Chapter V

Auschwitz and Agamben’s Philosophy of Aesthetics

Giorgio Agamben (1942–) is a key contemporary Italian philosopher and political theorist who has made significant contributions to current intellectual debates in political philosophy, legal theory, and cultural studies. He was born in Rome, Italy in 1942. He studied Law and Philosophy at the University of Rome and wrote there his doctoral thesis on the political thought of Simone Weil (1909–1943) in 1965. As a postdoctoral student, he attended Heidegger’s *Le Thor* seminars on Heraclitus and Hegel in 1966 and 1968. He taught regularly at University of Macerata, University of Verona, The New School University (New York), etc. and was also the Visiting Professor at several universities in the USA. He was the Director of Programmes at the Collège Internationale de Paris during 1986–1993. He worked at the library of The Warburg Institute, School of Advanced Study, University of London during 1974–75. He also served as the editor of the Italian edition of Walter Benjamin’s collected works between 1979 and 1994. He was also Professor of Aesthetics in the Faculty of Arts

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2 The dissertation is still unpublished. Simone Weil was a French philosopher, religious thinker and Marxist activist. She was a favourite thinker of the Italian novelist Elsa Morante (1912–1985) with whom Agamben had developed intellectual and personal closeness. Carlo Cecchi had handed over to him a copy of Spinoza’s *Ethics* which belonged to Elsa. In Agamben’s work, Weil’s presence is subliminal and disavowed and hence we find only single instance of a passing reference to her name in the essay on Morante titled “The Celebration of the Hidden Treasure” in *The End of the Poem*, Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999[1996]), p.102. Weil offered the important theory of decreation in *La Pesanteur et la grace* (1948), translated as *Gravity and Grace* (1952 & 2002) which was later used by Péguy, Blanchot and Levinas. The notion of potentiality in Agamben is genealogically rooted in Weil’s theory of decreation. The interrelations in their theoretical development have been examined at length by Alessia Ricciardi in her article “From Decreation to Bare Life: Weil, Agamben and the Impolitical,” *Diacritics* 39.2 (Summer 2009): 75–93. Web Source: https://muse.jhu.edu/article/469919/pdf
and Design at the University of Venice. He caused a controversy when he refused to undergo the “biological tattooing” requested by the U.S. Immigration Department for entry into the USA in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 attacks on World Trade Centre. When Agamben was invited to deliver a series of lectures and seminars at The New York University in 2004, he cancelled this tour and published an article “Bodies Without Words: Against the Biopolitical Tatoo” in the French newspaper Le Monde on 10 January 2004, seeking to justify his refusal. Those entering the USA are forced to undergo the “biopolitical tattooing” which includes data registration, finger print and retina scans. Agamben claims that this new development in biopolitics attempts “to accustom citizens to supposedly normal and humane procedures and practices that had always been considered to be exceptional and inhumane.” He traces importantly the biopolitical tattooing in the US airports to the condition of Jewish prisoners in the concentration camps which was then considered normal. He concludes the essay by saying: “the biopolitical tattoo imposed upon us today when we want to travel to the United States is the baton of what we might accept tomorrow as the normal way of registering into the mechanism and the transmission of the state if we want to be identified as good citizens”. For his outstanding work on contemporary lifestyles and ideologies, Agamben was given the Prix Europeen de L’Essai Charles Veillon award at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland in 2006.

According to Agamben, the contemporary world is characterized by the disappearance of the classical idea of politics, the vulgar culture of the spectacle and a continual erosion of human rights. His radically open critique of the contemporary world tries to imagine it anew and keeps an eye open to the coming community in

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2 Ibid. p.168.
3 Ibid. p.169.
future. The critique of the Western political and juridical traditions has been widely popular among his readers. Agamben’s popularity as a philosopher is due to his deep and abiding concern for the larger questions of human life that many theorists seemed to have left behind. Though he has intellectual ties with the wave of French theory in 1960s, especially Derrida and Foucault, he associates himself closely with continental philosophy – particularly Heidegger, Benjamin, Kant and Hegel. He has considered Aristotle as a central figure in Western philosophy throughout his philosophical career, but he has been greatly drawn to the political thought of Carl Schmitt (1888–1985). He is regarded now as a major critical theorist and his works are very close to deconstruction. They engage with the problems introduced into Western philosophy by Walter Benjamin specifically in his thesis on the German drama known as Trauerspiel (mourning play) entitled *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928), translated as *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1977), and the essay *Zur Kritik der Gewalt* (1920-1921), translated as “Critique of Violence”. Agamben was influenced by intellectuals like Aristotle, Benveniste, Debord, Schmitt, Arendt and Warburg in Western philosophy, but the chief influences on him were Heidegger and Hegel. He uses the work of Heidegger and Benjamin as the philosophical entry points to approach the important subjects of literature, art, cinema, ethics and politics. He also engaged with the Jewish Torah and Christian biblical texts, Greek and Roman law, Midrashic literature and Western literary authors. Agamben’s works cannot be arranged into any clear chronology, yet three major concerns can be seen evolved in

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his philosophical career: (a) His early writings focus on language and its limits. (b) He has also deliberated on aesthetics – the form and function of aesthetic production, the role of the artist, etc. (c) Since the mid 1990s, Agamben has thought profoundly about the limits of what it is to be human (most importantly in his books Homo sacer. Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita (1995), translated as Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (1998); Quel che resta di Auschwitz (1998), translated as Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive (1999) and Stato di eccezione (2003), translated as State of Exception (2005). Agamben’s oeuvre encompasses a variety of areas such as contemporary continental philosophy, history of philosophy, Holocaust literature, poetics, art and aesthetics, cinema studies, Biblical textual criticism, medieval literature, legal philosophy, philosophy of language, Italian and world politics, etc. In all of them, Agamben attempts to deactivate the apparatus of power in the interests of a coming community and his philosophical work as a whole is related to the radical potentiality of the coming community. He has given a provocative account of homo sacer and biopolitics which is generally concerned with the nature of Western legal and political systems. The biopolitical function of Western law and politics, described by him as the method of mapping, is his most important contribution to philosophy. Agamben’s interest lies in the ways languages of power and control are utilized in politics. In order to solve the problem of power circulating in language, Agamben suggests the idea of disrupting the logic of languages of power. He is interested particularly in the ways in which legal means are utilized to draw the boundaries of political systems and the privileges they bestow. Political community is usually measured by creating a binary between us and them, citizens and noncitizens. The political rights of one group become dependent upon them being excluded from another. Instead thorough exclusion of one group, Agamben writes, this process works
upon an inclusive domination. In order to pursue this, he explores the figure of homo sacer (sacred or holy man) who in ancient Roman law could be killed without the offender being punished by law. Bare/naked life is the product of the distinction between life and politicized life which, following Aristotle, Agamben calls zoē (life) and bios (qualified life). He traces the split between zoē and bios in ancient Greek notions of the political and identifies the problematic relationship of politics with bare life in the exclusion of zoē from the political sphere. He traces the genealogy of the production of inclusive exclusion of bare life from the political in the political and legal systems of West – from Aristotle and ancient Greece, Roman law, English ideas of habeas corpus, to the concentration camps of National Socialism and the contemporary flight of refugees. Agamben draws a clear line which connects the foundational principles of these political and legal systems with the Holocaust perpetrated by the National Socialists in Germany in World War II. He also shows the fragility of people living under the political system whose main function is to politicize and control forms of life.

Agamben’s whole work as a philosopher emerges from a concern with language. The fundamental premise of his thought is that the human is defined and redefined by its faculty for language. His concern with language is interrelated with three dimensions of ontology, politics and literature respectively and shows his move towards poetics: (a) Language is essentially connected to Being, so it is the object of philosophy. (b) Language is manipulated by those in power, and hence the object of philosophy, and (c) Language is the medium for creative expression, and therefore the object of literature. In his early books, Agamben probes the meaning of language and

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10 For his reflection on the relationship between language and the human, Agamben draws on Heidegger who said “language was the house of being”.
its place in the history of metaphysics, as a way of understanding being. The starting point is the absolute role of negativity in creating the human. Hegel systematically conceived of humanity in relation to negativity, in the early nineteenth century. Negativity in this sense is not ‘bad’, but the idea of being defined by what you are not (that is, I am me because I understand I am not you, or anyone else). This is the only means through which humans come to self-perfection. The profound implication of this, as teased out by twentieth century phenomenology and expanded on by Derrida, is that the self is not present to itself, but only exists as a by-product of something else (or of everything else). Agamben reworks this idea of ‘negativity’ to render it as an integral part of the things we understand to be present (beings, objects, the world), which becomes internal in and as language. In his early career, Agamben was profoundly influenced by Heidegger’s understanding of the relationship between language and being. He uses Heidegger’s model of ‘being-for-death’ in *Being and Time* (1927). Heidegger argues that authentic existence occurs only in awareness of death, death as something that will come, and yet, ‘I’ will not be there when it happens to me. Therefore the most authentic human experience possible is one of absence. Both Heidegger and Agamben emphasize how the animal cannot have this negative experience. Instead of dying, animals merely cease living. After a long discussion on the specificity of the human voice, Agamben returns to this dying animal, stating that the animal voice ‘contains the death of the animal’. Agamben’s reading of Heidegger focuses on the problem of the negative foundation of the human through the question of language. As human beings we are forced to conceptualize ourselves linguistically. In other words, language mediates our very consciousness, but language is an imposed and abstract system. Agamben argues that there is something more primary than language to which we cannot have any access. This element is voice. Due to our
inaccessibility to voice, we are condemned to living through a negative relation to language in which we experience our linguistic essence as loss. Agamben’s work is an investigation of how this irreducible negativity is played out in different ways. *Il linguaggio e la morte: Un seminario sul luogo della negatività* (1982), translated as *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity* (2006)\(^\text{12}\) contains the germ of ideas that inform Agamben’s later texts on sovereignty and limit conditions.

