



BETWEEN MONTAGE AND GESTURE

Ethics, Politics
and Cinema in
Giorgio Agamben
and Francis Alÿs

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ABSTRACT

The political valences of cinema have long been a topic of both artistic and philosophical enquiry. This thesis stages a dialogue between one artistic work and one body of philosophical work that, taken together, provoke critical reflection on the ethical and political significance of cinema in the context of contemporary global political conditions. The artistic work is Mexico-based Belgian artist Francis Alÿs's nineteen-and-a-half-minute digital video work *REEL-UNREEL* (2011). The philosophical body of work is Giorgio Agamben's texts on the politics of cinema, written during the first half of the 1990s, as well as a body of transdisciplinary scholarly literature engaging specifically with those writings that has emerged in the last few years. *REEL-UNREEL* can be seen as an encounter between cinema—as a historically-shaped technological apparatus, and as something like a sociocultural paradigm—and the political ramifications of modes of mediating situations of geopolitical crisis. Agamben's cinema texts excavate the significance for conceiving political and ethical life immanent to cinema. They do so through a philosophical elaboration of two main tropes, made separately but along comparable conceptual lines: montage—a theory of cinematic images—and gesture—a theory of cinema's treatment of the body. My task in staging an encounter between these two bodies of work is twofold. First, I frame *REEL-UNREEL*'s engagement with Afghanistan's political situation through the theoretical framework of Agamben's cinema texts. This involves situating the latter within the broader scope of the philosopher's politico-philosophical work on biopolitics and the society of the spectacle, as well as contextualising their ethical and political claims in the terms of Agamben's notion of potentiality. Second, I show how analysing *REEL-UNREEL* in this way calls for a way of reading Agamben's separate texts on montage and gesture *together*, since the video work provokes thinking about the ways in which these two concepts can become inseparable in cinema. Carrying out this twofold task shows how, through

Agamben's writings, *REEL-UNREEL* can be seen as manifesting a cinematic ethics in the specific context of contemporary political conditions. In doing so, it simultaneously calls for an intensification and a reconfiguration of the main conceptual tropes of Agamben's texts on cinema.

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INTRODUCTION

In spring 2010 Mexico City-based Belgian artist Francis Alÿs embarked on a trip to Kabul, Afghanistan's capital city. Along with several other artists and thinkers, Alÿs was invited to Afghanistan by the artistic directors of the thirteenth instalment of documenta, the international art quinquennale. This trip, and several others that followed it, provided an opportunity for its participants to develop works and ideas emerging in relation to Afghanistan's social and political situation. The results of these explorations were to be exhibited at dOCUMENTA (13) during summer 2012, both in Kabul and in documenta's traditional home of Kassel, Germany.¹

While Alÿs harboured a degree of skepticism at the outset of the project—he recounts asking himself 'what could a Belgian artist based in Mexico say about the situation in Afghanistan?'²—he nonetheless was able to produce a significant body of work as a result of the time he spent in Afghanistan. This included a number of paintings, drawings, photographs, and several short video works; but the most ambitious and large-scale piece developed there was *REEL-UNREEL*, a digital video work 19-and-a-half minutes in duration.³ *REEL-UNREEL* is set in Kabul and features two local children performing a modified version of a children's street game. In the original game an upright bicycle wheel is kept rolling with the aid of a stick. This game is known in English as 'hoop rolling' or 'hoop trundling'. In Alÿs's modification of the game the bicycle wheel is replaced with two film reels: the first (which is red) is rolled down the hills and through the streets of Kabul, unrolling the film; the second reel (blue) is made to follow the first, attempting to wind the film back up. A digital

¹ The use of capital letters in 'dOCUMENTA (13)' is a stylisation specific to that instantiation of the exhibition; the lower-case version ('documenta') is the general name of the institution.

² Francis Alÿs, Ajmal Maiwandi, and Andrea Viliani, "Conversation," in *REEL-UNREEL*, ed. Andrea Viliani (Naples/Warsaw: Fondazione Donnaregina/Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, 2014), 63.

³ The work can be viewed in its entirety at <http://francisalys.com/reel-unreel> (accessed October 29, 2017)

video camera—usually hand-held, and at the level of the children’s hands as they roll the reels—documents the unfolding of this artistic gesture in a series of episodic scenes: the performers roll the reels through Kabul’s rough-surfaced backstreets and down long flights of concrete steps, as well as through a busy market, and alongside a group of other children playing soccer. The ‘game’ is over when the film roll passes over a small roadside fire on one of the city’s elevated hillside roads, bisecting the film and severing the material connection between the two reels.⁴ In a dramatic sequence that marks this moment of the game’s interruption, the front reel is seen rolling off the edge of the road to an unknown fate in the city below. The video ends with the presentation of a maxim in Dari (one of Afghanistan’s main languages), which is subtitled in English as ‘Cinema: Everything else is imaginary’.

Aliys’s video work was commissioned by the artistic directors of dOCUMENTA (13) as part of a broader project that aimed, in part, to explore how contemporary artistic strategies could be developed to counterpose the prevailing tropes constituting representations of Afghanistan in the Western media. Afghanistan is a territory that has effectively been in a critical state of geopolitical conflict since the Soviet invasion in 1979. The conditions of crisis became significantly more acute following the deployment of military forces led by the U.S. in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. This contributed to the country becoming, in the estimation of dOCUMENTA (13)’s artistic director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, ‘a location encountered in the media more frequently than almost any other place in the world’.⁵ But in addition to the physical violence suffered by people on the ground in Afghanistan, this extensive and highly-politicised media

⁴ An intertitle suggests that this incident alludes to the Taliban’s burning of thousands of reels of film confiscated from the Afghan Film Archive on the outskirts of Kabul in 2001 (a dramatic act of destruction rendered absurd by the fact that the films they burned were, it turned out, replaceable prints rather than irreplaceable negatives).

⁵ Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, “Testimonies by Participants of d(13) Afghanistan,” in *REEL-UNREEL*, 166.

coverage has, according to various members of dOCUMENTA (13)'s curatorial team, led to the dissemination of a warped and dehumanising image of the country and its people in the West. dOCUMENTA (13) curator Ewa Gorzadek notes that the increased inaccessibility of Afghanistan to Western civilians means it has become a country that 'few foreigners have explored of their own free will', and as a result 'the media has played its part to ensure that the general public frowns nervously upon hearing its name. Afghanistan is perceived in the West as the Other with its own enigmatic reality—wounded, but dangerous'.⁶ Because of the Western media's monopoly over narrating Afghanistan's ongoing state of geopolitical crisis, a crystallisation of certain narrative tropes—suspicion, danger, violence—has come to be cemented around, and to define, the dominant image of Afghanistan in the West.

Primarily at stake in dOCUMENTA (13)'s presence in Afghanistan between 2010 and 2012 was an investigation into how artistic strategies might be developed and mobilised in such a way as to counterpose this dominant mode of mediating life in Afghanistan. Alÿs has himself framed the critical orientation of *REEL-UNREEL* in such terms, stating that '[t]he film is a portrayal of Kabul, of its daily reality, not the fantasy of a place that the media has created for the Western public'.⁷ The video's closing maxim ('Cinema: Everything else is imaginary') suggests that cinema functions as something like a paradigm for Alÿs's intervention. But if 'cinema' is put to work in such a way, it is done so in a decidedly idiosyncratic fashion. For one, the technical apparatus of cinema deployed in this work is neither used to record something, nor it is loaded into a projector and screened; rather, it is appropriated as a physical object for a modified local children's game. For another, the apparatus used appears out-of-date in relation to contemporary media technologies, including the digital cameras used by Alÿs and his crew to make *REEL-UNREEL*. Moreover, the relation between

⁶ Ewa Gorzadek, "Francis Alÿs. To Show Each Thing by its Rightful Image," in *REEL-UNREEL*, 153.

⁷ Alÿs, Maiwandi, Viliani, "Conversation," 76.

cinema and the media images and narratives that Alÿs's artwork is supposed to counterpose remains unclear. And yet Alÿs's choice to take 'cinema'—whatever that term might mean in this context—as the main trope for his response to the conditions of life in Afghanistan places a great deal of political weight on that notion. The question thus arises: *How can Alÿs's deployment of cinema in REEL-UNREEL be considered as part of his political project of counterposing the Western media's deleterious images and narratives of Afghanistan?* Addressing this question will be the principal task of this thesis.

Giorgio Agamben's writings on the politics of cinema—as well as a body of transdisciplinary scholarly literature engaging specifically with those writings that has emerged in the last few years—provide the theoretical framework through which I will approach this question. In those texts Agamben is primarily concerned with theoretically elaborating what he sees as the ethical and political valences of cinema. What makes Agamben's work especially pertinent to an analysis of *REEL-UNREEL* is the way in which the philosopher sees in cinema a positive possibility for ethical and political life that emerges from the otherwise catastrophic effects of two interrelated and inseparable logics: modern biopolitics and the society of the spectacle. For Agamben, biopolitics describes the production of 'bare life' (*vita nuda*) through the designation of biological life as an object of politics and law. Historically, this production took place in the margins of society; 'modern biopolitics', by contrast, marks the historical moment at which *all* life comes to be potentially determinable as bare life. This logic is reinforced by the increasingly dominant logic of the society of the spectacle, which describes the saturation of social relations by representational images (in particular those produced and disseminated by the media).

As described above, some of dOCUMENTA (13)'s curators, and Alÿs himself, have framed their intervention as a counterposition of the spectacularisation of Afghanistan in the West. Turning to Agamben's writings on cinema may, then, be helpful in constructing a theoretical framework for analysing how Alÿs's deployment of cinema might contribute to such an intervention. But this approach also raises the political stakes of Alÿs's artistic gesture. *REEL-UNREEL*'s deployment of cinema in Afghanistan can open onto considerations of the situation of life in a world not only saturated by the spectacle, but also structured by the logic of modern biopolitics. Additionally, Agamben's propositions of the various ways in which cinema can manifest a positive political possibility within these conditions can be helpful for unpacking the political valences of Alÿs's deployment of cinema. Agamben constructs his theory of cinema around two main tropes. The first is *gesture*. For Agamben the encounter between bodily movement and moving image technologies has the effect of partially separating gestures from the domain of meaning or signification. They come to make visible, instead, the *potential* for communication that conditions any given communicative act. It is by making this potential visible that cinematic gestures open onto the sphere of ethics and politics. This is because the existence of the potential for communication indexes the mediality of human life, which Agamben identifies as the proper realm of ethics and politics. The second trope of Agamben's philosophy of cinema is *montage*. Agamben develops his notion of montage through a series of reflections on Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-98) and the films of Guy Debord. Montage designates cinematic images' specific relation to history, namely their capacity to restore the element of possibility to the past by repeating images in new contexts. The term also designates the capacity of cinematic images to exhibit their own mediality: besides any visual content they may carry, with montage cinematic images also come to display the fact that they are images. The ethical and political valences of cinematic images reside in the immanence of these two operations to them.

Both of these tropes—gesture and montage—are potent for my analysis of the ways in which *REEL-UNREEL*'s deployment of cinema engages with the positive possibility of ethical and political life under conditions of modern biopolitics and the spectacle. However, Alÿs's video work also suggests a radical reconfiguration of these concepts in relation to Agamben's philosophy of cinema. Agamben's notions of gesture and montage both posit ways in which cinema opens onto the sphere of ethics and politics: in the first, through cinema's treatment of the body; and in the second, through characteristics immanent to cinematic images. However, these concepts are developed in separate texts, and are not explicitly brought into contact. As such, Agamben's notions of bodies and of images in cinema remain distinct and isolated from each other. The effect of bringing *REEL-UNREEL* into dialogue with these texts will not only be to affirm the potency of their arguments; it will also be to suggest that Agamben's cinema texts be read *together*. This is because the video work's central gesture—the boys rolling the film reels through Kabul—*both* manifests the logics of cinematic gestures and montage (in ways I will detail in chapter 5), *and* emphasises the inseparability of those logics. As such, *REEL-UNREEL* is seen as staging an encounter between Agamben's notions of gesture and montage.

Approaching my research question, therefore, will not involve a unilateral application of Agamben's philosophical writings to Alÿs's artwork. Rather, my approach takes the form of a dialogue between Alÿs's artistic work and Agamben's philosophical writings. On the one hand, it offers an expanded view of Agamben's cinema texts by considering their valences with his broader political philosophy, and makes use of this expanded view to approach *REEL-UNREEL*'s ethical and political resonances. On the other hand, *REEL-UNREEL* calls for Agamben's thematically separate philosophical elaborations of cinema to be brought together. The dialogue between Agamben and Alÿs therefore

has implications for both the philosophy of cinema and the political impacts of contemporary artistic strategies. Considered most broadly, this dialogue is framed as a critical reflection on the possible significance of cinema in the context of contemporary global political conditions.

Two questions may present themselves as regards the methodological approach taken up in this thesis. First: The texts by Agamben on cinema under consideration were written in the first half of the 1990s, so they are now over twenty years old. Cinema has undergone significant changes during this period—for example, the seismic changes brought about to cinematic production and distribution by the now widespread use of digital recording equipment and the internet. Given these developments, to what extent is Agamben's older work on cinema able to contribute to debates concerning the medium's political significance in contemporary contexts? To this I would respond that the ongoing relevance of their arguments is attested to by the particularly acute degree of scholarly attention that they have received in recent years. This includes two book-length volumes centred on Agamben's writings on cinema: the collection of essays published in 2014 entitled *Cinema and Agamben*, edited by Henrik Gustafsson and Asbjørn Grønstad, and Janet Harbord's *Ex-centric Cinema: Giorgio Agamben and film archaeology*, published in 2016.⁸ In addition to these volumes a number of scholarly articles on Agamben's cinema texts have appeared in the last few years (several of which I will have occasion to refer to later in this thesis). Furthermore, this recent resurgence of attention to Agamben's cinema texts is indicative of their suggestiveness for contemporary scholarly debates. This becomes even more apparent when considered in light of the relative lack of attention they received in the years immediately following their original publications (in their original Italian and French, as well as in English translations). While

⁸ Henrik Gustafsson and Asbjørn Grønstad, eds., *Cinema and Agamben: Ethics, Biopolitics and the Moving Image* (New York, etc. Bloomsbury, 2014); Janet Harbord, *Ex-centric Cinema: Giorgio Agamben and Film Archaeology* (New York, etc.: Bloomsbury, 2016).

Agamben's recent interlocutors are by no means entirely or uniformly affirmative of every aspect of these texts, the theoretical frameworks set out therein have nonetheless become—and continue to become—integral to contemporary scholarship concerned with elaborating cinema's ethical and political stakes.

A second question: Agamben's texts on cinema are brief (the two texts I will be chiefly preoccupied with are each around ten pages long) and form a relatively marginal part of the philosopher's oeuvre. How can the attempt to build strong theoretical claims on such minor texts be justified? In response to this I would note that while Agamben's texts on cinema are succinct, they are rich; but it is, admittedly, precisely this richness that can cause problems for the reader of Agamben's work. One may get the feeling that many of these texts' main points—particularly those bearing an argument's principal political weight—risk remaining elliptical in the absence of fuller development within the texts themselves. Part of the work of this thesis, in attempting to resolve this difficulty, will be to situate the conceptual trajectories of Agamben's cinema texts in the context of some of his politico-philosophical writings, in which his conceptual vocabulary is worked out at greater length. Due to considerations of length, I will only be able to summarise the content of those conceptually dense writings, focussing in particular on the aspects of them that are most pertinent to my discussion of the cinema texts (this will take place primarily in chapter 1). But this approach in itself poses a methodological problem: as Agamben scholar Catherine Mills notes, summarising aspects of Agamben's work risks neutralising the force of his 'fragmentary and iterative style, which [...] can too easily give the impression of a greater systematicity than there is in the original work'.⁹ Taking a methodological cue from Mills, the discussion that follows 'does not attempt to either

⁹ Catherine Mills, "Agamben's Messianic Politics: Biopolitics, Abandonment and Happy Life," *Contretemps* 5 (December 2004): 43.

replicate or to simply obscure his stylistics but instead attends to the rigorous conceptuality that gives such a style its critical theoretical force'.¹⁰

The structure of my argument is as follows. Chapter 1 casts the political problematic to which *REEL-UNREEL* responds in terms of Agamben's account of the conditions of modern political life. These conditions comprise the overlapping of two related but distinct logics: modern biopolitics—the way in which biological life is made an object of law and sovereignty—and the society of the spectacle—the inseparability of social relations from representational images. Chapter 2 considers Agamben's cinema texts in relation to the political conditions set out in chapter 1. In so doing this chapter also situates *REEL-UNREEL*'s political project in relation to the political stakes in Agamben's account of cinema. Agamben's cinema texts remain the subject of chapter 3, which unpacks the philosopher's two formulations of the positive political possibility of cinema: gesture and montage. Agamben's discussion of these concepts is then considered in relation to existing debates on the political valences of Alÿs artistic strategies. Chapter 4 deepens the political stakes in Agamben's discussion of gesture and montage by examining their relation to Agamben's ontological and political notion of potentiality. Chapter 5 comprises an extended reading of *REEL-UNREEL* in dialogue with the expanded reading of Agamben's cinema texts carried out in the preceding chapters.

¹⁰ Ibid.

1. BIOPOLITICS AND SPECTACLE

'REEL-UNREEL': A number of connotations attend the title Alÿs chose for his 2011 video work. For one, it names the movement of the physical roll of film as it is engaged in the gesture performed by the video's protagonists: one performer unreels the film, while the other simultaneously attempts to reel it up. For another, the words composing the title are homophonous with 'real' and 'unreal'. This is suggestive of the play of fact and fantasy, true and false, and reality and representation in the narrative tropes that converge around Afghanistan and its geopolitical situation in the Western media. The directors of the Fondazione Donnaregina in Naples, where *REEL-UNREEL* was exhibited in 2014, write that this homophony suggests how the work

underscores the contrast between the real image of contemporary Afghanistan and the unreal one, "reeled and unreeled" for Western media consumption in accordance with the external journalistic, political and economic agendas that for centuries have shaped our knowledge of this country, which has never been truly understood by the West.¹

Alÿs, too, has stated that *REEL-UNREEL* takes the form of 'a reflection on the real-unreal image of Afghanistan that was conveyed by the media in the West'.² These comments suggest that the main object of *REEL-UNREEL* is not so much to intervene in the intractability of Afghanistan's geopolitical situation itself, but to critically take up the ethical and political question of its modes of representation in the Western media. Thus, while *REEL-UNREEL* appears to focus on the local phenomena encountered through inserting an apparently innocuous gesture into Kabul's social fabric, the work also opens onto a broader set of ethical, political, and aesthetic questions: If the

¹ Andrea Viliani ed., *REEL-UNREEL*, 11.

