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# Agamben's cinema: psychology versus an ethical form of life

*by Janet Harbord*

What does the work of Giorgio Agamben bring to an understanding of cinema? A political philosopher known predominantly for the ongoing project of works that comprise the *Homo Sacer* series,<sup>1</sup> Agamben also writes about cinema. However, the relationship between the political determination of his work and the essays on cinema is not straightforward. Unlike Jacques Rancière, Agamben does not define a political aesthetic of the image. In fact, in the essay 'Notes on Gesture' the cinematic image is dismissed as the medium's coinage, replaced with the theoretically-compressed term of 'gesture'. In this same text he asserts that cinema 'belongs essentially to the realm of ethics and politics (and not simply to that of aesthetics)'.<sup>2</sup> Cautious of this move, James S. Williams enquires whether the category of the aesthetic is 'always pulled back towards ethics' and made 'safe' in Agamben's rendition of cinema – a question that resonates with Rancière's criticism of the recent ethical turn in philosophy as a profoundly nihilistic move.<sup>3</sup> Yet in presenting gesture rather than the image as cinema's 'element' Agamben orients the political stakes in a particular way, where cinema is a force-field through which oppositional currents pass. Within this force-field the opposition between gesture and the image opens onto a far more fundamental tension in which a common language of the (gestural) body is set against its biopolitical capture.

The second key point to note about Agamben's cinema is its elaboration of gesture through an archaeological method that threads connections across disciplines and discourses as well as times.<sup>4</sup> Cinema in this regard is a great reserve, providing an archive of gestures whose task is not to service meaning as an illustration or representation but to reveal the body's communicability as a dynamic force that

may be discharged at any point in time, and archaeological practice enables just that. Yet whilst gesture obtains this promissory potential, cinema at its inception also captures the moment at which humans have lost control of their gestures, manifest in a crisis of communicability. Comparing the traces of the gesticulating bodies of Gilles de la Tourette's patients with those in the proto-cinematic series of photographs taken by Eadward Muybridge, Agamben suggests that these are the twin processes of a biopolitical production of life; respectively, the body as the site of investigation and the exemplary body put to work. Yet the ethico-political implications of Agamben's essay on gesture and the biopolitical production of life are relatively under-developed. The aim of this article is to pursue not only cinema's relation to biopolitical capture, but the way in which cinema came to compensate for such a reductive version of corporeality by constructing the concept of an individual located as complex interiority. When gestural communication declines at the close of the nineteenth century meaning is relocated to the internal space within the human body; commensurate with this production of human interiority as a site of truth, cinema becomes a machine whose task is to decipher the turmoil of the inside. Thus, cinema is part of a production of human interiority as a veiled enigma, simultaneously foreclosing the common communicability of the gestural body, and weighing in against the instrumental figuration of the body as a site of biopolitical investigation.

The essay 'Notes on Gesture' is structured like a report with a series of points that read almost as intertitles in an early film, underscoring and interleaving the action.<sup>5</sup> The opening subtitle states that by the end of the nineteenth century the (Western) bourgeoisie had lost its gestures, followed by the second point that the cinema attempts to both recover and record the loss. The third point is that which redeems cinema in the assertion that the element of cinema is gesture and not the image – a hinge in the argument that turns towards potential salvation. The fourth and lengthiest point is this: '[b]ecause cinema has its center in the gesture and not in the image, it belongs essentially to the realm of ethics and politics (and not simply to that of aesthetics)'.<sup>6</sup> The final title closes the circle by bringing politics back to gesture: '[p]olitics is the sphere of pure means, that is, of the absolute and complete

gesturality of human beings'.<sup>7</sup> The essay closes on this statement with no elaboration beneath the subheading, as though this silent film may run on and we viewers must imagine the consequent scene. The simplicity of the headings contrasts to the complexity of thought compressed into this gnomic piece of writing that leads from the identification of pathology in motor coordination in the late nineteenth century to cinema, ethics, and politics, declining aesthetics along the way. How is it possible to unpack this assertion that cinema is summoned from the field of the image and aesthetics to take its place as a gestural medium belonging with ethics and politics?

