

Idling the Apparatus*

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Abstract

This article will undertake a threefold analysis to investigate a specific problematic concerning the construction of the contemporary subject which it will term, following Heidegger, the captivation of the subject. This captivation, by the various operative apparatuses of subjectification, consists today in the novel delimitation of *impotential*: the capacity not-to, the idleness of existence. Tracing first this concept of captivation in relation to the animal in Agamben and Heidegger and discussing how it functions, it will then discuss the specific captivation of impotential in the contemporary era, related as this is to issues on boredom and our being-in-the-world, before concluding with an account of the idleness of impotential and the possible deactivation (if idleness be restituted to existence) of the ceaselessness of the modern subject.

Keywords: Apparatus, Subjectification, Idleness, Impotential, Boredom.

L'articolo si propone di sviluppare una triplice analisi per indagare una specifica problematica relativa alla costruzione del soggetto contemporaneo, che verrà qui denominata, rifacendosi a Heidegger, la captivazione del soggetto. Questa captivazione, operata dai diversi apparati di soggettivazione, oggi consiste nella nuova cattura e delimitazione dell'impotenza: la potenza di non e l'inoperosità dell'esistenza.

Delineando in primo luogo il concetto di captivazione in relazione all'animale in Agamben e in Heidegger, e analizzando il funzionamento di tale cattura, l'articolo passerà quindi a esaminare la specifica captivazione dell'impotenza nell'epoca contemporanea, in relazione al concetto di noia e del nostro essere-nel-mondo. Nelle conclusioni ci si soffermerà sull'inoperosità dell'impotenza e della possibile disattivazione (qualora tale inoperosità venga restituita all'esistenza) dell'incessante operosità del soggetto moderno.

Parole chiave: apparato, soggettivazione, inoperosità, impotenza, noia.

1. Hook

The specific mode of analysis into the processes of subjectification begun by Foucault, and that in recent years has been developed significantly by Giorgio Agamben – one need only recognise how a highly original reading of *ēthos* and use-of-self as form-of-life is deployed

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from *Language and Death* to *The Use of Bodies* – is far from concluded. This is not least of all owing to the rampant, unregulated technologies, discourses, and networks which are increasingly constituting a new the domain of the everyday without recognition, and which thus demand attention specifically as concerns the new modes of subjectification that they render operative. As a consequence of this reconstitution, the subject whose outside Foucault sought, and that Agamben alike seeks to think – the machinations of which both their studies attempt to stall – has been seemingly triumphantly installed as a permanent fixture by these contemporary apparatuses. In tandem with thinkers such as Debord, Baudrillard, Virilio, Kittler, Crary, Han, and, Berardi, Agamben's critique of technological apparatuses (whose guiding insight, despite these influences, might well remain Heidegger's 'the essence of technology is by no means anything technological')¹ can yet be positioned as a novel contribution to these debates for the precise reason that in his work the question of the technological is inseparable not only from the question of use-of-self (here, Virno's work is also exemplary)², but of this use as an inoperative, idle one which, as we will argue, defines the human's dimension of freedom³.

In what follows, in order to investigate this dimension alongside the functioning of contemporary apparatuses of subjectification, we will start by examining the concept of "captivation" in the work of Heidegger and Agamben as it relates to the human/animal distinction, to locate in captivity the innovative core of the apparatus. Then, moving to a discussion of that which is captivated by the apparatus, i.e., impotential, we will consider the precise structure of world that the apparatus, in closing impotential, seals off. We will conclude with a discussion of the idleness of impotential to posit that the unique capacity that belongs to the exercise of impotential is to (potentially) idle the very apparatus of the subject produced. Throughout, we will critically deploy Agamben's analysis of captivity and his work on impotential to offer an account of idleness as the *ēthos* of the one whose existence is their essence – whose free use-of-self is no use at all.

2. Captivated⁴

To begin, in his essay *What Is an Apparatus?* Giorgio Agamben argues that an apparatus is «literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept,

¹ M. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, Eng. trans. William Lovitt, Harper & Row, New York 1977, p. 4.

² P. Virno, *The Idea of World: Public Intellect and Use of Life*, Eng. trans. Lorenzo Chiesa, Seagull Books, London 2022.

³ G. Agamben, *Potentialities*, Eng. trans. and ed. by D. Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1999, p. 183.

