

Giorgio Agamben on Aesthetics and Criticism

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Focusing on Giorgio Agamben's early writings (*The Man without Content*, *Stanzas*, *Infancy and History*) this paper investigates the peculiar status of aesthetics that is disclosed by these texts, highlighting particularly the shift that emerges therein from aesthetic to ethical concerns. Agamben's idea of a 'destruction of aesthetics' will bring attention to the question of the destination of aesthetics. The claim that only ruins can outline the original structure of works of art, providing a possible basis for creative criticism, will also be examined in the conclusion. | Keywords: *Agamben*, *Aesthetics*, *Ethics*, *Criticism*, *Gesture*

1. Introduction: Giorgio Agamben and the Problem of Aesthetics

If one were to categorize the work of Giorgio Agamben, one of the most well-known and versatile philosophers of our time, aesthetics wouldn't probably be among the first terms that would come to one's mind. In the vast secondary body of literature devoted to Agamben, one can hardly find any books dealing with this problem (Watkin, 2010; De Bouver, 2016) However, looking at Agamben's whole oeuvre, it seems that a constant aesthetic preoccupation underlies his writings, mainly through literary, painting, and film references (Gustafsson and Gronstad, 2014). This is particularly emphasized in Agamben's later essay collections on painting (Agamben, 2019) and literature (Agamben, 2021), and also in his autobiographical works (Agamben, 2017). As I have argued elsewhere, this late creative age in Agamben's production might be called an "age of summaries" (Darida, 2017), one in which many problems of aesthetics do in fact return.

It should not be forgotten, however, that back in 1979, Agamben already devoted a long encyclopaedia article to the issue of taste, which has recently been re-published as a stand-alone book (Agamben, 2015). Thirty-six years have elapsed between the two editions (1979 to 2015), and unchanged reprinting is a sure sign of the continuity of his philosophical thinking.

In this study, I won't deal with the late writings of Agamben, but rather with his first books *The Man without Content* (Agamben, 1970 and Agamben, 1999), *Stanzas* (Agamben, 1977 and Agamben, 1993), and *Infancy and History* (Agamben, 1978 and Agamben, 2007) – to outline the internal dialogue developing between them, a dialogue that places aesthetic questions and especially the problem of the destruction of aesthetics (Attell, 2015) at the forefront. In particular, I will rely on the works written before the aforementioned study on taste to outline a recurring problem in Agamben's later writings. At the same time, I will also observe how Agamben eventually moves away from aesthetic issues and turns to ethics.

2. The Melancholic Angel of Aesthetics

In the first chapter of Agamben's first book, *The Man Without Content* (1970), entitled *The Most Uncanny Thing*, the author introduces the notion of the destruction of aesthetics. What makes such a radical gesture of destruction necessary, Agamben asks? His answer is that aesthetics has moved away from art and its original meaning. (Agamben, 1970, p.11) Specifically, aesthetics has gone farther and farther away from the subversive, dangerous nature of art, until eventually the distance has become such that loss is no longer perceptible. In the history of aesthetics, mainly starting with Kant, the artwork has been considered the object of an uninterested judgment, only to later become 'uninteresting' in itself. The aesthetic observer is considered a disinterested spectator or a 'man without content' - a definition that could also depict the status of the modern artist.

In *The Man Without Content*, Agamben relies particularly on Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* (Agamben, 1970, p. 9) and especially on the considerations Nietzsche expresses in the third dissertation ("What do the ascetic ideals mean?"), which are worth quoting at length here:

"That is beautiful", said Kant, "which gives us pleasure *without interest*." Without interest! Compare with this definition one framed by a genuine "spectator" and artist – Stendhal, who once called the beautiful *une promesse de bonheur*. At any rate he *rejected* and repudiated the one point about the aesthetic condition which Kant had stressed: *le désintéressement*. Who is right, Kant or Stendhal? In our aestheticians never weary of asserting in Kant's favour that, under the spell of beautiful, one can never even view undraped female statues 'without interest', one may laugh a little at their expense: the experiences of *artists* on this ticklish point are more 'interesting' and Pygmalion was in any event not necessarily an 'unaesthetic man'. (Nietzsche, 1967, pp. 104-105)

