

# The Distance with the Present

## On Agamben's Notion of the Contemporary

Daniel Blanga-Gubbay

1. Some months ago the organizer of today's symposium sent me an email, asking if I could give – for this occasion – a short introduction on Giorgio Agamben's notion of the contemporary, present in the well-known short book *Che cos'è il contemporaneo?*, transcribed from the inaugural course that Agamben gave at his 2007-seminar at the European Graduate School, and later translated as *What is the Contemporary?*<sup>1</sup> The courses started with the following words: “The question that I would like to inscribe on the threshold of this seminar is: ‘Of whom and of what are we contemporaries?’ And, first and foremost: ‘What does it mean to be contemporary?’”

While replying to the first email, I was already projecting myself into the future, into the moment I am now in. *Am I, while writing this email, contemporary to the 5th of March?* Indeed back then, in the act of writing, I was not only projecting myself into the future, foreseeing myself today; the very typing of that e-mail was also a consequence of the moment of today, a peculiar sort of consequence that happens *before* the cause. Writing that email made me perceive, for an instant, the contemporariness of the two events. And the question comes back to me reversed today: in which way am I contemporary to that email?

The same question might arise for a reader, while reading this text, which is the transcription of the one pronounced at the conference on the 5th of March. Indeed, rather than taking on the form of a written essay, this text deliberately retains the formal qualities of that lecture, echoing Agamben's question about the contemporaneity in the coexistence of different temporalities in these words, traveling between the conference, the writing of this text, and the moment of its reading.

Indeed, at the beginning of his text Agamben writes:

In the course of this seminar, we shall have occasion to read texts whose authors are many centuries removed from us, as well as others that are more recent, or even very recent. At all events, it is essential that we manage to be in some way contemporaries to these texts. (39)

In these opening remarks contemporariness is not marked as a common belonging to a precise period of time, but as a coexistence of different times

within a single time; the presence of something that – while belonging to a different time – is still present or is not yet there. Agamben here refers to the idea of Walter Benjamin's *dialektisches Bild*, the dialectic image able to carry different moments of history, to link different times, almost reducing the space between them and making them contemporary. “It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on the past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation,” writes Benjamin in *The Arcades Project* (262). The shape of the constellation shines as the possibility of breaking the linear conception of time, and acts as a fundamental critique of the modern conception of historicity, that Agamben – just like Benjamin and other writers equally fundamental for him like Nietzsche or Warburg – has taken as a starting point.

The clearest example that Agamben gives in the text is the one of fashion, as that which – quoting Agamben – “recalls, re-evokes, revitalizes” (50) the past. While rethinking fashion with Agamben, fashion is no longer – as often conceived – at the point of the *now*, advancing as a single point at the edge of novelty within a linear time. While wearing clothes, I carry with me different times, both the references to the past and moments where these clothes were created or bought. I dress myself of times, which I transport into, in and beyond the present moment. I am the contemporaneity of different times, and the space between myself and the present time is full of other times.

2. Still, more than investigating the way in which we are contemporary with other times, the core question for Agamben is: are we contemporary with the present time? And if so, in what way? This is the question that I propose to explore here, especially given the two topics brought up by Frederik about contemporariness and performing arts: the relation between art and its time, and the paradigm of the *hic et nunc*.

To explore this question in his text Agamben starts from a position proposed by Friedrich Nietzsche in the *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, the *Untimely Meditations*, where contemporariness to the present is described as a state of disconnection and “out-of-jointness.”

Agamben writes:

Those who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. [...] Precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and

grasping their own time. (40)

We need to further specify this disconnection with the present time. Agamben explains immediately that this “dys-chrony” is not the one of a person who nostalgically lives in another time, by living in the past. To clarify this, he refers to a 1923-poem of the Russian poet Osip Emilyevich Mandelstam, titled “The Century,” which, according to Agamben, reflects on the relation between the poet and his time. It presents “the Century” as a running beast ridden by the poet. The image is particularly powerful: the beast is not simply running forward, but is also transporting us. We are transported by time, and we go further with the present.

Within the poem, Mandelstam addresses this beast, i.e. his century, and asks it: “who will manage to look inside your eyes?” (qtd. in Agamben “What Is the Contemporary?” 42), evoking the fundamental paradox of our (in)ability to perceive the present. Indeed, we cannot get off, since one cannot get off the time running forward, and the only possibility of perceiving the present – to look at the present – is to lean forward beyond the beast, to look it in the eyes. By doing this, we would still be in the saddle and advancing with the beast, but from there we protrude forward beyond the beast, from where we can firmly lock our gaze onto its eyes. The beauty of this image lies herein, that while still being on the beast galloping forward, we create a gap between the beast and ourselves.

