

## RETURN TO READING Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei

In his seminal text “Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art,” Benjamin Buchloh discusses Robert Rauschenberg’s work *Erased de Kooning Drawing* from 1953, “one of the first examples of allegorization in post-New York school art.”<sup>1</sup> The work consists of a drawing that Rauschenberg obtained from abstract expressionist painter Willem de Kooning with the explicit aim to erase it. After erasing the drawing — a repetitive action of gathering the signs left by de Kooning on the paper in charcoal, oil paint, pencil, and crayon, reading them, and copying them out through various means of erasure — the work was framed and affixed with a label carrying the work’s title.<sup>2</sup> *Erased de Kooning Drawing* thus seems to confront us as a drawing that is also the final palimpsest<sup>3</sup> — would it be possible to erase it again? —, an allegory of unreadability with the semblance of complete readability as one of those “first examples.”

For Buchloh, the allegorical nature of the work is apparent through the “procedures of appropriation, the depletion of the confiscated image, the superimposition or doubling of a visual text by a second text, and the shift of attention and reading to the framing device.”<sup>4</sup> Although such an analysis of Rauschenberg’s work, as a supposed precursor to the practices of Institutional Critique, is certainly not without merit, I remain stubbornly attracted to the surface itself, to what is discernible despite the thorough act of erasure, to what — despite all — remains readable, as if the very absence of de Kooning reveals him as most present, or, as Rauschenberg

suggests, as “poetry.”<sup>5</sup> It is perhaps the allegorical nature of the image itself that propels me (and Buchloh) to read it, because of, as Craig Owens suggests, the “blatant disregard for aesthetic categories,” the genre-bending or gender-bending, if you will, of allegory, in its “reciprocity [...] between the visual and the verbal.”<sup>6</sup> Or perhaps we should take our departure from Geoffrey Sirc, when he refers to *Erased de Kooning Drawing* as “anti-commodity.”<sup>7</sup>



If politics, at the onset of Western political history and theory, is expressed through public speech on the *agora*, the marketplace, allegory is that which “speaks differently” (*allēgoreō*, from *all’ agoreuō*), in a veiled and subtractive manner, irreducible to public, institutionalized political discourse. In Walter Benjamin’s oeuvre, which will be here my provisional point of departure, allegory is brought forward as politically disruptive in the sense that it resists totalization, separating “visual being from meaning” and therefore resisting the esthetization of politics practiced by fascism (and in fact the large majority of contemporary politics).<sup>8</sup> Benjamin thus seems to suggest a strategy which tentatively would ally allegory — against the logic of the symbol<sup>9</sup> — with possible projects of the politicization of art,<sup>10</sup> and, more generally, attempts to rethink the political status-quo. It is in the context of Benjamin’s notion of the political potential of allegory that I would like to revisit a fragment from Paul de Man’s *Allegories of Reading* that features a reading of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Social Contract*.<sup>11</sup> Our initial, and necessarily incomplete confrontation with this fragment will then serve as a springboard to analyze two more explicitly political projects, which, like Benjamin, attempt

to think a possible leftist, progressive, anti-fascist — even aligning these adjectives seems an insurmountable obstacle — politics.

In his reading of Rousseau’s text, De Man attends to a number of problematic conceptual and figural polarities, argumentative incongruities, and the general undecidability as to what genre — literary, political — the *Social Contract* belongs. He then specifically marks out the moment in another text, “Du bonheur social,” where Rousseau “shift[s] from a (deconstructed) binary model [between personal and public well-being] to this still unidentified ‘other’ model.”<sup>12</sup> This “other” model, the model of the contract in which “everyone puts his will, his property, his strength, and his person in common, under the direction of the general will,”<sup>13</sup> so De Man claims, is taken up again in the *Social Contract*. De Man ferrets out the numerous places in which the text cannot live up to its own expectations, making promises and drafting contracts that can never be honored, up to the point where the status of the *Social Contract* itself, vis-à-vis an “actual” social contract set up according to its specifications, turns out to be completely untenable as text:

To the extent that it never ceases to advocate the necessity for political legislation and to elaborate the principles on which such legislation could be based, it resorts to the principles of authority that it undermines. We know this structure to be characteristic of what we have called allegories of unreadability. Such an allegory is metafigural: it is an allegory of a figure (for example, metaphor) which relapses into the figure it deconstructs. The *Social Contract* falls under this heading to the extent that it is indeed structured like an aporia: it persists in performing what it has shown to be impossible to do. As such, we call it an allegory.<sup>14</sup>

