested in images when he has recognized them *as such*. That’s why he is interested in painting and why he goes to the cinema. A definition of man from our specific point of view could be that man is a movie-going animal. He is interested in images after he has recognized that they are not real beings.<sup>6</sup>

While the figure of Debord, rather than images, is the subject of the talk, Agamben parses the topicality of the image through Debord’s practice. Why, he asks, was cinema the privileged medium for Debord, the strategist, rather than, say, poetry (Debord having abandoned the Lettrist project earlier in his career) or painting? The answer brings into play the historical dimension of the image, “the close tie between cinema and history,” or what he goes on to call the eminently historical character of the image.<sup>7</sup> What follows in the essay is a summary (or condensation) of the meaning of the historical nature of the image in Agamben’s work, referencing messianic time, the dialectical image, stoppage and repetition, all appearing as keystones also to Debord’s film works. Of course, bound up with this question of what cinematic images mean to Debord, of why he chose this medium over others, is the question of what images mean for Agamben. While Agamben presents the choice of medium to Debord, there

is a degree of slippage in the way that he glides between his own references to image-types in this memorial lecture. In this particular description of man as a movie-going animal, one might note the equivocation of filmic images with paintings (“[t]hat’s why he is interested in painting and why he goes to the cinema”),<sup>8</sup> and, in other essays, reference to a third image-type in the photograph.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, across his work the media of photography, film and painting are drawn on variously yet their singularity as “means” is not brought into focus.

From the point of view of film theory and art history,<sup>10</sup> the lack of attention to such differences suggests a wide departure from the methodological concern with the specific properties of form and their historical (if promiscuous) development as inscribed in these disciplines.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the question of what is understood by the “historical nature of the image,” and by a medium, is potentially at odds in the encounter between film theory and Agambenian philosophy. The photographic image, according to Agamben, is not the mummification of moment resolute in its still capture, but the potential release of a dynamis and the site of a particular investiture concerning the capture of the human figure in her own medium. The human being as a species is fundamentally located in a mode of being visible, never self-defined but given over to the gestural qualities of her appearance. “The image,” writes Agamben in “Special Being,” “is a being whose essence is to be a *species*, a visibility or an appearance”<sup>12</sup> and while he is writing here with regard to the reflected image in a mirror, the philological tie between image as speculum and the human species as the locus of gestural production binds the two. Neither mirror image nor human subject is defined by a substance, but by the process of becoming visible, being given to appearance, a definition of humanity as communicability itself. The photographic image then, like the image in the mirror, and like the human subject, coincides there as an accident of sorts but not a substance of any kind.

If there seems to be a lack of attention to disciplinary demarcations and approaches in this treatment of image forms, we might re-orient debate with reference to Agamben’s recent discussion of method and in particular, his discussion of the term “paradigm,” in *The Signature of All Things: On Method* (2008/9). In this discussion, the concept of the paradigm is elucidated and may be traced retrospectively through Agamben’s work as the generation of a form of knowledge that moves from singularity to singularity, finding analogies, correspondences and echoes across categories in the production of a paradigm that is imminent to things.<sup>13</sup> That is, the paradigm does not impose a model or operate deductively, nor proceed from an example, but finds correspondences

between things in a crossing of diachrony and synchrony. We might postulate then that photography and film, and indeed painted images, create a paradigm as the site of encounter between the change of things across time (diachrony) and the relations between things at any one time (synchrony). Indeed, there is a reflexive re-play of the changing of things across time that photography in particular is thought to “capture.”

The idea of the photograph as the capture of an instant, as the registration of a temporal point in time, has characterized critical ruminations about photography for the past eighty years or more.<sup>14</sup> It is this notion of photography as an exemplary means to record time (arrested as a “still”), that Agamben’s paradigm of the image implicitly refutes. In his terms, the photograph’s potentiality is conversely the release of a dynamis, fundamentally linked to a Benjaminian concept of kairological time; that is, the paradigm takes no account of the polarity of stillness and movement as they are conventionally attributed to photography and film respectively. And yet the paradigm within which the image is situated, elaborated across some twenty texts and essay collections, remains (in terms of film theory at least) elliptical, connecting media with time but in an unorthodox re-writing of the relation, and simultaneously transgressing any definition of distinct media forms. My objective in this essay is to sketch the way in which Agamben’s use of images as a move away from a fixed medium specificity is, simultaneously, a move away from the concept of a fixed human ontology. Rather than appeal to the distinct domains of cinema and photography, I will refer to contemporary art and the installation as the location of a dismantling of traditional medium-specific definitions and the re-assemblage of resemblances, correspondences and sympathies across these lines. **provides for a mode that displays its practice,** In particular, Belgian artist, David Claerbout, produces such works where a medium is a site for experimentation, whose practice can be described as making coincidental rather than substantial productions, or controlled experiment in modes of appearing.