According to Agamben, contrary to the shocking and disturbing experience that art provided at the beginning, something from which ancient philosophers had to protect people (think of Plato's *Republic*), over time the work of art has increasingly lost its elemental influence on the recipient. Instead of the maddening or the divine madness triggered by artworks Plato refers to in his *Ion*, today we can at most experience the madness of the artist, who drifts away from society into the realm of aesthetics. (Agamben, 1970, p. 14)

As a typical example of the insane artist, Agamben refers to Artaud and Hölderlin (Agamben, 1970, p. 15). Significantly, in his *Theater and its Double*, Artaud says: “Unlike our idea of art, which is inert and disinterested, a genuine culture conceives of art as something magical and violently egoistical, that is, self-interested.” (Artaud, 2010, p. 7) Later, at the end of his study, Artaud warns us of the fallacy of artists who “dallying with forms, instead of being like those tortured at the stake, signaling through the flames.” (Artaud, 2010, p. 8)

Hölderlin’s poetry as “the place of the revelation of truth” is also important for Agamben; not by chance he returns to Hölderlin’s late fragments and the question of his madness in his last publication (see Agamben, 2021). Heidegger, whose interpretation of Hölderlin has a decisive influence on Agamben’s approach and method of interpretation, cannot be ignored here. As a student, Agamben attended the Thor seminars, held jointly by Heidegger and René Char, dealing with poetry and existence. Agamben, however, was quite critical towards Heidegger’s reading of Hölderlin, as when saying for example that it is only through the rhythm of poetry that we can break away from time.

One of the most remarkable investigations contained in *The Man without Content*, also pursued in Agamben’s other books, is found in the last chapter of the work, entitled *The Melancholy Angel*. Here, the starting point is how the relationship with the past and tradition has changed in the last century. According to Agamben, from the end of the nineteenth century, there has been a growing tendency to question traditions and a deliberate separation from them, with the consequence that culture and cultural heritage have become inalienable, and that cultural transmission is no longer possible (Agamben, 1970, p. 158).

According to Agamben, this basic experience is accurately described by Baudelaire (Agamben, 1970, p. 160). In his short writings and prose poems, the French poet often talks about the fracture and metropolitan shock that the crowd experiences. We also owe Baudelaire a vivid description of the modern perception - just consider the *Flowers of evil* and the cycle of images about Paris. In these works, the poet appears as a witness of the collapse in a world where beauty only appears as an epiphany, a flash, or a lightning.

The forms of our relationship to the past, Agamben believes, have thus been radically changing. For a human being of our era, the two most authentic forms of this relationship have become quotations and collection. Both are, according to Agamben, basically aggressive gestures, as they signify a break from the past. This is perhaps more obvious in the case of quotations, since quotations always result from a breaking out of an original context. However, collecting objects from the past is not a humble gesture either, since the accumulation of objects also results in depriving them of their usefulness. An unnecessary collection of objects taken away from their living space is a sign of alienation from the past. We can formulate this experience as the empty experience of the present that eliminates the permeability or the gap between the past and the future, a gap which, according to Agamben, is the present. (Agamben, 1970, p. 162)

All this also has an effect on the relation we have to history, as exemplified by the writings of Walter Benjamin. Already in this book, Agamben relies heavily on Benjamin's view of time, which outlines a prophetic (eschatological) way of saving events from the passing of time. (Agamben, 1970, p. 157) This can be clearly observed by looking at Benjamin's *Thesis on the Philosophy of History*:

The chronicler, who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones, acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a *citation à l'ordre du jour* – and that day is Judgement Day. (Benjamin, 1967, p. 254)

Before briefly addressing this messianic view of time, which plays a central role in Agamben's interpretation of Kafka, it is also important to recall the most memorable image of Benjamin's text 'the angel of history' that can be imagined by way of Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*.

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Ibid.)

The strength of Benjamin's interpretation is that it renders visible what is not visible in the picture. In Klee's painting, we can only see a portrait, and what causes the angel to be shocked remains hidden. However, thanks to this fascinating description, it is possible for us to visualize the debris and ruins of the past. But if we do that, our face will end up resembling that of Klee's *Angel* - horror will strike us and the portrait will become the portrait of our own face.