We accept this unreadability not as a defect of Rousseau's text, or as some perverse effect of De Man's thorough and incisive reading, but as an epistemological obstacle that turns out—following the best of philosophical traditions—to be ontologically fundamental, as it will appear that this text and the aporias it harbors partakes in a logic in which the search for the best art of government insistently thematizes “reading”—including the quotidian act of reading itself—as limit or threshold of political activity. Reading, which for De Man is an inherently deconstructive activity, therefore appears to be something that cannot be fully politically appropriated.<sup>15</sup> We will try to support this tentative suggestion by zooming in on two propositions that explicitly incorporate, if not somehow depart from Rousseau's text, and which can be construed so as to precisely fit into each other's limit points—Michel Foucault's “socialist governmentality” and Giorgio Agamben's “form-of-life”—precisely at the point where both have recourse to the avatar of the Proustian figure of the idle, inoperative reader, who constantly must “attempt the reconciliation between imagination and action.”<sup>16</sup>



If we follow Benjamin that allegory separates “visual being from meaning,” a prose text, such as the one you are currently reading, constitutes an allegorical extreme: its visual being is seemingly fully disjunct from its meaning, and therefore every text is by definition allegorical. Readability in itself is an allegorical effect. Philology has acknowledged this already since its inception, and it is therefore not surprising that De Man calls upon it in accounting for his deconstructive readings.<sup>17</sup> Readability

per se therefore continues to be a seemingly insuperable obstacle to philosophies that are strongly invested in the symbol, that is, in the inseverable bond between sign and meaning. A pertinent example here would be Quentin Meillassoux's impressive, yet ultimately unsuccessful attempt to clearly demarcate the “meaningless sign,” which, however ironically, happens through a fable, that is, an allegorical form.<sup>18</sup>

Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* exists precisely at this limit of readability between meaningful and meaningless sign, drawing out the precise point at which an image becomes allegorical and therefore readable: a total erasure in which visual being and meaning become indistinguishable. A counterpart can be located in Marcel Broodthaers's *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* from 1969,<sup>19</sup> which appropriates Stéphane Mallarmé's famous symbolist poem with the same title, which Meillassoux affirms to be a “code” that needs be “deciphered.”<sup>20</sup> Averse to any decipherment or decoding, Broodthaers violently rips the poem's visual being and meaning apart, and linearizes the disjunct phrases of the poem in the place of its original preface as prose text, while blackening out and therefore emphasizing the visual quality of the typography. On the cover, Broodthaers replaces Mallarmé's name with his own, and the word *poème* with *image*. Words and images seem to enter into a zone of indistinction.

Both Rauschenberg and Broodthaers's works, therefore, allegorize *incomplete processes of allegorization*. Traces remain, the erasure cannot measure up to its own expectations. De Kooning is still present in his purported absence, even more if we realize that on the backside of the erased drawing there is another, unerased De Kooning drawing, the figure of a woman.

Fig. 1. View of Robert Rauschenberg's  
Erased de Kooning Drawing (verso,  
unframed) showing an untitled drawing  
by Willem de Kooning (ca. 1953). Graphite  
on paper, 16 1/2 x 14 1/8 in. (41.9 x 35.9 cm).

Collection shown, purchase through a gift  
of Phyllis Wattis, © The Willem de Kooning  
Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS),  
New York



As Rauschenberg suggests: “The documentation of the work is built in.”<sup>21</sup> The amount of erasure could still be tentatively deduced from the drawing on the backside, in the same way that Mallarmé’s poem could potentially be reconstructed from the preface to which Broodthaers evacuated it. Both works are untenable as images, and that is perhaps why we feel the impulse to read them. Contrary to what Buchloh may want us to believe, any politically productive shift of attention from display to mode of display, from text to metatext, from work to parergon that would be accomplished by these works is fragile and incomplete. Allegorical procedures may open

the door to the politicization of art, but always threaten to destabilize such an appropriation. As Owens suggests, “[b]ecause allegory usurps its object it comports within itself a danger, the possibility of perversion.”<sup>22</sup>