Claerbout’s practice might be said to take place entirely within the space between film and photography. Unlike Barthes’ **strong preference for the photograph over and above cinema,** Claerbout seems to not take a preference, proffering a hesitant, reserved art that is never fully aligned with one or other medium. “We know to what extent David Claerbout keeps his distance from cinema,” writes Raymond Bellour.<sup>15</sup> Claerbout criticizes cinema for “just about everything Roland Barthes criticized it for so long ago”: cinema’s relative lack of pensiveness, its nervousness, its dependency on narrative structure,

all contributing to a sense of disappointment that cinema bears neither the definitive stamp of the studium nor the seductive sudden impingement of the punctum that Barthes found so appealing in photography.<sup>16</sup> Yet it is not the case that Claerbout neglects the indexical reference of the image as historical, but rather that he releases within this the gestural potential of an image. Take, for example, Claerbout's early work, *Kindergarten Antonio Sant'Elia* (1998), seemingly a photograph of a nursery garden, designed to angular modernist principles, featuring a scattering of young children at play. The original photograph was taken in 1932 in Como, Italy, at the opening of the nursery. Claerbout had found the picture in an architectural book celebrating the "new urbanism" of designed space in the 1930s, a moment that he talks about as utopian, the photograph part of a series staging and celebrating, in its original context, a fresh new environment.

The garden of *Kindergarten* was designed by Giuseppe Terragni, an architect who worked for Mussolini, who pioneered a rationalist international style which was subsequently to become associated with a clinical proto-fascist rationalism. The angle of the photograph suggests that it was taken from a level above ground, perhaps a first-story window looking down on an enclosed area pleasingly patterned with new white paving stones laid in geometric shapes with grass cut around the curves of paved form. Within the two paved areas a circle has been cut to allow the planting of two trees, which appear to fit the spaces exactly, young thin-limbed trees yet to mature. Around the trees, a number of children (at least eighteen) stand, run and play, dressed in identical pristine white aprons, also thin-limbed and yet to mature. A low but bright sun provides a startling light that throws well-defined shadows from the bodies of the children and the limbs of the trees. If we view the image for more than a few seconds, we notice a slight swimming movement, which is the swaying of the trees, discretely, subtly animated. Claerbout re-versions the image as a singlechannel video work that stages the signs of various temporalities.

The scene of *Kindergarten Antonio Sant'Elia*, becomes, in Claerbout's hands, a still from a lost film, a picture from a film that we have not (yet) seen, the dynamis of its capture returned in this particular moment of viewing. What Claerbout's works suggest is that there is a time of looking at an image as well as a time of taking. That is, the moment of its potency is not always visible, or available, but in a Benjaminian sense the charge of the image flashes at a particular moment. The barely discernable movement in Claerbout's single-channel works requires the viewer to be alert to such moments, to pay attention

to the surface of an image that we think we know but that catches us out in our complacency. Here are young trees that move as they may have moved in 1932, their dynamis intact, which in turn refers us to the movement of these children, each in a process of turning, running, stepping that is, as yet, incomplete. In the cast of these small gestures, the form of the bodies refers us to their dynamic potential, and moreover to further images and gestures to come. It may not be an exaggeration to say that the picture refers to gesturality itself. The moment brings together the historical context with an exigency to find a name for these children, to take account of their singular lives, while at the same time to apprehend their generic openness to communication, the capacity of gesturality that finds the human revealed in her own medium.

