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The Glorious Body: Agambenian Non-Unveilable Nudity in Art¹

“In fact, the Messiah involves the deactivation of the veil.”¹

Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*²

How does art figure into Agamben’s philosophy? This essay will explore Agamben’s conception of art in general—excavating within it his notions of the messianic and nudity in order to infer his idea of the nude. What does nudity in art signify from an Agambenian standpoint?

The answer has nothing to do with aesthetics. In *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben states unequivocally that “artistic practice ... belongs above all to ethics and not to aesthetics”³. He regards the split in art history between *poiesis* and *praxis* as unfortunate especially since it enabled the rise of aesthetics, transforming art into non-art. How we might extricate art from the “swamp of aesthetics and technics” is one of Agamben’s major challenges⁴. Especially given that we can discern his sense of the messianic in his descriptions of pre- and non-aesthetized art and that his concept of the messianic is imbricated with his notion of nudity, this essay proposes that Agamben’s philosophy of nudity, or his “ontology of nudity,” as I call it, is a way of healing the fracture between *poiesis* and *praxis* that paved the way to aesthetics.

But what then is the role, in this process of defeating aesthetics, of the nude figure in art? Perhaps art has maintained itself all along, even during the reign of

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¹ This article is a small part of my book *Agamben's Political Ontology of Nudity in Literature and Art*, forthcoming from Routledge in 2019.

² Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government (Homo Sacer II, 2)*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (with Matteo Mandarini), Stanford: Stanford UP, 2011.

³ Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko, Stanford: Stanford UP, 2015, p. 247.

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, trans. Giorgia Albert, Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994, p. 67.

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aesthetics that seemed to turn it into non-art, and nudity in art is the persistent symptom of that survival?

This essay will zero in on Agamben's view of art through his concepts of the messianic and nudity and deduce from it the significance of "the nude" in art history. If nudity is a way of closing the gap between *poiesis* and *praxis* and thereby combatting aesthetics (as aesthetics was enabled by that split), it seems possible that the persistent nude figure in art, for Agamben, serves as a continuous and forceful reminder that art conveys the medieval notion of "*haecce!* there is nothing other than this"⁵ *along with* a "special trembling"—such are the messianic coordinates of nudity, as I shall explain—and that therefore art never quite collapsed into "non-art," after all. Moreover, insofar as art may be rediscovered through "nudity," as it folds together *poiesis* and *praxis*, art can awaken us to the intimate contact of *poiesis* and *praxis* in life itself, allowing us to reclaim our poetic status in the world, thus configuring our lives as "form-of-life." For Agamben writes that the "place where one is made to feel most forcefully the urgency and, at the same time, the difficulty of the constitution of a form-of-life" is art⁶. To Agamben, painters, poets, and thinkers, or anyone "who practices a *poiesis* and an activity," render "inoperative the works of language, of vision, of bodies" as they "constitute their life as form-of-life," thereby modeling such a life for their viewers and readers.⁷

Art's Wedding of *Poiesis* and *Praxis*

In *The Man Without Content*, Agamben notes a split, as early as antiquity, in Greek philosophy between *poiesis* and *praxis* that unfortunately facilitated the rise of aesthetics that to him has sucked the life blood out of art. The Greeks, Agamben points out, "made a clear distinction between *poiesis* (*poiein*, 'to produce' in the sense of bringing into being) and *praxis* (*prattein*, 'to do' in the sense of acting)"⁸. *Praxis* involved the will expressing itself immediately in the act, whereas *poiesis* signified "pro-duction into presence, the fact that something passed from nonbeing to being." *Poiesis* to the Greeks was an involun-

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⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatell, Stanford: Stanford UP, 2011, p. 90.

⁶ Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, p. 247.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, p. 70.

tary “mode of truth understood as unveiling,” and because of such unveiling’s “essential proximity to truth,” Aristotle assigned “a higher position to poiesis than to praxis”⁹. Now, today it is “work” that has ascended to the highest level, while *poiesis* has undergone an eclipse. In *The Man Without Content*, Agamben laments the resulting demise of art that serves as a measure of man’s experience—an art in which, for him, *poiesis* and *praxis* are wrapped together.

However, Plato at least feared the poet for being dangerous to the soul and having the potential to shake the foundations of the city. Agamben would like to see art regain “its original stature,” to possess the power to be divinely terrifying as it was to the Greeks¹⁰. This would be far preferable to the vanilla sense we have today that art is merely “interesting”¹¹. Chiming with Heidegger in this early work, Agamben prefers the Greek view of art as carving out a space of truth and building a world for man’s dwelling on earth to the modern emphasis on “the question of the ‘how,’ that is, of the process through which the object has been produced”¹². In raising the possibility that there might be a “primally granted revealing that could bring the saving power into its first shining-forth in the midst of the danger” posed by technology, Heidegger refers to the “magnificent age” of Greece when works of art were “not enjoyed aesthetically” nor was art “a sector of cultural activity” but was “a revealing that brought forth and made present” and thus “belonged within *poiēsis*”¹³. Agamben overlaps with Heidegger in praising the Greeks’ non-aesthetic relation to art, although he later develops a notion of the coming to presence in art that cancels any idea of unveiling and insists on the interweaving of *poiesis* and *praxis*.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 68–69. In *The Use of Bodies*, however, Agamben appears to have changed his mind about Aristotle’s preference. He explains that Aristotle preferred acting and using (*praxis*) to *poiesis* in that *praxis* leaves *energeia* in the doer or user’s body, whereas the *energeia* of an artisan or artist who makes a product is transferred to that product. “For this reason,” Agamben writes, the artisan’s or artist’s “activity, constitutively submitted to an external end, is presented as inferior to *praxis*” (Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, p. 19). Still, despite the shift in Agamben’s sense of Aristotle’s preference (now for *praxis*), the split remains.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹³ Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *Martin Heidegger Basic Writings*, trans. William Lovitt, ed. David Ferrell Krell, London: HarperPerennial, 2008/1977, p. 339.