The image is not in itself a priority in Agamben's work. However, as Benjamin Noys writes, it appears as a 'minor' concern in the sense given to the term by Deleuze and Guattari, as a continuous flight to release the image from the function of representation and classification.<sup>8</sup> 'Although the image is nowhere a *sustained* point of reference for Agamben's work', writes Noys, 'his momentary reflections and fragmentary comments on the image attests to the necessity continually to *displace* its centrality'.<sup>9</sup> Where the image does appear it is often associated with the spectral system of capital, a moniker for the captivation of human desire (and gesture) in a system that returns this as a reified and ultimately unattainable condition.

Across his work, pornography and advertising are attributed the ambiguous role of 'hired mourners' that escort the commodity image to the grave.<sup>10</sup> Here Agamben draws on his friend Guy Debord and his analysis of the society of the spectacle, a condition that refers us not to the image itself but the way in which the image comes to constitute the relations between human beings, and indeed between humans and things. Under the sign of the spectacle the image mediates relations. It gets between a seductive and ultimately unattainable image of 'life' and separates it from the living being. This account is nonetheless inflected by a Benjaminian sense of salvation in which the image is redeemable, situated within a force-field that Agamben elsewhere calls a 'zone of undecidability', the site at which two possibilities for the image coincide. Here, the image may be deployed by capital to deaden its dynamic capacity (its call to act), or conversely it may maintain its own

potentiality, its capacity to release a dynamic energy that has been frozen but not destroyed. Out of these two elements the deadening effect of capital is described by Deborah Levitt as gesture expropriated by the spectacle, which silences its communicative capacity; 'we could read the spectacle as an in-between of object (image) and invested desire (eye) that suspends the two from a state of dialogue'.<sup>11</sup> If the system of reification has fixed the gestural potential of the image – that is, made static the energy of gestural display – the image retains the possibility of revivification (its gestural capacity) when it is re-appropriated. This is the argument made by Jessica Whyte in saying that through the notion of profanation the image (or other commodity form) may be taken from the space of a 'sacred' separation and inserted back into common use.<sup>12</sup>

Cinema as image and as gesture would seem to be situated ambivalently at the crossroads of capital and salvation, a position that arises from its footing in photography and the frozen gesture. The emergence of cinema qua cinema is subtly treated by Agamben in that the distinction between photography and cinema is not notable. Indeed, Garrett Stewart goes as far as to claim that Agamben 'defers all questions of medium-specificity to the phenomenological "plane of immanence" (the touchstone Deleuzian formulation), where motion is visible as such'.<sup>13</sup> If photographers such as Muybridge appear in Agamben's writings (and Muybridge assumes a particularly prescient position) it is not as a predecessor to the cinema as entertainment complex but as a progenitor of the study of bodies and their capacities, creating a different non-chronological alliance of photography and cinema that is concerned with what it is a body can do. It is of course an arising of a biopolitical investiture in the body as the site of investigation and the seeking of 'truth', as Pasi Väliäho notes, 'a politics that is situated on and constantly modulates and redraws the boundaries between the bare fact of living and social/psychic life'.<sup>14</sup> A prismatic figure, Muybridge turns his camera towards the body, many bodies, and charts their capacity to jump, throw, step, and run. He is not interested in portraiture (the common use for photography up until this moment), in who these people are or presume to be, but in the abstract and virtual capacity of bodies to act. He creates images that at once arrest movement and

capture its potency. He breaks the fluid motion of running into a series of staccato steps. Muybridge brings into being the still image as movement, a vector of transmission.

The significance of the division between a cinema of gesture and a cinema of the image that Agamben cleaves has a further legacy through his attachment to the art historian Aby Warburg, whose work he studied during a period of research at the Warburg Institute in London in 1974.<sup>15</sup> In 'Notes on Gesture', Warburg is evoked in the second section as a researcher whose practice and investigations into the image uncovered gesture as 'a crystal of historical memory'. 'Because of the fact that this research was conducted through the medium of images', writes Agamben, 'it was believed that the image was also its object'.<sup>16</sup> This is a belief that Agamben sets about dispelling. Warburg, through his method of collecting and tracing connections between thousands of images from antiquity to the twentieth century had, according to Agamben's corrective, achieved a transformation of the image into 'a decisively historical and dynamic element'.<sup>17</sup> His ambitious project, the atlas *Mnemosyne*, left incomplete upon his death, comprised over a thousand photographs that present the gestures of Western humanity over this duration. Each image is less an autonomous reality, writes Agamben, than a film still – that is, each image is part of a larger set or paradigm that it both establishes and is established by.<sup>18</sup> A film still, like a photograph, is characterised both by a mode of belonging (to other similar images) and by a relationship to movement.

