

Postmodern Culture

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Volume 13, Number 2, January 2003

Johns Hopkins University Press

Article

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Whatever Image

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Abstract

This essay can be seen as an attempt to foreground a new approach to representation with an outcome of a new concept, “whatever image.” This is undertaken by going through Benjamin’s handling of image via Leibniz in the prologue of “German Tragic Drama” where he problematizes epistemology’s claim to truth by introducing his idea of constellations and thus opens up the question of a rigid, bounded image of the world to an immanence; Adorno’s theories in “Negative Dialectics”, concerning the image as the third term, as a screen, between subject and object, by way of which he introduces the question of “the resurrection of flesh” as far as the perception of the world in the form of images is concerned; and Giorgio Agamben’s concept of “whatever” in “The Coming Community” by means of which I attempt to introduce a “whateverness” to the concept of image which aims to open the question of image to “experience through flesh.”

The evocative remarks of Giorgio Agamben on the concept of *whatever* have received relatively little attention. In opening the question of the *whatever* and its implications for the nature of representation, my intention is to investigate the possibilities for another concept, that is, the *whatever image*.

Whatever

For Agamben, language depends upon the notion of singularity, a concept he derives from an investigation of the “the Scholastic enumeration of transcendentals” that begins “*quodlibet ens est unum, verum, bonum seu perfectum*—whatever entity is one, true, or perfect.” Agamben points out that the adjective “whatever,” the Latin *quodlibet*, is the term that “remaining unthought in each, conditions the meaning of all the others” (1). “Whatever” is that which is neither universal nor particular; it is being “such as it is” (66). I will elaborate this critical notion in a moment, but at this point I would simply point out that, when considering language and writing, Agamben is drawn to the sensation of whatever from the viewpoint of the singularity that this *whateverness* endows the being with. The *whatever singularity* in a singular language calls into question the pre-eminence of central linguistic conventions, such as the I and its representations. It is this that enables Agamben to assert that “the perfect act of writing comes not from a power to write, but from an impotence that turns back on itself and in this way comes to itself as a pure act” (36). His figure for the perfect act of writing that is not-writing is Melville’s Bartleby, “a scribe who does not simply cease writing but prefers not to, . . . [who] writes nothing but its potentiality to not-write” (36).

The body has emerged as a subject of much recent critical and theoretical concern, and I believe there is merit in reconsidering the body in terms of whatever singularities. This would entail thinking of the body as the locus or the generator of representation. But if the body is seen as a generator of representation, what happens to art, to image, and to the broader question of representation in art criticism? And what happens to the relationship between art theory and politics, or indeed what happens to the “political” itself?

4. My intention here is to attempt to draw the possible relationships between the body and the image, understood as the singular experience of a singular language, largely ignoring the difference between visual and verbal language. To that extent the following investigation can also be seen as a contribution to the development of art criticism that will be based on a new community, a coming community of whatever singularities. My discussion will move through Leibniz and his interpreters Benjamin, Deleuze, and Adorno, and then return, at last, to Agamben.

Benjamin and Constellations

“The Epistemo-Critical Prologue” of Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* study conceptualizes Adam as the father of philosophy. Adam’s naming of the things foregrounds for Benjamin the linguistic base of representation of philosophical truth. The name before the Fall is thus the linguistic being which captures the intended object in its singularity. The period that comes after the Fall is the one in which names are transformed into words, and now they fail to capture the singularity of the objects to which they refer. For Benjamin, naming refers to a kind of mimesis that is a one-time-only configuration. The name pays attention to the object’s non-identity by identifying it as singular; in this way it imitates nature, whereas the concept or the word subordinates it. Words as concepts can never grasp the singularity of singularities because concepts are formed by means of class names that erase the particularity of the phenomenon.

Given the necessity of the conceptual moment in philosophy, the problem for Benjamin in the *Trauerspiel* is how to philosophize without falling into the prisonhouse of the concepts or yielding to class names. Or, to articulate this concern in Agamben’s terms, the question is how to move beyond the logic of “belonging,” that is the characteristic relationship between a class name and its subset, between the universal and the particular? Benjamin’s solution in the *Trauerspiel* is to rely on clusters of concepts in order to get away from the totalizing tendency of the concepts. It means to work with continuous combination and arrangement of words—in constellations—for the representation of philosophical truth.

Philosophical experience, for Benjamin, is concerned with the representation of truth and therefore raises the question of the objectivity of the structure of ideas constituted by the subject. For the structure of ideas to be objective, it should be constituted by the particular phenomena themselves, that is, by their inner logic. Philosophical experience—“the objective interpretation of phenomena”—is a representation of ideas gathered from out of empirical reality itself (***The Origin of German Tragic Drama 34***). Concepts thus function as the mediators between empirical phenomena and ideas without yielding to a totality. Here the crucial difference between cognitive knowledge and philosophical representation lies in the difference between the concept’s claim to capture the phenomena and the conceptualization process undertaken by a subject for each singular phenomenon—the difference between concepts and conceptualization as such.

