Life Support: The Documentary Means Without End of
Donigan Cumming

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by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the “experimental documentary” practice of Donigan Cumming. It takes his work as an intervention into the representation of the otherness of “the poor,” “the elderly” and “the sick” as formalized in the social realist tradition of documentary. The philosophy of Giorgio Agamben is mobilized to demonstrate how Cumming’s work problematizes the relation between documentary’s means and ends. This thesis argues that Cumming’s video documentaries, while posing a challenge to the conventions of the social realist tradition, are nonetheless committed to documenting the social reality of his subjects. I focus on two of Cumming’s videos: *Karaoke* (1998) and *My Dinner with Weegee* (2001). Cumming “others” the documentary, makes it strange, so as to re-imagine the social stigmas of his subjects and their world. Cumming subverts the reality-effects of documentary, thus opening his work to the shared space of the political, what Agamben refers to as “means without end.”

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INTRODUCTION

What's the Use? Documentary Means and Ends

Man is the only being who is interested in images as such. Animals are very interested in images, but only to the extent that they are fooled. You can show a male fish the image of a female fish and the male will ejaculate his sperm; you can fool a bird with the image of another bird, in order to trap it. But when the animal realizes its dealing with an image, it loses interest completely. Now, man is an animal who is interested in images when he has recognized them as such. That's why he is interested in painting and why he goes to the cinema. A definition of man from our specific point of view could be that man is a moviegoing animal. He is interested in images after he has recognized that they are not real beings.

Giorgio Agamben¹

In a world that really has been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood.

Guy Debord²

For Real?

To introduce the work of Donigan Cumming, Montreal-based photographer, video artist, and documentarian, it is perhaps appropriate to begin with a discussion of the current crisis of the image – the image's relationship to a given (profilmic) referent – and its social function or meaning – its circulation as a bearer of meaning, mediating the mundane or the extraordinary. Indeed it is necessary to begin in such a way, as Cumming's corpus obviously and manifestly confronts the viewer with what is normatively considered the absurd, the ridiculous, the grotesque, and the sordid. The poor, the sick, the mentally ill, and the forgotten: these are the figures that inhabit the documentary universe of Donigan Cumming; and if these figures are forgotten or beneath political and social representation, the role of representation itself, then, as instrument and ideology, quickly surfaces. If Cumming's videos shock and disgust – alongside

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¹ Giorgio Agamben, "Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord's Films," trans. Brian Holmes, in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 314.

² Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 14.

(potentially) educating and informing, as the tradition of documentary social realism is purported to do – and leave the viewer to wonder something like “What, exactly, did I witness?” or “How did that happen?,” then the real issue of the “real” and the image (which conveys this reality) is of the utmost concern.³ Cumming’s videos, the object of this thesis, are taken up with the subject, the power of images to emerge from real situations and, in return, affect and transform the reality from which they emerge.

The nature of the image and its power to affect, and to have effects, is the starting point of this thesis; looking ahead, to the conclusion, we shall see how Donigan Cumming’s image-practice breaks down the image (and its relations) into a more fundamental, dynamic unit: the gesture. In this way, Cumming’s images of the impoverished, by way of impoverished images, gesture toward a documentary of means without end: a documentary practice and form up to the challenge of the contemporary crisis of the image; indeed, of belief in a world seemingly beyond belief. To illuminate this aspect of Cumming’s videos, I turn to the thought of contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben, notably his meditations on the gesture, bare life, the coming community, and potentiality. Deeply indebted to such thinkers as Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger, Agamben’s thought is particularly relevant to Cumming’s work, for it is fundamentally concerned with questions of potentiality, mediality and means and ends

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³ Many of the critics who write on Cumming’s work situate it as falling within documentary social realism, only to deconstruct, question or subvert its founding principles or methods of representation. Indeed, as the title for his major 1986 photographic exhibition, *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography*, suggests, Cumming’s project is centered on the critique and the rethinking of the documentary enterprise. Among the vast literature on Cumming, see Robert Graham, “Donigan Cumming: Undoing Documentary,” *Parachute* 34 (March-April-May 1984); Clara Gutsche, “Open Parody, Hidden Agenda: Donigan Cumming,” *Vanguard* (May 1984); Martha Langford, “Donigan Cumming: Crossing Photography’s Chalk Lines,” in *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1986); Georges Bogardi, “In Camera: The Photography of Donigan Cumming,” in *13 essais sur la photographie / 13 Essays on Photography* (Ottawa: Musée canadien de la photographie contemporaine / Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1990); and Jerry White, “The Future of Documentary Video, or the Lack Thereof,” *Parachute* 97 (January-February-March 2000).

– concepts central not only to Cumming but to documentary as such. Of particular relevance to this thesis is Agamben’s concept of “bare life,” that is, life abandoned by political representation at the mercy of sovereign power.⁴

This thesis will demonstrate that Donigan Cumming’s video documentaries, while posing a challenge to the conventions of the social realist tradition, are nonetheless committed to documenting the social reality of his subjects. In my view, Cumming’s work has a political function in confronting viewers with a reality they otherwise deny: the very existence of his marginal subjects. This is a political act, for Cumming appropriates worn out documentary conventions for para-representational ends not bound to the State or the spectacle of suffering victims. Cumming makes his documentaries politically: he tests the ethical boundaries which typically, safely, separate the filmmaker from his subjects, challenging the easy assumptions of his viewers. If Cumming’s work – or, rather, *unworking* of the documentary – is political, and not merely spectacular-political, it is so because it resides in the zone of indistinction, the threshold, between fiction and reality, potentiality and actuality, exhibiting their mutual implication. As Nicholas Renaud puts it, “the commitment that reality’s instability demands is not some empirical distinction between reality and fiction – true or false – but humane mediation.”⁵

Cumming’s strategies of fiction critically intersect with and emerge from the displacements and contradictions of reality itself: in Cumming’s words, “discordant photographic and videographic techniques simulate the pressures on people’s lives.”⁶

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⁴ See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

⁵ Nicholas Renaud, “Exchange and Conflict: The Videographic Ritual of Donigan Cumming,” in *Barber’s Music / Donigan Cumming* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1999).

⁶ Donigan Cumming, “Continuity and Rupture,” *Offscreen*, April 30, 2000,

The work is political in the threshold where documentary blurs with fiction; in the politics of form and exigencies of life. In this, Cumming is a realist, and he definitely is social. And as such, his politics are aligned with Agamben's plea for the survival of humankind:

Only in a world in which the spaces of states have been thus perforated and topologically deformed and in which the citizen has been able to recognize the refugee that he or she is – only in such a world is the political survival of humankind thinkable.⁷

That said, this thesis does not simply read Cumming's videos through the lens of Agamben's philosophical speculations and observations; rather, it stages an encounter between Cumming's videos – in some measure works of "theory" in their own right – and Agamben's thought. This is an encounter which, I believe, not only mutually reimagines the work of both Cumming and Agamben, but contributes to a much larger conversation about the current state of the documentary; of documentary as such in a globalized world. Let me begin, then, with the problem of the image and reality.

Reality TV

There is a contemporary distrust of/in the audio-visual image, of/in its "truth-value," its "reality." This distrust is marked by an epistemological as well as ontological reevaluation of the status of the image: it oscillates between (an often problematic) representation to aestheticized spectacle, from functioning as a "window" into the world to an image which refers only to itself and other images in the simulacrum. Alongside this crisis of verisimilitude, however, is the proliferation of a certain term, description,

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http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/new_offscreen/cumming.html (accessed October 18, 2007). Cumming goes on: "Systematic tensions maintain a condition that goes beyond the absurd – beyond its negativity – as an interdisciplinary theatre of chaos – a productive condition."

⁷ Giorgio Agamben, "Beyond Human Rights," in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 26.

noun: reality. And often reality stands as the predicate for, in conjunction with, that most ubiquitous techno-cultural apparatus: television. Combine a (neo)platonian belief in the falsity of images with the audio-visual and one gets reality TV. Furthermore, if we consider briefly the etymology of the term “reality” itself, we see that it was originally a legal term pertaining to the notion of a “fixed property,” which in turn is connected to “realty,” the legal status of objects – in particular, property, the home. In the age of shifting boundaries and states of exception, the very being of reality is perpetually called into relief as the seeming fixity of the given gives way to new (ontological and political) contexts. The very question of how “fixed” the real is world goes to the very heart of Cumming’s practice, as his subjects are constantly at the mercy of real(i)ty: the shifting appearances of reality and the realities of appearance.

As numerous documentary film and media scholars have noted, reality TV enjoys worldwide success, in many cases attracting vast, record-breaking audiences.⁸ If we accept that there is distrust in the factual nature of the image, how do we account for the widespread popular interest in such reality TV programs as *Big Brother*, *Survivor* and *The Bachelor*? How come distrust in the image does not deter the viewer from enjoying *Big Brother*? One possible explanation is that the viewer does not so much disavow the elements of fiction and artifice that permeate such a program as *Big Brother* but deems them necessary, pleasurable even, in their own right.⁹ As John Corner writes, “*Big Brother* operates its claims to the real within a fully managed artificiality, in which

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⁸ For a discussion of the phenomenon of “reality TV,” among the growing scholarship, see, for example, Keith Beattie, *Documentary Screens: Nonfiction Film and Television* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 182-203.

⁹ I would add that the “conventional story format” of most reality TV, combining the suturing editing techniques of narrative feature film with overt and exhibitionistic surveillance strategies, only furthers the viewer’s rapt fascination with the image-spectacle.

almost everything that might be deemed to be true about what people do and say is necessarily predicated on the larger contrivance of them being there in front of the camera in the first place.”¹⁰ It would seem that the mediated or manipulated nature of *Big Brother*, of reality TV, is a key factor in its appeal: the spectacle that is reality TV serves as its own end. An aestheticization of ritualized surveillance and coerced confession is the end that reality TV makes of itself. The viewer explicitly enjoys the image as such; trust, in the end, is not the issue, for, as Bill Nichols succinctly puts it, “Referentiality dissolves in the nonbeing and nothingness of TV.”¹¹ Reality TV is the narcissism and solipsism of the world contemplating itself.

Documentary Means

Documentary on the other hand, also partakes in issues related to the “real,” to a referent, although to a much different end. Where reality TV institutes itself as spectacle, independent of any social obligation, documentary, as traditionally practiced, perceived, and theorized, positions itself as involved in an instrumental function, as a means to an end. For example, the classical expository documentaries of the Griersonian tradition from the 1930s were conceived and received as instrumental in various projects of nation and community building, social awareness and propaganda.¹² In this light, documentary was committed to serving the interests of the State and the public good. Didactic voice-over narration and reenactments are two of the hallmark tropes of this mode of documentary. Documentary filmmakers of the observational variety (direct cinema,

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¹⁰ John Corner, “Performing the Real: Documentary Diversions,” *Television & New Media* 3.2 (2002): 260.

¹¹ Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 59.

¹² For a recent analysis of the Griersonian tradition and governmentality at the National Film Board of Canada, see Zoe Druick, *Projecting Canada: Government Policy and Documentary Film at the National Film Board* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007).

cinema direct), to take another quick example, utilized new developments in lightweight sound and camera equipment to journey further into the field, ostensibly to capture something of “reality” in its more immediate manifestations. In their emphasis on immediacy, observational filmmakers typically eschewed voice-over commentary or the on-screen intrusion of the apparatus: observational documentaries strove for a “fly on the wall” aesthetic. Thus, the concerted effort to minimize the perceived effect of the presence of the filmmaking apparatus testifies, again, to a vision of the documentary as a means to an end – in this case an unobtrusive window into the life or lives of others. Often the observational aesthetic, along with its attendant assumptions of non-intervention, is put into the service of social reform and education. In this way, documentary is said to be a “discourse of sobriety,” aligned with other such “nonfictional systems” as “science, economics, politics, foreign policy, education, religion [and] welfare,” for it “can effect action and entail consequences” and “through [it] things are made to happen.”¹³ Conventionally, documentary is a teleological means to an end: the education of “the people” to be molded into citizens of the State.

The People

Agamben’s diagnosis of the term “the people” captures something of the logic of this problem of form and its teleological relation to life; of how a signifier – “the people” – works to simultaneously recognize and performatively construct a given referent. From Agamben’s “What is a People?”:

Any interpretation of the political meaning of the term *people* ought to start from the peculiar fact that in modern European languages this term always indicates also the poor, the underprivileged, and the excluded.

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¹³ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 3-4.

The same term names the constitutive political subject as well as the class that is excluded – de facto, if not de jure – from politics.¹⁴

The Griersonian tradition of the documentary takes precisely as its object “the people” as something to be molded into a more coherent, unified agent – what Agamben recognizes as being taken “as a whole and as an integral body politic ...the total state of the sovereign and integrated citizens.” As Grierson put it in a 1942 essay, “In a society like ours...art is not a mirror but a hammer. It is a weapon in our hands to see and say what is right and good and beautiful, and hammer it out as the mold and pattern of men’s actions.”¹⁵ Of course, says Agamben, there is a flipside to the equation, for just as “the people” are what can and must be united into a totality, to be made proper(ty), there is a necessary remainder, what supposedly cannot be united and, therefore, is not “the people” at all: bare life.

This also means, however, that the constitution of the human species into a body politic comes into being through a fundamental split and that in the concept of *people* we can easily recognize the conceptual pair identified earlier as the defining category of the original political structure: naked [bare] life (*people*) and the political existence (*People*), exclusion and inclusion, *zoe* and *bios*. *The concept of people always already contains within itself the fundamental biopolitical fracture. It is what cannot be included in the whole of which it is a part as well as what cannot belong to the whole in which it is always already included.*¹⁶

In light of this fracture, it is my contention that Cumming mobilizes strategies to estrange the documentary from its project involved in the sublation of the raw matter of “the people” into the sovereign citizen body politic. If the Griersonian documentary’s subjects are molded into the active, mobile life of the State and its attendant metaphysics

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¹⁴ Agamben, “What is a People?,” in *Means Without End*, 29.

¹⁵ John Grierson, quoted in Peter Morris, “Re-thinking Grierson: The Ideology of John Grierson,” in Pierre Véronneau, Michael Dorland and Seth Feldman, eds., *Dialogue: Canadian and Quebec Cinema* (Montreal: Mediatexte/Cinémathèque québécoise, 1987), 41.

¹⁶ Agamben, “What is a People?,” in *Means Without End*, 31-32.

of presence, Cumming's subjects are denizens – “whatever beings” – who partake of an “undecidability” inimitable to the State and its organic unity. That is, Cumming's “people” do not come to fully acquire the particular forms of life identified and instrumentalized by the State: “social-juridical identities (the voter, the worker, the journalist, the student...) that all rest on naked [bare] life.”¹⁷ As I will show, Cumming makes use of a metaphorical matrix of life and death to disperse the instrumental function of the documentary's subordination and administration of life, as well as to counter the perceived social death of his subjects. It is from a certain imaginary of death that Cumming reinvigorates the political life of the documentary for “the people” involved.

Torn Formations

The State (of things) is changing. As Patricia R. Zimmerman contends in her book *States of Emergency: Documentaries, Wars, Democracies*,

Transnationalization, privatization, and deregulation of both public and private media structures across the globe have rewired the relationship between the nation-state and national culture. The national imaginary no longer requires the discourse of documentary and public affairs, what Bill Nichols has termed “the discourse of sobriety.”¹⁸

Given the dwindling of the nation-state as classically conceived in the face of increasing globalization and spectacular commodification, documentary filmmakers turn to more subjective, intuitive and reflexive modes of filmmaking and aesthetics. This shift away from the “discourse of sobriety” is, in some respects, parallel to the current popular distrust of the image as referential, as (objective) proof of a given state of affairs. The shifting national-global terrain coincides with a shift in image-relations, as well as in documentary filmmakers' attempts to capture, to document, the nature of this

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¹⁷ Agamben, “Form-of-Life,” in *Means Without End*, 6-7.

¹⁸ Patricia R. Zimmerman, *States of Emergency: Documentaries, Wars, Democracies* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), xxi.

transformation. Many contemporary filmmakers thus practice a mode of documentary that Bill Nichols places under the general concept of the performative.¹⁹

Robert Carl Craig, writing about Philip Hoffman's *passing through/torn formations* (1987), describes performative documentary as a movement away from "traditions of empirical evidence, accepted conventions of representing 'reality' and classical narratives structuring the elaboration of the filmic text...It re-frames the profilmic event as phenomena subjectively perceived, weaving fragments of representation into an aesthetic response of knowledge and rhetorical truth."²⁰ The performative documentary thus explicitly aestheticizes the referent, or its relationship to the referent, thereby deemphasizing "reference to an empirical reality," in the process laying stress upon the internal workings of memory, fantasy, and the unconscious.²¹ In this way, the performative documentary is somewhat complicit with reality TV in sharing a kind of distrust of, or fascination with, the image as such. Both performative documentary and reality TV distance themselves from being means to an end, from an instrumental function, and place a stronger claim on being some form of an end in itself. However, where reality TV indulges in overt spectacle, with its accompanying logic of wish-fulfillment, performative documentary explicitly engages in formal exercises, aesthetically treating the image in its materiality, or reality in its ineffability, as such.²²

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¹⁹ See Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries*, specifically Chapter 5, "Performing Documentary," 92-106.

²⁰ Robert Carl Craig, "passing through/torn formations and the Performative Documentary," *Offscreen*, February 29, 2004, http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/new_offscreen/phil_hoffman.html (accessed December 10, 2006).

²¹ Ibid.

²² The underlying logic of the performative documentary would seem to be that the more the image emphasizes itself as such – *not* offering itself as an instrument to perceive the world "out there," but rather to represent the workings of the world "in here" (subjectivity) – the more the world "out there" seems to become ineffable and unknowable.

Performative documentary and reality TV together constitute two sides of what Jean-Francois Lyotard calls, in what is perhaps an already outmoded definition, “the postmodern condition.” In this “condition,” to quote Lyotard, “Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself, it loses its ‘use-value.’”²³ In the case of performative documentary, with the dispersal of “grand narratives” of enlightenment and progress, filmmakers respond by “restoring a sense of the local, specific, and embodied as a vital locus for social subjectivity.”²⁴ The disembodied, objective (mono)logic of documentary, as epitomized by the Griersonian tradition, is radically decentered. Performative documentary, then, aligns itself with late twentieth century movements related to identity politics, feminism, and post-colonial and queer studies. A dispersed, aestheticized form of documentary thus corresponds to a “multinational if not global capitalism, of a new world order of command and control, of interactive but hierarchically organized communications, of a ‘late capitalism’ that continues to discover new ways to transform and perpetuate itself.”²⁵ In this light, performative documentary may simultaneously challenge and express the logic of the society of the spectacle.

Reality TV, meanwhile, trades in the image as commodity, in what John Corner considers a “postdocumentary mode.”²⁶ To quote Nichols on reality TV:

An aesthetics of sensation underlies reality TV: Its claims of authenticity, its construction of an endless ‘now,’ its preference for the chronicle, the random and the unforeseen over the order and cohesion of historiography and the problem-solving discourses of a technocratic order all come at a time when master narratives are a target of disparagement.²⁷

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²³ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Brian Massumi, ed. Geoff Bennington (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 5.

²⁴ Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries*, 106.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 106.

²⁶ Corner, “Performing the Real,” 257.

²⁷ Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries*, 59.

Reality TV serves the logic of the spectacle insofar as it leaves its underlying structure intact, unquestioned, undisturbed, as well as in appropriating in the crudest possible form images and motifs from game shows, feature fiction film, and documentary. As what Nichols refers to as the “technocratic order” increases its grip over reality, reality TV responds with a “schizoid-like detachment from and reconstruction of the ‘reality’ it represents.”²⁸ Reality TV is the spectacular expression of a spectacular society, a “visual culture where the dynamics of diversion and the aesthetics of performance dominate a greatly expanded range of popular images of the real.”²⁹ Succinctly, it seems that both reality TV and performative documentary stress the role of the viewer: in the case of performative documentary, as interlocutor and subjective participant; in reality TV, as voyeur and sovereign. For the spectator, reality TV is comfortable viewing, as it ultimately reaffirms the (un)reality it parades before the surveillance camera; performative documentary presents the historical world as a formal, aesthetic experience, unhinged from the imperatives of social realism. Again, neither reality TV nor performative documentary manifestly address themselves as (instrumental, argumentative) means to an end; in this way they threaten to leave intact (in the case of performative documentary) or reinforce (as with reality TV) spectacle.

Documentary Ends

Where documentary practice is still most concerned with explicitly documenting a referent, mobilizing a positivist epistemology and realist ontology, it often serves the reactionary interests of the sovereign, surveillance-state. The logic of the documentary

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²⁸ Ibid., 58.