Agamben's study juxtaposes these two representations (Klee's painting and Benjamin's ekphrasis) with Dürer's *Melancholia*. (Agamben, 1970, p. 165) Looking at this drawing, instead of the angel of history, we find ourselves facing the angel of art (or aesthetics). This angel, the image of a woman immobile and still, is also an allegory of melancholy. To describe it, it may suffice turning to Benjamin's exceptionally beautiful text, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, where melancholy is accurately depicted. Melancholy, according to Benjamin, is characterized by a sense of steadfastness, sadness, and loyalty to the material world. At the same time, it also encloses a gesture of salvation: "Melancholy betrays the world for the sake of knowledge. But in its tenacious self-absorption it embraces dead objects in its contemplation, in order to redeem them." (Benjamin, 1990, p. 157)

Indeed, Dürer's etching is permeated with a kind of timelessness or out-of-timeness or atemporality. The still and monumental female figure, holding a pen in her hand, stares at the ruins of the past among other useless objects of knowledge – things deprived of their use – in a space that Agamben defines as the 'aesthetic space' (*terra aethetica*).

Returning to Klee's picture, Agamben also notes that Kafka's writings disclose a contrasting notion of history, one according to which, as we read in Kafka's notebooks, expulsion from Paradise is meant as eternal and irrevocable. (Agamben, 1970, p. 169)

The Expulsion from Paradise is eternal in its principal aspect: this makes it irrevocable, and our living in this world inevitable, but the eternal nature of the process has the effect that not only could we remain forever in Paradise, but that we are currently there, whether we know it or not. (Kafka, 2006, p. 65)

Kafka is thus another essential reference for Agamben in *The Man without Content* in order to describe the creative experience as a collapse (Agamben, 1970, p.172). In Kafka's perspective, the collapse is a conscious and crystalline experience and writing is a tedious job, an almost unbearable experience. Through writing, the writer constantly strives to transcend human potential, to "defeat the ultimate earthly boundary". In this way, Kafka's oeuvre constantly transcends the aesthetic sphere. Not only does it strive to eliminate all frontiers, but it also strives to burn them. This brings us back to the basic problem of Agamben's book.

The structure of this text is rendered explicit by the fact that it begins with the image of the destruction of aesthetics and ends with the image of a building in flames (Attel, 2015). The burning, however, is what makes the original plan or foundation visible. As Benjamin states in *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, only ruins show the original structure and plan of a building. In connection with this idea, Agamben's book closes with the thesis that the perfect vision of the new is nothing more than a ruin.

3. The Criticism of Criticism

Agamben's other early work, the *Stanzas* (Agamben, 1993), brings to the fore the issue of the status of criticism. Criticism, unlike fiction, always expects some kind of result or at least a valid thesis as its own outcome. According to Agamben, in the history of philosophy, criticism was, on the one hand, a mapping and a delimitation of the boundaries of knowledge and reason (just think of Kantian criticism), showing exactly where our investigations must end if we do not want to go astray. On the other hand, especially at the Jena School and among the members of *Athanaeum*, criticism played a different role and was primarily concerned with universal poetry, including science and the arts. After the Romantic era, Agamben believes, there has been however a decline in criticism so that criticism has become increasingly irrelevant. (Agamben, 1993, XV) It seems thus legitimate to ask what a 'creative criticism' may mean. Agamben gives two quite different examples of this. (Agamben, 1993, XV) The

first concerns Félix Fénéon, whose name may be familiar to only few people today although he was one of the finest art writers of the *fin de siècle* and of the early 20th century, as well as a friend and critic of Impressionists, Divisionists, and Nabis group painters. Fénéon also had an unparalleled taste in literature, as evidenced by his texts on the poetry of Rimbaud, Laforgue, Mallarmé, Valéry, Apollinaire. Agamben, however, does not dwell on Fénéon's artistic criticism, but rather on his journalistic work: his famous three-line news stories (Fénéon, 1990), which, Agamben claims, are superb short prose poems that sometimes are able to condensate the content of an entire novel in the space of few lines, while also being rich in dramatic tension.

