

“Gestures of happiness” in Sophie Calle’s *Trilogy of Desire*

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To have a name is to be guilty. And justice like magic is nameless. Happy and without a name, the creature knocks at the land of the magi who speak in gestures alone.

(Giorgio Agamben, 2007: 22)

Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben in his text *Profanations* relates happiness to magic. Commenting on Walter Benjamin’s claim that ‘a child’s first experience of the world is not his realisation that ‘adults are stronger but rather that he cannot make magic,’ Agamben concludes that ‘whatever we can achieve through merit and effort cannot make us truly happy’ (2007: 19). The philosopher explains the connection he sees between happiness and magic via Kafka’s words, namely ‘that there is plenty of hope - but not for us’. I would argue that it is because of this intriguing relationship between happiness and hope that Agamben claims that happiness ‘awaits us only at the point where it was not destined for us’, that in other words, we experience happiness only when we feel that we are capable of magic (2007: 21). Insofar as we ‘keep the genie in the bottle to [our] side’ we will be worthy of happiness. It is only when we know the magic words that we will gain the much-desired happiness. Happiness, thus, when understood within these coordinates, can never be something we deserve. As Agamben puts it: ‘what a disaster if a woman loved you because you deserved it’.

Agamben’s theoretical exploration of the interaction between happiness and magic touches upon the land of language when he writes ‘if we call life by its right name it comes forth, because ‘that is the essence of magic, which does not create but summons’’, as ‘magic is essentially a science of secret names’ (2007: 21-22). These secret names, however, instead of being bound by the chains of language actually escape them, and in doing so they make apparent the nexus between happiness and gesture. It is in its ability to break free from language that magic, which is for Agamben ‘a call to happiness’, becomes a *gesture*. And it is

through this very gesture that 'magic restores the creature to the unexpressed', so that finally, free from the name (of the Father), we can eventually be happy (22).

Such a 'breaking free from the name' is what in this essay I will refer to as a "gesture of happiness," which is an instance deeply tied to magic. It is in this 'liberation from language' that Agamben sees the taking place of happiness; a kind of happiness that cannot be either described or thought, but can only be experienced. This notion of happiness appears to be related to another concept of Agamben's, the one of the "gesture". Coming from the Latin verb *gerere*, which means "to carry on," "to support," gesture is an action rather different from any other action whether acted or produced. Agamben openly admits that he is borrowing the conceptual distinction between gesture, acting and making from Varro's theory, which states that 'a person can *facere* [make] something and not *agere* [act] it' in the same way as

a poet *facit* "makes" a play and does not act it, and on the other hand the actor *agit* "acts" it and does not make it, and so a play *fit* "is made" by the poet, not acted, and *agitur* "is acted" by the actor, not made. On the other hand the general [*imperator*], in that he is said to *gerere* "carry on" affairs, in this neither *facit* "makes" nor *agit* "acts", but *gerit* "carries on", that is, supports. (Varro, 1977: 245)

The third kind of action that gesture performs, which is an action of endurance aimed at carrying on something, hides an etymological link with burden, pain, and suffering: the meaning of *gerere*, namely "to carry on" has been 'transferred from those who *gerunt* "carry" burdens, because they support them' (245).

Agamben's description of gesture as that action in which 'nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported,' when read in the light of Varro's detailed terminological exposition, becomes self-explanatory (Agamben, 2000: 57).

[1] Moreover, if *making* is a means in view of an end (a playwright "makes" a play in order to

have it performed), and *acting* is an end without means (an actor just acts a play without making it), then the *gesture*, in its essence of being something carried on and supported, is a means without end; or as Agamben puts it:

the gesture then breaks with the false alternative between ends and means that paralyzes morality and presents instead means that, *as such*, evade the orbit of mediality without becoming for this reason, ends. (2000: 57; emphasis in the original)

One final aspect that needs to be highlighted before venturing into the performative realm of Sophie Calle's *Trilogy of Desire* is Agamben's conclusive remark about the gesture. Although gesture 'evades the orbit of mediality', it nonetheless 'is the exhibition of a mediality' (2000: 58; my emphasis). Such a claim is of extreme importance for my present investigation into "gestures of happiness" and the opening up of the sphere of *ethos* in Calle's *Trilogy of Desire*. The exhibition of a mediality is, for Agamben, 'the process of making a means visible as such', which 'allows the emergence of the being-in-a-medium' that as a consequence 'opens the ethical dimension' (58).

My main argument in this essay is that Agamben's concept of happiness and gesture might be employed to discern the way in which, philosophically speaking, "gestures of happiness" take place in the work of Sophie Calle. I argue that such "gestures of happiness" are "magic" instances that, endured, supported, and carried on, represent in fact the main event (*res gesta*) in the works I will analyse, namely *Suite Vénitienne* (1980) *Exquisite Pain* (2003) and *Take Care of Yourself* (2007).