⁴ Throughout, we will use a series of closely related words it is worth clarifying before we proceed. The passive noun "captivation" will be used as a technical term to denote not just the subject always-already being caught in a network of apparatuses (to the extent that the subject *qua* subject cannot be thought of outside of these), but the novel state of *being unable not to act* which defines the specific subjectification of contemporary apparatuses. The adjective "captivated" will refer to precisely this state, in that a subject captivated is a subject shut off from their impotential; the noun "capture" will refer, when appropriate, to the operation that the apparatus performs in the sense Agamben understands it, i.e., as subjectification and de-subjectification; and, finally, the noun "captured" will be used either only when quoting Agamben directly, as a synonym to "captivation," or early on in the article in the present passive form to describe the functioning of the apparatus. Both latter instances will occur without entailing the sense of the captivity of impotential as will subsequently be developed.

model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings».⁵

Indeed, throughout the essay Agamben will do no less than divide the experienceable world into two groups: living beings (or substances) on the one hand, and «apparatuses in which living beings are incessantly captured» on the other⁶. For Agamben, the principal function of the apparatus consists in subjectification and desubjectification: apparatuses construct subjects, provide them with a nominal consistency insofar as they interpellate them with their very functioning⁷, and yet also dissolve these constructions. That which the apparatus acts upon is brought into existence precisely through the apparatus' action: it is captured, subjectified. Apparatuses today, however (that is, in 2006 when the essay was published, twenty years prior to today's absolute acceleration of the apparatus), increasingly function via desubjectification.⁸ They provide no means for the opening of new modes of subjectification, they simply embed one further in the governmental logic of the structuration of indifference.⁹ Agamben's argument is therefore that subjectification occurs through the operative processes of management and governance, i.e., the orientation and determination of the subject within a given field of gestures, thoughts, and actions, whose function is to codify and operationalise the living being. The unlimited proliferation of apparatuses in the contemporary era signals a proliferation of the modes of subjectification-as-desubjectification and the variety and excessive nature of the different subjectivities available points increasingly to the indistinguishability of the subject produced from the apparatus which produces it. As Agamben notes of the «cellular telephone», which as of his date of writing was a year before the fateful introduction of Apple's first iPhone, «he who lets himself be captured by the “cellular telephone” apparatus – whatever the intensity of the desire that has driven him – cannot acquire a new subjectivity, but only a number through which he can, eventually, be controlled»¹⁰.

Clearly, then, critical attention to the dimension cultivated by apparatuses which Agamben hints at in his essay is essential to any analysis of modern subjectivity, i.e., the regulated production of indifference that we are here arguing has attained far more profound heights in recent years, such that the indifference of the telephone user or television spectator has been metamorphosed into a near-total captivation of impotential – the very freedom to not act, the idleness of which is freedom's core. Impotential (*adynamia*), as the gesture which both stalls and sits at the heart of Aristotle's metaphysics of *dynamis* and *energia*, and which is the non-force or impossibility contained in all force or possibility – the strict fragmentation and undoing of force or actuality, its impossibility not as the blockade to its successful fruition but as its unworking – is freedom as a life not consigned to purposive, ceaseless activity, the heart of which is idleness: a mode of living divested of the why or the goal and that is its own unworking of activity *as such*. It is precisely this impotential that the apparatus captivates, and which the restitution of idleness might undo.

⁵ G. Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, Eng. trans. by D. Kishik and S. Pedatella, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2009, p. 14.

⁶ Ivi, p. 13.

⁷ Ivi, p. 11.

⁸ Ivi, p. 20.

⁹ Ivi, p. 21.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

Furthermore, in a gesture which will come to form a cornerstone of his work on autoconstitution in *The Use of Bodies*,¹¹ with the nexus subjectification-desubjectification and the capture by the apparatus, Agamben effaces the category distinction between the substance of the subject and the place and object of its subjectification¹², the apparatus instead enacting the capture and production of the subject (this effacement hinting also at its undoing). Apparatuses capture beings and that capturing entails the programmatic production and installation of a function as its response, the figure of which is the subject. To capture the subject in the manner of the apparatus does not mean to latch on to it, to grasp it in its solid pre-existence – as though the apparatus were a garment cloaking the subject – but is to produce the subject in the moment of being caught. Less an overt mode of domination, as though it were an external power forced upon a subject – as in more classical, sovereign paradigms of power the likes of which Foucault stresses any analytic of power must abandon¹³ – the subtle power of the apparatus lies in its distance from any apparent constraint. As a mode of subjectification (and de-subjectification), the apparatus operates as a directed use of the self: an immanent mode of self-governance and self-management which produces the subject through its functioning. Yet still this alone does not strike at the novelty of contemporary apparatuses of subjectification, the specificity of the operation of which we are here, drawing on Heidegger, calling “captivation.”