In this way, Benjamin inverts Plato’s theory of ideas, in which ideas are transcendental forms whose likenesses appear within the empirical objects as pale reflections of their own eternal truth: he constructs the Platonic absolute (ideas) out of empirical fragments. Here ideas do not constitute a metaphysical first principle; rather, they are derived from various configurations of the phenomena in the form of constellations. In other words, ideas are treated as empirical phenomena: phenomenal elements are the absolutes while the ideas, hence the truth, are historically specific and subject to change.

For Benjamin this was a way of rescuing phenomena from temporal extinction by redeeming them within the name—Utopia for him was the reestablishment of the language of names through a theory of constellations. One-time-only configuration of names meant for him the production of a quasi-objective interpretation of phenomena whose truth is only momentary. When elaborating this theory with respect to a claim for objectivity, Benjamin supported his argument by referring to an infinitesimal calculus, and, unavoidably, to Leibniz. Perhaps this was for him the only way of defeating the conceptual prisonhouse of language, or the Platonic representation of ideas. However, Benjamin's account of Leibniz deserves special attention at this juncture for it will throw light on both how Benjamin's claim for objectivity through a theory of constellation leads to a certain production of truth, and also on how this truth is interpreted by him as a means for constituting an image, or rather a total image.

As can be witnessed in Benjamin's inversion of Platonic idealism, "The Epistemo-Critical Prologue" can be seen as an attempt to ground philosophy on a materialist base. However, toward the end of the "Prologue," where he discusses the finite number of ideas that deserve to be redeemed by philosophy, Benjamin with a strange move seems to be approaching a phenomenology of essences:

Ideas are displayed, without intention, in the act of naming, and they have to be renewed in philosophical contemplation. In this renewal the primordial mode of apprehending words is restored. And so, in the course of its history, which has so often been an object of scorn, philosophy is—and rightly so—a struggle for the representation of a limited number of words which always remain the same—a struggle for the representation of ideas. In philosophy, therefore, it is a dubious undertaking to introduce new terminologies which are not strictly confined to the conceptual field, but are directed towards the ultimate objects of consideration. Such terminologies—abortive denominative processes in which intention plays a greater part than language—lack that objectivity with which history has endowed the principal formulations of philosophical reflections. These latter can stand up on their own in perfect isolation, as mere words never can. And so ideas subscribe to the law which states: all essences exist in complete and immaculate independence, not only from phenomena, but, especially, from each other. Just as the harmony of the spheres depends on the orbits of stars which do not come into contact with each other, so the existence of the *mundus intelligibilis* depends on the unbridgeable distance between pure essences. Every idea is a sun and is related to other ideas just as suns are related to each other. The harmonious relationship between such essences is what constitutes truth. Its oft-cited multiplicity is finite; for discontinuity is a characteristic of the "essences."

I quote this long passage because it is here that Benjamin asserts a strange relationship between materialism and an obscure phenomenology: if from the materialist tradition he borrows the term “objectivity,” he borrows “essence” from phenomenology. And the resolution of this problem—the reconciliation of materialism and phenomenology—rests on the production of a *limit* which not only frees the rigid boundaries of conceptual knowledge but also marks the reconciliation with a finite multiplicity. “The discontinuous finitude” on which Benjamin bases his resolution is also that which, according to him, is neglected by Romanticists in whose “speculations truth assumed the character of a reflective consciousness in place of its linguistic character” (38). I will return to this “linguistic character” of truth later, but for the time being we must dwell a bit more on how Benjamin makes a move from this question of “discontinuous finitude” to Leibnizian monadology.

If Benjamin resolves the question of limit by introducing the idea of discontinuous finitude, his intention is probably to give flesh to his idea of “objective interpretation” by means of which the truth of a system of constellations could be maintained. In the following paragraphs it is not in vain that he opens his discussion by taking on the question of origins:

Origin [*Ursprung*], although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis [*Entstehung*]. The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis.

(45)

The objective interpretation—that is, the moment of coming-into-being of a constellation and its truth—should therefore be understood not as a moment of “genesis” but as a moment of “origin”: as coming-into-being and going-out-of-being. This characteristic of a constellation is what makes both itself and its truth momentary. Once redeemed under a name, the empirical phenomena are supposed to yield to a truth that is momentary due to its being conditioned by this limit, that is, discontinuous finitude.