Warburg's method of intuitive gathering and analysis of detail produces an iconography concerned not with an era and its subjects but rather the anomalies that reveal historical continuity. At the centre of Warburg's practice was a concept of culture as transmission, a concept possibly influenced by anthropology at the turn of the twentieth century. Agamben identifies the evolutionary biologist Richard Semon as a critical influence on Warburg's thought. Warburg had bought Semon's book *Mneme* (named after the Greek goddess of memory) in 1908. In this text Semon proposes a theory of memory that binds memory, culture, and biological function. Semon proposed that every external stimulus producing an effect on the

body left a trace or imprint which he named an *engram*, and, in a thread that leads back to the medical investiture of de la Tourette, he argued that this potential memory-affect was located within the nervous system (included in his list of inscriptions are involuntary spasms and discharges in response to stimuli). Capturing this energy, the *engram* is a type of residue, a trace of memory encoded and open to future transmission across time, retaining a potential for re-activation within the appropriate conditions. From this, Warburg took the concept that a potential existed within culture to conserve energy in a gesture, whose dynamic force could be discharged at a later date. In addition to the animating force of the gesture there is something potentially explosive in the concept of the *engram* as transmission that is encoded in Agamben's essay on gesture.

When Agamben writes '[f]or human beings who have lost every sense of naturalness, each single gesture becomes a destiny',<sup>19</sup> he is not referring explicitly to Muybridge, nor de la Tourette, yet each of them experience a gesture that marks their destiny. In 1874, Muybridge famously travelled some 75 miles to track down Major Harry Larkyns, the lover of his wife and probable father of the child Muybridge had considered his, and shot him – a 'gesture' for which Muybridge was to become infamous.<sup>20</sup> Agamben attributes an image sequence to Muybridge titled 'Running man with shotgun', which perfectly captures the journey, the intent of the act, and the heat of the event – and yet no such sequence exists.<sup>21</sup> Curiously, there was also a shooting incident in the life of Gilles de la Tourette that occurred some years after his studies of the human gait and of nervous disorders in 1893. De la Tourette was shot by a former patient, Rose Kamper, who claimed that she was hypnotised by de la Tourette against her will; Kamper appeared one day at his treatment center and stopped the flow of his conversation in the most startling of ways, but not for good. De la Tourette survived the relatively superficial head wound, but according to his biographer his reputation was permanently damaged in the suggestion of his abuse of power. In unintentional acts of transmission gesture may also become a destiny in which 'life becomes indecipherable'. Agamben reads Muybridge and de la Tourette as documentarians of a profound shift, yet they are also diagnostic figures for the philosopher when he writes: '[i]n this phase 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.’

One might say the same of cinema during the first decade of the twentieth century, as its modality transferred from one of gestural, externally-oriented *cinema muto* to a cinema of psychological drama located ‘within’ the character. It is not the case that cinema simply reflected a social phenomenon, but that cinema came into being as a properly institutionalised form through discourses of internalisation that were born a century earlier. If, for Foucault, subjectivity had been produced and stabilised through the long nineteenth century with the institutionalisation of ‘identity effects’ through medicine, education, criminalisation, juridico-legal discourses, and labour practices, such processes gave form to an emergent cinema as it too became regulated and standardised. The shift that cinema underwent in its twist from aberrant music-hall ephemera and eclecticism to psychological drama delivered it to the services of an individualising culture. The process runs parallel to what Roberto Esposito, in a discussion of Foucault’s biopolitical model, has designated a move from a paradigm of community (*communitas*) to one of immunisation (*immunitas*), or from commonality to the withdrawal of the living being from collective forms of life at the risk of contagion.<sup>22</sup> While Esposito is engaged with Foucault’s thesis of the optimisation of life at all costs through the institutions of medicine, education, and law – a far cry from cinema – it is possible to find in cinema’s designation of a space of truth internal to the individual a related withdrawal from communal communicability. Cinema’s designation as a ‘mass culture’ betrays the potency of an instituted atomisation of the subject on the screen speaking to the atomised subject of the auditorium.