Like the capture, captivation does not simply produce a neutral subject in opposition to the apparatus, as though this were a renewed instance of the subject-object distinction. But unlike the capture, the mode of subjectification operative in captivation entails, through the strict codification of behaviours and functions pre-inscribed into the apparatus, the captivation of the human’s innermost impotential – to borrow Hölderlin’s phrase, the free use of the proper, the domain of use and exercise of oneself as the destitution of use and activity *as such* – which, in captivation, is blocked off according to precisely those behaviours determined by the apparatus. Put differently – and herein lies the crux of our concern – the metaphysical problem of *ousia*, which for the object goes by the way of commodity fetishism under late-stage capitalism and for the subject by the way of various logics of essentialism, is here translated into the domain of political ontology – a new essence of the human is conceived, instantiated, and iterated with the use of the apparatus, as well as are new and more stringent modes of subjectification (the captivation of impotential: the capacity for idleness and the capacity not-to that is most proper to the human) being developed, such that this capacity is withdrawn, exiled by the regime of the apparatus.

What Agamben termed the production of desubjectification finds its accelerated corollary here: a mode of subjectivity in which the capacity to refuse, the capacity to undo all capacity, has been evacuated from the subject insofar as, captivated by the apparatus, the subject can only *react*. In the contemporary moment, with subjectification and desubjectification, the apparatus captivates the zone of potentiality and organises the behaviours of the one captivated according to the function and requirements of the apparatus (just as in commodity fetishism what is caught is the possibility for alternative uses of objects and things outside their given function), and what is most properly captivated, as the examples of the telephone user and television spectator hint at, is the

¹¹ G. Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, Eng. trans. by A. Kotsko, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2016, p. 29.

¹² G. Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?*, cit., p. 14.

¹³ M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1927-1977*, Eng. trans. by C. Gordon, L. Marshall, J. Mepham, K. Soper, ed. by C. Gordon, Pantheon Books, New York 1980, p. 92.

impotential, the idleness, that is precisely potentiality's inoperative origin and core.¹⁴ The potential to not act, the potential to refuse all action and reaction alike, becomes only the impossibility of not acting in the way already defined by the apparatus. Once captivated, the apparatus determines the scope and perimeters of response, and the possible deactivation of this endless activity, whilst thus captivated, appears foreclosed. Potentiality, determined most profoundly by impotential, is shut off by the apparatus which relentlessly demands total absorption and total activity. Anticipating our analysis in the following section, we might point to social media usage as an example of such a captivation: the subject who scrolls endlessly through a feed of information voided of content is a subject captivated by an apparatus the most extreme consequence of which is that one cannot seem to refuse the injunction to scroll. One is too impotent to do anything but react.

Turning now to a paradigmatic apparatus for Agamben, the complex operation of the "anthropological machine",¹⁵ or the process of anthropogenesis,¹⁶ we can articulate both how this captivation is ontological in a strict sense and how it concerns the human/animal distinction. For Agamben's situating of anthropogenesis – the becoming-human of the living being – along a field that stretches between «ultrahistory and history»¹⁷ is to situate this process as akin to what Heidegger called, despite his later abandonment of the term, fundamental ontology.¹⁸ Anthropogenesis, like ultrahistory and fundamental ontology, refers not to a specifiable, historical event, any more than Heidegger's fundamental ontology refers to a deeper, more ontologically secure ontology than the previously sought ones. They are rather the very horizons within which anything like the human, history, or the world, might be thought.

In the specific case of anthropogenesis, the anthropological machine is that apparatus which has always already determined the scission between the human and the animal. As Agamben writes, «ontology is in every sense the fundamental operation in which anthropogenesis, the becoming human of the living being, is realized»¹⁹ Yet what makes this machine ontological is the grasping and captivation of "a" world at stake within this operation – the very openness of the Open is circumscribed by the conditions of this ontological gesture. Every political or ethical question, insofar as they pertain to the Open, the Clearing of being within which beings come to be and from which they withdraw,²⁰ are therefore nothing other than modes of determining the very openness of "a" world and as such are they properly ontological questions. Thus it is not insignificant that it is precisely the word "captivation" which Heidegger uses to describe the relationship between the animal and its disinhibitors in his lecture series *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, considering which will here enable us to articulate the novel captivation of the human, the specific perimeters of subjectification and desubjectification performed by the apparatus²¹,

¹⁴ G. Agamben, *Potentialities*, cit., p. 183.

¹⁵ G. Agamben, *The Open*, Eng. trans. by K. Attell, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2004, p. 35.

¹⁶ Ivi, p. 79.

¹⁷ G. Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath*, Eng. trans. by A. Kotsko, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2011, p. 11.