Another example, perhaps less surprisingly, is Walter Benjamin. Here, Agamben does not cite Benjamin's short writings, for instance the aphorisms contained in *One-way Street* or the *Passagenwerk* fragments, but *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*. Emphasizing Fénéon and Benjamin, Agamben juxtaposes shortest, ephemeral and ambitious critical forms in a way that is not unreasonable, since their distance from a traditional and conventional form of criticism makes these uncategorized writings truly inventive critiques. (Agamben, 1993, XV)

But what is the specific subject of criticism? In the Foreword to *Stanzas*, Agamben emphasizes the distinction traditionally drawn between philosophy and poetry as two completely different forms of thinking. While poetry is based on inspiration and voice, philosophy is silent; while poetry seeks to grasp its subject by giving it a beautiful form, philosophy seeks to know it. In other words, poetry grasps its subject without knowing it, while philosophy knows its subject, but cannot grasp it.

Criticism, Agamben argues, was born out of a break between philosophical and poetic thinking. Criticism thus has no object of its own, but can be regarded as an objectless science which is constantly taking over the subjects of the discipline it is examining. (Agamben, 1993, XVII)

In the same work, the author returns to the theme of melancholy, this time emphasizing its lesser-known, erotic and cruel aspects. Agamben resorts to Freud's theoretical approach to account for melancholia (Agamben, 1993, p. 19). Freud describes this subject in much detail in his study of *Mourning and Melancholia* in 1917 (Glocer Fiorini, Bokanowski and Lewkowicz, 2019). According to Freud, like mourning, melancholia is a reaction to a loss. However, while bereavement is always concrete and can be grasped, as in the case of the loss of a loved one, in melancholia this loss can only be of an ideological nature. Therefore, Freud can rightly call melancholia an "unconscious object loss." In this interpretation, melancholia is an ill state in which self-structure undergoes fundamental changes. While in mourning the outside world becomes empty and meaningless due to the lack of the loved one, in melancholia the emptying of the self takes place, a decline in self-esteem, and a great impoverishment of the self.

A new element in Freud's concept, according to Agamben, is that he presents the melancholic person not as a hidden and silent person, but rather as

a talkative one. Melancholia lacks a sense of shame toward others: this is where its heightened loquacity comes from, his “insistent communicativeness which finds satisfaction in self-exposure.” (Glocer Fiorini, Bokanowski and Lewkowicz, 2019, p. 23). There is thus some unconscious and instinctive perversion in melancholia which Agamben emphasizes. In the melancholia of love, the object-loss becomes self-loss, while hysterical identification as a state of object obsession is observed. The subject of melancholia is thus both possessed and lost, much like the Freudian fetish object.

Similarly, a fetish object appears as something both real and unreal, embodied and non-existent, claimed and denied. *The Freud; or, the Absent Object* section of *Stanzas* looks indeed at the ambivalence of the fetish subject. (Agamben, 1993, p. 31) The fetish object - which may be a part of the human body, such as a foot, but also an object, such as a shoe - simultaneously appears in its concrete, tangible reality, while a non-existent object (in Freudian interpretation, the mother’s penis) remains intangible and intact. The ambivalence of the fetish object also affects the relationship of the fetishist to it. The fetishist is like a collector: he constantly multiplies and accumulates his fetish objects. It follows that the fetish object is not something unique and indispensable, but one that can be replaced by countless other indefinite objects, since none of its ‘incarnations’ can fill the lost object’s sign.

Agamben also talks about the fetishist character of certain artists, which manifests itself in the incompleteness of their works. In light of Freud’s artistic writings, we might think for example of Leonardo’s abandoned drawings and Michelangelo’s unfinished statues, but also, following Agamben, of the fragmentary cult of pre-romantic thinkers such as the Schlegel brothers or Novalis, or the new tendency of poetry, after Mallarmé, to recognize its traces via a form of negation: the fragment.

The melancholic, the fetishist and the collector, according to Agamben, all try to grasp the unattainable object of desire. For them, the unreal, the fantasy, becomes real, it binds all their thoughts, it determines their life and artistic activities. (Agamben, 1993, p. 32)

4. The Expropriation of Experience

The notion of the expropriation of experience refers to Agamben’s next book, *Infancy and History* (Agamben, 1978), in which the destruction of experience is already a fact. The expropriation of experience means that it becomes ineffable and inexpressible.