²⁹ Corner, “Performing the Real,” 267.

discourse of sobriety lives on in modern practices and techniques of population control.³⁰ These methods, from fingerprinting to image-gathering – all various means of biometric data-gathering and processing – operate as judicial and forensic evidence for the institutions that serve the nation-state; these methods produce *documents* which expose the bodies of citizens and, especially, (non)citizens – refugees, immigrants – to the power of the sovereign, uncannily akin to the viewer of reality TV.³¹ Utilizing terms such as “laboratory” and “experimental” to describe reality TV, Corner thus captures the logic and operation of the documentary in the modern state.³² The documentary discourse of sobriety, then, becomes a discourse and practice of power in the interests of social management; an instrument for biopolitics. This form of documentary is decidedly a means to an end, a functional(ist) and coercive mediator.

This thesis asks if there is a means out of this impasse, a way that does not, on the one hand, withdraw from “use-value” entirely and thus endorse an aestheticization of the referent; that does not reduce documentary referentiality to a kind of formal exercise, that, at best, seems to withdraw from the political world, and, on the other, reduces the referent to the form of a readymade identity for spectacular consumption; that does not dogmatically instrumentalize bodies, gestures, people as such. Is there not, perhaps, a third way that, in the words of Giorgio Agamben, “breaks with the false alternative

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³⁰ In the increasingly globalized world, where capital traverses borders that human beings are forbidden from crossing, the State form has not disappeared; rather, it now acts as a kind of police force, a functionary in the smooth flow of capital and the monitoring and confinement of bodies. I will discuss this in relation to Agamben’s political philosophy in the following chapters, especially Chapter One.

³¹ Giorgio Agamben addresses the mobilization of such methods by the State in *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). For a consideration of how documentary and surveillance conspire against the refugee and the body as such, see T.J. Demos, “Life Full of Holes,” *Grey Room* 24 (Summer 2006): 72-87.

³² Corner, “Performing the Real,” 261. The logic of the experiment and the laboratory reaches its fullest expression in the “zone of indifference” of the “new biopolitical *nomos*” of the planet: the camp. See Agamben, “What is a Camp?,” in *Means Without End*, 37-45.

between ends and means that paralyzes morality,” a way that neither withdraws from the public sphere of means for the realm of aesthetics and spectacle nor traps life itself in a rigid, teleological schema?³³ This is the crux of the problem that faces documentary production and reception today, in the age of spectacle and surveillance. Documentary has to be as radical as the (un)reality of spectacle itself.

Documentary Means without End

An answer, if we follow Agamben, lies in Cumming’s poetics of documentary which “presents means that, *as such*, evade the orbit of mediality without becoming, for this reason, ends.”³⁴ Evading the orbit of mediality, Cumming’s “means without end” operate in the space(s) of ethics and politics, not so much negating or ignoring as temporarily mis-appropriating documentary social realist means to other, never fully actualized ends, or re-appropriating observational strategies to explicitly involve the filmmaker as well as the audience. In Cumming’s work, the instrumental logic of action and the discourse of sobriety give way to the suspension of gesture; the private, subjective logic of performative documentary bleeds into a “zone of indistinction” with the public sphere (or, to use terms I will discuss below, the *oikos* blurs with the *polis*); aesthetics becomes ethics; and the spectacle, realized in reality TV, is re-appropriated as a power for the production of “whatever singularities” for the liberation of “forms-of-life” from readymade identity categories into a “coming community.” To use a theological analogy, Cumming’s documentaries take place after humanity’s fall from grace into spectacle. In the derelict spaces of his subjects, the fragmented testimonies of his actors, and the degradation of his images, the spectacle’s “positive possibility” is exposed as “language,

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³³ Agamben, “Notes on Gesture,” in *Means Without End*, 57.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

the very communicativity or linguistic being of humans...[for] in the spectacle our linguistic nature comes back to us inverted.”³⁵

The various reflexive “failures” – of representation, of performance, of authenticity, of testimony, of narrative, of action – in Cumming’s videos emerge as productively impoverished potentialities, exhibiting the power of documentary to (re)present by exposing (re)presentation as such. At one point in “Notes on Gesture,” Agamben suggests that cinema is “the dream of a gesture. The duty of the director is to introduce into this dream the element of awakening.”³⁶ In this context, perhaps the “element of awakening” can be linked to Bill Nichols’ call for a “heightened [political] awareness” on the part of the reflexive documentary, “capable of shattering frames, economies, and logics of every kind. In this act of radical defamiliarization lie magnitudes that conventional discourses of sobriety can only deny or disavow.”³⁷ The unpredictable effects of this “awakening” will be expanded upon throughout the thesis.

In Chapter One, “Making an Example: Bare Life and the Gesture,” I set out the terms necessary to discuss Cumming’s work from an Agambenian perspective. I show how the documentary is involved in the problem of biopolitics and the manner in which the State, by way of a sovereign decision, decides upon the status of a given body. I focus on Agamben’s concepts of bare life, the example, the state of exception, and the gesture; all imperative to the analysis of Cumming’s documentaries I undertake in the following chapters. These concepts help me to demonstrate how Cumming describes the contemporary loss of the gesture by articulating this loss in the very form of his

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³⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 80.

³⁶ Agamben, “Notes on Gesture,” 56.

³⁷ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 266.

documentaries, and how, in this way, Cumming restores “potential” to the gesture as such. This chapter, relative to the others, is more focused on the explanation of Agamben’s political philosophy.

Chapter Two, “Sovereignty and Spectacle: Framing *Karaoke*,” as the title states, centers upon *Karaoke* (3 min., 1998), a short video portrait of Cumming’s elderly subject, Nelson Coombs. I situate the video in the context of the documentary “discourse of sobriety” and the “violence” of the frame which would present Coombs as an example, an object of knowledge (a fact) and spectacle (a victim). It is my argument that Cumming subverts the instrumental violence of the frame as a kind of “state of exception” to create a non-instrumental gesture, a “constructed situation,” where art and life blur in a zone of indistinction. In *Karaoke*, Cumming’s political gesture evades the trap of treating his subject as either a qualified citizen or unqualified bare life. In my Agambenian reading, *Karaoke* is a documentary means without end: “mediality” is the message.

Cumming’s highly allegorical documentary *My Dinner with Weegee* (36 min. 26 sec., 2001) is the subject of Chapter Three, “On the Destruction of Experience: *My Dinner with Weegee*.” I take the video as Cumming’s most “properly political” work, where the problematic relationship between life, language and experience is staged. The main subject of the video, the ex-peace activist and present alcoholic Marty Corbin, whose life parallels political struggles of the mid to late twentieth century, is taken as the exemplary figure of the exile. I argue that, in effect, Cumming “exiles” the documentary form from itself so as to do justice to the troubled expression of Marty’s difficult experience. In the chapter, I mobilize the metaphorical potential of Dante’s *Inferno* to

analyze and discuss how Cumming's strategies link together politics and life to disturbing effect. As I demonstrate, *My Dinner with Weegee* is political precisely in its ambivalent depiction of Marty's breakdown.

Finally, in the Conclusion, "The Cumming Community: What Remains," I not only recap the arguments in the thesis, but I draw a certain parallel between events in Cumming's own life to the political work of his documentaries and the reverberations of Agamben's philosophy of means without end. I conclude by invoking Walter Benjamin's "Angel of History" to discuss one of Cumming's most recent projects, the retrospective series of photographs and sketches entitled *Kincora* (2008). One could argue that Benjamin's angel hovers over the entire thesis, observing the appearance of the ruin of humanity for what it offers to posterity. Indeed, like Agamben's gesture, this thesis attempts to "endure and support" what I take to be one of the lasting impressions of Donigan Cumming's entire oeuvre: the idea of the "coming community," the people, not captured in the State, but truly at home in the world.

CHAPTER ONE

Making an Example: Bare Life and the Gesture

ex·am·ple (ĭg-zām'pəl)

n.

1. *One that is representative of a group as a whole: the squirrel, an example of a rodent; introduced each new word with examples of its use.*
2. *One serving as a pattern of a specific kind: set a good example by arriving on time.*
3. *A similar case that constitutes a model or precedent: a unique episode, without example in maritime history.*
4.
  - a. *A punishment given as a warning or deterrent.*
  - b. *One that has been given such a punishment: made an example of the offender.*
5. *A problem or exercise used to illustrate a principle or method.*¹

Gesture is the name of this intersection between life and art, act and power, general and particular, text and execution. It is a moment of life subtracted from the context of individual biography as well as a moment of art subtracted from the neutrality of aesthetics: it is pure praxis.

Giorgio Agamben²

In this chapter, I set out a number of the terms and concepts that I will employ to discuss what I call Donigan Cumming's "documentary means without end." As put forward in the introduction, I will situate Cumming's work within the philosophical and political context of the writings of Giorgio Agamben, in particular his *Homo Sacer* project. Agamben's philosophical writings, with his emphasis on potentiality, language, and mediality, offer a multitude of critical perspectives through which to engage with Cumming's oeuvre: if Cumming's documentaries do indeed respond to a contemporary crisis of legitimization and spectacularization in documentary, Agamben's writings equally address a veritable crisis in the Western philosophical tradition of metaphysics, democracy and law. As I will discuss, Agamben's philosophy is focused on how current

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¹ example. Dictionary.com. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/example> (accessed November 22, 2008).

² Giorgio Agamben, "Marginal Notes on *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*," in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 80.

manifestations of sovereign power and control – what, after Walter Benjamin, Agamben terms the “state of exception” – expose fundamental structures, or the ontology, of human *being*. Cumming’s documentaries, in this light, simultaneously expose documentary conventions and power structures to a critical gaze and allegorize or figure our current biopolitical condition as well. Ultimately, the dialogue I construct between Agamben and Cumming is intended to illuminate a kind of hidden biopolitics within the documentary tradition; and through this illumination, it will be shown how Cumming, in conjunction with Agamben, also provides cinematic strategies of resistance (via exposure). To put it another way, what can social realist documentary do when the social itself has disappeared, when socio-politics has given way to biopolitics? If the documentary was and is complicit with biopolitics, can it not also, then, be seen as a battleground or laboratory within which to focus historical and contemporary biopolitical struggles; to expose contradictions and potentialities; to provide examples of resistance? If, as I will contend, the documentary as such – which Cumming figures in his exposure of documentary form – is a kind of crucible of society at large, is not its exposure and exhibition a kind of radicalizing of the very powers which the sovereign and the spectacle use to biopolitically subjugate people? As I will show, just as in Agamben’s thought the most dire of situations contain the possibility of redemption, so Cumming’s exposure of documentary undoes and fulfills its destiny, as it were, in one and the same gesture. I will begin, then, with a consideration of documentary, broadly speaking, and then introduce Agamben to take stock of the situation, reconsider the terms of the debate, and suggest possible alternatives for theorization and practice. I will return to Cumming,

specifically, in the following chapter, after I set out the concepts necessary for me to discuss his work as an immanent response to the biopolitics of the documentary.

*I look on cinema as a pulpit...*³

Standard historical accounts of the documentary begin by noting that the term “documentary” was coined by Scottish filmmaker and theorist John Grierson in a 1926 response to film pioneer Robert Flaherty’s *Moana* (1926).⁴ From Grierson we received a number of descriptive means by which to begin to define the documentary. Grierson’s two most famous expressions being, of course, that documentary is “the creative treatment of actuality” and that “in a society like ours...art is not a mirror but a hammer.”⁵ These two Griersonian maxims combine to construct the notion of documentary as instrumental in the everyday world affairs of the citizen, of the politically and socially engaged filmmaker, subject, and spectator. For Grierson, as I argued in the Introduction, the documentary is explicitly connected to the State and to citizen-building. Even Flaherty’s *Moana*, ostensibly an ethnographic study of a far-off culture (Samoa), was nonetheless connected to the logic of the documentary as an instrument that could “lead the citizen through the wilderness.”⁶ Documentary, for Grierson, involves the (re)appropriation of the gestures, language, habits, and customs of the everyday subject (to be) put into the service of fashioning an exemplary moment of truth. The “raw material” of the world, worked upon by the filmmaker-citizen, paves the way toward a proper form, that is, a politicized, subjectivized, public citizen of the State. In this way,

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³ John Grierson quoted in Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 85.

⁴ Richard M. Barsam, *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1973), 7.

⁵ John Grierson, quoted in Peter Morris, “Re-thinking Grierson: The Ideology of John Grierson,” in Pierre Véronneau, Michael Dorland and Seth Feldman, eds., *Dialogue: Canadian and Quebec Cinema* (Montreal: Mediatexte/ Cinémathèque québécoise, 1987), 39, 41.

⁶ Barnouw, *Documentary*, 85.

the forms of life (re)presented in the documentary – Grierson’s “actuality” – are further formalized – “creative treatment” – as belonging to (an idealized) notion of *being*, in the metaphysical sense, in the State.⁷

Another more inclusive, if not revisionist, history of the documentary film would date back to 1895, with the first of the so-called “actualities,” such as *Train Arriving at a Station* and *Workers Leaving the Factory*. These early Lumiere Bros. films were shot with a stationary camera, in one unbroken take, most often about a minute in length. Again, these films were concerned with the everyday, and, again, this everyday became a kind of exemplary everyday by virtue of its framing, its isolation, from the rest of the actual world that escapes the frame. One could say that, on the one hand, the early actualities (re)potentialize the actual – the real world – by delimiting a specific part of it, intervening in its flow and isolating a detail, enabling the spectator to observe an otherwise “hidden” reality, an otherwise overlooked aspect of existence. Seemingly banal and mundane moments in reality become in actualities charged with a whole new phenomenological and symbolic meaning, a form of historical significance. On the other hand, however, some might argue that the actuality film in fact limits the potentiality of reality in that it reduces a given moment in time to a single perspective, if not a framed and “tampered with” simulation of reality.⁸ Regardless of the relative merits and/or drawbacks of either position, both nonetheless focus on the issue of the actuality film’s ability to show us something about the world at large, whether it functions as a

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⁷ On Grierson’s Hegelian idealism (a metaphysics of Being) and the State, see Peter Morris, “Re-thinking Grierson,” 39-40.

⁸ However, while the film frame etc. may “limit” the limitless perspectives of reality to a single vantage point, it nonetheless participates in the creation of the condition for a multitude of viewers to witness the world from that single, same vantage point. The implications and consequences of this I will leave to the reader.

“window,” a “microscope,” or some other optical instrument. In both cases, then, the camera produces or makes some kind of exception which affects, accentuates and/or limits the reality it records (focusing on details, delimiting space, etc.) and projects it as an object of knowledge, contemplation and spectacle.

Both the Griersonian legacy of the documentary as the “creative treatment of actuality” – which can include what Bill Nichols terms the “Observational mode” – and the actuality film turn on the problem of revealing, of, to reconfigure the title of a seminal study of documentary film, “showing life.”⁹ However, the question of what the nature of this “life” to be shown is, of what “form” it takes, is far from resolved. Indeed, whether one endorses or criticizes the power of the documentary to “show us life,” the dilemma of “life” and its relation to representation persists. Does the documentary more decisively represent life through its “creative treatment,” thus cutting through the apparent reality in order to expose a deeper reality, or, does it better serve reality by recording the empirical surface of the world, in minimizing its “treatment” of profilmic actuality? If we introduce the notions of fact and Truth as two of the key touchstones in the documentary problematic, which are effectively what is being dealt with here, we begin to see how the matter of life as such is complex and contradictory, for, again, it raises the question of the interrelationship of the “form of life” to be shown as well as the form of representation to show it. To begin to unravel this problem, I will now turn to the work of Giorgio Agamben and his insights into the matter of life as such and the question of life’s relation to form.

***And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death.*¹⁰**

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⁹ See *Show Us Life: Towards a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*, Thomas Waugh, ed. (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1984).

¹⁰ Paul (Romans 7:10) King James Bible.

In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Giorgio Agamben traces the Western notion of “life” back to the ancient Greeks.¹¹ Agamben begins by stating that the ancient Greeks had not one, but two different terms to express “life:” “*zoe*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or group.”¹² *Zoe* is figured as a kind of “simple natural life,” unqualified by specific forms, unmediated, and instantly present. *Bios*, meanwhile, is qualified, formalized, social, and, in this way, mediated. *Bios*, therefore, is decidedly political; *zoe* is outside the political, yet at the heart of every living thing. One might say that in *bios* man fashions himself, actively, whereas in *zoe* life, without form (as pure power and potentiality), is always already manifested as such. The sovereign decision is a cut in life, one that separates real life from merely existent life, political and human life from the life of the non-human. Consequently, there is a difference for Agamben between biopolitical life and bare life: the former the managed political subject of power relations; the latter the necessary negative referent by which power-relations (through the sovereign exception) demarcates what counts as legal life, life that matters.

The *zoe/bios* distinction finds further elaboration in the separation of social, political space from private, personal space. Political space is termed the *polis*, the public arena of the city where, according to Aristotle, man contemplates his particular existence in his practice of the “good life.” The other pole, akin to *zoe*, is the *oikos*, man’s private dwelling place, his “home.” The public citizen of the *polis*, then, is regarded as the linguistic-being of man, where “human politics is distinguished from that of other living

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¹¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

¹² *Ibid.*, I.

beings in that it is founded through a supplement of politicity tied to language, on a community not simply of the pleasant and the painful but of the good and the evil and of the just and unjust.”¹³ The language of the *polis* – or, the *polis*-as-language – is the political and judicial arena where humankind decides on its public ways of being, ostensibly leaving the private sphere(s) of (bodily) existence – reproduction and the like – to the *oikos*. In this way, Agamben argues, “*the originary relation of law to life is not application but Abandonment.*”¹⁴ That is, the *polis* applies its rule over the *oikos* in the originary form of the *ban*, in applying itself by withdrawing. The effect of the originary biopolitical decision to abandon life as such to the *oikos* – seemingly leaving it intact so as to preserve its “natural beauty” – is to render it vulnerable to the machinations of politics, unchecked. “Life,” then, becomes bare life.

Bare life is precisely that life that has been stripped of the form and rights of the life that belong to the *polis*, the citizen. The sovereign decision over life that separates it between *zoe* and *bios* is thus at the root of what Agamben considers a biopolitical, sovereign decision at the base of Western democracy; a decision to exclude by including, to include by excluding. The sovereign logic that excludes *zoe* by relegating it to the sphere of the *oikos* maintains a relation to it, in the first instance, by a logic of exclusion: the law (the law of humanity, of the *polis*) rules over *zoe* by withdrawing from it, externalizing it. When, then, the *polis* takes it upon itself to explicitly manage the affairs of the bodies of its citizens, to take *zoe* as such as its object (in the case of euthanasia, for example, or abortion rights, to take two contemporary issues; a more extreme manifestation is Nazi Germany’s biopolitical practice of eugenics and genocide), it

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¹³ Ibid., 2-3.

¹⁴ Ibid., 29.

harnesses it as bare life in a state of exception. That is, the sovereign decision suspends its own rules so that it can apply itself in an extra-juridical fashion, so as to exert power directly on the body, as opposed to exerting power on or through the citizen. Agamben succinctly notes how democracy is founded on a separation, a founding fiction that forms the ground for the rights of man: "In Western politics, bare life has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men."¹⁵ Historically, the production of bare life is the necessary condition for the construction of the citizen. The "right" to life, for Agamben, is simultaneously the sovereign power to kill.

Concomitant with the reduction of the citizen to bare life, the sovereign decision produces *homo sacer* (sacred man), who "*may be killed and yet not sacrificed.*"¹⁶ *Homo sacer* is the figure of bare life, excepted from the *polis* and from the world of men. He is not – or no longer – a citizen. The life of *homo sacer* is sacred insofar that, as his life no longer belongs to the world of men, it is not profane, and thus does not belong to the realm of *bios*.¹⁷ His life cannot be sacrificed to the Gods, however, because it is not of value in itself: it has no form. If the life of *homo sacer* does not belong to the *bios* of man, then to kill him is not to kill a man, and therefore it is not a crime. The life of *homo sacer* is directly exposed to the power (to be killed) of the sovereign. In this way, *homo sacer* is the corresponding figure of the sovereign:

At the extreme limits of the order, the sovereign and *homo sacer* present two symmetrical figures that have the same structure and are correlative: the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially

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¹⁵ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 7. Furthermore: "Placing biological life at the center of its calculations, the modern State therefore does nothing other than bring to light the secret tie uniting power and bare life, thereby reaffirming the bond...between modern power and the most immemorial of the *arcana imperii*," Ibid., 6.

¹⁶ Ibid., 8.

¹⁷ *Homo sacer* can be a criminal, a refugee, a comatose person, or anyone without "rights." On the "sacredness" of *homo sacer* see Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 75-86.

hominess sacri, and *homo sacer* is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns.¹⁸

Both the sovereign and *homo sacer* stand/lie outside – as structuring principles – the democratic order of things, in a state of exception.