¹⁸ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Eng. trans. by J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford 1962, p. 34.

¹⁹ G. Agamben, *The Open*, cit., p. 79.

²⁰ M. Heidegger, Eng. trans. by J. Stambaugh, Harper & Row, New York 1972, p. 65.

²¹ That there is a political question underlying Heidegger's work on the animal and the human does not go unnoticed here, indeed *qua* world the political and the ethical are ontologically fundamental. However, as the purpose of this article is not to directly comment on either Heidegger, or Agamben's, analysis, but rather

for his doing so, like with Agamben's effacement of the distinction between the subject and its subjectification, is another hint at the deactivation of this – and the – apparatus.

Following a dense and intricate line of questioning, Heidegger contends that the animal is captivated, absorbed in its disinhibitors – the limited encirclement of its world – in a manner that forecloses the selfhood specific to the human, and that this defines what he calls the poverty of their world. In Heidegger's analysis, no comportment belongs to the animal, because it is poor fundamentally for being locked out of the hermeneutical circle of fundamental ontology, the circular structure of the "as"²². What is withheld from the animal, in other words, is its «*having every apprehending of something as something*»²³. Absorbed wholly by that which captivates it, the animal does, however, still exhibit its own form of openness, despite its absorption – an openness that is strictly determined and delimited and which, in a profound sense, *is* the life of the animal. Without separation, Heidegger's contention is that, contrary to a biological definition of life according to vital functions, «*life is nothing but the animal's encircling itself and struggling with its encircling ring*»²⁴. Thus the animal, unlike the stone, has that which disinhibits it – it displays «a not-having of world in the having of openness for whatever disinhibits»²⁵ – and it is this particular having which circumscribes its life.

That the "poverty" of the animal's world is privative is the clearest indication that what such captivation entails is the captivation of impotential, the same captivation which the contemporary apparatus performs on the human with ever renewed success. What the animal is deprived of is this very self-same relation which if it possessed, if it were granted to the essence of the animal, might compel us to assert that indeed the animal is free – the relation to *suspending ability*, to withholding activity in idleness. When captivated, the animal (or the human, the very name of which and decision to isolate is already an originary mode of captivation, the name being itself perhaps the originary captivation) can neither act nor be as a comportment, for all that is open to it is routine behaviour or automatic response to stimuli. Blocked off from the world proper, the animal is blocked off from, its stunning captivation closes to it, the domain of impotential, a domain which nevertheless must belong to it insofar as problematising the event of anthropogenesis means problematising the exclusion from the animal's world this capacity at all for the idle, free use of impotential.

If we now quote Agamben's discussion of the term captivation from *The Open*, our specific problematic emerges with startling clarity:

The mode of being proper to the animal, which defines its relation with the disinhibitor, is captivation [*Benommenheit*]. Here Heidegger, with a repeated etymological figure, puts into play the relationship among the terms *benommen* (captivated, stunned, but also taken away, blocked), *eingenommen* (taken in, absorbed), and *Benehmen* (behaviour), which all refer back to the verb *nehmen*, to take (from the Indo-European root **nem*, which means to distribute, to allot, to assign). Insofar

use them as a springboard for thinking the situation of the contemporary subject, I will not here pursue a directly critical line of questioning. Such work has already been successfully undertaken by Derrida, Ewgen, Calarco, Elden, amongst others.

²² M. Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Eng. trans. by W. McNeill and N. Walker, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1995, p. 274.

²³ Ivi, p. 247.

²⁴ Ivi, p. 257.

²⁵ Ivi, p. 270.

as it is essentially captivated and wholly absorbed in its own disinhibitor, the animal cannot truly act [*handeln*] or comport itself [*sich verhalten*] in relation to it: it can only behave [*sich benehmen*].²⁶

What is at stake in the concept of captivation, whether that of the animal by its disinhibitors or the human by the apparatus, *is nothing less than the very determination of world and life*. Agamben's analysis directly illuminates that involved in this determination is what we are understanding as the dimension of freedom, irrespective of whether that be human or animal (if this distinction holds): the freedom which is the capacity for the free use of the proper. Unequivocally, the question of captivation – the capacity to act or comport oneself – *is the question of freedom*, freedom as being «*capable of one's own impotentiality*, to be in relation to one's own privation»²⁷, because the essence of captivation is to foreclose free use, to foreclose the idleness that is the core of all activity.