In the medieval world too, art was not an object to be observed but instead enabled man to measure “the borders of his world,” as it embodied the grace that “put man’s activity in tune with the divine world of creation, and thus kept alive the echo of what art had been in its Greek beginnings: the wonderful and uncanny power of making being and the world appear, of *producing* them in the work”¹⁴. It would not have occurred to the medieval viewer to admire, far less judge, “art.” But, as *poiesis* and *praxis* fell further apart, man shed his poetic status in the world, and work became the “central value and common denominator of every human activity”¹⁵.

Agamben of course construes poetry very broadly. It does not designate one “art among others, but is the very name of man’s *doing*, of that productive action of which artistic *doing* is only a privileged example”¹⁶. Agamben’s idea of poetry definitely bears an intimate relation to *praxis*. *Praxis is poiesis* and *poiesis praxis*. Agamben conceives of man’s (now lost) poetic status on earth as the interweaving of *poiesis* and *praxis*¹⁷ in all types of production/doing and all realms of life. Nonetheless, it is art that has the capacity to awaken us to such a poetic status, to transform our “delay before truth into a poetic process”¹⁸. Here too, in privileging art, Agamben overlaps with Heidegger, who turns to “the fine arts” to “foster the growth of the saving power” that will enable us to confront technology. Van Gogh’s famous painting of the peasant shoes, for example, informs us of what these “shoes are in truth”¹⁹. In Heideggerian parlance, artistic creation is a “happening of truth”²⁰.

Agamben conceives of and believes in art’s capacity to demonstrate the *poiesis* of all *praxis*—which it is able to do essentially through its manifestation of messianic time (a causation that Agamben has not made explicit). That the trajectory of Agamben’s work is headed for an emphasis on messianic time is hinted at in *The Man Without Content* especially when he engages the topic of rhythm. Agamben

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¹⁴ Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, p. 34.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art” in *Martin Heidegger Basic Writings*, trans. William Lovitt, ed. David Ferrell Krell. London: HarperPerennial, 2008/1977, p. 161.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

is inspired by Hölderlin's statement that "Everything is rhythm, the entire destiny of man is one heavenly rhythm, just as every work of art is one rhythm, and everything swings from the poetizing lips of the god" to think about the meaning of rhythm as an "original characteristic" of a work of art²¹. Agamben then teases out the idea of rhythm as "the principle of presence that opens and maintains the work of art in its original space," as what "causes the work of art to be what it is"²². Agamben describes rhythm as what introduces something that escapes incessant flow into flow, thereby implanting within fluidity "an atemporal dimension"²³. He connects this paradox of atemporality within temporality to our experience before artworks when we feel abruptly hurled into "a more original time"²⁴. Agamben's conception of rhythm as granting an "ecstatic dwelling in a more original dimension" as well as "the fall into the flight of measurable time" prefigures his later rendering of messianic time, the "time of the now"²⁵: a contracted time conjoining *chronos* and the apocalyptic *eschaton*. To Agamben, it is this messianic aspect (or dual temporality) of a work of art that opens "the space of [man's] dwelling on earth," allowing him to take its "original measure" and "find again his present truth" *within* "the unstoppable flow of linear time"²⁶.

It cannot be overstressed that, to Agamben, *poiesis* is not confined to art, even as it is art that has the power to reveal our poetic status on earth, the *poiesis* inherent in all doing/activity/*praxis*. This idea attributes to art a supreme power, for it is only when we experience our "being-in-the-world as [our] essential condition," which experience art can grant, that "a world" can "open up for [our] action and ... existence." To Agamben, it is because man is capable of experiencing the power of production into presence that he is capable of *praxis*, free activity, and it is art that can offer such an experience and thereby bring him to this realization. Rather than being a "cultural 'value,'" a "privileged object for the [*aesthesis* or sense] of the spectators," or "the absolute creative power of the formal principle," art is situated in a "more essential dimension," as it enables man to "attain his original status in history and time in his encounter with it"²⁷.

²¹ Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, p. 94.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 98.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Art breaks into linear time so that man can recover “between past and future, his present state”²⁸. Art thrusts us into “a more original time” and thus allows artists and spectators to regain their “essential solidarity”²⁹. And so, while art is by no means the sole locus of *poiesis*, it gives the experience of a coalescing of *poiesis* and *praxis* so that we can discover such a wedding in all activities. That is, in presenting chronological time or “flow” impregnated by apocalyptic time or an atemporal dimension, art in effect marries *praxis* (movement, doing, “going through to the limit” of an action) with *poiesis* (“the original principle ... of something other than itself”)³⁰. Here we have linear time/*praxis* traversed by another time outside of that time/*poiesis*—all captured at once in a work of art, reflecting Agamben’s sense of the poetic/pro-ductive status of man on earth.