There are many comedies in the archives of early cinema pertaining to bodies which are routinely subjected to accidental or intentional harm, imaged by cinema, according to Lisa Tehair, as ‘preposterous figurations’,<sup>23</sup> defying the laws of the physical universe: crushed, flattened, dropped, broken, run over. The body almost always seems to get it, only to be magically rejuvenated in the course of a short film. However, there is an early film that reverses this story: *The Big Swallow* (James



Williamson, 1901). A man, wearing a bowler hat and carrying a cane, appears irritated and argumentative in response to the camera's presence. He moves towards the lens in a mode that is both tentative and threatening, continuing a highly gestural rant. Moving into extreme proximity, his mouth covers the lens and he appears (for the viewer) to have swallowed the camera. At this point (shot two) the screen becomes as black as the inside of a mouth would be without illumination. The shot then becomes illuminated to reveal an imagined space, dimly lit, showing the cinematographer and the camera as they meet their fate and are swallowed. The third shot withdraws from the mouth, passing back over the teeth, returning to the exterior of the body to show the man chewing and swallowing, ending with his satisfied smile.

The film is a gag, which is literally that which blocks or disenables speech. The camera would seem to have silenced the rattled man (played by comic actor Sam Dalton) and its presence is possibly the cause of his rising fury. But we are unable to hear what is being said, and in this respect the film capitalises on the body's gestural quality, its way of communicating without speech being heard. His gesticulation is tic-like in the sideways movements of the head, his repetitive arm flailing, the manic fiddling with a pair of spectacles, and the odd contortions of his face. Is this figure before us a member of the bourgeoisie losing control of his gestures and cinema recording the loss? If so, does cinema recover the loss of gesture as comedy? The gag takes a somersault when cinema is ingested, done away with by its own power to change the scale of things. The man's mouth on screen is huge, large enough to provide a tunnel into which a cameraman and his equipment may disappear, and so the gag rests on the turning of something explicitly cinematic against itself. Cinema's capacity to transform the scale of a thing as image redoubles and it is the apparatus as camera that is dwarfed inside the space of an enlarged mouth.

There is something more to be said of this act in terms of ingestion that requires us to question what it is that was swallowed with the emergence of cinema. This film, in open display, performs cinema's movement into the interiority of the body; the

film is an *engram* that demonstrates in just over a minute the potency of cinema to dramatise an interest in the internal space of the body, a transmission that finds resonance with the multiple versions of medical imaging that are circulated today.<sup>24</sup> In 1901, in James Williamson's innovative comic short, the horizon of a biopolitical condition is there to be seen, disguised as a gag. In Akira Lippit's reading of this film he draws a similar connection to dramatised internal space with reference to Freud's dream of his analysis with the patient Irma. Freud dreams of Irma's mouth, its resistance to his desire to reach her subconscious, and the specter of formlessness that it presented. The camera's move into the man's mouth in *The Big Swallow* suggestively echoes 'Freud's X-ray entry into Irma's mouth', as Lippit writes, continuing: '[i]t marks the passage of the subject into the illusory body of the other, but also the loss of oneself elsewhere, in an other, deep inside an other.'<sup>25</sup> For Lippit, cinema teeters on the edge of an anatomical excursus that threatens the dissolution of the self. The psychotherapist may get swallowed whole too, yet there is something of the mechanical registration of this excursion into the interior space of the body that stabilises and distances the threat. Writing on Jean Martin Charcot's infamous use of photography in his study (or invention) of hysteria, Georges Didi-Huberman offers this remark: 'photographic endoscopy, finally able to unveil the most secret anatomy – as it is'.<sup>26</sup> Photography of hysterical 'pathology' invites a performance of the 'inside' that translates as the interior made visible and legible.