When all that is possible is behaviour or reaction, what is sealed off is the dimension of activity which can paradoxically only be understood as impotential, a use or activity which is not an active use at all, but an inoperative, idle one, and it is this useless use that constitutes freedom. The contemporary subject has been captivated, subjectified as one desubjectified, entirely indifferent and caught in the endless loop of the modern apparatus, and it is this status that must be idled if the dimension of freedom is ever to be restituted to it, if Prometheus' wound is ever to close²⁸ and Poseidon ever to finally explore the oceans.²⁹ To deactivate an originary apparatus of subjectification such as the anthropological machine would thus not only be to restore to the figure of the human or the animal their idle impotential, but would be akin to deactivating the very scission continually distinguishing the human and from the animal, to the extent that both, in their newfound indistinction, would be free precisely in the idle exposure of their living.

That Heidegger should have maintained the position regarding the animal explicated above is more surprising than might at first appear. Indeed, arguably his references to Angelus Silesius in *The Principle of Reason* constitute one of the most profound expressions of the idleness of existence, and the centrality of impotential, that is in no way privileged to Dasein; at stake in the 'rose without why'³⁰ from verses 289 of Silesius is nothing but play, play in which the "because" 'withers away'³¹, and what is at stake is essence as life. A life loosed from the why is one loosed from the grasp of the apparatus, and one whose only law is idleness. An idleness, that is, which the imperatives of the modern apparatuses of subjectivisation and anthropogenesis cannot avow.

3. Impotence

It is within the context of what Heidegger called "profound boredom" that the captivation of impotential, the foreclosing of the hermeneutical "as-structure" of Dasein, can best be

²⁶ G. Agamben, *The Open*, cit., p. 52.

²⁷ G. Agamben, *Potentialities*, cit., p. 183.

²⁸ F. Kafka, 'Prometheus,' in *The Complete Stories*, Eng. trans. by W. and E. Muir, Schocken Books, New York 1995, p. 432.

²⁹ F. Kafka, 'Poseidon,' in *The Complete Stories*, Eng. trans. by T. and J. Stern, Schocken Books, New York 1995, pp. 434-435.

³⁰ M. Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, Eng. trans. by Reginald Lily, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1991, p. 35.

³¹ Ivi, p. 113.

located. Here, the longwhiling of boredom, Dasein's entrancement in «the time beyond [...] flowing and its standing, the time which in each case Dasein itself as a whole is»³², can be seen as the absolute inverse of the subject's captivation by the apparatus. For boredom reveals to Dasein the openness which belongs essentially to it as world-forming, but it does so as the suspension of the concrete possibilities available to Dasein in any instance – our unwillingness to read the book we have brought with us whilst waiting for a train, or our constant checking of our watch to yet again tell the time, none of which though satisfy us and are indeed those very possibilities for action that we are indifferent to when bored, when we are left empty by the world. This refusal of beings in their totality which boredom reveals is simultaneously, however, the very call to Dasein's originary possibilisation,³³ «*the singular extremity of whatever originally makes possible*»,³⁴ which is «*left unexploited*»³⁵ when things are boring for one.

This “originary possibilisation” that Heidegger speaks of is, for Agamben, none other than the idleness of impotential which belongs to Dasein as «the being which exists in the form of potentiality-for-being»,³⁶ the inoperative core of which is this «*being able not to*»³⁷ that profound boredom calls us to. Thus the subject's capture by the apparatus, and the captivation most fundamentally of impotential, is the captivation of the free clearing a shining light of which is the human's halo. That which is left unexploited, unutilised, in originary possibilisation is the idleness of the human, which is not a being-bereft of the active comportment of Dasein but rather the very essence of being-the-there – neither activity nor passivity, a manner of existing without function or purpose, simply an exposition of being in the there we let come to light.

As such, our inability for boredom today is a consequence, fundamentally, of contemporary apparatuses – smart phones, social media applications, cat videos and endless notifications – operating through a sheer overload of information and constant demand for attention. By taking up every concrete possibility, they conceal and close off the very originary possibilisation revealed in boredom. When using a smartphone (or, perhaps more aptly, when being used by one), the totality of beings is withdrawn by the apparatus' absolute captivation of one's every concrete possibility, and so too is the idleness uniquely left open by boredom's suspension of every such concrete possibility. With this profound “impotence,” nothing and everything is left unexploited; one is totally absorbed and productive, and yet the dimension of freedom which is the free use of the proper, the capacity for which requires that precise openness of impotential, or the use of uselessness, is stunned shut.

The tragic trajectory of the modern subject is hence to inhabit a world which promises to be everything that it might desire and all increasingly with as little effort as imaginable, except the ever so small, barely perceptible act of something like tapping a screen, an act seemingly so minor as to have all but apparently escaped the notice of those who perform it. With these «manipulations of relations of forces»³⁸ do we assume the properly comical dimension of this tragedy, the truth of the subject: its impotential

³² M. Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, cit., p. 147.