² *Ibid.*, 64.

capacity of images to convey 'reality' is put into question, to what extent is understanding and acting in the world possible when images increasingly come to be the basis of ways of encountering it? How can ethical and political life be thought in the context of a social world structured by a seemingly aporetic relationship between the 'real' and the 'unreal'? And how can a critique of image-based modes of mediation be carried out within the sphere of images themselves?

As stated in the introduction, I will approach these questions by considering the role of cinema in *REEL-UNREEL*. Although cinema is largely an image-based medium, in *REEL-UNREEL* it appears to take a central role in counterposing the aporetic real/unreal character of the images of Afghanistan disseminated through the Western media. How might Alÿs's deployment of cinema as an artistic strategy be understood in this regard? Giorgio Agamben's writings on cinema will be helpful for addressing this question. In those writings the philosopher is primarily concerned with showing how cinema can be seen as possessing conditions that can lead images away from the representational techniques of most conventional media practices, and towards the manifestation of a form of ethical and political relationality in which the most deleterious operations of media saturation can, perhaps, be circumvented. However, the ethical and political implications of Agamben's succinct cinema texts can be thoroughly grasped only by contextualising their arguments within Agamben's broader political philosophy. This is the task of the present chapter.

1.1 Agamben, Debord, and the society of the spectacle

The question of the 'reality' and 'unreality' of images produced and disseminated through the media raised by Alÿs and his interlocutors is far from new. One of the most influential articulations of this problematic was made in 1967 by Guy Debord, when he set about diagnosing the prodigious

saturation of every register of society by representational images. Debord names this phenomenon 'the society of the spectacle'. This notion is a theoretical development of Marx's analysis of the commodity form. According to Marx, the commodity is reducible neither to a concrete object, nor to its use value and exchange value; rather, it is understood to be condensation of social relations into things. This phenomenon has the effect of obscuring the nature of the social relations that it simultaneously reifies. 'Capitalism' is, among other things, the name given to the moment at which the commodity form comes to be immanent to all social relations, structuring them according to its logic.³ Debord's development of this line of argument proposes instead that this generalisation of the commodity form is manifested in the transformation of lived experience into representations.⁴ As he states in the first paragraph of *The Society of the Spectacle*, 'The entire life of societies in which modern conditions of production reign announces itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation'.⁵ The relation between lived experience and representation remains complex, however: the dichotomy is less antinomous than porous, as the spectacle comes to condition 'the real' to such an extent that the two come to be indistinguishable. Paragraph 8 of *The Society of the Spectacle* reads:

One can not abstractly contrast the spectacle to actual social activity: such a division is itself divided.

The spectacle which inverts the real is in fact produced. At the same time lived reality is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle, and it takes up the spectacular order within itself,

³ See the first chapter of Marx's *Capital*, Vol. 1 for his analysis of the commodity form. A thorough analysis of the process of reification can be found in the chapter of Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* entitled 'The Phenomenon of Reification'. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, trans. Tom Griffith (London: Wordsworth, 2013); György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1967 [1927]).

⁴ As Alex Murray points out, Debord relocates alienation from the sphere of to that of the commodity: 'For Debord [...] the alienation of capitalism is intrinsically linked to commodification and not to work'. Alex Murray, "Beyond Spectacle and the Image: the Poetics of Guy Debord and Agamben," in *The Work of Giorgio Agamben: Law, Literature, Life*, ed. Justin Clemens, Nicholas Heron, and Alex Murray (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 166.

⁵ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1970), paragraph 1.

giving it a positive adhesion. Objective reality is present on both sides. Every notion fixed this way has no other basis than its passage into the opposite: reality rises up within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real. This reciprocal alienation is the essence and the support of the existing society.⁶

The spectacle, therefore, does not designate a world of images separate from human experience; it refers instead to the way in which social relations come to be defined by their mediation through image. Just as, for Marx, the passing of the commodity form into the general form of social relations defined capitalism, so, for Debord, the society of the spectacle describes of the moment at which an indiscernibility between social relations and representational images becomes a general and defining condition of daily life.

For Agamben Debord's diagnoses in *The Society of the Spectacle* appear only to have gained in incisiveness with the passing decades. In an essay written in 1990, Agamben affirms that the spectacle has 'extended its dominion over the whole planet'.⁷ He draws on the examples of the events of Tiananmen Square and heavily mediated overthrowing of Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu to confirm the time at which he was writing as one of 'the complete triumph of the spectacle'.⁸ But, as Alex Murray notes, the sway of the spectacle may have been felt nowhere more strongly than in Agamben's native Italy, where 'democracy had, under the cover of terrorism, been subjected to a spectacularisation that had evacuated its sense'.⁹ Agamben thus appears to affirm the veracity and incisiveness of Debord's work. But turning to other passages in Agamben's oeuvre in which the spectacle is discussed suggests an important development of the concept. This, namely, is the way in which the logic of the spectacle is said to coincide with the logic of biopolitics. Agamben's

⁶ Ibid., paragraph 8.

⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 73.

⁸ Ibid., 82.

⁹ Murray, "Beyond Spectacle," 167.

formulations of this coincidence are instructive for thinking through the ways in which the spectacle bears not just on issues of representation and reality, or truth and falsehood, but also on the political determinations of life that issue forth from the logic of sovereignty. These formulations will be especially suggestive for my considerations of the spectacle and mediation in my reading of *REEL-UNREEL*. In the next section I set out how, for Agamben, interrelations and overlaps between the spectacle and biopolitics come to condition life in modernity.

1.2 Spectacle and Biopolitics

Agamben's work on biopolitics is a development of Michel Foucault's inauguration of the concept in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*. For Foucault biopolitics emerged in the nineteenth century, and describes the moment at which biological processes pass into the realm of calculation (in the form of birth rates, death rates, etc.), and thereby became subject to the forces of power-knowledge.¹⁰ For Agamben, in contrast, politics has been founded on conceptions of the category of life—and hence precisely *biopolitical*—at least since classical antiquity. According to Agamben biopolitics can be thought in relation to the Aristotelian distinction between two kinds of life. The first is *zōē*: biological life, or 'life in general', that is, the kind of life that is common to all living beings.¹¹ The second is *bios*, which Agamben describes as 'the qualified way of life proper to men', and is identified primarily with the human capacity for politics.¹² According to this distinction biological life is defined as being that which is excluded from the life of the *polis*—the realm of politics, public life, and law—and reserved exclusively for *oikos*—private and domestic life. The

¹⁰ Specifically, Foucault describes biopower as 'what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life'. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 143.

¹¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 66.

¹² Ibid.

term 'biopolitics' describes the process of including biological life within the realm of political life. Biological life becomes 'politicised' not by becoming equivalent to political life, however. Rather, it becomes included in political life *as that which is excluded from it*—it is what Agamben terms an 'inclusive exclusion'.¹³ Biological life becomes 'bare life' (*vita nuda*) by means of this process (also termed 'the sovereign ban'): 'bare life designates the inclusion of biological life within the realm of politics and law as precisely that which is excluded from those realms.

The transformation of biological life into bare life through the politicisation of the former becomes a primary condition for the exercise of sovereignty and the correlative institution of law. Drawing on Carl Schmitt, Agamben defines the sovereign's position as being both internal and external to the juridical order. It is from this position that the sovereign's role comes to be defined as the capacity to decide what lies within the purview of the law or rule and what remains outside it at any given moment. This is the capacity, in other words, to *suspend the rule*, and thereby to effectuate a 'state of exception'. The exception is therefore related to the rule not through mutual antagonism, but mutual constitution:

the exception does not subtract itself from the rule; rather, the rule, suspending itself, gives rise to the exception and, maintaining itself in relation to the exception, first constitutes itself as a rule. The particular force of law consists in this capacity of law to maintain itself in relation to an exteriority.¹⁴

The sovereign's prerogative is defined as the ability to effectuate this suspension of law or rule; as Catherine Mills writes, '[t]he sovereign determines the suspension of the law *vis-à-vis* an individual or extraordinary case and simultaneously constitutes the efficacy of the law in that determination'.

¹³ Ibid., 7.

¹⁴ Ibid., 18.

¹⁵ Bare life, being captured by the juridical order as an 'inclusive exclusion', is located at the border of juridical dominion over life. As such, the term indicates the threshold at which life becomes 'exposed to death'.¹⁶ The 'death' to which bare life is exposed is not simply biological death. It designates instead an exposure brought about by the specifically (extra)juridical status of bare life: since it is the sovereign decision that determines the limits of the juridical order, the sovereign is also able to exercise a 'right of death'.¹⁷ 'Bare life' thus designates the exposure of biological life to the sovereign's right of death through the former's 'inclusive exclusion' in the realm of law and politics.

The politicisation of biological life as bare life, moreover, marks the founding moment of politics as such: 'not simple natural life, but life exposed to death (bare life or sacred life) is the originary political element'.¹⁸ But although Agamben contends through this argument that politics has always been founded on the politicisation of biological life, and thus always, in a fundamental sense, *biopolitics*, the coming of modernity nonetheless marks a sea change in the distribution of bare life within the political sphere as a whole.¹⁹ In short, modern biopolitics is characterised by the increasing indistinction between biological life and political life, such that bare life comes to coincide with, and be indistinguishable from, the political realm as a whole. For Agamben this phenomenon reached its catastrophic apotheosis in the figure of the concentration camp:

¹⁵ Mills, "Agamben's Messianic Politics," 44.

¹⁶ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 88.

¹⁷ Mills, "Agamben's Messianic Politics," 46.

¹⁸ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 88.

¹⁹ It is unclear when exactly 'modernity' begins for Agamben; but it is important to note that the term does not designate a closed historical period, as it does for some writers, which was succeeded by postmodernity, the contemporary, or something similar. For Agamben 'modernity' extends up to and includes the present moment.

If one was a Jew in Auschwitz or a Bosnian woman in Omarska, one entered the camp as a result not of a political choice but rather of what was most private and incommunicable in oneself, that is, one's blood, one's biological body. But precisely the latter functions now as a decisive political criterion. In this sense, the camp truly is the inaugural site of modernity: it is the first space in which public and private events, political life and biological life, become rigorously interchangeable. Inasmuch as the inhabitant of the camp has been severed from the political community and has been reduced to naked life (and, moreover, to a 'life that does not deserve to be lived'), he or she is an absolutely private person. And yet there is not one single instant in which he or she might be able to find shelter in the realm of the private, and it is precisely this indiscernibility that constitutes the specific anguish of the camp.²⁰

Agamben's proposition in this passage that the camp is 'the inaugural site of modernity' is indicative of the special status that the camp has in Agamben's political thought. This, namely, is that the camp becomes a figure for the biopolitical conditions of modernity as such—that is to say, in modernity, all life comes to be potentially determinable as bare life. As Agamben writes in *Homo Sacer*, 'the realm of bare life—which is originally situated at the margins of the political order—gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoē*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction'.²¹ This means that all life, as it comes to be characterised more and more as potential 'bare life', thereby becomes increasingly exposed to the sovereign right to death—an exposure now encountered, according to Mills, 'as a constitutive condition of political existence'.²² The sovereign's defining capacity to determine the state of exception, which was formerly effective only in the political margins, is now potentially extendable to all regions of life. This, for Agamben, is the biopolitical upshot of Walter

²⁰ Agamben, *Means without End*, 122.

²¹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 9.

²² Mills, 'Agamben's Messianic Politics', 47.

Benjamin's observation in 'On the Concept of History': 'The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule'.²³ The specificity of modern biopolitical conditions thus consists in the process by which the production of bare life in the state of exception increasingly becomes a determinate condition of all forms of life, including political life.

For Agamben, then, the significance of the concentration camp a propos of modernity extends beyond an isolated instance of the production of bare life in the borderlands of the political. He suggests that the logic of the camp comes to saturate the experience of modern daily life in general, becoming 'the nomos of the modern'.²⁴ It is at this point that modern biopolitical conditions come to coincide with the conditions of the society of the spectacle, and the operations of sovereignty and capitalism begin to converge. It may appear that Agamben's critique of biopolitics and his affirmation of Debord's analysis of the society of the spectacle have quite different objects: the violence of sovereignty in its dominion over life, on the one hand, and on the other the structuring of social experience by capitalism through representational images. And yet, for Agamben, there is a slippage between the respective logics of modern biopolitics and of the spectacle. This slippage is manifested in the way in which the zone of indiscernibility between public and private, characteristic of modern biopolitics, carries over into the logic of the spectacle: 'To this slippage of the public into the private [in the camp] corresponds also the spectacular publicisation of the private: are the diva's breast cancer or [the sports star's] death public events or private ones? And how can one touch the porn star's body, since there is not an inch on it that is not public?'.²⁵ Far from standing as critiques of categorically separate aspects of modern political conditions, the

²³ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings* Vol. 4, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 392.

²⁴ 'The Camp as the 'Nomos' of the Modern' is the title of *Homo Sacer*'s final chapter.

²⁵ Agamben, *Means without End*, 123.

production of bare life in the concentration camp comes to be telescoped onto the status of life in general under the conditions of the society of the spectacle. This notion that experiences of the concentration camp and of the spectacle are in a certain way isomorphic has been highly controversial. I will suspend engagement with this controversy here, however. Agamben's call for his reader (in Deborah Levitt's words) 'to reflect on the ways in which our mediasphere reproduces—or produces—such spaces [as the camp]' is significant for my purposes less for this questionable isomorphism, and more for the way in which it makes space for thinking through the *positive* possibility of political life under these conditions.²⁶ This will take place in the chapters to come.

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The above discussion is not intended as an exhaustive summary of Agamben's philosophy of modern political conditions; indeed, several of its other valences remain to be picked up in the chapters to follow with regard to specific aspects of his texts on cinema. My aim, instead, has been to sketch the politico-philosophical scene before which Agamben develops his ethically- and politically-directed theoretical work on cinema. Before moving on to discuss the latter, it will be worth summarising my analysis of Agamben's political philosophy so far.

For Agamben, modern political existence is defined by two interrelated and inseparable sets of conditions: modern biopolitics and the society of the spectacle. Modern biopolitics is defined as a reconfiguration of the categories of life that have formed a basis for political thought since antiquity. According to Agamben, politics was founded on the production of the category of bare

²⁶ Deborah Levitt, "Notes on Media and Biopolitics: 'Notes on Gesture'," in *The Work of Giorgio Agamben*, 196.

life. This category emerges through the prior distinction between two kinds of life—*bios* and *zoë*, political life and biological life—and the corollary separation of the *polis* and the *oikos*, or the spheres of the public and the private. Bare life designates the politicisation of biological life through the latter's 'inclusive exclusion' within the juridical order: biological life becomes political precisely by being defined as that which remains outside the purview of the law. This definition is the prerogative of sovereignty, which is in turn defined as that which is located both inside and outside the juridical order, and is able to determine that boundary through decision. As such, bare life is life that is exposed to death and the violence of sovereign decision. With the coming of modern biopolitics, the 'exception' of bare life—a hitherto marginal political element—increasingly becomes 'the rule': all life becomes potentially determinable as bare life. This phenomenon comes to coincide with the increasing hegemony of the society of the spectacle: the entry of the logic of the commodity into the realm of images, which come to mediate all social relations and thereby effectuate a general social alienation.

While Agamben would appear to affirm the potency of Debord's critique of the spectacle for contemporary political thought, the conflation of the spectacle with biopolitics in modernity that emerges here is a significant development of Debord's critical orientation. The main objects of Debord's critique of the spectacle were capitalism's alienation of social relations, its conflation of reality and representation, and its obfuscation of truth and falsehood. These issues remain present with Agamben, but the focus now shifts to a critique of the logic of sovereignty, the tracing of the state of exception over the political realm *in toto*, and the various political determinations of life. It is this shift of critical focus with regard to the spectacle that I wish to carry over into my reading of *REEL-UNREEL*. In doing so, I turn less toward considerations of the aporetic relation of the 'real' and the 'unreal' connoted by the work's title and highlighted by Alj's and some of his interlocutors.

Instead, my main preoccupation is with how Alÿs's artistic strategies bear on the determination of forms of life through his attempt to mediate Afghanistan's situation of geopolitical crisis. So far in this chapter I have been detailing how, in Agamben's writings, the logics of modern biopolitics and the society of the spectacle together have the effect of determining all human life as potentially bare life. But these inauspicious developments also condition Agamben's formulations of a 'positive possibility' for political life conditioned in large part by these logics.²⁷ It is these formulations, seen through the lens of Agamben's cinema texts, that will undergird my reading of the artistic strategies Alÿs deploys in *REEL-UNREEL*. But before outlining how Agamben conceives of such a 'positive possibility' in cinema, it will first be necessary to situate cinema within the political context of modernity that I have been sketching in this chapter. This will be the task of chapter 2.

²⁷ Agamben, *Means without End*, 83.

2. CINEMA: IMAGE, BODY, BIOPOLITICS

In the previous chapter I discussed what, for Agamben, are the two distinct yet interrelated sets of conditions characterising the political upheavals of modernity. The first is the advent of modern biopolitics. This describes the process by which 'bare life' (*vita nuda*), formerly produced at the margins of the political sphere and in categorical opposition to political life, now comes to be increasingly indiscernible with the latter. The second is the ever-firmer consolidation of the spectacle's hegemony. This designates the way in which the experience of daily life becomes increasingly indistinguishable from its mediation by representational images. Agamben characterises modernity as conditioned by the conflation and consequent inseparability of these two developments.

My aim in this chapter is to situate Agamben's writings on cinema in relation to his broader politico-philosophical arguments, as described in chapter 1. Biopolitics and the spectacle are not subjects of sustained discussion in his cinema texts: the spectacle receives a few passing references in 'Difference and Repetition', and biopolitics is not directly mentioned in either that text or 'Notes on Gesture'. Yet reading those texts' arguments in relation to his broader philosophy of politics in modernity can provide a means by which the broader political implications of the cinema texts can be indicated. And since Agamben's cinema texts provide the terms for my reading of *REEL-UNREEL*, indicating their broader political implications here will also enable the video work's valences *vis-à-vis* biopolitics and the spectacle to be brought into relief.

