

ARTICLE

The Allegory of the Cage: Foucault, Agamben, and the Enlightenment

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ABSTRACT: This article reconsiders the relations between Immanuel Kant and Michel Foucault's essays on the Enlightenment and adds Giorgio Agamben's essay "What is an Apparatus?" to this constellation. It explores, specifically, the relations between Foucault's definition of enlightenment and the central notion of Agamben's philosophy: potentiality. The relation between potentiality and enlightenment is then mobilized in the article in the context of a discussion of technology in Kant, Foucault, and Agamben. What might be the relevance of the relation between Foucault's enlightenment and Agamben's potentiality for our understanding of technological developments today? The article engages with this question through a discussion of Foucault's writings on the care of the self, Agamben's theory of art, and Bernard Stiegler's work on technology. It closes with a discussion of an artwork that stages the dramatic relation between all of these texts.

Keywords: Stiegler; Agamben; Foucault; Enlightenment; technology

"It's a remarkable piece of apparatus," said the officer to the explorer, and surveyed with a certain air of admiration the apparatus which was after all quite familiar to him.

—Franz Kafka, "In the Penal Colony"

The question, I think, which arises at the end of the eighteenth century is: What are we in our actuality? ... "What are we today?"

—Michel Foucault, "The Political Technology of Individuals"

Technics and Enlightenment

In his recent book *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, Bernard Stiegler discusses a constellation of texts including Immanuel Kant's essay "What is Enlightenment?", Michel Foucault's essay "What is Enlightenment?", and Giorgio Agamben's essay "What is an Apparatus?" For readers familiar with Stiegler's early work, in particular the first volume of the six-volume project titled *Technics and Time*,¹ it comes as no surprise that Stiegler would be interested in a

¹ See Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

fellow philosopher's discussion of apparatuses.² Stiegler's general argument in this book is that philosophy is yet to think through technics. Criticizing philosophy's widespread *ressentiment* against and repression of technics, he offers an overview of some theorists of technical evolution (including both lesser known names such as Bertrand Gille, Lucien Febvre, René Boirel, and André Leroi-Gourhan, and more famous ones such as Martin Heidegger and Gilbert Simondon) in order to develop, in the brilliant second chapter of the book, a discussion of technics in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The position that shines through in these chapters as well as in the rest of the book is that contrary to what is generally thought, human beings did not invent technics; it is, rather, the other way around: technics invented human beings. The human being came about through a technical change in the constitution of the being that preceded it. Thus, the *who* emerges out of the *what*; the question of technics actually *precedes* that of the human.

Given Stiegler's project, it makes sense that he would appreciate Agamben's attempt to think through technics. But that does not mean he is *with* Agamben. His reading reveals, rather, that in Agamben's essay, technics is repressed once again in favor of what Stiegler characterizes as an "enigmatic," "mysterious," and even "mystagogic"³ praise for the "profanation" of apparatuses that would "bring to light the Ungovernable, which is the beginning and, at the same time, the vanishing point of every politics."⁴ Agamben's essay ends with this sentence, and without offering any further explanation of what this "Ungovernable"—which is pitched against both apparatuses and government—might be. In contrast with Agamben's

² One should note from the beginning the ambiguity of the term "apparatus." In the translations that I am working with, "apparatus" translates both the word for "device" ("appareil" in French) and what Foucault famously calls "dispositif" (which refers not so much to a device as to a network established between different elements such as "discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions" [Foucault quoted in Giorgio Agamben, "What is an Apparatus?" in Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stephan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 2]). The Italian word in Agamben's title that is translated as "apparatus" is "dispositivo" (the choice was inspired, apparently, not just by the fact that "dispositif" in Foucault is usually translated as "apparatus," but also by Agamben's note "that the torture machine from Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* is called an Apparat" [Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stephan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 55]). The reference to Kafka reveals much about Agamben's general take on technics and technology: from the get-go, the apparatus that Agamben is trying to define is associated with a torture machine. I will come back to this throughout this essay. In "What is an Apparatus?", Agamben uses the term "dispositivo" to refer to both "appareil" and "dispositif." Inevitably, my own essay is marked by this slippage. One other obvious lineage of the term "apparatus" is its use by Louis Althusser in his essay on the school as an "ideological state apparatus." Althusser's essay, which pertains to education, is very much within the scope of my own project, even though I will not address it explicitly. Finally, one should note that the obvious inter-text for Agamben's essay on the apparatus is Gilles Deleuze's essay "Qu'est-ce qu'un dispositif?", which marks a powerful engagement with Foucault's thought. I will leave aside here these obvious references in order to explore instead a much less obvious connection, namely the relation of Agamben's essay to Kant and Foucault's essays on the Enlightenment. For an exploration of Foucault and Agamben's uses of the word "dispositif," see Jeffrey Bussolini's contribution to this special issue.

³ Stiegler, 299.

⁴ Agamben, "Apparatus," 24.

facile opposition in the essay of “two great classes: living beings ...and apparatuses,”⁵ Stiegler insists on technics and human beings’ shared becoming: on the shared processes of individuation through which they both become. As Stiegler’s recent work makes clear, this does not mean that he blindly embraces technics as humanity’s redeemer. Indeed, if Stiegler’s early work insists on undoing the *ressentiment* against and the repression of technics in thought, his more recent work pairs this insistence on technics with a reflection on the Enlightenment’s emancipatory dimension, specifically its relation to education.

