

**Ido Govrin. *Philosophical Archaeology: With and Beyond Agamben on Philosophy, History, and Art*. State University of New York Press, 2023.**

Daniele E. C. Cardoso  
University of São Paulo, Brazil  
ORCID: 0000-0003-4973-0736

**Abstract:** This review critically examines Govrin's work on Giorgio Agamben's philosophical archaeology, focusing on its historical and conceptual foundations. To this end, the aim is to engage with the dialogue established by Govrin through key concepts in Agamben's thought: the relationship between act and potentiality, *origin* and *arché*, time and temporality. The review seeks to unveil how these concepts emerge and unfold, shedding light on their significance within Agamben's philosophical framework.

**Keywords:** Agamben; Philosophical Archaeology; Aesthetics; Conceptual Emergence; Interdisciplinarity

**Resumo:** Esta resenha examina criticamente a obra de Govrin sobre a arqueologia filosófica de Giorgio Agamben, com foco em seus fundamentos históricos e conceituais. Para tanto, o objetivo é adentrar o diálogo estabelecido por Govrin por meio de conceitos-chave do pensamento de Agamben: a relação entre ato e potência, *origem* e *arché*, tempo e temporalidade. A resenha busca desvelar como esses conceitos emergem e se desdobram, lançando luz sobre sua significância no quadro filosófico de Agamben.

**Palavras chave:** Arqueologia; Arqueologia Filosófica; Estética; Emergência conceitual; interdisciplinaridade.

## INTRODUCTION

In a world increasingly shaped by the contestation of narratives, where the proliferation of competing discourses challenges the hegemony of thought, philosophical archaeology emerges as a methodological alternative to traditional approaches. These approaches often tether thought to a positive relationship with knowledge that dictates "truth discourses." As developed by Giorgio Agamben, philosophical archaeology

proposes a mode of inquiry that examines the field of emergence of a concept through the tension between the pre-established and the rupture introduced by the new. It is an elucidation of a conceptual horizon that reveals the genesis of the categories structuring our experience of the world.

This perspective is not rooted in historical or economic determinism but in the visible emergence of a mode of relation. By focusing on the conditions of possibility rather than causal chains, philosophical archaeology shifts the emphasis from linear progression to the dynamic interplay between continuity and interruption. In doing so, it offers a critical framework that resists reductive accounts of history and knowledge, emphasizing instead the contingent and open-ended nature of conceptual formations.

In this sense, Ido Govrin's book, *Philosophical Archaeology: With and Beyond Agamben on Philosophy, History and Art*, serves as a tool for understanding Agamben's thought by characterizing what philosophical archaeology is and how it operates. As a multidisciplinary artist and philosopher, Govrin provides a rigorous and analytically precise commentary on Agamben's philosophy while simultaneously expanding, repositioning, and extending the notion of philosophical archaeology beyond theoretical discourse or a mere introduction to the Italian thinker. His work functions as a mapping and reorganization of key concepts that shape contemporary debates on philosophy, art, and history.

Moreover, Govrin demonstrates a research and investigative method that fosters dialogue between past and present, allowing for both a reinterpretation of concepts and a restructuring of the very framework of meaning. Through the application of a research method that is simultaneously a mode of writing, Govrin defines Agamben's philosophical archaeology. Perhaps one of the book's greatest achievements lies precisely in this quality—the production of a text that not only elucidates a concept but also demonstrates the way it is articulated. Instead of analyzing the phenomenon itself, the aim is to unveil the historical *a priori* in which the phenomenon can develop. However, this is not the only aspect that composes philosophical archaeology. In fact, the term encompasses a complex relationship between science, thought, art, and culture, and it is the intersection between these elements that forms the foundation of the concept's structure. As Govrin himself states:

In this sense, Agamben's corpus also becomes the site (or the research object) where I practice and execute philosophical archaeology in writing, where I use language as an artistic medium (*à la détournement*)—a performance that

illuminates the development of philosophical archaeology and the manner in which it is constituted within Agamben's own multi-layered, extensive oeuvre. (Govrin, 2022, p. 12)

From this perspective, Ido Govrin's book suggests, beyond an analysis of a philosophical investigative method, fundamental to Agamben's work, there is also, and above all, a way of unveiling a concept through the investigation of its layers of composition. This occurs through the intersection of the philosophical, historiographical, and methodological aspects that philosophical archaeology addresses, and the way these foundations structure the entire research and composition of Govrin's work.