³³ Ivi, pp. 143-44.

³⁴ Ivi, p. 144.

³⁵ Ivi, p. 141.

³⁶ G. Agamben, *The Open*, cit., p. 67.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1927-1977*, cit., p. 196.

captivated by the apparatus, it is radically “impotent” in its endlessly productive yet meaningless activity. Unable to do anything but continually and senselessly re-act in the precise, strategic manner determined by the apparatus, it is not animals we resemble, but the machinic apparatuses that we surround ourselves with, that are subjectifying the subject precisely as desubjectification and which can do nothing except function. Indeed, as Berardi so incisively puts it, «impotence is the present condition of cognitive workers, entangled in the neurototalitarian process of self-construction within the automaton.»³⁹ Incapable of navigating the absolute speed of the hyperconnected world of global capital, we are entirely submitted to the logic of impotent activity.⁴⁰ Activity can thus only truly be called so if it contains the dimension of impotential, the capacity to not act. The machine, and the one captivated by the apparatus, like Berardi’s cognitive worker, are active only in an impotent sense, consigned to their algorithmic fate. (For Berardi, however, this “exhaustion” is one wherein the processes of capitalist acceleration and development have eviscerated the originary possibilisation that is perhaps life’s locus of hope⁴¹, whereas our contention is that we must consider this precise possibilisation as a means to dismantle the automaton.)

Contrary to the openness revealed by boredom, wherein the longwhiling of the human is related to the innermost freedom of Dasein as the specific capacity to *not* act, the capacity to idle the active determination of being *qua* being-that-is-present, the machinic compulsion to act without reprieve is an incessant saturation of being that closes off the very withdrawal of being that opens Dasein to potentiality-as-such. The impotence of captivation is the parodic double of comportment, the genuinely world-forming essence of Dasein, as the evacuation of the act’s freedom and its coming to a standstill through the economy of its constant iterability. The “couch potato” of which Agamben speaks is but an earlier moment, imperfectly calculated, in this dromological trajectory, quickly being consummated by the total captivation of the human by apparatuses which above all render impossible anything the likeness of profound boredom.

Precisely like machines, moreover, which contrary to animals permit no openness, are entirely without world and have no relation to their own privation, the modern subject captivated by apparatuses is one that is mass (re-)produced according to the most sophisticated technologies and subtle modes of subjectification to meet the growing demands of capital. The power operating this reproduction is diffuse, often rendered invisible by either the glamour of the latest OLED display screen, or it is masked as being highly useful, seamlessly and unobtrusively hijacking any thought still remaining in the act of using digital technologies, as with the growing integration of artificial intelligence to everyday life. These distinct operations form, therefore, a «cluster of relations»⁴² without centre⁴³ and accordingly, in the same way that Foucault argues the moralization of the

³⁹ F. ‘Bifo’ Berardi, *Futurability, The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility*, Verso, London 2017, p. 232.

⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 11.

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 1. See also F. “Bifo.” Berardi, *Senile Futurism and Exhaustion*, in «Angelaki», XXXI, n. 2, 2026, 51–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2026.2651632>.

⁴² M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, cit., p. 198.

⁴³ M. Foucault, *Discourse & Truth and Parrësia*. ed. by H.-P. Fruchaud and D. Lorenzini, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2019, p. 41. Here one might compare these operations to what Foucault identifies as the apparatus of sexuality, likewise a regime of knowledge without centre and which is intimately linked to *parrësia*, truth-telling, an integral component in the pastoral power of the care-of-the-self and social media alike. Owing to constraints of space, this Foucauldian dimension of our above critique regrettably cannot be developed but suffice it to say that for Foucault this question of impotential and captivation would pass

working class was not imposed yet it was accomplished «because it met the urgent need to master a vagabond, floating labour force»⁴⁴, so too do these apparatuses captivating impotential achieve their objective: every instant of life must be rendered productive, indeed nothing can be allowed to be useless, such that even the meagre time apportioned to those who, under what Han diagnoses as the “burnout society”⁴⁵, endlessly scroll their mobile feeds, is captivated by capital, the ontological consequence of which is the evisceration of activity and passivity alike.