Given the limited number of names (essences) in contrast to the infinite multiplicity of concepts or words that attempts to define them conceptually, such moments of reconciliation, or, such momentary moments of coming-into-being of truth, could not be easily maintained by Benjamin without referring to this limit in the form of a discontinuous finitude which he apparently found in Leibniz:

The idea is a monad. The being that enters into it, with its past and subsequent history, brings—concealed in its own form—an indistinct abbreviation of the rest of the world of ideas, just as, according to Leibniz’s *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686), every single monad, in an indistinct way, all the others. The idea is a monad—the pre-stabilized representation of phenomena resides within it, as in their objective interpretation. The higher the order of the ideas, the more perfect the representation contained within them. And so the real world could well constitute a task, in the sense that it would be a question of penetrating so deeply into everything real as to reveal thereby an objective interpretation of the world. In the light of such a task of penetration it is not surprising that the philosopher of the *Monadology* was also the founder of infinitesimal calculus. The idea is a monad—that means briefly: every idea contains the image of the world. The purpose of the representation of the idea is nothing less than an abbreviated outline of this image of the world.

(47–48)

However, as can be observed in the paragraph above, what Benjamin finds in Leibniz with a concern for a limit yields to another expression: “image.” One thing that is obvious in this paragraph is that Benjamin’s appropriation of the Leibnizian monad is conditioned by its relation to the visible, to that which is representable in the form of an image. The possibility of redeeming ideas for Benjamin lies in the capacity to represent them, and he is at pains to find a way to establish a relationship between an idea and its representation that is not based on the question of “belonging,” or on the question of a hierarchy of representation. Yet, as Benjamin conceives it, the momentary representation of an idea that is found resonating in a constellation is an image.

I would like to argue at this point that although Benjamin formulates ideas as that which can be derived from empirical phenomena, there is still a relationship between an idea and its image based on belonging, on the hierarchy between an idea and its image. This is so because Benjamin’s theory of constellation still preserves a sense of idealism. For him, an idea is necessarily that which should be represented in the finitude of an image.

Leibniz

At this moment, I think it will be illuminating to divert the question from the relation between an idea and its image to the question of the possibility of such a moment of representation, such an image. For this purpose I would like to compare Benjamin’s reading of Leibniz (of the necessity of a discontinuous finitude, a limit, an image) with Deleuze’s reading of Leibniz. This, I believe, will also foreground why such a moment of visibility is necessary for Benjamin and at what cost he obtains these results that he adopts from Leibniz.

As Deleuze recounts clearly, neither seeing nor the production of an image can be a function of a monad. For Deleuze, a Leibnizian monad is not something whose perception can be projected in the form of an image, not even momentarily: a monad is made of infinite “folds” that cannot be limited. As Deleuze reads Leibniz, there is no “consciousness interpolating images, a third element, between itself and what it thinks.”¹ Leibniz’s position does not emanate from a ban put on images, but it develops as a result of his formulation of the monad and its body with respect to perception. The Benjaminian theory of constellation, on the other hand, produces representations, images, finite totalities which are continuous in themselves and yet, although momentarily, have a moment of coming into being.

Every monad in Leibniz contains the entire world: the monad is finite and the world is infinite. However, this opposition between the two does not mean that they constitute oppositional pairs because if the monad contains the entire world then it is itself made of infinite and infinitely small parts. What makes a monad finite is not that it can have or represent the world to itself in clear images but its capacity to have perceptions— clear zones of expression. As Deleuze puts it:

In brief, it is *because* every monad possesses a clear zone that it must have a body, this zone constituting a relation with the body, not a given relation, but a genetic relation that engenders its own “relatum.” It is because we have a clear zone that we must have a body charged with traveling through it or exploring it, from birth to death.

(The Fold 86)

Thus, having a body is a necessary part of having perceptions: either clear or obscure, such perceptions owe their state-of-being-perceived to the body, which is itself made of infinitely small parts. To put both the world and the monad into such an infinite structure of constitution, however, does not lead to chaos but to flux. At this point Deleuze draws our attention to the passage between microperceptions and macroperceptions: microperceptions are those minute, obscure, confused perceptions from which a monad obtains its conscious or macroscopic perceptions. The relationship between the two kinds of perceptions is not of the parts to the whole, but it is structured as a passage from “ordinary” to what is “notable” or “remarkable.” This passage from the ordinary to the remarkable is marked with the constitution of a threshold in the monad. The constitution of this threshold creates a qualitative difference between the sum of minute perceptions and what is perceived as conscious perception.

This is an important move in Deleuze’s reading of Leibniz because here we observe a consideration of inconspicuous, infinitely small, minute perceptions within the finite monad that will mark the monad’s finitude with a strange obscurity. Having a clear, a conscious perception never means a completely clear zone of expression, for if the monad is finite, it is not because it can have

basically clear perceptions out of obscure perceptions but because, given the infinite number of representatives of the world within itself, it can reach only an obscurely clear or clearly obscure perception. Comparing it with Cartesian “clarity” of reason, Deleuze has the following remarks:

What then is the implication of the Cartesian expression “clear and distinct,” which Leibniz nonetheless retains? How can he say that the privileged zone of every monad is not only clear but also distinct, all the while it consists of a confused event? It is because clear perception as such is never distinct.

(91)

Rather, it is “distinguished,” in the sense of being remarkable or notable (91).