In the first prefiguring of his later theories, the animal voice becomes ‘the voice of a mere sound’. Voice is not the human discursive voice, but the voice that lies between animal voice and discourse. Because of the connectedness of animal and human, Agamben’s insight is that the human voice is the loss of animal voice, a loss which only occurs for the animal at death. Voice is what is lost when an animal dies. Language cannot convey the most essential truth about it. It must be distant not only from its object and the speaking subject, but also from the truth of language, its capacity to exist as language, as opposed to animal sounds. All of language is there to display that language takes place. Agamben thinks what Heidegger’s idea of thrownness/alienation of being can be identified as coming from this perpetual borderline language/voice where the impossibility of being there for death ‘lives’. Human awareness of death is always lost, always deposited in the voice without meaning, and in turn, this voice without meaning is the indicator that Being is bordered and defined by death. The closing few pages of *Language and Death* directly announce his future interests. Agamben suggests that nothingness is the basis of ethics and otherness is the core human attribute. Human culture is a turning away from brute, simple death. He makes this paradoxical situation the core of humanity, and

moves on to ask what it would be like to remove the contradiction, what it would mean to prevent Voice from happening.

According to Agamben, the history of metaphysics understands language as the means of attaining or approaching the transcendental, as seen notably in Kant, Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger. In *Infanzia e storia* (1978), translated as *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*\(^{13}\)(1993), he claims that the transcendental is not beyond our mundane existence and knowledge but located in language. He returns again to the question of speech as a human phenomenon. The history of philosophy supposes animals to be without speech and humans the speaking animal. Agamben writes that it is not so, as animals are in language, while humans come to acquire language as something external to them. This discovery of language is what he calls ‘infancy’. At first, this refers to human children’s acquisition of language, their move from the simple inhabiting of speech of animals, to language and discourse. In so doing, language becomes a way of knowing the world that is other to the subject, and then the means of self-consciousness. The key point is that ‘infancy’ never goes away: the point of transition is an origin that is permanently maintained. At the same time, the space between speech and language is the location of the transcendent. Furthermore, humanity as a whole has this experience, in the shape of history, where cultural origins never go away, even if hidden, rejected or ignored. The unthinking use of ‘the animal’ is a widespread problem in critical theory of the last few years. Elsewhere, he states explicitly that modernity has privileged access to the thought of language, and thereby completes a journey into language but, ultimately, the biopolitics of modernity make of it a time where the humanity of humans is more lost than ever.

In L’aperto: L’uomo e l’animale (2002), translated as The Open: Man and Animal (2004), he further explores ‘the animal’, and is keen, as always, to explore a clear-cut divide by making the borderline a more messy, paradoxical space. Agamben makes virtually timeless claims about the human/animal divide. Animals are in the open, are open, even, to the openness of nature, but only humans ‘can see the open which names the unconcealedness of beings’. Humans are human by virtue of alienation from all that is other to them. The end of The Open returns to the idea of the contemporary world being increasingly dominated by biopolitics, bare existence, etc. with the complaint that today’s world is vacuous, lost in noise and superficiality.

AUSCHWITZ AND AGAMBEN

Agamben’s philosophical thinking on the Holocaust can be observed in three of his important books: Homo sacer. Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita (1995), translated as Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (1998); Quel che resta di Auschwitz (1998), translated as Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive (1999) and Stato di eccezione (2003), translated as State of Exception (2005). In them, Agamben looks at what happens when all the rules that govern human behaviour are completely stripped away. They explore the biopolitical nature of modern life by tracing its emergence in the juridical and political traditions of the West. Following Aristotle, Agamben thinks that the process of the splitting of life into the two categories of zoē15 and bios16 in ancient Greece led to the production of ‘bare life’17 which marks the limit

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15 Zoē is the biological fact of having life. Mankind, gods and animals all have life, which is indistinct and vital but unqualified. Zoē exists prior to language and community and is the substance out of which we emerge. For Agamben, we cannot return to this prepolitical world.
16 Bios is political, collective or qualified life, the attempt to construct life beyond zoē. Any attempt to qualify life either as good or bare, is bios and a moving away from zoē. The space of the bios is the polis (collective political space), which was the basis of Greek democracy. Bios, unlike zoē, is linguistic.
point of politics. In doing so Agamben questions the principles of Western democracy. Agamben takes the term ‘biopolitics’ from Michel Foucault whose intellectual work on public health, sexuality and prison system in *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique* (1961), translated as *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*18 (1961), *Histoire de la sexualité, Vol.1: La Volonté de savoir*19 (1976), *The History of Sexuality, Vol.1: An Introduction*20 (1978), *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (1975), translated as *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*21 (1977) had a significant impact on humanities. In addition to Heidegger and Benjamin, Foucault plays an important role in Agamben’s philosophy in terms of raising questions of methodology. For Agamben’s understanding of politics, Foucault’s genealogical method has a great value. Foucault first coined the term ‘biopolitics’ in *The History of Sexuality, Vol.1*22, a study which explores how in modern politics the state attempts to exert control over entire populations. The technologies of power have produced great evil: “at once it becomes possible both to protect life and to authorize a holocaust”.23 In Foucault’s account, the ancient Greeks had seen politics as separate from mankind’s life. The inclusion of life into the political constitutes for Foucault the modern idea of the political. Agamben’s view of biopolitics is a corrective to that of Foucault. Agamben claims that modern biopolitics represents not a break with the classical idea of politics which underpins Western society, but instead ushers in the exclusive inclusion. Agamben claims that the category of life (*zóē*) was not excluded.

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17 In Italian *nuda vita* (‘naked life’). Bare life is produced by the split/distinction between *zóē* (life) and *bios* (good, qualified or politicized life), the space of in-between. It exists in the realm of the political and represents the crisis as well as the potential undermining of the political. Aristotle first made this distinction as *zóē* and *bios*.
23 Quoted in Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p.3.
from the classical sphere of the political (*bios*). Agamben claims that the sovereign has the same place of being both within and outside the laws that he is able to control. A sovereign also has the potential to suspend the rule of law, as happens in a state of exception. The figure of the sovereign/king can exclude himself from laws and regulations but this exception works in the exclusion of the citizen from the city, taking away his/her rights so that he/she can be killed legally. For Agamben, the position of the sovereign and *homo sacer* reveal the limit point of politics, which is that any member of a political community has the potential to be excluded from that community and reduced to what Agamben names “bare life”. For Agamben, the problematic of death as other and death as the ultimate truth of humanity (as evidenced in the existence of language) plays out in the world of politics, law and social control. The figure of *homo sacer* appears – he who can be killed, the one outside of society and deprived of humanity. *Homo sacer* opens up Agamben’s long investigation into sovereignty as a limit condition of law, humanity, politics and the subject. This figure of the *homo sacer* (sacred man) is the paradigm of politics. Through this figure, Agamben provides the genealogy or counter-history of Western politics, i.e. the inclusive exclusion of bare life from the political. Through this genealogy, he suggests that the modern figure of the refugee and the prisoner in the concentration camp represents the limit point of politics and asks us to question the future of institutions through which we attempt to achieve ‘good life’.

In his views on the sovereign exception, Agamben is greatly influenced by Carl Schmitt (1888–1985). As a political philosopher, Schmitt wrote important works\(^\text{24}\) which justified and explained the National Socialist Party’s actions in Germany during

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the 1930s. The key to Agamben’s critique of politics can be found in Schmitt’s *Political Theology* where he wrote: “The exception is more interesting than the regular case. The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything: it confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception. In the exception the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become more torpid by repetition”. Though Agamben locates the modern sovereign exception in World War I, Third Reich and the contemporary political situation, he intends to view it in a longer history.

*Homo sacer. Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*\(^{25}\) (1995), translated into English as *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*\(^{26}\) (1998), first in Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* series, makes a complex critique of the political and is very much related to his earlier work on language. Agamben refers to Pompeius Festus for the meaning of *homo sacer*: “The sacred man is the one whom the people have judged on account of a crime. It is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide; in the first tribunal law, in fact, it is noted that ‘if someone kills the one who is sacred according to the plebiscite, it will not be considered homicide.’ This is why it is customary for a bad or impure man to be called sacred.”\(^{27}\) *Homo sacer* belongs to God as he is unsacrificeable and somehow already sacred: “Life that cannot be sacrificed and yet may be killed is sacred life.”\(^{28}\) The death of *homo sacer* is included and excluded both from the religious and the legal spheres. Like the sovereign, the figure of the *Homo sacer* is in a “zone of indistinction between sacrifice and homicide”.\(^{29}\) To understand their similar structural position of being inside and outside

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\(^{25}\) Giulio Einaudi s.p.a., 1995  
\(^{27}\) Quoted in *Homo Sacer*, p.71.  
\(^{28}\) Ibid. p.82.  
\(^{29}\) Ibid. p.83.
law, Agamben borrows the idea of ban/abandonment from Jean-Luc Nancy. Ban/abandonment is the state of being left on the threshold between inside and outside, “potentiality of the law to maintain itself in its own privation, to apply in no longer applying”.\textsuperscript{30} 