Against Unveiling

Disentangling Agamben’s agreement from his disagreement with the Greeks on the topic of art in *The Man Without Content* can be a hairsplitting task. He applauds the intensity that Plato attributes to art as well as Aristotle’s notion of its Form. However, Agamben also locates the start of the fissure between *poiesis* and *praxis*, which has caused so much trouble, in the Greeks. While he does pick up on positive aspects of *poiesis* as the Greeks conceptualized it (especially its bringing a certain excess into presence), Agamben also comes to reject their emphasis on unveiling. The overlapping of *poiesis* and *praxis* that Agamben privileges in art precludes the uncovering of something that is assumed to be *prior* to what gets italicized through *poiesis*. For the conjoining of a time that flows, a chronological time, with another time that lays atemporality into that flow has nothing to do with the revelation of something hidden. The kind of presencing that Agamben privileges does not depend on an unveiling to come forth but arises through *a seizing of what already exists*.

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Here we have a different kind of presencing from that of Heidegger as well, who also features unveiling or, in Heideggerian terminology, the disconcealment of the concealed. In his “Letter on Humanism,” to mention one example among hundreds, Heidegger writes that “ek-sistence—and through it the relation of the

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 75–76.

truth of Being to man—remains veiled in the *humanitas of homo animalis*³¹ and that, as the “destiny that sends truth, Being remains concealed”³². But if we think of *poiesis* as a contraction of what already exists that brings it to an atemporal state of fulfillment, exceeding the limit of itself and *praxis* as the movement of activity that reaches its own limit as it enacts chronological time, then perhaps we can grasp that the pouring of *poiesis* into *praxis* presents something that is illuminated in all its originality *without an uncovering*. Messianic time heals the laceration between *poiesis* and *praxis*.

Agamben derives his sense of the messianic—tantamount to messianic time—in *The Time That Remains* from the Apostle Paul. He concentrates on the first ten words of Paul’s Letter to the Romans to establish that messianic time is neither chronological nor apocalyptic but is both—simultaneously. It is a kind of end or consummation of time within each moment that does not halt the movement of time. The messianic is “the present as the exigency of fulfillment, which gives itself ‘as an end’”³³. Messianic time seizes hold of an instant, bringing it forward to completion, thus making it graspable, while not being external to chronological time. It is a segment of secular time that is transformed as it contracts, a “caesura” that surpasses the division of these two heterogenous temporalities³⁴. *Chronos* and *kairos* are co-extensive, so that “each instant may be, to use Benjamin’s words, the ‘small door through which the Messiah enters’”³⁵.

Agamben invokes Paul’s notion of *typos* to illustrate the relation of *kairos* to the arc of time that extends from the Creation to the Resurrection. He explains that for Paul events in the Old Testament as they serve as figures of events in the New Testament (for example, Adam prefigures Christ) indicate a transformation of time—past and future are clasped together “in an inseparable constellation.” *Typos* and *antitypos* “contract into each other without coinciding.” It is not a matter of a third time located between the two times but of a time that traverses those two times, dividing their division and thereby introducing a “zone of un-

³¹ Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism” in *Martin Heidegger Basic Writings*, trans. William Lovitt, ed. David Ferrell Krell, London: HarperPerennial, 2008/1977, p. 236.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 242.

³³ Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, trans. Patricia Dailey, Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005, p. 77.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

³⁵ Quoted in *The Time that Remains*, p. 71.

decidability, in which the past is dislocated into the present and the present is extended into the past”³⁶. I invoke typology here as an illustration of messianic time especially since it leads to a major Pauline notion pertinent to artwork I will eventually point to as epitomizing messianic time: “Love ... is the *pleroma* of the law”³⁷ and thus has the capacity to render the law inoperative. Agamben in fact again turns to Paul at the end of *The Use of Bodies*, as he articulates perhaps his most significant concept—destituent potential—to highlight this coinciding of “inoperativity and fulfillment”³⁸. In Paul, messianic faith renders the law “destitute of its power to command”³⁹; and the messiah brings about “a destituent potential” that deposes all social conditions to enable their use⁴⁰.

Messianic Nudity Versus Nothing

Agamben’s messianic time celebrates the nuptials of *kairos* and *chronos*, forms of time that both align with and operate within the conjuncture of *poiesis* and *praxis*. But how does such an overlapping of *kairos* and *chronos* pertain to nudity, which is also a way of asking how nudity might be said to bring *poiesis* together with *praxis*? Agamben has offered the faintest hints of an answer to these questions. By looking at certain sections of Agamben’s collection of essays titled *Nudities*, we can discern that messianic time gives rise to “nudity.” Although only one chapter in Agamben’s work *Nudità* has a title that refers directly to this topic (chapter seven, also titled *Nudità*), the book title covers the entire text, implying that chapters other than seven also convey the concept of nudity—as they fold together *kairos* and *chronos* and shut down lack.⁴¹

We can glean a great deal about “nudity” as it is comprised of messianic time indirectly from chapter one, which presents an interweaving of salvation (*kairos*) and creation (*chronos*). In “Creation and Salvation,” Agamben initially entertains the startling idea that salvation precedes creation. He also proposes that “it is almost as if the only legitimization for doing and producing were the

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³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

³⁸ Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, p. 273.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

⁴¹ Although words in Italian ending in *à*, such as *città*, can be either singular or plural, Agamben’s *Nudità* connotes a concept rather than a plurality of nudities.

capacity to redeem that which has been done and produced”⁴²: redemption (in other words) is intrinsic to creation. Agamben’s sense of the inextricable relation between these two poles of divine/human action becomes especially compelling as he links them via transience, a linkage that serves as a variation on Paul’s sense of the revocation in every vocation. The “ultimate figure of human and divine action,” Agamben theorizes, “appears where creation and salvation coincide in the unsavable.” That is, the coinciding of the work of creation with that of salvation occurs as salvation renders inoperative every “gesture” and “word,” “color” and “timbre,” “desire” and “gaze” in its “amorous struggle” with creation⁴³.