These strategic objectives of capital can, moreover, be positioned as governing principles of the precise captivation of impotential by contemporary apparatuses without suggesting a hierarchical, substantive account of power (precisely as Foucault cautioned against). Indeed, situated within the broader governmental logic of capital, the construction of wholly docile subjects is the construction of subjects *who can only be productive*, for whom authentic idleness is no longer possible, and who therefore are bound, like clockwork soldiers, to perform the rites of their subjectification programmatically. Devoid of the possibility for action and inaction alike, and the indetermination of either that is the proper characterisation of idleness, the subject is radically impotent, closed from any relation to their ownmost potentiality. Impotent, the subject captivated by the apparatus is compelled to an empty activity, the *telos* of which is the hidden double of the *automaton*. The banal inability to be bored that is increasingly the consequence of the subject’s captivation by the apparatus thus signifies more than an issue of technological regulation: it is a decidedly ontological problem. The impossibility for boredom emblematic of the impotence of the captivated subject is nothing short of the closing off of world, of the free dimension of the political and the ethical *tout court*.

4. Idleness

Our issue thus crystallises around the immaterial body of an artificially generated image, a figure tirelessly repeating the same movements without end on a platform designed never to cease captivating. Such images and videos serve a twofold function. On one side, this deluge is a means of flooding attentions with content, damming up social media feeds and deregulating what is available, and on the other, its mindlessness is the perfectly blank slate for effecting the captivation – the pure and empty formality of its meaningfulness, which is a jewel in the algorithm’s crown, is its means of guaranteeing the engagement requisite for the subject’s captivation. With this, the relentless power of modern media, the total aestheticisation of the domain of being-human, clearly consists in rendering the primordial mood of boredom impossible and in the foreclosing of impotential only the idleness of which might deactivate those very same apparatuses upon which such captivation is predicated.

Authentic idleness, we might then say, contrary to the passivity which marks the “couch potato” or the “doomscroller,” the productive “activity” involved in which is not so much active as it is functional, *reactive*, its aspect of freedom blocked and effaced, consists in the bringing of the world as a determinate system of ends to a standstill. Idleness

through a critique of the will as it figures in Western philosophy and political theory. The ontology of the command and the imperative of the will would converge at precisely the point of a subject compelled to exist in a state of impotent activity.

⁴⁴ M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, cit., p. 204.

⁴⁵ B.-C. Han, *The Burnout Society*, Eng. trans. by E. Butler, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2015.

suspends the operativity of the world, releasing it from its exclusive structuration as purposive activity (a gesture which in a certain sense is the very culmination of Kantian ethics: the supremely ethical essence of existence is that it is useless, that it can in no way be reduced to the achievement of a set of purposes), and is thus a mode of comportment, the composition of an *ēthos* in the exact sense of a manner of living and b(e)aring existence, not though as a project to be accomplished, as would be its Sartrean variant,⁴⁶ but rather as simply being-the-there, the beauty of which is its uselessness.

Idleness, in other words, is nothing other than the exercise of impotential, its use as a manner of living. This generation of living, or *ēthos*, is not directed toward an end that would fix it and guarantee its efficacy or its significance – living *qua* idleness is not the putting-to-use of a potentiality that is actualised and enters into the domain of what is only on account of suddenly being an active maintenance of itself. Idleness cannot even be construed as a subjective disposition of that living being, to the extent that the subject is defined as that which is actively captivated by apparatuses and determined by the functional, productive work that these demand as continual subjectification, whereas living, the composition and b(e)aring of existence as being-the-there, suspends the operativity of activity and inactivity, being an activity without purpose (only the joyous dwelling in the use as a free use, a use or exercise originating in the capacity not-to) and an inactivity the very power of which is to hold the world open. Idleness, in short, is the immanent deactivation of the distinction between the active and the inactive for it holds before each the image of a world brought to a standstill, and «in a flash with the now to form a constellation»⁴⁷ is a new figure suddenly possible.

If, then, the crystallisation of our problem is the programmatic ceaselessness of modern digital medias *qua* apparatuses of subjectification, and if the glimpse of a way of stalling captivation is to be found in the world's suspension, then our question becomes how idleness, the restitution of impotential to the human and animal alike, might possibly deactivate captivation? How can that which is foreclosed by the apparatus be none other than that which undoes the apparatus' hold? Returning to the political distinction between the human and the animal, which sees the human as the figure open to the world, as the one whose comportment forms and worlds that very world, and the animal as the being impoverished in their essentially helpless entombment in their circle of disinhibitors, will point us in this direction. For that the animal is captivated by its environment, and that this captivation is at once similar to that of the apparatus (it is a captivation of impotential) and dissimilar (the human's captivation is not its reduction to the animal: captivation is the becoming-machine of the human – the animal, in other words, *is not impotent*) means that if what is at stake in the animal's captivation is its living, then at stake is also what we will risk calling its freedom, such that freedom *is the very essence of what is as its living* (the human's *ēthos*), and that it is this dimension at issue in captivation.