It is possibly only through the pursuing of an illusive difference between film and photography in Claerbout's works that movement is revealed in its relation to temporality; the photograph is not the index of a static point in time, but the image of a potential capacity. Movement in both media is located in gesture rather than any type of chemical registration. What converges in Claerbout's practice and Agamben's treatment of the image is an understanding of filmic and photographic productions as the potential bearers of a messianic, kairological time, a time of the now that up-ends the conceptual framework within which film and photography are conventionally thought. In pursuing an encounter between the two, the features of the kairological are given greater force. By way of tending to the image as production, I want to turn to a number of particular images that are brought into appearance in the work of the artist and the philosopher respectively, and initially to cross-refer their treatment of stillness and motion in an approach to kairological time, before noting finally their points of difference.

### Boulevard du temple

The complexity of the correspondence between movement and stillness, which is subtly different from the pairing of dynamis and stasis, we find in Agamben's concise essay "Judgment Day", (*Profanations*, 2005/7). The essay opens with a description of the first photographic image featuring human figures, named after the place of its taking, "Boulevard du Temple," and photographed in 1838 by French artist and chemist Louis Daguerre. Daguerre, we may note, had an

involvement in other first things, having partnered in chemical experimentation with the photographer of the first still life, “The Dinner Table” by Joseph Niepce. *Boulevard du Temple* is not however about first things but about final things in Agamben’s account, an eschatology closely linked to Benjamin’s thought, but we will come to this. The everyday activity that became photography (as the documenting of “life”) evinced the detail of everyday existence, the ritual practices of life as habitat, practices that are partially un-thought marginalia. It is this seemingly irrelevant detail of the everyday, however, that comes to appear in this image, “is called forth, summoned to appear on Judgment Day.”<sup>17</sup> It is also the case that the first photograph showing human figures proffers the somewhat contingent nature of that by which we will be judged. For the boulevard, Agamben observes, should be crowded with people and carriages on a busy day, and yet because of the length of photographic exposure requiring more than ten or possibly twenty minutes to elapse, the crowd is not visible. Nothing of this throng is visible (though still present), but only a man who has stopped to have his shoes shined, who must have been stationary for some while: “The crowd of humans—indeed, all of humanity—is present, but it cannot be seen, because judgment concerns a single person, a single life: precisely this one and no other.”<sup>18</sup>

Agamben’s account resonates with that of a contemporary of Daguerre, Samuel Morse, inventor of the single wire telegraph system in 1838 (a year before the photograph of Boulevard du Temple). Morse wrote a description of the image after visiting Daguerre’s studio,<sup>19</sup> which was published in the *New York Observer* in April 1839. Observing the plate he writes, “Objects moving are not impressed,” with the exception of the individual who was having his shoes brushed. “His feet were compelled, of course, to be stationary for some time, one being on the box of the boot black, and the other on the ground,” he continues, “consequently his boots and legs were well defined, but he is without body or head, because these were in motion.” Photography fails to impress an object (or subject) in movement, except as an absence or a blurred form. For Morse, the body here fails to transmit itself across the boundary of life to register as silver nitrate inscription as a whole body, becoming fragmented, perhaps codified differently by qualities of movement and stillness. It is interesting to note that Morse expresses a concern with photography as an act of transmission, tracing what remains after the transmission is over, rather than with historical registration. In correlation to the morse signal transmitted across space, photography appears as a transmission across time.

Both Agamben and Morse fix upon the presence and absence that the image brings forth, but it is not the case that what is registered, or impressed, is a stillness in any simple sense. What is not registered is the animistic movement of bodies, or transport. What *is* registered however is motion, either as absence, blurred form, or gesture. The photograph in this sense does not polarize stillness and movement, or image and life, later to become the polarization of photography and film. Rather, it releases the mobile forces within an image as a centrifugal force-field. For Agamben, what the photograph captures is a gesture, “charged with the weight of an entire life.” In what we might call the implication of movement in gesture, the photograph calls up a moment that is not an instant within a continuum, but a paradigm of heterogeneous times that breaks from the concept of the image as a sealed surface containing an historical truth.

The various registers of movement within a photograph (that Agamben reads as indices of different conceptions of time), however created a degree of confusion in the time of the photograph’s production (the 1830s). The variation of what is and is not in focus in Daguerre’s photographs, for example, finds the commentary of his contemporaries reaching towards an understanding of what exactly, or inexactly, is being produced. The French correspondent for the *Foreign Quarterly Review* singled out the problematic imaging of leaves: “In foliage, he is less successful, the constant motion in the leaves rendering his landscapes confused and unmeaning [...] which can never be properly delineated without the aid of memory.”<sup>20</sup> The blurred leaves of Daguerre’s plates render the whole confusing, demanding recourse to memory on the part of the viewer. This particular “problem” for early photography is revisited by Claerbout to produce an opportunity to break open the surface of the image. Everywhere in his practice during the late 1990s are images of the swaying limbs of trees (single channel video works<sup>21</sup>).