I collectively refer to such pieces as *Trilogy of Desire* because of the longing they embody. Such a longing is what underpins the pieces themselves, whether it is the desire to know a stranger without being known (*Suite Vénitienne*), the desire to forget without being forgotten (*Exquisite Pain*), or finally the desire to exorcise a loss by alienating it (*Take Care of Yourself*). But where is the place of happiness in works that seem to spring from suffering,

pain, and loss? My argument is that happiness, in its performative absence (since the experience of happiness and the awareness of the very same happiness can never coincide), could then be regarded as “a philosophical gesture” that, breaking free from language, opens “the sphere of *ethos*.”

Calle’s development of a fluid narrative of desire in the pieces mentioned above appears to be closely related to the episodic narrative of memory, of remembering and forgetting. Nietzsche points out that the trouble with remembering is that it is closely related with the imperative understanding of the expression ‘it was’, of

that password which gives conflict, suffering and satiety access to man so as to remind him what his existence fundamentally is – an imperfect tense that can never become a perfect one. (1983: 61)

Defeating this sense of finitude, of temporal limit, and fulfilling the consequent desire to overcome it, is what human beings try to achieve through poetry, photographs, paintings; in a word through performance. It is the human attempt to stop the passing of time, to ‘make magic’ in order to access eternity through replication, through ‘the perpetual duplicating of a moment that never stops’ (Scarry, 2000: 5). Is it not true, after all, that what our memory does is to try, on the one hand, to duplicate and, on the other, to perform over again what is past and lost forever? I would argue that the tension within this performative quality of memory, and its implicit relation to desire, is one of the distinctive features of much of the artwork of Calle. By intertwining remembering and forgetting – mainly through the employment of photography and autobiographical text - Calle instigates a multilayered dialogue with life ‘as it is remembered’, as Benjamin would say (1999: 198). In Calle’s work, as Peggy Phelan has pointed out, ‘the speech act of memory and description becomes a performative expression’ (1993: 146-147). I will show that in order for “gestures of happiness” to open the ethical dimension, lack is indeed a necessary experience, being the main characteristic of that endless mediality that gesture is (Agamben, 2000: 59).

Lack of happiness caused by the constantly unfulfillable desire

Several of Calle's pieces have been inspired or caused by a longing arising from her (un)happiness, a term in which the displaced brackets are there to performatively indicate that continuous oscillatory move between happiness and sadness, between joy and pain, between desire and the impossibility to fulfil that very same desire. A swinging, an irresolvable unbalance, that in Calle's early works seems to be exposed through the gesture of 'following'. Therefore, while in *Paris Shadow* (1978-1979) and *Suite Vénitienne* (1980) it was Calle who was following random people through the streets of, respectively, Paris and Venice; in *The Shadow* (1981) she was the one who was followed by a detective who she herself had secretly hired to follow her in the first place. [2] The mutual relation of (un)happiness, memory and following is a germane one. In remembering we always follow a certain stream of thoughts, and we follow them only to end up feeling doubled, lost somehow in the always-already absent place of a past memory. Such a doubling experience is what Calle's started to play within the piece *Paris Shadows* where she tailed strangers through the streets of Paris only 'for the pleasure of following them', and certainly not because she had a special interest in them (Calle, 2007: 68-9).

The chance of the encounter, of the happening of the unexpected – of the ability to make magic – was what she wanted to capture in her notes and photographs. [3] These actions of tailing unknown people began as soon as Calle came back to her home in Paris after travelling abroad for a number of years. Once she was back, Paris appeared to her utterly changed, to the extent that she felt displaced, as if she were a foreigner in her own city. Therefore, while she was looking for a solution to her psychological displacement and consequent unhappiness, she felt that the gesture of following people in their daily activities and actions could somehow give a meaning to her life (Calle, 1993: 29). Black and white photographs of passers-by caught doing their shopping or approaching the metro station were collected on the pages of a diary where Calle also noted down in detail their movements and actions. On each page her handwritten notes chronicled the itinerary of

these people with an accurate description of the places they visited. In these first 'following pieces' by spying, documenting, and so doubling the private journeys of strangers, Calle attempted to regain a meaning for her personal journey. By identifying herself with the stranger, that is, by being absent to herself, Calle was paradoxically regaining a presence in her own life, for, as Scarry suggests, 'people follow [...] moving strangers and lost manuscripts trying to keep the thing sensorily present to them' (2000: 6). By keeping the stranger present to her, she became present to herself.

The personal experiment of *Paris Shadows* took a more performative shape throughout the project *Suite Vénitienne* in which Calle followed, instead of random people, a specific man, Henri B. Starting to follow him in Paris, she then continued to do so in Venice, secretly photographing him for two weeks. [4] As Calle remembers, it happened:

at the end of January 1980, on the streets of Paris, I followed a man whom I lost sight of a few minutes later in the crowd. That very evening, quite by chance, he was introduced to me at an opening. During the course of our conversation, he told me he was planning an imminent trip to Venice. I decided to follow him. (2007: 76-77)

What is at stake in the 'following pieces' is following itself as a tangible metaphor for not only memory and doubling, but also desiring. And if it is true what Janet Hand has pointed out, that following became 'the subject matter of [Calle's] work as well as the technique employed to generate the work' (2005: 470), I claim that following as a gesture, by embodying endurance, can be seen as what Agamben would call a 'means without end'. By exposing the mediality of the means itself, where the means here is *following* to fill a gap, one that is impossible to be filled, Calle inhabits the outside of language. She breaks free from language and thus becomes a 'being-in-a-medium', suspended between desire and fulfilment.