What the animal reveals, in other words, is that freedom is the essence of existence, for it is in the animal's total coincidence of its living with its dimension of freedom – its encirclement – that we find both the possibility for the human's inoperative coincidence of life with its living⁴⁸ and the gesture which would stall the anthropological machine. In other words, if to be captivated is to be closed to one's impotential, for the mode of

⁴⁶ J.-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Eng. trans. by Hazel E. Barnes, Routledge, Abingdon 2003.

⁴⁷ W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Eng. trans. by H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2002, p. 462.

⁴⁸ G. Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, cit., p. 207.

subjectification operative when caught by the apparatus to be the production of the impossibility for anything other than reaction, then to the bare extent that we are, and that our living coincides with our freedom, *the freedom that is the essence of our existence as our existence cannot be captivated*. To deactivate the apparatus is to recognise, outside of the paradigm of representational subjectivity, that our essence has only ever been the idleness of being-there, and that the instances of captivation cannot but fail in totally seizing this, for to be is to be most properly as the exercise of impotential. The idleness of impotential, the free and useless generation of a manner of living, is the essence of freedom: the originary possibilisation of the human that is Dasein and that has long been systematically denied to the animal. What deactivates the apparatus is then none other than the coincidence without remainder of one's life with one's living that the animal first and foremost reveals and that for Dasein is *ēthos*, but which when pushed to its extreme cannot but herald a new figure, neither strictly human nor animal.

To be idle is to comport oneself such that one's living is the free use of the proper. It is no coincidence, then, that Agamben⁴⁹ and Deleuze⁵⁰ each located this freedom in Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* – more than a mere refusal of action, idleness is the destabilisation of its claim to priority. Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" is but one figuration of the world's standstill as *ēthos* and the undoing of captivation. (It goes without saying that a sophisticated critique of the captivation of impotential could be developed out of Deleuze, so long as the caveat that distances Deleuze from Agamben and Heidegger in this regard is retained, namely that, if for Deleuze Bartleby's devastating formula exhausts language and the tiring proliferation of the possible in one fell swoop,⁵¹ such that one is 'exhausted by nothing',⁵² for Agamben and Heidegger it is precisely a question of deactivating the captivation of this possibilisation, and it is idleness that perhaps has this potential.)

The most perfect image of such idleness *qua* *ēthos*, which since Aristotle has been rejected in favour of life's activity,⁵³ is to be found in play, for with the gestures of play the whole world is not simply open to different modes of being-at-use but is open fundamentally to the very joy of existence as such. Play, whether by humans or animals or the indistinct being who emerges in their wake, holds a mirror before the world of function the reflection in which shows a world freed from the tyranny of purpose, the only law of which is to be, like blessedness, its own virtue.⁵⁴ Perhaps this explains why for Benjamin it was «play and nothing else» that was the mother of habit⁵⁵ – *ēthos*, the virtuous generation of a manner of living wherein freedom is the essence of existence, and what is exercised is first and foremost original possibilisation, can only be understood as the idleness of play. To suspend the subject's captivation and open the possibility for an alternative manner of living thus requires as its minimum something akin to the practice of a being like

⁴⁹ See G. Agamben, 'Bartleby or On Contingency' in *Potentialities*, cit., pp. 243-271.

⁵⁰ G. Deleuze, *Essays Clinical and Critical*, Eng. trans by D. W. Smith and M. A. Greco, Verso, London 1998, pp. 68-90.

⁵¹ Ivi, p. 70.

⁵² Ivi, p. 153.

⁵³ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Eng. trans. by D. Ross, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009, p. 11. Interestingly, Joe Sachs translates the line in question here quite literally as: «Is a human being by nature idle?» Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Eng. trans. by J. Sachs, Focus Publishing, Indianapolis 2002, p. 28.

⁵⁴ B. de Spinoza, *Ethics*, Eng. trans. by E. Curley, Penguin Books, London 1996, p. 180.

⁵⁵ W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 1, 1927-1930*, Eng. trans. by R. Livingstone and Others, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2005, p. 120.

Odradek:⁵⁶ without the purposiveness of a determined activity, he escapes the capture to such an extent that even his name is loose and ill fitting, of uncertain provenance and uncertain end. With this, we too might be loosed from the logic of subjectivity and the captivation it entails, and the hardest thing of all, the free use of the proper, is suddenly no use at all.

⁵⁶ F. Kafka, 'The Cares of a Family Man,' in *The Complete Stories*, Eng. trans. by W. and E. Muir, Schocken Books, New York 1995, pp. 427-429.