Like some of Stiegler’s other recent works—most explicitly, the volume titled *La télécratie contre la démocratie*⁶—*Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* discusses the ways in which technics, and in particular modern technological apparatuses such as the television, are in the process of destroying the contemporary youth’s capacity to *pay attention*. In addition, because our present situation is one in which our memory is exteriorized in apparatuses such as televisions, computers, cellular phones, and iPads, human beings become particularly vulnerable to the appropriation—the expropriation and manipulation—of their memory, a state that risks to short-circuit what Stiegler calls, after Simondon, human beings’ psychic and collective individuation. Once our memory is taken away from us and replaced with what-ever governments or capital might want to replace it with, our capacity to psychically and collectively individuate ourselves is destroyed. Television is one of the modern technological apparatuses contributing to this destruction, which Stiegler characterizes as a destruction of the spirit. In response, Stiegler (as well as the other members of the *Ars Industrialis* collective) calls for a new politics of the spirit, in which television might very well—will *have to*, even—play a role.⁷ But it is up to us to democratize this modern technological apparatus so that it can become the support of human beings’ psychic and collective individuation.

It is here—in other words, precisely where Stiegler demystifies Agamben’s closing call for a “profanation” of apparatuses—that his interest in the emancipatory dimension of the Enlightenment comes in. Whereas Agamben’s negative view on apparatuses is traced back in *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* to Foucault’s insistence, in his reading of Kant, on the second motto of the Enlightenment that Kant distinguishes—“Argue as much as you will, *but obey!*” [emphasis mine]—Stiegler for his part proposes a return to Kant’s first motto: “Dare to know!” What might this educational imperative still mean in the era of “telecracy”? That Stiegler takes this question seriously may be clear from one of *Ars Industrialis*’ most recent projects: the creation of a school of philosophy.⁸ This essay will engage, first of all, with the triangulation of Agamben, Kant, and Foucault—in other words, with the connection between the technical and emancipatory dimensions of the Enlightenment—that I uncovered in Stiegler’s work through a consideration of the close relations between Foucault and Agamben’s engagement with technics and the Enlightenment. After an analysis of the tension be-

⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁶ See Bernard Stiegler, *La télécratie contre la démocratie: Lettre ouverte aux représentants politiques* (Paris: Flammarion, 2008).

⁷ See Bernard Stiegler, *Réenchanger le monde: La valeur esprit contre le populisme industriel* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006).

⁸ For more information, see: Bernard Stiegler, “Ecole de philosophie d’Epineuil le Fleuriel,” <http://pharmakon.fr/wordpress/>.

tween potentiality and actuality in Agamben and Foucault, the essay will further its conclusions through a discussion of a work of art that stages the *dramatic* relations between the essays by Kant, Foucault, and Agamben. This artwork will be presented as a demystified instantiation of what Agamben in “What is an Apparatus?” calls the “profanation” of the “counter-apparatus”: a practice that is able to break with the dark underside of Enlightenment technologies, and restore them to their common use.

Actuality, Potentiality, Contingency

In 1986, Giorgio Agamben gave a lecture entitled “On Potentiality” at a conference in Lisbon organized by the *Collège International de Philosophie*. Agamben begins the lecture by saying that “I could state the subject of my work as an attempt to understand the meaning of the verb ‘can’ [potere]. What do I mean when I say: ‘I can, I cannot?’”⁹ This statement arguably finds its most radical articulation in the essay that closes the edited collection *Potentialities* in which “On Potentiality” was first published, namely Agamben’s essay “Bartleby, or On Contingency.” Uncovering the importance of Herman Melville’s enigmatic scrivener, Bartleby, for the history of philosophy, Agamben argues that Bartleby—a law-copyist who, on the third day of his employment in an office on Wall Street, begins to refuse any and all tasks that are assigned to him by repeating the formula “I would prefer not to”—is a figure of “a complete or perfect potentiality that belongs to the scribe who is in full possession of the art of writing in the moment in which he does not write.”¹⁰ In the history of philosophy, this “complete or perfect potentiality”—what Agamben calls, specifically, a “potentiality not to”—has become eclipsed by another kind of potentiality: one that is always already tipping over into actuality. Bartleby, however, calls this eclipse into question. The scrivener’s enigmatic formula—“I would prefer not to”—marks the persistence of that other kind of potentiality—the potentiality not to—that Agamben is interested in.

As the title of Agamben’s Bartleby essay indicates, Bartleby is ultimately associated in the essay with contingency. For his definition of this term, Agamben relies on Duns Scotus, who wrote: “By contingent... I mean not something that is not necessary or eternal, but something whose opposite could have happened in the very moment in which it happened.”¹¹ If Bartleby is thus a messianic, savior-like figure, as Gilles Deleuze, for example, has argued, he does not come: “like Jesus to redeem what was, but to save what was not. ... Bartleby comes not to bring a new table of the Law but ...to fulfill the Torah by destroying it from top to bottom.”¹²

This passage should not be misunderstood: what Agamben has in mind is not the actual destruction of the Law. What he is interested in, rather, is what he refers to as “another use” of the Law, its “deactivation” or “inactivity [inoperosità].”¹³ As a figure of the potentia-

⁹ Giorgio Agamben, “On Potentiality,” in Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 177.

¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, “Bartleby, or On Contingency,” in Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 246-247.

¹¹ Duns Scotus quoted in Agamben, “Bartleby, or On Contingency,” 262.

¹² Agamben, “Bartleby, or On Contingency,” 270.

¹³ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 64.

lity not to and more specifically of contingency, Bartleby opens up the possibility of this deactivation or inactivity because he perpetually situates the Law at a poetic distance from itself, in the region of its own saying. In other words: in that space where the Law could always also have been otherwise.

The central importance of the notion of potentiality for Agamben's work has already been demonstrated.¹⁴ For the purposes of this essay, I propose to reread Foucault's answer to the question "What is Enlightenment?"—and specifically, his relation to Kant on this count—through the lens of the tension between potentiality and actuality that lies at the heart of Agamben's project. Much has already been said about the relation of Agamben's analysis of the contemporary political situation to Foucault's work on governmentality and biopolitics. But what about the *solutions* that Agamben proposes in response to this analysis? What might be the relation of this particular dimension of Agamben's work to Foucault? Although I will focus on Foucault's "What is Enlightenment?", my general suggestion is that in order to answer this question, one must explore the relation of Foucault's late work on "the care of the self"¹⁵ to Agamben's writings.

"The Undefined Work of Freedom"

From 1978 until his death in 1984, Foucault repeatedly referred back to Kant's essay "What is Enlightenment?" Kant's essay famously begins with the definition of Enlightenment as "man's release from his self-incurred tutelage,"¹⁶ and follows up with a definition of "tutelage": "Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another."¹⁷ "Have the courage to use your own reason!"¹⁸ is thus the first motto of the Enlightenment. Kant insists on human beings' potential to *actively* make use of their own reason; Enlightenment is defined as human beings' release from the incapacity to do so. At the same time, however, the term Enlightenment refers to a historical period, a present to which human beings are *passively* exposed. It refers, in other words, not only to an enlightened *act* but also to an enlightened *age*. Kant addresses this double-sidedness—human beings' active and passive relation to the Enlightenment—towards the end of his essay, when he raises the question: "Do we now live in an enlightened age?"¹⁹ His answer is, unambiguously, "No." "[B]ut we do live in an *age of enlightenment*,"²⁰ he continues. With this shift from "an enlightened age" to "an age of enlightenment," Kant manages to combine the active and passive aspects of the Enlightenment: he evokes a historical period that is produced through human beings' actions. Thus, it is not so much the age that is enlightened, and that as such guarantees one's En-

¹⁴ See Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

¹⁵ See Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 3., trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1988).

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?," in Sylvère Lotringer (ed.), *The Politics of Truth*, trans. Lysa Hochroth and Catherine Porter (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 29.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

lightenment, but one's Enlightenment that produces the age. The final responsibility remains ours.

Although Foucault's essay "What is Enlightenment?" is no doubt the best known of his many engagements with Kant's text, Sylvère Lotringer has recently collected a number of the others in a volume titled *The Politics of Truth*. Since then, Foucault's 1983 lectures on Kant's text have also been published, in both French and English. From these different publications, it appears that for Foucault, the question of the Enlightenment was one that could not be settled. Its answer never quite actualizes in his lectures and his writings. Instead, it is perpetually deferred, like a potentiality that is reactivated in each instance in which it is addressed. It is not difficult to see how this feature of Foucault's engagement with the Enlightenment—specifically, the tension between the actual and the potential that characterizes it—is in fact a central component of his answer to the question of the Enlightenment.

Indeed, the tension between the potential and the actual around which Agamben's entire oeuvre revolves is equally central to "What is Enlightenment?" Towards the end of the essay, Foucault summarizes the two arguments that he has been trying to make. On the one hand, he has tried to:

emphasize the extent to which a type of philosophical interrogation—one that simultaneously problematizes man's relation to the present, man's historical mode of being, and the constitution of the self as an autonomous subject—is rooted in the Enlightenment.²¹

On the other hand, he has tried to emphasize that what connects "us" (Foucault and his audience, his readers) to the:

Enlightenment is not a faithfulness to doctrinal elements but rather the permanent reactivation of an attitude—that is, of a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era.²²

If the first argument could be rephrased as an argument about the human being's simultaneously "passive" relation to history and its constitution as an autonomous subject, the second pushes the latter aspect of that argument into an investigation of a more "active" "attitude."²³ Tying this attitude back to the first part of the first argument, it is described earlier on in the essay as:

a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task. A bit, no doubt, like what the Greeks called an ethos.²⁴

²¹ Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in Sylvère Lotringer (ed.), *The Politics of Truth*, trans. Lysa Hochroth and Catherine Porter (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 109.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 105.

²⁴ Ibid.

In the closing paragraphs of the essay, Foucault also refers to this attitude as a “philosophical life.”²⁵ What connects “us” to the Enlightenment is the permanent reactivation of this life.