Once the difference between clear and obscure perception is understood as a question of being “distinguished,” Deleuze stresses that inconspicuous perceptions are included within conscious perception not in a relation of parts to the whole but as a qualitative difference between two heterogeneous parts. The part still remains the part before and after the threshold. Conscious perception is not separated from infinite inconspicuous perceptions: it is only “distinguished” from the latter by simply stressing its heterogeneity which does not only apply to the relationship between parts but also to the ones between “wholes” and “parts.” The moment of heterogeneity is what puts the conscious perception and inconspicuous perceptions into a differential relationship. What would be called a totality in a metaphysical framework is still considered a part here—a part that includes all the other parts within itself and that differs qualitatively from the others without being separated from them.

Fold over folds: such is the status of the two modes of perception, or of microscopic and macroscopic processes. That is why the unfolded surface is never the opposite of the fold, but rather the movement that goes from some to the others. Unfolding sometimes means that I am developing—that I am undoing—infinite tiny folds that are forever agitating the background, with the goal of drawing a great fold on the side whence forms appear; it is the operation of a vigil: I project the world “on the surface of a folding ...” [Jean Cocteau, *La Difficulté d’être*, Paris, Rocher, 1983, pp. 79–80]. At other times, on the contrary, I undo the folds of consciousness that pass through every one of my thresholds, “the twenty-two folds” that surround me and separate me from the deep, in order to unveil in a single movement this unfathomable depth of tiny and moving folds that waft me along at excessive speeds in the operation of vertigo, like the “enraged charioteer’s whiplash...” [Henri Michaux, “Les 22 plis de la vie humaine,” in *Ailleurs*, Paris, Gallimard, 1948, p. 172]. I am forever unfolding between two folds, and if to perceive means to unfold, then I am forever perceiving within the folds.

(93)

When Deleuze makes us aware of the folds between the finite and the infinite, he is relying on one of Leibniz's fundamental principles of philosophy: "inseparability."² This latter enables Deleuze not only to see an obscure zone of separation between clear and indistinct perceptions but also to make us aware that this ensuing flux of perception in Leibniz leads to one of the most original points in philosophy: a monad's level of perception is dependent upon its body's relation to other bodies, that is, to the infinite. However, if this is so, we must first answer the following question: if the monad includes all the monads within its infinite inconspicuous, minute, obscure perceptions, then how can it have an extrinsic possession, such as a body, outside itself?

For Leibniz, as Deleuze puts it,

Every perception is hallucinatory because perception has no object. Conscious perception has no object and does not even refer to a exclusively physical mechanism of excitations that could explain it from without: it refers only to the physical mechanism of differential relations among unconscious perception that are comprising it within the monad. And unconscious perceptions have no object and do not refer to physical things.

(93)

Hence, Leibniz, at one stroke, refutes not only the possibility of having one finite perception (for if body cannot be thought without its relationship to other bodies, then what is produced as a perception is never free from echoes that open it to an infinity), but also the question of belonging by denying an exteriority to the monad. Even if one should insist on the exteriority of the body to the monad, this exteriority will be included within the monad because the body is a materiality that has its own monad or, simply, the body is just another monad within which differential perceptions comprise, and which, get into infinite differential relationships with the monad called "I." Thus, if the monad "I" has a body, this body is related to the "I" not in a relationship of belonging but on the principle of inseparability. Neither the monad "I" nor its body truly belongs to the other because each is already included in the other.

Deleuze's reading of Leibniz is remarkable in two senses: first, it locates the body in the process of perception and, second, it produces a critique of *Gestalt* such that the constitution of an image *as such* is put into question:

That we were always perceiving in folds means that we have been grasping figures without objects, but through the haze of dust without objects that the figures themselves raise up from the depths, and that falls back again, but with time enough to be seen for an instant...I do not see into God, but I do see into the folds. The situation of perception is not what Gestalt theory describes when it erects the laws of the “proper form” against the idea of hallucinatory perception, but what Leibniz and de Quincey describe: *When a herd or an army approaches*, under our hallucinated gaze ...—the event.

(94)

Given the limited scope of this essay, I cannot dwell here on the importance of the Stoic concept of “event” for Deleuze’s philosophy; suffice to say that it is through such a dynamic conception of event that Deleuze sees in perception a sense of “becoming.” To look at the relationship between body and perception from the viewpoint of becoming so that none of them truly comes to the fore *as such* raises questions about the individuation of the “I” and the particular certain body. In other words, if, as everything else, the body does not exist outside the monad, then it is what becomes, or comes into being when the monad perceives it as a difference between at least two heterogeneous parts—or, say, when the monad expresses what happens to its infinity of perceptions. Simply put, here the body is what is perceived or what is expressed through perception where “expression” is understood not only as a verbal activity but also as what appears as conscious perception.