\textit{Homo sacer} is the “human victim” captured in the sovereign ban and reveals that the production of bare life is the “originary activity of sovereignty”. It shows the potential for any and all of us to be one of these liminal figures: “the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially homines sacri, and \textit{homo sacer} is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns”.\textsuperscript{31} Tracing the genealogy of these two figures of the sovereign exception and the \textit{homo sacer} through to their originary structural point, Agamben contends that we are in a position to understand the nature of the concentration camp and the seize/capture of life under fascism. Agamben plots the development of modern \textit{homo sacer}, beginning with the introduction of the writ of \textit{habeas corpus}\textsuperscript{32} in England in 1969 and claims that this is the first instantiation of modern biopolitics. Body became the basis of a new modality of politics. For Agamben, to be the free subject of modern Western liberal democracy means to be potentially reduced to the \textit{corpus} (the body), stripped of rights and protection. The French declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in 1789 is the second step in Agamben’s genealogy of \textit{homo sacer} where it enters into its modern incarnation as tied to a sovereign state and territory. Here bare life (\textit{zoe}) becomes political. For Agamben, the most radical example of \textit{homo sacer} is of the concentration camp as \textit{nomos}\textsuperscript{33} and of the refugee and concentration camp prisoner as \textit{homo sacer}. He ties the political principles of Western civilization and the inalienable

\textsuperscript{30} Homo Sacer, p.28.  
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid. p.84.  
\textsuperscript{32} The Latin term means ‘present the body’. It is a summons to those who held a prisoner in custody to bring him/her before the court and prove their authority for holding him. It is considered one of the fundamental principles of the Western legal tradition that one is allowed a fair trial by jury.  
\textsuperscript{33} The space of the political.
freedoms of modern mankind to the most horrific events of the twentieth century. The refugee reveals the ways in which the spaces of sovereign power and the sovereign exception operate with a ruthless efficiency to define the life of its citizens from others. This figure of bare life\textsuperscript{34} calls into question the entire idea of human rights, the way a state includes a member in the community and later excludes it. In his essay “Beyond Human Rights,”\textsuperscript{35} Agamben suggests that the idea of human rights becomes untenable as a principle when one witnesses a human being reduced of all relations “except for the fact of being human.” The most horrible example of how citizens of a state can be stripped of their rights and reduced to bare life is the concentration camps set up in National Socialist Germany under Hitler. Jewish people in these camps were removed of their rights of the citizens of Germany or any other nation by the exercise of sovereign power. Hence they became the stateless people in a space which had been excluded from the laws of the nation state. The camps became the spaces of exception and those living in there completely without political life and condemned to live the bare life. Agamben sees all the hall marks of complete biopolitical space in the concentration camp, a space where the sovereign completely destroys political subjects and replaces them with a form of total physical and biological control. The programmes like \textit{Versuchspersonen}\textsuperscript{36} (VPs) were subjected to excessive air-pressure, drinking of salt-water and extensive immersion in ice-cold water, who represent to the sovereign as bare life and reveal the limit point of politics.

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34 The idea of ‘bare life’ is an extension of Agamben’s ruminations on language: ‘there is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation that bare life in an inclusive exclusion’. Bare life is empty humanity that is neither quite human nor animal, an intermediate state that, even as it appears, is shoved into the background to be made part of our society based on law.


36 Translated as Human guinea pigs
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Agamben aims to connect the problem of pure possibility, potentiality, and power with the problem of political and social ethics in a context where ethics has lost its previous religious, metaphysical, and cultural grounding. Taking his cue from Foucault’s fragmentary analysis of biopolitics, Agamben probes the covert presence of an idea of biopolitics in the history of traditional political theory. He argues that from the earliest treatises of political theory, notably in Aristotle’s notion of man as a political animal, and throughout the history of Western thinking about sovereignty, a notion of sovereignty as power over “life” is implicit. Classical philosophy distinguished between *zoe* (life) and *bios* (good life), but modern politics of bare life/biopolitics collapsed the distinction between the two. According to Agamben, here lies the genesis of fascism as the collapse of the distinction makes possible politics around body. The reason why the notion of sovereignty remains merely implicit has to do with the way the sacred (or the idea of sacrality) becomes indissociable from the idea of sovereignty. Drawing upon Carl Schmitt’s idea of the sovereign’s status as the exception to the rules he safeguards, and upon anthropological research that reveals the close interlinking of the sacred and the taboo, Agamben defines the sacred person as one who can be killed and yet not sacrificed. This paradox operates in the status of the modern individual living in a system that exerts control over the collective “naked life” of all individuals. The focus is on the idea of ‘bare life’, of a humanity stripped of nearly all of its defining characteristics, which is denuded at its most in the Nazi concentration camps. Bare life is at its height in the ‘biopolitics’ of modernity, but, according to Agamben, it can and must be traced back throughout Western culture to classical Greek and Roman law. Foucault writes of the biopoliticisation of life notably in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*. He argues that Western society moves from a regimen where the ruler controls the right over life and death (that is, to wield
the power of death), to one where life itself becomes subject to control. Biopolitics
governs in the bureaucratic, scientific, ruled-based ways, ostensibly to improve the
health and well-being of citizens. Agamben’s gloss on this is that where the ancient
Greek polity removed bare life as irrelevant, Western modernity makes life the subject
of control. The exclusion performed in Western societies prior to the seventeenth and
eighteenth centuries was not a complete exclusion, but the purposeful exclusion of the
biological in order to found the political, the juridical, or even, the human. In fact,
society is based not on separation from nature but on its exclusion of biology.
Sovereignty, then, must be based on biopolitics, while the concentration camp is
almost a return to the essence of the human society, to its less-than-contractual origin.

Stato di eccezione37 (2003), translated as State of Exception38 (2005), second
(2.1) in Agamben’s Homo Sacer series, was published when many were beginning to
explore his critique of Western politics as a means of understanding phenomena such
as Guantánamo Bay and the extradition procedures which governed it. The sovereign
is outside and beyond the Law and at the same time, the concentration of Law.
Agamben identifies this situation as ‘the exception’ – and from which the ‘state of
exception’ can emerge – that is the suspension of Law. The exception, the suspension
of Law, is the moment when Law is founded, which is itself neither legitimate nor
illegitimate, but violent. The violence of nature is held back to be restructured as the
exception that guarantees all else. According to Agamben, this is not merely the
mystical beginning of authority but a potential that cannot go away, the perpetual
absence part of existing systems. State of Exception begins with a discussion of the
increasingly murky space between the juridical order and life, the increasing power of

the juridico-political apparatus to use the ‘state of exception’ to call into question the universal nature of the rule of law in increasingly troubling ways. *State of Exception* was written immediately after 9/11 when the Bush administration, in the midst of what it perceived to the state of emergency, authorized the indefinite detention of noncitizens suspected of terrorist activities and their subsequent trials by a military commission. Agamben uses here such circumstances to argue that this unusual extension of power, or “state of exception”, has historically been an underexamined and powerful strategy that has the potential to transform democracies into totalitarian states. Agamben states, “The immediately bio-political significance of the state of exception as the original structure in which the law encompasses living beings by means of its own suspension emerges clearly in the “military order” issued by the president of the United States on November 13, 2001, which authorised the “indefinite detention” and trial by “military commissions” (not to be confused with the military tribunals provided for by the law of war) of noncitizens suspected of involvement in terrorist activities.”

He further says, “What is new about President Bush’s order is that it radically erases any legal status of the individual, thus producing a legally un-nameable and unclassifiable being”. *State of Exception* theorizes the state of exception in historical and philosophical context. Yet the novelty he demonstrates is only apparent when one places it in a genealogy of previous ‘states of exception’, including France during the revolution, the permanent state of exception declared by President Poincaré in World War I and importantly Hitler’s suspension of the Weimar Constitution in 1933. Agamben describes the people held at the Guantánamo Bay in a state of exception and compares them with the Jews in the Nazi Lager camps, who not

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39 *State of Exception*, p.3.
40 Ibid. p.3.
only lost their citizenship but every legal identity. Guantanamo is the space of sovereignty, not the mere effect of the US government’s sovereign power. The suspension of Law is Law at its purest, where it becomes only ‘force of law’, as in Nazi Germany. What then occurs is ‘legalised civil war’, with the State waging war against all whom it deems to be opposed to it. In his comparison of the present event with the Holocaust, Agamben sees a clear articulation of the structural logic at work within the contemporary. In Agamben’s view, the majority of legal scholars and policymakers in Europe and the USA have wrongly rejected the necessity of such a theory, claiming instead that the state of exception is a pragmatic question. Agamben argues here that the state of exception, which was meant to be a provisional measure, became in the course of the twentieth century a normal paradigm of government. He ultimately arrives at original ideas about the future of democracy and casts a new light on the hidden relationship that ties law to violence. Writing nothing less than the history of the state of exception in its various national contexts throughout Western Europe and the USA, Agamben uses the work of Schmitt as a foil for his own reflections and those of Derrida, Benjamin and Arendt. Agamben writes a history of the development of actual states of exception in the nineteenth century and beyond. He argues that it is only with democracy that we get the notion of ‘exception’, as individual sovereigns simply wielded power without recourse to breaking free of law in a way that required consulting other legally constituted bodies. As the French and American revolutions spread the idea of democratic legitimacy, they also spread the idea of the moment outside of that legitimacy. The moment of both sovereignty and exception is when we have to ask “who is competent to act when the legal system fails to answer the question of competence”. States of emergency are merely the marker of this permanent capacity and need for the system to deconstruct itself, underpinning the rest of
juridical and political order: “Sovereign is he who decides on the exception.” Agamben argues that the political life is based on the possibility of punishment and specifically the possibility of being killed: “There is no clearer way to say that the first foundation of political life a life that may be killed, which is politicized through its very capacity to be killed”.\textsuperscript{41} Sovereignty is the possibility of doing what is generally excluded (killing) to what is normally excluded (humans as animals). Both the ones who can be killed and the sovereign are outside the Law just as they are at its very core.