But how is one to understand this “reactivation” exactly, given the obvious tension between the active and the passive, and specifically the actual and the potential, that haunts Foucault’s essay? What is certain is that Foucault pitches his understanding of this “reactivation” against Kant. One might suspect that he is attempting to “enlighten” Kant here about something that he considers Kant’s essay to be missing (or perhaps better, that he considers Kant to be missing—for Kant’s text puts one on the track of it, even though Kant himself might be missing it). Foucault reveals that he wants to transform Kant’s enlightened interest in the limits of reason into an investigation of transgression. He is interested in how one can “transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression.”²⁶ Foucault points out that such a critique would be both archeological in the sense that it will seek “to treat the instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do as so many historical events” as well as genealogical in the sense that: “it will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think.”²⁷

If the notion of “contingency” in this passage appears to be tied to what Foucault elsewhere in the essay calls the present, one’s historical mode of being, Foucault appears to want to push it here toward Duns Scotus’ understanding of it as “something whose opposite could have happened in the very moment in which it happened.” Such would be an enlightened critique of contingency, the transformation of contingency into the possibility of transgression. Foucault calls such a practice the “undefined work of freedom.”²⁸

From the closing paragraphs of Foucault’s essay, one gathers that it is not entirely certain that such a transformation entails keeping one’s faith in the Enlightenment. Rather, to “enlighten” the Enlightenment, to push it towards the “potentiality not to” that is central to Agamben’s intellectual project, means to question any actualization of the Enlightenment itself, so as to return it instead to the *question* that both Kant and Foucault choose as their title. Any enlightened conception of the Enlightenment would thus refrain from presenting the Enlightenment as an answer; instead, the Enlightenment is crucially a question, is defined as a “potentiality not to” that permanently resists actualization. Thus, Enlightenment doctrine—the Law—is pushed back into the poetic regions of its own saying, into those liminal spaces that Agamben is so interested in, where the Enlightenment is always also otherwise.

Once More, Philologically

This is why Foucault, in one of his contributions to a book entitled *Technologies of the Self*, asserts that “[t]he question, I think, which arises at the end of the eighteenth century is: What are we in our actuality? ... ‘What are we today?’”²⁹ This passage does not only reveal—more

²⁵ Ibid., 170.

²⁶ Ibid., 113.

²⁷ Ibid., 114.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 145.

so than some of the other translations of Foucault's work on the Enlightenment—Foucault's explicit interest in actuality. The shift that one finds from the first question to the second—i.e. the shift from "actuality" to "today"—also marks one of the main problems of translation in Foucault's essay on the Enlightenment, as well as in his lectures on Kant's essay. The problem lies in Foucault's use of the term "les actualités," usually translated as "the present." From the opening paragraphs of Foucault's essay, it is obvious that "the present," "today," is a major concern in his engagement with the Enlightenment. However, to translate "les actualités" merely as "the present" means to lose the notion of actuality that is inscribed in the original French term, "les actualités." In French, "the present" is of the order of the actual: to inquire into the present means to inquire into the actual. Foucault's main critique of such a conceptualization of the present will be to insist on the potential, specifically on the "potentiality not to." From this perspective, the present becomes contingent (in Scotus' and Agamben's sense of the word): it could also always have been otherwise. If we are still living in the present of the Enlightenment, the Enlightenment is thus not so much "les actualités" but, rather, potentiality—specifically, the "potentiality not to."³⁰

Foucault's obsession with the tension between actuality and potentiality, and specifically with the word actual, is particularly obvious in the French original of his lectures on Kant's essay. Enlightenment is "la question du présent," he states, "c'est la question de l'actualité."³¹ Note how the present, "le présent," is immediately translated here into the actual, "l'actualité." "Qu'est-ce qui, dans le présent, fait sens actuellement pour une réflexion philosophique?"³² Here Foucault establishes once again the connection between the present and the actual, this time through his use of the adverb "actuellement": "What is it that, in the present, makes sense today [actuellement] for philosophical reflection?" At a crucial point in the first lecture, Foucault insists very forcefully on the centrality of actuality for his reflection on the Enlightenment by asking: "Quelle est mon actualité? ... Quel est le sens de cette actualité? Et qu'est-ce que fait le fait que je parle de cette actualité?"³³ "What is my present? ... What is the meaning of this present? And what causes me to speak of this present?" In each of these cases, "actualité" could just as well have been translated by "actuality." Whereas the reader of the English translation risks encountering a text that is obsessed with the present—an encounter that would not entirely be missed, since the present is obviously a central concern in Foucault's text—the reader of the French original encounters in addition a text that is obsessed with actuality.³⁴

At the end of his first lecture on Kant, Foucault evokes specifically the tension between actuality and potentiality that informs Agamben's work. He asks: "Quel est le champ actuel

³⁰ John Rajchman comes very close to stating this in his introduction to *The Politics of Truth*: John Rajchman, "Enlightenment Today" in Sylvère Lotringer (ed.), *The Politics of Truth*, trans. Lysa Hochroth and Catherine Porter (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 9-27. See in particular page 15.

³¹ Michel Foucault, *Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres: Cours au Collège de France 1982-1983*, ed. François Ewald, Alessandro Fontana, and Frédéric Gros (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 13.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 15.