*Boom* (1996), is an 18-minute single channel installation where a tree is filmed on a summer’s day in full color as the sun moves over its form. The film evidences both a multiplicity of the individually moving leaves, and a uniform swaying of the whole structure. A year later, Claerbout moves from filming leaves to selecting and animating the arboreal section of a photograph. *Ruurlo, Bocurlo scheweg* (1997), is an artwork derived from a postcard found in an old book, providing a view of a landscape displaying a tree, a windmill and two groups of figures, taken somewhere in the Netherlands around 1910. The postcard (notably a photograph concretized as an object of transmission), which might once have articulated something of the landscape and village life of

the time, now registers, retrospectively, the newness of the medium of photography. The novel appearance of what must have been a fairly cumbersome piece of equipment arriving in the village, can be read from the pose of the small clutch of figures in the foreground, left. The two figures slightly to the front of the group are both men, dressed, as far as one may discern, in dark trousers and jackets. Behind them, and in the shade of the tree, is a group of either women or adolescent girls with white aprons and possibly headwear showing, diminutive by comparison. Whether their place within the landscape conforms to social or economic hierarchy, or whether the day was warm and the women took to the shade, it is not possible to say. But certainly, the group is posing for the camera. By 1910, this group of villagers had learnt that in order to “appear” in the photograph, that is, to be registered with precision, one must keep still and face the camera (with an eye to the prospective future viewer) for the duration of the photographic “capture.” The photograph is staged, a presentation, and no longer located in the ordinary habituations, or “rags” and “refuse”, of the everyday.<sup>22</sup>

When *Ruurlo, Bocurlo scheweg* is installed as a video work, we see the slight swaying of the branches and the movement of leaves on the tree. The huge arboreal structure that spreads out across the frame, dwarfing the windmill and the figures, is stirred by an imaginary wind, a slight breeze. A portion of the photograph is animated, as indeed it would have been on that day; the human figures conform to a static pose while the tree remains in dynamic relation to the elements and environment. In *Kindergarten Antonio Sant’Elia* (1998), it is the young trees that have been given to animation and the children frozen, and once more, in an untitled work from 1998–2000, the only animated feature of an image of boys seated in rows in a classroom is the shadow of a tree on the back wall. Claerbout, it could be said, locates movement at the heart of photography in an inverse symmetry to the notion that at the heart of cinema is stillness.<sup>23</sup> Yet in Claerbout’s productions, movement is not in any simple sense an attribute of cinema (or video) that marks its difference from photography, nor is it the designation of an unfolding filmic present in contrast to a photographic past. Rather, the animated form of the image is a barely discernable pulse of dynamic movement operating on a loop; repetitive, circular but without a clear sense of a beginning or end, this looped movement undercuts the temporal associations that have been attributed to photography and film. What Claerbout reinserts into the photographic image is a form of gesture, or in other words, the mode of appearing as such.

In Agamben’s discussion of gesture, in the cinematic “Notes on Gesture,” and in the more literary discussion “Kommerell, or On Gesture,”<sup>24</sup> the gestural

act defies the binary of movement/stillness, and the discussion weaves between early cinema and photography. The former essay begins with identifying a new pathology in human movement, traced by Giles de la Tourette through the imprint of a subject's gait as a series of footprints on a roll of paper. Agamben finds a correspondence in the patterns that emerged with Muybridge's photographic experiments of the walking, running, jumping subject. What crosses from one to the other (de la Tourette to Muybridge) is not the recording of movement in time and space, but "a generalized catastrophe of the sphere of gestures."<sup>25</sup> As the natural gestural language of communication is lost, the "more life becomes indecipherable", and it is this loss that the cinema registers in its earliest form. Perhaps most significant in Agamben's reading of this period in the late nineteenth century is the comment that follows this diagnosis: from this moment onwards, the bourgeoisie "which just a few decades earlier was still firmly in possession of its symbols, succumbs to interiority and gives itself up to psychology."<sup>26</sup> This turn inwards becomes manifest in a cinema of psychological drama, instrumental in producing a linear, narrative form predicated on an internally located subjectivity in need of deciphering. Gesture, as a mode of appearing to others, and its demise, is at the center of a redistribution of ethical relations of which the cinema is implicated. This in turn drives definitions and uses of the cinema and photography as the arrest of time, movement and identity.