A collection of black and white photographs of moments furtively stolen from Henri B.'s trip

through a wintery and cold Venice remains as the evidence of Calle's dwelling in the sphere of mediality. The images are accompanied by minute reports of the man's movements, an attempt to hold on to the very mediality that following endures. On Monday, February 18, 1980 she notes:

At last, it's him. [...] He's wearing a wool-lined sheepskin coat. I find he's changed. His hair is longer. A woman is holding onto his arm, her head covered by a print shawl. I follow them from a short distance. They take the following route: calle del Traghetto, campo San Barnaba, ponte dei Pugni, rio Terà Canal, - he asks directions from a passerby - campo Santa Margherita, ponte San Pantalon [...] (Calle, 2007: 93)

As appears evident from this brief excerpt, the text that accompanies the photographs is obsessively precise; the space-time coordinates are so specific that it would be possible for us to draw a map of the itinerary undertaken by the mysterious man in Venice. We can easily imagine it. We can make what is absent present through the magic power of our imagination. As Hand states: 'the Suite writes and 'I' follow' (2005: 476). It is exactly here that the sphere of *ethos* emerges: in *Suite Vénitienne* 'we' follow Calle and the man Henri B., and in doing so we experience the labyrinth of desire and the consequent lack of fulfilment. We never in fact see the face of Henri B. The only close-up that Calle takes of him is a fuzzy one. It is a photograph taken when he already knew that she was following him, so that when Calle tried to photograph him for the last time, he held his hand up against the camera and hid his face.

If in *Suite Vénitienne* 'I' am the one who follows, 'I' become the double of Sophie Calle, who is already doubling Henri B. in the Venetian maze. While investigating the connection between memory, doubling and following in *Suite Vénitienne*, Jean Baudrillard suggests that what happens in the act of following the other is a seduction of absence, since we become a mirror for the other we are following:

You seduce yourself by being absent, by being no more than a mirror for the other who is unaware [...] you seduce yourself into the other's destiny, the double of his path. (1988: 76-77) [5]

Thus, when we follow the other, in doubling the other, we disappear. The seduction that Baudrillard talks about then, is the seduction of being able to make ourselves absent, 'the other's tracks are used in such a way as to distance you from yourself' (1988: 76), which is nothing but the seduction of being able to 'make magic'. By becoming a mirror for the other we turn ourselves into the image of the other and we, ourselves, disappear. However, we do not become the other as such, but rather the *image* of the other; and in being an image, we become 'special', for, as Agamben explains, the mirror image is:

a being whose essence is to be a *species* [6] a visibility or an appearance. A being is special if its essence coincides with its being given to be seen, with its aspect. Special being is absolutely insubstantial. It does not have a proper place, but it occurs in a subject and is in this sense like a *habitus* or a mode of being, like the image in the mirror.

Concluding that:

A being is special if it coincides with its own becoming visible, with its own revelation. (2007: 57)

Calle, then, in her 'following pieces' is a 'special being', with no proper place, with no stable place, displaced in her gesture of walking: dwelling in the sphere of mediality, an image of the man she is following.

The absence of place is an inherent feature not only of walking or following, but also of falling, whether it be in love or otherwise. When in 1984 the man Calle was in love with left

her, she felt she had no a proper place anymore. Twenty years later she embarked on the piece *Exquisite Pain*, the genesis of which was 'the most unhappy minute of her life' (Calle 1993: 40). Calle expressed her intimate dilemma about working on a piece focused on unhappiness, a piece that would have had its central point in the events that anticipated and followed the end of her love affair. In a 1993 interview she explains:

There is a project I have been trying to do for five years. Every time I have a new idea, anything, I do the new one quickly to postpone this one. [...] It is a project on unhappiness. [...] something happened to me in India that was the most unhappy minute of my life: I could put my finger on it and say, I've never suffered as much as right at that minute. There is a medical term called 'exquisite pain'. When you break your arm, if you put your finger where it was broken, they call the pain you feel exquisite pain. And I could put my finger just on the second of my pain. This was the thing that interested me. (40)

Finally realised in 2003, *Exquisite Pain* is a twofold project, that journeys from happiness to unhappiness and back again, and was first presented as an installation and then as book. Calle leads us from the initial 'countdown to unhappiness' through her symbolic process towards recovery. The first part documents a three-month trip she made to Japan after winning a scholarship; the second part records ninety-nine days 'after unhappiness', the time span she needed in order to forget. Ninety-nine is the same number of cantos required by Dante, in the *Divine Comedy*, to be able to gain his place in Paradise. [7]

At the beginning of *Exquisite Pain* we read:

I left for Japan on October 25, 1984, unsuspecting that this date would mark the beginning of a 92 day countdown to the end of a love affair. Nothing extraordinary – but to me, at the time, the unhappiest moment in my life. (Calle, 2004: 13)

The piece, presented to the public almost twenty years after the end of her love affair, recounts and combines events, pictures, mementoes, letters and her personal narration of the facts, of a 'life as it is remembered'. In the first half of the work, text and photos are marked by a large red stamp, halfway between a '*memento pati*' (remember you are going to suffer) and a passport stamp, signifier of travelling, both metaphorical and actual, which beginning from day ninety-two, the first day of her trip from Paris, continues to day one, the day of her arrival at the Imperial Hotel in New Delhi; the venue that was arranged by her lover for their reunion. Upon arrival at the airport Calle received the following message: 'M. can't join you in Delhi due accident in Paris and stay in hospital' (2004: 197). After ten hours of attempting to get through to his number, consumed with concern about the accident, she finally spoke to him only to find out that he had not come to India because there was another woman in his life and the accident, just an infected finger, was only an excuse. A photograph of her hotel bed with an old-fashioned red telephone sitting on it becomes the image of her dismay, nucleus of *Exquisite Pain*: 'I spent the night staring at the phone. I'd never been this unhappy before' (206), and we are there staring at the image of the phone too. Doubling her.

Once back in Paris she explained that whenever people asked her about the trip, she chose to tell them just about her pain:

I didn't want to speak about it [the trip], I just wanted to say I hated it because this happened. And then also my father whom I deeply loved nearly died when I was away, so when I saw that I had been through the worst pain in my life, I learned how relative this was, because I'd just passed by something worse. All this together made me decide to tell everybody my unhappiness [...] (Calle, 1993: 41)

In return she asked both friends and people she encountered by chance to tell her about their worst experience of pain, their moment of *exquisite pain*. She decided to continue such exchanges until she had gotten over her own pain by comparing it with other people's, or

had worn out her own story through sheer repetition (Calle, 2004: 206):

I asked all those people who I told about my unhappiness to tell me in exchange what was the worst minute of their life, not obviously what happened, but what was the colour of the wall, the music playing? (Calle, 1993: 41)

What she was looking for was the image of their unhappiness, the colour and sound of their pain, which will then become the material for the second half of *Exquisite Pain*. Each panel of this second part displays on the left hand side Calle's obsessive retelling of that night in the hotel room in New Delhi, written in a white font on a black background, paired with stories of pain and loss collected from friends and acquaintances, written in a black font on a white background. Calle retells the moment of the break-up over and over again, ninety-nine times, each time starting with the same obsessive sentence: '1 day ago the man I love left me' until she gets to '99 days ago the man I love left me'. And although her retelling changes slightly each time, especially in the opening sentences where memories from the past slowly infiltrate the rehearsed story, I would argue that this very retelling can be read as an attempt to exhaust language, to break free from language. So for instance, on the fifth day 'after unhappiness' we read:

He was a friend of my father's. I'd always had a thing for him. On our first night, I slipped into bed with a wedding dress. Before that day I had applied for a three-month study grant for Japan. [...]. M. didn't approve of such a long absence. He threatened to forget me. Maybe I wanted to know if he loved me enough to be patient. Anyway I went. [...] He suggested we meet up in India, after my trip. (Calle, 2004: 204)

The following day she changes the story slightly:

I used to dream about him as a little girl. He was so handsome. At thirty I managed to seduce him. For our first night I wore a wedding dress. We had been together nearly a

year when they gave me that damned three-month grant for Japan. He warned me that he'd forget me if I left him. But still I went [...]. Out of pride or bravado? In spite of his threat, he suggested we meet up in India at the end of my journey. (206)

Sixteen days 'after unhappiness' she writes again:

'[...] I loved him and yet I accepted the study grant in Japan even though he had warned me that he wouldn't wait that long for me. [...] Anyway, I ignored his reminders. Perhaps by leaving I meant to test his feelings. That day [the day in New Delhi] I thought I won: we were going to be together again [...]' (220)

At a first glance her narration in the second part of *Exquisite Pain* seems a mere reproduction of the "same," the same story of her relationship and of that night in the hotel room in New Delhi, where the image at the top of each of the nine-nine panels, the red telephone on the bed, acts as a visual metaphor of her pain. While "following" is what is at stake in *Suite Vénitienne*, 'repetition' is what is at stake in *Exquisite Pain*. "Following" embodies 'repetition' to the level that the very action of walking is a repetition of quasi-identical steps. On the other hand "repetition" relates to "following" through disappearance. In the same way that happens when we follow somebody, the other, as such, disappears and we become the image of the other, so it happens in "repetition", but slightly differently. When we repeat something too many times it loses its meaning, and somehow it disappears.

Bruce Fink commenting on Jacques Lacan's Seminar XI points out that even though the term repetition seems to suggest the return of the same, of something that once-was-present-in-the-past, which as a consequence would suggest some kind of 'magic power', in truth 'repetition is something of a misnomer' because as Heraclitus says 'you can't step in the same river twice'. Therefore 'repetition seems to be [...] consisting in the return, not of the same, but of the different - the return of something else, something other' (Fink, 1995: 223). Repetition, unlike reproduction, does not bring back the past. Rather, it brings back the real.