³⁴ All translations from *Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres* in both this paragraph and the following are mine.

des expériences possibles?"³⁵ "What is the present [actuel] field of possible experiences?" Enlightenment, for Foucault, will have to do with separating out from the actuality of what one is "the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think." Enlightened freedom thus comes about not as a state that would be achieved once and for all but as a process, a kind of "work": it is a "patient labor giving form to our impatience for liberty."³⁶ Enlightenment is thus inscribed at the very end of Foucault's essay in the aesthetico-ethical practices of self-cultivation that Foucault at this point in his career is analyzing in his work on sexuality. It is theorized here as an "art of existence,"³⁷ a form of what Foucault in the second volume of *The History of Sexuality* calls the "technè tou biou"³⁸ or "care of the self." In "What is Enlightenment?" Foucault theorizes Enlightenment as an "art of living,"³⁹ a practice which becomes part of the practices of the "cura sui"⁴⁰ that he reveals to be a central concern in classical philosophy. In the Enlightenment essay, the "labor"⁴¹ implied by the "care of the self" is turned into the "undefined work of freedom." Enlightenment is a social practice through which one attends to oneself and thus, ultimately, to others.⁴²

What thus emerges in my discussion of Foucault's understanding of Enlightenment is a theory of Enlightenment as a biotechnic, a technique of taking care of one's life. Enlightenment is theorized by Foucault as a technique of care-taking. In the next section of this essay, I discuss further the place of technics and specifically of technology in both Kant's and Foucault's essays, in order to then turn towards the third text in the constellation that is under discussion here: Agamben's "What is an Apparatus?" Indeed, while Agamben cites the first volume of Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, specifically its closing section on biopower, as one of his major influences in the introduction to his study of sovereign power titled *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Foucault's shift in the third volume of *The History of Sexuality* from biopolitics to biotechnics remains largely unthought in his writings. Instead, whenever Agamben is forced to address it, a careful thought of technics, technology, and the care of the self is pushed aside in favor of what Stiegler has characterized as a mystical politics of the Ungovernable, marked for example in Agamben's book on Saint Paul, by his embrace of messianism.

³⁵ Foucault, *Gouvernement*, 22.

³⁶ Foucault, "Enlightenment," 119.

³⁷ Foucault, *Technologies*, 43.

³⁸ Foucault, *Care*, 43.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 53. One of the many valuable points made by Jeffrey Nealon in his recent *Foucault Beyond Foucault*—a book that reexamines Foucault's importance *today*, and turns to Foucault's Enlightenment essay throughout its argument—is that this enlightened care of the self should not be understood as theory's version of Nike's "Just Do It" motto. Indeed, as my discussion of the tension between potentiality and actuality in Foucault shows, the "doing" of "care" and the "labor" or "work" it implies might ultimately have more to do with an "undoing" or "unworking"—with the "worklessness" and "inoperativity" evoked by Agamben—than with Nike's sweatshop-tainted imperative. See Jeffrey Nealon, *Foucault Beyond Foucault* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), especially the first chapter.

The Question of Technology

Early on in his description of the Enlightenment, Kant evokes the curious image of domesticated animals made dumb by their guardians who “have made sure that these placid creatures will not dare take a single step without the harness of the cart to which they are tethered.”⁴³ In his second lecture on Kant’s essay, Foucault comments on Kant’s use of the word “Gängelwagen” for what is translated in the English version of the essay as “cart.”⁴⁴ Foucault points out that the German word refers to a kind of walking rack that was used in the eighteenth century to *both* help infants to walk *and* to prevent them from walking wherever they liked. The cart is thus a technical object that *both* enables freedom *and* enforces a degree of obedience. One can understand why Foucault would have been interested in this word: he considers it to be emblematic of Kant’s answer to the question of the Enlightenment. The cart evokes, specifically, the second motto that Kant gives in response: “Argue, but obey!” The curious fact, however, is that Kant, in his text, rejects the cart as what prevents people from using their own reason. To have the courage to use your own reason means precisely to learn to walk without the help of the cart. Foucault’s analysis will show, however, that Kant’s enlightened subject nevertheless remains tied to the cart.

Kant’s definition of the Enlightenment thus appears to coincide with a rejection of a technical object. To become enlightened means to become independent from technical supplements. It means for the human being to “finally learn to walk alone.”⁴⁵ Even though the Enlightenment is usually associated with the exponential increase of technological developments, Kant’s definition of Enlightenment appears to install a separation between human beings and technology. It is a definition of Enlightenment that is suspicious of the relation of technological development to freedom.⁴⁶ This suspicion is echoed in Foucault’s essay, which partly aims to show that “the relations between the growth of capabilities and the growth of autonomy are not as simple as the eighteenth century may have believed”:

And we have been able to see [Foucault writes] what forms of power relation were conveyed by various technologies (whether we are speaking of productions with economic aims, or institutions whose goal is social regulation, or of techniques of communication): disciplines, both collective and individual, procedures of normalization exercised in the name of the power of the state, demands of society or of population zones, are examples. What is at stake then, is this: How can the growth of capabilities be disconnected from the intensification of power relations?⁴⁷

In this passage, Enlightenment technology is closely associated with power. It operates in the service of collective and individual discipline. In this sense, it prevents the autonomy (that the Enlightenment so prides itself on) from coming about.

⁴³ Kant, 29-30.