2.1 Lost gestures

Agamben's theories of cinema begin from considering its emergence at the end of the nineteenth century. The philosopher recounts how the work of several scientists and photographers at that time began to refigure relations between bodily movement and socially-situated structures of subjectivity. In 1886, Agamben relates, one of the most commonplace human gestures of all had attracted the attention of the French physician Gilles de la Tourette. The scientist's meticulous experimental study of walking required subjects to walk along a piece of white paper with the soles of their feet covered with a rust-red powder. Performing various measurements on the footprints they made allowed Tourette to make precise determinations about a person's gait. A year previous to the aforementioned study the physician was engaged in a study of human movements that were constantly disrupted by a nervous condition manifested in a lack of motor coordination—what would come to be known as Tourette's syndrome. Agamben writes of these gestures as nonvoluntary interruptions of a subject's intentional movement: 'If they are able to start a movement, this is interrupted and broken up by shocks lacking any coordination and by tremors that give the impression that the whole musculature is engaged in a dance that is completely independent of any ambulatory end'.¹

For Agamben Tourette's work on motor dysfunction and the methods he employed in his study of human gait are indicative of a key historical moment: 'By the end of the nineteenth century', he writes, 'the bourgeoisie had definitively lost its gestures'.² This gestural loss primarily took place when the causal determination of bodily movement began to be thought of as outside the domain of conscious subjective deliberation. The emergence of cinema at this time catalysed this

¹ Agamben, *Means without End*, 51.

² *Ibid.*, 49.

development. To emphasise this Agamben contrasts Tourette's scientific analysis of gait with Balzac's 1833 *Théorie de la démarche*. While Balzac, writing at a time when 'the bourgeoisie's good conscience was still in tact', was able only to perceive the *moral* constitution of a character, Tourette's method involved 'employ[ing] a gaze that is already a prophecy of what cinematography would later become' in order to make his scientific determinations.³ What is posited here is the exiting of gestures from the order of 'symbols' that the bourgeoisie 'just a few decades earlier was still firmly in possession of'.⁴ A lost 'sense of naturalness' accompanied this shift, marking the moment at which the bourgeoisie 'succumb[ed] to interiority and [gave] itself up to psychology' in the wake of its gestural dissolution.⁵ The bourgeoisie's loss of gestures at this historical moment is thereby amplified into a crisis in the coherence of bourgeois subjectivity itself. This is because (to borrow from Alex Murray's analysis) the aforementioned scientific and technological innovations that subjected the body to fragmentation, in order to make it subject to 'the gaze of observation', precipitated the exposure of the 'false unity' undergirding a bourgeois conception of subjectivity—a unity that circumscribes the body as 'an embodied, experienced whole'.⁶ For Agamben these scientific studies of human movement, and their corollary alienation of subjects from gestures, strongly resonated with the photographic and cinematographic work of Eadweard Muybridge, Étienne-Jules Marey, and the Lumière Brothers, with which they were more or less contemporary. In being distanced from its gestures by the techniques of observation employed by Tourette, Marey, and Muybridge, subjectivity in modernity was also separated from the symbolic order that depended on gestural coherence and unity, since those gestures had now become fragmentary and

³ Ibid., 50.

⁴ Ibid., 53.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Alex Murray, *Giorgio Agamben* (London/New York: Routledge, 2010), 88.

alienated from them.⁷ This marks the advent of a modernity lived as 'a generalized catastrophe of the sphere of gestures'.⁸ Janet Harbord summarises this process as follows:

The atomization of movement in turn atomized the subjects of a community whose dwelling had been located within the commons of a gestural language and who were now isolated within the indecipherable language of a body unable to articulate itself.⁹

Cinema's effectivity *vis-à-vis* the loss of gestures is ambivalent, however. On the one hand cinema is a site for the partial separation of gestures from the domain of subjectivity, which determined the bourgeoisie's loss of its gestures. On the other hand cinema is said to record and preserve those gestures that it simultaneously marks as lost. As Agamben writes: 'In the cinema, a society that has lost its gestures tries at once to reclaim what it has lost and to record its loss'.¹⁰ Each gesture is marked as archaic at the moment of its cinematic registration. Or, as Anthony Curtis Adler phrases it, '[t]he modern gestures, as it were, trace out the decaying traces of the past, before these are lost without a trace'.¹¹

⁷ Walter Benjamin had made similar observations in his essay 'Franz Kafka': 'The invention of motion pictures and the phonograph came in an age of maximum alienation of men from one another, of unpredictably intervening relationships which have become their only ones. Experiments have proved that a man does not recognize his own gait on film or his own voice on the phonograph. The situation of the subject in such experiments is Kafka's situation; this is what leads him to study, where he may encounter fragments of his own existence-fragments that are still within the context of the role. He might catch hold of the lost gesture the way Peter Schlemihl caught hold of the shadow he had sold. He might understand himself, but what an enormous effort would be required!' Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings* Vol. 2 Part 2, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 814. As several scholars have noted, Benjamin's essay appears to be an unacknowledged cornerstone of Agamben's own theory of gesture.

⁸ Agamben, *Means without End*, 51.

⁹ Harbord, *Ex-centric Cinema*, 58.

¹⁰ Agamben, *Means without End*, 53.

¹¹ Anthony Curtis Adler, "The Intermedial Gesture," *Angelaki* 12:3 (August 2010): 59.

For Agamben, then, the principal sociocultural significance of cinema lies in the way its technical capacity to register bodily movement indexes a profoundly reconfigured set of relations between bodies and subjectivities. As Deborah Levitt has shown, these reconfigured relations can be seen as an instance in which the emergence of modern biopolitics and the spectacle came to be played out. Of the figures to whom Agamben attributes these technological developments, Levitt singles out Marey in particular as ‘perhaps the most persuasively emblematic’ for his role as ‘a central figure in this history of the biopoliticisation of the body via the image’.¹² Marey’s most significant innovation in this regard is the chronophotographic gun, a rifle-shaped device that, like Muybridge’s later serial photography, was used to capture successive instants of human movement in single frames. Marey saw a vast number of uses for this technology: it ‘could alert workers, soldiers, gymnasts, etc., to which of their movements were wasteful and which the most effective’.¹³ These analyses could be applied ‘to cut down on fatigue and increase productivity in almost all areas of social life’.¹⁴ The biopolitical significance of Marey’s work is thus twofold. First, submitting human bodily movement to this new form of technologically-mediated observation entailed opening human movement to a visual schema inaccessible to ordinary human vision: ‘The faster mechanical eye of the camera freezes the body at moments in a movement that are too quick for the naked eye to perceive’.¹⁵ Second, the ways in which analyses of these images could be used to augment productivity (by identifying and eliminating excessive or wasted movements) indexed the encroachment of a ‘biopolitical *ratio*’ into the realm of bodily movement.¹⁶ The modern biopolitical logic that Agamben describes, projected from concentration camp to capitalist spectacle, is recapitulated here: the specifically *biopolitical* dimension of this logic of efficiency consists in its acting directly on the

¹² Levitt, “Notes,” 197.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 199.

¹⁵ Ibid., 198. This is an observation already made by Benjamin: ‘Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye – if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man’. Benjamin, *Selected Writings* Vol. 4, 254.

¹⁶ Ibid.

body; as a result ‘the public domain penetrates and operates within the body’.¹⁷ The bourgeoisie thus lost its gestures at this moment of their expropriation from the private sphere into the modern biopolitical zone of indifference between public and private. This moment, moreover, was primarily effectuated through the ‘appropriation of gestures as images’ by means of new photographic technologies—technologies that moved human gestures away from the domain of human perception and alienated them from established structures of subjectivity.¹⁸ Levitt describes this appropriation as a further kind of indiscernibility, one predicated by the overlapping logics of biopolitics and the spectacle: *an indiscernibility between body and image*.¹⁹ The spread of this space of indiscernibility to encompass all forms of social relations is thus seen a defining condition of life in modernity. In a twist of Foucault’s definition of biopolitics, Benjamin Noys describes this moment as one in which ‘the image puts at stake our existence as a living being’.²⁰

What has the term ‘cinema’ come to designate in Agamben’s argument? Levitt writes that in ‘Notes on Gesture’ this term ‘is not equivalent to the technical-social scene of the moving picture, but is rather a kind of impersonal eye, a perceptual modality, a kinesthetic sense, a social *milieu*’.²¹ In particular, it describes a social milieu that has resulted from a deep shift in the sphere of everyday sensorial experience. Agamben’s intertwined notions of gesture and cinema are thus themselves dynamic: they trace a vector from a bodily movement’s engagement by moving image technologies (and their scientific forebears) to a social milieu characterised by the ‘indecipherability’ of daily life.

¹⁷ Ibid., 199.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 195.

²⁰ Benjamin Noys, “Film-of-Life: Agamben’s Profanation of the Image,” in *Cinema and Agamben: Ethics, Biopolitics and the Moving Image*, ed. Henrik Gustafsson and Asbjørn Grønstad (New York, etc.: Bloomsbury, 2014), 90. In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault defines ‘modern man’ as ‘an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question’. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 143.

²¹ Levitt, “Notes,” 204.

Thinking of cinema in this way is suggestive for a first step in considering Alÿs's deployment of cinema in *REEL-UNREEL*. The encounter in *REEL-UNREEL* between the physical cinematic apparatus and the protagonists' bodily movements can be seen as opening a space of indistinction between bodily movement and moving image. The boys' physical movements are inseparable from their engagement with the cinematic apparatus; they are determined by the exigencies of their set task of keeping the film reels rolling. The boys' repetitive movements and the reels' revolutions mutually constitute each other; each is inseparable from the other. In this sense, it is not just the physical cinematic apparatus that indexes 'cinema' in *REEL-UNREEL*. Remaining within Agamben's theoretical framework, it may be suggested that it is in the encounter between bodily movement and moving image technologies—an encounter that renders each inseparable from the other—that 'cinema' also consists. Additionally, the action of keeping the reels rolling involves the constant negotiation of Kabul's milieu in the entanglement of its social, architectural, and material dimensions. The city's architectural and material particularities of the city effectuate rhythmic variation in the unfolding of the boys' action: at times rough terrain causes the rolling to be dramatically slowed, and in several shots the front reel bounds headlong down sets of concrete steps. Similar rhythmic variations occur in encounters between the boys' action and various social situations: the reels roll through a busy market only with a careful and deliberate winding motion, and in one shot on a hillside road one of the boys stops completely to allow a herd of goats to pass (Figure 1). In addition to manifesting an inseparability between bodily movement and moving image technologies, the boys' gesture is also inseparable from the social-material-physical environment in which it is located.

Locating 'cinema' in this encounter between body, image, and milieu allows the logic of the boys' action to be magnified to encompass what, in Agamben's writings, is cinema's political crux. On the

one hand, this gesture indicates the impossibility of separating life in Afghanistan from its engagement by media technologies. This situation leads to the vulnerability of the country's situation to the Western media's various narrative filters. This, in turn, recapitulates the interrelated logics of modern biopolitics and the society of the spectacle: the passing of the 'private' biological body into the realm of the public, effectuated by the impossibility of distinguishing the body from its capture in images.

2.2 Cinema's 'dynamic tension'

As described above, cinema and protocinematic technologies figured the dissolution of a gesture's symbolic legibility and a correlative subjective experience of alienation from coherent bodily comportment. But its reconfiguration of gesture also became the site of a 'positive possibility' for ethical and political life within modern biopolitics and the spectacle—one residing within this gestural malaise.²² In Agamben's argument this positive possibility emerges first from the way in which, with the advent of cinema, images come to be charged with a 'dynamic tension'.²³ This is not a straightforward identification of the way in which movement came to be conferred on ostensibly motionless precinematic images. Rather, cinematic technologies made visible an 'antinomic polarity'²⁴ internal to images in their relation to gestures:

[...] on the one hand, images are the reification and obliteration of a gesture (it is the *imago* as death mask or as symbol); on the other hand, they preserve the *dynamis* intact (as in Muybridge's

²² Agamben, *Means without End*, 83.

²³ Giorgio Agamben, "Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord's Films," in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, MA/London: The MIT Press, 2002), 314.

²⁴ Agamben, *Means without End*, 55.

snapshots or in any sports photograph). [...] And while the former lives in magical isolation, the latter always refers beyond itself to a whole of which it is a part.²⁵

In the realm of images, cinema reveals this dynamism to be immanent to images of all kinds—that is, the way in which the dynamic element of an images allows it to ‘refer beyond itself to a whole of which it is a part’. This does not apply exclusively to photographic or cinematic images; rather, it brings a cinematic paradigm to bear on images in general: ‘Even the *Mona Lisa*, even *Las Meninas* could be seen not as immovable and eternal forms, but as fragments of a gesture or as stills of a lost film wherein only they would regain their true meaning’.²⁶ This paradigm is imported from Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas*, a document that contains no words, but only juxtaposed images, thereby offering ‘a representation in virtual movement of Western humanity’s gestures from classical Greece to Fascism’.²⁷ This suggests to Agamben that ‘the single images should be considered more as film stills than as autonomous realities’.²⁸ In other words, this cinematic paradigm under which all images can be encompassed recasts images as dynamic vectors rather than isolated symbols. The paradigm inaugurated by Marey and Muybridge (among others), that single images attain their power only insofar as they make visible discrete moments of a complete human action, comes to be telescoped, in Agamben’s invocation of Warburg, onto a way of considering discrete images in the ‘constellation’ of their historical relationality.²⁹ Cinematic images’ dynamic charge thus comes to envelopes a second kind of charge: what, in ‘Difference and Repetition’, Agamben calls a *historical* charge.³⁰ Invoking Walter Benjamin’s notion of the dialectical image as the locus of historical experience, Agamben suggests that ‘[h]istorical experience is

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 56.

²⁷ Ibid., 54.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 56.

³⁰ Agamben, “Difference and Repetition,” 314.

obtained by the image, and the images themselves are charged with history'.³¹ But Agamben goes further still, claiming that this form of relationality extends beyond even the realm of images; it is also the structure of a philosophical idea, which should be seen as 'a constellation in which phenomena arrange themselves in a gesture' rather than as an 'immobile archetype', as Agamben claims it is more commonly considered.³²

Agamben's discussion of cinematic gestures begins with the way in which bodily movements are registered by mechanical media; but at this stage in his argument the term 'gesture' has also come to stand for a far broader array of phenomena. By what logic has this term come to stand for much broader objects than its more commonplace denotations? What connects these various registers of Agamben's argument is the way in which the recording of bodily movements by means of (proto)cinematic technologies manifests a 'dynamic tension', a tension between stillness and movement. This element of dynamism proper to cinema is thus taken to reside neither exclusively in the movements of the body that it documents, nor simply in the technical capacity of cinematic images to be seen as either individual stills or in motion as parts of a series. Rather, this dynamic quality comes to be exhibited *in the encounter between bodily movements and moving images*. The social, political, and aesthetic repercussions of this encounter are bilateral. On the one hand, the dynamic force of bodily movements exhibited by cinematic images tears them away from their capture in the domain of meaning or symbolic codes. This effectuated a 'general catastrophe in the sphere of gestures'—a crisis in which this cinematic treatment of gestures came to saturate all aspects of quotidian experience. On the other hand, images of all kinds came to be potentially subject to the same dynamic force: they are no longer entirely assimilable to any given meaning attributable to them, but understood as individuated instantiations on a plane of immanence

³¹ Ibid.

³² Agamben, *Means without End*, 56.

common to all images. Agamben's use of the term 'gesture' to name these apparently diverse and unconnected phenomena may at first seem elliptical. However, I would suggest that the term's multivalence in Agamben's text can be understood as emerging from the dynamic force released in the encounter between human bodily movement and moving images, and as describing the manifestation of that force in the zone of indistinction thus opened up between body and image.

However, while this indistinction between body and image is essential for situating cinema within the overlapping logics of the spectacle and modern biopolitics, further theoretical elaboration of cinema's effect on both becomes split between Agamben's cinema texts. 'Notes on Gesture' is concerned primarily with the ethical and political implications of cinema's modulation of bodily movement, while the political dimension of cinematic images is the main object of the texts on montage. I argue later in this thesis that one of the main film-philosophical injunctions of *REEL-UNREEL* is for the urgency of reading both texts together. First, however, it will be necessary to outline how each of these concepts functions in Agamben's cinema texts.

3. GESTURE AND MONTAGE: CINEMATIC ETHICS

3.1 Gesture

For Agamben the cinematic treatment of gestures becomes politically potent through bringing gestures into relation with a particular form of mediality. He defines this relation thus:

*The gesture is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such. It allows the emergence of the being-in-a-medium of human beings and thus it opens the ethical dimension for them.*¹

What is the ethical significance of ‘making a means visible as such’? Why is gesture—and specifically the form of gesture exhibited in cinema—identified as the process of making a means visible? And how do ethics and politics come to be embedded in this process?

In ‘Notes on Gesture’ ‘making a means visible as such’ designates an alternative to what Agamben identifies as the Aristotelian polarity of action considered, on the one hand, as a means to an end, and on the other, as an end in itself. (Aristotle refers to these two forms of action respectively as ‘poiesis’ and ‘praxis’.²) ‘Finality without means’, he argues, ‘is just as alienating as mediality that has meaning only with respect to an end’.³ Both poiesis and praxis are thus understood as ethically and politically insufficient ways of considering action. Agamben goes on to invoke the ancient Roman scholar Varro’s identification of a third kind of action, one irreducible to either poiesis or praxis. Making the analogy with theatrical practice, Varro first distinguishes between the poet that ‘makes’

¹ Agamben, *Means without End*, 57. Agamben’s emphasis.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 58.

(*facit*) a play, and an actor that ‘acts’ (*agit*) it—a distinction that Agamben proposes is homologous to the Aristotelian polarity between, respectively, poiesis and praxis.⁴ In contrast to this polarity Varro posits the figure of the general (*imperator*) who, in engaging with his affairs, neither *facit* (makes) them nor *agit* (acts) them, but *gerit* them—a verb (*gerere* in the infinitive) meaning ‘to bear’ to ‘to carry’, and from which ‘gesture’ derives. Being reducible neither to a means to an end nor to an end in itself, *gesture* designates a related but distinct logic—one that Agamben identifies as specifically ethical:

What characterizes gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported. The gesture, in other words, opens the sphere of *ethos* as the more proper sphere of that which is human. [...] What is new in Varro is the identification of a third type of action alongside the other two: if producing is a means in view of an end and praxis is an end without means, the gesture then breaks with the false alternative between ends and means that paralyzes morality and presents instead means that, as such, evade the orbit of mediality without becoming, for this reason, ends.⁵

Gesture, then, is defined neither as a means to an end nor as an end in itself, but as a manifestation of ‘the sphere of a pure and endless mediality’ in which the ethics of human life are put into play.⁶ Bodily movements considered as pure mediality, rather than as a means to an end or as an ends in themselves, are then equated with the Kantian expression ‘purposiveness without purpose’, a felicitous phrase with regard to Francis Alÿs’s artistic practice.⁷ But what brings this notion of gesture so directly to bear on an understanding of what constitutes political and ethical life?