In this first chapter, “Creation and Salvation,” one line in particular clinches the point that messianic temporality inheres in Agamben’s conception of salvation/creation. After asserting that what is “truly singular in every human existence is the silent and impervious intertwining of the two works, ... of the power of the angel (with which we never cease producing and looking ahead) and the power of the prophet (that just as tirelessly retrieves, undoes, and arrests the progress of creation and in this way completes and redeems it),” Agamben refers directly to time. Equally “singular” is “the time that ties the two works together.” *Kairos* and *chronos* bind salvation and creation. Agamben even harks back here to the topic of rhythm, which is the element that reflects most of all, in *The Man Without Content*, the notion of messianic time in art. It is according to rhythm, he writes, that “creation precedes redemption but in reality follows it, as redemption follows creation but in truth precedes it”⁴⁴. We recall that rhythm introduces atemporality into temporal flow, which parallels salvation’s penetration of creation. And so we are able to apprehend not only the interconnectedness of Agamben’s thought (as the topic of rhythm sews together *The Man Without Content* and *Nudities*, as well as *The Use of Bodies*) but also that the salvation/creation caesura, comprising rhythm, is bound together by *kairos* and *chronos*. And, insofar as “Creation and Salvation” serves as the introductory chapter of a text titled *Nudità*, we can in turn deduce that *nudity* partakes of messianic time. Nudity is the penetration of creation/*chronos* by salvation/*kairos* that happens every moment, all the time.

⁴² Agamben, *Nudities*, p. 4.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Our sense of what Agamben means by nudity expands exponentially once we are patiently open to reading chapters in *Nudità* that may seem removed from the concept as in fact defining it. Over and over Agamben works against the notion of the privative, setting up his conception of nudity as a thing in itself rather than a lack (of clothing). In “What is the Contemporary?” (chapter two), Agamben claims that the contemporary has the ability to hold his gaze not on the light of his time but on its darkness. The contemporary can envision the obscurity of his time. To explain, Agamben turns to the neurophysiology of vision: when we are in darkness, cells in the retina known as “off-cells” are activated, effecting the sort of vision that allows us to see darkness. The salient point here is that darkness is not “privative.” Envisioning darkness is not passive but rather an activity, even “a singular ability”⁴⁵. Whereas conventional theological thinking assumes that salvation is missing in creation but emerges at the end of time (in need of revelation or a kind of unveiling), and darkness is commonly considered to be an absence or lack of light, Agamben shows that creation/*chronos* is woven together with salvation/*kairos* just as light is inseparable from darkness. He urges us to discover the obscurity of our epoch, “its special darkness, which is not, however, separable from those lights”⁴⁶.

In “On What We Can Not Do” (chapter five), Agamben makes a case for being able to *not* do something. Quibbling with Deleuze, he argues that power insidiously keeps us not from what we *can* do (Deleuze’s view) but from what we can *not* do. Agamben’s position here is basically a defense of impotentiality. He derives from Aristotle the idea that an “*adynamia* ... belongs to all *dynamis*: the potentiality to not-be”⁴⁷. He stresses that humans have a capacity to embrace such impotentiality and that it is critical that we not allow the market to dictate to us all the various things we can do by holding out for our freedom to *not* do. For, Agamben adds curiously, “it is only the lucid vision of what we cannot, or can *not*, do that gives consistency to our actions”⁴⁸. Whereas conventional logic would assume that creation/*chronos* and salvation/*kairos* are separated, that darkness is an absence of light, that impotentiality is the inferior, empty opposite of potentiality, and that *praxis* is distinct from *poiesis* (or even that they are antitheses),

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⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999, p. 183.

⁴⁸ Agamben, *Nudities*, p. 45.

Agamben is at pains to show the positive status of these “negatives.” As *Nudities* unfolds, it cancels the possibility of a void, an abyss, a realm of Nothingness external to the present reality in which we live. Nudity is such a foreclosure. It is therefore Agamben’s answer to problem of the negative basis of metaphysics and in particular to the Heideggerian idea that Nothing is the veil of Being. As he writes in “The Messiah and the Sovereign,” Agamben finds “redemption in the overturning of the Nothing”⁴⁹. And nudity—a way of thinking, experiencing, and being that does not lie on an unspeakable foundation but celebrates “the ungroundedness of all human praxis”—enacts just such an overturning⁵⁰.