According to Jonathan Auerbach, the first decade of cinema (1893-1904) offers a prime opportunity to think questions of the body and its importance for this emerging technology with its probing attempts at coherence and intelligibility. He asks, '[h]ow do we read a film made at the turn of the twentieth century that has no clearly demarcated characters or actors, settings or plot?' He continues: '[w]hat is a body without a comprehensible story to give it some context?'<sup>27</sup> If one of the first popular British films of the early nineteenth century dramatises these questions it also provides the answer; in a figural way and during the following decade, the grammar of cinema evolves to consolidate the internal 'world' of characters as the site and anchor of intelligibility. There are various cinematic fronts that this quest to

secure interiority-as-truth moves forward on, including medical science films and popular entertainment, their efforts jointly efficacious in driving attention towards the join of physiognomy and psychology. Through early film experiments and figural instances it is possible to circle back to Agamben's statement and find greater force in its assertion that '[i]n this phase 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>28</sup> However, succumbing to interiority is no facile trick; the subject is made to articulate the inner world to the best of her or his ability, and the couch is ready and waiting to facilitate the process. The speaking cure, well underway before *cinema muto* breaks out into babbling song and speech with talkies, appears intent on removing the gag, releasing the secrets of this interiority to flutter out like so many butterflies. Foucault names this psychologisation a 'clinical codification of the inducement to speak',<sup>29</sup> part of a set of procedures that are not a repression of talk about sexuality but on the contrary the site of an excitable proliferation of discourses.

The manifestation of a film grammar takes its form in correspondence with the pairings of speech and silence, gesture and image, bodies and their meaning, as they exist across numerous fields. How film in this era might be said to 'succumb to interiority' concerns the establishment of a set of production techniques that stabilise around the period 1910-13. The construction of space and time through the break-up of the tableau image, the placement of the camera within the scene itself and in multiple locations within the scene, and an emerging attention to matching the sightlines of actors collectively bring into being a grammar that establishes point-of-view shots, aligning the viewer with the camera. This was achieved in *The Big Swallow*, as the viewer is taken into the mouth of the irate man along with the camera, traversing the flat space of the tableau. In addition, there are early examples of reverse angle camera placements. A film made by Williamson the year before *The Big Swallow* contains a reverse angle set-up. The film, *Attack on a China Mission* (1900), showed an approach to the mission from two different angles. However, according to Barry Salt, it is not until 1911 that the reverse angle shot becomes more directly aligned with the viewer's perspective.<sup>30</sup> In this year Arthur

Macklay's *The Loafer* used reverse angle shots to stage a scene between a farmer and a character called simply 'a stranger', who approaches the farmer for money. The reverse angle shots play the tension of the conflict by creating opposing views. The 180° stage rule that began to be imposed through this technique was, as many film historians have described, the division of screen space into two half circles in which the camera could be positioned anywhere within one portion but was prohibited from transgressing this boundary-line.

These developments successfully fragmented the tableau scene of the earliest films, where the fixed camera at the front of what was effectively a stage had created a field of vision viewed from a single, static point. In varying the camera's placement the tableau was fractured, splintering into a number of images that the viewer was able to place psychologically within the overall scene. The relocation of the camera from the front of the stage into the space of the action offered the possibility of greater proximity to the faces of actors, focusing attention on the emotional register of the face. The faces of the actors could be given over to a type of surveillance, but this suggestion of omnipotence was overridden by the new style of editing that alternated close-ups: the shot-reverse shot. The increasing alignment of the viewer with characters (over other features of the set such as objects or animals) intensified the need for emotional legibility; the face became the screen within a screen through which 'character' could be read. With the move from long shots to medium shots to close-ups, the bodies of actors became sliced into segments (knee to head, waist to head, face and neck), with the close-up on the face the critical point of an intensification of the emotional tenor of these early films. Moving away from a cinema of capers (a cast of bungling characters acting on a stage being observed by the viewer as a simultaneous event), the new grammar demanded that the viewer assemble the various shots psychologically as parts of a whole picture, bearing in mind the order of their sequence. The further effect of reverse angle shots then is temporal and rhythmic, producing a chronology and beat through expressions that move from the face of one actor to the face of another.