Now, if we return to one of our earlier considerations of Benjamin, there is a special point where Benjamin and Deleuze, or Deleuze’s reading of Leibniz, come closest: this is where we quoted Benjamin saying: “Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming.” The question of origin that post-structuralist thought elaborated thoroughly seems to be one of Benjamin’s most serious concerns, where the proximity between Benjamin and Deleuze occurs with the latter’s conceptualization of “becoming” based on “event.” However, as we slightly adumbrated earlier, there is a cost that Benjamin pays in concluding his discussion on constellations with a “discontinuous finitude”: forgetting the body, the body as the locus of generator of perceptions.

Adorno

Given the discrepancy between the Leibnizian monad on the one hand, and its appropriation by Benjamin in his theory of constellations on the other, it is interesting, at this juncture, to look at what Adorno might have said about similar issues in *Negative Dialectics*, and in some of his earlier work.

For example, one can observe such passages in Adorno’s inaugural lecture:

The task of philosophy is not to search for concealed and manifest intentions of reality, but to interpret the unintentional reality in that, by the power of constructing figures, images, out of the isolated elements of reality, it negates questions whose exact articulation is the task of knowledge.

(“Die Aktualität der Philosophie” 95)

What kind of an image is Adorno talking about here?

According to Frederic Jameson, the project of constructing constellations in the form of images led Adorno in *Negative Dialectics* to put a ban on images, as in the case of the ban on graven images (119).

However, let us look briefly at the context in which Adorno mentions this so-called ban.³ At the end of the second chapter (“Concepts and Categories”) of *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno critically reconsiders the possibility of representational thinking. Adorno suggests that representational thinking is merely “a consciousness interpolating images, a third element between itself and that which it thinks,” and that the “materialist longing to grasp the thing” aims at the “absence of images where the full object could be conceived” (207). However, his evocation of the body in the same paragraph does not in any sense allow for an interpretation as a ban on images. For Adorno critically maintains this ban only to the extent of formulating materialism at its most materialistic moment where he claims that this materialistic ban has resulted in a prohibition of picturing a positive Utopia. Adorno’s immanent criticism of materialism sees it as the possibility of the “resurrection of the flesh” (207), the body, and it does not necessarily mean that resurrection can take place only within the absence or prohibition of images. As a dialectician without a position, Adorno is silent on whether the reconsideration of the body necessitates a ban on images or requires a new constellation of representation. I believe that Adorno’s position cannot be put into an either/or framework and can best be interpreted as opening up the possibility of reconsidering the body as the locus of representation. At this point I would like to raise the following question: is it possible to formulate an image, a form of representation, without necessarily dealing with the question of its belonging or not-belonging to a body?

Agamben

If Adorno’s thoughts on image resonate well with Leibniz’s monadology, it is because, for both, image is that which cannot be thought of as separate from the body. Yet Adorno does not elaborate this thought in the rest of *Negative Dialectics*, and Benjamin, as we have seen, closes the matter with a “discontinuous finitude.” I would like to suggest it is precisely in this sense that Agamben’s *The Coming Community* can be read as the unthought of Benjamin’s theory of constellations and Adorno’s questions

about the image. One of the main problems—the question of belonging, which Benjamin criticizes but then reappropriates in his theory of constellations—remains a problem for Agamben; however, the question of belonging is no longer seen within a program of redemption or sublation but is now understood with respect to “whatever.”

Whatever, as Agamben formulates it, is not something that can be logically deduced from a series of properties that condition the belonging of a certain particular to a certain universal. For example, if a class name is constituted by the properties it contains, it is the presence of the properties which makes a class name belong to a universal, whereas the “whatever” is that which, “remaining unthought in each, conditions the meaning of all the others” (1). Consequently, *whatever* is that term whose inclusion among properties is that which creates the difference between particular and singular, or that which transforms particularity into a whatever singularity. Up to that point, the proximity between Agamben and the Benjamin of the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” is unmistakable, for in the two accounts of singularity one observes a debt to Leibnizian monadology. This is a question of *the countables* which, as we have seen, is answered differently by Benjamin and Leibniz: discontinuous finitude for Benjamin and discontinuous infinitude for Leibniz. For Agamben, however, the question of the countables is considered in terms of properties that constitute a singularity such that the concepts of property and singularity are put into question. What are those properties that go into the constitution of such entities? Can they be counted as things that have an identity, the summation of which will endow an identity to that which is consequently constituted?