***The normal proves nothing, the exception proves everything.*¹⁹**

The crux of the logic of sovereignty is how examples and exceptions are formed through processes of exclusion and inclusion, for the key to understanding bare life and the fate of *homo sacer* is to see how it is not in any way a “natural condition” or given, but rather formed through actual historical, political and logical processes. Agamben, in reference to set theory, outlines the “symmetrical” nature of the relative positions of the example and the exception: “Exception and example constitute two modes by which a set tries to found and maintain its own coherence. But while the exception is, as we saw, an *inclusive exclusion* (which serves to include what is excluded), the example functions as an *exclusive inclusion*.”²⁰ Historically, life as such, *zoe*, is included in the political order by relegating it to the sphere of the *oikos*. Qualified life, the “good life” of the exemplary citizen, meanwhile, is the example that is exclusively included in the *polis*, by way of excluding so-called “natural life.” The two are mutually constitutive, but it is sovereign power (not necessarily embodied in a single head of state but more aptly understood as dispersed throughout systems of governance and control) that instrumentalizes language

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¹⁸ Ibid., 84.

¹⁹ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 20.

²⁰ Ibid., 21.

to make such separations, including its own separation from the sphere of the rule of law when it suspends said rule, as in a declared “state of emergency.”²¹

The production of the exception – bare life, *homo sacer*, an expelled heterogeneity – is the founding and necessary gesture that erects the homogeneity of the set, the collective. The example stands for the set in its exemplary presentation of the *appearances* necessary to belong to the set. The exception and the example, then, stand in a topological space outside the set to which they relate. Basically, bare life as the exception is at the center of the set, for it is what all members of the set – as citizens – precisely abandon by including “life” through exclusion. The example is excluded from the set for which it stands insofar as it shows its very belonging to the set.

What the example shows is its belonging to class, but for this very reason the example steps out of its class in the very moment in which it exhibits and delimits it...If one now asks if the rule applies to the example, the answer is not easy, since the rule applies to the example only as to a normal case and obviously not as an example. The example is thus excluded from the normal case not because it does not belong to it but, on the contrary, because it exhibits its own belonging to it. The example is truly a *paradigm* in the etymological sense: it is what is “shown beside,” and a class can contain everything except its own paradigm.²²

The logic of the exception passed down through history in democratic systems of governance (from ancient Greece to today), then, establishes “facts,” “rights” and “laws” based on what it can both internalize as examples (if only for the example to be what is “shown beside”) and externalize as exceptions (if only to be included by exclusion). For the law of the sovereign to rule, it “must first of all create the sphere of its own reference in real life and *make that reference regular*.”²³ Sovereignty thus depends on constructing

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²¹ On the “state of emergency,” or “state of exception,” see Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

²² Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 22.

²³ *Ibid.*, 26.

its own autoreferential world, all the while relating to that which it abandons: life itself. The paradoxical nature of the example – which must stand *outside* in order to stand *for*, as a *paradigm* – and the exception – “*what cannot be included in the whole of which it is a member and cannot be member of the whole of which it is always already included*” – point to an aporia, an undecidable, at the very center of the foundation of Western democratic civilization.²⁴ *Homo sacer* is the “limit figure” of this aporia: the secret (exception) identity of every citizen (example), marking a “radical crisis of every possibility of clearly distinguishing between membership and inclusion, between what is outside and what is inside, between exception and rule.”²⁵ If bare life is life nakedly exposed to sovereign power, the political life of the citizen, then, is a “dressed” life, a mystical shroud conveniently draped over the scaffolding of the mute, brute body.

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule.²⁶

Agamben goes on to argue that the explicitly biopolitical agendas of twentieth century (totalitarian) regimes – notably, democratic regimes realizing their totalitarian potential (Nazi Germany being the extreme case) or manifestations of totalitarian, sovereign violence in democratic states (such as the US with the “extra-legal” detainment of “unlawful combatants” in Guantanamo Bay) – bring to light the modern crisis of bare life and its relation to the (political) subject. Developments in science, industry, technology, culture, and politics have increased the power of sovereignty to focus on and harness the

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²⁴ Ibid., 25.

²⁵ Ibid., 25.

²⁶ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. and introd. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257.

body – bare life separated from form – as such.²⁷ Moreover, Agamben contends, modern nation states have entered a “zone of indeterminacy” in relation to bare life and the (political) subject. The “health” of the people is a political question in the age of biopolitics, as bare life enters the *polis* in a state of exception.

The state of exception of contemporary biopolitics exposes the originary fiction upon which Western democracy is based: the (false) separation of life from its qualities, of *zoe* from *bios*. In this state, the previously separated spheres of the public and the private, the *polis* and the *oikos*, language and the body, and law and fact become blurred in the zone of indistinction. Agamben: “We must begin with the clear awareness that we no longer know anything of the classical distinction between private life and political existence, between man as a simple living being at home in the house and man’s political existence in the city.”²⁸ Not only is the previous dichotomy between *zoe* and *bios* confounded in the instrumentalization and harnessing of the body in biopolitics, but, Agamben argues, the very distinction between life and death is undermined, deferred and ultimately decided upon by an instrumentalizing sovereign decision. In *The Culture of Death*, Benjamin Noys describes the hospital room as an example of the categorical confusion the biopolitical zone of indistinction generates. Noys:

What we can see, in the hospital room, is the reappearance of the sacred man, or woman, who may be killed and yet not sacrificed. Also, the hospital room exists as the zone of indistinction, where it is the indistinct status of this body, wavering between life and death and wavering between medicine and law, which constantly calls for the sovereign decision [...] This is the vision of an absolute politicization of bare life, in which the

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²⁷ See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979) for a seminal discussion of the modern development of new techniques of power over and within the body.

²⁸ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 187.

body is completely subject to the vicissitudes of medical science, whether that be transplantation or experimentation.²⁹

The zone of indistinction, then, does not overcome the founding, sovereign fissure between *zoe* and *bios*; rather, it spectacularly reifies *zoe*, “the body,” for the interests of *bios*, the citizen. The body is still maintained as a support and expression of and for the subject, in the interests of language and sovereignty. The subject is realized as bound-up with the body, with life, and, yet, the subject nonetheless is presupposed as somehow aloof, independent of the body, even though the body is the location of the subject, and that *zoe* would seem to be the condition of *bios*. In a sense, biopolitics normalizes the exception and makes life its very ground, problem, and consolidation.

It is clear, then, that the sovereign state of exception takes as its object bare life; first, by inclusively excluding it, then, in a biopolitical move, applying its power to it directly in the zone of indistinction. In conjunction with the total instrumentalization of the body – its reduction to a means to an end – is another important aspect to bear in mind in relation to sovereign biopolitics: the logic of spectacle. The logic of spectacle, as diagnosed by the 20th century Situationist theorist and filmmaker Guy Debord (whose work Agamben continues and combines with his paraontology of language), is the counterpart to the biopolitical body. The “society of the spectacle” is the stage of capitalism where capital has realized its grip on the social and productive being of humanity to such an extent that capital has become image.³⁰ That is, in Debord’s Marxist decoding of the capitalist mode of production, in the increasing divorce of labour-power from the objects of its efforts, in the destruction of use-value for exchange-value (and the

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²⁹ Benjamin Noys, “Politicising Death,” in *The Culture of Death* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005), 63.

³⁰ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 1994), 24.

emergence of “exhibition-value,” as Walter Benjamin calls it), and the total commodification and abstraction of all objects, subjects, space(s), and time, human experience has so reified itself in spectacle that it can only communicate its own reification, it can only speak its own separation. Humankind is cut-off from the potentiality of reality, from an outside possibility, from each other: “Spectators are linked only by a one-way relationship to the very center that maintains their isolation from one another. The spectacle thus unites what is separate, but it unites it only in its *separateness*.”³¹

Spectacle thus shares with sovereignty the strategy of excluding or separating one (vital) thing from something else – life from the citizen, labour from expression, the world from its experience (in the image) – only to exceptionally take it back it into itself in an alienated form: bare life, the spectacular image. If the zone of indistinction, in the context of bare life, instrumentalizes it in its own categorical confusion of the citizen and the body, then spectacle unites in the separate sphere of the image – divorced from experience – what it has separated and excluded from itself. As Agamben puts it in *The Coming Community*, “When the real world is transformed into an image and images become real, the practical power of humans is separated from itself and presented as a world unto itself.”³² The postmodern proliferation of discourses and processes of fragmentation and pluralization in late capitalism, then, could be seen to be nothing other than the totalization of fragmentation, the unification of all things in spectacle through, precisely, their separation.

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³¹ Ibid., 22.

³² Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 79.

According to the principle by which it is only in the burning house that the fundamental architectural problem becomes visible for the first time, art, at the furthest point of its destiny, makes visible its original project.³³

The combined logics of spectacle and sovereignty mutually validate one another, corroborating their mystifying violence. The sovereign exception instrumentalizes bare life in the interests of biopolitics, further extending its grasp over life itself; spectacle alienates and expropriates the very productive and communicative nature of humanity. Simply put, sovereignty robs the subject of its body; the spectacle takes its language. In the zone of indistinction in the state of exception, however, sovereignty and spectacle reach a kind of crisis point of legitimization, for in their exhaustive grasp over the power of human life, they hit up against a certain kind of limit, a paradoxical endpoint, an aporia or gap. In this gap, sovereignty and spectacle potentially expose themselves and the mystifications upon which they are founded. This exposure, though, cannot be said or manifested in a discourse counter to sovereignty or a “correct” image against the spectacle, for the logic of sovereignty, as the basis of Western metaphysics and politics, has subtly infiltrated or informed even the most seemingly contrary discourses of emancipation and human rights. The spectacle’s greatest power resides in its recuperative power of assimilation, for its logic is ultimately not one of false images or statements as opposed to correct ones, but the very logic of image, statement and appearance itself. That is, the spectacle can assimilate to its logic all identities, all “truths,” as it can (re)present them as “sacred,” untouchable images, timeless and intractable, and thus divorce them from the very productivity of humanity and history that

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³³ Giorgio Agamben, “The Melancholy Angel,” in *The Man Without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 115.

brought whatever identities or truths into existence in the first place.³⁴ Opposition to capitalism as spectacle is, arguably, always first a break from its regime(s) of sense and representation. The moment opposition becomes “sensible,” that is, the moment it can be identified as *this* or *that* identity or position or language, it is susceptible to the economy of spectacle.

If the zone of indistinction can be taken as a crisis point that simultaneously increases and exposes the logic of sovereignty, if it is the “burning house” (as a crisis point) that exposes the “fundamental architectural problem” of Western democracy and philosophy, how, Agamben asks, do we recognize and appropriate this crisis, this exposure? We do not begin to speak in the name of this or that identity, in the interests of reform, for we will be taken into the embrace of spectacular (re)presentation. The paradox of sovereignty, rather, is “played with,” and the logic of spectacle is exposed as the (albeit parodic) expression of humanity’s “linguistic-being.” Indeed, the zone of indistinction not only explicitly returns the citizen to the body – in the form of bare life (or, rather, life without form) – to exhibit it as a means to an end – the “health” of the citizen and the nation – but, in the very inclusion it enacts, it inadvertently shows us how the very categories it takes as ends are dressings, manufactured means. It shows how bound-up and inextricably connected to bare life the citizen’s given identity – as police

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³⁴ An obvious example of the spectacle’s assimilative power is its appropriation of images of rebellion and revolution. From the events of Che Guevara’s iconic involvement in practical revolutionary activity in Cuba and Bolivia, to the student protests of May 68 in France, the spectacle rips them from their vital, oppositional and destructive context and – “historically” – turns them into biopics, objects of documentary, and t-shirt slogans, thus reifying their hostility to recuperative representation. Effectively, the spectacle assimilates opposition by turning it into representation, image. And, of course, representation and image are all too consumable. This line of argument is complicated, however, by the necessity of representational strategies within revolutionary practice, such as slogans, posters, speeches, etc. Needless to say, representation cannot easily be done away with, if ever.

officer, social worker, professor, garbage man, politician, or nurse, for example – is.³⁵ Indeed, it shows how precarious our identity categories are in relationship to the appearance of the impersonal life that subtends them.

A paradox emerges in the zone of indistinction: the citizen is recognized as operating legally and culturally to serve its life-function, to protect itself (with rights) so that it may simply “live,” all the while bare life, as that which was seen to serve (via abandonment then inclusion) the citizen in the world of “man” and politics, comes to the fore as *the* central concern, the reason, of the citizen. The sovereign zone of indistinction cannot “exhaust” bare life in its identity categories, nor can it resolve the tautological problem of the mutual constitution of the citizen and (bare) life. This is why the zone of indistinction in the state of exception has become the rule in modern democracy, as it tries to resolve its categories all the while maintaining its commitment to sovereignty. Until sovereignty is overcome and abandoned, the zone of indistinction between bare life and the citizen will continue to manifest itself, as the exception to the rule – and the inclusion of life as such – becomes the rule. In the zone of indistinction, the question of bare life is not simply technical – dead or alive? – but ethical and political. And if the very question of life is ethical and political, that is, if life is bound-up with form and being, then it is really a question of the potentiality of life, rather than the status – the actuality – of the citizen.³⁶ Bare life can be taken as a means without end, as the pure possibility of life, before (or after) its qualities are codified into State identities.

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³⁵ This also applies to other identity categories that mark the world of humankind: race, class, sex, gender, etc. – all human co-ordinates of being *thus*, that is, of being “black,” “red,” “a student,” “a man,” “a member of parliament,” or “whatever” predicate linked to membership in a class.

³⁶ The figure that corresponds to the state of exception, that both results from and potentially overcomes it, is the refugee. The refugee is a non-citizen, exposed to the raw power of the sovereign State. The refugee is a limit-figure in constant flight from his/her citizenship, perhaps in search for another place to belong; and yet it is his/her very body (race, ethnicity, for example) that acts as a boundary in the eyes of the State.

This is the crux of the appropriation of bare life in the zone of indistinction, where the “body without words” of bare life and *homo sacer* intersects with the “words without body” in the spectacular representation of the citizen.³⁷ Indeed, if the sovereign logic of exception constructs the non-represented (and non-representational) body of bare life in such a way as to make it immediate – to be put to death by power – the zone of indistinction brings this immediacy up against the mediations of life in spectacle that create identity categories and citizens.³⁸ Mediality and immediacy become blurred in the zone of indistinction. Again, life – as a means – becomes immediately present as such: its “meaning” does not emerge from the ends (citizenship) it potentially realizes; its matter (life, body) does not disappear into its content (the citizen). Rather, the “aura” of the citizen – as end – gives way to the materiality of the means – (bare) life as such – to expose “pure being” as humankind’s inessential essence.

In reducing form to bare life (a diminished yet pure potentiality) and the social to spectacle, exposing language as such, the logic of spectacular sovereignty, biopolitics, then, opens toward a potentially ethical experience. Agamben:

The fact that must constitute the point of departure for any discourse on ethics is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize. This is the only reason why something like ethics can exist, because it is clear that if

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³⁷ To help explain the difference between a socio-political phenomenon and Agamben’s concern with the biopolitical zone of indistinction, we must acknowledge that for Agamben the realm of the “social” – language, community, belonging, etc. – is exhausted: it is alienated by and in the fulfilled nihilism of the spectacle. The continuous, social life of the citizen is ever-separated from itself in the spectacle’s expropriation of language and experience into a separate sphere. The commodified identities the spectacle trades in wear away the State-form as classically, socially understood. That is, the “old” notions of “nationhood” and collective “belonging” to a given, exemplary group identity are still practiced, but they are done so by the law of spectacle. Agamben grasps this, and his objective is to describe the conditions of fulfilled nihilism and to gesture toward positive possibilities immanent to biopolitics. This involves an ontological inquiry into being, language, and life itself. In this way, description is deeply connected to prescription in Agamben’s diagnoses of the contemporary state of exception.

³⁸ Indeed, “society” itself is composed of the mediations that make it into a kind of totality, a social structure. In biopolitics, rather than, say, socioeconomics or social and/or societal mechanisms, life itself is at stake, rather than the “form” – the specific (mediated) category – or “interests” of the citizen.

humans were or had to be this or that substance, this or that destiny, no ethical experience would be possible – there would only be tasks to be done.³⁹

Biopolitics links together language and body, public and private, politics and life in an unprecedented way: everything, via spectacle and the state of exception, is “inside” the biopolitical fold. In this way, in the totalizing grasp of spectacular biopolitics, a “positive possibility” is produced that “can be used against it.”⁴⁰ Biopolitics brings into relief the unspoken nature of life itself – the fact that being alive often simply “goes without saying” – at the same time that the spectacle reveals language as such. This is the opening to ethics not as a moral command or transcendental imperative but as inhabiting a body, being alive. Ethics expresses itself not so much as this or that appropriate action, but rather as the potential to act as such, the contingent power to be this or that or not-this or not-that. Spectacle and sovereignty thus expose the human as pure potentiality, a means, against the forms of the state and its readymade categories of the citizen, its ends. In this way, the form of life of the human, figured beyond the horizon of modern biopolitics, the state, is never a “fact” – simply, technically alive – but wholly invested in its way of being, its potentialities. The question, then, is, how does potentiality show itself without disappearing into actuality; how does a “form-of-life” appear without appealing to the qualities of the citizen?

The novelty of the coming politics is that it will no longer be a struggle for the conquest or control of the State, but a struggle between the State and the non-state (humanity), an insurmountable disjunction between whatever singularity and the State organization.⁴¹

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³⁹ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 43

⁴⁰ Ibid., 80.

⁴¹ Ibid., 85.

In the chapter titled “Tiananmen” in his book *The Coming Community*, Agamben describes the 1989 student demonstrations against the Chinese government, what he dubs “the Chinese May” in reference to the student and worker protests in France and Europe in May, 1968, as an example of “the politics of whatever singularity,” a politics based not on recognized State identities and coordinates of belonging but “by belonging itself.”⁴² In Agamben’s view, the demonstrators did not demonstrate in the name of *this* or *that* determinate content so much as in the nameless and unrecognized principal of demonstrating their “being in common,” their unclassifiability.⁴³ As such, the demonstrators did not subordinate their actions to a specific political objective or reform; rather, the students engaged in a gesture that exhibited a non-signification, or, if you will, a potential-to-signify (a means) that had not solidified into a given identity or form (an end). In this sense, the students exhibited themselves as a “means without end.”

Agamben specifically links the notion of a “means without end” to the notion of the gesture in his genealogical discussion of the cinema in his short but profoundly allusive essay “Notes on Gesture,” a part of his *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*. The problem that informs the entirety of *Means Without End* is the question of how politics, broadly defined, relates to life. If classical politics was divided from life in the form of a schism between *bios* and *zoe*, or the *polis* and the *oikos*, then how does the spectacular biopolitics of the state of exception produce a new terrain and topology upon which and within life and politics intersect, or, indeed, become one? And, if this is in

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⁴² Ibid., 85.

⁴³ Agamben maintains that notions such as “democracy” and “freedom” are “too generic and broadly defined to constitute the real object of a conflict” and that the “only real concrete demand, the rehabilitation of Hu Yao-Bang, was immediately granted.” Thus, the struggle was really between the State’s *sense*, its forms, and the demonstrators’ *nonsense*, their “non-stateliness.” See Agamben, “Tiananmen,” in *The Coming Community*, 85.

fact the case, then how does the politicization of life and the vitalization of politics show itself? Agamben contends it is via the mediations of language, cinema and, ultimately, the very mediality of life itself.

In "Notes on Gesture," Agamben opens with the startling claim: "By the end of the nineteenth century, the Western Bourgeoisie had definitely lost its gestures."⁴⁴ In this single stroke, Agamben sets up a whole problematic that links the materiality of both the body and cultural/social practices to systems of mediation and (re)presentation; we could argue, moreover, that for Agamben materiality is medial and vice versa – this is the premise of his whole (para)ontology. In his elaboration of the "crisis of the gesture" that began at the end of the nineteenth century, Agamben turns to the clinical studies of human movement conducted by the French doctor Gilles de la Tourette in 1886, the *Clinical and physiological studies on the gait* (1886). The gait, simply put, is the manner of moving on foot of a given subject, be it a man or a horse. The gait is one of the most typical instances of a gesture, ostensibly expressing the will to movement of a human being. Tourette constructed scientific means to measure the gait of his subjects: basically, he applied a kind of stain to his subject's feet, drew a line down the middle of an extremely long roll of paper approximately fifty meters wide, and had them walk down the center of the paper. In this way, he could measure with great accuracy the "length of the step, lateral swerve, angle of inclination, etc." of the subject's gait.⁴⁵ Agamben draws a parallel here between Tourette and the photographic and chronophotographic works of Eadward Muybridge and Etienne Jules Marey. All three scientists were involved in measuring, in quantifying and charting, the "hidden-within-the-visible,"

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⁴⁴ Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," in *Means Without End*, 49.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 52.

so to speak, of movement. Indeed, these observations employed a gaze that prophesized modern cinematography: there is the practice of breaking-down into discrete fragments a once unified whole, for instance, and a sense of the brute fact of the apparatus recording, automatically, whatever passes before its surface, without regard for intent or meaning. In relation to this biometric apparatus, the sovereignty of the observer, or camera operator or director, is a problem I will explore further in the next chapter.