⁴ Ibid., 57.

⁵ Ibid., 58.

⁶ Ibid., 59.

⁷ Ibid. Jean Fisher has used precisely this phrase to describe Alÿs’s *When Faith Moves Mountains*. Jean Fisher, “In the Spirit of Conviviality: *When Faith Moves Mountains*,” in *Francis Alÿs*, ed. Cuauhtémoc Medina, Russell Ferguson, Jean Fisher (London: Phaidon, 2007), 110.

Agamben bases his notion of ethics and politics on the ontological claim that human beings themselves exist both *in* and *as* mediality. More specifically, in Agamben's argument this mediality becomes coextensive with language, in particular the ability to communicate that language embodies and expresses. It is this capacity to communicate as such, rather than the communication of any specific datum or fact, that gestures make visible: 'The gesture is, in this sense, communication of a communicability. It has precisely nothing to say because what it shows is the being-in-language of human beings as pure mediality'.⁸ One figure Agamben uses to exemplify this is the *gag*, both in the sense of something put in one's mouth to impede speech, and the impromptu jokes of an actor that attempt to cover up for forgotten lines or 'an inability to speak'.⁹ In this case the exhibition of language-as-such is correlative to exhibiting 'a gigantic loss of memory, [...] an incurable speech defect'.¹⁰

The ethical and political significance of gestures therefore lies in their capacity of making that mediality visible, of exhibiting the consistency of human life defined as the capacity for communication. And as Agamben writes, making this capacity visible depends entirely on a logic of means without end: 'Such a finality in the realm of means is that power of the gesture that interrupts the gesture in its very being-means *and only in this way* can exhibit it'.¹¹ Gesturality conceived in this way is, for Agamben, coextensive with politics as such, as he declares in the final sentence of 'Notes on Gesture': 'Politics is the sphere of pure means, that is, of the absolute and complete gesturality of human beings'.¹²

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Agamben, *Means without End*, 59.

¹⁰ Ibid., 60.

¹¹ Ibid. Emphasis added.

¹² Ibid., 60.

While 'Notes on Gesture' begins with a discussion of the social vicissitudes manifested in the cinematic mediation of bodily movement, the specific significance of cinema for thinking about the conditions political life in modernity appears to evaporate from the surface of Agamben's argument in the later sections of this essay. However, it is important to recall that Agamben's formulation of the ethical and political significance of gesture emerges from his reflections on the transformations brought about by cinema in the sphere of bodily movement. Alastair Morgan paraphrases the logic of Agamben's trajectory from cinematic images to pure communicability as follows:

It is in the interruption of gesture, or the freezing of gesture in a cinematic image, that this sphere of a pure 'display of mediation' can take place [...] Agamben, then, moves from the articulation of mute gesture to thinking about the gesture contained within language or, more specifically, the word, and articulates a conception of language as the showing of its own pure communicability, its potential for communication.¹³

According to Morgan, then, cinematic images manifest communicability, or the potential to communicate, as a result of their capacity to freeze a gesture in an image. But Morgan's brief reconstruction of Agamben's argument seems to present a flawed understanding of the relation between movement, gesture, and image in Agamben. The way in which cinema can manifest a 'potential for communication' rests on a more complex notion of cinematic images' dynamism than Morgan's description suggests. Agamben has argued that cinematic images consist in a polarity vis-à-vis movement and stasis: the 'obliteration' of the gesture by isolating it, turning it into a self-contained 'symbol'; and the preservation of the gesture's '*dynamis*' by manifesting its status as a part of a larger whole, like a film still. It is this element of *dynamis* that animates (proto)cinematic

¹³ Alastair Morgan, "'A Figure of Annihilated Human Existence': Agamben and Adorno on Gesture," *Law Critique* (August 2009): 304.

images (and Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*), which is what allows Agamben to make the claim that '[c]inema leads images back to the homeland of gesture'.¹⁴ And since it is by means of gesture that the 'potential for communication' is made manifest, it must be concluded that it is the dynamic element of gestures brought into relief in cinematic images, rather than the gesture's 'freezing' therein, in which the capacity to show the 'potential for communication' resides. Noys has succinctly described this relation between stillness and movement immanent to cinematic images:

Film, for Agamben, recapitulates the general antinomy of the image. Every image is a force field structured by a polarity between the deadly reification and obliteration of gesture (imago as death mask or symbol), and as the preservation of dynamis intact (for example, Muybridge's images, especially those of sporting activity). Film, in putting the body in motion, would appear to free us from the bewitching potency of the static image, to free the gestural. In fact, however, the gestural is recorded only to be subordinated again—subsumed within a flowing of images that leaves each gesture subject to identification and delimitation.¹⁵

The dynamic charge of cinematic images acts as a ground for another set of reflections on the ethical and political valences of cinema. While 'Notes on Gesture' considers the way in which cinema provokes thinking about the ethical and political dimensions immanent to gestures, this second set of reflections locates ethics and politics in the historical character of cinematic montage.

¹⁴ Agamben, *Means without End*, 56.

¹⁵ Noys, "Film-of-Life," 92.

3.2: Montage

Agamben's reflections on the relation of cinematic images to history is the subject of two brief texts. The first is 'Le cinéma de Guy Debord: Image et mémoire', which has been translated into English as 'Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord's Films'. This text is a transcription of a lecture Agamben delivered in November 1995 on the occasion of the Sixth International Video Week at the Centre Saint-Gervais in Geneva. The second is 'Cinema and History: On Jean-Luc Godard', published in *Le Monde* in October of the same year. The main arguments of both texts are closely related. Since these arguments are elaborated more fully in the essay on Debord, this will be my primary point of reference as regards Agamben's theory of montage.

At stake in 'Difference and Repetition' is the relation between Debord's technique of cinematic montage and the 'eminently historical character' of the image.¹⁶ Specifically, Agamben's project is to theorise the 'messianic' historical orientation immanent to montage, as exemplified in Debord's *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978). This messianic vocation is located in the capacity of montage to exhibit the image 'as such'—that is, in its mediality, as 'pure means'—and to simultaneously effectuate an indiscernibility between past and present within the image.¹⁷

Agamben elaborates his theory of montage as a way of counterposing the ethical and political stakes of cinema to those of 'the media'. (Agamben appears to mean primarily journalistic media by using this term: 'the TV news' is the most concrete example he gives in this regard).¹⁸ Casting cinema and the media in such an oppositional relation will be particularly pertinent to my reading of *REEL-UNREEL*, a work that, as described above, has been positioned in terms of this same

¹⁶ Agamben, "Difference and Repetition," 314.

¹⁷ Ibid., 318.

¹⁸ Ibid., 316.

dichotomy. Moreover, this distinction, although made only briefly in Agamben's texts, can be seen as a microcosmic instantiation of a far broader set of concerns with the interrelations between images, history, and the shape of modern political life under the conditions of modern biopolitics and the ongoing prevalence of the spectacle.

One aspect of this distinction between cinema and the media is a distinction between two ways in which images can manifest relations between the present and the past. Cinematic images occupy a 'zone of indifference' between perceptions of what is present and what has already taken place, thereby becoming 'a way of projecting power [*puissance*] and possibility toward that which is impossible by definition, toward the past'.¹⁹ Images transmitted by the media, by contrast, are presented simply as 'facts' without this element of power or possibility. An 'indignant, but powerless [*impuissant*]' audience is its inevitable after-effect.²⁰ The difference between cinema and the media is thus reducible to the question of the presence or privation of possibility or power, specifically in images' relation to the past. Agamben argues that such a power comes to be conferred on cinematic images by considering a particular capacity of cinema, namely *montage*.

What is montage, for Agamben? Two operations define what the philosopher, borrowing Kantian terminology, calls the 'transcendental conditions' of montage: these are *repetition* and *stoppage* [*l'arrêt*].²¹ Taking a cue from the four 'great thinkers of repetition'—Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Deleuze—this term, in Agamben's text, does not entail the return of the same.²²

¹⁹ Ibid., 316. I refer to the original French version of the lecture found at <http://espace.freud.pagesperso-orange.fr/topos/psycha/psysem/cinedebo.htm> (accessed September 20 2017).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 315.

²² Giorgio Agamben, "Cinema and History: On Jean-Luc Godard," in *Cinema and Agamben*, 26. The English title of Agamben's 1995 lecture makes explicit reference to Deleuze's 1968 volume *Difference and Repetition*. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans.

Rather, 'the force and the grace of repetition, the novelty it brings us, is the return as the possibility of what was'.²³ As such, repetition is said to bear a close relationship to memory. 'Memory cannot give us back what was, as such: that would be hell. Instead, memory restores possibility to the past'.

²⁴ This, for Agamben, is equivalent to cinema's capacity to 'transform the real into the possible and the possible into the real'.²⁵ The media, on the other hand, only give 'the fact, what was, without its possibility, its power'.²⁶ By means of repetition cinematic images manifest a 'zone of indifference' between present and past: the past is re-activated as possibility in the present, and, conversely, the present appears 'as though it had already been'.²⁷ As Janet Harbord writes, 'images of and from the past operate as a force in the present, connecting with and animating other images. The consequence of this is not only in the act of the past reaching into the present, but more importantly in the opening up of new meaning in the images of the past'.²⁸ Re-opening the past as possibility is the operation by which cinematic images come to be both present and 'charged with history'.

The second transcendental condition of montage, 'stoppage', designates not so much a 'chronological pause' in the flow of images, but a power that can 'pull [the image] out of the flux of meaning [in order to] exhibit it as such'.²⁹ Agamben notes that in this respect montage shares a characteristic of poetry that differentiates it from prose, namely the capacity to interrupt the transmission of semantic content by aural and rhythmic devices like caesura and enjambment. The poet, in Agamben's words, 'can counter a syntactic limit with an acoustic and metrical limit. This limit is not only a pause; it is a noncoincidence, a disjunction between sound and meaning'.³⁰

²³ Agamben, "Difference and Repetition," 315-6.

²⁴ Ibid., 316.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Harbord, *Ex-centric Cinema*, 28.

²⁹ Agamben, "Difference and Repetition," 317.

³⁰ Ibid., 316.

Debord's and Godard's aforementioned works stand as exemplary instances of montage in Agamben's argument. In Debord's film various items of found footage—old television news transmissions, advertisements, and films—are edited together in an apparently haphazard fashion, over which Debord reads excerpts from his own theoretical writings on consumer-capitalist society. Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* comprises excerpts of film culled from cinema's history. Repetition's force comes to the fore in these films through the way images are torn from their original contexts and juxtaposed in new arrangements, opening those images of the past to new possibilities in the present. And stoppage entails exhibition of those images *qua* images through their juxtaposition. According to Agamben's specific definition of montage, the films' properly *cinematic* dimension consists in the deployment and inseparability of both of these operations within the image.

It is in terms of its capacity for montage that Agamben distinguishes between cinema and the media. Cinema, as described above, is able to confer possibility or power onto the past via montage, thereby transforming the real into the possible and the possible into the real. By contrast, the media is only able to present 'facts' without this element of possibility or power. Agamben goes on to describe an antagonistic relation between montage and such 'facts', one in which 'the messianic task of cinema' is carried out.³¹ This relation is described as one of 'decreation'. Specifically, each act of cinematic creation is such insofar as it 'possesses the power to decreate facts'.³² Decreation, Agamben writes,

is not a new creation after the first. One cannot consider the artist's work uniquely in terms of creation; on the contrary, at the heart of every creative act there is an act of decreation. Deleuze once

³¹ Ibid.

³² Agamben, "Cinema and History," 26.

said of cinema that every act of creation is also an act of resistance. What does it mean to resist?

Above all it means de-creating what exists, de-creating the real, being stronger than the fact in front of you.³³

The power of decreation resides, in the case of cinema, in the twin operations of repetition and montage. Repetition, as described above, ‘decreates’ the real by transforming it into a space of possibility. The decreative potency of stoppage consists in its capacity to insert an interval between a meaning that is carried and the medium that carries it. To explain this Agamben contrasts two notions of expression. The first—the ‘Hegelian’ formulation—dictates that expression is always realised in a medium or means; but, in this model, the expressive act finds its fulfilment in the disappearance of the medium: ‘The expressive act is fulfilled when the means, the medium, is no longer perceived as such’.³⁴ By contrast, in the second model of expression the medium ‘shows itself as such’; that is, ‘what [the means] makes visible’ retains the visibility of the means itself rather than erasing it.³⁵ Agamben describes this as making visible the ‘imagelessness’ [*sans image*] of an image, an explicit reference to Walter Benjamin’s remark that imagelessness is ‘the refuge of all images’.³⁶ Imagelessness designates the capacity of an image to exhibit its status as an image, beside

³³ Agamben, “Difference and Repetition,” 318. Durantaye notes that Agamben probably first came across the term ‘decreation’ in Simone Weil’s notebooks while he was writing his doctoral dissertation on the French writer. The term receives a more extensive elaboration in Agamben’s essay ‘Bartleby, or On Contingency’ as part of an engagement with Leibniz’s theological thought experiments. There, decreation is thought of as ‘a second creation in which God summons all his potential not to be, creating on the basis of a point of indifference between potentiality and impotentiality. The creation that is now fulfilled is neither a re-creation nor an eternal repetition; it is, rather, a decreation in which what happened and what did not happen are returned to their originary unity in the mind of God, while what could have not been but was becomes indistinguishable from what could have been but was not’. Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 23; Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 270.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 319. Benjamin makes this remark in an aphoristic recounting of an experience in Paris. The full passage reads: ‘I dreamed I was on the Left Bank of the Seine, in front of Notre Dame. I stood there, but saw nothing that resembled Notre Dame. A brick building loomed, revealing the extremities of its massive shape, above a high wooden fence. But I was standing in front of Notre Dame, overwhelmed. And what overwhelmed me was yearning-yearning for the very same Paris in which I found myself in my dream. So what was the

and apart from any particular visual content: “The image exhibited as such is no longer an image of anything; it is itself imageless. The only thing of which one cannot make an image is, if you will, the being-image of the image’.³⁷ And yet imagelessness is an element immanent to images; it is, in Noys’s words ‘the moment of a refusal to pass over into the image, held always “in” the image’ that montage possesses the capacity to contract and display.³⁸ Of the relation between montage and imagelessness in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* Agamben writes:

What becomes of an image wrought in this way by repetition and stoppage? It becomes, so to speak, “an image of nothing.” Apparently, the images Godard shows us are images of images extracted from other films. But they acquire the capacity to show themselves qua images. They are no longer images of something about which one must immediately recount a meaning, narrative or otherwise. They exhibit themselves as such. The true messianic power is this power to give the image to this “imagelessness” [...].³⁹

This notion emerges from a similar conceptual logic to that underpinning Agamben’s notion of gesture as pure communicability. Indeed, the term ‘pure means’, which was used to describe gesture, is also used to describe montage’s imagelessness. Just as gesture describes the exhibition of the mediality of language as separate from the communication of this or that datum or fact, so montage describes the display of images ‘qua images’, that is, as divorced from the imperative of transmitting any given item of visual content. In both his theories of gesture and montage Agamben

source of this yearning? And where did this utterly distorted, unrecognizable object come from?—It was like that because I had come too close to it in my dream. The unprecedented yearning that had overcome me at the heart of what I had longed for was not the yearning that flies to the image from afar. It was the blissful yearning that has already crossed the threshold of image and possession, and knows only the power of the name—the power from which the loved one lives, is transformed, ages, rejuvenates itself, and, imageless, is the refuge of all images’. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings* Vol. 2 Part 1, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 269.

³⁷ Agamben, “Difference and Repetition,” 319.

³⁸ Noys, “Film-of-Life,” 93.

³⁹ Agamben, “Cinema and History,” 26.

casts the space of ethics and politics as one in which the means of transmission and informational content are spliced apart, and the structures of signification and sense, of meaning and narrative, are held in suspension.

3.3 Suspensions of Signification

Francis Alÿs has described the political operativity of his own artistic strategies along similar lines.

The ‘poetic’ gesture, he writes,

operates like a hiatus—an “*agent provocateur*,” a short circuit—into the atrophy of a situation that finds itself in a state of political, social, confessional, ethnic, economic or military crisis or lethargy. Through the absurd and sometimes impertinent nature of the poetic act, art provokes a moment of suspended meaning, a sensation of senselessness that may reveal the absurdity of the situation. Via this act of transgression, the poetic act makes one step back for an instant from the circumstances. In short, it may make one look at things differently.⁴⁰

Such lines of thought, being descriptors of Alÿs’s artistic strategies in general, may readily be taken up to describe the political dimension of *REEL-UNREEL*. And yet questions remain about the potency of inserting such a gesture into a politically turbulent locale like Kabul. If this gesture is unassimilable to semiotic determination, it is also thereby severed from the possibility of communicating a determinate statement about such a political situation. And yet contemporary art, especially at the scale of an international event like documenta, can offer a unique platform for communicating ideas, facts, or narratives that could counter those dominant and debilitating

⁴⁰ Alÿs quoted in Mark Godfrey, “Politics/Poetics: The Work of Francis Alÿs,” in *Francis Alÿs: A Story of Deception*, ed. Mark Godfrey, Klaus Biesenbach and Karryn Greenberg (London: Tate Publishing, 2010), 9.

narrative tropes disseminated by the Western media. This, indeed, was one of the stated intentions of dOCUMENTA (13)'s presence in Afghanistan.⁴¹ What is to be made of Alÿs's apparent withdrawal from any such attempt at formulating and communicating such counternarratives? And in the wake of this apparent withdrawal, on what grounds could *REEL-UNREEL* be conceived as being—in Michael Taussig's words—'political filmmaking in a new key'?⁴²

Such questions open onto an existing debate in the critical reception of Alÿs's work. Before continuing with my analysis of *REEL-UNREEL*, it will be instructive to consider how the relation between politics and artistic or 'poetic' gestures in Alÿs's oeuvre has been theoretically elaborated, both by the artist himself and by a number of his interlocutors. Doing so will also allow me to bring into relief aspects of Agamben's work that can address some of this debate's apparent theoretical aporias. In turn in particular to the contrasting critical positions taken up by art historians Jean Fisher and Grant Kester around Alÿs's 2002 work *When Faith Moves Mountains*.