At the other end lies \textit{homo sacer}. This person can be killed but are not eligible for sacrifice. They have become nothing. They maintain a residue of humanity. They are the ones that can be killed. We can see how this plays out in the killing of the Nazi camps. One’s biology is subject to control through the notion of life being sacred. Agamben sets himself against ambiguous notions of the sacred which emerged in late nineteenth-century anthropology. He considers only notion of ‘sacred’ from Roman law, where the sacred/\textit{sacer} is the one who can be killed, who is outside the Law. Western society, as it has developed from Judaic, Greek and Roman traditions. He dismisses other conceptions of sacrificial sacreds. In general, human life has not been thought of as sacred, but medical and legal developments have brought about such a thought. Agamben’s point is that to think of life as sacred means treating the people involved as only life – as life that must be saved, rather than in their political/judicial contexts. All of modern life tends toward biopolitics and the reduction to ‘bare life’ – whether through mass killings, rights and ‘saving’ people, or medical technology – ‘all life becomes sacred and all politics becomes the exception’. Humans become totally subject to rules and regulations, subject to exclusion, and less and less subject as \textit{subjects} within the realm of law.

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Homo Sacer}, p. 89.
translated as *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive. Homo sacer III* 43 (1999), the third volume in Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* series, turns to the subject of the Nazi concentration camp where exception becomes the rule and all become bare life. Agamben rethinks the Shoah and rejects the term Holocaust by arguing that it is a massive category mistake, implying a holiness of sacrifice rather than murder on a colossal scale. He provides a silent critique of the principles underpinning the Levinasian/Derridean account of ethics and their relation to the Holocaust. With regard to the question of ethics, *Remnants of Auschwitz* talks about the act of witnessing as a perpetual commentary on testimony. In the preface Agamben indicates that there has been a tendency to either oversimplify or obscure the question of Auschwitz: “The only way forward lies in investigating the space between these two options.” His aim here is only to understand the small aspect of the Holocaust, which is the testimonials written by those who survived it: “For my own part, I will consider myself content with my work if, in attempting to locate the place and theme of testimony, I have erected some signposts allowing future cartographers of the new ethical territory to orient themselves.” 44 This territory is tied to the question of language bearing witness to the very idea of the human. Agamben closely examines the literatures of the survivors of Auschwitz, probing the philosophical and ethical questions raised by their testimony. He notes that the Holocaust narratives are dominated by survivors who feel a sense of shame for having survived. They bear witness but to something it is impossible to bear witness to. They didn’t suffer the ultimate injustice (death), but survived and can never do justice to the experience of

those who cannot bear witness. Auschwitz makes witnessing impossible. Bearing witness and the problems of bearing witness are the basis for Agamben’s intervention in ethical debates. His comments on testimony made it first necessary to interrogate the essential lacuna at the core of testimony. In order listen to what was absent, Agamben had to clear away the doctrines which since Auschwitz have been advanced in the name of ethics. On Sereny’s narrative of the camp, he comments: “it marks the definitive ruin of his capacity to bear witness, the desperate collapse “that darkness” on itself. The Greek hero has left us forever; he can no longer bear the witness for us in any way. After Auschwitz, it is not possible to use a tragic paradigm in ethics”.45 Like Adorno’s view of poetry, Agamben observes that after Auschwitz, it is not possible to use a tragic paradigm in ethics. The process of bearing witness produces shame rather than guilt in subjectivity. The narratives of Primo Levi and Robert Antelme bear this experience of shame. For Agamben, ethics is a philosophical space and guilt is not in the territory of ethics but that of law.46 The difficulty of bearing witness is in fact the failure of language to communicate the experience of the camp. But it does not mean that Agamben endorses Adorno’s famous statement about the barbarity of poetry after Auschwitz. Instead, Auschwitz brings into relief the necessity of poetry/poetics. Hence ethics becomes a question of language than law. For Agamben, in the testimonies of survivors, we should look for the moment in which language breaks down, becomes inoperative and cannot bear witness to anything other than “that which does not have language”. He gives various examples of such inoperativity in language in the narratives of survivors. In the specific example of Primo Levi, he refers to Levi’s description of the babbling of Hubrinek as “a nobody, a child of death, a child of

Auschwitz”. The child, on its death bed, repeatedly utters a word called mass-klo or matisklo which those around it cannot understand even after great effort. According to Agamben, Levi understood that this word should remain without definition, yet paradoxically Levi saw himself as bearing ‘witness through these words of mine’\textsuperscript{47} to the memory of Hubrinek. The case reveals for Agamben that ethics, bearing witness, is about registering the inability to bear witness to anything other than language: “The language of testimony is a language that no longer signifies and that, in not signifying, advances into what is without language, to the point of taking on a different significance – that of the complete witness, that of he, who by definition cannot bear witness.”\textsuperscript{48} The representation of the Holocaust demands a new language of ethics which is precisely, silence. Agamben’s purpose is to think the Nazi concentration camps in a way that refuses the mysticism of the ‘unsayable’ he sees at work in other theoretical writings: “But why unsayable? Why confer on extermination the prestige of the mystical?”\textsuperscript{49} Agamben does not do justice to the position he criticises, but he adopts a convincing position from which to account for ‘unsayability’ as part of a wider situation occurring in the shape of the concentration camp. In his examination of Robert Antelme’s memoir \textit{The Human Race}, Agamben focuses on a particular incident of a young man from Bologna who blushes when he is indiscriminately pulled out of a crowd to be shot. The young man’s embarrassment at being shot seems first unusual. Antelme and people around him read the pink in the face of the young man as a universal condition: “Ready to die – that, I think, we are, ready to be chosen at random for death – no. If the finger designates me, it shall come as a surprise, and my

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, p. 38.\\textsuperscript{48} Ibid, p. 39.\\textsuperscript{49} Ibid, p. 32.
face will become pink, like the Italian’s.” Agamben describes his flush as “a mute apostrophe flying through time to reach us, to bear witness to him”. It is an act of failing to bear witness, failing to communicate an experience. It is equated by Agamben with his concept of shame as what lies at the limit of expression in language. The flush is a shame of having to die, of being destroyed so easily. The relationship between shame and language, the movement from the flush of the young man from Bologna to the flying apostrophe, not only provokes our thinking about the act of writing but also provides the essence of Agamben’s concept of new ethics. Ethics is an attempt to encounter the “homeland of humanity” by turning towards the glossolalic potentiality of the human being. As Agamben states, “the subject has no other content than its own desubjectivation; it becomes witness to its own disorder, its own oblivion as a subject. This double movement, which is both subjectivation and desubjectivation, is shame.” Auschwitz is a moment of extreme desubjectivation and resubjectivation. The true challenge of testimony is to “establish oneself in aliving language as if it were dead, or in a dead language as if it were living”. This attempt to bear witness through the presentation of language as language is a means of reading Holocaust literature and of seeing the possibility of life beyond the desujectivation of the biopolitical state.

The most striking feature of Remnants of Auschwitz is Agamben’s discussion of the figure of the Muselmann in the camp. Muselmann (muslim) enter into the zone of indistinction between human and non-human. They are physically alive but dead and

51 Remnants of Auschwitz, p. 104.
52 Ibid, p. 106.
54 It is literary translated as ‘the Muslim’, but its exact meaning is not known. They are the ones who suffered from extreme malnutrition and hence became the living dead of the camps. Being physically disintegrated and mentally oblivious, they scour the ground in search of food and give from a distance the impression of a Muslim man at prayer. According to Agamben, “the most likely explanation of the term can be found in the literal meaning of the Arabic word ‘muslim’: the one who submits unconditionally to the will of god” (RA: 45). The word first appears in Homo Sacer: Sacred Power and Bare Life.
resigned to fate. They have neither seen nor known anything. Therefore, it is difficult to become their witness and since they are dead, they cannot tell their story. It embodies the way in which sovereign power works to produce forms of bare life. The *Muselmann* is the camp’s *homo sacer*. As a form of *homo sacer*, the figure represents the product of the biopolitical machine and indicates its logic of inclusive exclusion. *Homo Sacer: Sacred Power and Bare Life* was concerned with looking at the production of bare life, while *Remnants of Auschwitz* looks at the problems of attempting to bear witness to these figures. He requires the witness who survives to become a witness to this impossibility of witnessing that the *Muselmann* is. The witness is never present, but is always an other, even in the case of someone who recovers from being a *Muselmann* and survives the camps. Witnessing is not only about recounting the horrors of Nazi industrialized mass murder, but is a testimony about what it is to be human. Witnessing implies surviving, that something remains (translated as ‘remnant’ in English) and “survival designates the pure and simple continuation of bare life with respect to truer and more human life. In another sense, survival has a positive sense and refers – as in Des Pres – to the person who, in fighting against death, has survived the inhuman”.

Agamben raises the issue of language in terms of representing the unrepresentable experience of the *Muselmann*. Hence, for Agamben, ethics becomes a question of representation: how to write the Holocaust? As in earlier works, humanity’s relation to language as a limit condition is in play, as he focuses on the figure of the *Muselmann* – the prisoner who gives up and seems to be living a minimal animal existence, bereft of humanity. The *Muselmann* is the true witness of the camp, truer in one way than those who survive with their humanity intact. The *Muselmann* leaves threshold of language and sociality behind, becoming a

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55 *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 133.
risk to fellow prisoners, shunned by all. It is from them that we can begin to understand what Auschwitz does to humans, and what it tells us about ‘the human condition’ in general: “in Auschwitz ethics begins precisely at the point where the Muselmann, the ‘complete witness’, makes it forever impossible to distinguish between man and non-human”. Agamben reveals historical truth which occurs in specific times, politics and context. The Nazi regime, in which the camps were the most extreme element, turned the ‘state of exception’ where the normal legal system is suspended into a permanent condition. The Muselmann is the ultimate exception, the human being taken out of the human, a product of the state of exception, the product of the general suspension of law as the sovereign exercise of power from 1933 to 1945.

