

CONCLUSION

Every work, even a short one, implies a significant undertaking or a long internal duration
—Gilles Deleuze

The exigency of the lost does not entail being remembered and commemorated; rather, it entails remaining in us and with us as forgotten, and in this way and only in this way, remaining unforgettable
—Giorgio Agamben

The messianic subject does not contemplate the world as though it were saved. In Benjamin's words, he contemplates salvation only to the extent that he loses himself in what cannot be saved; this is how difficult it is to dwell in the calling.
—Giorgio Agamben

The thought of the exception is a thought of life in a state of suspension: of a deferral and delay that is, perhaps, best exemplified by the figure of Kafka's "man from the country" who sits by the door to the law and waits in order to "suspend" its force. This is why we must be attuned to that which interrupts the suspension that is the exception: to think seriously about how to bring about an "accomplishment" of those potentialities *for life* capable of interrupting its force. This is problematic precisely because of the urgency of a life lived in separation from itself. In this circumstance, there is little time. This is one way to think about the immediate historical moment, in which all civil liberties, and with them, the possibility of thought, art, and expression of any kind, are in danger of being permanently policed and suspended. An image that readily comes to mind is one in which civil rights will continue to exist solely on paper—even, perhaps, for the sake of legitimacy, for the excluded (and, perhaps, this is one way to think about "gay

marriage”)—but civil rights will be, pragmatically, non-existent. This is a difficult time in which to think, to write, and to live.

While it is well known that Agamben has formulated a theory of messianic time, following Benjamin, it is less known that he is formulating a theory of messianic subjectivity: of “being beside itself” in the exception.¹ In other words, not only does the messianic concern an immanent concept of time—another time (*kairos*) capable of suspending “normal” chronological time (*chronos*)—it also concerns another subjectivity: a life that would remain within itself, without its decreation, or desubjectivation, being taken in the exception. This theory of messianic subjectivity is part of Agamben’s “paraontology”—of being “beside itself,” which shows or exposes itself through its example.² What could such a life, and the thought of that life, be? This is the thought of *another life*. Not an extra-life—a supplement to this one and, therefore, to the exception—but a remaining life, a life that is left, immanent within this one, that points to the possibility of disrupting the normal life we are all forced to live as mere survival. Another life is a life immanent to life. And that potential needs something to bring it to life. A performative expression, a transformation, that would allow that life to bear witness to its own being in the exception. (There is such a performance “hidden,” if you will, in plain sight in this very text. The careful reader will note that I repeatedly write about “not having time” to think, to write, to explicate even this very work.)

One way to think about this book is as an experiment in Agamben’s “paraontology.” It is an effort to bear witness to my own life in the form of a theoretical engagement with the project of *Homo Sacer*. In 1994, I became homeless and was forced to live in my car. This homelessness lasted for 18 months. During this time, I continued to work full-time as a clerk in a video store (Scarecrow Video in Seattle, WA) where I found myself, literally, waiting on my

intellectual friends and colleagues. I worked an 8-hour day, at minimum wage, and then would spend the rest of my time trying, in whatever way I could, to forget what was happening to me. Homelessness is like Benjamin's Angel of History, except that the endless pile of debris at the feet of the angel is not the debris of modern progress, but of the "experiences" one is unable to endure. *Each moment of life* in such a state of disassociation contains such experiences (experiences that one cannot bear to "have"). Here, one has to imagine the pile of debris as containing all these unclaimed experiences of life, from *every moment of that life*, piling one on top of the other. Undergoing such an "experience"—an experience that one is not able to "have"—is all the more terrifying for beings who have experienced the life of a moment: the lifetime contained in each and every moment, which is what we call immanence. I was pretty good at hiding all of this, which is the nature of traumatic experience. No one would ever know, to look at me, to "experience" my absent presence, what I was undergoing precisely because I was not "having" this experience (I was, myself, unable to touch and "experience" it).

Agamben names the ethical relation to such experiences of the limit of human experience as "exigency."