In “The Glorious Body” (chapter eight), Agamben makes a similar case for inoperativity, which one might consider to be “inert.” Not at all, argues Agamben, since inoperativity frees the potentiality that has “manifested itself in the act to appear” so that a new use can be brought into being⁵¹. Inoperativity “belongs to creation; it is a work of God”—very “special work”⁵². And, interestingly, toward the end of “Hunger of an Ox,” we find a direct reference to “praxis.” Making his case that the inoperativity of the *festa* does not negate or abolish activity but suspends it in order to *exhibit* festiveness, Agamben notes that such an exhibition happens within “a dimension of praxis,” thus indicating that the atemporality of inoperativity locates itself in “simple, quotidian human activities” or that the bringing forth of something more—for example, festiveness—happens within the simple things we do or within *praxis*⁵³. Such is nude (rather than bare) life, life “generated by the very act of living”⁵⁴, in which “essence and existence, potential and act, living and life interpenetrate” to the extent that they are indistinguishable⁵⁵, as they “contract into one another and fall together”⁵⁶—the life or form-of-life to which art has the potential to awaken us (thus ruling out “anything like a bare life”⁵⁷, the despicable product of sovereignty).

⁴⁹ Agamben, *Potentialities*, p. 171.

⁵⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen E. Pinkus with Michael Hardt, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1991, p. 105.

⁵¹ Agamben, *Nudities*, p. 102.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁵⁴ Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, p. 221.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

In “The Last Chapter in the History of the World,” on the last page of *Nudities*, Agamben highlights what I consider to be the central concern of this text by underscoring that the zone of nonknowledge does not indicate a simple not knowing. It is much more than a “question of lack”: it means instead “maintaining oneself in the right relationship with ignorance.” The very “art of living,” Agamben avers, is the capacity to remain in a relation of harmony with what escapes us⁵⁸. Agamben cancels the idea of a space of Nothingness. He closes the gap between something and its opposite (non-something) by showing that they participate in a kind of interplay or dance that precludes lack.

Nudity in relation to clothing (like nature in relation to grace) works the same way. That is, rather than being a *lack* of clothing, nudity has its own status/ontology. In the case of each of the above ostensible binarisms, Agamben is dedicated to showing that one is not the lack of the other, that what we might conceive of as an absence thrust out of the world of presence is its own form of presence. Lack of lack too, then, governs Agamben’s take on literal nudity, which he arrives at after condemning our impoverished modern sense of it. Agamben’s complaint about nudity, as he elaborates in “Nudity,” is that what we now have is merely baring, an interminable peeling off of clothing. Or, where denudation is no longer possible since there is nothing left to take off, nothing at all happens. In both Vanessa Beecroft’s performance at Berlin’s Neue Nationalgalerie, in 2005, which featured one-hundred (for the most part) nude women, and Helmut Newton’s 1981 diptych in *Vogue*, which shows on one side four naked (except for their shoes) women and on the other the same women now clothed in elegant outfits, “simple nudity” does not take place.

58 It is due to the theological signature stamped on nudity in our culture that nudity has become a mere lack of clothing. Agamben points out that Adam and Eve actually wore a garment of grace *before* eating the forbidden apple and that sin was instrumental in bringing about their corrupt naked corporeality through an uncovering of that garment of grace. Thus Agamben considers Adam and Eve’s “nudity” to exist “only negatively, so to speak: as a privation of the clothing of grace and as a presaging of the resplendent garment of glory that the blessed will receive in heaven”⁵⁹. The theological apparatus is, to Agamben,

⁵⁸ Agamben, *Nudities*, p. 114.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

responsible for nudity being a mere presupposition of clothing, just as nature is a presupposition of grace. Such nakedness has no status of its own. Striptease, which makes nudity impossible, is therefore “the paradigm for our relationship with nudity,” as it is “an event that never reaches its completed form, ... a form that does not allow itself to be entirely seized as it occurs”⁶⁰. Agamben wants to open our eyes—to a nudity that assumes its own form and may be seized and thus “satisfy the gaze”⁶¹, although he is keenly aware that extricating nudity from “the patterns of thought that permit us to conceive of it solely in a privative and instantaneous manner is a task that requires uncommon lucidity”⁶².

Instead of being a lack of clothing, Agamben’s simple nudity is “pure visibility and presence.” Envisioning a naked body is to “perceive its pure knowability beyond every secret”⁶³. Nudity is without veils—and therefore non-unveilable—being presentation per se. Human nudity is “what remains when you remove the veil [altogether] from beauty”⁶⁴. Agamben’s aim is to liberate nudity from its theological signature by calling for dwelling-in-motion. That is, in referring to dwelling at this point, Agamben counterintuitively invokes the dimension of nudity that corresponds with *chronos* or movement, given that to him nudity’s “dwelling of appearance in the absence of secrets” is “its special trembling”⁶⁵. Nudity lies at the crossroads of an atemporal seizing of the apparent (or inapparent, as Agamben calls it, since nothing comes forth out from under a concealment) and movement (trembling). Works of art that embody nudity in the form of this non-lacking messianic temporality that seizes time within time therefore have the capacity to offer the viewer an experience of *poiesis* as it informs or is poured into *praxis*. Epitomizing what Agamben calls in *The Use of Bodies* an “ontology of style,” art thus models the form-of-life with which Agamben urges us to constitute ourselves. As the “guiding concept and the unitary center of coming politics,” form-of-life is a political life that has, however, absolutely nothing to do with being a “man” or a “citizen,” both of which

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

Agamben regards as “clothing” covering over bare life, thus precluding an inseparable— or nude—life⁶⁶.