In her essay on *When Faith Moves Mountains* Fisher distinguishes between two ways in which artistic practices can approach the political. The first is through using art as a platform for the direct transmission of political statements. For Fisher strategies like this are unsatisfactory, since they rely on the 'naive' presupposition that meaning can be directly communicated in this way.⁴³ The second way in which art can approach the political is through 'poiesis', that is, the production of 'a hitherto unthought configuration of reality', which can only take place by enacting a 'suspension of signification'.⁴⁴ Art that manifests a suspension of signification facilitates for the spectator 'an

⁴¹ See introduction.

⁴² Michael Taussig, "Politics, Play, and Art. Documenting 'Afghanistan'," in *REEL-UNREEL*, 131.

⁴³ Fisher, "Conviviality," 116.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

encounter with an event', a happening that as such escapes 'ready-to-hand explanations'.⁴⁵ Meaning, however, is not jettisoned entirely; rather, it is displaced from the 'poetic gesture' itself to 'what its absurdity discloses of the historical and sociopolitical framework that surrounds it'.⁴⁶ More precisely, the gesture shorn of signification attains meaning precisely through exposing 'the void of meaning' in such a sociopolitical situation.⁴⁷ And it is in this 'void' that the possibility of new configurations of 'reality' can take place; as Fisher concludes:

If the effect of conventional politics and its technologies is to disable human exchange and shrink existence to the limited world of 'interests', the effect of Alÿs's poetics is subversively political in its gift of the gesture as a potential catalyst for working through and reconfiguring reality, from senselessness to sense, impasse to passage, inhuman to human, towards a more expansive politic of solidarity and conviviality.⁴⁸

For Fisher, then, the political significance of a poetic gesture's intervention consists in rending an interstice in the fabric of reality within which the production of unforeseen modes of perceiving sociopolitical circumstances takes place. It does so specifically by enacting a suspension of signification, bringing the meaninglessness of a social or political situation into relief. But the encounter with this meaninglessness in turn provides spaces in which possibilities of 'reconfiguring reality' can emerge.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Ibid., 117.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 120.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 117.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 122.

⁴⁹ Similar positions to Fisher's have been articulated by Mark Godfrey, Eduardo Abaroa, Laymert Garcia dos Santos, Lorna Scott Fox, Cuauhtémoc Medina, and Anna Dezeuze in relation to other works by Alÿs. Godfrey, for example, writes: "The poetic qualities of Alÿs's projects reside in their fantastical absurdity, their transience or incompleteness, their imaginative imagery, and most of all in their enigmatic openness to interpretation. The most significant question he poses—to himself as well as to his viewers—is whether such poetic acts, while underlining the 'senselessness' of particular real situations, can also create a space for new ways of thinking that will lead in turn to 'the possibility of change'". Mark Godfrey, "Politics/Poetics," 9. For

In contrast to Fisher's critical stance, Grant Kester's assessment of *When Faith Moves Mountains* in his essay 'Lessons in Futility: Francis Alÿs and the Legacy of 'May '68' stands as an isolated instance of polemical critique in a body of Alÿs scholarship that is largely affirmative of his work. Kester argues that the 'suspension of signification' that Fisher and Alÿs both claim is embodied in the artistic gesture appeals to a poststructuralist preoccupation with disrupting regimes of representation or signification. The underlying ethos of this preoccupation is avoiding complicity with hegemonic signifying systems by disrupting conventional semiotic mechanisms. The cost of this, for Kester, is that the artwork tends to become more concerned with its poetic 'purity'—the means by which it can guarantee its not being metabolised by the very dominant systems it seeks to overturn—than with the possibility of engaging any 'more sustainable narrative of resistance or emancipation'.⁵⁰ Kester likens this to the strategy taken up by some of the student protesters of May '68, who refused any form of engagement with the existing political institutions, in spite of the fact that this would have been the only way of instigating any form of palpable social change. Instead the solution was 'a tactical withdrawal into the protected field of the text' in order to preserve 'the liberating purity of the poetic gesture'.⁵¹ This withdrawal into the realm of poetic purity, and the corollary shoring-up of the singular 'conative autonomy'⁵² of the artist, effects, for Kester, a profound emaciation of the political potency of any such gesture:

The only hope for a positive form of action, capable of resisting cooption and complicity, lies in the orchestration of a singular moment of joyful collectivity that is so brief, so ephemeral, so utterly

essays by the first four authors listed, see *A Story of Deception*. For Medina, see *Francis Alÿs*. For Dezeuze, see Anna Dezeuze, "Wall of Silence," *Art Monthly* 307 (June 2007): 1-4.

⁵⁰ Grant Kester, "Lessons in Futility: Francis Alÿs and the Legacy of May '68," *Third Text* 23:4 (August 2009): 419.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 411.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 420.

disconnected from any broader or more sustainable narrative of resistance or emancipation, that it vanishes almost at the moment it is expressed. Thus, the only pure moment, the only *poetic* moment (and here aesthetics is very much a discourse of purity) must occur prior to the contaminating, predicative constraints of practice, application or engagement. Alÿs's work returns us to the ethical normalisation of desire and the logic of an infinite regression. The goal of art is to reproduce that most preliminary and unadulterated expression of liberatory desire before it achieves coherence or articulation: to be decanted and preserved for some potential future use.⁵³

The terms of this debate could likewise be turned onto Agamben's own political philosophy.

As an interruption of ends-directed action or effective communication, Agamben's notion of gesture seems to figure something very different from forms of political agency that privilege the capacities of effective intentional action. Indeed, gesture often seems to predicate a certain *incapacity* for speech. Similarly, in his essays on montage, the ethical and political significance of cinematic images lies in their capacity to separate themselves from the communication of any particular image, displaying instead what Agamben calls their 'imagelessness'. What kind of political or ethical existence is at stake here, when the sphere of politics is correlated with such incapacities and interruptions? What shape does an ethical life take when the ethical sphere is conceived of as one of speechlessness or imagelessness? In the next chapter I will provide a means for addressing these questions by outlining Agamben's interrelated notions of pure means and potentiality. Outlining the conceptual connections between Agamben's cinema texts and these notions will allow me to bring the ethical and political claims Agamben makes in the cinema texts to bear on the political conditions discussed in chapter 1: the overlapping processes of modern biopolitics and the society of the spectacle. This, in turn, will allow the deeper ethical and political significance of those claims to be brought into relief.

⁵³ Ibid., 419. Kester's emphasis.

4. CINEMA AND POWER: 'PURE MEANS', POTENTIALITY, FORM-OF-LIFE

In his cinema texts Agamben identifies the ethical and political charge of cinema with the various ways in which it exhibits 'pure means'. The cinematic gesture is characterised by the way it breaks out of the logics of signification, narrative, and meaning (all broadly related phenomena for Agamben), displaying thereby its medial character. Similarly, in montage the ethical and political force of cinematic images is identified as the capacity of images to display themselves in their imagelessness—that is, as separated from any determinate visual content that they might transmit. But at this point two important questions remain regarding the identification of the ethical and political dimension of cinema with this notion of pure means. The first, internal to Agamben's writings, bears on the relation of pure means to the philosopher's broader political philosophy—the overlapping conditions of modern biopolitics and the spectacle, described in chapter 1. The second emerges from a debate on the political potency of Alÿs's artistic strategies—the effectuality or ineffectuality of strategies that seek to suspend or circumnavigate semiotic logics, set out in the preceding chapter. These questions become intertwined in the present context, since my project is to approach Alÿs's artistic practice—*REEL-UNREEL* in particular—through the terms and concepts of Agamben's writings on cinema and politics. In this chapter my aim is to prepare the ground for addressing the second question by engaging more directly with the first. The initial task I undertake is to unpack the political and ethical valences of the notion of 'pure means', central to the cinema texts' main politico-philosophical claims, by locating it within Agamben's related notions of power and potentiality. These overlapping concepts are then placed in relation to the way the philosopher's frames the positive possibility of political life in the context of modern biopolitics and the spectacle. The task of folding these terms into an extended film-politico-philosophical reading of *REEL-UNREEL* is reserved for the following (and final) chapter.

4.1 'Pure means': Benjamin and Agamben

A more detailed understanding of Agamben's notion of pure means can be attained by briefly looking into the philosophical genealogy of the concept. In *State of Exception* Agamben develops a notion of pure means, or pure mediality, out of a conceptual conjunction made between Walter Benjamin's essays 'Critique of Violence' and 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man'. In the former essay Benjamin's critique takes the form of investigating the relation between law and violence. This is because an act can only be called 'violent' when it enters the sphere of morality, and it is 'the concepts of law and justice' that define this sphere.¹ Benjamin determines the relation between law and violence as a relation between means and ends. He does so by contrasting two kinds of violence: one taking place within the realm of law and justice ('mythico-juridical violence'), and one taking place outside that realm ('pure violence' or 'divine violence'). The difference between the two is that in the first violence is considered as a means to an end, whereas in the second violence is divorced from any end, becoming instead 'pure means'. As Agamben's paraphrase reads:

Benjamin's thesis is that while mythico-juridical violence is always a means to an end, pure violence is never simply a means—whether legitimate or illegitimate—to an end (whether just or unjust). The critique of violence does not evaluate violence in relation to the ends that it pursues as a means, but seeks its criterion "in a distinction within the sphere of means themselves, without regard for the ends they serve."²

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings* Vol. 1, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1996), 236.

² Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 63. The passage by Benjamin that Agamben cites can be found in Benjamin, *Selected Writings* Vol. 1, 236.

In 'On Language as Such' Benjamin seeks to understand how it is possible to talk about a 'language' of things that exists outside spoken languages like German and English—some examples he gives are the language of music, the language of justice, and the language of technology.³ Benjamin asks: if these are languages, what exactly do they communicate? He proposes that, beside any linguistic 'content', language communicates the 'mental entity' with which it is associated: 'What is communicable in a mental entity is its linguistic entity. Language therefore communicates the particular linguistic being of things, but their mental being only insofar as this is directly included in their linguistic being, insofar as it is capable of being communicated'.⁴

Agamben draws a parallel between Benjamin's notion of pure violence and his definition of pure language as a communication of a communicability:

In the essay on language [Benjamin's 'On Language as Such and the Language of Man'], pure language is that which is not an instrument for the purpose of communication, but communicates itself immediately, that is, a pure and simple communicability; likewise, pure violence is that which does not stand in a relation of means toward an end, but holds itself in relation to its own mediality.⁵

By assimilating the logic of Benjamin's thoughts on language to his critique of violence, Agamben puts forward the possibility of thinking about language—or rather, a particular dimension of language—as a 'pure means'. It is now possible to see how Agamben adapts his own adaptation of Benjamin for thinking about the ethical dimension of cinema: gesture and montage, in their

³ Benjamin, *Selected Writings* Vol. 1, 62.

⁴ Ibid., 63.

⁵ Agamben, *State of Exception*, 62.

particular ways, are able to exhibit their 'relation to [their] own mediality' according to these Benjaminian lines of thought.

One theoretical aspect of this argument may remain obscure, however. The 'communicability' that Agamben describes is said to be both 'pure' and relational, since it always emerges 'in relation to its own mediality'. How can communicability (or violence) be both pure and relational? This anomaly can be addressed with recourse to the concept of purity that Agamben finds in a letter Benjamin wrote to Ernst Schoen in 1919:

The purity of a being is never unconditional or absolute; it is always subject to a condition. This condition varies according to the being whose purity is at issue; but this condition never inheres in the being itself. In other words: the purity of every (finite) being is not dependent on itself.⁶

Purity thus emerges as something 'relational rather than substantial'.⁷ For Agamben the purity of something (language or violence) depends on its capacity to exhibit that relationality, to manifest the conditions external to it and on which it depends: 'just as pure language is not another language, just as it does not have a place other than that of the natural communicative languages, but reveals itself in these by exposing them as such, so pure violence is attested to only as the exposure and deposition of the relation between violence and law'.⁸ But since pure language does not exist outside of communicative languages, it becomes perceptible only through establishing a relation to communication *within* those languages. Samuel Weber has observed that this relationality internal to language is latent in the original German of Benjamin's text. 'Communicability' is the English rendering of the German '*Mittelbarkeit*', but Weber suggests that a more literal translation of the

⁶ Benjamin quoted in Agamben, *State of Exception*, 61.

⁷ Agamben, *State of Exception*, 61.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

German term would be ‘parting with’.⁹ Considered in this way, Weber asserts, ‘[t]he mediality of language would thus consist in a movement that separates *from* itself, and yet [...] in so doing establishes a relation to itself as *other*. In relating (to) itself as other, it stays “with” that from which it simultaneously departs’.¹⁰

But if such a relationality is identifiable as a characteristic of language, why, for Agamben, does this bear so heavily on his notion of ethics and politics? The answer is that it is in the manifestation of communicability—the potential to communicate—that the collective dimension of human existence comes, simultaneously, to be exhibited:

Among beings who would always already be enacted, who would always already be this or that thing, this or that identity, and who would have entirely exhausted their power in these things and identities--among such beings there could not be any community but only coincidences and factual partitions. We can communicate with others only through what in us—as much as in others—has remained potential, and any communication (as Benjamin perceives for language) is first of all communication not of something in common but of communicability itself. After all, if there existed one and only one being, it would be absolutely impotent. [...] And there where I am capable, we are always already many (just as when, if there is a language, that is, a power of speech, there cannot then be one and only one being who speaks it).¹¹

As this passage shows, the positing of ‘communicability itself’ is not significant just for implying that more than one party is necessary in order for an instance of communication to take place, and that therefore communication must be collective. What is more important for Agamben is the

⁹ Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2008), 197. In German ‘*teilen*’ means ‘to part’; ‘*mit*’ means ‘with’.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Agamben, *Means without End*, 10.

manifestation of the *potential* to communicate. The notion of potential is a cornerstone of Agamben's political and philosophical thought.¹² Understanding this concept will be necessary for drawing the notion of pure means—and, by extension, the ethical and political stakes of the cinema texts—into relation with Agamben's broader politico-philosophical framework outlined in chapter 1. This is not the place to engage in a detailed discussion of the nuances of the concept as it emerges throughout Agamben's oeuvre. Instead, I offer a brief discussion of its main features, focussing on those that have direct bearing on the trajectory of the rest of my argument.

4.2 Potentiality and power

The notion of potentiality, in Agamben's work, marks an intersection between political and philosophical (or, more specifically, ontological) registers. In *Homo Sacer* Agamben's development of the concept of potentiality turns on a discussion of juridical power. What is at stake there, in particular, is the difficulty of theoretically distinguishing between constituted power and constituting power.¹³ Constituted power designates the iterative application of pre-established laws and standards in various forms of juridical practice. Constituting power, on the other hand, refers to the power to which the original establishment those laws is attributable. Both constituted power and constituting power are necessary conditions for the existence of juridical institutions, and yet the 'impossibility of harmoniously constructing a relation between the two powers'¹⁴ often leads to a widespread disavowal of the originary and irreducible character of constituting power; the latter 'cannot be conditioned and constrained in any way by a determinate legal system and [...]

¹² Leland de la Durantaye remarks that if there is one main idea animating Agamben's work as a whole, it is potentiality. Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben*, 4.

¹³ This is a discussion that, in various ways, mirrors Benjamin's distinction between 'law-instantiating violence' and 'law-preserving violence' in his aforementioned 'Critique of Violence'. See Benjamin, *Selected Writings* Vol. 1, 241-244.

¹⁴ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 39.

necessarily maintains itself outside every constituted power'.¹⁵ In other words, constituting power must reside outside the juridical order itself, and is therefore impossible to account for or justify within any legal framework. Agamben posits that it is in these difficulties that 'the paradox of sovereignty' manifests itself most fully.¹⁶ (As described in chapter 1, sovereignty is characterised by its residence both within and without the sphere of the *polis*.)

But despite the fact of its definitive location outside the domain of established law, constituting power is not identical with sovereign power. It is in this distinction that the aforescribed ontology of potentiality attains its urgency for political theory. As Agamben writes:

The problem of constituting power then becomes the problem of the "constitution of potentiality," and the unresolved dialectic between constituting power and constituted power opens the way for a new articulation of the relation between potentiality and actuality, which requires nothing less than a rethinking of the ontological categories of modality in their totality. The problem is therefore moved from political philosophy to first philosophy (or, if one likes, politics is returned to its ontological position). Only an entirely new conjunction of possibility and reality [...] will make it possible to cut the knot that binds sovereignty to constituting power. And only if it is possible to think the relation between potentiality and actuality differently—and even to think beyond this relation—will it be possible to think a constituting power wholly released from the sovereign ban. Until a new and coherent ontology of potentiality [...] has replaced the ontology founded on the primacy of actuality and its relation to potentiality, a political theory freed from the aporias of sovereignty remains unthinkable.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid., 40.

¹⁶ Ibid., 39.

¹⁷ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 44. Agamben quotes a passage from Antonio Negri's, *Il potere costituente*.

The ontological status of potentiality is thus central to the politico-theoretical imperative of separating the 'originary' constituting power from sovereignty. In what does the ontological status of potentiality consist? And how, with this end in mind, does Agamben suggest that the relation between potentiality and actuality be thought differently? As the above citation states, the political imperative is to forge a notion of potentiality that is not reducible to the relation between potentiality and actuality. Agamben turns to Aristotle's discussions of potentiality in the *Metaphysics* and *De Anima* to formulate such a notion of potentiality. In so doing, he seeks to determine a way in which 'the existence and autonomy of potentiality' can be thought.¹⁸ Agamben writes that Aristotle's theory of potentiality begins from the thought that potentiality (*dynamis* in Aristotle's Greek) always antecedes actuality (*energeia*), but is also 'essentially subordinate' to it.¹⁹ According to this thought, potentiality can only be understood in terms of the actuality into which it passes. The potential of the builder to build, for example, is made evident in his/her buildings, and the potential of the guitar player to play is evident in his/her music. Durantaye describes this form of potentiality as 'the potentiality to be'.²⁰

But it is possible to imagine a different form of potentiality, one in which it is no longer subordinate to actualisation. In short, for potentiality to be preserved and not disappear in an instance of actualisation, it must 'constitutively be the potentiality *not-to* (do or be)'.²¹ It is necessary, in other words, 'that potentiality be also im-potentiality [*sic*] (*adynamia*)'.²² In an earlier lecture drawing on similar material Agamben turns to Aristotle's remarks on sensibility in *De Anima*, which is held as an example of potentiality. Sensibility is determined to be 'not actual but only potential', since it is

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben*, 5.

