

Ilustração do demônio Nickar por Louis Le Breton, gravada por M. Jarrault (*Dictionnaire Infernal*, 1863). Arte de domínio público. Composição visual remixada.

DOI: 10.53981/destrocos.v6i1.57580
TRADUÇÕES

AGAMBEN AND GODARD:
THE MESSIANIC TASK OF CINEMA*

Ricardo Evandro Santos Martins
Universidade Federal do Pará, Belém, PA, Brasil

Abstract
This is an essay originally published in Portuguese in the week of the death of French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, in September 2022. Using an analogue methodology, this general objective of this text is to draw a parallel between Godard's short film, called *Je vous salue, Sarajevo* (1993), and the concept of a state of exception developed by Giorgio Agamben, based on his project *Homo sacer* (1994-2014). The civil war between Serbs, Bosnians and Croats, in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, in the 1990's, was a contemporary theme both for the Godard's film and for the publication of the first volume of Agamben's *Homo sacer* series, *Homo sacer: Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita* (1994), which celebrated 30 years of its first publication. Thus, considering this striking geopolitical fact in the period after the end of the Soviet Union, this text seeks to answer the question of whether there would be any other relationship between the works of Agamben and Godard. The hypothesis is that Godard and Agamben, through an aesthetic-cinematic form and through a theological-political arguments, developed truth essays on the relationship between exception and rule, in addition to developing, based on Walter Benjamin, the concept of "Messianic task of cinema".

Keywords
Agamben, Godard, Cinema, Exception.

AGAMBEN Y GODARD: LA TAREA MESIÁNICA DEL CINE

Resumen
Se trata de un ensayo publicado originalmente en portugués en la semana de la muerte del cineasta francés Jean-Luc Godard, en septiembre de 2022. Utilizando una metodología analógica, el objetivo general de este texto es establecer un paralelo entre el cortometraje de Godard, llamado *Je vous salue, Sarajevo* (1993), y el concepto de estado de excepción desarrollado por el italiano Giorgio Agamben, a partir de su proyecto *Homo sacer* (1994-2014. La guerra civil entre serbios, bosnios y croatas, en el territorio de la antigua Yugoslavia, en los años 1990, fue un tema contemporáneo tanto para la película de Godard como para la publicación del primer volumen de la serie Homo sacer de Agamben, *Homo sacer: Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita* (1994), que celebró su aniversario en filosofía. 30 años de publicación. Así, considerando este sorprendente hecho geopolítico en el período posterior al fin de la Unión Soviética, este texto busca responder a la pregunta de si habría alguna otra relación entre las obras de Agamben y Godard. La hipótesis es que Godard, a través de la forma estético-cinemática, y Agamben, a través de argumentos filosóficos y teológico-políticos, desarrollaron verdaderos ensayos sobre la relación entre excepción y regla, además de desarrollar, a partir de Walter Benjamin, el concepto de "tarea mesiánica del cine".

Palabras clave
Agamben, Godard, Cinema, Excepción.

Submetido em: 15/02/2025
Publicado em: 16/05/2025

Como citar: MARTINS, Ricardo Evandro Santos. Agamben and Godard: the messianic task of cinema. *(des)troços: revista de pensamento radical*, Belo Horizonte, v. 6, n. 1, p. e57580, jan./jul. 2025.

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* This essay was originally published in Portuguese by the portal *A Terra é Redonda*. Available at: https://aterraeredonda.com.br/jean-luc-godard-e-giorgio-agamben/.

1. Jean-Luc Godard

An image shows two soldiers in olive camouflage combat uniforms. They wear black watch caps. Their eyes are fixed on the horizon. One of them looks apprehensive, while the other seems calm, as if they were feeling on the control of the situation. The soundtrack swells in the form of grieving strings, creating expectation for something to happen. Maybe this same expectation is felt by the soldiers. The music[1] oscillates between anxiety and serenity, as if it is itself caught between expecting an attack and in a dominating position over something or someone.

