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Navigating Agamben's Cinematic Paradox via Laruellean Immanence

A Hactivist Case Study

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Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" advances the claim that, for the first time in history, the "function" of the work of art is political, as evinced by cinema. For Benjamin, film is the "first art form whose artistic character is entirely determined by its reproducibility" (1936, 109) and Giorgio Agamben, a contemporary Benjaminian philosopher, further elucidates on this "function," positing that cinema essentially ranks with ethics and politics, not solely with aesthetics, and, consequently, is "proximate" to philosophy itself. Whereas Deleuze's *Cinema* books posed cinema as enacting time in a pure state, Agamben, in his "Notes on Gesture," (1992) breaches from Deleuze's spatial and cartographic theory of cinema (Conley 2007, 9), drawing from Guy Debord's "détournement via montage" (2003, 29), Simone Weil's "decreation" (1947, 32) and, perhaps most implicitly, from Benjamin. Agamben's political theory of cinema, mo-

tivated by cinema's "stoppage and repetition of time," (1977) is directly informed by Benjamin's: "optical unconscious," (1931) appropriation of Brecht's "social *Gestus*," (1973) and the relationship between technological *reproducibility* and *aura* (1946). Agamben's gesture fastens cinema's aesthetics not only to ethics and politics, but to the "ontological consistency of human experience," or to a *way of being*. (2014, 23).

While many film theorists declare Agamben as, in equal part, a Deleuzian film theorist, I pose that, through this Benjaminian lens, we can parse distinctive cinematic questions that Agamben exclusively pursues - in particular, cinema's potential as a repurposive counter-dispositif to combat dominant forms via critique. This is not to suggest that parallels do not exist between Agamben and Deleuze's approaches: as Meillassoux has noted, Deleuze's logic of representation (also known as "correlationism") develops an "image of thought that attempts to overcome the binary separation" between matter and spirit, mind and body. (2008, 5). Furthermore, Agamben is unequivocally astricted to the Bergson-bound Deleuzian tradition of "untimeliness," whereby cinema extricates "the fallacious psychological distinction between image as psychic reality and movement as physical reality." (2000, 55). Furthermore, both Agamben and Deleuze are committed to a notion of "cinema-thought," as Jean-Luc Nancy terms it (1996, 10), or haecceities of Oneness - a commitment to cinema-as-immanence, or *indexing* thought, rather than mediating it via hermetic historicism. However, Agamben's concept of gesture, as a prelinguistic mode of communication, suspends the symbolic, replacing taxonomy and, therefore, offers a sublime breach: "Gesture is the communication of a potential to be communicated." (1993, 156). In other words, Agamben's gesture is something of an "enigmatic signifier" (Leplanche 1987, 126), insofar as it is impregnated with a primitive and unconscious meaning.

Thus, drawing from gesture via Agamben and cinema's social capacity by way of Benjamin, I implore a central question:

what does cinema look like when it enacts philosophy? Benjamin's 1936 text is in coalition with his publication on Max Weber titled "Capitalism as Religion," (1921) whereby Benjamin enjoins the logic of religion with the cultic "logic of capitalism." Agamben, carrying the Benjaminian torch, proclaims that capitalism as a "pure cult religion" can solely be countered via "profanation." (Agamben 2005). For Agamben, profanation is the return of objects of social praxis to "free use," or a messianic ideal of the generic, non-exclusive community. (2007, 58). Agamben, in associating cinema with the uniquely "gestural" prowess to enact political "profanation," does not proffer cinema with destructive capability but, in his Heideggerian reading, offers cinema-as-pharmakon: Agamben inculcates cinema with the means to both expose the emptiness of the apparatus, "capturing life," and, simultaneously, with converting it to spectacle, thereby "hacking spectacle" by pulling the "emergency brake on the religion of late capitalism." (Baumbach 2018, 131).

With the decay of Benjaminian aura via cinema's reproducibility, ever-exacerbated in the so-called "digital turn," "Web 2.0," and the era of "post-cinema," it is critical that we conceive of Agamben's gesture, diacritically opposes to auratic terms, as a practice that can "de-auraticize," or, in this instance, "make cinema profane" by dispelling it of its cult value. While Adorno and Horkheimer decried the culture industry for exacerbating the auratic terms of mass art (a distinct, newfound aura of detachment), Benjamin neutralized such romantic concepts associated with aura. Thus, as Baumbach notes, a conflict is born - "the weapon of the star," or spectacle, which seeks to restore aura to a means of expression (cinema) is "in some sense, contrary to it." (158). The solution to Agamben's "cinematic paradox" that I hereby propose to proffer is that of a truly "profane" cinema, or an immanent "cinema of the anonymous," which is a political cinema both infinitely reproducible and, simultaneously, liquidated of the "star." Thus, in order to examine this politically profane potentiality we need to look at

specific gestures or operations, meaning that we must turn to a case study.