In his analysis of the concepts of biopolitical power and governmentality, which he developed over the course of a series of lectures at the Collège de France, notably in *Security, Territory, Population* and *The Birth of Biopolitics*,<sup>23</sup> Michel Foucault locates the origin of biopolitics as a “political power” that assigns itself “the task of administering life” in a break with the previously dominant concept of sovereign power in the seventeenth century,<sup>24</sup> followed by the explosive development and increasing primacy of the art of government in the eighteenth century.<sup>25</sup> He associates this development of what he terms governmentality with, among others, the work of Rousseau, who signals the shift in meaning of the word economy from “father’s management of the family’s goods” to a “political economy [...] that can no longer be reduced to the old model of the family” (STP 142-3). The “allegories of unreadability” uncovered by De Man are constitutive of this shift, a translation — as we will see — from the theological to the political sphere that will not cease to create its own points of incomprehension.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout his lectures, Foucault defines the development of different modes of governmentality, of managing and administering the physical and social life of populations, as a type of political thinking operative in the liberal tradition, such as the French physiocrats, the German ordoliberals, and the contemporary neoliberal



paradigm. According to Foucault, this paradigm renders the question of the state increasingly irrelevant, becoming nothing but the accumulation of different modes of “statisation”: “The state is nothing else but the mobile effect of a regime of multiple governmentalities” (BP 77). The current withering of the nation-state under the pressure of multinational corporations and supranational trade agreements only testifies to this claim. Under the paradigm of liberal governmentality, states alone or in conjunction are no longer in any position to control or distribute wealth, or life and death, among their respective populations.

This brings Foucault to observe that, within the context of an analysis of the post-WWII renunciation of socialist principles by the German Socialist Party (and a fortiori all other left-wing parties in Europe), “what socialism lacks is not so much a theory of the state as a governmental reason, the definition of what governmental rationality would be in socialism, that is to say, a reasonable and calculable measure of the extent, modes, and objectives of governmental action” (BP 91-2). Different types of socialism may, however, be “connected up to liberal governmentality,” functioning as a “counterweights, as a corrective, and a palliative to internal dangers” (BP 92). But socialism may function just as well under a “police state,” operating “as the internal logic of an administrative apparatus” (BP 92-3).

In none of these cases, a truly *socialist governmentality* is to be discerned. As Foucault points out, this shows the fundamental asymmetry between liberalism and socialism: one only asks the latter whether it be true or not; liberal governmentality, on the contrary, has nothing to do with the truth. It is worth quoting the entire passage, because it explicitly introduces “reading and interpreting” — and with it the entire problematics I have tried to

sketch out above — as the obverse of governmentality, or perhaps as a cover-up of its absence.

I think that if we are so strongly inclined to put to socialism this indiscreet question of truth that we never address to liberalism — “Are you true or are you false” — it is precisely because socialism lacks an intrinsic governmental rationality, and because it replaces this essential, and still not overcome [absence of] an internal governmental rationality, with *the relationship of conformity to a text*. The relationship of conformity to a text, or a series of texts, is charged with concealing this absence of governmental rationality. A way of *reading and interpreting* is advanced that must found socialism and indicate the very limits and possibilities of its potential action, whereas what it really needs is to define for itself its way of doing things and its way of governing. *I think the importance of the text in socialism is commensurate with the lacuna constituted by the absence of a socialist art of government.*

(BP 93-4, my emphasis)

After this remarkable passage, in which “reading and interpreting” become placeholders for “governmental rationality” in a mode that recalls De Man’s reading of Rousseau, Foucault finishes by asking: “What governmentality is possible as a strictly, intrinsically, and autonomously socialist governmentality? In any case, we know only that if there is a really socialist governmentality, then it is not hidden within socialism and its texts. It cannot be deduced from them. It must be invented” (BP 94). In what follows, we will confront the issues that Fou-

cault raises here as regards the conditions of possibility for a “socialist governmentality.” That is, on the one hand, its tentative “invention” outside or beyond “socialism and its texts,” and, on the other, an investigation into the precise consequences of the displacement of governmental action with “reading and interpreting.” Through an inspection of Giorgio Agamben’s extension of Foucault’s research it will appear, however, that this invention — which like any real invention can present nothing but a radical break with the paradigm of liberal governmentality analyzed by Foucault — dispenses with the idea of governmentality as such, and is predicated on the complete inoperativity of a community. It is in this inoperativity that reading returns.