This is how Jean-Luc Godard's very short film *Je vous salue, Sarajevo* (1993) begins. As the title already makes it clear, the time and space relevant to this image is easy to determine: the war between Croats, Serbians and Bosnians in the former Yugoslavian territory, more specifically, the battle in Sarajevo, the Bosnian capital. After fighting in the October Revolution and both World Wars, General Tito gained enough popularity to unify these different ethnicities in the wake of the failed Nazi invasion. However, with his death and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the early 1990's saw the Balkans engulfed in a violent civil war — or *stasis*, as it was said in Ancient Greece.[2]

Godard's film consists of slowly revealing and showing different pieces of a single photo, taken in 1992 by Ron Haviv[3] — a photojournalist who witnessed the war in Sarajevo. We learn gradually through off-camera narration by Godard himself about the meaning of this apparent serenity in the midst of the soldiers' apprehension. His hoarse voice speaks of how fear is, "in a sense", "the daughter of God". Fear is the mocked, cursed and ugly daughter that is "redeemed on Good Friday night". As he finishes to paint his portrait of fear as a character, the music stops as if Godard is interrupting the viewer to make a disclaimer: "but don't be mistaken, she watches over all mortal agony, she intercedes for mankind.".[4]

This observation is accompanied by the reveal of a different section of the photograph, which is in turn followed by further explanation: "for there is a rule and an exception". In this new image, we see a third soldier. In his left hand, a lit cigarette. From this point on, the narration goes on about the opposition between the "rule" and the "exception". Still over the image of the hand holding the cigarette, we hear in Godard's voice: "culture is the rule..." The next shot then frames the right hand of the soldier, in which he holds a firearm pointing downwards, as the narrator concludes: "...and art is the exception". The complete quote by Jean-Luc Godard is: "Culture is the rule and art is the exception".[5]

We then cut back to the third soldiers' left hand, with the cigarette. In this part, Godard lists examples of this relation between rule and exception: "Everybody speaks the rule; cigarette, computer, t-shirt, television, tourism, war." As he mentions "war", the music cuts again. The image of the right hand holding the rifle is repeated in the same instant as he utters: "nobody speaks the exception.".[6]

[1] Song by Arvo Pärt, *Silouans' Song*.
[2] Agamben, *Stasis*, p. 04.
[3] This picture is disponible in: https://www.ronhaviv.com/blood-and-honey
[4] Godard, *Je vous salue, Sarajevo*.
[5] Godard, *Je vous salue, Sarajevo*.
[6] Godard, *Je vous salue, Sarajevo*.

Godard follows this affirmation with another list of examples, this time concerning what he calls the "exception". This narration happens over a detail of the photo not yet shown in the movie. At this moment, he then reveals what this third soldiers' gun is pointed at: three civilians lying on a sidewalk, their faces hidden by their hands. In the background, the narration states: "It [the exception] isn't spoken, it is written... Flaubert, Dostoyevsky. It is composed... Gershwin, Mozart. It is painted... Cézanne, Vermeer. It is filmed... Antonioni, Vigo. Or it is lived, then it is the art of living... Srebrenica, Mostar, Sarajevo.".[7]

Why is Sarajevo mentioned as an example of the "exception", more specifically a lived exception? Godard doesn't seem interested in explaining it any further. He just says, right after, the phrase that marks a shift in the film. It is finally revealed that these three soldiers are all in the same static photograph. The whole picture shows the first two gazing at the same distant direction while the third has his right hand pointing a gun at the bodies on the floor and his left holding a lit cigarette. Godard then introduces Europe to this relation between rule and exception, in the context of art, war and death: "The rule is to want the death of the exception. So, the rule for cultural Europe is to organise the death of the art of living, which still flourishes.".[8]

The soundtrack is swelling again. The off-camera narration stops. The photograph zooms out, allowing it to be taken in its entirety. We are then shown the last sordid detail: the third soldier, who seems to carry some kind of rocket launcher on his back, is just about to kick one of the fallen civilians directly on the head. This could be an image of this very relation between exception and rule. The war — the rule — wants death for Sarajevo, its citizens, its form of living — the exception.

Picture 1: Three soldiers with three hostages in the Balkans.



Source: Haviv, *Blood and Honey*.

[7] Godard, *Je vous salue, Sarajevo*.
[8] Godard, *Je vous salue, Sarajevo*.