For Agamben, the expropriation of experience of the modern human being is a common phenomenon, unlike Benjamin’s idea that it should rather be interpreted as a post-war traumatic symptom. The expropriation of modern experience, including the loss of artistic (or aesthetic) experience, is accompanied by a proliferation of banality. We seem to have more and more experiences, but in reality our world of experience is getting narrower and poorer. The rapid flow of images does not allow for a true experience of the

art. In his book, Agamben only mentions the fact that the camera is slowly taking over the role of the eye, but now, after a few decades, we see digital cameras doing this much more effectively. Today, people don't even need to visit a museum, as they can walk around a virtual museum, sitting in front of their computer screen, something that, during the pandemic era, has increasingly become part of our real-life experience.

It is important to emphasize that in *Infancy and History* Agamben is not concerned with the sensual experience of the artwork. What concerns him here is more a question of linguistic and prelinguistic experience. Already in this book there is the problem of the *Experimentum linguae*, which Agamben seeks to approach by turning to the experience of the mute words. This is why childhood or infancy (*infanzia*) is so important to him as it denotes, as etymology shows, a pre-speech state. In infancy, there is still a magic language that preserves the original secret names.

In a later study, *Magic and Happiness*, Agamben states:

The secret name is the gesture that restores the creature to the unexpressed. In the final instance, magic is not a knowledge of names but a gesture, a breaking free from the name. That is why a child is never more content than when he invents a secret language. His sadness comes less from ignorance of magic names, than from his own inability to free himself from the name that has been imposed on him [...] And justice, like magic, is nameless. Happy, and without a name, the creature knocks at the gates of the land of the magi, who speak in gesture alone. (Agamben, 2007, p. 22)

This enigmatic passage clearly shows how Agamben's interest is focused on speechless speech, gesture and expression, that is, pure sign language. It is no coincidence that one of his most cited studies, entitled *Notes on Gesture*, is attached to the end of the book *Infancy and History* (Agamben, 2007).

5. Gestures

Notes on Gesture also had a great influence on contemporary theater aesthetics, as gesture-based approaches to theater and dance have become almost paradigmatic today (Lecoq, 1987). However, as Agamben points out, it is not obvious what we mean by the word 'gesture'.

As a starting point, relating to some of his previous works, Agamben refers to the experience or loss of experience of the *fin de siècle period*. As he recalls, by the end of the 19th century, it was a common, almost symptomatic phenomenon for people to 'lose' their simplest gestures. In other words, the simplest and most common gestures, such as walking, became increasingly problematic and difficult for people to execute. As evidence, Agamben relies on studies by Gilles de la Tourettes, including clinical-psychological studies of gait, which accurately demonstrate intermittent steps, meaning the footsteps unstable and volatile (Tourette, 1986). The irregular footsteps curves recorded by de la Tourette and drawn by the patient's steps can also be regarded as a kind of cortical symptom. (Agamben, 2007, p. 150)

It is no coincidence, therefore, that new arts born at that time – first photography, then cinema and modern dance and ballet (consider for instance Duncan and Diaghilev) – deliberately used strong sign languages. The primary reason for this is that spectators looked for lost or alienated gestures in these works. What else could show the continuity of movement and the validity of an expressive gesture better than dance? At the same time, Agamben believes (Agamben, 2007, p. 152), the search for gestures defined not only art practice but also art theory, the most glorious example of which is Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*.

This broad extension of the meaning of gesture, however, renders the concept elusive. At the end of his short study (Agamben, 2007, p. 154), Agamben provides a new definition for it: the gesture, like for instance walking, is essentially action. This implies that it is not fixable. Gesture always serves as an intermediate, mediating role: it goes beyond itself and does not involve anything definable. A gesture can thus be considered a display of mediation, but only insofar as the gesture itself is the goal of the gesture; to use a Kantian formula, gesture is a 'finality without end'.

It is not surprising, considering the criticism of language Agamben pursued in his earlier works, that what he means by gesture should not be understood as speech but rather as a silent expression. It is a gesture that *shows*, and thus a form of self-certification, which by itself, so Agamben claims, has ethical meaning (Agamben, 2019). Gesture, as stated in the final passages of the *Notes*, is not only aesthetic but also ethical in nature.

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