Fulfillment: Challenging Sovereignty

Although Kenneth Clark in his exhaustive work *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* does not directly engage the issue of *poiesis* in relation to *praxis*, he offers striking corroboration of several of Agamben’s assumptions about Western art—whose “central subject” is to Clark the naked human body. It is “the nude alone,” Clark points out, that has “survived” as our “chief link with the classic disciplines”⁶⁷. Moreover, the distinction for which Kenneth Clark is famous between “nude” and “naked” defines the naked privatively as “to be deprived of clothes”⁶⁸, which correlates with Agamben’s false nudity—“nudity” that springs from the removal of clothing and that therefore neglects the body altogether, a practice that, to Agamben, as mentioned, evolved from the Christian theology of clothing. Clark likewise confirms Agamben’s sense that Christianity did its best to stamp out *nudity*, which, perhaps unintentionally, produced a *nakedness* that possessed the supposed secret of desire, as opposed to a *nudity* that grants fulfillment. Drapery presupposes nakedness and in the process elicits the desire to uncover the drapery, so that “nudity” becomes a question of mere baring, an event that disallows the body to be seized or the gaze to be satiated. Through its use of clothing in art, Christianity gives rise to a provocative nakedness generally unknown in the classical era.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, p. 213.

⁶⁷ Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, New York: MJF Books, 1956, p. 3.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ It is noteworthy that Agamben holds high—for joining *poiesis* and *praxis*—the very era (the Middle Ages) dominated by a religion that strongly suppressed naked bodies in art. But perhaps this apparent contradiction makes sense, after all, in that literal nudity in art was unnecessary during the Medieval Period as a sign of Agamben’s conceptual nudity. Its absence would then fortify my contention that literal nudity comes forward aggressively in art during those epochs in which the meaning of art as nudity falls behind, for example, when aesthetics reigns. Our current-day frenzied preoccupation with naked images as well as public (literal) nakedness might be seen as a failed hysterical groping for the kind of experience of *poiesis* within *praxis* that Agamben’s nudity involves. However, a tension does seem to exist between Agamben’s sense of the Middle Ages as the time of the co-existence of *poiesis* and *praxis* and Medieval Christian art’s adherence to Christianity’s theology of clothing that produces a sinful nakedness/corrupt nature beneath clothing/grace.

Clark's sense that Greek nudes were meant to impart a feeling of fulfillment dovetails with Agamben's idea of the inoperativity of nudity. Clark reminds us that Aristotle believed that art "*completes* what nature cannot bring to a finish"⁷⁰. And Clark's own descriptions of Western nudes are laden with terms of completion and fulfillment. In the middle of the "whirlpool of carnality" in Ingres's *Baigneuse de Valpignon* (1862), Clark writes, is his "old symbol of peaceful *fulfillment*, the back of the *Baigneuse de Valpignon*"⁷¹ In this stunning Ingres painting, we have "*relaxed sensuality*," "*languor and satiety*" that offer an "*intellectual satisfaction*"⁷².

It is in referring to *Venus of Urbino* that Clark makes his most Agambenian formulation: "We seize upon the mass of Titian's *Venus* immediately and abruptly"⁷³.

Does Clark not pay tribute to Agamben's messianic in testifying to this painting's power to provoke an atemporal seizing of Venus's unavoidable mass as he apprehends her "immediately" and "abruptly"? Titian's *Venus* is presented in all her splendid fullness, satiating the "gaze" through a blatant unmediated exposure. Here we have a potent assertion of literal nudity—announcing "*haecce!* there is nothing other than this"⁷⁴. Nothing is lacking, nor is anything unweilable or even unveiled/disconcealed.⁷⁵ *Venus* in fact lies atop a potential veil, as if to insist that no veil even preceded her nudity, as if to stamp out the veil. She faces us with a piercing glance, head-on, in a state of non-unveilability. The numinous painting celebrates its liberation from a theology of clothing, inviting us to engage in simple nudity independent of all veils. Yet, *Venus of Urbino* yields more than a static dwelling, fulfilling Agamben's criterion that nudity's

⁷⁰ Clark, *The Nude*, p. 12, my emphasis.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 159, my emphasis.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 160, my emphases.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁷⁴ Agamben, *Nudities*, p. 90.

⁷⁵ While it is the case that Titian's *Venus* hides with her hand some of her pubic area, to (mis) read her hand as a cover meant seductively to veil this private part would be to neglect the work's blatant message of exposure and to turn what is clearly a "nude" (painting) into a striptease. But the painting, as Clark's outburst testifies (he seizes her "mass" "immediately" and "abruptly"), cries out for acknowledgment of its *haecceity*. Perhaps, then, instead, it is appropriate to regard the placement of *Venus*'s hand as suggesting self-induced *jouissance* that underscores the painting's message of fulfillment through its numinous display of *Venus*'s massive flesh.



Venus of Urbino by Titian (1488–1576).
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“dwelling of appearance in the absence of secrets” is “its special trembling”⁷⁶. For the surrounding sheets, which seem deliberately arranged so as *not* to cover Venus, undulate. Clark himself discusses the Greek use of drapery to produce the effect of movement: “by suggesting lines of force,” drapery “indicates for each action a past and a future”⁷⁷. To Clark, drapery can create “a pool of movement,” in which a body may seem “to swim”⁷⁸, even a hypnotic motion, having the effect of waves. The arrested presentation of literal nudity in this painting sits side by side a flow of drapery: *kairos* and *chronos* are conjoined to offer the spectator an experience of *poiesis* cradled in *praxis*.