²¹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 45.

²² Ibid.

said to be existent even in the absence of any sensed object that would 'actualise' it.²³ This observation has important implications for considering potentiality's ontological valences: potentiality 'is not simply non-Being, simple privation, but rather *the existence of non-Being*, the presence of an absence'.²⁴ One way in which this 'existence of non-Being' can be thought is as a 'faculty' or 'power': "To have a faculty" means *to have a privation*'. As such, it is not so much the capacity to *do* something—to act, for example—in which potentiality consists, but in the capacity to *not-do*—to *not-act*.²⁵ Potentiality is thus always also an impotentiality: 'To be potential means: to be one's own lack, *to be in relation to one's own incapacity*. Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality *are capable of their own impotentiality*; and only in this way do they become potential. They *can be* because they are in relation to their own non-Being'.²⁶ For Agamben this structure of potentiality-as-impotentiality extends to cover '[e]very human power'.²⁷ And it comes to stand, moreover, as an ontological definition of the figure of the human:

Every human power is *adynamia*, impotentiality; every human potentiality is in relation to its own privation. This is the origin (and the abyss) of human power, which is so violent and limitless with respect to other living beings. *Other living beings are capable only of their specific potentiality; they can only do this or that. But human beings are the animals who are capable of their own impotentiality. The greatness of human potentiality is measured by the abyss of human impotentiality.*²⁸

²³ Agamben, *Potentialities*, 178.

²⁴ Ibid., 179. Agamben's emphasis.

²⁵ Murray describes the difference between these two kinds of potentiality in terms of the generic and the specific: 'The generic can apply to all of us: the child has a potential to acquire language. The specific relates to someone having a specific set of attributes/skills which will allow for the potential to do: the architect has the potential to build. The difference, Agamben notes, is that the child has to become altered, acquire a function it is initially without, whereas someone who has a skill has the potential to use it. The specific is then a potential to do something as much as it is NOT to do something, the potential not to pass into actuality'. Murray, *Giorgio Agamben*, 47.

²⁶ Agamben, *Potentialities*, 182. Agamben's emphasis.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., Agamben's emphasis.

What is at stake in this formulation of potentiality, then, is a potentiality that is not simply a privation or absence, but the *existence* of that privation. This notion bears significantly on Agamben's formulation of the relation between potentiality and actuality in Aristotle: 'What is potential can pass over into actuality only at the point at which it sets aside its own potential not to be (its *adynamia*). To set im-potentiality [*sic*] aside is not to destroy it but, on the contrary, to fulfill it, to turn potentiality back upon itself in order to give itself to itself'.²⁹

For Agamben this setting aside of potentiality in a moment of actualisation corresponds precisely to the structure of sovereignty. This is so because of the way in which the relation of potentiality to actuality is analogous to the sovereign mediation of exception and rule:

[T]he sovereign ban, which applies to the exception in no longer applying, corresponds to the structure of potentiality, which maintains itself in relation to actuality precisely through its ability not to be. Potentiality (in its double appearance as potentiality to and as potentiality not to) is that through which Being founds itself *sovereignly*, which is to say, without anything preceding or determining it (*superiorem non recognoscens*) other than its own ability not to be. And an act is sovereign when it realizes itself by simply taking away its own potentiality not to be, letting itself be, giving itself to itself.³⁰

The politico-philosophical attempt to cleave potentiality away from sovereignty thus consists in the elaboration of a different form of potentiality—one, specifically, that exists 'without any relation to Being in the form of actuality'.³¹ Perhaps the clearest articulation of the political and ethical stakes

²⁹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 46.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 47.

in this form of potentiality takes place in *The Coming Community*. There, Agamben unequivocally aligns the field of ethics with the ontological claim that humans exist in and as potentiality:

There is in effect something that humans are and have to be, but this something is not an essence nor properly a thing: *It is the simple fact of one's own existence as possibility or potentiality*. But precisely because of this things become complicated; precisely because of this ethics becomes effective.³²

One effect of this identification of ethics with being-as-potentiality is the separation of ethics from the sphere of acts or deeds. It becomes impossible to determine any given act as more or less ethical than another; and moreover, it relinquishes the possibility of an ethical life becoming manifested or communicated through acts. Ethics, for Agamben, is carried not through an act or a deed but through *experience*: the experience 'of being (one's own) potentiality, of being (one's own) possibility'.³³ Such an experience is equivalent to 'exposing [...] in every form one's own amorphousness and in every act one's own inactuality'.³⁴

As Durantaye recounts, Agamben's insistence on this form of potentiality emerges from his conviction that no specific vocation can be attributed to human life. 'For [Agamben], mankind has no millennial or messianic task to complete, no divinely ordained work that it must do, and no set function it must exercise'.³⁵ Agamben is thus moved to define the human as, in a fundamental way, *inoperative*. Durantaye notes that inoperativity is not equivalent to 'apathy, pessimism, or indifference to mankind's present or future'; rather, it means that there is no pre-defined task or

³² Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007 [1993]), 44. Agamben's emphasis.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben*, 6.

work to which human life can be reduced.³⁶ Ethics thus primarily involves effectuating the experience of inoperativity or the potentiality not-to. Melville's character Bartleby is exemplary of such an exposition: a scrivener that refuses to write, Bartleby's is a life 'that writes nothing but its potentiality to not-write'.³⁷ Analogously, Agamben identifies Glenn Gould as unique among pianists for being the only one who 'can *not* not-play', such that 'he plays, so to speak, with his potential to not-play'.³⁸ Bartleby and Gould can thus be seen as exemplary figures of inoperativity.³⁹

One further aspect of the ethics and politics of potentiality remains in question, however. This, namely, is the specificity of their relation to the historical conditions of modernity (as set out in chapter 1). How does ethical life, conceived as the exposing the potentiality of human life, gather force in the face of modern biopolitics and the society of the spectacle? To address this question I will turn to a figure that Agamben uses for ethical life emerging from within these conditions: 'form-of-life'.

4.3 Form-of-life

In *Means without End* form-of-life is defined in the terms of biopolitics, being determined as 'a life in which it is never possible to isolate something such as naked life'.⁴⁰ Its positive definition is given as a life in which 'what is at stake in its way of living is living itself'⁴¹—what Agamben also names 'a *life*

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 37.

³⁸ Ibid., 36.

³⁹ Arne de Boever has called this kind of manifestation of potentiality 'inoperative power'. But this term is tautologous: for Agamben inoperativity and power are two expressions of the same concept, namely potentiality. Arne de Boever, "Overhearing Bartleby: Agamben, Melville, and Inoperative Power," *Parrhesia* 1 (2006).

⁴⁰ Agamben, *Means without End*, 3.4

⁴¹ Ibid., 4.

of power [*potenza*].⁴² This means that subjectivity, conceived as form-of-life, is constituted by ‘possibilities of life, always and above all power’ rather than ‘simply facts’.⁴³ Form-of-life thus becomes the figural horizon for the possibility of political subjectivity under conditions of modern biopolitics and the society of the spectacle; form-of-life is ‘immediately constitute[d]’ as ‘political life’.⁴⁴ But this form of political life that is the object of the ‘coming politics’ is not identical to the Aristotelian notion of *bios*. This notion describes the life of the *polis*: a life concerned with public issues, such as law, right, and justice. ‘Form-of-life’, by contrast, designates a life that is outside the capture of law—and, thereby, outside the capture of the ‘inclusive exclusion’ that determines biological life as an object of law and politics, as bare life. As such, the political life of the ‘new politics’ is defined as

a life directed toward the idea of happiness and cohesive with a form-of-life, [one that] is thinkable only starting from the emancipation from such a division [of political life and bare life], with the irrevocable exodus from any sovereignty.⁴⁵

In *The Highest Poverty* Agamben engaged in an extended discussion of a historical example of form-of-life: the Franciscan religious movement that emerged in Europe during the 11th and 12th centuries. Agamben’s interest in this movement lies in the way in which its religious practice resided in a particular relation between law and life. (This is a relation that occupies Agamben a great deal in his work, including, prominently, his writings on sovereignty and biopolitics.) What was in question here, Agamben writes, ‘was not the *rule*, but the *life*, not the ability to profess this or that article of faith, but the ability to live in a certain way, to practice joyfully and openly a certain

⁴² Ibid., 9. Agamben’s emphasis.

⁴³ Ibid., 4. Agamben’s emphasis.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 8.

form of life'.⁴⁶ The 'form of life' in question was, namely, the example of the life of Christ. In attempting to live the way Christ lived, rule and life became indistinguishable from each other:

One could not say more clearly that if a life (the life of Christ) is to furnish the paradigm of the rule, then the rule is transformed into life, becomes *forma vivendi et regula vivifica*. The Franciscan syntagma *regula et vita* does not signify a confusion of rule and life, but the neutralization and transformation of both into a "form-of-life."⁴⁷

The originality of the Franciscan movement consisted in the way in which form-of-life both designated the transformation of rule and life in the way Agamben describes, and opened up 'the possibility of a human existence beyond the law'.⁴⁸ One way in which this possibility was manifested was in the Franciscan's renouncement of property rights and consequent appeal to the use of things by virtue of necessity—the natural right of use, which is, insofar as it is a natural right, unrenounceable'.⁴⁹ In an expression of this renouncement of right the Franciscans referred to themselves as 'Friars Minor', a reference to the 'minor' figures of society, such as children, who were not able to own anything but nonetheless practised this 'natural right of use'. This monastic 'life that remains inseparable from its form' is simultaneously a manifestation of the possibility of life conceived as an 'exodus from any sovereignty'.⁵⁰

Agamben concedes that such a radical renouncement of law is 'in the present conditions of society, totally unthinkable'.⁵¹ And yet the attention the philosopher pays to this movement, antiquated and

⁴⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 93. Agamben's emphasis.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 107.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 110.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 114-5.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 121.

⁵¹ Ibid., 110.

obscure though it is, may be seen as testament to the particular *political* urgency of thinking the unthinkable in the situation of the present. Indeed, Agamben's importation of the term 'form-of-life' to the context of modern biopolitics and the society of the spectacle (in 'Form-of-Life') testifies to this sentiment. But in making this move, Agamben brings into focus another philosophical element immanent to the concept. This, namely, is potentiality or possibility. As stated above, Agamben characterises 'form-of-life' as a life from which its '*possibilities of life*' are inseparable—that is, a life in which the passing of potentiality into actuality can have no defining role. This is why Agamben's formulations of political life under conditions of modern biopolitics and the spectacle do not prescribe any definite programme of action. An 'irrevocable exodus from any sovereignty' can thus be said to take place not by means of any particular action, but in the manifestation of a life-as-potentiality, or possible way of life, at any given instant. The political question, therefore, is not whether a way of life outside the paradoxical logic of sovereignty can be theorised; the question—which Agamben, tellingly perhaps, leaves open—is whether 'something like a form-of-life [is] possible? Is today a *life of power* available?'.⁵²

Agamben's notion of form-of-life thus relates directly from his politico-philosophical preoccupations with the way modern life is conditioned by biopolitics and the society of the spectacle. It is a positive possibility of political life that emerges from within the very terms of those conditions that it seeks to counterpose.

⁵² Agamben, *Means without End*, 9. Agamben's emphasis.

4.4 The potentiality of cinema

The reasons for Agamben's insistence on the ethical and political stakes of cinema, as well as the reasons behind his choice of terminology to express those stakes, now begin to become clearer. The specifically cinematic variations of 'pure means'—speechlessness, in the case of gesture, and imagelessness in the case of montage—can also be seen as manifestations of inoperativity, or moments of potentiality. This is because speechlessness and imagelessness do not designate the privation of speech or images, any more than inoperativity designates the privation of work or vocation. Instead, they are figures for the *existence* of those privations, variations on the theme of 'the being of non-being' in the spheres of language and image. Speechlessness and imagelessness, in other words, make visible the potentiality not-to; thereby making possible the form of experience Agamben defines as ethical: the experience of potentiality.

By functioning in this way, these figures also provide the means by which a 'form-of-life' may be manifested. This is because the experience of potentiality is equivalent to the experience of a life that is inseparable from possibilities of life, or a 'life of power'. But speechlessness and imagelessness attain a particular force in relation to the political conditions specific to modernity, modern biopolitics and the spectacle. This is because they emerge as figures of positive political promise from within the effects of those conditions, most saliently the indiscernibility between body and image. In the wake of this analysis it is now possible to sense the ethical weight of speechlessness and imagelessness. *Speechlessness and imagelessness can be determined as the manifestations of potentiality specific to the technical and historical conditions of cinema. As such, they figure the ways in which cinema can bring about the form of experience that Agamben names 'ethical'.* But a more fundamental connection between cinema and potentiality can be gleaned from

Agamben's texts by recalling his proposition that cinema, in the encounter between bodies and moving images, introduces a *dynamis* into the realm images. This word designates a relation between stillness and movement in the cinema texts; but it is also Aristotle's word for, precisely, potentiality. If imagelessness and speechlessness are two forms of inoperativity emerging from cinema's dynamic charge, this observation (rarely picked up by commentators on Agamben's cinema texts) intensifies the need to read the cinema texts in the context of potentiality, both in its ontological and philosophical registers.

Agamben's notion of potentiality can also lead to a way of thinking through the ethical and political resonances of Francis Alÿs's artistic strategies beyond the aporia animating current debates on his work. In the previous chapter's crystallisation of this debate the political status of Alÿs's 'suspension of signification' became an object of contestation. For Fisher (and for Alÿs himself) it is this removal of a gesture from any determinate meaning that provides a space for considering a situation differently, perhaps disclosing social, political, and historical conditions that remain occluded in routine modes of thought and perception. For Kester Alÿs's withdrawal from the logics of meaning or narrative undermines any possibility of concrete and sustainable changes to those conditions, while simultaneously having the effect of hermetically sealing the artwork away in its aesthetic purity. My discussion of Agamben's political philosophy suggests a way of approaching the political valences of Alÿs's work differently, in a manner that both bears on and moves away from the terms of this debate's aporia. Rather than assimilating the political efficacy (or lack thereof) of Alÿs's work to its capacity to bring about forms of change in a given situation, it may instead be approached, via Agamben's writings, as a reflection on the possibility of ethical and political life under the *conditions* of that situation. This is the theoretical orientation taken up in the next chapter's reading of *REEL-UNREEL*.

5. *REEL-UNREEL*: ETHICS, POLITICS, AND CINEMA

In this chapter I put forward some of the ways in which the main vectors of Agamben's analysis of cinema—body, image, mediality, history—are brought into play in *REEL-UNREEL*. Marking the specifically political significance of these notions has been the main task of the two preceding chapters. In the present chapter this discussion will provide the theoretical framework for responding to my thesis's central question: *How can Alÿs's deployment of cinema in REEL-UNREEL be considered as part of his political project of counterposing the Western media's deleterious images and narratives of Afghanistan?*

As I have shown, Agamben develops his theory of the ethical and political dimensions of cinema around two main tropes. The body—or more precisely, the relations between bodily movement and modes of meaning or signification—is the main trope of 'Notes on Gesture'. The historical and political valences of cinematic images are the subject of the texts on montage. Gesture and montage act as figures for cinema's ethical and political charge with regard, respectively, to bodies and images. However, it is precisely within the encounter and subsequent inseparability of body and image that Agamben locates cinema's *dynamis*, its potentiality. This would suggest that his theories of gesture and montage be read in relation to each other. How might this be done? In this chapter I suggest that *REEL-UNREEL* calls for a way of reading these two texts together. I propose that gesture and montage do not need to be seen as distinct aspects of cinema, but can in fact enter into relation with each other, perhaps to the point of inseparability. In doing so, it is not my intention to put forward an 'integrated' Agambenian philosophy of cinema that would uncover a unity submerged in the apparent diversity of his arguments. Rather, the claim I put forward both takes up the trajectory of Agamben's arguments and suggests ways in which they can be reconfigured and

rethought by encountering each other. I aim to trace some of the ways in which this encounter between gesture and montage resonates in an ethical and political register in *REEL-UNREEL*, with particular reference to Afghanistan's status *vis-à-vis* modern biopolitics and the spectacle.

5.1 Imageless images

The frames of the roll of film that becomes scuffed and scratched by the rough surfaces of Kabul's streets in *REEL-UNREEL* can be seen as manifesting imagelessness in several ways. On the one hand the film appears to contain figural images: in the video's last shot a group of boys, closely huddled together, examine the film: as they do so some of them comment (in Dari) 'look at all these people locked up!' and 'here is a man standing and the rest is scratched'. But throughout the video the film reel remains too far from Alÿs's camera for the viewer to be able to make out whether or not it has images inscribed on it, or what those images may depict. As such, the film's images that are present but nonetheless remain outside the viewer's means of perception could be said to manifest an imagelessness: the images are shown in their not-showing, thereby, following Agamben's line of argument, making their mediality visible as such.

But imagelessness, as it bears conceptually on cinema in particular, is something more complex than this: *cinematic* imagelessness, Agamben posits, emerges through the conjoined operations of repetition and stoppage (or interruption). *REEL-UNREEL* does not deploy a Debordian style of montage, juxtaposing sequences of heterogeneous found images—but the film nevertheless provokes thinking about other ways in which those operations might be articulated. How are repetition and interruption operative in *REEL-UNREEL*?

Before addressing this question directly it will be instructive to turn to a more schematic technique of repetition and interruption used in a series of paintings Alÿs made in Afghanistan simultaneously with *REEL-UNREEL*. In his series informally referred to as ‘colour bar paintings’ the artist repetitively attempted to copy the abstract images used in television broadcasting that mark (or used to mark) the periods during which no programming is shown. In some of these paintings the colour bar configurations occupy the entirety of the wooden panel; in others the colour bars are inserted into or mounted on top of a figural painting of an Afghan land- or cityscape (Figure 2). Alÿs’s strategies in these works can be likened to Agamben’s theorisation of montage in Godard’s and Debord’s films. Montage, for Agamben, comprises two intertwined operations. The first of these is repetition, which consists in placing images found elsewhere in new contexts and arrangements. First, the abstract schema Alÿs deploys does not directly derive from reflections on the medium in which he works (usually encaustic on wood), or from any imperatives of artistic expression. Instead, the paintings feature a repetition of an abstract schema found elsewhere, in the sphere of television broadcasting. This schema is torn from its original context and transposed to a new medium and a new aesthetic situation. Alÿs’s repetition of television colour bar patterns in his paintings also has a historical dimension, since the colour bars are a rapidly vanishing feature of the ‘24/7’ mediasphere’s increasingly incessant information flows. Drawing on Jonathan Crary’s work on 24/7 culture’s rhythms, Robert Slifkin writes that ‘the color bar test pattern constituted part of a quickly vanishing mediascape characterized by “intervals of slow or vacant time,” which occasioned the “daydream or any mode of absent-minded introspection”’.¹ Repetition plays a comparable role here to repetition in Debord’s and Godard’s use of montage (according to Agamben’s writings). This, moreover, forged part of cinema’s ‘messianic task’, that of preserving the possibility of the

¹ Robert Slifkin, “Painting/Withdrawing,” in *REEL-UNREEL*, 102. The use or indexing of (almost) obsolescent technologies recalls, for Slifkin, Alÿs’s preoccupations in other of his works (such as the *Rehearsal* pieces) with the constant interruptions to processes of modernisation undergone in so-called ‘underdeveloped’ geopolitical regions. Slifkin cites passages from Jonathan Crary’s *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*.

past in the present. Alÿs's similar strategy could be seen as opening onto a similar messianic orientation through a transference of cinematic montage into painting practice.