Exigency does not properly concern that which has not been remembered; it concerns that which remains unforgettable. It refers to all individual and collective life that is forgotten with each instant and to the infinite mass that will be forgotten by both. Despite the efforts of historians, scribes, and all sorts of archivists. The quantity of what is irretrievably lost in the history of society and in the history of individuals is infinitely greater than what can be stored in the archives of memory. In every instant, the measure of forgetting and ruin, the

ontological squandering that we bear within ourselves far exceeds the piety of memories and consciences.³

This is the exigency of the unforgettable: “the capacity to remain faithful to that which having been perpetually forgotten, must remain unforgettable. It demands to remain with us and be possible for us in some manner.”⁴

One night, in the Fall of 1994, I took someone “home” with me from a bar, parking my 1970 VW Van on a quiet street. My friend had to take a piss and opened the side door of my van. Of course, we had been “intimate” in a van filled with all of my belongings, which were strewn about the van (not particularly comfortable, but at least it was dry and inside). When he opened the sliding door to take a piss, my copy of *The Coming Community* fell out of the van and right into a big, wet, puddle of mud in the gutter. That copy of the book is sitting on my desk right now, as I write these lines. Stacked on top of a pile of books, the cover is separated from its spine, the top edges ragged and worn—the pages inside show obvious water damage, dirt, and even signs of mildew. In short, it’s pretty much ruined. It’s probably not very “healthy” to keep around, but it’s the only copy of *The Coming Community* that I own. As I look at this ruined book, I am not so much reminded of my experience of homelessness, as I am about the ruination of thought in the historical present. What I see in this ruined book today is the ruination of all books, and perhaps all thought that would seek to have an effect in the world within these forms. Many of us, I think, have sensed that the time for such work, the very work we do, has come to an end (insofar as it is capable of bringing about a positive and productive change in the world). Perhaps this is the case, but then perhaps not. This does not mean that other forms do not exist, or will not emerge, to take their place. But that, for now, it seems that

the very form of philosophy has become a kind of “failed commodity.”⁵ Philosophy is broken, precisely because it is ceaselessly forgotten in the present moment, and it is this *brokenness* that calls to us, marking it as unforgettable.

This ruined copy of *The Coming Community* is instructive. It was one thing to undergo the experience of homelessness, and quite another thing to deal with its aftermath. Not only was I unable to talk about this experience after it was “over,” but there is a very real sense in which it ruined the possibility, for me, of continuing to think *with* Gilles Deleuze (and Deleuze and Guattari). While I did continue to think with Deleuze, I could not make sense of, nor even give expression to, my experience of homelessness from within this image of thought (and here I am referring to the image of *affect* as vulnerability and exposure). Everything I had experienced and been through was excluded as the “negative” of the dialectic and *ressentiment* (desire turned against itself). I tried to write about these experiences within Deleuze and Guattari’s thought, together with Agamben’s *The Coming Community*, the work of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, and Michel Foucault.⁶ But the language of “post-disciplinary societies” did not adequately convey the separation of experience I had gone through and was continuing to experience *in relation to* Deleuze’s thought. I thought of these experiences, within this speechlessness, as I read *Homo Sacer* in the Summer of 1998, and again as I watched Tsai Ming-Liang’s film *The Hole* in the Spring of 1999 at the San Francisco International Film Festival. By the time I met Agamben in the Fall of 1999, these thoughts were fully at the surface, even to the point where it seemed that my life itself, in some ways, confirmed the outlines of his work.

This experience is, I think, instructive for those of us who think *with* Deleuze, yet come after him. There was a palatable kind of dogmatism in 1999— there is no other word to describe

it—among Deleuzian scholars about the concerns I’ve raised in this text (and, quite obviously, about the experiences I had just lived through). A dogmatism that I think, or hope, is not the result of a lack of thought—one can hope, at least—but of the sheer amount of time and energy that is necessary to enter into Deleuze and Guattari’s thought. Of course, there is also the possibility that this exclusion is the result of the exception itself. This is the pragmatic context in which the present text was written: not as something against Deleuze, and Deleuze and Guattari’s thought, but as something that continues to think *with* them. Following Agamben, this relation refuses to treat that thought as something “completed”: as something passed or, *finished*. It is in this sense that Agamben considers his work as one of “completing” this thought by continuing to use it in ways that Deleuze, Deleuze and Guattari, and Foucault, never considered.