In *The Open*, Agamben turns to a Titian painting to illustrate the inoperativity at the heart of his concept of nudity. A late work, Titian’s *Nymph and Shepherd* presents fulfilled lovers who have “lost their mystery,” although they have not

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Clark, *The Nude*, p. 184.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

become “less impenetrable.” Agamben perceives their “mutual disenchantment from their secret,” which allows them to enter “a new and more blessed life” *because* they are beyond (Heideggerian) “concealment and disconcealment.” Being neither concealed nor disconcealed, these lovers are “inapparent,” “workless,” inhabiting “a human nature rendered perfectly inoperative—the inactivity [*inoperasità*] and [*désœuvrement*] of the human and of the animal as the supreme and unsavable figure of life”⁷⁹. Herein lies nudity, a blissful condition of lack of lack. *Nymph and Shepherd* reflects Agamben’s concept of nudity at the same time as it features a nude figure—a rather imposing nymph. Why does Agamben select a painting that includes literal nudity to illustrate the inoperativity at the core of his concept of nudity? The matheme of nudity (“*haecce!* there is nothing other than this”⁸⁰) might just as easily be proclaimed by paintings without literally nude figures. What is it about the conspicuous nude in art that conveys nudity perhaps better than any other image? When the literally nude figure is foregrounded, does she not appear festively suspended in a way that grants a new use to the body—perhaps to announce the philosophical concept of nudity? Does she not emphatically, through her radiance, emblemize the point of a *poietic* emergence into presence of a glorious mundane body beneath which one cannot seek something more, bringing (nevertheless) gratification instead of disappointment? In “The Glorious Body” in *Nudities*, Agamben appropriates the inoperativity of glorious bodies that the Church relegates to heaven in order to identify the truly glorious body: “The glorious body is not some other body, more agile and beautiful, more luminous and spiritual; it is the body itself, at the moment when inoperativity removes the spell from it and opens it up to a new possible common use”⁸¹. Does this late Titian painting not go even further in presenting an overlapping of *poiesis* and *praxis* through its intimate juxtaposition of this messianic dwelling with a trembling sensation given off by surrounding rippling layers of bedclothes and of the shepherd’s clothing as well as curled dabs of paint encircling the nymph throughout the work? We have here a visual pun—on nudity as the shimmering time of the end.

⁷⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attel, Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004, p. 87.

⁸⁰ Agamben, *Nudities*, p. 90.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 103.



Nymph and Shepherd by Titian (1488–1576).
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Perhaps surprisingly, it is a sculptor whose work epitomizes Agamben's nudity in art again often through literally nude figures. Especially (Gian Lorenzo) Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne* may be apprehended as combining *kairos* and *chronos* and thus as another superb instance of art that presents and offers an experience of *poiesis* held in *praxis*. Perhaps in here we have Bernini's sculptural rendition of Apollo's necessarily thwarted pursuit of the nymph Daphne in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. Thanks to Cupid's piercing of Apollo's vitals with his arrow, the god is compelled forever to chase after Daphne, and since another of Cupid's arrows has pierced Daphne, she is doomed always to flee from that pursuit. Movement has become mandatory, and the sculpture manages to capture the relentless chase, even though, up until Bernini, sculpture for the most part represented accomplished actions. Instead, Bernini presents the metamorphosis of a nymph into a tree. In *Apollo and Daphne*, we observe the transition of flesh



Apollo and Daphne by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680). Creative Commons license.



Apollo and Daphne by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680). Photo by Frances L. Restuccia.

to bark and hair to leaves; we apprehend motion as Daphne's body parts turn dramatically into stalks, blades, and laurel leaves, all conveyed through marble.

One therefore might assume, since everything here is in flux, that inoperativity is not the point and that the sculpture is not a reflection of Agambenian nudity, after all. However, just the opposite would seem to be epitomized. Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne* brings Agamben's messianic time/nudity to an artistic culmination in extensively seizing the very moment of passage. Culmination and caducity coalesce in this sculpture, italicizing the collapse/movement inherent in all seizing. The apex of decline is featured as this poignant work of art includes the time it takes to bring time to an end (Agamben's operational time). It is as though we are watching in slow motion the making/fading of this sculptural crystallization of Apollo's pursuit of Daphne. Bernini stretches out the very instant of loss, which is the essence of messianic time or salvation in the unsavable. *Apollo and Daphne* embodies these paradoxes, captures them beautifully and brilliantly in *achieving* loss, that is, in italicizing the capturing of loss itself, therefore coming closer than any other work to marrying *kairos* and *chronos* and thus perfectly emblemizing Agambenian nudity and in turn folding together *poiesis* and *praxis*.

While *Apollo and Daphne* features a contraction of the loss of the object, Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* shows a contraction of the lost subject. Here we have Bernini's sculpted version of Saint Teresa of Avila's vision and experience of Divine Love in the guise of a short angel wielding a golden spear. While in this sculpture vibrates with activity produced by: golden sunrays stabbing the scene from above, a cloud below that lifts up the levitating Saint, the swirling robe of the angel, the angel's spear poised to plunge anew, as well as by Teresa herself as she experiences *jouissance*. As Jacques Lacan unsubtly pronounces in *Encore*, "she's coming. There's no doubt about it"⁸². And, in her gargantuan novel *Teresa, My Love*, Julia Kristeva describes the "boiling of marble folds" in this sculpture of Teresa whose love of God "quivered" with an intensity that produced "ecstatic convulsions" that turned her into "a sumptuous icon of the Counter-Reformation"⁸³. If nudity is as dwelling within trembling, it is manifested here vividly through an ek-static orgasmic seizure set within tumultuous waves of heavy cloth.