2. Agamben

In the first volume of the *Homo sacer* series, *Sovereign power and bare life* (1995), the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben reminds us that the war in Bosnia and in the former Yugoslavia in general was a moment rule and exception became confused in "the state of exception as the permanent structure".[9] Therefore, the philosopher argues that the events that took place in Sarajevo were "premonitory": "like bloody masses, announcing the new nomos of the earth, which (...) will soon extend itself over the entire planet."[10]

In the first part of the second volume, *The state of exception* [*Iustitium*] (2003), Agamben develops this idea further. The exception becomes confused with the rule in an analogous manner to how the Law is confused with life. This state of things means that the confusion between rule and exception will not be resolved by the "resumption" or "return" to the rule of Law?, in which rule and exception, norm and anomy, Law and life would be supposedly well distinguished and defined. Agamben seems more inclined to show that, if one aims to halt the legal-political machine of the state of exception which enforces itself as the rule, the true path is in identifying the void of substance that lies beneath this confusion, the lack of grounding of the bond between violence and law, life and juridical norm, rule and exception. This also reveals two opposite movements: one seeks to maintain these fictitious relations through the continuation of the confusion between its two terms, while the other tries to rip them apart, as they are "violently linked".[11]

Thus, says Agamben, "in the field of tension of our culture, two opposite forces act, one that institutes and makes, and one that deactivates and deposes.", and what he calls the "state of exception", which has become the rule, "is (...) the point of their maximum tension". Then, living under this state of exception "means to experience both of these possibilities and yet, by always separating the two forces, ceaselessly to try to interrupt the working of the machine that is leading the West toward global civil war".[12]

In another text, when writing specifically about the French director in a short text called *Cinema and history: on Jean-Luc Godard* (2014), Agamben tries to demonstrate some hypotheses about his cinematographic work in film, which can be summarised as such: Godard's films are essentially about "the constitutive link between history and cinema"; the meaning of history, as far as this parallel to cinema goes, would be messianic instead of chronological, "a history that has to do with salvation", "something must be saved"; that which has to be saved is the image itself — "the image will come at the time of the Resurrection", [13] as Godard himself said, in some way echoing St. Paul; and, quoting Serge Daney, Agamben agrees that the Messianic power of the image lies in an essential element of cinema: the *montage* and its two conditions of possibility, repetition and stoppage.

About these two conditions that form "a system in the cinema", Agamben also states that "together they realise the messianic task of the cinema". Still in the same work, he explains that repetition was already thought by philosophers like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Deleuze, and it is based on these concepts of repetition that Agamben gives his concept of cinema: "the memory of that which was not". Here, the

[9] Agamben, *Homo sacer*, p. 28.
[10] Agamben, *Homo sacer*, p. 28.
[11] Agamben, *State of exception*, p. 87.
[12] Agamben, *State of exception*, p. 87.
[13] Agamben, *Cinema and history*, p. 40.

meaning given to the concepts of repetition and cinema refers to the notion that "repetition is not the return of the same but the return of the possibility of what was. What returns returns as possible". Agamben then compares this to memory, stating also that "repetition, for its part, is the memory of that which was not".[14]

Through Agamben's interpretation of Godard, one can then infer that cinema is the memory that returns as a possibility yet to be fulfilled. In turn, that definition strongly alludes to a notion very present in the thought of late German philosopher Walter Benjamin, especially in his famous theses *On the concept of History* (1942) —the latest original manuscript, which Agamben found in the French National Library and is still in his possession. About this return of something repressed in the historic memory, the Benjaminian Thesis VI says: "in every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist", and this "subduing" of the Antichrist comes through "the gift fanning the spark of hope in the past", for "even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious."[15]

This enigmatic passage shows Benjamin's theological-political view on the role of the materialist historian: that of perceiving memory as a possibility of resurfacing that which is possible, but unfulfilled. Doing so also demands victory against the ones who insist on preventing the liberation of tradition from conformism. And the enemy, or the "adversary" as per the New Testament, the Antichrist, has not ceased to be victorious over the forces of liberation of dormant past possibilities against the historical violence of the ruling class.

It's through these concepts of memory and repetition that Agamben reads Godard's work, as a way of revealing the messianic task of cinema. For Agamben, Godard unveils "the cinema by the cinema": not unlike the task of the materialist historian, the messianic task of cinema, of the film-maker, the director, is to take hold of a remembrance, of a memory still not realised, and brandish it in the struggle against the dominant classes and their looting, their culture goods, and also against all forms of fascism, all forms of subjugation over the living and the memory of the dead.