The yellowish paper looks more like a meticulously rubbed-down, smooth vellum, with its wavy edges and irregularities that may well be stretch marks. Rauschenberg’s act of erasure — which took two months<sup>27</sup> — has not only nearly fully erased de Kooning’s drawing, but also honed its material carrier. Nonetheless there are some traces left of the underdrawing. We can distinguish two sharply defined blots on a diagonal line in the upper right corner of the same color as a brownish dot halfway on the right edge of the paper, next to what looks like a partial fingerprint in the same color. Two smudges of an undefined color seem to lie halfway on the two sides of a triangle that can be drawn between the blots in the upper right corner and the dot the with finger print halfway on the right side. That smudge with the fingerprint is maybe de Kooning’s, still identifying the picture as originally his. A larger oily discoloration below

it, next to large black blot, the most prominent on the entire surface, some oil stains at the bottom the paper. They could have originally part of de Kooning’s drawing or maybe Rauschenberg’s table was dirty. A reddish smudge a bit below the center of the painting is the most colorful element, it may hide yet another fingerprint. There are decidedly less smudges on the left side of the paper. Perhaps there was less drawing on the left side? I can discern at least one figure, in the lower left quadrant of the image: a female figure, perhaps a sketch for one of de Kooning’s large nudes; de Kooning reportedly said that he wanted to give Rauschenberg an image he would miss.<sup>28</sup> Behind or above her, dimly emanating from the underground — “background” seems to be too strong a word — perhaps some other (partial) figure emerges



fig. 2. Unprocessed infrared scan of Robert Rauschenberg’s Erased de Kooning Drawing (1969) showing traces of the original drawing by Willem de Kooning. Infrared scan; Robin D. Myers, 2010, courtesy SNOVA

faintly. An infrared image of the drawing — a technique used also in order to read ancient palimpsests — reveals a third figural form on the right (fig. 2), while the blots and smudges appear as white holes in the paper. Absence figures as presence and vice versa.

In the same period that de Kooning painted very large female nudes, Rauschenberg erases a small drawing of one of them, a drawing, de Kooning insisted, that would be very hard to erase.<sup>29</sup> But women are not the only figures under erasure; another way to read the title of the work, which involves improperly translating a proper name, yields *Erased Drawing of the King*.<sup>30</sup> This is reading underneath the lines. I now also notice that there are no women in this text except for the one erased by Rauschenberg. Did his work spill over into my writing? We will see that even Agamben's monastery is full of men contemplating form-of-life.

And then there is this other effacement, which in certain regions of philosophy and art history continues to be patrolled. Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, whose work *Flag* Buchloh discusses just after *Erased de Kooning Drawing* as an “equally conspicuous example,”<sup>31</sup> used to be lovers.<sup>32</sup> They lived, worked and slept together when all of this collage, ready-made, montage, the entire wave of allegorical procedures hit the American art scene. Maybe as a queer couple they were more receptive to the subversive aspects “appropriation and montage,” to the ability to “say in pictures, what would have been banned by the censors if [...] said it in words.”<sup>33</sup> So to return once more to Foucault who chastises the left for not developing a “socialist governmentality,” did he not already find such models in the San Francisco bathhouses, a governmentality at a far remove from the state, just before Agamben rendered it all chaste again? It may

well be that Agamben attends to the legal and religious categories that he feels Foucault has disregarded, but at the same time, the questions of sexuality so pertinently raised by Foucault later in his career, have no place in his Agamben's work.



The philological, genealogical, and archaeological project formulated by Giorgio Agamben under the header of *Homo Sacer* may be considered a continuation of Foucault's work on biopolitics and governmentality.<sup>34</sup> The introduction to the first volume of *Homo Sacer*, subtitled *Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben proposes, *inter alia*, to extend the timeframe of Foucault's investigation, relocating the biopolitical point of origin in Greek philosophy, that is, in the Aristotelian distinction between *zoē* and *bios*.<sup>35</sup> This initial distinction sets off the discussion of a range of polarities, which will give the rise to the suggestion of a “form-of-life,” “to think politics [...] beginning from the inoperative disarticulation of both *bios* and *zoē*”<sup>36</sup> that eludes governmentality, from what appears to be the very heart of governmentality itself.

The question of governmentality is addressed in volume II.2 of *Homo Sacer*, entitled *The Kingdom and the Glory*, an interpretative tour de force that hunts down lost meanings, shifts in translation, and multiple terminological crossovers. Agamben here provides a genealogy of economy and government from a theological perspective, thus “completing” Foucault's research (KG xi). Apart from an extension of the temporal frame of investigation, Agamben also moves away from the inspection of the development of modern liberal economical policies, shifting back from Foucault's insight that the idea

of “government of men” be located in the organization of the Christian notion of pastorate<sup>37</sup> to an investigation of theological sources from (late) antiquity and the medieval period.