Gesture as a potentiality enacted between people but without being a means to an end (of a story, a time, an outcome), appears as a type of experiment in re-making cinema in a number of Claerbout's works.<sup>27</sup> In *Bordeaux Piece* (2004) the use of repetition forces the principle act of gesture into the foreground over the duration of the piece (13 hours and 43 minutes). The story of Jon-Luc Godard's *Le Meppris* is chosen as a narrative to be re-versioned, although according to Claerbout, it could have been a different story (2007: 112). The film is reworked as a series of situations for which Claerbout wrote dialogue, and about which he has said that he filmed it "so that it doesn't really work." The film sequence of about 10–12 minutes is shot 70 times, beginning at 5.30 a.m. and continuing to 10 p.m. and the loss of light. The same script is performed, the same dialogue spoke in the same locations, a production that plays out Agamben's treatise on stoppage and repetition.<sup>28</sup> What changes most significantly is first of all the light, and second, the experience of the film *as film*. The production rolls on, repeats, replays, and as the light changes, the content of the dialogue becomes less significant, the outcomes of the actions

unimportant. The production is an experiment of the emptying out of causal factors (means directed towards ends), and the appearance of gesture as such, or what Agamben also refers to as pure means. Human gesture is slowly, repetitively (through the deployment of stoppage and repetition), detached from its commodified form (to serve narrative ends), and diverted towards a non-linear model of communication, dependent on a cyclical temporality located in the environment (the cycle of a day). This model of gesturality returns us then to models of temporality as they pertain to the image.

### The instant and the continuum

If the paradigm of Agambenian thought that encompasses the photographic and filmic, and stasis and dynamis, is brought into correspondence through the articulation of humanity through gestural means, the final manoeuvre in this densely crowded scene is a re-conceptualization of time. We speak, in our disciplines, of film as time-based media, and we use both film and photography to record, to make a document of a particular time that we archive, canonize, re-play or conversely discard or neglect. The time of the image would seem to be an instant (the photograph), taken from a larger continuum (the film, or indeed the continuum of life). Yet if we regard the image as an indeterminate form between film and photography, as we find in Claerbout's productions, the categorical definitions of the instant and the continuum do not coincide. This final section turns to an early essay by Agamben published in 1978, "Time and History: a critique of the instant and the continuum," where, I will argue, the key to this image paradigm is located. The essay opens with the statement that "[e]very conception of history is invariably accompanied by a certain experience of time, which is implicit in it, conditions it, and thereby has to be elucidated."<sup>29</sup> The implicit category of time, however, changes from culture to culture and indeed across time (historical periods), imagined and enacted in multiple ways. The stakes are **however** high in any imagining of time:

...every culture is first and foremost a particular experience of time, and no new culture is possible without an alteration in this experience. The original task of a genuine revolution, therefore, is never merely to "change the world", but also – and above all – to "change time."<sup>30</sup>

The essay, in true Agambenian mode, presents something of a compendium of thought concerning time as it has been conceived of since Aristotle, and it is

worth outlining the contours of his account to grasp the basis of his critique. It is from Greek culture, Agamben posits, that we inherit the notion of time as an infinite quantifiable continuum. According to Aristotle it is a “quantity of movement according to the before and the after,”<sup>31</sup> its ongoing condition assured by its division into discrete instants, which none the less are circular and cosmic, modelled on astronomy and the movement of celestial spheres. Within this, the instant provides something like a seam, a join that links the past and the future while the present (instant) remains elusively other; notably the past and the future are, within this system, more tangible than the ungraspable present-yet-passing instant.