⁴⁴ Foucault, *Gouvernement*, 28.

⁴⁵ Kant, 30.

⁴⁶ Many have commented on Kant’s suspicion of technology. See, for example: R.L. Rutsky, “The Spirit of Utopia and the Birth of the Cinematic Machine,” in R.L. Rutsky, *High Technè: Art and Technology from the Machine Aesthetic to the Posthuman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 23-47.

⁴⁷ Foucault, “Enlightenment,” 116.

One should note, however, that the key question to which this insight leads is not a rejection of technology. Foucault asks, rather, how the growth of Enlightenment technologies could be disconnected from the intensification of power relations. One could read this as a version of the genealogical question, formulated elsewhere in the essay, about “the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think”: how could Enlightenment technologies be used otherwise?

In this, Foucault’s engagement with the particular problem of Enlightenment technologies appears to differ fundamentally from that of one of his students, Giorgio Agamben. Although they are not the obvious inter-texts for Agamben’s essay, “What is an Apparatus?” clearly refers to both Kant and Foucault’s essays on the Enlightenment. Foucault is, as always, one of the main interlocutors in Agamben’s text; but Agamben focuses on the dark side of Foucault’s analyses rather than on his late work on the aesthetico-ethical techniques of the self. When Agamben speaks towards the very end of his essay of how “the harmless citizen of postindustrial democracies... readily does everything that he is asked to, inasmuch as he leaves his everyday gestures and his health, his amusements and his occupations, his diet and his desires, to be commanded and controlled in the smallest detail by apparatuses,”⁴⁸ it is not only Foucault and his discussion of governmentality and biopolitics that resonates here. One is also reminded of the second paragraph of Kant’s essay on the Enlightenment, where Kant criticizes human beings who do not have the courage “to be of age”: “If I have a book which understands for me, a pastor who has a conscience for me, a physician who decides my diet, and so forth, I need not trouble myself. I need not think, if I can only pay—others will readily undertake the irksome work for me.”⁴⁹ The echoes of Kant in Agamben’s essay allow one to understand that Agamben is also engaging with the Enlightenment in “What is an Apparatus?” Like Kant, he is calling for an emancipation; even more explicitly than in Kant, the emancipation that Agamben has in mind is an emancipation from apparatuses—from the apparatuses that command and control “in the smallest detail” the lives of human beings.

In this loaded context, Agamben proposes a distinction between two major classes: “living beings” on the one hand, and “apparatuses” on the other. In addition, he distinguishes a third class, which is produced in the power struggle between living beings and apparatuses: “subjects.”⁵⁰ Agamben’s vision of life’s relation to technology is one of a perpetual war between living beings and apparatuses. Foucault’s question: “how can the growth of capabilities be disconnected from the intensification of power relations?” thus appears to become tainted in Agamben by the specter of blind rejection.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Giorgio Agamben, “What is an Apparatus?” in *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, trans. by David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 22-23.

⁴⁹ Kant, 29.

⁵⁰ Agamben, “Apparatus,” 14.

⁵¹ Of course, one might argue that Agamben’s distinction is ultimately merely analytical, and does not reflect the nuances of his thought on technology. As Anne Sauvagnargues remarked in response to a conference presentation I gave on Agamben and Simondon, Agamben’s ultimate interest might simply be modes of subjectivation. Although this point is well taken, it does not adduce the *tone* of Agamben’s essay, which is one of struggle and conflict between human beings and machines. For my text on Agamben and Simondon, see Arne De Boever, “Agamben et Simondon: Ontologie, technologie, et politique,” trans. Jean-Hugues Bar-

However, although Agamben explicitly says that he is not interested in “another use” of technology,⁵² “blind rejection” does not appear to describe his position correctly either. Somewhat enigmatically, the closing pages of the essay reveal him to be calling for a “profanation” of apparatuses, meaning a restoration of apparatuses to their “common use.”⁵³ In this sense, profanation would function as a “counter-apparatus”⁵⁴; a technique or technology *against* technologies that would halt the destructive progression of modern Enlightenment technologies. It would end the “telecracy” that Stiegler also warns against. Whereas apparatuses have become part and parcel of what Agamben calls the theological economy of government—a division of power that intends to saturate the entire field of life with the violence of the law—our task is to liberate apparatuses from this arrangement and restore them to their common use. As to what this might mean, exactly, with respect to an apparatus such as the cell phone, which Agamben comes close to rejecting in his essay, remains vague. And it precisely on this account that Stiegler attempts to push Agamben further. But what are the realms included in Agamben’s work in which the counter-apparatus of profanation might be witnessed in action? What might be the link that is included (and lies occluded) in Agamben’s work between the profanation that Agamben is calling for and what Foucault in his late work calls the “art of the self”?