The Time That Remains can be read as part of a diptych with Homo Sacer: in both humans must come to nothingness and how it is structured historically, politically and theologically. Agamben clarifies the nature of the messianic and the political and ethical important of the messianic vocation. He defines messianic vocation as “a zone of absolute indiscernibility between transcendence and immanence, between this world and the future world.” He refers to the Biblical figure of St Paul and extends Benjamin’s exploration of the meaning of ‘messianic time’. St Paul suspended Jewish law by rendering it inoperative which is described by the concept “remnant”. Used in relation to the messianic time, the remnant does posit an apocalyptic messianism, time after time (final destruction), but as one existing within regular time. Messianic time is not just about waiting for the future messiah who inhabits a time in which it is almost impossible to dwell. It is a time where nothing comes to be, but all the past is made present: “the time that time takes to come to an end”. Time contracts, becomes an endless moment of all time occurring at once, like

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56 The Time That Remains, p. 25.
Nietzsche’s eternal return. The conception of messianic time refers to how Jewish law pertained only to Jews. From Paul onward, the world is split into Jew and non-Jew’ but Jew and ‘non-non-Jew’. Everyone is defined only through negativities. Those awaiting in messianic time become a remnant: neither one thing nor another, neither subject to law nor fully outside, but something less.

Thus, Agamben’s Homo Sacer series raises the question of ethics, which is a matter of understanding the foundation of human shame. On one hand, ethics, when faced with the question of the greatest evil (Holocaust), is a matter of attempting the impossible task of remembering and representing those to whom the greatest injustice was done. On the other, ethics is the task of attempting to construct a new idea of community. Agamben makes a critique of Western politics with an eye toward what he terms the “community that comes.” This community is a rejection of all forms of identity, a community made of “whatever being” which will have no form of commonality except being in common. This community is not futural; it is not going to come, but is always coming. The means by which the coming community will emerge are related to the inoperativity within the political, social and cultural structures of the present. Inoperativity refers to the ways in which these structures fail to work. The structures are characterized by paradoxes and tensions that produce figures such as homo sacer in the case of politics. Agamben focuses upon the inoperativity of the system and the sites and finds it necessary to force them to breaking point. One of Agamben’s favorite figures who produces greater inoperativity in a system is Melville’s “Bartelby, the Scrivener” who, when asked to perform tasks in the legal office in which he is employed responds, “I would prefer not to.” His preference, which is importantly not a refusal, suspends the logic upon which a series of ideas, such as work, law, action, etc. are based and becomes instead an instance of
potentiality. This is a key idea for Agamben, for whom human potentiality is not strictly a question of passing through into actuality, of a potential to do, but also to not do. The idea of not doing, of rendering inoperative is the driving force behind Agamben’s community.

**AGAMBEN AND AESTHETICS**

Agamben’s work in the domains of literature and art should not be seen as secondary. Like language, politics, religion and law, literature is also an important facet of his work. Agamben often turns to literature to explain his theoretical concepts. But in doing so, he does not subordinate literature to philosophy. He is an original reader of literary texts and understands their historical, aesthetic and political meanings and effects. Agamben has a genuine concern for art and literature which is visible in his personal canon of writers and artists like Dante, Holderlin, Kafka, Pessoa, Caproni, etc. The canon consists of largely male European writers who emerge from late medieval period, late nineteenth century or early twentieth century and who struggle with questions of religion and faith. They also occupy liminal and inbetween position.\(^{57}\) He uses literary figures and characters as well as artistic examples to intervene in a variety of debates and destabilize the critical assumptions that may color the dominant understanding of what philosophy may be. He finds philosophy everywhere and seeks to erode the distinction between politics, philosophy and poetics. Agamben’s idea of poetics is of a general schema of representation which stretches across the arts. Aesthetics/poetics is a representation of language which works to disrupt and arrest the uses of language by calling into question its dominant language. This representation also aims at “the political task of the coming generation”.

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\(^{57}\) Agamben uses the concept of 'poetic atheology' to describe such inbetween or liminal states.

*Lúomo senza contenuto*, Agamben’s first monograph, was originally published in Italian in 1970 and republished in 1994, and translated into English as *The Man Without Content* 58 (1999). Agamben views here that the phenomenon of modernity brought a fundamental shift in collective practices, knowledge and identities. He examines the status of art in the modern era and regards modern art as nihilistic. 59 He takes seriously Hegel’s claim that art has exhausted its spiritual vocation, that it is no longer through art that Spirit principally comes to knowledge of itself. He argues that Hegel by no means proclaimed the indefinite continuation of art in a “self-annuling” mode. Agamben probes the meaning, aesthetics and historical consequences of that self-annulment. He argues that the birth of modern aesthetics is the result of a series of

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59 Friedrich Nietzsche used the term nihilism to mean the rejection of prevailing moral and religious beliefs, the emptying out of or the lack of values. It denies that one perspective or approach should be given celebrated over other. It took two forms: passive and active. Passive nihilism was characterised by decline or decadence, a weakness of will, while active nihilism by a strengthening of a ‘will to power’. In modernity, passive nihilism, which seeks to shatter and destroy the very institutions of art and aesthetics, needs to be overcome by active nihilism, which will unleash a dynamism that will return art to its originary purpose.
schisms – for example, between artist and spectator, between genius and taste, and between form and matter. Modernity created a rupture in the relation between art, spectator and the artist which needs to be overcome in order to reacquire an original condition. The nihilism of modernity provides the condition for art to ‘reacquire its original stature and once again become meaningful in and of itself, instead acquiring meaning through the limited discourses that prescribe our experience of art. Modern art is defined by “aesthetic judgement” and “artistic subjectivity without content”. 60

They deny the two originary elements of the work of art: the ability to communicate without aesthetic judgement and the unity between art and world. Agamben’s study of art is concerned with the Romantic idea of art which, under the influence of the Enlightenment, gave freedom and autonomy to the artist. It led to artists becoming obsessed with the work and its relation to the self rather than with the world outside the work of art. The development of the modern notion of taste (tied to the development of Enlightenment rationality) and the modern notion of aesthetics worked to obscure the origin of the artwork and our experience of artwork. Taste becomes a collective measure of a response to art. We longer respond to something intrinsic in the artwork or fail to isolate its kernel which contains its qualities. In our world of crass entertainment and spectacle we can see this phenomenon in which our bad taste as viewers is reflected in the works of art we consume. Taste destroys judgement and makes it impossible to look at the work, except through collective lenses. In this contemporary world of bad taste, the artist removes himself from the world of his viewers: “The artist, faced with a spectator who becomes more similar to an evanescent ghost the more refined his taste becomes, moves in an increasingly free and rarefied atmosphere and begins the voyage that will take him from the live tissue

60 The Man Without Content, p. 37.
of society to the hyperborean no-man’s-land of aesthetics…” The vocation of the artist in this no-man’s-land has been transformed from artisanal creativity to idle emptiness. The emptiness is derived from the split between the creative-formal principle and content. The artist ties to the formal pursuit over content and tries to find content in the formal features of the aesthetic: “The artist is the man without content, who has no other identity than a perpetual emerging out of the nothingness of expression and no other ground than this incomprehensible station on this side of himself.” This potent image of the artist as the man without content accounts for modern art’s drive to destroy the figure of the artist. The institutionalized nature of taste and the split between art and world have led art into a state of nihilism. The development of modern aesthetics, in an effort to uncover the idea of disinterested beauty, led to a passionate, deeply interested idea of the work of art which was self-reflexively concerned with the position of the artist rather than with the spectator. The move to the modern idea of disinterested aesthetic judgment would have seemed ridiculous in ancient Greek world. Plato perceived the potential threat of poets and artist to destroy his ideal city (the Republic) and hence banished them out of it: “the power of art over the soul seemed to him so great that he thought it could by itself destroy the very foundations of the city; but nonetheless, while he was forced to banish it he did so reluctantly”. Modern art is ineffectual in arousing the divine terror suspected by Plato. The role of art has changed completely today and it is the artist who has the most moving and impassioned experience of art. It has moved away from its originary purpose in its inability to represent a unified image. Agamben refers to the

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61 Ibid, p. 16.
63 Ibid, p. 4.
example of the medieval Wunderkammer as symbolic of the premodern understanding of the work of art. The cabinet was a collection of a king such as paintings, natural and cultural objects such as manuscripts, unicorn horns, stuffed birds, canoes, etc., placed in the exhibition room. As a microcosm, it provided a mirror of the larger divine concept of the world. Art was designed to reflect the world in accordance with a larger more unified world view. Agamben finds a profound non-relation between this medieval idea of art and the modern art in the museum/gallery: “… the work of art is no longer, at this point, the essential measure of man’s dwelling on earth, which, precisely because it builds and makes possible the act of dwelling, has neither an autonomous sphere nor a particular identity, but is a compendium and reflection of the entire human world. On the contrary art has now built its own world for itself”. Therefore, it is unable to reach out beyond the world of the artist. In modernity, passive nihilism, which seeks to shatter and destroy the very institutions of art and aesthetics, needs to be overcome by active nihilism, which will unleash a dynamism that will return art to its originary purpose. The last chapter of the book “The Melancholy Angel” offers a dazzling interpretation of Albrecht Durer’s (1471–1528) Melencolia I (1514) in its own terms. Agamben links an overcoming of art to Benjamin’s work on history. A returning of art to its originary purpose is figured here as something like the advent of messianic time. According to Agamben, the destruction of cultural transmissibility as the dominant feature of modernity has led to the creation of modern aesthetics. Art, literature and culture are no longer the space in which a culture is able to transmit its own history. The fracturing between form and content which has led to this lack of transmissibility needs to be sutured in order for mankind

64 Its literal meaning is a ‘cabinet of wonder’ and has a distant relation to the ‘cabinet of curiosities’.
65 The Man Without Content, p. 33.
to ‘appropriate his historical space, the concrete space of his action and knowledge’.