However, in the lexicon of early cinema language there is a shot that retains the deepest degree of ambiguity in terms of its intelligibility: the close-up. It resides ambivalently in the codification of the body, oscillating between description and immersion, a celebration of surface and an aggressive desire to know the other. Jean Epstein magnificently rides the cusp in his writing on cinema's magnifying qualities. 'Even more beautiful than a laugh is the face preparing for it', he writes. 'I love the mouth which is about to speak and holds back, the gesture which hesitates between right and left, the recoil before the leap, and the moment before landing, the becoming, the hesitation, the taut spring, the prelude.'<sup>31</sup> Epstein's obeisance in front of the close-up permits a submission to its graphic nature, its texture, and its variable form. The essay also testifies to an intensive desire to be inside of the screen other, evident when he writes of a situation in which a character is going to meet another. 'I want to go along with him not behind or in front of him or by his side, but in him', he states, pressing the thought further: 'I would like to look through his eyes and see his hand reach out from under me as if it were my own; interruptions of opaque film would imitate the blinking of our eyelids' – as though film could not only facilitate the desire but combine the two bodies.<sup>32</sup> Cinema presents an invitation (to Epstein at least) to go inside of another, and it is this interior space that forever remains an enigma.<sup>33</sup>

The desire to 'see' inside or beneath or through is, according to Tom Gunning, prevalent in literature of the late nineteenth century, where the flâneur oscillates with the detective – the former an oneiric floating observer while the latter prevails through a moral framework of intense scrutiny.<sup>34</sup> The detective, like the psychologist and the criminologist, needs to see through the surface of things. It is no coincidence that a discovery of this nature occurs in 1895, as Lisa Cartwright notes: '[t]he histories of the X-ray and the cinema coincide in concrete and matter-of-fact ways.'<sup>35</sup>

When the German physicist Wilhelm Röntgen was experimenting with the path of electrical rays passing from an induction coil through a partially evacuated glass tube he noticed an uncanny effect. The tube was covered in black paper enclosing

the light rays and the room was blacked out, yet the rays appeared on an illuminated screen at one end of the room. The 'screen' was a small piece of card covered in fluorescent materials (barium platinocyanide). In further experiments he discovered that objects of diverse thicknesses interposed in the path of the rays showed varying degrees of transparency. The experiment that clinched it involved a body – not his but that of his wife Anna Bertha, whose hand Röntgen placed over a glass photographic plate. The resulting image famously showed the bone structure of her hand and the detail of her wedding ring, offering a perception of the body beneath the skin and apart from the flesh. The 'new rays' (as they were called) were produced by the impact of cathode rays on a material object, but their newness defied naming. Röntgen called them X-rays, drawing on the principle from mathematics that 'X' represents an unknown quantity. The paper that he wrote reporting the research, 'On a New Kind of Rays',<sup>36</sup> was published in December 1895 – the same month that the Lumière brothers were screening their invention at the Salon Indien du Grand Café in Paris.

The desire for 'seeing through' is identified by Steven Connor as an inherent feature of modernism, for the modern experience (according to Connor) is of being permeated.<sup>37</sup> Figuratively, these two positions of 'permeation' and of 'seeing through' mark the respective polar lines that converge in the subjectification of bodies to the many practices of observation and taxonomy throughout the nineteenth century. According to Connor, during the first ten years of their recognised existence, X-rays were considered akin to the photographic apparatus, requiring an alchemical process in which a transformation occurs (development) and delivers a revelation (the image). What the X-ray brings to the foreground is seeing, the act of vision caught in its own mediality: 'X-ray vision was linked with photography's power to arrest and anatomise vision, to get on the inside of seeing itself', writes Connor, 'making the invisible, the act of seeing itself, visible.' Another inside opens up, the 'inside of vision', that through which an action can be exhibited in its own mediality. Seeing, far from being a naturalised operation of sight-as-knowledge, becomes detached from the body just at the moment that the body becomes see-through to itself. X-rays articulated a body not exactly see-through –

more accurately, the term described the various dimensions and properties of the body as a composite of diverse and mutating matter. 'The term *artefact* perhaps best describes the X-ray image', writes Akira Lippit, 'which is at once buried and revealed, invoking its archaeological nature as spectacle.' He continues: '[t]he X-ray image determines a kind of living remnant, a phantom subject.'<sup>38</sup> Despite how solid the bones of the X-ray appeared to Anna Bertha her exclamation 'I have seen my own death!' produces an opposite assurance: that the body (all bodies) obey the second law of thermodynamics (inertia and decay). In fact, as Connor writes, it is this 'intermingling and reversibility of the positive and the negative, the radiating and the fixed, the interior and the exterior, the force and the form' that is 'the essential feature of magical thinking regarding the making visible of the invisible'.