In the gap of this movement Agamben conceives the first definition of the contemporary in the text: contemporariness is “a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is *that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*” (41). Leaning beyond the beast, the contemporary is the one who detaches himself from his time, in order to stare the time directly in the eyes.

3. Nevertheless a new question immediately emerges: what does he, who can stare at his time, actually see? What do we have to see in the eyes of the beast?

A few sentences later Agamben details his definition of the contemporariness further, when specifying that “the contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness” (44). The contemporary is thus the person who sees the obscurity in the eyes of the beast, in order to access the obscurity of the present. Agamben immediately clarifies that this darkness is not a privative experience but an active one; it is not a de-activation of sight – as might happen by closing the eyes – but rather a new ability

that emerges in seeing details in the absence of light. Still, how can we define this darkness of the present?

A first interpretation of this darkness might be to approach it as the darkness which exists in the present without being the image of the present, i.e. its dominant narrative. We can trace here in Agamben's text the influence of Pier Paolo Pasolini and the idea of "minor cultures." A minor culture is that which exists but is disappearing under the homogenizing image of modernity. In a well-known article of 1975 – the year of his death – Pasolini used the image of the fireflies: in the same way the tenuous and elusive lights of the fireflies disappear in the dazzling lights of modernity, a dancing swarm of minor cultures is annihilated by the strong light defining the image of the present.

In this sense, leaning forward and distancing himself from the beast of the present, the contemporary is he who grasps and recognizes in this distance the construction of the very image of the present, and by doing this is able to go beyond this light, to see what is left aside by its construction. That is why Agamben is writing that being contemporary is having "the ability [that] amounts to a neutralization of the lights that come from the epoch in order to discover its obscurity, its special darkness" (45). Being contemporary means to hold the gaze in the darkness to see the light of the century, instead of being blinded by it; and to see at the same time in the darkness what is left beyond the light. We do not simply enter into the obscurity of the present, but we make the obscurity enter the present.

4. Still, does this beam of darkness not contain more than simply what is left over by the homogenizing light of the present? Beyond what is invisible and yet present, does this darkness that surrounds the image of the present not contain other temporalities? Or, to put it in other words, beyond what it was and is, is this darkness not full of what it might be?

At this point in his text, Agamben describes a beautiful image that I would like to share to investigate the temporality of the darkness of the present further.

Apart from referring to the image of the disappearing fireflies we encountered in the work of Pasolini, Agamben indicates other luminous points suspended in the dark when he portrays the image of the stars shining in the middle of the darkness of a nightly sky:

In the firmament that we observe at night, the stars shine brightly, surrounded by a thick darkness. Since the number of galaxies and luminous bodies in the universe is almost infinite, the darkness that we

see in the sky is something that, according to scientists, demands an explanation. (46)

Starting from the scientific problem at the core of this image, Agamben invites us to understand this darkness differently:

In an expanding universe, the most remote galaxies move away from us at a speed so great that their light is never able to reach us. What we perceive as the darkness of the heavens is this light that, though traveling toward us, cannot reach us, since the galaxies from which the light originates move away from us at a velocity greater than the speed of light. (46)

If the stars – or the patterns of their constellation – correspond to our present, the darkness that surrounds them is not empty, but rather full of constellations that might no longer or not yet be there. While looking at the darkness of the sky, we can imagine still invisible stars that might shine or never shine in front of our eyes. The darkness of the present is not empty, but rather it carries within it the possibility of a different constellation, of a universe different from the one we know, or the presence of other planets still preserved by the darkness of time. If the present manifests itself in the light, the darkness that surrounds it is first of all an exercise of imagination, and a space of contingency. The darkness is not the opposite of the light, but a laboratory where one can imagine a different conformation of the light. The darkness is not occupied by the nothing, but by the possible. Looking at the darkness of our time means to find the black spot of the present, where we can imagine a different conformation of the present; to be able to distance ourselves from the beast of time, to imagine – while firmly looking inside and almost archeologically digging in the dark of its eyes – a different form of the beast.

For this reason Agamben writes that

one can say that the entry point to the present necessarily takes the form of an archeology; an archeology that does not, however, regress to a historical past, but returns to that part within the present that we are absolutely incapable of living. [...] The present is nothing other than this un-lived element in everything that is lived. [...] And to be contemporary means in this sense to return to a present where we have never been. (51-52)

At the end of the text, we discover that we are again challenged by a *dialektisches Bild*, the image connecting and presenting different temporalities. However, it is

not a present point that connects with a different point in the past, but rather a present point that connects with a point in the realm of the possible. The darkness of the present is the breach in the present that allows new things to enter, similar to the “crack in everything” sung by Leonard Cohen: “that's how the light gets in.”<sup>2</sup> It is a black stain on a historical atlas, from where events that have never occurred will enter the present.