First of all, the whatever, within the context of the questions above, is not only a term whose inclusion among properties can be translated to a “being such that it always matters” (1) but also the whatever is that which “remains unthought” in each singularity. This peculiarity of the term, the whatever, thus opens the thought of singularity to a space where “its being *such as it is*” (1) is valued as the unthought with respect to properties, or common properties. This means that the space of the unthought puts to the test not only countability but also the definition of the properties of a singularity. One immediate question that concerns the whatever singularity, then, is the one related to the individuation of a whatever singularity. If the properties that go into the constitution of a singularity are put at stake, then, how is it possible to individuate whatever singularities? Such questions also underline the suppositions concerning common nature, or the speculations on form, which Agamben traces in Duns Scotus:

...Duns Scotus conceived individuation as an addition to nature or common form (for example, humanity)—an addition not of another form or essence or property, but of an *ultima realitas*, of an “utmostness” of the form itself. Singularity adds nothing to the common form, if not a “haecceity.” ... But, for this reason, according to Duns Scotus, common form or nature must be indifferent to whatever singularity, must in itself be neither particular nor universal, neither one nor multiple, but such that it “does not scorn being posed with a whatever singular unity”

(16).

Agamben builds this argument on a previous introduction of the whatever according to which whatever is that whose addition to a singularity creates the singularity’s difference from others—not because whatever’s addition brings about another, a different identity, to the singularity in question, but because it endows the singularity with an indifference to difference. Thus, with this move, what creates the difference—the inclusion of certain properties within a certain singularity and, also, what went into the constitution of properties—is made irrelevant. This indifference, however, cannot be thought without whatever singularity’s relation to common nature because the moment of addition of the whatever also abolishes the singularity’s concern with common nature or properties in the sense of installing indifference as the main trait of a whatever singularity. In Agamben’s words:

Whatever is constituted not by the indifference of common nature with respect to singularities, but by the indifference of the common and the proper, of the genus and the species, of the essential and the accidental. Whatever is the thing *with all its properties*, none of which, however, constitutes difference. In-difference with respect to properties is what individuates and disseminates singularities, makes them loveable (quodlibetable).

(18)

The whatever is that whose addition does not mean “being, it does not matter which” but “being such that it always matters” (1). Within the context of singularities, what happens to our earlier considerations related to the questions of continuity, discontinuity, finite and infinite—the question of countability? Agamben’s formulation of whatever singularities as “being *such as they are*” makes irrelevant not only such concerns (because a question concerning countability can only be relevant where entities come into being *as such*), but also the questions of representability of such moments of being, whether they be in the form of images, concepts, constellations, or identities.

One thing that renders whatever singularity unrepresentable can be found in the parallels that Agamben draws between the unbaptized children in limbo and the location of whatever singularities. Limbo is a non-place, where the inhabitants, lacking a conception of a first metaphysical principle, experience a condition of being lost. This lack of a first principle incapacitates any

moment of representation and, thus, any possibility of having a memory and not having a memory, both remembering and forgetting. Since there is no sense of redemption, limbo is also marked by a temporality that is a not-yet-taking place. Time can only take place in the end, at the apocalypse; however, even then the inhabitants of limbo will not be absorbed into it, for they are characterized as “letters with no addressee” with no destination (6). Time is only relevant for those who have a destination to reach, who have committed an act to be punished, or for those who have something to redeem.

If life in limbo describes the whatever singularities’ relation to the first metaphysical principle and temporality, and in this way describes their unrepresentability in terms of an identity, the question of whether language *as such* can grasp them is explained by Agamben by referring to whatever singularities’ indifference to antinomies such as the universal and the particular, or in short, to class names. Language *as such* transforms singularities into members of a class. Subsumed under a class name, the meaning of the singular is defined by a common property shared by dissimilar particulars—meaning is a condition of belonging to a name. “Linguistic being,” on the other hand, is different from that which is signified by a name for linguistic being comes into being only by *being-called* something such as “*the tree, a tree, this tree*” (8). The being-called of tree, that is, for example, *the tree*, signifies both one certain tree and also its belonging to a class of trees, and this is why linguistic being is a class that both belongs and does not belong to itself.

Linguistic being in this sense is a whatever singularity that is best exemplified by the concept of the example. Considering a class name and any particular subsumed under it as the example of this class name, the difficulty that arises when giving an example of the concept of example is what endows the latter with a singularity. Here the impossibility of giving an example of the concept of example is due to the concept’s lack of its own properties or its lack of a common property with other examples. In this sense, an example is a singularity that does not have any common property with other examples; that is, it comes into being by being-called, by referring to properties that neither belong to itself nor to the class name it constitutes. Each example in this sense is both a class name and a singularity on its own. In Agamben’s words,

Exemplary being is purely linguistic being. Exemplary is what is not defined by any property, except by being called. Not being-red, but being-called red ... defines the example.

(10)

If nothing could be tied to a classifying concept—if it were possible to get rid of the linguistic convention, that is the first principle—then everything could be an example. Pure singularities with no property of their own would communicate “without being tied by any common property, by any identity” (11). Singularities would exist with no identities, no selves, no belonging to any class name. In Agamben’s words, this would be “an absolutely unrepresentable community” (24).