In reviewing Agamben's methodological lexicon the terms of hacktivism reappear in convergence with cinematic logic. Agamben's "making profane," or denaturalizing mystifications, is akin to whistleblowing and leaking classified (and potentially obstreperous) information. The messianic charge of Agamben's "pure gesture," as articulated in his "The Six Most Beautiful Minutes in the History of Cinema," works within the spectacle that it seeks to "reveal...to be empty and unfulfilled." (2005, 93-94). The hacktivists' arsenals - from the DDOS attack to dictionary and brute force attacks - all share in common the possibility of achieving a time-space tradeoff by pre-computing a series of hashes, in turn inverting or flooding the database against its own logic. Agamben's "decreation," a borrowed term from Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace*, seeks "to make something created pass into the uncreated" (Weil 1947, 35) and allots the capacity for images and signs to be invested with newfound potential. A "hacktivist cinema" of anonymity, whereby the instrumental hack is made immanent (and, consequentially, political) and the subject, hacker, or, in Agamben's terms, the "star" is made anonymous, imbues hacking with imagistic reproducibility and retrieval - through cinema, the enacted hack can be galvanized anew.

Thus, I would like to examine an instance of filmic hacktivism by way of Redhack. Established in 1997, Redhack is the world's oldest hacktivist group, drawing from a systematized Marxist-Leninist organizational history. While infamous for inspiring Anonymous' politically-motivated efforts (such as Operation Tunisia in 2011), at home in Turkey Redhack is quietly lauded for audacious whistleblowing efforts, dispelling disinformation campaigns shepherded by President Erdoğan, and illuminating the AK Party's authoritarian domestic policies. In a political zeitgeist of paranoia, blanketed by censorship and the ubiquitous potential of imprisonment for dissenters, Red-

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hack’s critical efforts require clandestine methods. While surreptitiously communicating within the impenetrable shadows of IRC, Redhack has breached the Ankara Police Directorate’s website in February 2012, leaking documents from the Gendarmerie Intelligence Department about the state’s foreknowledge re: the 2013 Reyhanli car bombings and, in 2012, hacked the Turkish Power Distribution System to delete over \$650,000 of debt.

As expounded by Bülay Doğan in “Contextualizing Hacktivism: The Criminalization of Redhack,” (2018) Turkish journalists, academics, and authors publish under a nation-wide moratorium that censures discussing or mentioning Redhack in publications, propelling Redhack into further marginalization. This is exemplified by the recent incarceration of six dissenting journalists who reported on Redhack’s leaked emails in 2016, whereby the accused were charged by the Turkish government with being members “of a terrorist organization” and “committing a crime in the name of the organization.” (Diken 2018). As Doğan evinces, the discourse of the State has fabricated and bolstered a “folk devil” falsehood in characterizing Redhack while imbricating journalists or sympathetic parties under the terrorist rhetoric.

Working under relative adumbration in their documentary production, Redhack has instrumentalized the archaeological-reproducibility impulse of the “post-cinema” terrain in all its migratory relocation and community responsiveness. Post-cinema calls to recognition a Benjaminian “*Trasuerspiel*” of authenticity that corresponds not to an archetypal model or history but, rather, to the conditions in which it reappears and the “destiny towards which it is directed,” emphasizing the act of discovery of that which is unrecognizable. (Benjamin 1977). Therefore, it is both original and authentic - what appears derived or secondary are mutually bound together, ultimately emerging together; pre-history and post-history fixed

in bondage, or a “vortex” created around a “constant becoming.” (Cassetti in Denson and Leyda 2016, 596-597).

In 2012, the composer Suavi wrote a march for Redhack, quickly published on the Redhack Youtube channel/ (Tatar et. al 2015, 64). This was shortly followed by the publication of the Redhack Documnetary *RED!* (2013), which was translated into English and circulated online, bolstered by artists, politicians and academics (Harber 2013). The documentary voiced first-hand testimonials and articulated Redhack’s political aims and activities - shrouding their identities, these on-screen Redhack members’ shared rhetoric underscored the development of a “hacktivist commons,” which they would use the moving image to distribute.