It has become somewhat common to think of *A Thousand Plateaus* as an effort to write the *event* of May ‘68. As beautiful as that thought may be, our contemporary experiences suggest the need for *another* relation to this text. A different relation. Perhaps *A Thousand Plateaus* is part of the work of a philosophy yet to come as an *event that hasn’t yet happened*: one whose immanent potential we have not yet fully reached, insofar as the loss of the dialectic has not corresponded with the end of separation and exclusion that seemed to characterize it (something that Deleuze and Guattari did not fully consider in their work). Perhaps another way of saying this is that it took the West a long time to free itself from the dialectic. How long will it take us to free ourselves from the exception? With regard to the current exception of the political, the one analyzed by Agamben as coextensive with the post-68 era, perhaps it is in *swerving* from or, interrupting, our vision of *A Thousand Plateaus* that our work on the exception holds the most promise: the work of patiently preparing for another time. One in

which a new *event* along the lines of May '68 would happen again. Here, we should note that 2008 marks the 40th anniversary of this event, and that every 40 years, if the past century is any guide, seems to bring with it some kind of “break” or interruption in the West. There is, of course, no proof that this will happen, but we can always hope. That is, we can “remain faithful” to the hope that Deleuze and Guattari *already expressed* in *A Thousand Plateaus*.⁷

It is worth remembering here the importance of Deleuze’s *Nietzsche and Philosophy* as an existential work of non-dialectical politics, and the non-dialectical self, within post-structuralism. Perhaps by tearing a quote from this work, and placing it within the context of the present text, we can learn something about Agamben’s “paraontology.” Here Deleuze writes, “Life struggles with *another kind* of life.”⁸ This simple quote is enough for us to begin to see the possibilities for thinking “being beside itself” in the state of exception. It is not a struggle against a dialectical life, but a life separated from itself and the world, the outside. A life lived in the state of exception. Being beside itself is still being in the state of exception, but it is one that gives an account of itself (or otherwise finds a way to inhabit its own being) and, thereby, allows for a more or less transformation. In this way, another self or, being is possible: one that is not reduced to mere survival. This, I think, is one way to summarize this text as an experiment in Agamben’s “paraontology,” which is now coming to a close: the status of *a* life in the state of exception, and the exigency of what is unforgettable in that experience and the ethical relation that calls to us from within that exigency: the possibility that another life, and another time—not transcendent, but immanent *within* this one—is possible.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷² I am indebted to James Martin for pointing me to the etymological meaning of *suavitas* and *swave*.

⁷³ It is worth quoting Benjamin at some length here. The discussion takes place over two pages, 244-245. Benjamin begins by asking, “Is any nonviolent resolution of conflict possible? Without doubt, the relationships among private persons are full of examples of this.” He goes on to state:

Courtesy, sympathy, peaceableness, trust and whatever else might here be mentioned are their subjective preconditions. Their objective manifestation, however, is determined by the law . . . that says that pure means are never those of direct solutions, but always those of indirect solutions. They therefore never apply to the resolution of conflict between man and man, but apply only to matters concerning objects. The sphere of non-violent means opens up in the realm of human conflicts relating to goods . . . a policy of pure means. We can therefore point only to pure means in politics as analogous to those which govern peaceful intercourse between private persons (244).

Benjamin refers to the example of the conference and then continues, “This makes clear that there is a sphere of human agreement that is non-violent to the extent that it is wholly inaccessible to violence: the proper sphere of “understanding,” language,” 245. Finally, he concludes, “We can therefore point only to pure means in politics as analogous to those which govern peaceful intercourse between private persons” 245. As much as I like my idea of “sweetness,” it seems important to point out that “peaceful intercourse between private persons” is an increasingly rare commodity today. This problem will be further explored in relation to post-war music in my essay “Sweetness.”

CONCLUSION

¹ “What is a Paradigm?” See, also, Kafka’s parable “On Parables,” in *Parables and Paradoxes*, 10 – 11, and Agamben’s reading of this parable in relation to language in *Il tempo che resta*, 45 - 46.