Agamben's theory of such an unrepresentable community, based on whatever singularities, without doubt, is a critique of today's linguistic situation which he, building on Debord's theory of the spectacle, describes with a story (Shekinah) from the Talmud. This story, according to Agamben, bears witness to the separation of knowledge and the word with the following risk:

The risk here is that the word—that is, the non-latency and the revelation of something (anything whatsoever)—be separated from what it reveals and acquire an autonomous consistency. Revealed and manifested (and hence common and shareable) being is separated from the thing revealed and stands between it and humans. In this condition of exile, the Shekinah loses its positive power and becomes harmful.

(80–1)

For Agamben, this risk transforms language, spectacle, image, or indeed, any representative claim, into an autonomous sphere or, as Adorno puts it, into a third term between consciousness and what it thinks. What has happened to the body is closely related to what has happened to representation in the modern era with respect to language and image, or, to the verbal and the visual.

Describing the process with a chapter entitled “Dim Stockings,” Agamben sees in the commodification of the body—in mass-media reproductions of body images—its redemption from theological foundations.⁴ The invention of the camera, photographic reproduction, and the ensuing businesses of advertisement and pornography signal the end of a kind of a ban on graven images which has left no part of the body unrepresented in technologically manipulated images. The emergence of such images by the beginning of the nineteenth century held a promise for the body to come: “Neither generic nor individual, neither an image of the divinity nor an animal form, the body now became something truly *whatever*” (47). The technologically reproduced image of the human body had no resemblance now with its archetypal model formulated in Genesis.⁵ Still preserving a certain sense of resemblance without having any archetype, now the body severs its ties from an obligation to belonging, or to belonging to a class name. In Agamben's words, this situation bore witness to becoming-whatever of the body where the whatever should be understood as a “resemblance without archetype—in other words, an Idea” (48).

If the emancipation from an archetypal resemblance had a promise of a whatever-body-to-come, it was because it claimed to abolish the “third term,” any claim of representation determined by belonging; however, the reason why it has never been realized must be sought, according to Agamben, in the failure of technology which technologized only the image, that transformed not the body, but its representation.

To appropriate the historic transformations of human nature that capitalism wants to limit to the spectacle, to link together image and body in space where they can no longer be separated, and thus to forge the whatever body, whose physics is resemblance—this is the good that humanity must learn how to wrest from commodities in their decline.

(50)

At this point, it is useful to remember what Adorno offered in the passage from *Negative Dialectics* that I cited earlier and the critique of Benjamin's reading of Leibniz. If Benjamin insisted on an image, though a momentary one, we have seen how Adorno defended a position in which the image is questioned by opening the possibility of the "resurrection of the flesh," the body. Earlier, this question of whether the body can become the locus of representation received a certain explanation in Deleuze's reading of Leibniz; yet after bringing Agamben's whatever into our discussion, we are faced with slightly different question: whether the whatever body can lead to a formulation of a *whatever image*? If there is such a thing as *whatever image*, can it be said to come between "a consciousness and what it thinks"?

Now, as can be concluded from Agamben's discussion of the body in "Dim Stockings," separation of the representation of the body from an archetype not only saves the image from being a third term, but also introduces the "whatever" into the body-*as such* itself. The addition of the "whatever" to the body-*as such* does not transform it into another body—does not deepen the body/consciousness distinction—it only gives birth to whatever singularities, thereby blurring such oppositions between antinomies. Addition of whatever, one can argue, brings along an indifference of body and consciousness with respect to whatever singularities.

I mentioned earlier the space of the unthought that the whatever adds to the singularities. Considering such an addition, such an opening to singularities, is it still possible to talk about image as a third term?

If we follow Agamben to the end of the book, there is a passage in which he summarizes this space in the following terms:

Whatever adds to singularity only an emptiness, only a threshold: Whatever is a singularity plus an empty space. . . But a singularity plus an empty space can only be a pure exteriority, a pure exposure. *Whatever, in this sense, is the event of an outside. Quodlibet is, therefore, the most difficult to think: the absolutely non-thing experience of a pure exteriority.*

(66)

Agamben reaches this point, the “non-thing experience of a pure exteriority,” by recounting Spinoza’s concept of extension in relation to the common. “All bodies, he [Spinoza] says, have it in common to express the divine attribute of extension. . . . And yet what is common cannot in any case constitute the essence of the single case” (17). The extension in question here is what opens the singularity to a space, the space of the unthought, to an exteriority. This outside, or “the threshold,” in Agamben’s terms, is determined not by an essential commonality; this is a commonality with neither substance nor no property. “The threshold is not, in this sense, another thing with respect to limit; it is, so to speak, the experience of the limit itself, the experience of being-*within an outside*” (67). This passage from common form to singularity, or, the limit-experience, which is the “event of an outside,” should thus be understood not as an event accomplished once and for all, but as an experience of “an infinite series of modal oscillations” (19).