5. The description of the experience of the darkness makes us suddenly slide towards the black boxes and dark halls that welcome performances, and it is starting from this image of the darkness that I would like to go toward the end, with some questions about the relation between the performing arts and the contemporariness that might emerge from this reading of Agamben. The invitation to the *Contemporaneities*-symposium suggested two aspects of the term contemporary: it asked, on the one hand, how the performing arts relate to the world they are contemporary with, and, on the other hand, what kind of contemporariness the performing arts can evoke with its paradigm of the here and now. Now, the reading of Agamben echoes in these different questions.

First of all, Agamben's use of the contemporary suggests to reinvestigate the relation between art and its time, and by doing so to question the value of both actuality and novelty often associated with it. On the one side, Agamben seems to withdraw from reproducing actuality in the way topical documentary forms might be grasping the present day. Instead of pursuing actuality in this sense, his use of the contemporary invites us to explore through fiction the possible disjunctions and anachronisms, which are able to make appear the complexity of the present beyond its image. This exploration of the gap between us and the beast of time has been at the core of the work made in recent years by a new generation of dancers and choreographers: from the body as a field of irreconcilable histories that rejects simplification in the work of Cecilia Lisa Eliceche, to the complexity opened by the merging of Jamaican dancehall and traditional songs from Georgia in *DFS* by Chaignaud and Bengolea. We can also find it in Fabián Barba's reflection on anachronism and the dominant canon in contemporary dance, and the possibility for contemporary Ecuadorian dance to be perceived as contemporary – and no longer traditional – in the European context. While looking at this work through Agamben, the contemporary emerges an act of acknowledgement of what exists in the luminous darkness of the present, similar to that which Peggy Phelan named “the unmarked” in the paradigm of the present.

At the same time, if the perception of the term “contemporary” in the arts is often

linked to the value of novelty (inheriting the avant-garde model, well embodied by Kandinsky's image of the apex of the pyramid making new discoveries and ushering in tomorrow's reality), the reading of Agamben invites us to rethink the pioneering position of art. More than a point at the edge of novelty, do not the arts – like it was for fashion – have the possibility of showing a temporality beyond linearity, of storing multiple temporalities that are recalled, re-evoked, revitalized? According to this reading, Agamben's use of contemporary might resonate in the exploration of the notion of the archive that manifestly crossed the field of the performing arts in recent years, from the living books of Mette Edvardsen (*Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine*) to the practices of Boris Charmatz (*Untitled, 2000*) and Mette Ingvartsen (*69 positions*). The performer does not stand at the edge of novelty. Instead, these performance present complex and multiple temporalities within the body, whose gestures travel beyond linearity, becoming time and again a dialectic image in front of the audience.

6. There is, however, a last point raised by the reading of Agamben that needs to be addressed: beyond the specific content of a performance, is not the same experience of performing art interrogating the contemporaneity?

The words *hic et nunc* are often taken as paradigm of the performing arts. They suggest an idea of contemporaneity in the sense of a coexistence of performers and spectators, and of an immediacy of that which appears before our eyes. Following the reading of Agamben, and the location of the contemporary in the obscurity surrounding the stars, contemporaneity seems reversed into an experience of the invisible: the experience of contemporaneity is not that of the present stars, but rather that of the darkness where a star might exist.

Hence, if we venture back into the obscurity of theatre, Agamben seems to suggest that performance is not so much about what is *here* and *now* on stage, but rather about the exercise of contingency that surrounds it, and that is activated through it. Governed by fiction or by a lack of necessity, that which is on stage continuously raises the possibility of its contingency, and by doing this it makes us discover the contingency of our own world. Agamben hence seems to define the *here* and *now* no longer as an immediacy of what is but rather as a medium to discover what might be. It is the tip of an iceberg, standing as a visible witness of other invisible and yet possible *heres* and *nows* beneath the surface of the present, and transporting us therein.

That is why Agamben was writing that “the appointment that is in question in contemporariness does not simply take place in chronological time: it is

something that, working within chronological time, urges, presses and transforms it” (47).

While seating in the black spaces of theater halls, we face the un-lived elements in everything that is lived, we feel the vibration of the contingency, while the events that have not yet happened are fleeing from us at a faster pace than that with which they approach us.

Maybe we can also see the reverse of this perspective: art is not simply that which flourishes in the dark distance between the present and the possible; it is that which allows this distance to be preserved, as a layer that prevents the present to adhere too much to itself, and to close the crack through which other possibilities enter the present. This is why – to conclude – while speaking about the beast, Agamben was saying with Mandelstam that a poet *is* the contemporary: he does not simply live in the fracture but he is this fracture, cracking the image of the present and eventually impeding the present to be unchangeably what it is.

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1 All quotes in this text are from the English translation of the essay that appeared in Agamben's book “*What Is an Apparatus?*” *And Other Essays* published in 2008.

2 Cohen, Leonard. “Anthem.” *The Future*, Columbia Records, 1992.