The second operation of montage identified by Agamben is stoppage, or interruption. This designates the capacity of montage to exhibit an image's status as an image, interrupting thereby an image's wholesale assimilation into the logics of meaning or narrative. Alÿs's paintings index interruption in one fairly obvious way, by invoking the visual schema used to mark the end of the day's television programming. As such, the colour bars are, as it were, images that mark the absence of images. In these paintings—just as in Godard and Debord—this 'imagelessness' comprises both the exhibition of mediality and the resurgence of the past in the present in an inseparable interrelation. The colour bar schema marks the interruption of television programming, but, in the context of the contemporary mediasphere, it is a form of interruption that verges on the archaic. Both of these aspects come to the fore in the paintings in which colour bar patterns are placed in or on figurative scenes depicting Afghanistan's daily life. This artistic gesture could be seen as indicating the quotidian violence inflicted by media technologies in attempts to sense and make sense of conditions of life in Afghanistan. It could also be seen as a reflection on the political stakes inherent in any encounter between world and representation. This is a perspective articulated by Slifkin:

Juxtaposing geometric forms that often suggest television color bars with scenes of everyday life, many based on the artist's own drawings and photographs, these paintings convey the various channels through which material reality must pass in order to become a picture, whether abstract, representational, or technical. [...] Alÿs's recent paintings [...] consider the inherent complexities of representing singular historical events within an essentially limitless and mutable world. In their dual significance as tokens of modernist autonomy and medial transmission, these works convey the

competing demands of fictional creation and factual reportage that inform the production of any analog to reality, never more so than when that reality encompasses a charged political subject such as contemporary Afghanistan.²

But in terms of Agamben's theory of montage another aspect of this strategy becomes salient. This, namely, is the reflection on the relation between mediality and representation. Alÿs's technique of juxtaposing abstract elements on figural depictions enacts an interruption in the visual logic of painting's traditional modes of figural representation. What becomes salient with this strategy is not so much the figural content Alÿs's paints, but the exhibition of the figural image as an image through the interruptive interpolation of the colour bar schema in the image.

A final point: The intensity of such streams of information is not just a property of contemporary media ecologies, however; it was also part and parcel of Alÿs's everyday experience of Kabul's overbearing impenetrability. Alÿs recounts that the process of painting 'functioned like a sort of antidote to the overwhelming experience and influx of information in Afghanistan. It was a way to retreat and process' (RU 82)—an interruption, of sorts, of the everyday's perceptual intractability. As with the gestures of epic theatre that emerge from the interruption of narrative flows while remaining partially inserted within them, Alÿs's paintings derive their interruptive capacity from the technological and cultural landscapes from which informational oversaturation emanates.

Agamben has described the combination of repetition and interruption in Debord's montage techniques as a way in which an image can exhibit its imagelessness, its 'pure means', thereby approaching its 'messianic task' and entering into the sphere of ethics and politics. On the one hand,

² Ibid., 93-4.

the colour bar paintings display such imagelessness in a self-evident way: they are visual indicators that the transmission of televisual images has been temporarily halted. But in their reference to media technologies on the verge of vanishing, the paintings could also be seen as approaching what Agamben identifies as cinema's 'messianic task', namely the stretching of the borders of the present moment into the past, effectuating a temporal 'zone of indifference' within which the past's potentiality is resuscitated in the context of the present.

Such an analysis may also help account for Alÿs's use of analogue film in *REEL-UNREEL*. The images registered on the film that is rolled through Kabul's streets are never made visible to the viewer, and neither are the physical artifacts left on the film from being dragged across the city's terrain ever exhibited.³ The physical apparatus of the film thus becomes separated from its express purpose of recording and projecting images, even though, as the video's final shot testifies, images had in fact been recorded on it previously to its deployment in the children's game. As such, the film's images that are present but nonetheless remain outside the viewer's means of perception could be said to manifest imagelessness: the image that is exhibited as such. The film that is never screened in *REEL-UNREEL* could thus be an analogous counterpart for the painted colour bar patterns that both occupy and obstruct the visual regime of figural landscapes. Like those patterns, the 'imageless' film roll interrupts the visual field captured by Alÿs's digital camera. In other words, the imagelessness of the film real manifests a 'pure mediality' within the flow of figural images, with the possible effect of inserting a 'hesitation' between those images and their assimilation to logics of narrative or meaning. From this perspective, Alÿs's digital camera is no longer seen as a device for

³ Although, as Michael Taussig notes, the film's scratches are captured by Alÿs's crew's audio recording equipment: 'much is made in this work of the destruction of the film and its picking up scratches and dirt as it slithers, snakelike, along the rough ground. This is above all a sonic phenomenon with scratching, screeching, sound, matter-in-torment, at once playful and sinister, at other times a whiplash'. Taussig, "Politics, Play, Art," 131.

passively or 'objectively' documenting the boys' gesture. By interrupting the flow of digital images, the older cinematic apparatus's imagelessness renders the digital images themselves visible *in their mediality, in their dimension as 'pure means'*. In this sense, the creation of each digital image is also a *decreation* of the same. If the imagelessness in Alÿs's video could be seen as an instance of 'making visible the fact that there is nothing more to be seen', as Agamben states, perhaps, like the colour bar paintings, it could be understood as indexing the imagelessness that conditions each effort of representational or figural image-making as a means of conveying Kabul's everyday reality.⁴

This relation between the film roll and the digital images that capture it is also a historical relation. Physical film is by no means an obsolete method of recording images (although chronologically it evidently precedes its counterparts in the digital realm). But, as Slifkin notes, the reels themselves do index an obsolete method of film projection, since contemporary film projection involves horizontal platters rather than reels.⁵ In *REEL-UNREEL* the two-reel filmic apparatus not only interrupts the digital flow of images through its manifestation of imagelessness; it also interrupts contemporary means of technological mediation as a disruptive resurgence, in the present, of a figure of media-technological history. This is what Agamben has called a 'repetition': the film reels in *REEL-UNREEL* are dislocated from their historical status as an obsolete technology and interpolated into the contemporary digital mediasphere. This presents a further parallel with the colour bar paintings, in which a technological archaism comes to take on an interruptive quality in scenes representing Kabul's daily life. But in the video work the historico-technical dimension of this interruption becomes more pronounced, since here it is a specifically digital regime of mediation—hence a stronger index of the present that the paintings' materials of encaustic and wood—that is interrupted. In effectuating this historical tension between analogue and digital

⁴ Agamben, "Difference and Repetition," 319.

⁵ Slifkin, "Painting/Withdrawing," 99.

moving image technologies, the digital is no longer seen as a neutral or passive mechanism for image production. Rather, by being brought into this historical relation it becomes exhibited as a historically-situated media technology. Attention is drawn to the mediality of digital images by means of the historical relationality that they are drawn into with the archaic cinematic apparatus. In this way *REEL-UNREEL* makes visible the mediality of its own mode of image production.

This figural resurgence of the past in the present can be seen as one way in which *REEL-UNREEL* effectuates what Agamben has called a 'messianic' historical orientation. Messianic history involves the formation of a zone of indiscernibility between the past and the present, in which a given historical moment is seen as embodying a historical 'charge' as the potentiality of the past in the present. This is in contrast to 'chronological' history, which would see history as a progressive, linear continuum. The resurgent, interruptive function of the obsolete film reels in the contemporary digital regime of mediation disrupts this chronological orientation, manifesting instead the possibility or power (*potenza*) of the past, figured by an obsolescent technology, to re-enter and interrupt the present. But this interruption consists not just in the archaic quality of the film reels in the context of contemporary video production. The archaic cinematic apparatus is also separated from its function of recording and projecting images. It thereby manifests a capacity for 'imagelessness' at the heart of digital video image production. In this deployment of the cinematic apparatus *both* its status as a figure of the past *and* its separation from its function are manifested. These two features correspond to the two 'transcendental conditions' Agamben identifies with cinema's 'messianic task', repetition and stoppage. And thereby, it might be suggested, Alÿs's deployment of the cinematic apparatus in *REEL-UNREEL* manifests the power or potentiality immanent to cinematic images that Agamben identifies.

This analysis, moreover, leads to one way of thinking through *REEL-UNREEL*'s staging of an encounter between the historicity of cinematic technologies and the politics of mediating Afghanistan's political situation. As described above, Agamben distinguishes cinema from the media in terms of the power of transforming the possible into the real and the real into the possible. For Agamben this power is immanent to cinema via its capacity for montage, but it is absent from the media, which can only transmit 'facts'. If Alÿs's constellation of media technologies is to be considered as an instance of montage, as argued above, then this can be seen as one way in which *REEL-UNREEL* puts forward a modality of image-making to which that transformative power is restored. *REEL-UNREEL* shifts the focus of image-making from the 'factual' or objective documentation of an object or scene to historically-situated modes of mediation. This draws attention to the realm of images' means, rather than their ostensible ends of transmitting information or data. This is a strategy that, as Agamben emphasises, opens onto the ethical and political dimension of cinema, suggesting a way in which the video's subject—Kabul's 'daily reality'—can be framed as a locale of positive political life, rather than being subject to the spectacle's cultivation of 'indignant but powerless' citizens.

Alÿs's deployment of media technologies may thus be described as a set of interrelated operations of repetition and interruption—an interrelation that, in the context of cinema, Agamben calls 'montage'. But if *REEL-UNREEL* may be considered in these terms, it presents a very different conception of montage either the conventional denotation of that term or that laid out by Agamben in relation to Debord's and Godard's films. In 'Difference and Repetition' Agamben considered montage as a set of conditions immanent to cinematic images which, if 'made visible' (as Debord's work is said to do) can manifest cinema's 'messianic task'. In *REEL-UNREEL* this line of thought is transposed from a logic of cinematic *images* to a reflection on the historical relations of moving

image *technologies*. This suggests, perhaps, a way in which the terms of Agamben's argument have the potential to be stretched beyond the context he envisioned for them. If Agamben's concept of montage can be stretched in this way, it may also be possible to import the political implications of Debordian/Godardian montage into works, like *REEL-UNREEL*, that take as points of reflection the historical situatedness of cinematic technologies themselves.

5.2 Between montage and gesture

But *REEL-UNREEL* consists in a redoubling of this manifestation of potentiality by engaging the cinematic apparatus in a *gesture*—the boys' purposeless dash through Kabul's environs. Agamben's politico-philosophical definition of gesture as something that is in part separated from any determinate meaning—rather than, in its more commonplace understanding, a carrier of meaning or a semiotic vessel—can be instructive for thinking about the political status of *REEL-UNREEL*'s central action. Agamben describes gestures as neither a means to an end nor as ends in themselves, but as a manifestation of 'pure means' separated from any form of use, purpose, or possibility of being instrumentalised: a 'purposiveness without purpose'. The boys' act in *REEL-UNREEL* may be seen as an exemplary instance of such a purposiveness without purpose: the act appears to have no aim or end point, even though it requires a great deal of attention, diligence, and physical exertion on the player's part. Michael Taussig describes the movements of the boys rolling the reels through Kabul's streets as 'aimless—completely aimless—except for the mad intensity with which the boy behind races to keep up with the boy some twenty feet in front, and the boy in front races to keep ahead of the one twenty feet behind'.⁶

⁶ Taussig, "Politics, Play, Art," 130.

But what becomes decisive in *REEL-UNREEL* is the conjunction between this form of gesturality and the archaic cinematic apparatus. It is through this conjunction that Alÿs's video work both affirms the potency of Agamben's politico-philosophical reflections on cinema and suggests possibilities for their radical reconfiguration. In chapter 2 I associated *REEL-UNREEL*'s central gesture with the indiscernibility between body and image effectuated through the overlapping conditions of modern biopolitics and the society of the spectacle. I argued that in this gesture the boys' movements and the cinematic apparatus became inseparable, just as, in a broader political register, daily life in Afghanistan is said to be inseparable from its capture by the media. But if the children's action can be seen as instantiating such a space of indistinction between body and image, it is in some ways one very different from that found in Agamben's texts. Rather than movement being subject to capture by the operations of the cinematic apparatus, that apparatus is itself separated from its principal function—to register and project images—to be engaged, physically, in a gesture. Both the boys' aimless, purposeless gesture and the 'imageless' cinematic apparatus coincide in this action. As such, *REEL-UNREEL* can be seen as exhibiting a symmetrical but inverse body-image indistinction to that predicated by modern biopolitics and the spectacle. *REEL-UNREEL* can, therefore, be seen as a work in which Agamben's notions of cinematic gestures and cinematic images, though formulated separately and without direct relation to each other, come to coincide.

As such, *REEL-UNREEL* can be seen as a more radical manifestation of cinematic potentiality than Agamben's texts account for, even while remaining within their terms. In 'Notes on Gesture' the gesture as 'pure means' emerges through the encounter between bodily movement and moving image technologies, which has the effect of tearing gestures away from their 'ends' in symbolic codes. But in *REEL-UNREEL* the cinematic apparatus, too, is separated from its end or purpose. Rolling film reels would usually be engaged either in recording or projecting images. But in

REEL-UNREEL no such task is accomplished: the boys expend energy, dexterity, and attention in keeping the reels rolling, but no 'film' of any form is directly produced by their efforts. The ethical and political dimension of this gesture can be glimpsed with recourse to Agamben's notion of potentiality. As described in the previous chapter, the form of potentiality specific to political life (that is, form-of-life or 'happy life') is the experience of the potentiality not-to, an experience made possible through the exposition of figures of that form of potentiality. Just like Bartleby's exhibition of his potentiality not-to-write, Alÿs (via his protagonists in *REEL-UNREEL*) exhibits a potentiality not-to-film by separating the rolling film reels from any engagement in registering or projecting images, and by separating the boys' physical engagement of the cinematic apparatus from any effort to make a film. Like Bartleby's not-writing or Glenn Gould's not-playing, in *REEL-UNREEL* Alÿs films his potential not-to-film.

This analysis shows how the inseparability of body and image predicated by modern biopolitics and the spectacle can also be seen as the site of a 'positive possibility': the manifestation of potentiality at the very nexus of biopolitical and spectacular logic. This takes place through the conjunction and subsequent indistinction of the 'pure gesturality' of the boys' action and their engagement with the 'imageless' cinematic apparatus. In Agamben's argument both this 'pure gesturality' and this 'imagelessness' are understood as instantiations of 'pure means'; and this, as I have argued, opens onto the sphere of potentiality as the possibility of political life beyond the reach of sovereignty and the spectacle. But their conjunction in *REEL-UNREEL* raises the stakes of Agamben's cinema texts. This, namely, is that gesturality and montage, or speechlessness and imagelessness, can be thought *together* as co-constitutive components of a differential yet integrated cinematic practice.

Agamben's emphasis on the historical character of montage suggests a consideration of the historical character of *REEL-UNREEL*'s central gesture. Alÿs's intervention in Kabul does not consist in inventing a new 'game' or purposeless task for the children to occupy themselves with, as had been his main strategy in many of his previous works (such as *When Faith Moves Mountains*). Instead, he appropriates a game that already exists (rolling a disused bicycle wheel with a stick), modifies it (by replacing the wheel with two film reels), and transports it to a new context (from a popular children's game to a time-based artistic intervention). This marks *REEL-UNREEL*'s gesture apart from those of Alÿs's earlier works in an important way: it becomes a further instance of repetition, in the specific sense that Agamben elaborates in 'Difference and Repetition'.

Moreover, the particular game that Alÿs selected for *REEL-UNREEL* has its own specific historical status. Hoop trundling, as I mentioned in the introduction, is now a largely extinct pastime in the West, and yet it remains commonly practised in Afghanistan. In terms of the global context in which *REEL-UNREEL* circulates, the game is thus simultaneously contemporary and archaic. This is important because—to turn to Taussig again—the citation of this children's game can be seen as having a historical dimension: Taussig suggests that Alÿs's preoccupation with children's games 'is inspired not so much by children's games as by their world historical loss' (RU 128). This 'loss' is not to be understood as one of children's capacities to play as such; instead, Taussig posits that the kinds of games in danger of becoming obsolete are those that 'children have played *with each other* for a long, long, time' (RU 122. Taussig's emphasis), rather than the ones 'invented by adults such as video games generally isolating the child from other children and from their own bodies' (RU 122). For Taussig it is the conjunction of the social and the bodily dimensions of children's games that may be in danger of 'dying out, like a threatened species' (RU 124) with the individualising and isolating effects of forms of play like video games. The gesturality of these games consists not only

in their deployment of the body, but also in the body's transactions with its surroundings, by turns social, urban, and natural. As Taussig comments on another of the games documented by Alÿs, a ten-year-old boy flying a kite in Balkh, Afghanistan:

The involvement of the body is overwhelming, yet as finely wrought as a mirage. Against a dune-colored adobe wall, standing under a powder blue sky, the boy wears a pinkish trouser suit. He is gesticulating like crazy, emitting frenzied gesture language, conversing in stops and starts with the heavens or at least with the gusting wind because you never see the kite and because the string is so fine you can't see that either. All you see—what you see—is the body in action with unknown forces, pulling to the left, pulling to the right, up, down, quick, over to the left again, and so on and on. The body is all the more obvious because it is connected like this to the coursing wind by an invisible string. This is not only the body of the boy but the body of the world in a deft mimesis of each other, amounting to what I call “the mastery of non-mastery” which, after all, is the greatest game of all, a guide, a goal, a strategy—all in one—for dealing with man's domination of nature (including human nature) (RU 128-9).