According to Lacan, difference is the essence of repetition because 'as soon as we enter the signifying order, difference being at the very core of the signifier, we cannot [...] control the difference of elements. Only the real can do the trick' (2004: 224). Lacan clarifies that 'repetition is not reproduction' because reproduction is 'a making present, *in act*' (50) whereas repetition is an attempt to bring back the sudden intrusion of the Real into the Symbolic. Thanks to the abrupt intrusion of the Real, epitomised in Calle's piece by the message at the airport and by the subsequent phone call, Calle seeks to symbolise the Real through the repetition of the traumatic "loss of love event."

The suffering felt by Calle and recorded in *Exquisite Pain* is a direct result of the "loss of love event" and not of the loss of that particular man; it is a result of the loss of that image – outside her and loved – that made her feel complete, in a word, whole. Agamben explains that it is in the mirror that we discover that we have an image and that at the same time we are separate from that image, 'that our *species* or *imago* does not belong to us' (Agamben, 2007: 57). The gap that exists between the image and the self is what 'the medieval poets called *love*', is Narcissus' mirror, 'the source of love' *par excellence* (57; my emphasis). I argue that what informs *Exquisite Pain* is the illusion of being one with the image, which inevitably leads to the experience of lack and loss. Interesting to note that the man himself is constantly absent in Calle's recalling of their relationship: 'From time to time he would remind that he wasn't really in love but I blithely ignored the warning: he was living with me after all' (Calle, 2004: 208). This climactic and revealing statement performs the absence of M. The reiteration of the words 'x days ago the man I love left me' at the beginning of each day in the second part of *Exquisite Pain*, with the picture of the red telephone on the bed at the top of each page, conjures up the claustrophobic and obsessional quality of repetition.

Lacan in his seminar 'The Unconscious and Repetition' highlights the paradoxical essence of trauma, as being a non-event and yet one that needs to be repeated over and over again: on the one hand, he says, the traumatic is the 'missed encounter' with the real, while on the other 'repetition serves to screen the real understood as traumatic' (Foster, 1996: 132).

Using the terms *automaton* and *touché* Lacan elucidates further the intertwining of the real and the symbolic. He describes the *automaton* as 'the network of signifiers' (Lacan, 2004: 52), and the *touché* as 'the encounter with the real' (53) adding that 'it refers to the incursion of the Real into the Symbolic Order' (Evans, 1996: 24). For 'the Real is beyond the *automaton*' (Lacan, 2004: 53) that is to say that the real is beyond the network of signifiers, consequently the traumatic event is nothing but the encounter with the real beyond signification; it is the missed encounter because it happens in a time and space that go beyond signification itself. [8] Hal Foster comments that 'as missed encounter the real cannot be represented, it can only be repeated, indeed it must be repeated' (1996: 132). According to Freud the repetition of a traumatic event, whether it happens in images, actions or dreams, occurs in order to help the subject to integrate the trauma into the symbolic order. *Exquisite Pain*, by its very nature being a recounting of a traumatic event, is Sophie Calle's attempt to screen the real perceived as traumatic and to symbolise it. Calle herself seems to notice the healing properties of repetition:

To tell everybody my unhappiness [...] was a very good way to get rid of it, because when you tell the same story sixty times the first time you cry deeply, but after sixty times it's not even your own story, it becomes a fiction. So I got rid of this in a very therapeutic way. (1993: 41)

Around the eightieth day 'after unhappiness', the text begins to fade on the page. With an effort on the ninety-eighth day we can just about make out the word 'Enough'. The ninety-ninth day 'after unhappiness', the last one, is blank. The loss of love was so traumatic because of Calle's incapability of naming or even verbalising the *touché*, her missed encounter with the real. Even though we could interpret the fading of Calle's words on the page as an exemplification of the real's resistance to symbolisation, I would argue instead that the wordlessness seemingly espoused by Calle in the end of *Exquisite Pain* is an authentication and proof that an effective symbolisation of the real has happened in her work. The symbolisation in fact is the regaining of control. The repetition and erasure

enables Calle to distance herself from the event, thereby allowing an intimate encounter for the spectator.