Art must approach the realm of myth and turn history into myth at this point. It will bring art to a point where the object and the means of transmission are unified. This is not a return to a previous mythic ideal from which art had detached itself in modernity. Instead, Agamben views it as a new ‘poetic process’ in which “art succeeds in opening the very space in which he [man] can take the original measure of his action”. Art then must become a poetics which provides us with a broader representation form which works to undo the schisms of modernity and prepare the ground for a future community. This kind of poetics appears in Agamben’s later work. Thus, Agamben offers an imaginative reinterpretation of the history of aesthetic theory from Kant to Heidegger through Hegel’s concept of self-annulment and offers original perspectives on phenomena such as the rise of modern museum, the relation between art and terror, the natural affinity between ‘good taste’ and its perversion, and kitsch as the inevitable destiny of art in the modern era. Therefore, *The Man Without Content* is an important contribution to art, art history, history of modern aesthetics and popular culture.

*Stanze: La parola e il fantasma nella cultura occidentale* (1977), translated as *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (1993), is Agamben’s first major contribution to the philosophy of aesthetics. At the invitation of Frances Yates who was known through Italo Calvino, Agamben went to London in the Fall of 1974 and conducted research for this book at the library of the Warburg Institute for a year. *Stanzas* begins with a refrain which is repeated throughout his body of work: poetry and philosophy are intrinsically connected. The connection is in terms of fulfilling the

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absent conditions of the other: “the scission of the word is construed to mean that
poetry possesses its object without knowing it, while philosophy knows its object
without possessing it. In the West, the word is thus divided between a word that is
unaware, as if fallen from the sky, and enjoys the object of knowledge by representing
it in beautiful form, and a word that has all seriousness and consciousness for itself but
does not enjoy its object because it does not know how to represent it.”69 He argues
that to the extent Western culture accepts the distinction between philosophy and
poetry, knowledge founders on a division in which “philosophy has failed to elaborate
a proper language. . . and poetry has developed neither a method nor self-
consciousness”.70 The urgent task of thought of criticism, Agamben says, is to
rediscover “the unity of our own fragmented world.” The modern split between poetry
and philosophy produces criticism. Criticism is “born at the moment the scission
reaches its extreme point” and “it neither represents nor knows, but knows the
representation”.71 Criticism is situated at the point at which language is split from itself
and its task is to point toward a “unitary status for the utterance” in which criticism
“neither represents nor knows, but knows the representation”.72 Thus, against both
philosophy and poetry, criticism “opposes the enjoyment of what cannot be possessed
and the possession of what cannot be enjoyed”.73 Agamben regarded Benjamin’s
Trauerspiel as the only book which deserves to be called critical in the twentieth
century. Benjamin’s project was tied to the Jena Romanticism in their attempt to
develop a form of critical poetic practice in which the poetic fragment enacted a model
of critical reflection. In the manner of Benjamin, criticism is a form of critical

69 Stanzas, p. xvii.
70 xvii
71 Ibid, p. xvii.
72 xvii
73 xvii
engagement that believes that knowledge emerges through the representational form. Agamben is not interested in returning to a point where the two opposing fields of poetry and philosophy can be reunited but seeks to explore the points where the medium and the production of that split becomes most pronounced. He calls it an ‘erotics’ of the suspension between the two. For Agamben, in any reading of a literary text, the connections among poetry, philosophy and criticism should be understood first. The proper critical method of reading literary texts does not profess knowledge about it but instead, through criticism, tries to represent its truth. Agamben’s criticism of literary texts is oblique, and therefore demands explication.

*Il linguaggio e la morte: Un seminario sul luogo dela negatività* (1982), translated as *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*74 (2006) examines the relationship between philosophy and literature and offers a rigorous reading of numerous philosophical and poetic works to examine how these issues have been traditionally explored. Having explored negativity at the heart of thought and being, Agamben turns to the twentieth century Provençal poetry to ask whether we can uncover “another experience of language that does not rest on an unspeakable foundation”.75 Agamben often explores etymology and medieval and classical texts in order to find the ways and the means of reconstructing and explaining the problems of the present in those obscure works of the past. *Language and Death* presents the Provençal poets as writing on the cusp when poetry was still concerned with the topics, the ancient rhetorical practice whereby poetry was constructed utilizing the rhetorical places of language, considering language itself as already given, and the more modern notion of poetry as expressing a lived reality. He examines two poems to

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75 *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, p. 66.
demonstrate how they present the “originary event of its own word as nothing”\textsuperscript{76}. The analysis of these two poems is complex and demonstrates the importance of close reading in Agamben’s work. Agamben investigates that poetry, like philosophy, struggles to conceptualize the place of language as anything other than negativity. He returns more than once to the relationship between poetry and philosophy in his entire work. It is between these two discourses that he seeks to discover a new ethos or dwelling place: “Perhaps only a language in which the pure prose of philosophy would intervene at a certain point to break apart the verse of the poetic world, and in which the verse of poetry would intervene to bend the prose philosophy into a ring, would be the true human language.”\textsuperscript{77} Agamben’s allusion to the collapse of the distinction between these two practices is coupled with a turn to poetry in his conclusion “Excursus 7 (after the final day)”. In the penultimate section of the book “The Eighth Day”, he suggests that one way of thinking beyond the horizon of metaphysics is to begin a ‘liquidation’ of the mystical foundation of our entire culture. He concludes this section by quoting one poem by Paul Klee\textsuperscript{78} (1879–1940) and another by Giorgio Caproni\textsuperscript{79} (1912–1990) which talk of a return to a place where one has never been and that has never existed. This image of returning to a space we never knew is designed to be indicative of how we can imagine a sense of returning to a land of language we have never known, yet which seems uncannily familiar. Agamben concludes the book with an idea of a social praxis and speech, contained in his brief poetic Epilogue, dedicated to Caproni. Its closing lines state Agamben’s principle of new ethical community: “so language is our voice, our language. As you now speak, that is

\textsuperscript{76} Language and Death: The Place of Negativity, p. 74.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid, p. 78.

\textsuperscript{78} German artist and critic

\textsuperscript{79} Italian poet and translator
ethics”. Agamben argues that the human being is not just “speaking” and “mortal” but irreducibly “social” and “ethical”.

In Idea Della Prosa (1985), translated as Idea of Prose81 (1995) takes up the question of the distinction between philosophy and poetry through a series of fragments on poetry, prose, language, politics, justice, love, shame, etc. Agamben undermines a difference between poetry and philosophy by breaking apart the strictures of logos. Agamben brings into play the strategies of the apology, the aphorism, the short story, the fable, the riddle and other simple forms that are no longer used, in order to seek a new form or prose for thought. The task of the simple forms is to bring out an experience/awakening rather than attempting to put forward a theory. It is in this sense of thought contending with the exposition of an Idea that the problem of “thought” becomes in these treatises, a poetic problem. These are little ideas or forms that, in their brevity, compress that which cannot in any way be forgotten, since according to the platonic admonition, it would be put “the shortest possible measure”.

Categorie italiane: Studi di poetica (1996), translated as The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics82 (1999) discusses the relationship between poetry and prose and provides important readings of a number of Italian poets, most notably Dante. The book emerges out of a series of Agamben’s discussions with the Italian writers Italo Calvino and Claudi Rugafiori in the 1970s on the idea of creating a number of ‘Italian categories’ which could be used to examine the polar concepts that dominated the Italian culture. However, the programme was never completed. In The End of the Poem, Agamben attempts to grapple with a number of oppositions which dominate

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80 Language and Death: The Place of Negativity, p. 108.
Italian poetry from Dante through to the twentieth century poet Giorgio Caproni. He undertakes the task of rethinking the nature of poetic language and of articulating relationships among theology, poetry and philosophy in a tradition of literature initiated by Dante Alighieri. The book opens with a discussion of just how Dante’s poem is a “comedy”. Agamben presents “literature” as a set of formal or linguistic genres that discuss or develop theological issues at a certain distance from the discourse of theology. This distance begins to appear in Virgil and Ovid, but it becomes decisive in Dante and in his decision to write in the vernacular. His vernacular Italian reaches back through classical allusion to the Latin that was in his day the language of theology, but does so with a difference. It is no accident that in the Commedia Virgil is Dante’s guide. The End of the Poem concludes with a discussion of the “ends of poetry” in a variety of senses: enjambment at the ends of lines, the concluding lines of the poems, and the end of poetry as a mode of writing this sort of literature. Of course, to have poetry “end” does not mean that people stop writing it, but that literature passes into a period in which it is concerned with its own ending, with its own bounds and limits, historical and otherwise. Poetry is its example in which enjambment is explored by Agamben as a key feature of poetry, a feature which distinguishes it from its other, prose. Enjambment is the poet’s attempt to retain the distinction between poetry and prose. Enjambment is the name for the sentence, or syntactical construction that carries over or continues beyond a rhyme. Hence there is a tension between the meaning of the sentence (syntax) and form (metre of the rhyme). Agamben takes Paul Valéry’s definition of poetry as a “prolonged hesitation between sound and sense (Le Poème, hésitation prolongée entre le sons et le Sens).” He states: “Poetry will then be defined as that discourse in which it is possible to oppose a