In ‘Notes on Gesture’ Agamben states that cinema represents both an attempt to reclaim lost gestures and to record their loss. With this in mind, it could be suggested that part of Alÿs's project in documenting these games is to preserve them; but in doing so it also marks those games in their historical dimension—as simultaneously present and archaic. But, following Agamben's argument, this archaism's re-emergence in the contemporary moment—particularly as it becomes subject to registration by digital moving image technologies—could be seen as effectuating a further ‘zone of indifference’ between what is contemporary and what is archaic—another instantiation, in other

words, of what Agamben calls a 'messianic' historical orientation. It is perhaps telling that when, in *REEL-UNREEL*, Alÿs applied a modification to one of these games, it was to lead the gesture explicitly into the paradigm of cinema, that medium in which, according to Agamben, a messianic vocation is specifically embedded and exercised. But in this work, in its conjunction between a technology and a gesture both touching obsolescence, this messianic vocation becomes doubly underscored.

A final point: Agamben's discussion of form-of-life, recounted in the previous chapter, provokes reflection on the political significance of the figure of the child in *REEL-UNREEL*. 11th-century Franciscan monks and contemporary kids in Kabul may have little in common—but one thing they do share is a social status that separates them from right or law, in the sense Agamben discusses in *The Highest Poverty*. Children are one form of society's 'minor' citizens, a status the Franciscans sought for themselves through the appellation 'Friars Minor'. According to Agamben, it was this position outside the law that allowed the Franciscans to practice a 'form-of-life', in which life and rule became mutually constitutive. In 'Form-of-Life' Agamben comes to associate 'form-of-life' with potentiality, the possibility of ethical and political life under the political conditions of modernity. Perhaps the child protagonists in *REEL-UNREEL* could be thought in similar terms. Alÿs frequently suggests a lightly antagonistic relationship between the world of children and that of adults. One of *REEL-UNREEL*'s first shots shows a group of kids hoop trundling on one of Kabul's hillside roads. The hoop rolls out into the road, and a motorcyclist, colliding with it, is forced to stop. The child's aimless game thus comes to interrupt the adult's presumably more purposive travels. Does Alÿs propose, with this and similar sequences, an interruptive potential immanent to children's games? Alÿs's collaborator in Afghanistan, architect and conservator Ajmal Maiwandi, has stated that

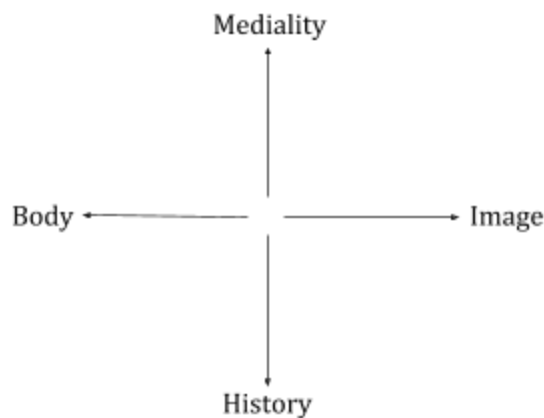
Kabul's children are 'full of potential'.⁷ But, with an eye to Agamben, this phrase may take on a great deal more political significance that is at first apparent. Perhaps the children's games, including the one invented by Alÿs, can be seen as occasions for the exercise of form-of-life—an instance in which, by virtue of their 'purposiveness without purpose', the grip of biopolitics and the spectacle on life (life in Afghanistan in particular) might be loosened, and an Agambenian experience of potentiality might be effectuated. But through its invocation of a cinematic paradigm for its game, *REEL-UNREEL* appears to present a special case in this regard. As I have described in previous chapters, cinema is a politically ambivalent site: it has the capacity both to catalyse the saturation of society by the logics of biopolitics and the spectacle; but it also provides the possibility for exiting those conditions. It might be with cinema, then, that the stakes in effecting instances of ethical and political life reach their highest possible point. As such, the various ways in which *REEL-UNREEL* indexes the capacity of cinema to manifest potentiality, and to exit thereby the aforementioned political logics, are underscored by its engagement by children, paradigmatic figures for the possibility of living outside the domain of sovereignty and law, and hence outside of biopolitical incursion.

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The foregoing analysis of *REEL-UNREEL* through the lens of Agamben's cinema texts (as well as his broader political philosophy) yields two main points. First, it shows how *REEL-UNREEL* calls for Agamben's ostensibly separate theorisations of cinematic gesture and montage to be read together. In his text on cinematic gesture Agamben identifies the ethics and politics of gesture as emerging from the encounter between bodily movement and moving image technologies. The political force

⁷ Alÿs, Maiwandi, Viliani, "Conversation," 75.

of montage consists in the interrelation between cinematic images' ability to restore potentiality to the past via repetition, and its ability to exhibit its own mediality, or 'imagelessness'. In *REEL-UNREEL* these two sets of relations—body/image, mediality/history—themselves encounter each other. As body and image enter a space of indistinction in the boys' action, the inseparability of the historical and medial dimensions of both also become manifest. This interrelation could be schematised as follows:



While the theoretical framework of the preceding analysis is constructed around Agamben's terms, *REEL-UNREEL* can nonetheless be read for its own film-philosophical implications when put into dialogue with Agamben's cinema texts. The video work suggests that 'cinema' designates a field of relations at the intersection of bodily movement and moving image technologies—one conditioned by the capacity to exhibit the historical and medial dimensions of both, inseparably.

This leads to the second main point of my analysis: by staging an encounter between the arguments of Agamben's main cinema texts, the full ethical and political force of cinema can begin to be made visible. This has a particular bearing on *REEL-UNREEL*'s setting in Afghanistan. As described in chapter 2, the indistinction between body and image is one site in which the defining political conditions of modernity—the distinct but overlapping logics of modern biopolitics and the society of the spectacle—are played out. The capture of the biological body's motions by cinematic technologies makes it possible to register and intervene in bodily movements at a level of perceptibility beyond that of human consciousness. Such use of those technologies can thereby separate the body from the domain of human subjectivity, rendering it subject to the imperatives of profit-making and efficiency. This corresponds to the modern biopolitical indiscernibility between the private and the public realms: the body-image now comes to occupy a space where the two realms become indistinguishable. As this phenomenon comes to saturate experience as a whole—as the body comes to be increasingly inseparable from images—all bodies thus come to be potentially determinable as 'bare life'. Such a process also describes the ever-increasing 'spectacularisation' of life. The spectacle, as described by Debord, designates the mediation of all social relations by images, and a corollary indistinction between reality and representation.

If, as Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev has suggested, Afghanistan has come to be the location in the world most subject to media attention, it is also the site at which critical intervention into the logics of the spectacle and biopolitics becomes most urgent. Following the preceding analysis of Agamben's politically-oriented philosophy of cinema and Alÿs's artistic activity in Afghanistan, it now becomes possible to see how *REEL-UNREEL* manifests such a critical intervention. Such an intervention is not primarily aimed at uncovering or revealing those dominant political logics. Rather, *REEL-UNREEL* can be seen as positing the possibility of positive political life, of a

form-of-life or a life of power, from within the political conditions that bear with such weight on Afghanistan's daily life. Such a possibility emerges, crucially, from the conjunction and subsequent inseparability of bodily movement and moving image in *REEL-UNREEL*'s main gesture—it emerges, in other words, from precisely from the biopolitical/spectacular logic that it seeks to counterpose.

What differentiates this space of indistinction in Alÿs's work from that effectuated by the operations of biopolitics and the spectacle is the exhibition, in the former, of *potentiality*. For Agamben the experience of potentiality is the element of political life as such. More precisely, it is the display and preservation of a potentiality not-to, that is, not to pass into actuality, that characterises the sphere of ethics and politics. In *REEL-UNREEL* such a potentiality not-to is conferred on both body and image, simultaneously and inseparably. While film reels are typically put into motion in order to record or project a film, the physical energy that the boys expend in rolling the film reels through Kabul yields no cinematic result or product. As such, their gesture manifests the potential to not-film; or, to use Taussig's term, it is a gesture of 'unfilmmaking'.⁸ One role of Alÿs's film—a film that, indeed, *was* made—can thus be seen as preserving this potentiality to not-make a film. But this gesture manifests potentiality in another way, one described in Agamben's essay on Debord as conferring possibility or power onto the past. This comes about, too, through the encounter and inseparability of bodily movement and moving image technologies in *REEL-UNREEL*. In ways described above, both the cinematic apparatus deployed and the gestural game modified in *REEL-UNREEL* come to be understood in their element of archaism. Their resurgence in the present—both in the sense of Kabul's contemporary political conditions, and in the contemporary digital technologies Alÿs and his collaborators used to make the video—can be seen as an instance of what Agamben calls 'messianic' history: the punctuation of the 'real' or factual with possibility or

⁸ Ibid.

power. As such, the video's gesture of not-filming converges with the historical dimension of the elements used to construct it: the antiquated cinematic apparatus and the archaic children's game.

CONCLUSION: 'WHAT IS CINEMA?': A QUESTION OF ETHICS AND POLITICS

The primary task of this research project has been to understand how *REEL-UNREEL* deploys cinema as a response to the political problematic of mediating Afghanistan's situation of geopolitical crisis. The main way of accounting for this response, both by the artist and by his interlocutors, has centred around the aporetic indiscernibility between the 'real' and the 'unreal' in the Western media's dominant image and narrative of Afghanistan's situation. The specific role of cinema in these accounts, however, remains unclear. My approach to this task, made through Giorgio Agamben's writings on cinema and political philosophy, reframes this response: *REEL-UNREEL* is seen as a reflection on the possibility of political life under what might be considered the prevalent political situation of modernity and the contemporary moment. This situation is constituted through an admixture of two sets of conditions. The first is modern biopolitics: the extension of the production of bare life, effectuated through the logic of sovereignty and the state of exception, to (potentially) all social life. The second is the society of the spectacle: the inseparability of social relations from their mediation through representational images.

These two sets of conditions converge in the modern mediasphere, in which the biological body becomes indistinguishable from its images. This is a phenomenon that renders the body subject to both the imperatives of economic efficiency and biopolitical control. Agamben's cinema texts propose various ways in which life can circumvent these overlapping logics within the very terms of the political situation brought about by these conditions. This possibility resides in the dynamic quality immanent to the body-image indistinction, a quality that cinematic images possess the capacity to make visible. Agamben traces this dynamic quality of cinema along two distinct axes. The first axis is cinematic gestures. This involves the separation of human gestures from the domain

of meaning or signification through the dynamism produced in cinematic images. By means of cinema gestures come to be seen as a possible site for manifestations of the 'pure mediality' of ethical human life. The second axis is montage. For Agamben this concept designates the distinct but interrelated capacities of cinematic images to manifest a historical charge (their dynamism takes the shape of a zone of indistinction between past and present) and to exhibit their status as images, which Agamben names 'imagelessness'. The ethical and political weight of cinema resides in its exhibition of these capacities. This, I have suggested, is because it is through this exhibition that cinema can bring about what Agamben calls the 'only ethical experience', namely the experience of human existence in and as potentiality.¹

My reading of Agamben's cinema texts within the expanded field of his broader political philosophy oriented my analysis of *REEL-UNREEL*. My analysis focussed on the ways in which the video work engages with a comparable ethical and political stance to that found in Agamben's writings. It did so primarily by locating the ways in which gesture and montage—the two main axes of Agamben's cinema texts—are put into play in *REEL-UNREEL*: its deployment of an archaic cinematic apparatus, divorced from the task of registering or projecting images, manifests both the historical and medial axes of Agamben's theory of montage; and the boys' action of rolling the reels through Kabul was considered as a gesture of 'purposiveness without purpose', a 'pure means' separated from any relation to ends.

Alÿs's video work was not just seen as an illustration of Agamben's theories of cinema, however; rather, it proposes both a reconfiguration of the latter's components and an intensification of the logic of those texts' arguments. In particular, *REEL-UNREEL*'s combination and corollary

¹ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 44.

inseparability of montage and gesture suggests ways of intertwining these two threads of Agamben's cinema texts, which remain relatively separate in the philosopher's own writings. This has ramifications in both film-philosophical and political registers. *REEL-UNREEL*'s film-philosophical significance lies in its suggestion that the cinematic dynamisms residing in the encounter between body and image, on the one hand, and between history and mediality on the other, can be brought together. This frames cinema as a dynamic space emerging from the intersection of these axes. The political repercussions of this analysis is that its combination of and indistinction between montage and gesture is a way in which cinema's dynamism, residing in its body-image amalgam, can be transformed into a site of the exposition of human potentiality. It is by means of this exposition that the deleterious logics of modern biopolitics and the society of the spectacle can be counterposed.

It is of particular significance that Alÿs's reflection on cinema takes place in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is framed as a locale in which the global political conditions of modern biopolitics and the society of the spectacle reach fever pitch: the subjection of life to media spectacle is carried out there with a violence more acute, arguably, than in any other location in the world. If cinema is to be seen as carrying an element of political promise in such conditions, then an investigation of its political potential attains a particular urgency in the context of Afghanistan. *REEL-UNREEL* and Agamben's cinema texts, read together, show how, in such an investigation, questions of the political and the ontological status of cinema become inseparable. As such, Afghanistan's situation of geopolitical crisis provides occasion for asserting the ontological question of cinema—'What is cinema?'—as always also a question of ethics and politics.

Multiple lines of thought open out from the trajectory of this thesis that might be taken up in future research. One concerns the role of moving image media in Alÿs's work. The majority of Alÿs's best-known works are video works, and yet most of the critical and scholarly writing on his various works largely or completely ignores this aspect of it, implicitly taking his use of video as a passive and neutral documentation of his (or his delegates') performances. Although *REEL-UNREEL* presents the artist's most explicit reflection on moving image media, part of the argument I have developed has been to emphasise the importance of the use of moving image technologies as one of Alÿs's salient artistic strategies. Re-approaching his works from this perspective could open new possibilities for considering Alÿs's artistic strategies, in particular in the political dimension as moving image works.

Another potential line of enquiry, opening out from my discussion of the messianic in Agamben's writing, concerns Alÿs's relation with history. Like *REEL-UNREEL*, several of Alÿs's works make explicit reference to world historical events or situations, such as the demarcation of the borders of Israel/Palestine in 1949 (*The Green Line*, 2004), the effects of the U.S.'s presence in the Panama Canal Zone throughout most of the twentieth century (*Painting/Retoque*, 2008), and the historically strained relations between the U.S. and Cuba (*Bridge/Puente*, 2006). And yet the relation between Alÿs's works and those events or situations has yet to be the object of sustained theoretical enquiry. Approaching Alÿs through Agamben is suggestive of a way in which such an enquiry might be oriented. This, namely, is in terms of the differences between chronological and messianic notions of history. As my discussion of Agamben posits, messianic concepts of history can bear directly on the broader political question of the possibility of ethical and political life in contemporary political situations. If such a trajectory were to be taken, it might provide a way of thinking through how

Alÿs's relation to history, in the works just listed and others, can be seen as indexing such political possibilities.

This research project's propositions also have the potential to be extended beyond subsequent considerations of Alÿs's oeuvre: they may provide the theoretical armature for reflections on the possible political significance of contemporary artistic practices beyond the imperatives of concrete social or political change. In the present moment the cultural significance of contemporary art is drifting away from aesthetic issues, becoming increasingly correlative to its capacity for gearing itself toward social and political change. And yet the evaluation of artistic practices according to this criterion can lead to somewhat myopic views as to what can be legitimately defined as concrete political practice. (Grant Kester's assessment of Alÿs's *When Faith Moves Mountains* discussed in chapter 3, though important and thought-provoking, nonetheless testifies to the presence of such myopic tendencies in contemporary art criticism.) Perhaps—as this thesis, I hope, testifies—more nuanced notions of what comprises contemporary art's ethical and political significance may be accessed through bringing those practices into dialogue with political philosophy. This research project is certainly not the first scholarly effort to attempt such a dialogue. But if my approach has yielded some measure of insight beyond the terms of the debates circulating around Alÿs's work, it might suggest the potency of similar methodological positions in engagements with contemporary artistic practices. But perhaps the most valuable outcome of staging dialogues between contemporary art and political philosophy is emphasising the need to continually throw the relation between art, ethics, and politics into question. Not only does such questioning help prevent art from falling back into blunt and clichéd notions of what 'the political' consists in; it also stresses the need to attend to artistic work for their capacity to make visible that notion's multiplicity of registers and points of entry. In this regard *REEL-UNREEL* is exemplary: it shows how attention to

the archaic, the childish, and the useless can be brought to bear, incisively, on the circulation of biopolitical and spectacular forces as they reach their highest degree of intensity. And more particularly, they index a means by which such a situation can be survived—a means, that is, by which possibilities of ethical and political life can continue to appear.

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ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1: *REEL-UNREEL* (2011) (6:57)

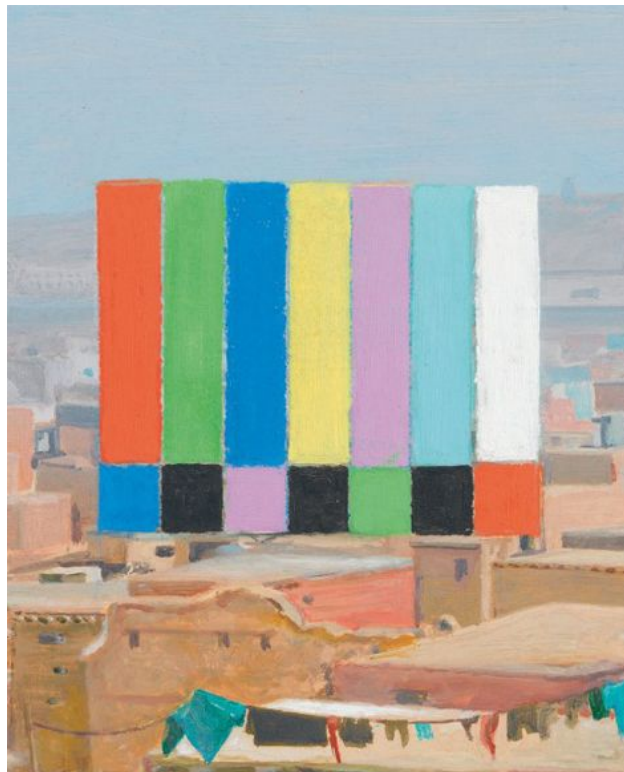


Figure 2: *'Untitled'* (2011). Encaustic on wood..