This “commons” - an open source hacktivist archive – sought to universalize hacktivism and the documentary quickly spread, reposted on varied Youtube channels while garnering laudation from artists, politicians, and academics beyond Turkey’s physical bounds. (Haber 2013). Unraveling the enveloping vectors of nation-state borderlines, Redhack reterritorialized the ethos of “hacktivist-subjectivity,” while retaining an anonymous guise. Unlike *Citizenfour* (2014) and Snowden, *The Hacker Wars* (2014) and Barren Brown, or *The Internet’s Own Boy* (2014) and Aaron Swartz, with *RED!* there appeared the unique case of a purely immanent hacktivist film, one that that abrogates the “star,” or “divo,” (Agamben 1992, 22) untangling individual practice from its genus, positing an aura without presence.

In “For an Ethics of Cinema,” Agamben’s critique of metaphysical and cinematic personhood discerns the genealogical development towards *divo* by bifurcating its terms of “individualized emergence” from *persona*, tied to the “mask” (or masked theatrical actor). (1992, 21). In detailing the *commedia dell’arte* tradition of “Harlequin, Punchinello, Pantalone, and Beltrame,” Agamben details encounters whereby the mask no longer provides a “vehicle of a higher realm,” (21) but, via anonymity and

Diken, “RedHack Davası: Tunca Öğreten ve Mahir Kanaat’e Tahliye Kararı.” Online, 2017. <http://www.diken.com.tr/redhack-davasi-tunca-ogreten-ve-mahir-kanaate-tahliyekarari/>.

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immanence, allots a contamination between real life and the theatrical scene. In fact, in popular culture’s hackerly imagination, the Harlequin is all but the mischief motif *par excellence* - consider Anonymous’ Guy Fawkes mask and its correlation with the gesticulating, pantomime-clown (in fact we see can locate such an instance of historical synthesis in the nineteenth century Christmas production of “Harlequin and Guy Fawkes, or, the 5th of November: a Comic Pantomime”). (Covent Garden 1935, 64).

Perhaps, given their separate histories – Anonymous drawing from jocular 4chan beginnings, culling the puckish ethos of what Gabriella Coleman dubs “lulz” (e.g. Anonymous’ puerile 2006 “Habbo Hotel Raid” or the group’s “Project Chanology” 2008 hacks against The Church of Scientology), and Redhack from a markedly Marxist-Leninist history – Redhack’s anonymizing mask is appropriately a simple red scarf stamped with an axe and sickle. Agamben describes the role of the mask as that “which unites the real name with that of the mask,” (21) or a modular coupling between the actor and the actor (Benjamin’s “Author as Producer”). *RED!*, in its sans-*divo* circulation, posed a way to navigate Agamben’s cinematic paradox by engendering the ability to don an analog relation where “twoness is dissolved or deterritorialized into a continuous or generic identity.” (69). The mask, lifted from the virtual plane, saw its physical appropriation in Turkey during the 2013 May Day protests and Gezi Park riots, where crimson scarf-donned marchers mounted remonstrance.

Interestingly enough, Benjamin’s 1970 “Author as Producer” uncovers a path that leads from Plato’s dialogues to epic theatre in Benjamin’s efforts to navigate the Platonic dyad between the ideal and its instantiation, between essence and instance. In his disquisitions on Brecht, Benjamin seeks to rescue the artist in Plato, whom Plato both feared and admonished, while constricting the philosopher’s ideal Forms with materialist aesthetics. However, rather than that Brechtian *Verfrem-*

dungseffekt (“distancing effect”) aesthetic operation of theatrical spectatorship, which produces real immediacy through estrangement from spectacle, the theatrical mask is without differentiation or identification - it is real “in itself” and, thereby, precedes scission, separation, or rupture. It is, in fact the aesthetics of politics that opposes the equation of spectacle and power, which Benjamin noted as the affective dimension of fascism. (1936, 42).

Donning the mask irradiates a Laurelean irreflective immanence, or a “simple identity without identification,” (Laurelle 2016, 45) for it prevents the Kantian transcendental system of the universal and scattered multiplicity, which Deleuze tried to tie together in mating “immanence with difference.” For Laruelle, this is pure contradiction: Kantian metaphysics bifurcates - the analytic *a priori* is the realm of transcendentals and the synthetic *a posteriori* the realm of the real, the empirical. Laruellean immanence, unlike Deleuze’s, superimposes the analytic *a priori* as the real. Thus, whereas Mladen Dolar points to theater’s *coup de force* as separating the spirit from the body - lifting the curtain and allowing the voice to obtain a surplus-meaning originally disjunct in everyday life - (2006, 69), the theatrical mask, imagistically circulated in a political *bal masqué*, superimposes identity or “clones the One,” to borrow Laruelle’s conception. Devoid of “aura,” the politically-networked mask of immanence becomes Agamben’s pure profanity.