Within Greek thought, time appears to be experienced as something objective and determining of its own course, enveloping events inside of itself: time, like space, is what we exist within, and the movement is circular, a series of operations that follows astronomy in the repetition of orbits: from this model we inherit the notion of return as repetition. The Christian notion of time, according to this account, introduces us to the inverse. Time is linear and irreversible, with the birth of Christ marking a midway point between the fall from Eden and the future redemption of humanity. Significantly, it is under the auspices of Christian thought that time is detached from the rotational movement of the ancient world and re-located within the subject as an interior phenomenon. Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*, writes Agamben, is a prolonged anguished interrogation of the fleeting nature of the present as an instant that “has no extent of duration,”<sup>32</sup> a nullified time. Christian time is overlaid with the same notion of the instant and the continuum but now the circle is ironed out as a straight line, conjoining with modern time, the time of industrialization, and a secularisation of Christian time. Under modernity, dead time is extracted from experience, with manufacturing work enacting the linearity of both the production belt and clock time. The concept of modern time draws its developmental structure from the natural sciences, remaining linear as an account of progress as movement forward. But time here is not connected to experience; modern time is experience alienated.

If these are both familiar and fallible models of temporality, an alternative and altogether more potent version of time is however to hand. “The elements for a different concept of time lie scattered among the folds and shadows of the Western cultural tradition,”<sup>33</sup> Agamben writes, and it is from Gnosticism and third century Stoicism, the forgotten traditions that retain a complex notion of time, that he draws an account of an un-homogenous, incoherent time,

modelled as a broken line. Within Stoic thought, the concept of a continuous time broken into discrete instants is unreal time, which can only condition experience as waiting and deferral. Time, for the Stoics, is neither objective nor removed from our control, but springing from the actions and decisions of the human subject. Its model is the *kairos*, the abrupt and sudden conjunction where decision grasps opportunity and “life is fulfilled in the moment.”<sup>34</sup> *Kairos*, the opportune moment in which something is driven through is also the *Jetzt-Zeit*, an indeterminate, qualitative “now-time,” distilling within itself different times.

This critique of a western concept of time is notably dependent upon, or congruent with, Benjamin’s thesis on history, and the incomplete project of modernity as an unfolding catastrophe, radically in need of reconceptualizing time itself. Yet there is a further dimension to the argument that Agamben makes in this essay that refers us to the point as simultaneously a temporal and spatial form. That is, the geometric point of perspective is aligned, in his thinking, with the instant. The point in geometry is also a metaphysical concept, the foundation of a Euclidean formulation where, in its fundamental formulation, space is flattened and expressed as a pair of points connected by a straight line. This mathematical foundation posits a linear model of thinking analogous to the instant, the point in time, about which he has this to say:

[The point] is the opening through which the eternity of metaphysics insinuates itself into the human experience of time and irreparably splits it. Any attempt to conceive of time differently must inevitably come into conflict with this concept, and a critique of the instant is the logical condition for a new experience of time.<sup>35</sup>

In other words, a Euclidean geometric formulation secured a spatialized time of the instant and the continuum, providing the model for a chronology dependent on the infinite procession of time along a straight path, with markers that identify any place along the line as points. For the Stoics, in contrast, dividing time into discrete instants is “unreal time,” productive of a “fundamental sickness” of waiting and deferral for time (as something objective) to arrive. This fundamental sickness is the primary mode through which the photograph is produced and apprehended, as the capture of the instant, a point in time that is sealed from points after and before. Agamben binds this apprehension of time to a modernist sensibility with its associated corrosion of experience: “The experience of dead time abstracted from experience, which characterises life in modern cities and factories”, he writes, “seems to give credence to the idea that

the precise fleeting instant is the only human time”<sup>36</sup> Within the same logic, film comes to stand for the continuum, the potentially infinite process of recording time as a set of instants running forward.<sup>37</sup>

In Louis Daguerre’s first image of humanity, it is possible to identify a process in which time is not broken down into instants extracted from a continuum, but an alchemical transformation of light into an image composed of different times. In this sense, *Boulevard du temple* is not so far from Claerbout’s animated images that use qualities of movement and stillness to signal different temporalities. In Daguerre’s image, contingency has left its trace in a literal sense, as the actions of people in stillness or movement on the Boulevard has rendered time as a qualitative rather than quantitative phenomenon. The revelation of the first image then is not only that it is the first image of humanity, but that it is the revelation of time reconceptualized as kairological. As Agamben reminds us, the Greek concept of time was twofold, *chronos* and *kairos*, the former referring to the sequential concept of events following events, while *kairos* provides for an indeterminate time, taking advantage of contingent, opportune circumstance. It may be fitting then that *chronos* has become the dominant term for thinking of time and the technologies through which we model and experience it, and that *kairos* has disappeared into the folds and shadows of a different tradition, only to emerge fleetingly in image forms. The photograph as “opportunity”, as colloquial usage has it, reverses and returns here as the model of a revolutionary potential, the grasping of what is to hand, “the moment of rupture and opening of temporality” and also “power at precisely the moment that the experience of time restlessly observes the edge over which it leans.”<sup>38</sup>