The year before the studies on the gait, Tourette published his *Study on a nervous condition characterized by lack of motor coordination accompanied by echolalia and coprolalia* (1885). The same method of measuring the movement of the gait was used, except this time, rather than the fluid, controlled movement of a co-ordinated body, Tourette found something much more startling: his subjects could not complete the simplest of gestures, their bodies twitching and gesticulating frenetically, as if controlled by an unseen, terrible force. Agamben quotes Jean-Martin Charcot, physiologist and neurologist, on “these unknown and suffering creatures:” “He looks like an automaton that is being propelled by a spring: there is nothing in these rigid, jerky, and convulsive movements that resembles the nimbleness of the gait.”⁴⁶ Tourette would lend his name to a particular manifestation of this phenomenon: Tourette’s syndrome. Could not these “unknown and suffering creatures” at the turn of the century be uncanny figures of *homo sacer* relative to the respectable gait of the recognized citizen?

After noting that while “thousands of cases” of Tourette’s syndrome were observed in the latter part of the nineteenth century, Agamben explains how observation of this phenomenon virtually disappeared for the better part of the twentieth century. Agamben suggests that it was not until 1971, in New York City, that sociologist Oliver

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⁴⁶ Ibid., 52.

Sacks noted a series of cases of the syndrome within the time span of a matter of minutes. Drawing on Sack's alarming observations, Agamben hypothesizes that, in fact, western society lost its gestures to such an extent that it was, at that point, the norm; a norm, we might add, that no one noticed or dared discuss. Effectively, for Agamben, the "society of the spectacle" had succeeded in expropriating a person's very body, their mobility, from their control: "For human beings who have lost every sense of naturalness, each single gesture becomes a destiny. And the more gestures lose their ease under the action of invisible powers, the more life becomes indecipherable."⁴⁷ The cinema, then, relates to this because, as the embodiment of the technological and perceptual transformation that is the twentieth century, it is precisely *the* medium to simultaneously record the loss of and reclaim the gesture.⁴⁸

Agamben goes on to discuss how the "element of cinema is gesture and not image," in that the cinema breaks down the "mythical rigidity of the image" by, on the one hand, fragmenting the gesture into a series of images – seemingly rigid, still, and intact (Agamben refers to this notion as the "eternal pose") – and on the other preserving the "dynamis" of movement and its various contingencies – suggesting a missing gesture outside the frame of which it is a part. In this way, the cinema – and by extension digital

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⁴⁷ Ibid., 52.

⁴⁸ Agamben's second thesis in "Notes on Gesture:" *"In the cinema, a society that has lost its gestures tries at once to reclaim what it has lost and to record its loss."* Agamben discusses a number of scientific and artistic practices that engage with the problem of the gesture, including, "most exemplarily, the silent movie [which] trace[s] the magic circle in which humanity tried for the last time to evoke what was slipping through its fingers forever." Ibid., 53-54. I would only extend this effort on behalf of cinema to compensate for the loss of gesture to the rise of, for example, the "action film," where powerful males overcome incredible odds and complex plots by virtue of their mastery of action as a means to an end. Similarly, I am tempted to offer that much of what is called "romantic comedy" is a kind of fantastical resolution to the breakdown of the social and physical fabric that causes bourgeois men and women to feel and behave powerless and ineffective as "lovers" or "romantics." For that matter, perhaps such middle or highbrow cinema as so-called "art house drama" responds to a crisis in feeling that follows the loss of gesture; that is, the characters in a well-crafted and acted drama can endure and express incredible depths of feeling and emotion in the viewer's stead, thus offering a spectacular solution to our present-day "dearth of feeling:" "dignified" characters can feel "dignified feelings" for us.

video (which, of course, raises its own host of issues related to the ontology of the image or gesture to which it may refer) – is the essential medium of the gesture for it takes this problem of fragmentation into its very nature and potentially shows the mediality, the “in-between-ness” of both itself as medium and the human body as an expressive, affective means. This takes us, then, to the crux of Agamben’s argument: today, in the contemporary, “What characterizes gesture is that in it nothing is being “produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported.”⁴⁹ Agamben disassociates the gesture from both *poesis* – production (of an object or a goal outside of the labour) – and *praxis* – act or action (where nothing is produced for true action is an end in itself).

The gesture, then, is an integral element in Agamben’s anti-foundationalist philosophy; a philosophy, however, which aims to rearticulate the problem of political agency and representation, to shift the terms away from rights, goals, and identities to pure means, potentialities, and a “coming community.” Agamben’s maneuver is to detach the notion of gesture from both ends-driven teleologies – operations which instrumentalize subordinate actions and people to serve some seemingly higher transcendental purpose (like the working of narrative, perhaps) (*one merely walks to get from point A to point B*) – and the aesthetic realm of gesture which has “movement as an end in itself.” On the contrary, Agamben situates the gesture as a means without end, the “*exhibition of a mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such.*”⁵⁰ Agamben uses as an example pornographic film: while the performance can be construed as merely engaged in a means-ends relationship (to orgasm) or in a purely aesthetic endeavor (the beauty of the body as spectacle, perhaps), it is precisely that it is filmed in

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⁴⁹ Agamben, “Notes on Gesture,” 57.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

the process of an act that transforms it into gesture, for it is “suspended in and by [its] own mediality.”⁵¹ When the porno actor addresses the audience by gazing into the camera, for instance, the expression of her performance-in-process “speaks” its own in-between-ness, its mediality, for the audience may now realize their own part in this gesture – the act, in effect, is re-appropriated. We may also be drawn to see the body that supports the action it supposedly serves – the body may speak itself. Agamben also provides the example of the mime: in presenting banal, routine gestures in the context of her performance she defamiliarizes these gestures and sensitizes the viewer to their “pure and endless mediality,” their endless power or lack thereof, their poverty, to be appropriated, subverted, in a word, to (potentially) fail.

The gesture can be both the potentiality of the actuality of an act(ion) – that is, the non-actualized, unfinished aspect of a deliberate action – or the deliberate, performative element of signification intended and manifest in and through the body. We can discern the gesture in action (an end in itself) and in its asignifying, nonproductive aspect of “enduring and supporting” production (a means to an end exterior to itself).⁵²

Politics is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the act of making a means visible as such. Politics is the sphere neither of an end in itself nor of means subordinated to an end; rather, it is the sphere of a pure mediality without end intended as the field of human action and of human thought.⁵³

The gesture, then, can expose itself as such and become what Agamben calls a *res gesta* – an event. Language is implicated in this gestural politic, for what the gesture really shows is the “being-in-language” of human beings, the state where we find ourselves in an arbitrary relationship to the particular words or language we use; where we find

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⁵¹ Ibid., 58.

⁵² Ibid., 57-58.

⁵³ Agamben, “Notes on Politics,” in *Means Without End*, 116-117.

ourselves as political animals with the power of speech that, as such, defines us as human. Language is not merely the shifting ground upon which we center ourselves to express ourselves *through* it; language, in fact, is the non-place we are *in*. Agamben goes on:

The gesture is, in this sense, communication of a communicability. It has precisely nothing to say because what it shows is the “being-in-language” of human beings as pure mediality. However, because being-in-language is not something that can be said in sentences, the gesture is essentially always a gesture of not being able to figure something out in language; it is always a *gag* in the proper sense of the term, indicating first of all something that could be put in your mouth to hinder speech, as well as in the sense of the actor’s improvisation meant to compensate a loss of memory or an inability to speak.⁵⁴

The gesture, then, speaks a kind of silence in language, and, in this way, attests to what Agamben calls “bare life,” that is, “life exposed to death,” for it is the exhibition of the material presence of the body in relation to the linguistic presence of the speaking subject, the social actor. In the gesture, the mediality of the body (as potentially expressive and signifying) is made immediate rather than disappearing into the transmitted “content” of an effective action. In this sense, bare life does not disappear into the dressings of the citizen; potentiality does not disappear into the act; the medium does not disappear into the work. The gesture exhibits a singularity, the “being-in-language” of that which is non-linguistic: (a) life. This is why Agamben can argue in another context, “And we are not only, in Foucault’s words, animals whose life as living beings is at issue in their politics, but also – inversely – citizens whose very politics is at issue in their natural body.”⁵⁵

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⁵⁴ Agamben, “Notes on Gesture,” 59.

⁵⁵ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 188.

According to Agamben, the gesture can allow for appearance itself to appear, for just as humanity's linguistic-being is exposed in the fulfilled nihilism of spectacle and its total expropriation of all human communication, so the gesture is the "appropriation" of the spectacle's "expropriation" of human praxis, action, interaction.⁵⁶ As such, the gesture can be taken as Agamben's "ethical" response to the biopolitical logic of inclusively excluding (bare) life from the realm of politics proper, as the gesture exhibits the mediality of the living singularity (a non-subjectivized "citizen") and its necessary relation to language, meaning, and, ultimately, form. The gesture does not communicate anything but its own communicability, and, therefore, does not isolate *bios* from *zoe* but exhibits a "*bios of zoe*," a "form-of-life" beyond the sovereign fiction of the citizen/bare life distinction of the State. In the gesture's communication of a communicability, a truly political space is opened; a space that could only be opened after the passage through spectacle.

Because human beings neither are nor have to be any essence, any nature, or any specific destiny, their condition is the most empty and most insubstantial of all: it is the truth. What remains hidden from them is not something behind appearance, but rather appearing itself, that is, their being nothing other than a face. The task of politics is to return appearance itself to appearance, to cause appearance itself to appear.⁵⁷

When they have no political recourse to the channels of official representation, the political "act" is the coming-to-appearance of "the people" as such. This is the Agambenian gesture, as it shows the thing which endures and supports the actions and

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⁵⁶ Somewhat prophetically, Agamben writes: "Even more than economic necessities and technological development, what drives the nations of the Earth toward a single common destiny is the alienation of linguistic being, the uprooting of all peoples from their vital dwelling in language. But exactly for this reason, the age in which we live is also that in which for the first time it becomes possible for human beings to experience their own linguistic essence -- to experience, that is, not some language content or some true proposition, but language *itself*, as well as the very fact of speaking." Agamben, "Tiananmen," in *Means Without End*, 85.

⁵⁷ Agamben, "The Face," in *Means Without End*, 94-95.

codes taken to form the world: the potentiality of the life of “the people.” In his videos, Donigan Cumming brings to appearance a “people” without essence, scrambling the documentary’s co-ordinates of sense. How this gesture, working between appearance and being, bare life and citizenship, troubles (and makes appear) documentary representation is the topic of the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO

Sovereignty and Spectacle: Framing *Karaoke*

Our characters are indeterminate, there's nothing solid, we're this way one day and that way another. It's only a conceit that we have this narrative line running through the stories of our lives. You see, I'm not a narrative person; I'm an episodic, and that's quite different.

Donigan Cumming¹

These pure singularities communicate only in the empty space of the example, without being tied by any common property, by any identity. They are expropriated of all identity, so as to appropriate belonging itself... Tricksters or fakes, assistants or 'toons, they are the exemplars of the coming community.

Giorgio Agamben²

I. A Rite of Passage

In *Faking Death: Canadian Art Photography and the Canadian Imagination*, Penny Cousineau-Levine associates Donigan Cumming's photographic practice with a wider trend in Canadian art photography concerned with a national "rite of passage" that is part of a Canadian "syndrome."³ Cousineau-Levine argues that Cumming's ostensibly documentary photographs are about "liminal" states, transitional passages between two more recognized co-ordinates, indicative of a transformation on a national level. For Levine, the ambiguity inherent to Cumming's work is the allegorical manifestation of a national ambiguity over questions of national identity and sovereignty. The uncanny, interstitial nature of Cumming's photographs are said to be "but one more example of Canadian art photography's persistent positioning of the subject in that place that is

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¹ Donigan Cumming in interview with Robert Enright, in Robert Enright, "Endgames: Donigan Cumming's Subverted Narratives," *Border Crossings* 94, 2005, 30.

² Giorgio Agamben, "Example," in *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 10-11.

³ Penny Cousineau-Levine, "Rite of Passage," in *Faking Death: Canadian Art Photography and the Canadian Imagination* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 147.

‘betwixt and between’ the worlds of ‘inside’ and ‘outside,’ ‘here’ and ‘there,’ life and death.”⁴ The Canadian “experience” is marked by border crossings between polarities with subjects who never arrive at a final destination. In this sense, the Canadian subject rendered in Cumming’s work is “always becoming” something other, something somehow unknown.⁵ It is in this sense that Cousineau-Levine reads a national allegory in Canadian art photography: the image, and the experience represented, promises or suggests an achieved state, a sovereign identity, but never quite gets there; Canadian art photography never becomes the real, the actual. While grounded in a kind of documentary rhetoric, employing tropes of realism, Cumming’s photography – again, read as an example of a broader logic of Canadian art photography – at some point *suspends* its referentiality to the empirical world – a common, everyday world of appearance – to allegorize mystical, metaphysical and unknown qualities inherent in the Canadian experience: wilderness.⁶

State of Exception

It is my contention that Cumming’s photo- and videographic practice, while concerned with a certain Canadian ambiguity of (national, spiritual) experience, is engaged in a broader critique of documentary convention: its assumptions, methods and overall logic. Indeed, we can expand Cousineau-Levine’s analysis of Cumming’s photography by approaching his videographic work with the constellation of philosopher Giorgio

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⁴ Cousineau-Levine, “Underworld Geography,” in *Faking Death*, 223.

⁵ Cousineau-Levine, “Conclusion,” in *Faking Death*, 271.

⁶ Cousineau-Levine’s notion of suspended reference finds an intriguing precedent in film scholar Peter Harcourt’s investigation of the Canadian documentary of the 1960s, the National Film Board of Canada’s Unit B films in particular. Harcourt finds that the “direct cinema” of filmmakers such as Wolf Koenig and Roman Kroitor reveals an “atmosphere of events more deeply felt than thoroughly understood – something again that I find characteristically Canadian.” For Harcourt, as for Cousineau-Levine, the Canadian experience is marked by an intersection between the empirical and the metaphysical. See Peter Harcourt, “The Innocent Eye,” *Sight and Sound*, 34:1 (1964/1965: Winter), 19-23.

Agamben's critical terms associated with his concept of the state of exception. As I explained in the previous chapter, the state of exception is produced by a force that suspends the typical application of law and order to expose the otherwise qualified life of the citizen to the naked power of the sovereign. The sovereign thus creates the abandoned figure of *homo sacer*, whose bare life – that is, life unqualified and unprotected by political standing – is subject to a condition where it “may be killed and yet not sacrificed.”⁷ The life of *homo sacer* is caught in a zone of indistinction between law and fact, where the false, founding division in Western metaphysics and law between the political inclusion of *bios* (the specific form of life) and the exclusion of *zoe* (life as such) in the world of Man is mobilized to capture life in a biopolitical logic, best exemplified, perhaps, in the thanatopolitics and eugenics of Nazi Germany.

I employ Agamben's notion of the state of exception in my effort to politically inflect Cousineau-Levine's description of Cumming's work as “'betwixt and between' the worlds of 'inside' and 'outside,' 'here' and 'there,' life and death.” The parallel figures of the sovereign and *homo sacer* are the exemplars of beings who are both “inside” and “outside” the social realm of law and order, the sphere of the world as it is commonly conceived: the sovereign is the figure inside the juridical order who can suspend the order, thus, in a sovereign act, separating himself from that order; *homo sacer* is the figure who is precisely all the more caught in political power in his being abandoned by political identity, by political standing: he would seem to occupy that strange intersection between civilization and wilderness that Cousineau-Levine describes. The sovereign and *homo sacer* are not only ambiguous epistemological categories, but

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⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 8.

they force us to reconsider our ontological coordinates, that is, how we as social, linguistic beings who share a common world understand our social and political space as arranged by such deictic signifiers and operators as “here” and “there.” For example, *homo sacer* is “here” physically but absent – or “there” – politically/socially. Such terms as “here” and “there,” “inside” and “outside,” and even “life” and “death” (as in the case of neomorts and overcomatose patients, to take two of Agamben’s examples) are topologically rearranged in the biopolitical zone of indistinction mobilized in the state of exception.

The political implications of Cumming’s allegories of uncertainty are both broader (international) and more specific (body politics, biopolitics) than Cousineau-Levine’s analysis makes clear. Her allegorical linkage of the ambiguity of culture and nature in Cumming’s photography as indicative of a problematic of Canadian nationhood can be politically amplified by an Agambenian reading which interprets the paradoxical presence of interstitial figures in Cumming as the depiction of a biopolitical (non)relation between *homo sacer* and sovereignty, bare life and the life of the citizen. Where Cousineau-Levine reads Cumming’s self-reflexive focus on the poor and elderly bodies that are typically excluded from the mainstream media perspective as indicative of a crossing over of the mystical or natural into the “frontiers of ordinary reality,” I take Cumming’s work as a critical engagement with a media apparatus (social documentary, say) that plays a significant role in the biopolitical exposure and subjugation of the bare life of citizens.⁸ Indeed, the strange public appearance of what is normally considered private – in Agamben’s terms, the confusion of the *oikos* (home) and the *polis* (city, public sphere) – in Cumming’s photography and videos is, I argue, part of his powerful

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⁸ Cousineau-Levine, *Faking Death*, 224.

critical awareness of contemporary aporias related to the increasingly intertwined worlds of the personal and the political. In question is the instrumentalization of life; the appropriation of all life as a means to the ends of commerce and management: in a word, spectacle.

Sovereignty and Spectacle

My extension of Cousineau-Levine's analysis of Cumming's work to the role of documentary as such in the age of spectacle, then, necessitates staging a (brief) encounter between Agamben's notion of the state of exception and documentary film theory. I hope to show in this encounter how documentary film theory has also elaborated a kind of theory of spectacle in the problematic relationship between a contested "reality" and the documentary engagement with and depiction of – that is, formalization of – this "reality." In the previous chapter, I already suggested how the Griersonian tradition of documentary – in its explicit concern with citizenship, education and national identity – produces an idealized image of the citizen, inadvertently producing a kind of bare life in its exclusions (abandoning certain forms of life, fetishizing the role of the "public sphere" and dogmatically asserting a simplistic formal division between the documentary and fiction). Here, somewhat abruptly perhaps, I want to take the documentary encounter as such – from Robert Flaherty aiming, and intervening, with his camera at the Inuit in *Nanook of the North* (1922) to Michael Moore engineering his cult of personality against the backdrop of impoverished Michigan autoworkers in *Roger and Me* (1989); from Wolf Koenig and Roman Kroitor's perceptive study of Paul Anka and the then emerging phenomenon of the pop star in *Lonely Boy* (1962) to David O'Rourke's ethically charged study of ethnocentrism and commodification in *Cannibal Tours* (1988); from Alain

Resnais' haunting and terrifying excavation of mass-produced death in *Nuit et Brouillard* (1955) to Errol Morris' slick, expressionist deconstruction of crime and (in)justice in America in *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), to take just a few high profile examples – and, in particular the documentary encounter in the work of Cumming, which to my mind radicalizes a tradition of interactive documentary film associated with such luminaries as Pierre Perrault and Jean Rouch, as an engagement in relation to the “real” that is analogous to Agamben's state of exception. Let me explain.

In his introduction to the seminal collection of essays in documentary film theory, *Theorizing Documentary*, Michael Renov makes the case that “the very act of plucking and recontextualizing profilmic elements is a kind of violence, particularly when cultural specificity is at issue as it is with ethnographic texts.”⁹ I want to seize here on Renov's use of the word “violence” to explain my link between the state of exception as Agamben defines it and the documentary project, but first, allow me a generalization. Documentary as such, whatever its rhetoric or techniques (including those of fiction), is premised on some bond to the real world, to a world that extends beyond the frame, beyond even the confines of the length of the film. The real world, however contested, however debated, both preexists and proceeds after, and during, the completion of the film. There is a past in every documentary film, and there is a promise, a relation to the future as well. Some documentaries, via a variety of self-reflexive techniques, explicitly bring into relief the problem of “capturing” reality – here, there is an epistemological uncertainty. Perhaps Morris' *The Thin Blue Line* is an exemplar of the epistemological uncertainty characteristic of the so-called postmodern moment from which it emerged, as it calls into

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⁹ Michael Renov, “Introduction: The Truth About Non-Fiction,” in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 7.

question the status of evidence and the subject's ability to "know what really happened." Other documentaries adopt a more realist style and philosophical position, thus, arguably, maintaining a higher degree of supposed fidelity or veracity, however naïve, to a given historical event. Perhaps the films of Richard Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker and the like are the best examples of this tradition. What all these films share, I maintain, is a common horizon: the actual, historical world.