And so, we must address the second condition of possibility of the system of cinema. Other than repetition, there is the stoppage of images. Still in *Cinema and history*, Agamben seeks to further clarify his attempt at explaining the link between history and cinema through the concept of "messianic task of cinema". The Italian philosopher even posits the stoppage of the image and the proletarian revolution as synonyms. As he says, the stoppage concerns the "'revolutionary interruption' of which Walter Benjamin spoke."[16]

The messianic task of cinema is not only realised in the repetition of what is yet to happen, the unfulfilled promises of the oppressed classes, but also by the power of the revolution to interrupt the course of a history of victories of the ruling class; this historical-political process that made the state of exception — which suspends rights and guarantees — the rule, in the name of progress and development at any cost. In the *Paralipomena to "On the concept of History"* (1940), Benjamin offers an alternative reading of Marxism that differs from the mainstream Marxists of his time: "Marx says that revolutions are the

[14] Agamben, *Cinema and history: on Jean-Luc Godard*, p. 40.
[15] Benjamin, *On the concept of History,* online.
[16] Agamben, *Cinema and history: on Jean-Luc Godard*, p. 41.

locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train — namely, the human race — to activate the emergency brake."[17]

In this sense, the stoppage in cinema is analogous to revolutionary power. A power that not only "repeats", in the sense of only resuming the historical promises that went unfulfilled, but also that "stops" or interrupts bourgeois history, the history of the victors, who bequeathed us cultural goods which are, simultaneously, "documents of barbarism", as Benjamin writes in Thesis VII.[18]

And so, for Agamben, the messianic task of cinema and history is not only creating the new, but also "unmaking" as Deleuze puts it, perhaps in the same sense as the negative force Agamben described in State of exception: the "deactivation" of the violent entanglement of law and life, nomos and anomy, rule and exception. Only this way could the image of cinema appear in this salvific time of redemption of that which was not, through the interruption of the course of history which threatens us both here in the present and in the past — threatens both the living and the dead.

Final considerations

Returning to the photograph in *Je vous salue, Sarajevo*, that of the three soldiers murdering civilians during a civil war which employed, as we now, a genocidal strategy of "ethnic cleansing", Godard finishes the film with a final pause in the narration, now for a longer time; a few more seconds. The soundtrack of the film swells one last time. Each section of the image is slowly revisited, until we are shown the Ron Haviv's full shot. Godard's narration offers his closing words, which may seem initially disconnected from the central theme of the film. They are not about fear nor war, but about life and death. This last section seems as if the narrator is bidding farewell. The closing of a book. Maybe of a life.

Jean-Luc Godard passed away on the 13th of September, 2022, at the age of 91 years old. In the final sentence of *Je vous salue, Sarajevo*, his voice sounds in peace about his own finitude. The peace of someone who made his art an art of living, or maybe a "form-of-life". Godard singularized himself before the "rules", and did so in these times of fear we have been living on — fear of imminent environmental catastrophe, of the many forms of neofascism of our current times, of neoliberal economic crisis, of the refugee crisis in Europe, of the still ongoing Cold War and its ever present threat of nuclear apocalypse; fear of the civil war that has been increasingly and paradoxically becoming a "global civil war", fear of the permanent state of exception, Jean-Luc Godard bids his farewell from the film and from life, which made him a true exception in this world full of so many rules: "When it's time to close the book, I have no regrets. I've seen so many people live so badly, and so many die so well.".[19]

[17] Benjamin, *Paralipomena to "On the concept of History"*, p. 402.
[18] Benjamin, *On the concept of History,* online.

[19] Godard, *Je vous salue, Sarajevo*. Online.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ricardo Evandro Santos Martins
Professor of Legal Theory and History of Law at Federal University of Pará (UFPa, Amazon), Brazil. Author of 4 books: Legal Science as Human Science (2016); Legal Science and Hermeneutics (2018); Six essays on Agamben (2020); Law, Cinema and Biopolitics (2022). *E-mail*: ricardoevandromartins@gmail.com.