This question might ultimately not be all that hard to answer. One realm of technical production in which such profanation becomes possible is art. In the opening chapter of his first book titled *The Man Without Content*, Agamben calls for a notion of the aesthetic that would do justice to the human being’s technical capacities, specifically the human being’s uncanny “ability to produce, to bring a thing from nonbeing into being.”⁵⁵ Such an understanding of the aesthetic would reconsider art from the position of the creator (rather than from the position of the spectator from where Kant considers it in his *Critique of Judgment*) and return it to its Ancient, political vocation: to pose a danger to the *polis*, to the city-state. In its technical dimension, art is something profoundly dangerous. The tragedy of our time is that art has lost this dimension, and has turned into something that is “merely interesting”; it is “[o]nly because art has left the sphere of *interest* to become merely *interesting*” that “we welcome it so warmly.”⁵⁶ Aware of the danger that art poses to the city, Plato instead bans it from his ideal republic. A terrifying judgment, at first sight; but at least Plato took art seriously. Agamben theorizes art in the opening chapter of his book as “the most uncanny thing,” as a capacity that inspires “divine terror” because it reveals human beings’ essential capacities for production, for “divine” creation and destruction.⁵⁷

In his work on the care of the self, Foucault as well appears to maintain a positive connection between art (“*technè*”) and life (“*bios*”) as a way for the subject to become the

thélémy, *Cahiers Simondon*, no. 2 (2010), 117-128.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, trans. by Georgia Albert (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

author of her or his own life, to cultivate her or his own existence. It is here that the connection between biological and psychic life and technics and technology can begin to move from the horrific nightmare of biopolitics and biotechnology (instantiated in the imagination of film directors such as David Cronenberg, for example), to the more positive promise of biopower and biotechnics. The latter can be found not just in Foucault's work on the care of the self but also in the visionary volume titled *Incorporations* edited by Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter, in more recent publications such as William Connolly or Catherine Malabou's books on the brain (titled *Neuropolitics* and *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*), or even in cinematic explorations of the figure of the samurai in films by Akira Kurosawa (*Seven Samurai*), Jim Jarmusch (*Ghost Dog*), or Quentin Tarantino (*Kill Bill*).⁵⁸ Today, and in line with both Foucault and Agamben's suggestions, it is the new interest in bioart that appears to be one of the most promising realms for such a new discussion of techniques of life. It would seem appropriate, then, to explore in the final section of this essay, the ways in which a work of art contributes to the theoretical debates with which I have engaged, specifically with the dramatic relations between Kant, Foucault, and Agamben that this essay has uncovered.

The Allegory of the Cage

During the Fall 2009 semester, a few weeks before I was set to teach a cluster of texts including Kant and Foucault's essays on the Enlightenment, as well as Agamben's essay "What is an Apparatus?", I came across a minimalist art installation at the California Institute of the Arts that seemed to capture not just something about each of these three texts, but also about their dramatic relation.⁵⁹ The installation consisted of a rectangular cage that was open in the back but set up against a wall. The front of the cage and the right side of the cage were closed with chicken wire. Although the cage was locked in its top right corner, the wire in the bottom left corner was peeled up, suggesting the possibility of a way in or out. Inside the cage, a pink neon light stood slanted against the left wall of the cage. Against the right side, there was a small mirror reflecting (depending on the viewer's position) either the pink light on the opposite side of the cage, or the chicken wire and the space outside the cage. Resting on top of the cage was a white neon light. It turned out that this was a work by Photography and Media student Lee Perillo, who was at that time taking my BFA upper-level philosophy course titled "What is Biopolitics?" Perillo's work was part of a group show on "queer art."

Perhaps because I had the Enlightenment on my mind, this work made instant sense to me within the constellation of essays about the Enlightenment that I have been discussing. Couldn't one think of the pink light inside the cage as Kant? Kant's answer to the question "What is Enlightenment?" revolves around two mottos. The first is "Sapere aude!" "Have the courage to use your own reason!"⁶⁰ For Kant, to become enlightened means to come "of age": it means to move from being a minor, who can only walk with the help of a frame, to being a

⁵⁸ On this point, see George Collins' contribution on the figure of the samurai to the study group on the "Techniques de soi" organized by *Ars Industrialis*, available at <http://www.arsindustrialis.org/petite-annonce-pour-un-sous-groupe-de-travail-sur-les-cultures-de-soi>.

⁵⁹ A photograph of the installation is shown on the cover of this issue of *Foucault Studies*.

⁶⁰ Kant, 29.

major, to walking “alone.”⁶¹ Kant’s second motto, however, is: “Argue as much as you will, and about what you will, but obey!”⁶² It is this second motto—argue, *but obey*—that seemed to justify Kant’s position inside the cage.

Although Kant’s text is clearly about a way out—“Enlightenment is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage”⁶³—that way out comes with the necessary limitation of obedience (the cage). The mirror standing against the right wall of the cage reflects this truth back to Kant. It is for this reason that Foucault, at the beginning of his text about Kant’s essay, can (no doubt partly as a joke) refer to Kant’s essay as “a minor text, perhaps”⁶⁴: from where Foucault is standing, it appears that Kant’s enlightenment is not entirely enlightened yet. Kant’s own text had not fully completed the process of “becoming major.” Foucault’s reference to Kant’s text as a “minor” text can be read as a joke, given the emphasis that Kant puts on becoming major, “of age.” Enlightenment is, for Kant, about growing up, about turning from a minor into someone who can walk and think for her- or himself. And so Foucault sets out to “finish” this task—a completion that in Foucault’s essay never quite takes place, as I have already discussed above. In Perillo’s work, the white light could thus be said to represent Foucault, or Foucault’s understanding of the Enlightenment, which has worked its way out of the cage.