Renov's documentary "violence" addresses the issue of capturing reality: taking a piece in whatever shape from whatever time and place and exhibiting it in another context. The point, whether one is a realist or a radical skeptic, is that documentary violence is both less and more than reality: documentary film inflects, subdues (subtracts) and amplifies (adds to) reality in myriad ways. Of course, these elements are involved in a highly complex problematic that ultimately undoes any easy hard and fast distinction, but let us say for simplicity's sake that Renov's "plucking" is the subtractive element of documentary and that "recontextualizing" is the productive, additive element. The "violence" of documentary, then, is a dialectical relation between "plucking" and "recontextualizing," a complex of loss and intervention, destruction and creation. Perhaps even more to the point, the problem of the "violence" of documentary can be considered a tensional relation between the given – let us say "reality" (however contested) – and the power of film to exhibit and affect the given (let alone to "effect the given," to reify representation into naturally seeming to *be* what is). Indeed, documentary can serve to reinforce or call into doubt the very "given-ness" of the given; that is, documentary's very condition of possibility hinges on a dialectical relation between faith and skepticism, affirmation and contestation. (Does not the documentary

filmmaker shoot the world to confirm, or [re]affirm, the very existence of the world? “The world is there: I have to film it.” And then, is it not as if the documentarian says to herself, “The world must be there, because I can film it; and in filming it, I [can also] doubt it?”) The documentary, then, would seem to rest on the “violence” of a decision in (re)forming the world.

Paradigm

As discussed in Chapter One, Agamben’s concept of the state of exception is a *paradigm* of modern government, wherein a democratic regime suspends its own constitution and institutes an extra-legal “outside” or lawless zone at the very “inside” of legality.¹⁰ The state of exception is a radical reconfiguration of the ontology of the State; that is, the state of exception transforms the very relationship of power (in signification, application and meaning) to reality in a sovereign way, to the extent where rule and exception, fact and life, coincide. The state of exception is a kind of unreality or violence – the violence of law, or of signification itself, which produce reality-effects – which structures the everyday reality of subjects. The documentary, then, is a paradigm that shares the same horizon with reality. And in sharing the same ontological horizon with reality, the documentary is a paradigm that is both a part of reality – an object and set of discourses in the world – and, to quote Agamben from his lecture “What is a Paradigm?” a “contemplation of phenomena in the medium of their knowability.”¹¹ That is, the documentary film exhibits the stuff of the world, a part, in a “world apart” and holds it up for scrutiny: to be “known,” in the case of realist documentary, say, and to be

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¹⁰ See Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

¹¹ Giorgio Agamben, “What is a Paradigm?,” *European Graduate School*, 2002, <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/agamben/agamben-what-is-a-paradigm-2002.html> (accessed October 16, 2007).

“unknown,” in the example of the deconstructive documentary. In both cases, though, the epistemology of (non)knowledge in the documentary is connected to an ontological “violence” done in and to the world. In sovereign fashion, the documentary produces the world as something to be (un)known.

The documentary dialectically and “violently” engages with the world to produce what Agamben calls an example: “What an example shows is its belonging to a class, but for this very reason, it steps out of this class at the very moment in which it exhibits and defines it. Showing its belonging to a class, it steps out from it and is excluded.”¹² The documentary, at the very moment it comes into being, to show something of the world – however limited, contingent, or universal – stands *beside* the world: in showing the world, the documentary example becomes a singularity with a difference. The exemplarity of the documentary in respect to reality – as a state of exception – is both its enabling condition of being in the world and what makes it stand apart, to, possibly (in promise), instrumentally or poetically, affect the world. In “knowing” the world, the documentary is not exactly “of” the world: it stands beside the world. The documentary is at the same time an example and an exception, a state of exception that exhibits the exemplarity of the stuff of the world: “the specificity of the paradigm resides precisely in the suspension of its immediate factual reference and in the exhibition of its intelligibility as such in order to give life to a new problematic context.”¹³ In the “violent” suspension of reality and the given, the documentary paradigm *regards* reality and creates a space for action. And like the state of exception, the documentary paradigm “is neither universal

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¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

nor particular, neither general nor individual, it is a singularity which, showing itself as such, produces a new ontological context.”¹⁴

However, in the instrumentalism of the conventional documentary, this “new ontological context,” this “state of emergency,” is re-integrated, assimilated back into the logic of the State and the fact, instead of *really* using its “violence” as a gestural “rite of passage” to open the world to the potentiality of the political and the political as potentiality. I want to now turn to Donigan Cumming’s *Karaoke* (3 minutes, 1998) to explore how its “violence” unsettles the documentary state/State of knowledge. I will link the video’s “violent” production of a new ontological context (the example) to the use of the documentary frame as a means to “re-potentiate” the political-being of Cumming’s subject(s).

II. *Karaoke*: Mediality is the Message

Karaoke (3 min., 1998) is Donigan Cumming’s fourth video; it is the first I want to discuss, however, because it powerfully and yet succinctly demonstrates a number of the ways in which his videographic work exhibits the exemplary nature of the documentary in its privileged relationship to the logic of example as a kind of state of exception. For my purposes, *Karaoke* uses a minimum of exposition for maximum emphasis. First, a preliminary discussion of the title: *Karaoke*, Cumming’s first so-called “moving still” (I will return to this notion), refers to the widespread and cross-cultural practice of amateur singing to a pre-recorded musical soundtrack, in most cases a popular hit song. In the performance of a karaoke number, always performed before an audience, the act – its

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¹⁴ Ibid. This is what the debate about documentary veracity and the problem of “truth” needs to consider in greater detail: documentary truth is not simply reflective, nor relative, but productive and creative, even destructive.

transmission and social meaning – hinges on a kind of paradoxical relationship to the original number. The performer and the audience respond to the number in its tensional relationship to the original performance, the recording: the point of, and the pleasure in, karaoke lies in the varying degrees of fidelity to and variation from the standard. Karaoke is an act of repetition with a difference, wherein the primary difference lies in the very being – in terms of identity, spatiality, and temporality – of the subject performing whatever song.

Karaoke is a strange practice, really, of cultural regurgitation, alternately imitation and appropriation, and always premised on some form of (dis)connection between the imaginary associations of authenticity attached to the source song and original performer, and the actuality, banality even, of the amateur performer and the context of the performance in which it takes place (often an embarrassingly public space such as a bar). The karaoke performance, then, is paradoxically related to the example set by the original, for the more it takes on its own identity as a legitimate performance – that is, as manifesting something of the given performer (style, personality, spirit) – the more the event itself cannot be said to belong to either the performer or the original piece: its power lies in the “in-between” (in-between the original and copy, the imaginary and actual).

If well-executed, the karaoke number would seem to testify to the humanist principle of individual sovereignty, where each person always and at all time is said to “be” oneself, unproblematically, and yet never more so than when attempting to be someone else (as in the extreme case of intentionally trying with all of one’s efforts and resources to duplicate another; to become another; to fashion oneself as a means to the

ends of the original). On the other hand, if poorly performed, the karaoke number also exhibits an irreducible singularity, but in this case not that of the triumphant sovereign subject; rather, it is the exhibition of the brutal, embarrassing, and shameful fact of being oneself. In the shameful manifestation of an irreducibly singular material existence, all the more pronounced in the judged failure of execution, one is exhibiting, really, one's self.

Is this naked exhibition of oneself in (the failure of) performance not connected to the coming into appearance of bare life, that is, the coming into relief of that part of oneself that cannot be subjectively mastered except by abandoning it? Is not bare life, in relation to the qualities and qualifications of belonging, the proper, and the self, the ugly waste matter, the noise, of a bad performance? Can one reconcile oneself to this experience of one's being that is indifferent (deaf, dumb, and blind) to one's being? Is there something in the coming to light – the appearance – of the unsaid or unsayable (bare life in the subject) in the said that suggests a potential form of post-sovereign communication that does not abandon (bare) life and banish the medium from expression? Karaoke may bring into relief the very problem of the modern subject and her relationship to community, the State, and the fact of language as such. Moreover, “now that the great State structures have entered into a process of dissolution and the emergency has, as Walter Benjamin foresaw, become the rule, the time is ripe to place the problem of the originary structure and limits of the form of the State in a new perspective.”¹⁵ Karaoke can help expose the enabling and disabling nature of a common language as a kind of script we all perform (as citizens of the State) to varying degrees of success. If the current society of the spectacle in which we live is a bad script, a bad

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¹⁵ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 12.

song, a bad number, then it would seem that the area infused with the potential for emancipation would be *not* in the execution or enactment of said script (a particular grammar, language, State), however artful and seemingly communicative, but rather in the exposition of the very taking-place of the performance of the script; to exhibit the very taking-place of performance as a pure mediality indifferent to the ends of proper repetition and sovereign expression. Cumming's *Karaoke*, as a problematic document of performance, as a gesture and a rite of passage, then, can help us to think this through.

The Frame

We can begin the proper analysis of Cumming's *Karaoke* by describing its use of the frame: how the frame establishes and limits, conditions and constrains, locates and dislocates – in a word, exemplifies – the documentary project of uniting being and appearance, the thing itself and its relations of use and signification, its world. In its inclusion as a part of Cumming's "Moving Stills," *Karaoke* exposes the threshold between the photographic (still) and the (moving) video image. Cumming (de)mobilizes – in what will be argued is a political gesture – the frame to expose its power to hold things in a state of suspension, ready and available for use, what Martin Heidegger calls the "ready-to-hand," where things are taken as "equipment" subordinated to the "manifold assignments of the 'in order to,' or the 'toward which.'"¹⁶ Cumming's political gesture resides in ultimately withholding the instrumental use of (things in) the documentary image, and to remain in, and to reveal, the being of potentiality. In its potentiality, Cumming's exposure of the frame is integral to his refusal to reduce his subjects to either (false) citizen-subjects or bare life.

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¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 69.

I will try to show how *Karaoke* is an intervention into one of the very founding gestures of the documentary: the use of the frame as the establishment of presence as a fact ready for appropriation, the appropriate. Where the conventional documentary transforms the gesture into an action, Cumming suspends the “activity” of the gesture: he exhibits it as a means without end. To help with my discussion of the Agambenian gesture and its relevance to the frame in *Karaoke* it is useful to consider the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht’s well-known concept of the *gestus*. As will become evident, Agamben’s gesture and Brecht’s *gestus* share a remarkable number of things in common; chief among them an emphasis on mediality to open an interval where the political can be explored. Where the two diverge is on the question of the political use of exhibiting the social actor’s mediality. Agamben, it seems, wants to ontologize the politics of the gesture, which does not exactly fit within Brecht’s fundamentally social-historical understanding of the *gestus*.

Gestus

In what is usually regarded as the clearest definition of his central concept of the *gestus*, Brecht defines it thus:

“Gest” is not supposed to mean gesticulation: it is not a matter of explanatory movements of the hands, but of overall attitudes. A language is gestic when it is grounded in a *gest* and conveys particular attitudes adopted by the speaker towards other men...Not all *gests* are social *gests*...the social *gest* is the *gest* relevant to society, the *gest* that allows conclusions to be drawn about the social circumstances.¹⁷

Brecht’s “conclusions to be drawn” would link social behavior to economic and social status, which are historically and politically constructed. Brecht’s *gestus* is designed to

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¹⁷ Bertolt Brecht, “On Gestic Music,” in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willet (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 104-105.

show a space between the actor and the character being played so as to demonstrate this constructedness; to embody and concretize – exemplify – social relations. In this, the gestus works by alienating the familiar gesture: it highlights the performance as performance, not to lock it into a self-enclosed aesthetic but to open it to its changeability. The gestus, akin to the alienation effect, “occurs when the thing to be understood, the thing to which attention is to be drawn, is changed from an ordinary, well-known, immediately present thing into a particular, striking, unexpected thing.”¹⁸ We might say that Brecht’s gestus alienates (interrupts) the subject’s contemporary alienation (the commodification of her experience and social interaction) so as to open her communicative powers to a new use free from the seeming necessities to which it is, for the time being, normatively attached; the necessities of life are alienated, called into question. The gestus exposes the mediality of what is normally taken to be socially immediate, for to interpret life is to interrupt it; and a life composed of interruptions beckons for the interpretive act.

Cumming utilizes the Brechtian gestus in a number of ways throughout his work. The most obvious example, perhaps, is Colin Kane’s visit to the barber in *Erratic Angel* (50:00 min. 1998), as it demonstrates the undeniably social dimension of a shave: the shave is a key part of the social actor’s preparation – in terms of appearance and self-consideration – for a renewed engagement with the world. The gestus exhibits at once the social attitude of the body as a kind of symbolic action specific to the conventions (and contradictions) of a specific socio-political and historical conjuncture *and*, in highlighting the sociality of the body, presents the possibility of taking the attitude

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¹⁸ Bertolt Brecht quoted in Ronald D. Gray, *Brecht the Dramatist* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 71.

toward a different end, to adapt it to an explicitly political use. As theatre scholar Meg Mumford puts it, “Brecht’s gestic theatre asks: why and to what end do people comport themselves as they do? Can or should their social bearing or stance be changed?”¹⁹

For Agamben, however, the political is not connected to a specific use or meaning; rather, the political, as gesture, exhibits the “communication of a communicability. It has precisely nothing to say because what it shows is the being-in-language of human beings as pure mediality.”²⁰ The political is where humanity comes into immediate contact with its mediality, its absence of essence as the space of potentiality. The political, following Agamben, is naturally unnatural, essentially without essence – this is why it is fundamentally tied to language or communicability as the originary supplement to bare life, the supplement which founds the human as such. In this way, the gesture corresponds to the public exhibition of bare life in the *polis*: the gesture crosses the separation between *zoe* and *bios*. As such, the gesture is fundamentally connected to the contemporary question of biopolitics, the management of life (and death) itself.

If, as Agamben contends, there is a contemporary crisis of the gesture, symptomatically registered as a breakdown in the symbolic power of (body) language and the sensory motor apparatus of “the people,” then it becomes clear that Agamben’s diagnosis of it takes place in the state of exception, where the possibility of the Brechtian gestus itself collapses. Cumming may indeed start from the principle of the Brechtian gestus, but often it seems to give way to the Agambenian gesture. For instance, in *A Prayer for Nettie* (33 min. 1995), an idiosyncratic video testament to the passing of his

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¹⁹ Meg Mumford, *Bertolt Brecht* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 55.

²⁰ Giorgio Agamben, “Notes on Gesture,” in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 59.

longtime model Nettie Harris, Cumming assembles a motley group of collaborators to improvise a series of prayers and devotions in her memory. In a scene early in the video, Cumming regular Albert Smith expresses his sadness upon hearing of her death. With his eyes closed, and in total seriousness and solemnity, he begins to offer a prayer: “Nellie, I hope that you are with God and God is with you. I’m sorry that you have passed away, and then I heard it today...” Following Brecht, this example can be read as a *gestus* of bourgeois solemnity, what Cumming derisively refers to as “the cycle of piety and hope.”²¹ However, Albert’s error with the name – “Nellie” instead of “Nettie” – undermines the end of the *gestus* and turns it into a gesture, an Agambenian means without end. The *gestus* becomes the gesture in the weakening of content and reference: meaning becomes undecidable. That is, the gesture no longer signifies a determinable content to be decoded, and, as such, what it comes to signify is the presence of excluded “life” in the otherwise managed “form” of the human community in the State. The decipherment of social meaning in the *gestus* gives way to the “pure and endless mediality” of the gesture.²² In short, where the *gestus* ceases to signify, the gesture “takes place.”

The Square: A Frame of Reference

As Agamben’s example of the 1989 student demonstrations at Tiananmen Square shows, the exceptional presence of the otherwise excluded “being” of the students necessitated, as far as the Chinese government saw it, the declaration of a state of exception: the extralegal suppression of the “illegal” student gathering. This sovereign decision resulted in a massacre: the mass killing of (what the State considered) *homo sacer*: the bare life of

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²¹ Donigan Cumming, “Continuity and Rupture,” *Offscreen*, April 30, 2000, http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/new_offscreen/cumming.html (accessed October 18, 2007).

²² Agamben, “Notes on Gesture,” 59.

the unmanageable “people.” And this is why Agamben holds that “the novelty of the coming politics is that it will no longer be a struggle for the conquest or control of the State, but a struggle between the State and the non-state (humanity), an insurmountable disjunction between whatever singularity and the State organization.”²³ As the State tries to control the “frame” of reference – not only *what* appears but *how* it appears – it exhibits the very foundational, exceptional logic of the metaphysical-political: the inclusive exclusion of bare life. When bare life reappears on its own accord in the *polis*, contrary to the spectacle of biopolitics (biometrics, pornography, fashion), it becomes the gesture: it exhibits how bare life “endures and supports” the potentiality of a meaningful, symbolic act. The gesture, then, takes on exemplary status: it is exclusively included in its singularity as a (potentially meaningful) political event; it is “whatever singularity.” As an event the example is paradigmatic: standing *beside* the order of things, the example “is thus excluded from the normal case not because it does not belong to it but, on the contrary, because it exhibits its own belonging to it.”²⁴ The frame is the public square, the political stage, as it were, where the exception and the example play out their fate.

Agamben acknowledges the complexity of the relationship between the exception and the example: they are “correlative concepts that are ultimately indistinguishable and that come into play every time the very sense of the belonging and commonality of individuals is to be defined.”²⁵ It is the sovereign “decision on the exception” which attempts to stabilize the shifting (political) ground of the exception and the example, to fix their relation. Here, the sovereign decision tries to maintain its control over the use and form-giving power of the frame to maintain the logical consistency of the set, the

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²³ Agamben, “Tiananmen,” in *The Coming Community*, 85.

²⁴ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 22.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

State. In what follows, I shall investigate the “decisionism” of the frame relative to *Karaoke* and the interlocking problems of bare life, the gesture and the documentary example/exception. In *Karaoke*, as I hope to make clear, Cumming alerts the viewer to her own responsibility in making a decision (or not) on the example and the exception of life in the documentary.

Object Lesson

The effects of Donigan Cumming’s *Karaoke* are more easily felt than formulated. In an introduction to a public screening of *Karaoke* in Toronto in 2008, experimental filmmaker and writer Mike Hoolboom posed a question to Cumming, “Why conjure this universe of a body, this landscape of flesh?”²⁶ To my understanding, Hoolboom’s question, perhaps inadvertently, cuts to the very heart of the matter of the documentary example. A description of the video will help set up my Agambenian explanation.

Karaoke opens with an extreme close-up study of an elderly man’s face: with his eyes closed, the man licks his lips; the camera jostles slightly, suggesting it is handheld; the image is almost imperceptibly in slow-motion. Given the man’s apparent age, his reclined posture suggesting infirmity, and the emphasis on his fragile bodily-being (indexed by labored swallowing), it seems, for all intents and purposes, that he is quite sick and unconscious – perhaps even near death. Is this, as Cumming puts it, a “deathwatch?”

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²⁶ Mike Hoolboom, “Practical Dreamers – Launch,” www.mikehoolboom.com, October 18, 2008, <http://www.mikehoolboom.com/writing/Books/Practical%20Dreamers%20launch.htm> (accessed February 12, 2009). Hoolboom’s question, in its entirety: “We’re going to watch a three minute movie you made ten years ago called *Karaoke*. It’s shot very close up, refusing the surroundings, the room, the context. Why conjure this universe of a body, this landscape of flesh? Who is this man, and why is the tape called *Karaoke* (after all, he never utters a word, nor do you)?”

The oral component of the video is somewhat distorted: the audio track hisses, faint sounds, clicking and clacking in general proximity, are heard – is this the diegetic room sound recorded by Cumming’s camera’s built-in microphone? Perhaps. But while the sound first seems to correspond to the elderly man’s action, his lip-licking and swallowing possibly the source of the audio, it quickly becomes evident that the sound we hear is not necessarily coming from him, or even from the room, at all. The audio and the visual do not seem to be in synch; they may be from different temporalities, perhaps even different spaces, entirely. It really is difficult to tell.²⁷

While the handheld camera lingers over the elderly man’s face with a kind of special emphasis given to his oral region (his mouth), moving slightly back and forth and continually reframing as handheld shots do (a trope of observational cinema), a song emerges from the off-camera audio: a strange combination of Christian pop music and Inuktitut singing.²⁸ The off-camera voices of two women, presumably of Inuit origin, join in with the music, singing along to the lyrics praising Christ, declaring his love and how they are blessed for partaking in it – as one line exclaims (with English subtitles) “How the message will be understood!” At one point early in the song, the recorded music cuts out: it is here, via this aural cue, that the viewer recognizes that the Inuit women’s voices heard are not part of the music recording; they seem, in fact, to belong to

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²⁷ Cumming explains in interview with Mike Hoolboom: “The tape starts with the cassette being loaded and a tight shot of Nelson’s head, as he licks his lips. The movement of his tongue is slightly accentuated in the edit with some slow motion.” See Mike Hoolboom, “Donigan Cumming: Reality and Motive in the Documentary,” in *Practical Dreamers: Conversations with Movie Artists* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2008), 118.

