

THE GENERIC UNMASKED: REPRODUCIBILITY & PROFANATION

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Walter Benjamin's oft-quoted 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 evidenced 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 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 on 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, motivated 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 veers toward a (correlationist) "image of

thought that attempts to overcome the binary separation" between matter and spirit, or 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). Agamben and Deleuze are also 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: "[g]esture 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), as it is impregnated with a primitive and unconscious meaning.

Thus, drawing from cinema's social capacity by way of Benjamin, I implore a central question: what does (post)cinema look like when it enacts philosophy? If Walter Benjamin upheld that cinema was political insofar as it held a revolutionary social function, Deleuze reified cinema's pedagogical value by emphasizing that, as an art of time, cinema, which offers time in the "form of perception", is caught between creation (potential) and resistance (impotential). Badiou, for whom cinema is also a condition of thought, has suggested that cinema's greatness—conveyed in movement, passage, and the infected vagaries of memory—doesn't lie in reproducing Bergson's division between constructed time and pure duration; it lies, instead, in showing us that a synthesis between the two is possible. Thus, for Badiou cinema is political because it is social—as a "mass art" it amends, frames, and comments on the ideological content of everyday life; therefore, it is the "plus-one" of the arts. Alas, is cinema still a condition for thought, or is cognizing cinematically—that is, "object-oriented" and hierarchical stratification—simply a kind of algorithmic extrapolation, rendered universal?

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 into 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,” and the era of “post-cinema,” it is critical that we conceive of Agamben’s gesture, diacritically opposed 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, a conflict is born—“the weapon of the star,” or spectacle, which seeks to restore aura to a means of expression (in this case cinema) is, “in some sense, contrary to it” (158). The solution to Agamben’s “cinematic paradox” that I hereby propose 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—transgressions that appeal to the “elective genealogy of law, operating at a level of community more basic than the social order” (Land 2011, 257)—we need to look at specific gestures/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 of 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). Any hacktivist worth their salt is armed with an arsenal of attacks—from the DDOS attack to dictionary and brute force attacks—that 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 for 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, consequently, political) and the subject, hacker, or, in Agamben's terms, the "star" is made anonymous—imbues hacking with imagistic reproducibility and retrieval; through post-cinema, the enacted hack can be galvanized anew (the utility of the commons).

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 Erdogan, 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, RedHack's critical efforts require clandestine methods. In 2012, RedHack breached the Ankara Police Directorate's website, leaking documents from the Gendarmerie Intelligence Department about the state's foreknowledge of the 2013 Reyhanli car bombings. Later that year, RedHack hacked the Turkish Power Distribution System to delete over \$650,000 of debt.

As expounded by Bülay Dogan 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 indictment 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 Dogan 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 of 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 and 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 et al. 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 Documentary *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 "hactivist commons," which they would use the moving image to distribute.

This "commons"—an open-source hactivist archive—sought to universalize hactivism 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 "hactivist-subjectivity" while retaining an anonymous guise. With *RED!* there appeared the unique case of a purely immanent hactivist film, one that abrogates the "star," or "divo" (Agamben 1992, 22), untangling individual practice from its genus, positing an aura without presence. This generic veil uniquely separates *RED!* from *Citizenfour* (2014), marked by the cult of Snowden, *The Hacker Wars* (2014), colored by Anonymous "spokesperson" Barrett Brown, and *The Internet's Own Boy* (2014), which focuses almost exclusively on information activist Aaron Swartz.

In "For an Ethics of Cinema," Agamben's critique of metaphysical and cinematic personhood discerns the genealogical development toward *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 recounts encounters whereby the mask no longer provides a "vehicle of a higher realm" (21), but, via anonymity and immanence, allots a contamination between real life and the theatrical scene. In fact, in popular culture's hackerly imagination, the Harlequin is but the mischief motif *par excellence*—consider Anonymous' Guy Fawkes mask and its correlation with the gesticulating, pantomime-clown. In fact, we 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, we ought to remark on RedHack's separate history qua Anonymous. Anonymous drew from jocular 4chan beginnings, culling the puckish ethos of what Gabriella Coleman dubs "lulz." This was vividly exemplified in Anonymous' puerile 2006 "Habbo Hotel Raid" and the group's "Project Chanology" 2008 hacks against The Church of Scientology. In contrast, RedHack draws 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 (recalling Benjamin's "Author as Producer"). *RED!*, in its sans-*divo* circulation, poses 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.

Benjamin's 1934 "Author as Producer" uncovers a path that leads from Plato's dialogues to epic theater 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, whom Plato both feared and admonished while constricting the philosopher's ideal Forms to materialist aesthetics. However, rather than that Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* ("distancing effect") aesthetic operation of theatrical spectatorship, which produces real immediacy through estrangement from the 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).

The mask is also generic. Donning the mask irradiates Laruelle's irreflexive immanence, or a "simple identity without identification" (Laruelle 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* is the realm of the real or 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.” Devoid of “aura,” the politically-networked mask of immanence becomes 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 universalizing the shrouded face of the “common hacktivist,” masked in the anonymizing red scarf, RedHack visually proclaims the masked face of “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 Laurelle’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. Such is a Marxism of passage rather than an exchange, of immanence (rather than transcendence) vis-a-vis the real.

RED!, as YouTube-networked (social) media object, runs contrary to traditional cinema—this is partially why I believe it may profane the “unprofanable,” an endeavor Agamben tasks the “coming generation” (2005, 92). As Nico Baumbach notes, Agamben explicitly terms that cinema may no longer be “emblematic of our situation” (167). Furthermore, 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

most evidently bolstered by the avant-garde cinema of Jean-Luc Godard and Guy Debord but, perhaps, a non-cinematic media ecology that exploits the terms of immanent reproducibility may better counter the “new condition of objects and even of the human body in the era of fulfilled capitalism” (Agamben 2005, 92). That is, such networked artifacts more sufficiently reproduce the commons.

If, as Alexander Galloway proposes in *Laruelle: Against the Digital* (2014), 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”). Thus, computer language is divided into 1’s and 0’s. 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 non-distinction, or, more specifically, 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 whereby “digital cinema” is simply a materialist descriptor of media, technological processes, and distribution.

Terminology aside, this is one such strategy to answer Badiou’s 1998 query in *Cahiers du Cinema*: “[w]hat 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 by temporal restraints (despite Casetti is more liberal and welcoming when it comes to the reticulated “post-cinema” experience). Thomas Elsaesser’s post-classical position and theory of “cinema as thought experiment” redefine 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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