Following back a thread already present in Rousseau’s *Social Contract* and Foucault’s references to it,<sup>38</sup> Agamben starts out with an analysis of the term economy from the perspective of the Trinitarian *oikonomia*, which “may constitute a privileged laboratory for the observation of the working and articulation — both internal and external — of the governmental machine” (KG xi), in order to prove that instead of a series of counter-practices against the pastorate, modern governmentality is much more the result of a thorough secularization of the conceptual framework built by theologians around the providence of divine government.<sup>39</sup> This idea of secularization, which Agamben borrows from Carl Schmitt as nothing but a *translation* of theological concepts to political concepts operative to this very day,<sup>40</sup> is an important methodological hinge in Agamben’s argument.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, Agamben himself suggests later that “[i]t is not necessary to share Schmitt’s thesis on secularization in order to affirm that political problems become more intelligible and clear if they are related to theological paradigms” (KG 229). We may suggest, then, that the theological and political paradigms allegorize each other, even though “thresholds of indifference” (KG 230) may show up between them. It is at these points of theological and the political indiscernability that readability collapses and only lingering signatures can be traced, being precisely that which operates on the threshold between semiotics and semantics, the signifier and the signified.<sup>42</sup>

This concept of providence, which is built upon a separation between the Kingdom and the Government

in God (originating in the *oikonomia* of the Trinity<sup>43</sup>) and the specific nature of providential action, is neither “for itself,” nor “by accident”: “The god that reigns, yet does not govern, thus makes possible the government. In other words, the government is an epiphenomenon of providence” (KG 118). Subsequently, Agamben interprets modern bureaucratic institutions, one of the foundations of modern governmentality, as again based on secularized versions of the angelical hierarchies produced by Christian theology.<sup>44</sup> These directly responded to the need to explain God’s governance over the world, if indeed, following the nature of providential action, he did not govern every single detail of the world himself and immediately, nor was fully withdrawn from it. From this theological perspective, all politics proper in the government of the “City of God” until judgment day — the end of all political action — is necessarily angelic work. And this governmental work of providence only ends in a complete inoperativity of the angelic hierarchies, with only glory left to sing in a “Kingdom without Government” (KG 160): pure sovereignty without governmentality. Therefore, “[t]he political vocation of man is an angelic vocation, and the angelic vocation is a vocation to the song of glory” (KG 147).

Setting out his beacons under the provisional heading of an “archaeology of glory,” dedicated to the “history of the ceremonial aspects of power and right; a sort of political archaeology of liturgy and protocol” (KG 168), Agamben indicates the intriguing paradox that although “glory is the exclusive property of God for eternity, and it will remain eternally identical in him [...], glory is glorification, [...] something that all creatures always and incessantly owe to God and that he demands from them” (KG 216). The resolution of this paradox is found in the



increased articulation of the split between the former, inclusive form of glory, which God possesses infinitely, and the exclusive form, namely the glory that God receives from the mortals, which continually needs to be increased through the proselytizing work of the church. Eternal glorification is therefore also the only work, or, perhaps, “unwork,” that is left to the blessed after the Last Judgment, praise which is effectively useless, in so far God already possesses a plenitude of it.<sup>45</sup>

Having reached this point of the total collapse of *oikonomia* and governmentality — a point of indiscernability in the heart of politics — into an eternal, inoperative Sabbath that is only concerned with endless and timeless acclamation and glorification, Agamben singles out precisely this inoperativity, the “political substance of the Occident” (KG 246),<sup>46</sup> as the point through which a non-economical and non-governmental “form-of-life” can be — to employ Foucault’s term here — “invented.”<sup>47</sup> As he indicates himself, this fully follows Agamben’s program, made explicit at the end of the eponymous first volume of *Homo Sacer*, to transform the biopolitical body “into the site for the constitution and installation of a form of life that is wholly exhausted in bare life and a *bios* that is only its own *zoē*.”<sup>48</sup>

Finally then, this is the topic of the *The Highest Poverty*, which deals with the form and function of monastic rules and form-of-life.<sup>49</sup> This treatise addresses precisely the “hidden center” of the governmental machine operative both in Foucault’s and Agamben’s previous accounts: a center that is subtracted from the genealogy of governmentality, while at the same time animating it. It is here, in a description of monastic “form-of-life” which, importantly, is fully subtracted from the administrative structures of the church, that Agamben arrives at a description

of what we might consider a possible model for what Foucault called a socialist governmentality. That we end up finding such a model in monastic life should not surprise us, considering the insistent tendency in all forms of “utopian socialism,” ever since its first formulation, to withdraw from society into small-scale communes.