What Calle calls *exquisite pain* can be seen as the Lacanian *touché*, as a missed encounter with the real. The subject of Calle's repetition in *Exquisite Pain* is not the break-up but her inability to acknowledge the idea that the desire to be one with the image would lead to a deadly experience, à la Narcissus. Calle therefore by working through such an impossible desire ends up in silence: the last panel of *Exquisite Pain* being blank. According to Freud 'nothing can be grasped, destroyed, or burnt except in a symbolic way, in *effigie*, in *absentia*' (Lacan, 2004: 50), therefore she could metaphorically destroy her pain only in *effigie*, through the power of that silenced panel, which performs the act of closure for both Calle's pain and the piece alike. Such a blank panel is an example of what Agamben calls 'the finality of the realm of means' that is

The power of the gesture that interrupts the gesture in its very being-means and only in this way can exhibit it, thereby transforming a *res* [a simple fact] into a *res gesta* [an event]. (2000: 59)

The event that happens at the end of *Exquisite Pain* is indeed a "gesture of happiness" since the pain vanishes in the moment when there is nothing to say any more. Agamben's claim that 'the gesture is communication of a communicability' (2007a: 59) further proves my point. The absence of language in the end of *Exquisite Pain* is the "gesture of happiness", for it exposes the word, or rather it exposes the absence of it, and in so doing it exposes the mediality of language itself. What is exposed in the last blank panel is the 'being-in-language as pure mediality':

However, because being-in-language is not something that could be said in sentences, the gesture is essentially always a gesture of not being able to figure something out in language. (59)

A gesture of not being able to figure something out in language is also at the core of *Take Care of Yourself*. The piece, originally created by Calle as an installation to represent France in the French Pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale, is a movingly performative piece that deals with the unstable nature of narrative. Calle explains the concept that lies at the base of the project as follows:

It was two years ago. An ordinary break-up letter, in a way, such as men write to women all the time. A woman would not have written this letter; though I can't say why, can't defend that certainty. Except to say that it was not ordinary at all: it was too *written*, too considered, too stylised, as if that were the point of it: its literariness. And it ended with a sentence that was violent in its formality, its Pilate-like washing of hands, its brusque dismissal of me. [...] Take care of *yourself*. (Dillon, 2007: 69; emphasis in the original)

The conclusive sentence of the email, *take care of yourself*, ironically became the title of the piece in which

107 women (including two made from wood and one with feathers), [were] chosen for their profession or skills, to interpret this letter. To analyze it, comment on it, dance it, sing it. Dissect it. Exhaust it. Understand it for me. Answer for me. It was a way of taking the time to break up. A way of taking care of myself. (Calle, 2007a) [9]

This work, in a similar way to *Exquisite Pain*, was first presented as an installation and then as a book. It is worth noting that the usual small size of her books embodies an understated elegance, which in turn suggests a whispered performative intimacy. For example, the small book *Exquisite Pain*, with its grey cloth-cover and the red edges of the pages, resembles a prayer book, bringing to mind ideas of confession, suffering, and atonement. For this new project, however, Calle chose a different format: the book *Take Care of Yourself* has all the

look and feel of a sophisticated art book with its embossed fuchsia metallic-looking cover, with a variety of textured pages throughout, and numerous writing styles and formats, along with several little additional booklets and green squared envelopes enclosed within, to hold the DVDs of the video or audio interpretations of the letter. Calle's silhouette, from mouth to breast, appears in black on the cover of the book, her name is printed above, and the title is engraved in French just below her neck and in English underneath the picture. Calle's eyes are erased from the picture as if to suggest that the gaze we will encounter in this work might not be just hers. The final pages of the book are baby-pink in colour and perform different translations of the over-repeated email: we find one in morse code, another in hexadecimal language, and one in braille; another one in shorthand, and even one in binary form and one as a bar code. The work's dedication reads to 'Monique Sindler, who plays the role of the mother in this book, a role she recently left behind...' By using the suspension dots Calle leaves this sentence open, only to conclude it on the following page as: '...and to *you*' (Calle, 2007a). Her mother and this hypothetical *you* literally belong to two very different pages. In fact, while her deceased mother inhabits the past, *you* – as the other than her - might inhabit the future, hereby offering an interesting opening to the other as such, and not just to the image of the other. This *you* printed in italics refers, not only to the author of the email who, by leaving her, offered her the spark to create this new piece, but also to us, readers of the email and viewers of the piece. This *you* then becomes a doorway to the sphere of *ethos*. With this dedication Calle turns us into the ultimate witnesses and keepers of the content of the email.

In the piece, all of the interpreters of the email are females, and each of them is asked to read and "translate" the document according to her specific profession: so for example Valerie Lermite, a proof-reader, gives the edits of the text; Soledad Bravi, a cartoonist, turns it into a cartoon; a judge gives a legal interpretation of it; Mazarine Pinget, a graduate of the École Normale Supérieure provides for it a very long textual analysis, and so on. Calle also asked well-known international performers, such as the actress Jeanne Moreau, the Italian comic actress Luciana Letizzetto, and the composer Laurie Anderson, to physically

enact the letter, to perform it. She filmed the interpretations of singers and actresses; photographed all the others, so that in the book each printed interpretation of the email is paired with at least one image of its author, and some are even accompanied by their digital documentation. This happens with Maité Lassime, family mediator and the first woman in the book who tries to enact the content of the email. It is paradigmatic that the letter finds its first active interpreter in her who works with “mediality”: a family mediator. The video shows the mediation room featuring two chairs divided by a tiny glass table on which a glass of water and a pack of Kleenex lie. While Calle sits on one chair, the other is occupied by the printed email, signifier of the ‘absent man’. Repetition indeed always happens only ‘in *effigie*, in *absentia*.’ The disembodied voice of the family mediator – an audible ‘being-in-language’ - asks the (absent) man to clarify several aspects of the content of the email. After each of these questions the camera shows us the gendered empty chair where the tiny letter is. Since the man is not there to answer, Calle takes the chance to answer for both of them, and although it is clear that she is playing along with the family mediator, there are moments in which it is not so obvious if she is just embodying a performance or if she is performing, through her artistic self, some aspects of her “real” self. The intertwining of reality and fiction, presence and absence, which usually doubles Calle within her own work, in *Take Care of Yourself* fragments her so as to multiply her. As if she had just stepped into a metaphorical room with 107 mirrors which, instead of reflecting her unified image, reflect different facets of it:

I found 107 women - I chose them by profession - who agreed to interpret the email. Among them are writers, actors, dancers, musicians, a chess player, my accountant, an etiquette consultant, a clown, a judge, a moral philosopher, a historian of the eighteenth century and a puppet at the Jardin d’Acclimation, Paris. They are my doubles, my proxies: they understand, dissect, judge. They take care of me because I cannot. (Dillon, 2007: 70)

Calle states in clear terms her disappearance in the piece: the other women will take care of

her, because she cannot. These will be the women who will manage to break free from the name of the father, from language as the main patriarchal means by turning it into a 'means without end'. All these women, by performing their response to the email, enact one of the many *personas* [masks] of Sophie Calle. *Take Care of Yourself* allows us to navigate among its material, whether it be text, images or videos, so as to find our own individual way of understanding language and the relationship between language and *res gesta*, that is, an event.

Lars Iyer in the opening lines of his essay *Blanchot, Narration and the Event* addresses the reader as follows:

Trust the tale, not the teller-but what if the identity of the teller is given in the articulation of the tale? What if there would be not only no tale without a teller, but no teller without a tale? What if tale and teller were bound up in an interdependence that is far more complex than hitherto supposed? (2002: paragraph 1)

The tale that we are presented in *Take Care of Yourself* is a tale about the essence of communication, in which the tellers are the 107 women employed, the viewers of the piece, Calle herself and the hypothetical absent one-time-lover. By underlining that 'the work is all about the letter. Not the man who wrote it,' Calle seems to refer to what Maurice Blanchot calls *narration (récit)* in his 'Sirens' Song', where he warns us that:

[...] we shall miss the point of the *narration* if we see it only as the exact relation of an unusual event which has actually taken place and which we try to report. *Narration* is not the account of an event but *the event itself*, its immanence, the site where it will occur – it is a happening about to happen whose magnetic power may enable the narration to happen. (1982: 62; my emphasis)

This happening that enables the narration to happen is in *Take Care of Yourself* a “gesture of happiness” that magically makes the letter and Calle disappear while exposing ‘the communication of a communicability’. In the wake of Blanchot, Iyer argues that when people write about an event, they remove themselves from this event. As happens in dreams, where they never see themselves as such, although they are inevitably present. Calle’s attempt to work through the break-up letter requires her disappearance: ‘the trace of the writer is found only in the singularity of [her] absence’ (Foucault, 1998: 207). Acknowledging this necessary instance, she writes:

I showed the letter to a friend, asked how she would respond. And then it struck me: I would not reply, but ask others to answer on my behalf. For once - in fact, I've done it before, but not when the subject was so personal - I would withdraw, efface myself and let other voices speak for me. (Dillon, 2007: 69)

In contrast to what she does in *Exquisite Pain*, where she attempts to tell the traumatic encounter with the real in order to make it disappear, in this work she accepts her disappearance in the first place. She declares that she will ‘efface herself’, where the term bears within itself another one: face. Agamben notes an intriguing connection between face and language: ‘the face’s revelation is the revelation of language itself. Such a revelation, therefore, does not have any real content [...]: it is *only* opening, *only* communicability (2000: 92; emphasis in the original). The letter that bears witness to the end of her love affair is a document that signifies an event and the ephemerality of it. In asking other women to tell their tale about the email Calle can do away with the event to which her work of art bears witness, she abandons what is ‘dead in the past’ in favour of the ‘deathless eternity’ of her piece. Blanchot in a poetic fashion explains that the event is ‘dead’ and ‘absent’ because there is an impossibility to have any presence of the event in the images used to narrate the event itself:

What has happened now? Only a presence of a song to come. And what has [Ulysses]

experienced in the present? Not the event of the encounter become present, but the beginning of that endless movement which is the encounter itself, always distanced from the place and the time in which it occurs; for it is this distance, this imaginary distance where the absence materializes and at the end of which the event only begins to occur – the place where the reality of the encounter is, and whence the words that describe it emerge. (1999: 65)

Calle's sirens' song is the letter, an event that, in its being *res gesta*, cannot be recounted since it can only be endured. Blanchot's concept of narration shares with Lacan's theory of the traumatic real the inherent impossibility of recounting the event that occurred. Both concepts fit with Agamben's ideas of gesture as that which has nothing to say, for the event, the *res gesta* is always absence. It is this very absence that embodies the potentiality of the event itself, which thus opens it to the sphere of *ethos*. *Take Care of Yourself* concludes with a parrot destroying the letter, performing once again an attempt to escape language via a gesture, a "gesture of happiness."