² “What is a Paradigm?”

³ *The Time That Remains*, 39 - 40.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵ Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, 28.

⁶ See my “Whatever Intellectuals: The Politics of Thought in Post-disciplinary Societies,” *Symposium*, No. 4. 1998, 205 – 235.

⁷ Agamben calls this, following work that is attributed to Paul in Hebrews 11:1, “faith in things hoped,” *The Time That is Left*. For Agamben, this is not about blind faith or belief, but the status of faith and belief in relation to thought. The full text of Hebrews 11:1 reads, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” This is another definition of *sweetness*. For a fuller articulation of sweetness as a concept, see my “Sweetness,” forthcoming.

⁸ *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 8. From the beginning of this project, I have conceived of my work as taking place along side or, leading directly to, a re-writing of Deleuze’s *Nietzsche and Philosophy* in light of the exception.

APPENDIX: THE PERSISTENCE OF THE SPECTACLE

⁹ For Debord on the spectacle see *The Society of the Spectacle* trans. by Ken Knabb, HTML <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/debord/index.htm> (Accessed March 14, 2003), and his *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (New York: Verso Press, 1998). See, also, the writings collected in the *Situationist International Anthology* Ed. by Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) and Guy Debord, *Complete Cinematic Works*, Ed. and Trans. by Ken Knabb (San Francisco: AK Press, 2003). For Agamben on Debord and the spectacle, see *The Coming Community* and his “Marginal Notes on *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*” in *Means Without End*, 73 – 89. It should be obvious to the reader, by now, that I have not been simply following Agamben’s brief statements on cinema and gesture, nor even the spectacle, as they pertain to cinema, but developing my own thought based on my own lengthy association with cinema and cinema studies.

¹⁰ For an interesting discussion of the concept of “everyday life” in relation to globalization, which uses both Benjamin and Lefebvre, mediated through Peter Osborne, see Harry Harootunian’s *History’s Disquiet*. The Situationists were, of course, inspired in their usage of this term by Lefebvre. See also Kafka’s “Parable on Parables” in Franz Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes* (New York: Schocken, 1975): 10 – 11.

¹¹ This is an idea that Agamben and I share. My thinking on this subject was formed long before my encounter with Agamben, through my reading of the work of Alice Miller (see, for example, her *Prisoners of Childhood, For Your Own Good, and Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*). Agamben and I talked about this idea, and Miller’s work, during the course of the seminar on *Il tempo che resta*.

¹² See Agamben, *The Coming Community*, the sections titled “Dim Stockings,” “Shekinah,” and “Tiananmen.”

¹³ See, for example, Benjamin’s “Theological-Political Fragment,” in *Selected Writings Volume 3: 1935 – 1938*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and Others. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 305-306. See also Jacob Taubes’ lectures on “Paul and Modernity” in his *The Political Theology of Paul*, particularly his discussion of Benjamin’s text, 70 – 76.

¹⁴ See “On the Concept of History,” particularly the distinction between the real and “virtual” exception. (As Agamben points out in *Il tempo che resta*, Benjamin’s work on the exception invalidates this earlier position).

¹⁵ This reminds us, of course, of the camps and the story Primo Levi relates of the soccer matches between the SS and the *Sodderkommando*. See *The Drowned and the Saved*, 54 – 55.

¹⁶Transcript: Hardball MSNBC, Thursday September 1, 2005) <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9173433/> (Chris Matthews and Michelle Hofland of NBC). (Accessed September 2, 2005).

¹⁷ See *Society of the Spectacle*, Chapter One, thesis 29, “The spectacle thus reunites the separated, but it reunites them only *in their separateness*.” See, also, Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 79 – 83.

¹⁸ Cited in “Bush, Clinton announce relief fund; Barbara Bush says relocation 'working very well' for refugees” by Pam Easton, Newday.com <http://www.newsday.com/news/local/wire/newyork/ny-bc-ny--katrina-formerpre0906sep06.0.7162001.story?coll=ny-region-apnewyork> (accessed September 6, 2005)