Hence, I propose that *RED!*, as both a networked “post-cinema” media-object and as “non-cinematic” film, provides a viable way to navigate Agamben’s aforementioned “cinematic paradox” by transfiguring the documentary mode and enacting something a-cinematic: displacing *divo* and circulating the mask, melding the traditionally riven bifurcation of the virtual vector (of “communication and transport”) and posing a free alliance between the “technical or cultural,” conjoining the “objective” with “subjective.” Thereby, the “hacker class produces itself as itself, but not for itself.” (Wark 2004, 48; 349). By univer-

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salizing the shrouded face of the “common hacktivist,” masked in the anonymizing red scarf, Redhack visually proclaimed the masked face of Agamben’s “generic humanity,” sans-identity and, thus, not codifiable by the State. (Agamben 2007, 58).

Through this uniquely inter-mechanical process of reproduction and repetition, we see the actualization of Benjamin’s “Author as Producer,” (1934) whereby the intellectual merges with the mode of production, directly fused with mankind and, in the most general sense, de-individuated. (Galloway 2014, 179). This is how I would like to bridge Agamben’s generic being with François Laurrelle’s Marxian project of immanence and theory of identities. Here, we have retained the Marxist idea of “species-being” but done away with the metaphysical, disrobing dialectic synthesis.

Red!, as Youtube-networked (social) media object, runs contrarily to traditional cinema - this is partially why I believe it may profane the “unprofanable,” an endeavor Agamben tasks the “coming generation.” (2005, 92). As Baumbach notes, Agamben explicitly terms that cinema may no longer be “emblematic of our situation.” (167). As Benjamin identified, a seminal shift re: the work of art in the age of technological reproducibility includes a shift from cult value to exhibition value, whereby the latter is associated with the social act of mass viewership. Agamben’s emphasis on gestural repetition and stoppage is bolstered by the avant-garde cinema of Godard and Debord but, perhaps, a non-cinematic cinema of immanence that exploits the terms of reproducibility may better counter the “new condition of objects and even of the human body in the era of fulfilled capitalism.” (Agamben 2005, 92).

If, as Alexander Galloway proposes in *Laruelle: Against the Digital*, we consider the digital/“digital thinking” as the constitution of the binarisms of being and other (or self and the world), the digital is the capacity to make distinctions between essence and instance (“the one dividing in two”). The universal mask, subject-bereft, constitutes “the two coming together as

one,” or an analog relation. The networked mask, no longer rarefied by the terms of the theatrical stage or nation-borders, produces a relation of nondistinction/an integration between the moving image and the streets of protest. In probing RedHack’s documentary effort, I am also attempting to contemplate the possibility of a “non-digital cinema,” or, at the risk of professing a paradoxical proposal, a “non-digital digital cinema.” By “non-digital,” what I mean is relation without distinction and “digital cinema” is simply a materialist descriptor of medium (DCP), technological processes, and distribution though “post-cinema” perhaps more adequately frames and circumscribes “digital cinema’s” intermedial tendencies.

Terminology aside, this is one such strategy to answer Badiou’s 1998 query in *Cahiers du Cinema*: “What does cinema think that nothing but it can think?” without appropriating Metz and Baudry’s “grand theories” of 1970’s film studies, Althusserian “knowledge effects,” reifying Comolli and Narboni’s limp claim that “every film is political,” or turning to the cognitivist neoformalist “post-theory” position of Noël Carroll, David Bordwell, and Kristin Thompson. Jacques Aumont, Raymond Bellour, and Francesco Casetti’s position on cinema seem to be in relative agreement that the experience of a film is concentrated and constituted in temporal restraints (despite Casetti is more liberal when it comes to “cinema experience”). Thomas Elsaesser’s post-classical position and theory of “cinema as thought experiment” redefines cinema in relation to the generative feedback of game-spaces and the cultural conditions that frame postmodernity. However, given Agamben’s cinematic paradox, by mapping the Benjaminian conditions/influence while contemplating a Laruellean political film theory of immanence, perhaps, via specific case studies, we can evaluate post-cinema in lieu of how digital cartography burgeons, blossoms, and superimposes the flat and motile filmic experience with the mobile and networked exigence of political protest.

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