83 §8 The End of the Poem in The End of the Poem, p.
metrical limit – which can, as such, also fall in the context of prose – to a syntactical limit; prose will be defined as the discourse in which this is not possible”. 84 Agamben therefore reads poetry as having an anxiety about the end of the poem, the point where poetry must fall back into prose as the tension between meaning and form collapse back into one another (sound and sense coincide). The identity of the poem as a discourse is entwined with prolonging the opposition between sound and meaning, therefore “the last verse of the poem is not a verse”. In that sense, the end of the poem becomes the point of ‘undecidability’ between poetry and prose and constitutes almost a crisis of the poem in which “sound is alone to be ruined in the abyss of sense”. 85 But this does not happen for Agamben. Sound and sense do not coincide, instead there is silence, an ‘endless falling’ in which poetry can fulfill its task: “the poem thus reveals the goal of its proud strategy: to let language finally communicate itself, without remaining unsaid in what is said”. 86 Thus, the goal of poetry is to expose the nature of language by drawing attention to its function as a “communication without communicability”. Poetry is the means of responding with its language, communication without necessary meaning as the only answer to the deafening silence of the Voice. Agamben focuses mostly on Italian, French and German poetry and his study of poets include Paul Valéry, Dante, Giorgio Caproni, Stephane Mallarmé, Paul Celan, Rainer Maria Rilke and Friedrich Hölderlin. He rarely takes any example of English poetry except that of the American poet Williams Carlos Williams who composes poetry in the tradition of Poe, Mallarme, etc. Though most of the essays make specific reference to various authors of the Italian literary tradition such as Dante, Polifilo, Pascoli, Delfini and Caproni, they transcend the confines of Italian

84 Ibid, p. 34.
86 Ibid, p. 115.
literature and engage with several other literary and philosophical authors like Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Boethius, the Provençal poets, Mallarmé, Hölderlin, etc.

La Potenza del pensiero: Saggi e conferenze (2005), edited by Daniel Heller-Roazen and published as Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy in 1999, collects fifteen major philosophical essays on the theme of potentiality written by Agamben over a period of more than twenty years. The whole book is organized around three fundamental concepts: (a) language, (b) history and (c) potentiality.

Agamben understands potentiality as a fundamental problem of metaphysics, ethics and the philosophy of language. According to Agamben, potentiality is the principle that one always has the potential to do something, but whether one does it or not is another matter. He investigates its philosophical history in order to outline the way in which suspending between the potential to do and not to do can disrupt forms of authority and control. As an opposition to actuality, the principle of potentiality was first formulated by Aristotle in two forms: generic and specific. The generic applies to all of us, while the specific relates to someone having a specific set of skills which will allow for the potential to do. Using the Aristotlian image of thought as the empty writing tablet, Agamben defines the potentiality of human beings as characterized by their impotentiality: “Potentiality, which turns back on itself, is an absolute writing that no one writes: a potential to be written, which is written by its own potential not to be written, a tabula rasa that suffers its own receptivity and can therefore not not-write itself.” Writing draws attention to these paradoxes or absences of meaning. The greatest of potentialities is fluid, dynamic and in a process of ‘becoming’.

In his introduction, Daniel Heller-Roazen situates Agamben’s work with respect to both the

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88 De Anima, nous (intellect) is like “a writing tablet on which nothing is actually written.”
89 Potentialities, p. 216.
90 Gilles Deleuze
history of philosophy and contemporary European thought. The essays that follow articulate a series of theoretical confrontations with privileged figures in the history of philosophy, politics and criticism such as Aristotle, Benjamin, Deleuze, Derrida, Hegel, Heidegger, Plato, Schmitt, Spinoza, Warburg, etc. To illustrate his notion of potentiality, Agamben examines Hermann Melville’s short story “Bartleby the Scrivener”. Bartleby is the exemplary figure of potentiality who works as a scribe in a legal office on Wall Street. When asked to undertake a number of tasks, apart from copying documents, he responds ‘I would prefer not to’. While this response enrages his employer, Bartleby remains steadfast in his response to all entreaties to perform any task beyond that of copying. He even refuses copying which causes his employer (symbol of law) so much consternation he is forced to quit his offices and move to another building. The new tenant finds Bartleby in the same position and he again repeats the phrase ‘I would prefer not to’ when asked by them to leave the offices. He is eventually arrested as a vagrant and put in prison where he ‘prefers not to’ eat and at the close of the story the narrator informs us of his death. In his essay ‘Bartleby, or On Contingency,’ Agamben considers Bartleby’s response as the epitome of potentiality: “The formula that he so obstinately repeats destroys all possibility of constructing a relation between being able and willing, between potential absoluta and potentia ordinata. It is the formula of potentiality”.

Through Bartleby, Agamben is able to provide us with a relatively straightforward example of what this philosophical claim look like through turning to a literary experiment to exemplify potentiality. Potentiality is about to not do as well as to do. The figure like Bartleby hold important place in Agamben’s body of work. Towards the end of the story, the narrator hears a report that Bartleby had once worked in the Dead Letter Office in Washington, a job

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91 Potentialities, p. 255.
which left his acute preference: “Conceive of a man by nature and misfortune prone to
a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of
continually handling these dead letters, assorting them for the flames?” 92 It is the final
image of Bartleby which underpins the logic of potentiality. He says:

Sometimes from out of the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring – the finger it was meant for,
perhaps, moulders in the grave; a bank-note sent in swiftest charity – he whom it would relieve, nor
eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those who dies despairing; hope for those who dies unhoping;
good tidings for those who dies stifled by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed
to death.

Thus, potentiality is also about the potential not to be written. The Dead Letter Office
indicates potentiality: it is the letters not sent, “the cipher of joyous events that never
took place. What took place was instead the opposite possibility”. 93 In this way,
Bartleby marks potentiality not in terms of what could happen but one who comes not
“like Jesus to redeem what was, but to save what was not”. 94 Agamben’s
understanding of Messianic is an attempt to save what has never happened, “saved in
being irredeemable”. 95

In Profanazioni (2005), translated as Profanations 96 (2007), Agamben
assembles some of his most pivotal essays on photography, novel and cinema. It is a
meditation on memory and oblivion, on what is lost and what remains. In the ten
essays of the book, Agamben rethinks approaches to a series of literary and
philosophical problems: the relation between genius, ego and theories of subjectivity;
the problem of messianic time as explicated in both images and lived experience;
parody as a literary paradigm and the potential magic to provide an ethical canon. The

93 Potentialities, p. 235.
94 Ibid, p. 270.
95 Ibid, p. 271.
variety of topics and themes addressed in *Profanations* attest to the very creativity of Agamben’s singular mode of thought and his persistent pursuit to grasp the act of witnessing – the talking cricket in *Pinocchio*; “helpers” in Kafka’s novels and the pictorial representations of the Last Judgment, the anonymous female faces and Orson Welles’s infamous object of obsession Rosebud. In the central essay of this book “In Praise of Profanity,” Agamben confronts the question of profanity as the crucial political task of the moment. He demonstrates that sacrifice is the threshold that divides the sphere of the humans and the gods, the practice that produces the very division. But if sacrifice marks the movement from the sacred to the profane, then it is the point at which the distinction between the two can be rendered inoperative, returning what was once sacred back to the common use of mankind. Agamben gives the example of a sacrifice in which part of an animal will be transformed from the human to the divine sphere. To appease the gods it is necessary that part of the internal organs of the victim would be reserved for the gods, the rest consumed by human beings. But if human beings touched those organs, then they, contaminated by them, would be returned to the human sphere. Sacrifice as a threshold activity becomes the point at which separation and exclusion can occur, but it always has the potential to be returned to the sphere of the profane. An act of resistance to every form of separation, the concept of profanation, as both “return to common usage” and “sacrifice,” reorients perceptions of how power, consumption, and use interweave to produce an urgent political modality and desire: to profane the unprofanable. In *Profanations*, Agamben provides not only a new and potent theoretical model but also a writerly style that itself forges inescapable links between literature, politics and philosophy. Chapter ten of the book entitled “The Six Most Beautiful Minutes in the History of Cinema” describes the exposure of the illusory nature as the ultimate task
of cinema. Here Agamben refers to the clip from Orson Welles’s incomplete film of *Don Quixote*. In this version Don Quixote and Sancho Panza find themselves in modern America of 1950s. The scene takes place in a cinema in which Sancho Panza is watching a film with a young girl, while Don Quixote stands to the side. Once the film begins, Don Quixote, roused into action by the violence in front of him, feels compelled to perform his Quixotic duty and attacks the cinema scene, slashing at it until there is a gaping hole in the screen and we can see the frame upon which it is hung. The attack on the screen is Quixote’s chivalric attempt to protect a young lady, revealing a gap between image and reality that he cannot see. Following his account of the scene, Agamben asks, “What are we to do with our Imaginations?”  

For Agamben we must realize that the young girl we hope to save, Quixotic in our imaginings, can never love us. Our imagination must be exposed as ‘empty and unfulfilled’ in order that we can begin to reconstruct a new form of image, a new poetics that denies imagination as a distortion of the here and now, as cinema so often is. In his another example of the shattering of illusion in cinema, Agamben cites the moment in Ingmar Bergman’s film *Summer with Monika* (1952) when the filmstar Harriet Andersson (1932–) suddenly stares directly into the camera, at us for a few seconds, which encapsulates profanation. Bergman informs, “Here for the first time in the history of cinema, there is established a shameless and direct contact with the spectator.”  