If singularities are accomplished in “an infinite series of modal oscillations,” then it means, in a Spinozian sense, that they exist as substanceless extensions—with no property of their own—but it is each singularity’s way of establishing a neighborhood with others that determines its accomplishment. Agamben illustrates the coming-to-itself of each singularity with a life story:

Toward the end of his life the great Arabist Louis Massignon ... founded a community called Bahaliya, a name deriving from the Arabic term for “substitution”. The members took a vow to live *substituting themselves* for someone else, that is, to be Christians *in the place of others*.

(23)

For Agamben, the moment of substitution signifies the interconnectedness of each singularity’s existence. The place where this substitution takes place does not belong to anyone nor to itself: the coming-into-being of each singularity is a common thing. One is singular and common at the same time in the process of its *taking place*. Hence, the unrepresentability of such a community where there would be no identity, for the latter will be a substanceless extension always in the form of its taking place. For Agamben, this is the space of becoming whatever of each singularity, and he calls this unrepresentable space the “Ease”:

The term “ease” designates, according to its etymology, the space adjacent (*ad-jacens, adjacencia*), the empty place where each can move freely. ... In this sense, ease names perfectly that “free use of the proper” that, according to an expression of Freidrich Hölderlin’s, is “the most difficult task.”

(25)

Without doubt, the difficulty of this task arises from the possibility of acting within the space of the Ease where identity and representation *as such* disappear: or, rather, in the Ease, in this “being-*within* an *outside*,” what disappears is the possibility of an image that comes as a third term between a consciousness and what it thinks. The constitution of such an image is determined by the way the passage from potentiality to act is formulated. For Aristotle, as Agamben explains, the decisive potentiality is the “potentiality to not-be.”

In the potentiality to be, potentiality has as its object a certain act in the sense that for it *energhēin*, being-in-act, can only mean passing to a determinate activity ...; as for the potentiality to not-be, on the other hand, the act can never consist of a simple transition *de potentia ad actum*. It is, in other words, a potentiality that has as its object potentiality itself, a *potentia potentiae*.

(34–35)

What happens to the antinomy of “a consciousness and what it thinks” in this framework is that, having the potentiality to not-think, thought turns back to itself and, without having an object, or, without being able to form a pure image, it thinks of its own potentiality to not-be.

Whatever-singularity’s affinity with the potentiality to not-be, with such a limit-experience of “being-*within* an *outside*,” eases not only the question concerning the possibility of action within the space of the Ease, but also trivializes the question of the disappearance of representation. Representation, or the image, does not disappear but is absorbed into whatever singularity’s potentiality to not-be.

Given this limit-experience, can one still preserve the body *as such* at the moment of the potentiality to not-be? Do whatever singularities leave room for a possibility of raising distinctions such as that between body and consciousness? Are we still talking about something visible when we talk about “*whatever image*”?

Does this potentiality to not-be or this limit-experience point toward a direction where whatever singularities might ask for the abolition not only of the possibility of a politics of identity but also the establishment of art and art-criticism? Our answer would be “yes,” if the *whatever image* were *simply* “no image.” But if a character like Bartleby in Melville’s story is still in our heads with “no image,” or if it behaves like a ghost whenever we are put into a position of “preferring not to,” I would like to conclude this essay without an answer.

Notes

1. See Adorno, "Die Aktualitat der Philosophie."
2. "One of Leibniz's essential theses consists in positing at once the real distinction and the inseparability: it is not because two things are really distinct that they are separable" (*The Fold* 107-8).
3. "Representational thinking would be without reflection - an undialectical contradiction, for without reflection there is no theory. A consciousness interpolating images, a third element, between itself and what it thinks would unwittingly produce idealism. A body of ideas would substitute for the object of cognition, and the subjective arbitrariness of such ideas is that of the authorities. The materialist longing to grasp the thing aims at the opposite: it is only in the absence of images that the full object could be conceived. Such absence concurs with theological ban on images. Materialism brought that ban into secular form by not permitting Utopia to be positively pictured; this is the substance of its negativity. At its most realistic, materialism comes to agree with theology. Its great desire would be the resurrection of the flesh, a desire utterly foreign to idealism, the realm of the absolute spirit" (*Negative Dialectics* 207).
4. "In the early 1970s there was an advertisement shown in Paris movie theaters that promoted a well-known brand of French stockings, "Dim" stockings. It showed a group of young women dancing together. Anyone who watched even a few of its images, however, distractedly, would have hard time forgetting the special impression of synchrony and dissonance, of confusion and singularity, of communication and estrangement that emanated from the bodies of the smiling dancers. This impression relied on a trick: Each dancer was filmed separately and later the single pieces were brought together over a single sound track. But that facile trick, that calculated asymmetry of the movement of the long legs sheathed in the same inexpensive commodity, that slight disjunction between the gestures, wafted over the audience a promise of happiness unequivocally related to the human body" (*The Coming Community* 46).
5. Here Agamben refers to a phrase in Genesis: "in the image and likeness" (48).

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Footnotes

Additional Information

ISSN	1053-1920
Launched on MUSE	2003-05-06
Open Access	No
Archive Status	