The interior of the body becomes the site of an investiture of truth and identity, but one to which access is obscure, requiring magic, or inventiveness at least. The cinema, the X-ray, the many taxonomic tests, practices, and observations are all driven by the same quest to unravel the enigmatic subject, which is simultaneously a process that inscribes as much as it discovers the enigma as an internal form. The language describing this investiture of the interior of the body as a locus of truth begins to be influenced by its own descriptions. Evolving this as metaphor; there are the acts of 'seeing through' someone or 'getting under the skin' of another. The paradox that places the subject at the centre of a biopolitical discourse as an axis of meaning is this: that the subject may never be the agent of discovery of her or his own 'truth'. On the interplay of psychic, physical, and metaphysical discourses in the inventory of unseen forces (of which the X-ray is an instrument of taxonomy), Marina Warner writes that '[t]he capacity to see through solid matter did not have the effect of disenchanting empiricism and turning such vision mundane'. On the contrary, 'doctors now seemed endowed with supernatural powers'.<sup>39</sup> If the interiority of the individual rendered as graphic form appeared ghostly, the cinema as it became an institutionalised narrative form provided a more familiar access to the inside in its focus on an inner world expressed in complex form over the duration of an hour or more.

In conclusion, gesture frames the body in its communicability over and against the biopolitical drive to locate, examine, and fix meaning. Cinema can go either way, and it does, funnelling in one direction into the restricted contours of generic bodily forms, standardised gestures of performance, and the hallmark ‘tics’ of star personae produced in studios. The ‘meaning’ of film sequences is secured in their moment of recording and in the closure of narrative, and films in turn become dead letters, a correspondence with no destination. In another direction gesture inheres in cinematic images as a transmission, displaying a common language that exhibits the delight of communicability as a question, awakening the image into movement, as Libby Saxton argues, ‘without *telos* or destiny’.<sup>40</sup>

Kafka, according to Benjamin, took gesture to be an act whose meaning cannot be known in advance, but from which the author attempts to find the meaning ‘in ever-changing contexts and experimental groupings’.<sup>41</sup> Kafka’s version of gesture might be the most potent description of cinema as it moved in other directions, avoiding the funnel of gestural cliché and the demand for subjective truth, flowing into bodily comedy, science films, education, and amateur footage among multiple modalities. That is, Agamben’s focus on gesture retains the potentiality of a body liberated from the biopolitical demand for meaning and exactitude, for bodies to be calculated, calibrated, and known. When gesture is allowed to inhere in a cinematic form in a manner that refuses exact interpretation it works against the apparatus of identity effects. Confronted at the beginning of the twentieth century and again at the beginning of the twenty-first with a generalised demand for an account of the self, the subject in gesture points only to the failure of such a system; gesture does not speak the subject but is the demonstration of its contingency. Gesture is the empty space of identity, a space that cannot be inhabited as a permanent or fully-knowable phenomenon. In an essay on authorship and gesture, Agamben ends the text in this way:

[a] subjectivity is produced where the living being, encountering language and putting itself into play in language without reserve, exhibits in a gesture the impossibility of its being reduced to this gesture. All the rest is psychology,



and nowhere in psychology do we encounter anything like an ethical subject, a form of life.<sup>42</sup>

If Agamben opposes psychology (or the turn to interiority) to an ethical form of life, the link between the ethical and the openness of the body is elucidated in the short essay 'Without classes' in *The Coming Community*.<sup>43</sup> The essay opens with the denouncement of the triumph of a single planetary bourgeoisie, the inheritors of the earlier turn-of-the-century bourgeoisie who lost gesture and lost all pathos. This class, within which all social classes and differences are now dissolved, is the triumph of a nihilistic individualism that tragically precludes any recourse to the common being, to community. If this humanity, instead of searching for a 'proper identity' in individuality, sought 'a singularity without identity, a common and absolutely exposed singularity', as he writes, 'if humans could, that is, not be-thus in this or that biography, but be only *the* thus, their singular exteriority and their face, then they would for the first time enter into a community without presuppositions and without subjects, into a communication without the incommunicable'.<sup>44</sup> The potential of early cinema was the possible site of community, of singular exteriorities, faces, and contingencies being only the thus. Archaeologically speaking, this potential remains with cinema in the present.