While the sculpture does not contain literal nudity, *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* nonetheless makes Agamben's most mind-boggling point about nudity and the veil. Toward the end of "Nudity," he refers to a certain "limit beyond which exists neither an essence that cannot be further unveiled nor a *natura lapsa*." At this limit, Agamben writes, "*one encounters only the veil itself*, appearance itself, which is no longer the appearance of anything. This indelible residue of appearance where nothing appears ... —this is human nudity"⁸⁴. Agamben conveys the experience of non-unveilability here paradoxically by calling it an encounter with the veil itself, an engagement with merely the veil—which, I am claiming, is what Bernini presents in *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* by replacing his typically nude figures with a figure saturated in clothing, rolling veils that make emphatic the point of "nudity" by stressing the veil alone with nothing underneath to be uncovered.

Agamben as we know supports the rendering inoperative of objects directed toward a goal especially insofar as such deactivation makes them available for

⁸² Jacques Lacan, *Encore: On Feminine Sexuality/The Limits of Love and Knowledge 1972–1973*, trans. Bruce Fink, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998/1975.

⁸³ Julia Kristeva, *Teresa, My Love: An Imagined Life of the Saint of Avila*, trans. Lorna Scott Fox, New York: Columbia UP, 2008, p. 3.

⁸⁴ Agamben, *Nudities*, p. 85, my emphasis.



The Ecstasy of Teresa by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680). Creative Commons license.

a new use. He gives “amorous desire and so-called perversion” as examples of new uses of “the organs of the nutritive and reproductive functions” since these activities turn our organs “away from their physiological meaning, toward a new and more human operation”⁸⁵. Bernini’s *Teresa in Ecstasy* certainly deflects attention away from physiology to the amorous. Beyond this, in depicting Love in particular, *Teresa in Ecstasy* not only renders Teresa inoperative (she is ek-static, lost to herself) but the Law as well. This sublime work of art announces the messianic marriages of *kairos* and *chronos* and *poiesis* and *praxis* and thus shuts down lack through fulfillment: the sculpture sets in motion pure satisfaction/*jouissance*. And given that the very constitution of the Law or sovereignty depends on its ability to produce an exception—Agamben accepts Schmitt’s definition of sovereignty in his *Political Theology* as “he who decides on the exception”⁸⁶—this model of Love embodied by *The Ecstasy of Teresa*, where nothing is left out, effects sovereignty’s collapse. Law is deactivated, in other words, through the sculpture’s fulfillment of Love. Paul’s assertion that “Love ... is the *pleroma* of the law,” as stated in Romans 13:9-10, is itself, in turn, fulfilled.

Art that demonstrates the marriage of *poiesis* and *praxis*, that gives the experience of their intimacy (without exclusion) challenges sovereignty insofar as sovereignty subsists on an exception or *bare life*. This is the invaluable political consequence of Agamben’s concept of nudity. Agamben’s “bare life,” a function of sovereignty as well as its necessary downgraded foundation, must not be confused with nudity—as it is capable of collapsing the very sovereignty/*bare life* structure by virtue of its brilliant non-unveilability, its insistence that nothing be excluded, not even Nothing. The nude in art makes such inclusivity even more emphatic, and Bernini’s sculpture of Teresa brings it to an extreme by intertwining *poiesis* with *praxis* specifically through a depiction of the Love that, according to Paul, has the power to fulfill the Law and thus disarm it. In returning to us our poetic status in the world, then, art does even more than give us that tremendous gift. Art is in tandem with politics. They are, as Agamben states on the penultimate page of *The Use of Bodies*,

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⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁸⁶ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab, Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1985/1922, p. 5.

not tasks [or] simply ‘works’: rather, they name the dimension in which works—linguistic and bodily, material and immaterial, biological and social—are deactivated and contemplated as such in order to liberate the inoperativity that has remained imprisoned in them. And in this consists the greatest good that, according to the philosopher, the human can hope for: ‘a joy born from this, that human beings contemplate themselves and their own potential for acting’ (Spinoza 2, III, prop. 53).⁸⁷

Art’s messianic vision precludes the exception of precarious lives, which points to the high political stakes of realizing that *poiesis* inhabits *praxis*. Agamben’s concept of nudity, such “nudity” especially as it operates in art, and the nude that reflects it, in healing the myriad lacerations mentioned in this essay, work against power’s production of vulnerable lives. To think against lack—lack of lack being the condition of a poetic status in the world, where life and living are inseparable and come or fall together as “form-of-life”—is, for Agamben, to ruin the Law’s ability to exclude, which, given that such an ability constitutes the Law, renders it impotent.

Veiling (one might go so far as to suggest) is politically dangerous, while non-unveilability is politically subversive—powerful. Agamben’s messianic nudity effects the undoing of sovereignty by precluding presupposition—that which a veil relies on—by simply italicizing what already exists. Sovereignty is disempowered, as it depends on the presupposition of an exception that brings it into existence and that Agamben’s messianic vision held within nudity rules out.

⁸⁷ Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, p. 278.