The kairological refers us not only to the image, but to its legibility, which has an equally contingent appeal as the site of an historical understanding (history as experience here rather than chronology). The contingency of the appearance of time as the animated form in images is “the movement at their interior,” legible only at a particular moment.<sup>39</sup> The notion of legibility, deployed by Benjamin, works against the traditional context-based understanding of the singular image, made sense of through supplementary information (what is outside of the frame in terms of spatial and temporal referents). In Benjamin’s reading, legibility is founded rather in a moment of connection across time, a singular instance where meaning is revealed: “For the historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time.”<sup>40</sup> Not all images are readable at all times, but are documents within which an encrypted dynamis is released in

its correspondence with other images and events in the indeterminate relations of diachrony and synchrony. Benjamin calls this moment an awakening, and Agamben re-purposes the phrase to use it for the entry of humanity into history.<sup>41</sup> The demand for us to look, to not forget, to remember, is “the moment of gestural demand that gives [the photograph] a political destiny.”<sup>42</sup>

The notion of a language or communication that we have not yet learnt how to read or hear, is how we may think of filmic and photographic images today. Fixated on their stillness or movement, we are not open to the possibilities of their transmissions except perhaps through their re-workings in various places, the installation being one. Claerbout's single channel works prise open the various times dormant within an image through the release of its animated and gestural potential. In a sense, Claerbout's productions may be viewed as a taking back of the photograph for everyday use, removing it from the realms of consecrated History, and thoroughly profaning it in his exercise of free use. If commodification has separated goods from their context in a sacramental act, profanation is the political act of returning a thing to the everyday, and to the realm of play over economy.

We could extend this application and say that Claerbout's practice profanes the idea of the (film or photographic) image as a time removed and commodified, for what he reveals is the multiplicity of times and their broken correspondences within the frame. His works direct us beyond this frame to other images, towards unmade films that none the less press in on the present, and virtual films to come. Profanation proliferates questions but offers no answers: what is outside the classroom window? What is it that this child is turning towards in the playground? And what has happened between this scene and the next of a film made and remade over and over? On the Boulevard du Temple, a man is having his shoes shined. The soft rub and scuff of the brush as it passes over the surface of the leather, the posture of the man crouched over his work who may be engrossed or bored by this act of labor, whose labor has not yet been spoken of at all, all of this belongs to another image, a film to come.

## Notes

- 1 Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1993 [1978]), 3. Agamben uses the problematic term “man” throughout but I will abide by his usage here.

- 2 Agamben's thesis is not that man is inside language and animals exterior, but, as he writes in another text, "Animals do not enter language, they are already inside it. Man, instead, by having an infancy, by preceding speech, splits this single language and, in order to speak, has to constitute himself as the subject of language—he has to say *I*," in "Infancy and History: an essay on the destruction of experience," in *Infancy and History*, 52.
- 3 See "Infancy and History: an essay on the destruction of experience," in *Infancy and History*, 59–60.
- 4 The relationship between language and images is not, of course, one of counter-tension in Agamben's work. His approach is aligned with Benjamin's who describes the dialectic at a standstill, ending "Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language." Walter Benjamin *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland, Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge and London, MA: Harvard University Press 1999 [1982]), 462.
- 5 Debord died November 30, 1994.
- 6 This text, "Difference and Repetition: on Guy Debord's Films," is the translation of a lecture by Giorgio Agamben, delivered on the occasion of the "Sixth International Video Week" at the Centre Saint-Gervais in Geneva in November 1995, reproduced in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Thomas McDonough (Cambridge and London, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 314. For further commentary from Agamben on Debord, see "Marginal Notes on *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*," *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti, Casare Casarino, (Mineapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press), 73–89.
- 7 "Difference and Repetition," 313.
- 8 Agamben, "Difference and Repetition," 314.
- 9 "Judgement Day", in *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007) 23–8.
- 10 Agamben's figuring of disciplines echoes the relation of the said to the unsaid in that each discipline would appear to be predicated on that which cannot be articulated as much as that which is named. Take for example his essay on Aby Warburg and the "science of culture", which opens thus: "This essay seeks to situate a discipline that, in contrast to many others, exists but has no name." Giorgio Agamben, "Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science" [1975] in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Werner Hamacher, David E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 89–103.
- 11 *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, Karen Beckman, Jean Ma (eds) (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008).
- 12 Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2005 [2007]), 57.