Although the interconnection between happiness and magic has been considered immoral by philosophers and thinkers (Agamben refers to Kant for instance), it nonetheless 'can testify to a higher ethics' (Agamben, 2007: 20). In the paradoxical relationship between happiness and the subject what occurs is that as soon as we realise we *are* happy, we *no longer are*: 'someone who is happy cannot know that he is; the subject of happiness is not a subject per se and does not obtain the form of a consciousness' (20). As if to say that the subject of happiness, in its ontological impossibility, is a non-subject, a subject always vacant of consciousness and self-knowledge. A subject that constantly experiences a lack. An effaced subject. Absent. Disappeared. And this is the reason why, for Agamben, we can only find happiness through magic: for magic is the only exception that allows us to be happy and to know that we are. It is only through magic that we can have an experience of happiness while escaping 'from the hubris implicit in the consciousness of happiness', since happiness gained through magic is not exactly ours (20). But if it is true that we always strive to find

'magic means' that should help us to reach what we desire; Agamben concludes by suggesting that it is in the impossibility of such 'magic means' that we achieve happiness: 'there is only one way to achieve happiness on this earth: to believe in the divine and not to aspire to reach it' (21).

Therefore the "gestures of happiness" that take place in Calle's *Trilogy of Desire* show that happiness rather than being divine, is quite a human affair since 'there is nothing simpler and more human than to desire' and that 'the crypt where we hide our desires contains only images' (53). The images that conclude each of the pieces of the *Trilogy of Desire*, namely a fuzzy photograph, a blank panel, a shredded letter, are all images of silence, of speechlessness, of erasure. Images that in turn become gestures because:

If speech is originary gesture, then what is at issue in gesture is not so much a prelinguistic content as, so to speak, the other side of language, the muteness inherent in humankind's very capacity for language, its speechless dwelling in language.
(Agamben, 1999: 78)

Only through silence then "gestures of happiness" can take place, in that place outside language, and yet very much within it.

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Endnotes

[1] Agamben discusses the concept of the 'gesture' in *Infancy and History* (149-156); in *Means Without an End* (49-60) and in *Potentialities* (77-85) where we can detect the influence of the work of German critic Max Kommerell on his understanding of *gesture*.

[2] The artistic and cultural roots of the 'following pieces' can be found first of all in the art of wandering and walking that developed between the nineteenth and the twentieth century, see Walter Benjamin, *Paris, Capital of the 19th Century* which marks the distinction between *l'homme des foules* and *flâneur*. This essay, written in 1939, is part of Benjamin's monumental work *Arcades Project*. As for conceptual art, Vito Acconci in 1969 would employ 'following' in his *Following Piece*.

[3] This is the 'art of making the other disappear' that Baudrillard employs as a starting point of his argument in his essay 'Please Follow Me', in Calle, 1988: 76-87.

[4] Illegality was another one of the issues raised by *Suite Vénitienne* which, although realised in 1979, was published one year later, in 1980. This delay was the result of the advice of a lawyer who was concerned about legal action from the man described and photographed in the piece. Therefore Calle, while not altering the descriptions of this man's journey in Venice, postponed the timing of the events to the following year for matters of privacy. The first time that photographs and texts were shown to the public was in a 1996 installation at the White Cube Gallery in London.

[5] Jean Baudrillard suggests that there is an interesting correlation between this concept and the mirror that Søren Kierkegaard refers to in his *Diary of a Seducer* trans. by Gerd Gillhoff (New York; London: Continuum, 2006), 16-19.

[6] Agamben guides the reader through the etymological path of the term *species* as follows: 'The Latin term *species*, which means 'appearance', 'aspect', or 'vision', derives from a root signifying 'to look, to see.' This root is also found in *speculum* (mirror), *spectrum* (image, ghost), *perspicuus* (transparent, clearly seen), *speciosus* (beautiful, giving itself to be seen), *specimen* (example, sign), and *spectaculum* (spectacle) (2007: 56-57).

[7] The number of cantos in the *Divine Comedy* is one hundred as one canto is dedicated to Limbo, a space that Dante positions outside the actual entrance of Hell. This is the reason why the cantos that are required to gain the holy vision in Paradise are in fact ninety-nine.

[8] As happens 'in the dream Lacan had that he recounts in this chapter [Seminar XI], the knocks at the door are enveloped, as it were, in the primary process constitutive of the dream, so as to allow Lacan to go on sleeping and dreaming. Something from the real appears [the knocking]' (Fink, 1995: 226). On this topic Lacan explains that 'the real has to be sought beyond the dream – in what the dream has enveloped, hidden from us, behind the lack of representation [...]' (2004: 60).

[9] This quote is printed on the back cover of the book *Take Care of Yourself*, as well as in one of the first pages of the same book. All the pages throughout the book are unnumbered.

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