Nevertheless, even Foucault’s Enlightenment is not entirely freed of the cage. The white neon light rests on top of the cage; it is supported by it. This relation between the white light and the cage appears to draw into question the “completion” that Foucault’s text at first sight might appear to provide. And indeed, the point of Foucault’s essay appears to be that the process of Enlightenment might never be completed. It involves, rather, a “patient labor giving form to our impatience for liberty.”⁶⁵ In other words, Enlightenment is not a permanent state that can be achieved, but the very movement from inside the cage (the pink light) to outside the cage (the white light) that Perillo’s work captures. It involves, in other words, a patient work upon oneself—a turning back upon oneself and one’s limitations from a perspective that is gained through one’s labor for freedom. Might this not be why the titles of both Kant and Foucault’s essays take the form of a question? Might this not explain why Foucault’s essay exists in many different versions, all of them exploring the same question from slightly different angles, with slightly different concerns?⁶⁶ As the title of my essay suggests, this understanding of Enlightenment also recalls Plato’s dialectic: the point of Plato’s allegory of the cave is not simply to move outside of the cave and into the realm of the ideas, where one is blinded by the sun; it is, rather, to return back into the cave after one has grasped the ideas, and to try to explain them to those who can see only shadows.⁶⁷ There is thus an emphatically pedagogical dimension to Plato’s allegory, as Stiegler in his reading of the Kant-

⁶¹ Kant, 29-30.

⁶² Kant, 31.

⁶³ Kant, 29.

⁶⁴ Foucault, “Enlightenment,” 97.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁶⁶ See Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*.

⁶⁷ See Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 532a-533a.

Foucault-Agamben constellation has suggested.⁶⁸ Perillo is staging a veritable allegory of the cage here.

Perillo's joke, of course, is that Kant is represented by the pink, "queer" (slanted) light and Foucault by the white, "straight" light. Given that the work was part of a "queer art" group show, the play with colors is no doubt significant. By putting the pink light inside the cage, the artist might want to evoke the ways in which queer identity is, as queer identity, still very much caught up in the normativizing constrictions that a more radical, a more enlightened, queerness might instead aspire to subvert. To be identifiably pink might ultimately be no more queer than to be identifiably straight. A radical politics of queerness would, perhaps, undermine these identitarian constructions and draw out, instead, a more universal, more enlightened, humanity.⁶⁹ At the same time, however, the artist's choice of the color white to represent this enlightened humanity that has worked its way out of the cage draws into question the use of the color "white" to represent this ideal. To what extent is humanity still caught up in the moralizing color scheme—darkness is bad, sunlight is good—within which Plato's allegory of the cave already operated? It might be, and here is where the work again captures the spirit of Foucault's "What is Enlightenment?", that the white light—which is still supported by the cage—might need to do some further work on itself. It might be that its whiteness is not quite as ideal as one might have assumed.

Finally, and now we come to Agamben's essay, there is the technical dimension of Perillo's work. Perillo's minimalist installation makes no attempt to hide the technologies on which it depends: the work needs to be set up near a power outlet, and it leaves clearly visible the electric cables connecting the lights to the outlets. Whatever thought the work enables, thus explicitly depends on the support of technology. Technology is not Perillo's enemy. Instead, the artist mobilizes it within the context of a radical Enlightenment project—a project that goes beyond Kant and stages the dramatic relation of Kant to Foucault.

Perhaps Perillo's work thus provides us with an example of what Agamben calls the profanation of the counter-apparatus. Its *bricolage*-like assembly of the frame of the cage, the chicken wire, the neon lights, and the lock on the cage, recalls Agamben's memorable description, in a chapter from *State of Exception*, of a day when humanity "will play with law just as children play with disused objects: not in order to restore them to their canonical use but to free them from it for good."⁷⁰ This practice is described by Agamben not as a destruction but as a "deactivation" or rendering "inoperative."⁷¹ It is perhaps in this "inoperativity," this "worklessness," that the link between the profanation of the counter-apparatus and Foucault's understanding of Enlightenment—marked by their shared interest in potentiality—becomes most clear. For as I remarked in a footnote earlier on, one should not confuse Foucault's theorization of Enlightenment as a technique of attending to oneself with the "Just Do It" imperative that governs contemporary culture. Instead, both Foucault's theorization of

⁶⁸ See Bernard Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, trans. Stephen Barker (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2010), from Chapter Seven onwards.

⁶⁹ See Michael Warner, *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁷⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 64.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Enlightenment and Agamben's theorization of profanation challenge such blind actualization by insisting on a potentiality that precedes any actuality and marks actuality's capacity of being otherwise—what I have called in the second section of this essay, its contingency. It is this powerful truth that a philosophy of technics and technology, of human beings' uncanny capacity to bring something from nonbeing into being, *also* entails.

In Perillo's artwork, the incapacitating technology of the cage thus becomes the capacitating—understood here in the sense of potentializing—component of the work of art, enclosing the slanted, pink light representing Kant's Enlightenment, and supporting the straight, white light of Foucault's Enlightenment. As a work of profanation, it liberates the cage from being an actualizing technology of government, turning it into a dramatic, playful staging of Kant, Foucault, and Agamben's answers to the question "What is Enlightenment?"

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