²⁸ Cumming informs us that the singing is in Inuktitut in the Hoolboom interview. See Hoolboom, “Donigan Cumming: Reality and Motive in the Documentary,” 118. This opens up thinking about a provocative ethnographic intertext to read with *Karaoke*, Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922). For starters, both films partake in a kind of cross-cultural encounter; furthermore, music – and the apparatuses for playing recorded music – figures strongly in both. Also, in both films there is the problematic relationship of staging and re-enactment. Pursuing the specifics of this comparison is, however, beyond the scope of this paper.

the same space as the old man (who, importantly, it seemed at first was singing but in fact was merely breathing). The women are singing along to the tape beside the old man in a kind of impromptu karaoke performance.

Approximately a third of the way through the three minute duration of *Karaoke*, the camera begins to deliberately and purposively scan its way over the horizontal plane of the old man's body, arriving at his feet. As it turns out, the elderly man seems to indeed be listening to the karaoke performance with some measure of interest: he is tapping his foot in time with the song. This is the "punch-line" of the video, the moment of truth revealing that the opening half of the video is a kind of set-up, the necessary opening of the gag. As Cumming puts it, "In *Karaoke*, the horror of a deathwatch is pure illusion. The transgression is a set-up, which turns on the spectator when the camera gets down to the feet. Nelson [the elderly man] is not dead! He is tapping his toes!"²⁹

From here, again in an almost imperceptible gesture, the tape in fact begins to repeat itself backwards, audio included. This switchover almost passes unnoticed – in fact, I would argue first-time viewers often miss it – as the camera lingers over the tapping foot only to return to the "grizzled face" of the elderly man, licking his lips and breathing, in slow motion. With this, the tape ends.³⁰

Landscape of Flesh

If we consider *Karaoke* a kind of documentary, exhibiting its means without end, then we are forced to take seriously Hoolboom's inquiry. Hoolboom again: "[*Karaoke*] is shot

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²⁹ Hoolboom, "Donigan Cumming: Reality and Motive in the Documentary," 118.

³⁰ It should be noted that *Karaoke*, as part of the "Moving Stills" series, was originally shown in an art gallery context, in a room alongside the other videos in the series. Each video, projected at a large size, runs in a continuous loop, alternating between their respective soundtracks. This presentation format reinforces the monumental, formal repetition of the work that is arguably lost in a single channel, non-looped, screening.

very close up, refusing the surroundings, the room, the context. Why conjure this universe of a body, this landscape of flesh? Who is this man...?”³¹ Hoolboom’s query points to the foundational problematic of the documentary logic of example, which *Karaoke* exposes via my Agambenian reading of its strategies. The central problem: how is “a landscape of flesh,” that is, bare life, produced, and how is it overturned; or, rather, how is a form of life shown without falling into the trappings of sovereign citizenship?

The elderly man framed by the extreme close-up of Cumming’s camera is presented to the viewer in a kind of extreme biological proximity at the expense of knowing who and where he, the would-be subject, is. The epistemological grounds of knowledge related to context and the like are refused for the ontological priority of the body: here he, or, perhaps, *it*, is. The elderly man is first and foremost an object of display and his being is reduced to maintaining his very existence: he breathes, he licks his lips – his life is stripped of context, it is bare life. As such, his position relative to the documentary logic of example is analogous to what Agamben considers the foundational gesture of Western politics and metaphysics: the inclusive exclusion of bare life. In this case, Cumming refuses the elderly man’s life-world by way of the close-up, framing and including him as bare life by excluding his environment. The elderly man *is* the environment, a “landscape of flesh.”

The Camp

The elderly man’s existence, his existence as such, that *Karaoke* establishes at the outset and which seems to teeter on the brink between mere being (life) and non-being (death), or, even more to the point, the human (a speaking-being with subjectivity, desire and

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³¹ Hoolboom, “Donigan Cumming: Reality and Motive in the Documentary,” 118.

history) and the inhuman (a mere “landscape of flesh”), finds an instructive parallel in what Agamben identifies as one of the paradigmatic figures of the twentieth century: the *Musselmann*. The *Musselmann*, for Agamben, is the exemplary figure of the concentration camp, whose total degradation and malnutrition has wasted away the speaking subject to the limit-figure of life and language at the brink of death and speechlessness.³² A kind of living dead – who/which is the site of confusion between the categories of life/death and human/inhuman as figured in the extreme biopolitical decisionism of the Nazi regime – the *Musselmann* is part of the administered process of the killing machine of the concentration camp, wherein the prisoner passes into the threshold of the *Musselmann* and thus does not die as a Jew or human being, but as mere biological existence, bare life. The *Musselmann*, then, is a (non)subject without context, history, personality, or desire; it is biology, possible motor skills, and the barest minimum of needs. This seems to be the existential status of that withered face in *Karaoke*: death seen in the death scene, what Cumming calls “the horror of a deathwatch.” Or is it?

As argued above, the *Musselmann* comes into existence by way of the concentration camp. Agamben is quick to argue, however, that while the Nazi concentration camp is a historically specific phenomenon, it is nonetheless the hypostatized manifestation of a much more general logic. Agamben:

The camp is the paradigm itself of political space at the point in which politics becomes biopolitics and *homo sacer* becomes indistinguishable from the citizen[...]. If the essence of the camp consists in the materialization of the state of exception and in the consequent creation of a space for naked life as such, we will then have to admit to be facing a camp virtually every time that such a structure is created, regardless of the nature of the crimes committed in it and regardless of the denomination

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³² For his most sustained discussion of the *Musselmann*, see Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), in particular “Chapter II, The Musselman,” 41-86.

and specific topography it might have[...]From this perspective, the birth of the camp in our time appears to be an event that marks in a decisive way the political space itself of modernity.³³

The camp can appear and manifest an otherwise latent state of exception anywhere, isolating bare life, *zoe*, from the qualified life of the citizen-subject, *bios*. The camp is mobile and can temporarily install itself in such spaces as airports, shopping centres, soccer fields, and even living rooms – it is the potential for a kind of sovereign violence that confounds the distinction between the *oikos* (the home) and the *polis* (the city, public space) where all public citizens are potentially private prisoners. In this way, the camp is what Agamben calls a “dislocating localization” that scrambles the co-ordinates of a seemingly determinate topos – a space and place – in order to suspend law and order and institute the “inscription of life” into the paradoxical order of sovereign violence.³⁴

The Gag

In *Karaoke*, Cumming’s camera, his frame, imposes a kind “dislocating localization” upon the profilmic space: the frame excludes “the surroundings, the room, the context,” rendering the elderly man as “this landscape of flesh,” bare life on the brink of death. As an object/subject held up by the documentary as an example, what *Karaoke* seems to present is the *fact* of the elderly man as such. However, is the man merely a “moving still,” that is, a being (moving) on the brink of death (still)? As we shall see, and as was suggested above, the “fact” of the elderly man – the “deathwatch” of bare life – is problematized by the same “violence” and power of the frame which presented it. Indeed, the frame, the logic of the camp as dislocating localization, becomes the very means by which Cumming repotentializes the world: the camp becomes the “constructed

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³³ Agamben, “What is a Camp?,” in *Means Without End*, 41-42.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

situation,” as the presence of fact gives way to the mediality of potentiality; as action falters the gesture appears. This is the gag off/in *Karaoke*.

The gag of *Karaoke*, of course, is that the seemingly unconscious subject-object, the ailing man as bare life, is revealed to be engaged with his milieu, tapping his foot as he enjoys the off-camera music. The movement of the frame thus establishes a kind of newly invigorated ontological context for the world in which the video takes place. The significance of the gesture of foot tapping is not that it has the priority of being the new fundamental reality or fact to which the video bears witness, but that, in Agamben’s words, it “defines a life – human life – in which the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simply *facts* but always and above all *possibilities* of life, always and above all power.”³⁵

A Situation

If the camp is a mobile space of exception that organizes its own form of disorganization (a zone of indistinction between citizenship and the natural body), that realizes the nihilistic potential for sovereign violence at the heart of everyday law and order (a pure political violence), and that isolates bare life in the ruthless alienation of the human being from its form (by way of transforming experience into spectacle), the “constructed situation” takes this alienation and violence and turns it on its head in a liberatory gesture. It is the constructed situation which can take “this biopolitical body that is bare life” and transform it into “the site for the constitution and instalment of a form of life that is wholly exhausted in bare life and a *bios* that is only its own *zoe*.”³⁶

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³⁵ Agamben, “Form-of-Life,” in *Means Without End*, 4.

³⁶ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 188.

Following Debord and the Situationists, Agamben defines the constructed situation in the following way:

The situation is neither the becoming-art of life nor the becoming-life of art. We can comprehend its true nature only if we locate it historically in its proper place: that is, *after* the end and self-destruction of art, and *after* the passage of life through the trial of nihilism...[at] a point of indifference between life and art, where *both* undergo a decisive metamorphosis *simultaneously*. This point of indifference constitutes a politics that is finally adequate to its tasks. The Situationists counteract capitalism [and I would add the state of exception, the logic of the camp] – which “concretely and deliberately” organizes environments and events in order to depotentiate life – with a concrete, although opposite, project.³⁷

The constructed situation mobilizes the “dislocating localization” of the frame and its intrusiveness, its manifestly interruptive nature in a given milieu (breaking the supposed unity of the moment for aesthetic reasons [a nice picture]), and makes of it an opportunity for experimentation in the zone of indistinction it opens between art and life. In this way, the constructed situation transforms life at the level of experience rather than representation or contemplation: life and theatre intersect to mutually transform and repotentiate one another. To put it another way, if the generalized state of exception and spectacle in which we live has already falsified experience and inclusively excluded life, then the constructed situation uses an apparent falsity – its constructedness – to highlight this very spectacle and fragmentation, thereby directing it to an alternative use, albeit one not directed toward a specific, pre-given, end.

The Gesture

Central to Agamben’s conception of the constructed situation is the gesture. Indeed, in explaining the constructed situation, Agamben argues that

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³⁷ Agamben, “Marginal Notes on *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*” in *Means Without End*, 78-79.

Gesture is the name of this intersection between life and art, act and power, general and particular, text and execution. It is a moment of life subtracted from the context of individual biography as well as a moment of art subtracted from the neutrality of aesthetics: it is pure praxis.³⁸

Just as the constructed situation emerges from a “dislocating localization,” the gesture exhibits itself as a kind of action that, in exhibiting itself, suspends its commonplace function as a means to an end and becomes a means without end. For Agamben, as I outlined toward the end of the previous chapter, this is the very promise of cinema – the paradigm of (a potential) situation-constructing apparatus (and not necessarily a storytelling medium at all) – itself: to exhibit the very movement of humankind in a state of suspension freed from immediate ends, that is, to show in an immediate way the fundamental mediality of humanity. As Stephen Crocker states in his article “Noises and Exceptions: Pure Mediality in Serres and Agamben,”

What the late nineteenth century interest in gesture seems to promise, and what, Agamben argues, remains the promise of cinema since, is some understanding of the world’s movement exempted from all-purpose and displaying nothing more or less than the taking place of life in a ratio of time and movement. As such, cinema gives us the world in the form of a gesture. Cinema brackets out the significance of the event so that the pure act of its enunciation can come forward.³⁹

The constructed situation as, with and by the gesture does not operate on a representational so much as a kind of para-phenomenological level: whatever “understanding” it generates is not something one possesses, as a collection of facts to be decided on in sovereign fashion, but is rather something one endures: it is an orientation, an attitude of the political body opening to the world.

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³⁸ Ibid., 80.

³⁹ Stephen Crocker, “Noises and Exceptions: Pure Mediality in Serres and Agamben,” *CTheory.net*, March 28, 2007, <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=574> (accessed October 14, 2007).

Signs of Life

Cumming's *Karaoke* is exemplary in its exhibition of the very gesture that Agamben identifies with the constructed situation. First, the video brackets out the context in its suspension of typical documentary markers of place, "refusing the surroundings, the room, the context." What transpires is not a narrative or argument in any conventional sense; rather, a situation develops. The viewer is confronted with what seems to be the exhausted figure of bare life, of mere life, struggling to simply be. Is this the barest expression of an existential dilemma? Perhaps, but then, as the camera tracks to his tapping foot, the elderly man's gesture opens up the question of the political. Neither a fact nor reducible to individual expression (as Hoolboom asks, "Who is this man?"), and not the expression of an autonomous, modernist aesthetic (the "aesthetic dimension" of dance), the gesture exhibits the mediality of the elderly man and the ultimate inseparability of his life (*zoe*: his breathing, his bare existence) from his *being* a singularity.⁴⁰ "It is a moment of life subtracted from the context of individual biography as well as a moment of art subtracted from the neutrality of aesthetics."⁴¹

The gesture of tapping his foot to the music is an expression, an exhibition, of the elderly man's "form-of-life." This is crucial in understanding how *Karaoke* moves from the fact of a "landscape of flesh" to the potentiality of a subject and the inseparability of his *being* from his body: "this being that is only its bare existence and...this life that, being its own form, remains inseparable from it."⁴² In this sense, it is the degree to which the subject of *Karaoke* evades being knowable "factually" or as a citizen-subject that he exists as a "form-of-life;" his life is connected to possibility: the elderly man's political

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⁴⁰ Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," 58.

⁴¹ Agamben, "Marginal Notes on *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*," 80.

⁴² Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 188.

existence depends on his irreducibility to factual existence. The “horror of a deathwatch” as fact gives way to the “gag” of the gesture; bare life opens to what Agamben calls the “*absolute and complete gesturality of human beings*.”⁴³ In the gag, the elderly man, Nelson Coombs, is thus not the documentary example of a victim, bare life, but an exception. He is an exception precisely because, in the apparently closed-in world of the frame, he is epistemically undetermined; a weak symbol in his potentiality; a “whatever-being” occupying the zone of indistinction between the example and the exception.

Furthermore, the reverse playback of the video deconstructs any pretences of non-mediated presence. Cumming makes *Karaoke*, the video, gesture itself, undoing its “action” by reversing it back to the beginning. Effectively, *Karaoke* splits itself in its doubling: it makes itself an example, a paradigm, beside itself. The reverse playback is another example of the ongoing and endless deferrals in the video, challenging any sovereign decision which would ground the political in a limited, instrumentalist frame. In this cinematic gesture of a means without end, Cumming makes the mediality of *Karaoke* immediate.⁴⁴

How the Message will be Understood

Cumming’s framing of the elderly man is productively indecisive in its documentary “violence.” That is, Cumming suspends the instrumental use of documentary: *Karaoke* never arrives at a definite conclusion, a clear cut end; its exception is not naturalized. In the video, being and appearance continually shift, as the “deathwatch” gives way to the

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⁴³ Agamben, “Notes on Gesture,” 60.

⁴⁴ Indeed, as Cumming makes clear in the interview with Hoolboom, the encounter itself was staged for his camera; that is, the performers in *Karaoke* had already listened to the song, sang, and tapped along. Cumming asked them to do it again, this time with his camera running. Thus, the repetition in/of the video replicates the founding repetition of the performance. See Hoolboom, “Donigan Cumming: Reality and Motive in the Documentary,” 118.

punch-line of the gesture of the tapping foot, which in turn moves into an exhibition of the medial nature of the video as it plays back in reverse. The extreme close-up on the elderly man's face which, while "violently" refusing context, would seem to privilege a kind of epistemology of proximity, yields no such thing. Rather, as the camera tracks, the video exhibits the "gag": a gesture not circumscribed by the clichés of bare life and citizenship so naturalized by the documentary form. The close-up of *Karaoke* does not establish the presence of a citizen-subject but rather exhibits a "form-of-life" that is "not the sphere of an end in itself but rather the sphere of a pure and endless mediality."⁴⁵ As a means without end, *Karaoke* and its exhibited examples are held up for free use, never exhausting their potentiality in appearing. In contrast to a specific meaning, endless mediality – that is, pure means – is the message. In my Agambenian reading, *Karaoke* redeems as the true vocation of both humanity and the documentary project the endless, repetitive and seemingly futile Sisyphean execution of a task without proper completion, inoperative operability and non-work: means without end.

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⁴⁵ Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," 59.

CHAPTER THREE

On the Destruction of Experience: *My Dinner with Weegee*

The exile is, I believe, the typical figure, the personification, the archetype of our century, which is a century of the culmination and the transcendence of nationalism. The exile, by the very fact that he is wrenched away from the traditional supports of human personality – tradition, custom, family, solidarity – must in the end, if he survives the experience mentally and physically, find himself as himself, as being for himself alone, in total freedom.

Martin Esslin¹

The question of experience can be approached nowadays only with an acknowledgement that it is no longer accessible to us. For just as modern man has been deprived of his biography, his experience has likewise been expropriated. Indeed, his incapacity to have and communicate experiences is perhaps one of the few self-certainties to which he can lay claim.

Giorgio Agamben²

Any system that forgets to be nervous about its own certainties is headed for deep shit.

Donigan Cumming³

In this Exile

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, Donigan Cumming's *Karaoke* (1998) reworks the documentary as a kind of absurd ethnographic portrait, exposing its process of exhibition in a kind of state of exception, thereby exiling the documentary project from the metaphysics of citizenship exemplified in the Griersonian tradition. In this chapter, I further pursue the concept of exile as it pertains to documentary representation. Indeed, *My Dinner with Weegee* (36 min. 26 sec., 2001) takes as its central subject an exile, Marty Corbin, a war refugee of sorts, in fact. Cumming's focus on the figure of the exile in the video provides an excellent opportunity to discuss in greater detail the relationship

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¹ Martin Esslin, "Peter Weiss: Dramatist Beyond Brecht and Beckett," in *Reflections: Essays on Modern Theatre* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 150.

² Giorgio Agamben, "Infancy and History: An Essay on the Destruction of Experience," in *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 15.

³ Donigan Cumming in interview with Mike Hoolboom, in Mike Hoolboom, "Donigan Cumming: Reality and Motive in the Documentary," in *Practical Dreamers: Conversations with Movie Artists* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2008), 114.

between the documentary (re)presentation of experience – of life and language – and the political. As I will show, the problem of experience is crucial to Cumming's videographic practice: *My Dinner with Weegee* powerfully exemplifies a parallel between its central thematic preoccupation, the experience of exile (or exile *as* experience), and the documentary procedure (and idea) as such.

Political Life

My Dinner with Weegee is perhaps Cumming's most explicitly "political" work. There is, among other things, "a very clear exposition of how the social actor prepares to interact within the current state of socialized medicine," to quote Donigan Cumming in interview with Mike Hoolboom⁴ The main subject, the "social actor," of the film is Marty Corbin, an elderly, exiled American teacher now residing in Montreal. In his past, from the forties to the sixties, Corbin was involved with the labour movement (he was an editor of *The Catholic Worker* in New York) and worked as a peace activist, which brought him into a close friendship with the famed peace movement figure and member of the so-called Chicago Seven (1969-70), David Dellinger. In the course of the video, Marty and Cumming discuss their shared involvement in the peace movement of the sixties, reflecting on its failures and contradictions, and their subsequent exile from America and relocation in Montreal, Canada. Cumming, for instance, at one point describes how his "very anarchistic frame of mind" led him to not only resist the war but to refuse even the status of conscientious objector, as this was to still too compromised a position, and thus flee the country as a draft dodger, risking possible imprisonment. Woven into this ongoing conversation are also Marty Corbin's memories of his

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⁴ Ibid., 114.

encounters with famed photographers Weegee and Walker Evans and writer James Agee, author of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). These artists, notably Evans and Agee, were key figures in what is known as socially concerned photography, which resonates with Cumming's work in a multitude of ways, as the very title of his first exhibition suggests: *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* (1986).

Indeed, a key aspect of Cumming's work, from *Reality and Motive* to *My Dinner with Weegee*, is the critique of documentary convention, its codified and mannered forms that formalize to become a kind of language, a semiotic, a jargon. Documentary, from Grierson through the various forms of observational cinema, has become a system of codes associated with authenticity, including various means of self-reflexivity – these too come to, as film scholar Paul Arthur puts it, “generate recognizable, perhaps even self-conscious, figures through which to signify the spontaneous, the anticonventional, the refusal of mediating process.”⁵ Documentary, in its politics as a public forum for effective communication, is a language that is produced, written, viewed, and read. However, the same conventions that establish effective transmission also become routine, technical, tyrannical in their repetition: documentary divides itself between an ideology of authenticity based on a presumed unmediated access to the real world (a naive realism, empiricism or positivism) and the cultic jargon of signifiers and codes decoded by a select, sovereign few. In both cases, the citizens of documentary, producers and consumers alike, participate in the perpetuation of a politics of exclusion: the exclusion of the medium on the one hand, and the exclusion of everything but the signifier/signified, on the other.