Importantly, the “new and unheard-of” invention “form-of-life” itself is a point of indiscernability between form and life (HP xi-xii), in this case approached from the monastic tradition in which rule and life collapse in an attempt to “realize their ideal of a communal form of life.” And this monastic invention of form-of-life indeed shows, according to Agamben, the only example of an *actual* social contract being formulated.<sup>50</sup> The form-content of monastic rule transports us straight back to Foucault’s concern with the invention of socialist governmentality and the problem of “reading” hampering its actual development. Ironically, it now appears that the “rule,” which is nothing but the materialization of a practice of reading and interpreting folding onto life, is precisely the realization of such a non-liberal governmentality as cenoby, a “model of total communitarian life” (HP 9) fully outside Agamben’s paradigm of Kingdom and Government: “a human life entirely removed from the grasp of the law and a use of bodies and of the world that would never be substantiated into appropriation” (HP xiii).<sup>51</sup> A human life that is rendered fully inoperative and completely dedicated to the “glory of God” (HP 23).

The elaboration of this form-of-life is again couched in figures of (un)readability. Its study and elaboration require the consultation of “texts [...] the reading of which seems so difficult to the modern reader” (HP 4). Reading the rule — and explicitly not the epistemologico-juridical “knowing the law” — becomes an essential element

in the testing period and initiation ceremony of a new monk,<sup>52</sup> up to the point where he is admitted to the monastic community. At this point of collapse of life into rule and rule into life, the world world itself becomes eminently readable: “the perfect life” in full devotion to God “coincides with the legibility of the world” (HP 27). Citing the opening lines of *Rule of the Master*,<sup>53</sup> Agamben shows that this reading of the rule is never reducible to a contractual logic of read-and-signed, an unproblematic and unilateral transmission of information: “O man, (I say) first of all to you who read (me), and then you who are listening to me as I speak...” (HP 76). Thus the rule itself, being read and read to, being spoken and listened to, continually calls into question its own written form and the predominance of writing.<sup>54</sup> This should not surprise us, as the very material on which these rules were written was often a palimpsest, a piece of parchment from which the original text of a more worldly, perhaps legal or literary nature, had been scraped. Living according to the rule is defined as a *lectio continua*, that is, according to the injunction to read that is contained in the rule that is read everyday. Agamben sketches this aporetic situation as follows:

One must thus imagine  
that there will necessarily be  
a moment when the reader, having  
reached chapter 24, will read the passage  
that enjoins him to read the rule every day.

What will happen at that moment?<sup>9</sup> In reading the other passages of the rule, the reader executes the precept of the reading, but does not actualize what the text enjoins him to do in that moment. In this case, however, the reading and putting into action of the rule coincide without remainder.

By reading the rule that prescribes to him the reading of the rule, the reader performatively executes the rule ipso facto. His *lectio* realizes, that is to say, the exemplary instance of an enunciation of the rule that coincides with its execution, of an observance that is rendered indiscernible from the command that it obeys.  
(HP 77)<sup>55</sup>

Thus reading — palimpsestuous reading — becomes the allegory *par excellence* for the rule of monastic life, the moment that rule and life fully coincide. At the same time it is an allegory of Foucault’s socialist governmentality, invented and fully subtracted from the paradigms of governmentality from whose theological analogues the monastic movement equally tried to escape. De Man’s “allegories of unreadability,” as a continuous reading and rereading — a *lectio* — of texts whose fundamentals are impossible to gauge here, find their proper political actualization. Perhaps it would therefore be more accurate to revise Foucault’s statement that “the importance of the text in socialism is commensurate with the lacuna constituted by the absence of a socialist art of government” (BP 94) into “the importance of the text in socialism is commensurate with the lacuna constituted by the *presence* of a the socialist art of government.”