Agamben views that this technique has been now perfectly made banal by pornography as “pornstars now look resolutely into the camera, showing that they are

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97 *Profanations*, p. 93.
98 Ibid, p. 94.
99 The original Swedish title of the film is *Sommaren med Monika* which is an adaptation of Swedish writer Per Anders Fogelström’s (1917–1998) novel of the same title.
100 *Profanations*, p.89.
more interested in the spectator than in their partners.”\textsuperscript{101} The mask created by the image of the spectacular body is separated from reality. Pornography is now rendered unprofanable and it is the task of the cinema to attempt the profaning of the unprofanable. The mediated forms of advertising and pornography, writes Agamben in \textit{The Coming Community}, have the potential to usher in the new body of the coming community, “unknowing midwives of this new body of humanity”\textsuperscript{102}.

\textit{Nudità} (2009), translated as \textit{Nudities}\textsuperscript{103} (2011), a collection of his ten masterful essays, is a mosaic of Agamben’s most pressing concerns. There is secret affinity among the ten essays of the book. The book is an indispensable piece of the finely nuanced philosophy that Agamben has been patiently constructing over the years. If nudity is unconcealment, or the absence of all veils, then \textit{Nudities} is a series of apertures onto truth. It weaves together the prophet’s work of redemption, the glorious bodies of the resurrected, the celebration of the Sabbath, the specters that stroll the streets of Venice, and its guiding thread is inoperativity or the cessation of work. \textit{Nudities} shuttles between philosophy and poetry, philological erudition and unexpected digression, metaphysical treatise and critique of modern life.

In his critique of art, Agamben is also influenced by the critical practice of the German art historian and cultural critic Aby Warburg. Agamben had visited the Warburg Institute in 1984 for his book \textit{Stanzas}. Warburg provides him an image of art history which is not trapped in the reductive logic of modern aesthetics. Agamben discovers an aesthetic or image-based manifestation of what he was to find in the linguistics of Benveniste and in the critical project of Benjamin. The study of Warburg provides Agamben a break with his earlier works, namely \textit{The Man without Content}

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid, p.89.
\textsuperscript{102} \textit{The Coming Community}, p.50.
and refine his position on aesthetics. There is no elaborate engagement with his work, yet he provides a vital link between Agamben’s early work on art and later work on cinema. From ‘Postilla’ (1983) to “Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science” (1975), Agamben writes, “what continues to appear as relevant in his work is the decisive gesture with which he withdraws the artwork (and also the image) from the study of the artist’s conscious and unconscious structures”. The image is read here from a historical perspective as part of a historical montage, placing images together in order to draw out unusual confluences. The method of placing images next to each other, to find similarities and differences, allowed different meanings to flicker up as they were gazed upon. Warburg described it as “an art history without text” and his principles of organization helped Agamben develop a generalized theory of the image, moving from seeing the artwork as revealing the emptiness of the self-absorbed artist, to the image as part of a larger historical canvas. The history of art is tied to reductive and linear forms of organization which limits the possibility of alternate voices being heard and unusual links being forged. Warburg type imagistic art history creates a more dynamic and fluid history of art and, by capturing the body in motion, ushers in the cinematic moment. When Agamben in his essay “Notes on Gesture” states that cinema “leads images back to the homeland of gesture,” we find how Warburg’s imagistic theory of art leads to a reading of cinematic texts. It posits the artwork as ruptured, a series of fractured images that conceptualizes the history of art which is like a long reel of film and in which artwork is a still. In mapping Agamben’s movement from art to

cinema, the notion of gesture\textsuperscript{106} is important. “Notes on Gesture” provides a genealogy of gesture comparable to the genealogy of modern biopolitics. It presents the movement from the study of the human gait (how people walk) by Gilles de la Tourette in 1886 through to Eadweard Muybridge’s snapshots of the body in motion, the birth of the silent film and the high modernism of Proust and Rilke. The period from 1886 to 1933 was the point when the Western bourgeoisie lost its gestures.\textsuperscript{107}

The loss of gestures is about the loss of grasping the body as an embodied, experienced whole. According to Agamben, the nineteenth and twentieth century technologies changed the way we perceive bodies/selves. The rise of scientific methods for measuring and observing led to seeing the human body as minute movements. Modernity’s desire to observe, measure and control is tied intricately to the rise of the film. Instead returning to premodern forms of experiencing our bodies as whole and unified, Agamben suggests that we should think of the new possibilities of gesture. He uses gesture in relation to the film. Gesture is the name for harnessing of the collapse of subjectivity and aesthetics, and cinema is the aesthetic space in which this is most possible.

Agamben’s work on cinema is also a response to the theory of cinema put forward by Gilles Deleuze\textsuperscript{108} (1925–1995). Deleuze thought that cinema offers new ways of seeing by creating images that are not dependent on the human eye. It is a composition of images and signs. In the ‘time-image,’ cinema becomes the space in which we can see time presented; while in the ‘movement-image,’ cinema is the space

\textsuperscript{106} Agamben takes the notion of gesture from the Roman scholar Varro (116–27 BCE). It operates as a third concept between production (poeises) and action (praxis) distinguished by Aristotle in the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}.


in which human life is seen anew through cinematic effect. Distancing himself from Deleuze, Agamben in “Notes on Gesture” suggests that his theory of the ‘movement-image’ relies too heavily on a mythical archetype of the image and misses the fundamental fractured nature of the image in modernity. Agamben identifies rupture as an essential aspect of cinema in his short lecture on Guy Debord’s cinema. Agamben in his study of cinema also explores Debord’s theorization of the ‘society of the spectacle’ and his experimental cinematic works. His cinema is made up of détourned (largely sampled) images from advertisements, films and news footage which are placed in random order and accompanied by his voice-overs and readings of his own theoretical works. Debord’s aim is to create a fractured cinema in which the images of the mediatized world are ripped from their context and placed in a montage so that unusual constellations occur. Agamben identifies stoppage and repetition as two transcendental conditions of montage. The media attempt to take images and control their narrative uses leaves the viewers powerless/impotent. The technique of repetition frees images from their circumscribed meaning and offers to the spectator the possibility of other meanings. The other technique of stoppage links cinema to poetry as opposed to prose. Debord’s cinema evinces a disruption of meaning, as enjambment in poetry and Agamben describes cinema or a ‘certain kind of cinema’ as a ‘hesitation between image and meaning’.109 However, his cinema removes the illusion of reality by making visible its source or means, i.e. contemporary media. The task of cinema, according to Agamben, is to expose its own illusory nature. Unlike advertising and pornography whose images mask reality, Debord’s cinema takes the image and presents it as an image, allowing us to see the medium, in order to stop the illusion of

cinema and of art, in its tracks. Thus, cinema, rather than being an aesthetic, is a political and ethical medium.

**Conclusion**

Though Agamben is less known for his work on literature and aesthetics, yet his work on art and film is part of a unified and sustained philosophical project. The true efficacy of Agamben’s work lies in helping us understand our contemporary. For him, aesthetics is a form of representation, a mode of drawing attention to the medium that one is attempting to engage. His work provides us with ways of reading the literary texts as registers or indexes of philosophical concerns. Literature provides Agamben the ground for an understanding of the poetic, the broader system of representation which suspends the relationship between form and content in order to examine the medium of its transition. His turn to poetry demonstrates the potential to move beyond the philosophical impasses. There is a relation between poetry and poetics in Agamben and nearly all of his works on poetry and poetics demonstrate a high understanding of poetic form and literary history. He shows the importance of poetry and poetic form in *Language and Death*, *Stanzas* and *The Time That Remains* by reading the twentieth century Provençal poets, the famous medieval French poem *Roman de la Rose* and Arnault Daniel’s *Sestina*. It is difficult to summarize his views on poetry from any individual examples. In order to give a summary of his idea of poetics, poetics are works which draw attention to their own form: artworks that expose the artist; literature that exposes language; films that expose the mechanics of cinema. Poetics is the name of a more general form of representation which has as its horizon a broad vision of ethics and politics. From his first book on art and subjectivity *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, through to his
theorization of advertising and pornography, Agamben has examined the image in its various manifestations. Agamben views modern aesthetics as a form of atemporal nihilism through his exploration of ‘gesture’ as the basis of cinema. Cinema has the potential to rupture the homogenous narratives of history and to reveal the potentiality of gesture. Agamben has been a major inspiration in the theoretical return to the political that, allegedly, theory somehow forgot. In combining a thoroughgoing critique of biopolitical institutions and a phenomenological ‘deconstruction’ of being at both individual and cultural level, his theoretical project is a powerful tool. Antonio Negri (1933–) outlines the critical interrogation and the radical openness as two important elements in Agamben’s philosophical thinking, but finds his thought being characterized by the ‘negative critique’. Following the Second World War, critical thinkers in the Continental tradition attempted to escape from the dialectical forms of totalizing thinking present in most systems of philosophy by indulging in negative critique. The rejection was thought urgent after the horrors of the Holocaust. As a result, the post-war thought is characterized by the lack of faith in the narratives of progress and development which drove Enlightenment modernity. It attempts to deconstruct the systems and structures of thought that lead to abuses of power and domination. However, Agamben suggests the radical potential of language to resist forms of domination. Therefore Negri finds two Agambens: the positive Agamben holds onto “an existential fated and horrific background” and “forced into a continuous confrontation with the idea of death”, while the negative Agamben seizes “the biopolitical horizon through an immersion into philological labour and linguistic

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analysis”. For the positive, Benjamin is the source for Agamben, while for the negative, the source is Heidegger. Benjamin was discovered by Agamben as a negation to Heidegger and Agamben’s thought develops in opposition between the two. The range of his reading and ethical drive makes him a vital part of any self-reflexive political philosophy. Agamben’s study of stateless refugees has led to powerful interrogations and had significant impact on the study of refugees. His work has given new directions to the discourses of law, political geography and migration studies.

Ibid.