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⁵ Paul Arthur, “Jargons of Authenticity (Three American Moments),” in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 109.

Life, as openness to the world, contingent and radical being-in-the-world, is caught in the apparatus, the language, of the documentary. If *My Dinner with Weegee* is Cumming's most explicitly political film, then, it is not simply because Marty Corbin and Cumming discuss ostensibly political subjects – the peace movement, labour struggle, political exile – but rather because it makes radical use of, that is, *exposes* and *exhibits*, one of the key means by which politics in the documentary takes shape: the interview. Indeed, if politics is so much shaped and defined by language and speech, and the documentary itself is a kind of language, then one of its most extreme forms of political manifestation is in/as the interview. The primary political gesture of *My Dinner with Weegee* is its exposure of the interview as the exhibition of life in the apparatus of language.

The Interview

My Dinner with Weegee is structured around a series of (ultimately problematic or even failed) interviews with Marty Corbin. It was Cumming's initial intention to produce a kind of archive of interviews with the intellectual Marty, whose past, as noted above, intersects with Cumming's in various ways. The interviews would capture Marty Corbin's eloquence and learnedness: history itself, as he experienced it, was to be transmitted within his words. However, as the interviews began, the process was overcome by a disturbing presence: alcoholism and death. As Cumming puts it in a recent article in *Millennium Film Journal* on Experimental Documentary, "I wanted to talk about his [Marty Corbin's] history and mine on tape, but his alcoholism and declining health overtook us. I kept visiting, talking to Marty, trying ineffectually to

help, while recording relentlessly (toilet paper in one hand; camera in the other)."⁶ What was to be a series of interviews premised on the linguistic transmission of Marty's memories becomes at once the intermittent exchange of memories, questions, and half-articulated, half-understood answers, an invasive observational study of a physical and mental breakdown, and the intervention and care of one friend for another. The relationship between Cumming and Marty becomes simultaneously more abstract and more direct as language falters and convention gives way to silence, absurdity, and the paradoxical presence of the body, bare life.

In *My Dinner with Weegee* Cumming includes in the final work Marty Corbin's struggle to express himself in the face of his failing health (due to alcoholism, old age, depression). There are indeed passages including "Art Marty's," as Colin Kane refers to him at one point in the video, wit, charm, and lucidity. These are the informative sessions where Marty Corbin – the exemplary interviewee – recalls his personal experiences with his wife and Weegee, Dellinger, Agee and Evans. These memories evoke another time related to the counter-culture of which both Corbin and Cumming once belonged, a community of socially concerned artists and intellectuals, many working for peace during yet another senseless war: Vietnam. Simultaneously separating and weaving together these moments are other fragments which capture Marty's speechlessness, his degradation and suffering. At times able to speak a few words, at others practically mute, Marty is exposed in his most private anguish. These sequences include Cumming helping Marty, in soiled underwear, to the toilet to take a piss, and passed out and sleeping, as well as refusing to speak unless he has another beer. These

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⁶ Donigan Cumming, "Response to Experimental Documentary Questionnaire," *Millennium Film Journal* 51 (Spring/Summer 2009): 16.

fragments de-normalize the interview, bringing into relief the mechanics, the conditions of the interview as such, that is, they show how the interview produces its subject, how it is a process of experimentation (with language – film language as much as speech and text) that quite literally takes place.

Experimental/Experiential

In his contribution to the *Millennium Film Journal* article mentioned above, Cumming discusses the term “experimental” in relation to his documentary practice:

Applied to documentary filmmaking and videography, forms in which the delivery of information is paramount, categorization of a documentary work as “experimental” might lead to its dismissal as incomplete or inapplicable to the average person – or worse, as so imaginative as to verge on fiction. Since much of this filmmaking is intended to immerse the audience in a set of circumstances that can be felt, as much as observed, a better term might be “experiential” documentary – a cinematic experience that is also a life experience, which is knowledge of a different order.⁷

The question of the “experiential,” of experience, is of the utmost of importance in considering the exposure of the apparatus of the interview in *My Dinner with Weegee*. If the interview is a convention of the documentary, necessary to the effective “delivery of information,” then we can discern how Marty’s own inability to endure the speech-act of the interview is analogous to Cumming’s fragmentation of the more general language of the documentary, which, conventionally, binds interviews into a seamless whole. Moreover, if Cumming’s inclusion of Marty’s decline in the very process of the interview troubles the language of the documentary (that is, that the interview is a problem for Marty and that, in a sense, Marty is a problem for the interview), then we should consider in some detail how Marty’s inability to express his life experience (which is the

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⁷ Ibid., 14.

destruction of his experience of the present: death) is itself a kind of experience: the experience of observation, of life observed, as such. Cumming not only interrogates Marty, he interrogates the very notion of the interview.

In *My Dinner with Weegee*, Cumming's interviews with Marty do indeed "deliver information," but, more explicitly, that is, exemplarily, they put emphasis on the teller over the tale, so to speak. Furthermore, as Marty's very powers of speech and testimony give way, his own experience of himself is expropriated, abandoned: Marty, in not speaking, is not himself; remember: Marty, for the better part of his life, was a professor, a speaker. In this, the viewer "experiences" the documentary subject's, Marty's, inscription in the documentary apparatus all the more so for its malfunction: the speaker does not, or cannot, speak. In the jargon of documentary, as communication breaks down, we observe Marty's exposition at the same time that we experience the observation. The expository and interactive powers of intentionality connected to the interview – with a clear and precise sense of what is being transmitted – are overcome by the observational power of the camera, which is itself a kind of automatic passivity (taking in whatever of the milieu it can), lingering on the frailty of Marty's existence in extreme close-up. Indeed, Cumming often fills the frame with Marty's mouth, *the* organ of information transmission par excellence, but in these instances, information – language, meaning – transforms into the material struggle of the body, how it "endures and supports" effective social communication.⁸

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⁸ Samuel Beckett's disembodied mouth in the dark emitting a rapid-fire monologue about sexual repression and memory, among other things, with an unseen "auditor" taking note in *Not I* is relevant here as another formulation of the materiality-communication problematic and its relationship to a body which "endures and supports" its efforts. See Samuel Beckett, *Not I* (London: Faber, 1973) for the script of this haunting stage work.

The Last Radical Act

These interviews about politics are thus also about the politics of the interview, in fact, they exhibit the interview as political. Remembering Agamben's account of how the foundational political act is the inclusive exclusion of bare life by abandoning *zoe* to the *oikos*, leaving it at the mercy of the spectacular politics of the *polis*, it becomes even more pronounced, then, how Cumming's intervention into the language of the documentary by way of the interview and its malfunction is in fact an intervention in life – the life that was/is inclusively excluded by the fetishism of (the transmissibility of) information, that is, speech. *My Dinner with Weegee* exhibits Marty Corbin within the medium of the documentary apparatus: Marty's performance and failure to perform produces a zone of indistinction between his (in)activity as a social citizen-subject (a troubled speaking-being) and the "active" passivity of his biological existence (bare life).⁹ Cumming highlights this as he helps Marty piss and emphasizes his ingestion of liquids and solids, booze and food. In the destruction of his experience, Marty's body and speech, the private and public, blur, thus confounding the clean transmission of information so naturalized in the documentary. Moreover, pissing and drinking become political gestures as they trouble the naturalized jargon of the documentary interview.

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⁹ Agamben on the "zone of indistinction" between the private body and public speech: "Living in the state of exception that has now become the rule has meant also this: our private biological body has become indistinguishable from our body politic, experiences that once used to be called political suddenly were confined to our biological body, and private experiences present themselves all of a sudden outside us as body politic. We have had to grow used to thinking and writing in such a confusion of bodies and places, of outside and inside, of what is speechless and what has words with which to speak, of what is enslaved and what is free, of what is need and what is desire. This has meant – why not admit it? – experiencing absolute impotence, bumping against solitude and speechlessness over and over again precisely there where we were expecting company and words." See Giorgio Agamben, "In this Exile," in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 138-139.

Marty's last "radical act" (Marty died only months after the completion of the video), as Cumming puts it, was to take his body – his experience of the destruction of his experience – as a political problem, for to trouble the interview was/is to trouble the mythological politics of the American war machine and its imposition of the *form* that dialogue, as political communication, takes. In *My Dinner with Weegee* Marty brought life to his politics and, in the brave exhibition of his struggle and decline, his politics to life.

A Descent into Hell¹⁰

...death is hardly more bitter.

*And yet, to treat the good I found there as well
I'll tell what I saw, though how I came to enter
I cannot well say, being so full of sleep
Whatever moment it was I began to blunder*

Off the true path.

Dante¹¹

The above quotation is from American poet Robert Pinsky's translation of Dante's *Inferno*. It is part of the environmental sound that Cumming's camera captures toward the end *My Dinner with Weegee*, his camera swirling, perhaps mimetically gesturing the various spirals of Hell, as it arrives to frame a snowy lane with a strange celestial light in the distance in one of the few outdoor shots in the video. If, as argued above, in *My Dinner with Weegee* the intentionality and deliberateness of the interview is appropriated for the ends of observation in its contingency, then it is also true that Cumming mobilizes the inverse strategy: the appropriation of the contingencies of observation – capturing

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¹⁰ "A Descent into Hell" is a reference to Patrick Roegiers' essay "A Descent into the Hell of Donigan Cumming," in *Donigan Cumming – Diverting the Image*, ed. Nicole Gingras (Windsor: Art Gallery of Windsor, 1993), 53-56.

¹¹ An excerpt from the first canto of Dante's *Inferno* as translated and read by Robert Pinsky on CBC Radio in *My Dinner with Weegee*. See Robert Pinsky, *The Inferno of Dante, A New Verse Translation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994).

whatever, the contingency of the world – for a precise, intentionally illustrative use. Furthermore, Cumming’s problematization of the interview format in the documentary – its conventional grammar and syntax, its language – is linked to a tradition of radical politico-formal experimentation which stretches back to Dante and his decision to write his *Divine Comedy* in vernacular Italian rather than the accepted Latin.¹² It may very well have been mere fortuitous chance that Dante’s *Inferno* was being read aloud on that particular evening in what we presume to be Marty Corbin’s apartment, but it nonetheless contains a key to assessing the political vocation of *My Dinner with Weegee*: the documentary as allegory of political exile.

Exile from the Kingdom

As mentioned, both Cumming and Marty are Americans in exile: Cumming left the USA in the early 70s as a war resister; Marty, we glean from the fragments of exposition, left around the same time. Dante, at the time of writing the *Inferno* at the beginning of the fourteenth century, was in exile from Florence, and some commentators argue that the story is indeed Dante’s allegorical expression of the torment he felt at his exile from his beloved city. Dante scholar John Freccero argues that Hell is “the parody of a city,” an abysmal “limit situation, like the prison camp or the cancer ward, where all illusions are stripped away and one has no choice but to acknowledge one’s powerlessness.”¹³ Indeed, in Dante’s Hell, the various historical figures the Pilgrim, Dante’s literary double, and his guide, Virgil, encounter are prisoners rather than citizens, disciplined and punished rather than participants in a vibrant, public *demos* or *polis*. As Freccero puts it, “the pain and

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¹² See Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem. Studies in Poetics*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

¹³ John Freccero, Foreword to Robert Pinsky, *The Inferno of Dante, A New Verse Translation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), ix-xii.

despair of the damned seem to separate them from the rest of humanity and from one another, leaving them radically alone in the midst of an infernal crowd.”¹⁴ The subjects of Hell suffer their private anguish publicly, each on display as an example for the others and the reader, separated by an infinite distance manifest by the power of an ultimately unfathomable judgment. In this light, Dante’s Hell is apparently a kind of state of exception, where a divine, cosmic force marries a moral, metaphysical judgment to the bureaucratic management and execution of a punishment which lasts forever. The *Inferno* is a place of perfectly controlled, and unimpeded, violence.

The opening sequence of *My Dinner with Weegee* recalls elements of the elaborate scenarios rehearsed and repetitive punishments meted out in Dante’s *Inferno*. The video opens in medias res, as it were, with a hand – we later infer that it belongs to Marty – hanging over the side of a mattress, a few inches from the floor. The hand, fingers stained with nicotine and obviously trembling from exhaustion, searches for a nearby bottle of beer. A voice from off-screen, Cumming’s, provides directions: “Move up the bed a bit more. A little bit more. That’s it. Now drop your hand over. See where it is.” In this scenario, Cumming’s off-screen voice acts in a sovereign fashion, guiding and directing the mute body of the subject-object, Marty. Comically and tragically, that is, absurdly, the hand gropes around for the bottle, trying and failing to find it according to the directions of the voice. Eventually, the “game,” as critic Peggy Gale refers to it, comes to an end, as the hand finally grasps its obscure object of desire.¹⁵ This victory, however, is obviously rife with contradictions: the alcoholic, dying from his addiction,

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¹⁴ Ibid., ix.

¹⁵ Peggy Gale, “Touching on Donigan Cumming” in *Lying Quiet* (Toronto: Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, 2004), 14.

succeeds in securing yet another dose; at the same time, this achievement nonetheless allows Marty to somehow go on.

Suffering Creatures

A radically ambivalent and ironic document of Marty Corbin and his experience, *My Dinner with Weegee* reconfigures the expression and the space of the political: Marty's vice, a la Dante's *Inferno*, is the very motor of this punishing game.¹⁶ The ironic, contradictory effect of the beer bottle scenario, read with the *Inferno*, describes a central aspect of the experience of the exile: the ungrounding of the familiar as it pertains to values, means and ends. Freccero puts it, "Illusions must be destroyed before any spiritual progress can be made. The descent into Hell is meant to be destructive, its irony corrosive, in order to clear the way for the ascent."¹⁷ The radical uncertainties and ambivalences of the experience of exile are potentially positive opportunities to reconceive the world – its make-up, its order, its sense. As Lucas Hilderbrand notes in his article "Experiments in Documentary: Contradiction, Uncertainty, Change," "Uncertainty is a precondition for change."¹⁸

Remembering Agamben's description of the "unknown and suffering creatures" Gilles de la Tourette documented (and thus made infamous in their hysteria) in his clinical studies on the gait at Salpetriere, we can see how Marty's experience – or the

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¹⁶ The notion of a game/punishment recalls the later sequence in the video where Cumming interrogates Marty in regards to how many beers he drank the previous night. Cumming emphasizes the cruelty of the interrogation by rapidly panning back and forth with his hand held camera between his face and Marty's in extreme close-up.

¹⁷ John Freccero, Foreword, xii.

¹⁸ Lucas Hilderbrand, "Experiments in Documentary: Contradiction, Uncertainty, Change," in *Millennium Film Journal* 51 (Spring/Summer 2009): 10. Hilderbrand goes on: "Experimental documentary is structured by possibility, marked by ambiguity...There is a certain openness to this work, a resolute interpretability, despite the fact that the makers come from specific political positions."

destruction of Marty's experience – evokes the weight of history and social struggle.¹⁹ Marty is a kind of Virgil to Cumming's Pilgrim, a guide through the descent into Hell and history. Freccero describes Virgil as “the poet of loss,” and, suitably, in both his words and physical degradation, Marty embodies the disembodiment of decay and entropy.²⁰ That is, in his role as the guide through Hell, Marty's seemingly private experience becomes endowed with an “undeniable historical dimension,” as Patrick Roegiers puts it in reference to the echoes of the Holocaust in Cumming's photographs.²¹ As appropriated by Cumming, the metaphorical potential of Dante's *Inferno* avows and opens a distance (as a rite of passage) between the immediacy or specificity of Marty's experience and, as a result of this distance, brings it into proximity with the magnitudes of larger social and political struggles.

Marty's experience, punctuated and malformed by alcoholism and silence, is in its negative symbology the experience of the oppressed (in America and elsewhere), an epic akin to Agamben's “unknown and suffering creatures” at Salpetriere. As Nicole Armour observes in “The Comfort of Strangers,” in the interview segments where he manages to effectively communicate, “Marty delivers his monologue animatedly, recalling a visit to New York's Bowery with Weegee, where he encountered broken-down alcoholics and aging ex-Follies girls drunkenly performing for a similarly worn-out audience.”²² These “broken down alcoholics” are the denizens of Marty and Cumming's version of Hell, the tormented subjects of mysterious, oppressive forces pulsing through the social body,

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¹⁹ For a discussion of Gilles de la Tourette's clinical studies on hysteria and movement, see Giorgio Agamben, “Notes on Gesture,” in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 49-60.

²⁰ Freccero, Foreword, xvi.

²¹ Patrick Roegiers, “A Descent into the Hell of Donigan Cumming,” 2.

²² Nicole Armour, “The Comfort of Strangers,” *Film Comment*, July/August 2001, 49.

making it convulse (in sickness and in song). These anonymous “people” are the ironic doubles of Evans and Agee’s edifying “famous men.”

The Face

If in *My Dinner with Weegee* Cumming’s “broken down alcoholics” indeed inhabit a version of Dante’s Hell, a “parody of a city,” which thus opens the space of symbolism by way of the distance of metaphor (suspending pure immediacy, singularity and indexicality for abstraction), the video, as many of Cumming’s do, nonetheless uses to great effect strategies of proximity and scale, namely, the extreme close-up of the face. *My Dinner with Weegee* is not merely a series of (failed) interviews with Marty Corbin; it is really a collection of close-up studies of his face, in particular, his mouth and eyes. Cumming engages the political problem of communication itself in his focus on Marty’s eyes and mouth, which, Agamben notes, are emphasized in advertising and pornography, two key forms of spectacular separation.²³

Given my reading of the video via the *Inferno*, it would seem that the extreme close-ups of Marty’s face – isolated, forlorn, exhausted, exaggerated – are precisely what take the place of images of a vibrant city, a *polis*. That is, the single face occupies the space where the multitude, the citizenry, might dwell, perhaps in a long shot framing a collective working in unison. It would seem that, contrary to the city, Marty’s face is emblematic of the experience of the damned in Hell, what Freccero refers to as those who are “radically alone in the midst of an infernal crowd.”²⁴ However, the emphasis Cumming puts on Marty’s face via the extreme close-up opens up another possibility; a possibility which, in its very ambiguity, is the power of potentiality.

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²³ See Agamben, “The Face,” in *Means Without End*, 91-100.

²⁴ Freccero, Foreword, ix.

In his article “The Face,” Giorgio Agamben meditates on the strange power of the human face to simultaneously reveal and hide the being and interiority of the subject. The face at once embodies the passion and the betrayal of revelation. Thus the face is aligned with language as the key to human community, as well as of a politics of means without end. Agamben:

The face is at once the irreparable being-exposed of human beings and the very opening in which they hide and stay hidden. The face is the only location of community, the only possible city. And that is because that which in single individuals opens up to the political is the tragicomedy of truth, in which they always already fall and out of which they have to find a way.²⁵

For Agamben, the struggle to name the expression that forms upon the face or to locate the hidden meaning that lies behind it is a political and ethical problem. A thing – whether a person or an inanimate object – acquires a face the moment it signifies to another, the moment it comes to appear and thus offer some meaning. The specific content of this appearance is not the issue, Agamben maintains, for “the face’s revelation is the revelation of language itself...it is *only* opening, *only* communicability.”²⁶ The face is thus the locus of exposition, which in turn is the location of politics, for politics is the human arena where appearances are received and interrogated to uncover the truth. A good example of this, perhaps, is Aristotle’s notion of man as a “political animal” who determines the “good life” in the realm of the *polis*. For Agamben, it is clear that the political does not lead to the uncovering of this or that particularity but to the potential *to be*, that is, a pure communicability: language as such. The political as such does not belong to a specific group or time, nor is it a property or demand: the political is the opening, the exposure, of one to another in their shared mediality.

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²⁵ Agamben, “The Face,” 91.

²⁶ Ibid., 92.

The Only Possible City

Following Agamben's logic of means without end in the society of the spectacle – a society which transforms faces and appearances into propaganda and commodities (proliferating images of dictators and celebrities contributing to cultish followings; languages hardened into technical command words and clichés and/or pulverized into gibberish) – it becomes evident that “the task of politics is to return appearance itself to appearance, to cause appearance itself to appear.”²⁷ The political gesture will make the mediality of the face immediate and expose its potential to appear; that is, politics/the face will not disappear into *this* or *that* particularity (a specific issue, a given facial expression), but will exhibit how the face, akin to the gesture, “endures and supports” the appearances of particularity. Undermining the logic of spectacle and empire which either attaches a totalitarian univocal meaning to a face or empties it of all potential communication via the saturation of a proliferating, cannibalizing culture of consumption, Agamben's politics of means without end recognizes the face as “above all a pure communicability.”²⁸

In *My Dinner with Weegee* Cumming captures Marty's face in a variety of poses, ranging from smiling and expressive to sullen and closed. In these intimate portraits, Marty discloses and withholds information as Cumming observes his expositions and exposes his observations: as Marty speaks we notice how his face endures and supports his language, and as Marty refuses or fails to speak we read his face for signs. Cumming's camera provokes and documents the truth that Marty's face is not reducible to any one of its visages. This is connected to Cumming's destabilization of the

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²⁷ Ibid., 95.