- 1 Benjamin Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," *Artforum* 21.1 (1982): 43-56, at 46.
- 2 "Robert Rauschenberg discusses *Erased de Kooning Drawing*," *ArtForum*, <<http://artforum.com/video/id=19778&mode=large&page.id=19>>, accessed November 25, 2014.
- 3 See also Amelia Groom, "There's Nothing to See Here: Erasing the Monochrome," *e-flux journal* 37 (2012).
- 4 Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures," 46.
- 5 "Robert Rauschenberg discusses *Erased de Kooning Drawing*."
- 6 Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Oxford Press, 1998), 320.
- 7 Geoffrey Sirc, *English Composition as a Happening* (Logan, UT: University of Utah Press, 2002), 309.
- 8 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London & New York: Verso, 1998), 165; id., "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 217-51, at 242. See also Lutz P. Koepnick, "Allegory and Power: Walter Benjamin and the Politics of Representation," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 79.1/2 (1996): 59-78.
- 9 Cf. Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 325: "If the symbol is a motivated sign, then allegory, conceived as its antithesis, will be identified as the domain of the arbitrary, the conventional, the unmotivated."
- 10 Buchloh suggests as much in "Allegorical Procedures," when he opens with a reference to allegorical nature of early (photo)montage techniques and subsequent practices commonly understood as "Institutional Critique," which resist the commodification of art, that is, its absorption in general practices of, in the words of Hito Steyerl, making capitalism more beautiful (cf. "Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy," *e-flux Journal* 21 (2010): 1-6, at 1).
- 11 Recently, the supposed political convictions and investments of Paul de Man himself again stirred up debate, surrounding the appearance of a new biography, Evelyn Barish's *The Double Life of Paul de Man* (New York: Liveright [did anyone point out the profound irony of the publisher's name?]) Publishing Corporation, 2014). The loci classici for the debate surrounding De Man's writings during the German occupation of Belgium are the volumes *Wartime Journalism, 1939-1943*, ed. Werner Hamacher, Neil H. Hertz, Thomas Keenan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988) and Werner Hamacher, Neil H. Hertz, Thomas Keenan (eds), *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988). Although an exploration of De Man's "personal" political convictions are outside the scope of this paper, it should be clear from his own readings — of Benjamin, Rousseau, among many others — that a reduction of his critical oeuvre to the adjective "antisemitic" is unacceptably reductive — and as a gesture not without its own political presuppositions.
- 12 Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), 253-4.
- 13 Rousseau, cited in *ibid.*, 259.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 275.
- 15 Cf. Bill Readings, "The Deconstruction of Politics," in Lindsay Waters & Wlad Godzich (eds), *Reading Paul de Man Reading* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 223-243, at 225.
- 16 De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 64.
- 17 For example in Paul de Man, "The Return to Philology," in *Allegories of Reading* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 21-6.
- 18 See "The Fable of the Contented Paleographer" in Quentin Meillassoux, "Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Meaningless Sign," lecture at the Freie Universität, Berlin, April 20, 2012, trans. Robin Mackay; for an extensive commentary Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, "By Any Language Necessary: Quentin Meillassoux and the Question Concerning Signification in Philosophy," *Quaderna* 2 (2014), <<http://quaderna.org/by-any-language-necessary-quentin-meillassoux-and-the-question-concerning-signification-in-philosophy/>>, accessed November 25, 2014.
- 19 But see Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures," 47, for a different interpretation.
- 20 Quentin Meillassoux, *Le Nombre et la sirène* (Paris: Fayard, 2011), 6.
- 21 "Robert Rauschenberg discusses *Erased de Kooning Drawing*."
- 22 Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 327.
- 23 Michel Foucault, *Security Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007) (henceforth, STP); id., *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-79*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008) (henceforth, BP).
- 24 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 139.
- 25 Cf. Foucault, *Security Territory, Population*, 144.
- 26 As De Man states in the opening lines of his essay: "The connection between the political and the religious writings of Rousseau is enigmatic and, at first sight, entirely contradictory" (*Allegories of Reading*, 246).
- 27 Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, *De Kooning: An American Master* (Westminster, MD: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 360.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 The theme of Oedipal murder indeed resonates in descriptions of the meeting between *de Kooning* and Rauschenberg, cf. Stevens and Swan, *De Kooning*, 359-60.
- 31 Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures," 46.
- 32 See e.g. Mark Joseph Stern, "Is MoMA Putting Artists Back in the Closet?," *Slate* (Feb. 26, 2013). [http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2013/02/26/moma\\_closets\\_jasper-johns\\_and\\_robert-rauschenberg\\_why.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2013/02/26/moma_closets_jasper-johns_and_robert-rauschenberg_why.html) (Accessed November 4, 2014). But see for example Sirc, *English Composition as a Happening*, 112: "I see this old quilt, the one on the bed where Jasper and I sleep, that's art"
- 33 Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures," 43.
- 34 For a general overview of Foucault's influence on Agamben, see Jeffrey Bussolini, "Michel Foucault's Influence on the Thought of Giorgio Agamben," in Sam Binkley and Jorge Capetillo (eds.), *A Foucault in the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 104-21; Anke Snoek, "Agamben's Foucault: An Overview," *Foucault Studies* 10 (2010), 44-67.
- 35 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1.
- 36 Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa with Matteo Mandarini (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 259 (henceforth, KG).
- 37 Cf. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 169; Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 110.
- 38 Cf. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 142. According to Agamben, "with the notions of *volonté générale* and *volonté particulière* the entire governmental machine of providence is transferred from the theological to the political sphere" (Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 272). Rousseau appears at several points in Agamben's text, always on the hinge between the theological and politics, e.g. *ibid.*, 171, 254, 272ff.
- 39 Cf. Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 112.
- 40 Cf. *ibid.*, 2.
- 41 Cf. Alberto Toscano, "Divine Management: Critical Remarks on Giorgio Agamben's *The Kingdom and the Glory*," *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 16.3 (2011): 125-36, at 130. Although Toscano rightly connects secularization to Agamben's theory of the signature, he fails to see that signatures, like many other terms in Agamben's philosophical vocabulary suggest a deconstructive logic that cannot be passed off as "reductivist idealism" (*ibid.*). See also Adam Kotsko's response to Toscano, "Genealogy and Political Theology: On Method in Agamben's *The Kingdom and the Glory*," *Political Theology Today* (June 11, 2012), <<http://www.politicaltheology.com/blog/agamben-symposium-adam-kotsko/>>, accessed September 12, 2014.
- 42 Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, trans. Luca D'Isanto with Kevin Attell (New York: Zone Books, 2009), 64. Perhaps, considering Agamben openly professed indebtedness to Benjamin, we can think of his theory of signatures as a theory of allegory.
- 43 Cf. Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 68ff.
- 44 Cf. *ibid.*, 157.
- 45 Cf. *Ibid.*, 220; 239: "Inasmuch as it names the ultimate ends of man and the condition that follows the Last Judgment, glory coincides with the cessation of all activity and all works."
- 46 *Ibid.*, 245-6: "What is at stake is the capture and inscription in a separate sphere of the inoperativity that is central to human life. The *oikonomia* of power places firmly at its heart, in the form of festival and glory, what appears to its eyes as the inoperativity of man and God, which cannot be looked at. Human life is inoperative and without purpose, but precisely this *argia* and this absence of aim make the incomparable operativity [*loperosità*] of the human species possible. [...] This inoperativity is the political substance of the Occident, the glorious nutrient of all power. For this reason festival and idleness return ceaselessly in the dreams and political utopias of the Occident are equally incessantly shipwrecked there."