- 13 Agamben provides a summative list of six points defining the paradigm including its analogical procedure, its neutralization of the dichotomy of the general and particular, immanence and the refusal of origins (ἀρχή) on page 31.
- 14 Kracauer's essay "Photography" (1927) stands out as one of the first discursive texts on the medium in Europe (Kracauer, "Photography", *The Mass Ornament Weimer Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995)).
- 15 Bellour, Raymond, "How to See?", *David Claerbout and the Shape of Time*, ed. Christine Van Assche (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2008), 36.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 17 Agamben, *Profanations*, 23.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 24.
- 19 This was a private letter from Morse to the editor of the New York Observer, 9 March 1839, published 20 April. The day after Morse visited the studio, Daguerre in turn paid a visit to Morse to view the telegraphic system. During the period of the visit however, Morse recounts the melancholic event simultaneously occurring in Daguerre's studio: a fire took place destroying "his valuable notes and papers, the labour of years of experiment". The plate of the Boulevard, presumably was amongst the salvaged items of the fire. The Daguerreian Society website: [http://www.daguerre.org/resource/texts/04-20-1839\\_morse.html](http://www.daguerre.org/resource/texts/04-20-1839_morse.html)
- 20 Cited in Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 44.
- 21 Single channel video works are screened as a single image, usually displayed on a loop providing continuous duration of a repeated text.
- 22 Benjamin's terms for the way in which material forms offer themselves to his project, or "come into their own." *The Arcades Project*, 460.
- 23 Laura Mulvey, *Death 24 x a second: stillness and the moving image* (London: Reaktion, 2006).
- 24 The former is published in *Means without end*, and the latter in *Potentialities*.
- 25 Giorgio Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," in *Means Without End*, 51.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 53.
- 27 Another example is the film *White House* (2006).
- 28 For an account of stoppage and repetition in relation to new media and artworks, see Carolyn Guertin, *Digital Prohibition: Piracy and Authorship in New Media Art* (New York and London: Continuum, 2012).
- 29 Agamben, "Time and History: a critique of the instant and the continuum," in *Infancy and History: the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London Verso: and New York, 1978/1993), p. 11. Agamben returns to the concept of messianic time as *ho nyn kairos* (the time of the now) in the Letters of Paul the

- apostle, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford University, Stanford Press: California, 2000/2005).
- 30 Agamben, Giorgio “Time and History: Critique of the Instant and the Continuum,” *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron, (London: Verso, 1978/1993), 91.
- 31 Aristotle cited by Agamben in “Time and History,” op. cit., 93.
- 32 Augustine cited by Agamben in “Time and History,” op. cit., 95.
- 33 Agamben in “Time and History,” op. cit., 100.
- 34 Agamben in “Time and History,” op. cit., 101.
- 35 Ibid., 100.
- 36 Ibid., 96.
- 37 There is also the implication in this argument that the basis of the one-point perspective characterizing western image forms as emanating from the centre of the image and moving out as a triangle, is complicit with a linear model of temporality.
- 38 Antonio Negri, *Time for Revolution*, trans. Matteo Mandarini (New York and London: Continuum, 2003 [1997]), 152–3.
- 39 This citation is from *The Arcades Project* rather than the essay on photography. *The Arcades Project*, 462.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 The concept of awakening and the kairological are brought together in another essay from *Infancy and History*, “Fable and History.” Here Agamben writes of the miniature scene of the nativity crib that a “cairological event” is taking place, “what it shows us is the world of the fable precisely at the moment when it wakes up from enchantment to enter history.” 127.
- 42 Benjamin Noys, “Separation and Reversibility: Agamben on the Image”, *Filozofski Vestnik*, 30:1 (2009), pp. 143–59.