²⁸ Ibid., 96.

presence, a fracture in his form-of-life. The final words spoken in *My Dinner with Weegee*, after the closing credits, exhibit this separation. To quote the script of the video:

MALE VOICE (VO)

Did you ever find my birth certificate?

DONIGAN (VO)

Nope. (Sighs)

As the script to *My Dinner with Weegee* illustrates, the owner, the enunciator, of the voice asking about its/his birth certificate is unclear – we cannot be sure it belongs to Marty, and, in effect, it belongs to no one and everyone, the anonymous.

The birth certificate, official in its function as a national security apparatus, is the embodiment of the inscription of life into and by the State: it is *the* document which ensures the unity of the face and the name; it is the attempt to shore up the unity of being and appearance, the citizen and the State. The false unity of the citizen-subject who is always potentially *homo sacer* is undercut by Cumming's suspension of the referent, the owner of the voice. In withholding the (visual) identity of the owner of the voice, Cumming re-appropriates the sovereign exception which suspends political identity as citizenship to produce bare life, and opens it up to an existence beyond fact, to potentiality.³¹ That is, the loss of the unity and ownership of the voice – Cumming's uncoupling of the subject from the birth certificate rendered formally by a negative visibility – gestures toward a non-sovereign form of belonging. While disabling in terms of the official channels of identity and their modes of access and accessibility (as evinced in the earlier scene where Cumming attempts to get Marty's documents and story straight

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³¹ Cumming, highlighting his role as documentarian, a kind of sovereign, attributes his name to his voice when he answers the question: "Nope." It is significant, however, that Cumming includes in the script the element of his sighing: "Nope. (Sigh)." The sigh is the presence of the material body, Cumming's, in rhythm with language, as well as the expression of his resignation or concern at the state of affairs of his undisclosed interlocutor.

interview as structuring device in the documentary in that it resists the reduction of Marty to either the idealized form of the perfectly communicating citizen-subject or to the degraded, non-communicative negativity of bare life.

Cumming engages viewers with the pure communicability of Marty via his face, thus transcending Dante's Hell of a man "radically alone in the midst of an infernal crowd" and opening it to Agamben's notion of the face as the "only location of community, the only possible city." This is a key aspect of Marty's "last radical act:" the opening of exhaustion and failure to political communication/community. Marty, like the subjects in Cumming's other works, is both hidden and revealed by, in, and through the face as a zone of potentiality: "To walk in the light of the face means *to be* this opening – and to suffer it, and to endure it."²⁹

Judgement Day

My Dinner with Weegee is an excellent example of how Cumming enacts a "real state of exception" to keep the viewer epistemologically – and ontologically – destabilized, thus opening the space of the political. In this sense, Cumming's troubling of documentary appearance in *My Dinner with Weegee* partakes in another key aspect of Dante's *Inferno* involving the question of the Last Day of Judgment, the final day of reckoning. In "A Meditation on Hell: Lessons from Dante," James Wetzel states: "all of the action in the *Inferno* takes place prior to the Last Day of Judgment, prior, that is, to the time when the denizens of hell are reunited with their bodies."³⁰ The destruction of Marty's experience is precisely this, the separation of his words from his body, a troubling of his (self)

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²⁹ Ibid., 92.

³⁰ James Wetzel, "A Meditation on Hell: Lessons from Dante," *Modern Theology* 18:3 (July 2002), 382.

on the way to the hospital), the loss of the birth certificate creates a space of political possibility: the citizen can, potentially, recognize him or herself as a refugee, that is, in exile.

Taking into account Dante's Hell as the (infinite) moment prior to the "Last Day of Judgement," we can see that to be in exile, in contrast to citizenship, is to move a step closer to the true unification of the (non-sacrificial) body with the (post-sovereign) subject. The irony of the "Last Day of Judgement" is the truth of Agamben's "coming community:" an example of "the politics of whatever singularity," a politics based not on recognized State identities and coordinates of belonging but "by belonging itself."³² In a paradoxical way, the separation of the voice – possibly Marty's – from the birth certificate is akin to Freccero's notion of how Dante strips away illusions so that progress can be made. Freccero again: "The descent into Hell is meant to be destructive, its irony corrosive, in order to clear the way for the ascent."³³ Of course, this descent-ascent is a radically ambivalent rite of passage: the space of potentiality.

Uncertainty: Political Survival?

My Dinner with Weegee's ambivalence troubles the documentary convention of the interview by punctuating and/or suspending it with transgressive moments of observation. Cumming often confounds the "delivery of information" by alternately showing too much (Marty pissing) or too little (the owner of the missing birth certificate): the video invites fragmented processes of interpretation and abstraction – "readings" – of the indexical artifacts captured (Dante's *Inferno*, the face, the voice-off) to create a radically uncertain, post-sovereign form of political documentary. It is in this

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³² Giorgio Agamben, "Tiananmen," in *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 85.

³³ John Freccero, Foreword, xii.

way that Cumming exiles the social documentary form itself from its ground in the normalizing social apparatus of the State.³⁴ If, as I have argued elsewhere in this thesis, the documentary has conventionally been aligned with the Griersonian project of State-building and citizenship (a means to an end), then Cumming's gesture is to destabilize the work of the documentary and to exhibit it as a means without end. This is the true vocation of *My Dinner with Weegee* (a "cautionary tale," a "last radical act"): the creation of a public space that does not abandon life, that is, a *polis* that is not created at the expense of excluding (and thus dominating) the *oikos*: a deformed nation. This public space is exilic rather than national or State-oriented, as it problematizes sovereign distinctions with its *real* state of exception. It is in the radical ambivalence and uncertainty of this potential public space – a kind of "whatever-space" – that Cumming, Marty and the viewer are politicized. As Agamben puts it,

Only in a world in which the spaces of states have been thus perforated and topologically deformed and in which the citizen has been able to recognize the refugee that he or she is – only in such a world is the political survival of humankind thinkable.³⁵

To think the political survival of mankind in this deformed space is to heed Cumming's warning about the documentary and the State: "...any system that forgets to be nervous about its own certainties is headed for deep shit."³⁶

Nervous System

A changing reality requires a changing form: this is the crucible of the political. As I have shown, Donigan Cumming's *My Dinner with Weegee* topologically deforms the

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³⁴ This is why, contrary to Cousineau-Levine's otherwise fine analysis in *Faking Death*, I argue that Cumming's work, not only *My Dinner with Weegee*, is broader in scope than a Canadian national allegory. In my view, Cumming's work partakes in a more politicized, exilic form, undermining the self-referential State form, and its imagination of itself apart from a "wilderness," from within.

³⁵ Agamben, "Beyond Human Rights," in *Means Without End*, 26.

³⁶ Cumming interview in Hoolboom, "Donigan Cumming: Reality and Motive in the Documentary," 125.

space of the State documentary: it engages the ruins of a citizen/exile, the drunk and dying Marty Corbin, in a radical gesture of exhibition. Marty Corbin's destruction of experience, realized in his body, his nervous system, embodies the uncertainty of the documentary and the crisis of gesture. In its troubling of documentary communication, *My Dinner with Weegee* partakes in the blurring of life and politics in a biopolitical zone of indistinction, opening up new questions for the representation of life and how it is lived in the cinema. Cumming effectively shows how a troubling of documentary epistemology is at the same time an intervention in the political problematic of representation. That is, *My Dinner with Weegee* links the documentary's realist epistemology to the ontological problem of what, after Agamben, I consider to be the contemporary state of exception: Cumming takes the exception into his documentary as a productive tension, a nervous system, forcing viewers to continually reorient themselves, to experiment with life (continuing a tradition, as it were, that Weegee's "shock value" tabloid photography participated in like a civic duty).

Akin to being at a dinner table with someone, struggling to find a topic of conversation (struggling to find the words), *My Dinner with Weegee* puts one into contact with another person, facing them. Putting a face to the destruction of experience is to experience one's "outside" – another person – as immediately one's own face (it is only in facing another that one has a face). The destruction of experience, then, is a shared experience.

CONCLUSION

The Cumming Community: What Remains

At a simple level I think of all people I work with as national treasures.
Donigan Cumming¹

*At the point you perceive the irreparability of the world, at that point it is transcendent.
How the world is – this is outside the world.*
Giorgio Agamben²

Family Matters

Given the fragmentary, recursive nature of his documentaries, and their intermittent references to his own personal life, it is perhaps fitting that I begin the conclusion with a brief biographical note on Donigan Cumming himself. In his artist statement “Continuity and Rupture,” as well as in interviews and most especially his videos *Cut the Parrot* (40 min. 1996), *Locke’s Way* (21 min. 2003) and *Voice: off* (39 min. 2003), Cumming makes a link between the formative influence that his older brother, Julien, had upon him and his practice. From “Continuity and Rupture:”

I have referred to the world that I photograph by various terms: an imagined community, an arena, a theatre – these are very open concepts because I want the working space to accommodate a great many people and enterprises. My own enterprise is of course at the centre. The work that I do is intensely personal, based on life’s lessons. The story that I tell at the end of *Cut the Parrot* is true. My older brother, Julien, is mentally retarded. Growing up with Julien – with the paradoxes of his life – has been very influential. I am always thinking about Julien and the people that he has introduced me to. They have led me to other people whose views and experiences are very different from my own.³

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¹ Donigan Cumming in interview with Robert Enright, in Robert Enright, “Endgames: Donigan Cumming’s Subverted Narratives,” *Border Crossings* 94, 2005, 24.

² Giorgio Agamben, “Appendix: The Irreparable,” in *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 106.

³ Donigan Cumming, “Continuity and Rupture,” *Offscreen*, April 30, 2000,

As Cumming explains at the close of *Cut the Parrot*, as a child Julien was sent away to live in an institution, as it was deemed inappropriate for Cumming's mother to take on the burden of tending to a retarded child while there were other, normal children to care for. The exclusion of Julien deeply marked Cumming's sensibility and world view: it gave him "an edgy sense that life is arbitrary – that arbitrariness, not continuity, is the norm."⁴

Based on the perceived appearance of his deviation from the norm by the authorities, a sovereign decision on Julien was made: he was, in Agamben's terms, "inclusively excluded" from the family. Among other things, this was a biopolitical maneuver; it demonstrates the power of the State to influence and intervene in what is normally taken to be the private sphere of the home. The State and the family – two key terms in social organization – took it upon themselves to manage the appearance of reality for the other Cumming children: Julien's abnormality was not to appear as normal; in fact, it was to be seen only in controlled conditions, in conditions of control. These conditions of control are the operational, world-managing powers of the institution where Julien grew up, only seeing his family on such exceptional occasions as the family vacation or the ritual visitation – during official visiting hours, of course.

Indeed, at the end of *Cut the Parrot*, for example, Cumming describes one such visit to the institution which held and protected Julien. Cumming explains how at one point a man – seemingly normal and well-to-do, taken as another "visitor" – approached the family and enjoyed a friendly chat with Cumming's father about cars, work, and

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http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/new_offscreen/cumming.html (accessed October 18, 2007).

⁴ Donigan Cumming interview with Mike Hoolboom, in Mike Hoolboom, "Donigan Cumming: Reality and Motive in the Documentary," in *Practical Dreamers: Conversations with Movie Artists* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2008), 120.

family life – the stuff of a conventional bourgeois conversation. It turns out, however, that the man was also retarded and, like Julien, a patient at the institution. This man appropriated the language and gesture – the appearance – of the norm. This was a shock to the family, and as Cumming poignantly puts it, “It amazed them.” Effectively, this unnamed man made appearance itself appear: he exposed the social world itself as, to take Cumming’s words, “an imagined community, an arena, a theatre.” In my understanding, this man’s performance was an exemplary political act precisely because it exhibited how the management of appearance is intimately linked to a social (and familial) harmony/norm which precariously rests upon an exclusion at the very heart of the social order. This unnamed man destabilized the order of things in his very being: being *this* (a normal citizen) and being *that* (retarded); being *here* (family, society) and being *there* (institutionalized, excluded).

The efforts of the State and the family to manage the “problem” of Julien – sending him away (separating him) – is an echo the founding sovereign decision over political life and life as such in civilization. The inaugural, arbitrating fiction of this decision leads to the ongoing series of fictions and strategies which, in true Freudian fashion, continually displace and cover over the original crime with their own crimes. The sovereign division between the *polis* and *oikos* (and the effort to overcome it) perpetually reappears as the State imagines itself as the perfectly natural “homeland” – the depoliticized public sphere – and takes care of its “children” (depoliticized citizens). Political strife, then, is conceived as a “family matter,” necessitating the intervention and sovereign arbitration of the “master of the house.” In this biopolitical zone, trouble in the

family is civil war. Cumming's documentaries reveal that the battlefield of this civil war is everywhere.

Being Thus

In this way, we can discern how Giorgio Agamben's diagnosis of the contemporary state of exception provides a fruitful theoretical paradigm with which to engage with Cumming's work. My analysis of Cumming's documentaries with the philosophical and critical theory of Agamben is indeed a creative response to the very fundamental sense of arbitrariness as the norm in Cumming's work. I have tried to politicize – or draw out the political implications of – Cumming's work in relation to this spectacular sense of life's arbitrariness and the violence of the norm. With Agamben, I have shown how arbitrariness and anomie are at the very centre of modern society's law and order, that is, how the norm of the State is always (potentially) a state of exception. I linked Cumming's exploration of life's arbitrariness and his problematization of the social realist documentary form to the question of what Agamben calls biopolitics, the management of life. This led me to argue that Cumming develops a kind of documentary means without end which never normalizes or domesticates its exceptions and disturbances, all the while never abandoning the social realist documentary objective to show and, more importantly, change the world.

In my discussion of *Karaoke* (1998) I took up the question of the frame as simultaneously a material construct which defines and delimits (profilmic) space and as an epistemological construct connected to the establishment of a perceived ontological presence in the documentary. I argued that Cumming's troubling of the epistemological work of the frame is a means to produce a “gag,” the revelation of a new ontological

context or a “constructed situation” which cannot be limited to a State of knowledge. That is, the reclining elderly man (Nelson Coombs) the viewer “knows” (because shown) as near death, as mere bare life, is revealed to be engaged with the outside world, listening to a song and tapping along with his foot: his is a “form-of-life,” a gesture, and not simply biological existence, epistemic presence or an ontological given. The elderly man’s “being,” Agamben might say, cannot be separated from his “being thus.” This led to my analysis of the political act of the video *My Dinner with Weegee* (2001).

Here, I mobilized Agamben’s notion of the “destruction of experience” to show that the aged intellectual Marty Corbin’s “last radical act” was to demonstrate (exhibit) how his own physical and mental decline was inextricably bound-up with the ongoing struggle for peace in a world at perpetual war. Certain codes of the documentary – the interview, observation, interaction, etc. – were taken as the very site for this demonstration: Cumming and Marty worked in the documentary medium as a biopolitical space to stage a life in conflict with itself. The symbolism of Dante’s *Inferno* and the notion of exile played key roles in my analysis as I tried to show how *My Dinner with Weegee* is a non-sovereign form of communication between the subject and viewer. I analyzed how Cumming appropriates the social (and actual) destruction of Marty Corbin to create a productively problematic, heterogeneous documentary that challenges the viewer to see the world differently, in a process of disturbance and social exchange. In the video, Cumming leaves no one innocent, and, I conjecture, unchanged.

Angels of History

This leads to the final thing I would like to mention in regards to Cumming’s documentary means without end. I want to conclude by briefly describing one of

Cumming's newer works and address how it speaks to the very heart of, how it crystallizes, what I have tried to express in this thesis: an idea of the "coming community."

The work in question is entitled *Kincora* (2008), a collection of photographs and drawings taken from and inspired by photographs in Cumming's collection dating back to the early 1980s. Like the previous monumental installation pieces *Prologue* (2005) and *Epilogue* (2005), *Kincora* is a kind of cumulative statement on Cumming's practice as a whole: it exhibits the vicissitudes of life in a medium as it collects the collection; it communicates the process of the destruction and creation of a community. Echoing his previous photographic presentation *The Stage* (1991), *Kincora* takes the presentational form of a grid, each frame defining and containing a subject in place. The framed images are haunting...and haunted. Often they are what appear to be half-finished sketches from photographs; indexical tracings by hand of images indexically rendered by light. In the drawings, these half-formed/deformed/reformed people often bear glorious wings. Are they angels? Are they moths? Both have wings, and both suggest a temporality unlike that of man. Perhaps, to again invoke Walter Benjamin, they are "Angels of History," blasted away from Paradise by the blowing winds of destruction, trying to "make whole what has been smashed."⁵ What, beyond the particular fragments of form they now take, has been smashed?

In one of the artist books which accompanies *Kincora* in public exhibition (bearing the title *Pencils, Ashes, Matches & Dust* – powerfully highlighting the medium, materials and means of the piece), Cumming writes:

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⁵ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn, Hannah Arendt, ed. and introd. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257.

In the late 1980s, urban developers razed a street named
Kincora erasing the name and scattering its residents.
Nothing was ever built on the site.
Most of the people who lived there are now dead.

I photographed and videotaped the exiled Kincorans
and the people they led me to.⁶

According to my Benjaminian reading, paradise, it seems, was a street named Kincora in Montreal in the 1980s – a real place, perhaps, but retroactively made mythical. The destruction of Kincora corresponds to the documentary project of the management of life, the action of molding “the people” into citizens. It becomes apparent that the management of life is in fact always already political in its hubris: it ceaselessly creates bare life as it “apolitically” exerts its power on bodies. The angels of Kincora, then, are in exile: a people out of place, lost and running out of time: refugees.

Speaking of temporality, Cumming’s further comments in *Pencils* are instructive:

In the beginning, I was shy and hesitant about shooting. I learned my lesson on the day that I was visiting without a camera, and watched a small, neat man in a suit open his attaché case near a window. The case was empty, except for a half eaten pork chop covered in cling wrap. A shaft of sunlight caught the plastic, making it sparkle and glow. Time stopped; the man reached into the case and began to eat.⁷

Appearances are deceiving in *Kincora* as the “small, neat man in a suit” evades expectation and reveals his pork chop as a kind of theatrical prop: a strange treasure which stops time like a photograph in the sun, an exceptional state of suspension. Here, in this suspended moment, Cumming learned a “short lesson:” always be ready to shoot, for reality itself is exemplarily exceptional. Here, in this moment of suspension, the world shines in its appearance, its potentiality.

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⁶ Donigan Cumming, *Pencils, Ashes, Matches & Dust* (Montreal: Les Éditions J’ai VU, 2009), 10. I have preserved the type-spacing and punctuation as presented in the book.

⁷ Cumming, *Pencils, Ashes, Matches & Dust*, 16. I have preserved the type-spacing and punctuation as presented in the book.

Kincora partakes of both the documentary impulse to record for posterity that which constantly passes and risks obliteration *and* the artistic-messianic impulse to redeem the world in its destruction by way of the elaboration of form, giving the moment the promise of new life. That said, Cumming is deeply ambivalent, ironic even, about the prospects of salvation, of any “use” at all, in his social realist work. Yet this is precisely why, as documentary means without end, it continues to give us hope. In “The Assistants,” Giorgio Agamben writes, “Everything that now appears debased and worthless to us is the currency we will have to redeem on the last day[...]the unfilled is what remains.”⁸ And he goes on to conclude the article:

What is lost demands not to be remembered and fulfilled but to remain forgotten or lost and therefore, for that reason alone, unforgettable. The assistant is at home in all this. He spells out the text of the unforgettable and translates it into the language of deaf-mutes. Hence his obstinate gesticulations coupled with his impassive mime’s face. Hence, too, his irreducible ambiguity. For the unforgettable is articulated only in parody. The place of song is empty. On every side and all around us, the assistants are busy preparing the Kingdom.⁹

Perhaps Cumming’s subjects are Angels of History, “the assistants” for our nihilistic, biopolitical times, redeeming the destroyed and preparing the way. Or, perhaps, in a spectacular world that would just as soon forget about them, obliterate them, they are indeed moths: those accursed things, those anachronistic “people,” so weak and flimsy and bare, who refuse to appear as we desire; who refuse to disappear. In a kind of messianic gesture, Donigan Cumming’s life’s work with his angels and moths takes us to the limits of the documentary: he at once transgresses and fulfills its promise.

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⁸ Giorgio Agamben, “The Assistants,” in *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 34.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

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