- 47 On inoperativity, see also Giorgio Agamben, "The Work of Man," trans. Kevin Attell, in Matthew Calarco & Steven DeCaroli (eds), *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 1-10; Kevin Attell, "Potentiality, Actuality, Constituent Power," *diacritics* 39.3 (2009): 35-53.
- 48 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 188.
- 49 Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013) (henceforth, HP).
- 50 Ibid., 53: "[T]he *pactum* constitutes [...] the first and only example of a social contract in which human beings in a group subject themselves unconditionally to the authority of a *dominus*, attributing to him the power to direct the life of the community that is this founded in all its aspects."
- 51 Cf. Ibid., 29 et passim.
- 52 Cf. Ibid., 40: "observance to the rule he has read several times"; ibid., 41: "testing period [...] punctuated by repeated readings of the rule"; ibid., 74: "The rule is already a written text that therefore can and must be read[.]"
- 53 *The Rule of the Master*, trans. Luke Eberle (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1977).
- 54 See also Jacques Derrida's analysis of Rousseau's "Essay on the Origin of Languages" in *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).
- 55 The short-circuit that Agamben establishes here between the *lectio* and the structure of the command resonates with Hamacher's interpretation of De Man in *Allegories of Reading*: "Allegorical texts are imperative" (Werner Hamacher, "Lectio: De Man's Imperative," trans. Susan Bernstein, in Lindsay Waters & Wlad Godzich [eds], *Reading Paul de Man Reading* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989], 171-201, at 184).