## **Author**

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<sup>1</sup> The *Homo Sacer* series is an ongoing project that began with the publication of Part I: *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995), followed by a growing number of parts published out of chronological order. Part II comprises *State of Exception* (2003), *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government* (2007), *The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath* (2008), and *Opus Day: An Archaeology of Duty* (2013). Part III comprises *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (1998), and Part IV includes *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Forms-of-Life* (2013).

<sup>2</sup> Agamben 2000, p. 56.

<sup>3</sup> See Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009) as a framework for thinking the relation of looking to the aesthetics of the image in art and other domains and his critique of the ethical turn in *Disensus* (2010). For a discussion of Rancière's critique of the 'ethical turn' and cinema, see King 2013, pp. 29-46.

<sup>4</sup> Agamben's archaeological method, drawing heavily on the discipline of philology, characterises his approach across the board. However, in *Signature of All Things* he discusses, defends, and clarifies his method.

<sup>5</sup> Deborah Levitt rather nicely describes the mode of these intertitles as 'telegraphic' (Levitt 2008, p. 194).

<sup>6</sup> Agamben 2000, p. 55.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>8</sup> Deleuze & Guattari 1975.

<sup>9</sup> Noys 2014, p. 89.

<sup>10</sup> See 'Dim Stockings' for this connection of cinema to advertising and commodification, in which the hired mourners appear in the final sentence in Agamben 1993 (orig. in 1990), p. 49.

<sup>11</sup> Levitt 2008, p. 166.

<sup>12</sup> Whyte 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Stewart 2014, p. 161.

<sup>14</sup> Valiaho 2014, p. 111.

<sup>15</sup> de la Durantaye 2009, p. xviii.

<sup>16</sup> Agamben 2000 (orig. in 1996), p. 53.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>18</sup> See Agamben's extensive treatment of the term paradigm in *The Signature of All Things*.

<sup>19</sup> Agamben 2000 (orig. in 1996), p. 52.

<sup>20</sup> Haas 1976.

<sup>21</sup> It was in fact the French photographer Etienne Jules Marey (mentioned in passing by Agamben in the gesture essay) who recorded sequences of a man running with a gun (1891-2). This was captured by Marey's hybrid machine the 'gun-camera', or the chronophotographic gun.

<sup>22</sup> Esposito 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Trehair 2007, pp. 191-212.

<sup>24</sup> See for example Mol 2002, in which she argues that the singular object of the body is multiplied through processes including imaging, producing discrete pockets of knowledge that are often contradictory but which are forced to unify under the sign of 'the body'.

<sup>25</sup> Lippit 2005, p. 73.

<sup>26</sup> Didi-Huberman 2007 (orig. in 1982), p. 34.

<sup>27</sup> Auerbach 2007, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Agamben 2000 (orig. in 1996), p. 53.

<sup>29</sup> Foucault 1990 (orig. in 1978), p. 65.

<sup>30</sup> Salt 1992.

<sup>31</sup> Epstein 1977, p. 9.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>33</sup> This enigma is of course the attraction for Bela Bálász in his study of human physiognomy in the cinematic close-up (Bálász 1972).

<sup>34</sup> Gunning 1997, pp. 25-61.

<sup>35</sup> Cartwright 1995, p. 109.

<sup>36</sup> Röntgen 1896.

<sup>37</sup> Connor, 'Pregnable of Eye: X-Rays, Vision and Magic', <http://www.stevenconnor.com/xray/>: an expanded version of a text given as a talk for the annual conference of the British Society for Literature and Science, Keele University, 29 March 2008.

<sup>38</sup> Lippit 2005, p. 53.

<sup>39</sup> Warner 2006, p. 256.

<sup>40</sup> Saxton 2014, p. 58.

<sup>41</sup> Benjamin from the essay 'Franz Kafka', cited in Agamben's essay on Kommerell, p. 80.

<sup>42</sup> Agamben 2005, p. 72.

<sup>43</sup> Agamben 1993 (orig. in 1990), pp. 62-64.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 64.