## 1.0. Critical Examination

Before delving into the organization of the chapters and the central ideas of Govrin's book, there are some formal aspects worthy of note. The use of a gloss to explore key concepts in Agamben's thought serves not only as an instructional tool but also as a map outlining the constellation of references that shape his philosophy. This device functions as an image that removes the concept from a fixed position and situates it in relation to other ideas and authors. From a pedagogical perspective, this is essential for a lay reader to grasp the structural framework of Agamben's thought. However, there is also a significant theoretical foundation underlying this approach—namely, the idea that a concept is always defined in relation to others. Rather than a sequential process that purifies reasoning through refinement, it constitutes a network of articulated meanings, emerging precisely from the intersections within this web. One of the remarkable qualities of this book is that it allows the reader to witness Agamben's thinking in action.

That said, the book is structured into three chapters, which will be discussed in detail later, along with a preface and a conclusion. Agamben's thought is presented in dialogue with other authors, an approach that is fundamental to his conception of philosophy—consistent and grounded in substantial theoretical frameworks. However, certain passages addressing other philosophers are somewhat concise, occasionally resulting in minor inaccuracies or overly hasty conclusions on complex topics. Even so, these limitations do not detract from the book's overarching objective, which is, on the contrary, achieved with remarkable success. It is a cohesive and well-structured work that effectively fulfills its purpose: to explore the historical and philosophical origins of

archaeology within Agamben's thought and to examine its applications beyond the confines of his philosophy.

The first chapter, in a certain sense, constitutes a meta-history of philosophical archaeology. It is not strictly a history, as the very definition of history is called into question. In this chapter, it is particularly striking how the need to produce an a priori rationality also generates a specific relationship with history—one that does not unfold through historical narrative but through the conditions that make certain forms possible. By identifying the genesis of philosophical archaeology in Kant, Govrin highlights a fundamental aspect of Agamben's approach to history, namely its elusive nature, in which its totality remains out of reach, leaving only the task of producing an inventory of this incompleteness. After all, history is often an unattainable goal. Nevertheless, the Kantian aspect of constructing a field of possibilities is reflected in the relationship that Agamben superimposes onto history as origin, or *arché*. The distinction introduced by this conception is that it does not aim to identify the first manifestation of a given phenomenon but rather the principle or the thought that determined its emergence. This approach subverts the analysis of empirical aspects in favor of producing a meaning that does not depend on the full development of events but can be conceived as the structuring principle of the field of possibilities.

Another aspect the author addresses successfully is the relationship between Agamben and Benjamin, not only from a conceptual perspective but also in terms of their proximity in the digressive manner of textual construction. Thought is not demonstrated through an argumentative structure but rather appears almost as an image created through collage. Composition, in this sense, is akin to archaeology—a non-linear construction, an overlay that presents language not as a finalized form of meaning production but as one permeated by gaps, intervals, and lapses of meaning. Beyond the formal aspect, the connection with Benjamin's thought becomes evident in the way he develops a vision of the relationship between origin and original, a distinction that Agamben adopts to significant effect. The passages discussing Benjamin's thought are exceptionally clear and direct, illuminating with precision the lines of continuity between the two thinkers. As will be seen later, this distinction, so well-constructed by Govrin, will be fundamental for the development of an even more complex conception in Agamben: his thought on temporality.

In this way, the first chapter not only introduces the concept and its historical foundations but also the distinction between origin and original, with the former linked

to a principle and the latter to a manifestation. This distinction serves as the master key to Agamben's thought on time, or rather, how times relate to each other. To this end, it is essential to understand the meaning of origin for the philosopher and how this meaning is profoundly shaped by Benjamin's conception. The definition of origin as the first appearance of a phenomenon presupposes a logic of causality in which time is ordered through a succession of events. In this framework, the origin of something is necessarily what came before, in a linear unfolding. However, what is at stake in Agamben's conception is not a relationship of priority but one of intensity: the approach to the origin is not a return to something that has already passed but rather the possibility of opening time itself at the precise moment when—the thing *becomes*. In this sense, the origin is understood as a structuring principle that operates temporalities. As Govrin states: "Origin, for Benjamin, does not precede a phenomenon's becoming nor is it separated from its chronology; origin autonomously dwells within a phenomenon but also derives its matter from it" (p. 15). This concept reflects the interplay between act and potentiality, as well as the possibility of becoming contemporary with a given phenomenon. This idea, in fact, is one of the fundamental concepts in Agamben's philosophy.

Further into the first chapter, it is notable how Govrin navigates the history of philosophy, offering a synthetic overview of the main points of thought from such complex philosophers. However, some conceptualizations are somewhat reductionist. While this is not problematic for the contextualization of Agamben's thought, it is somewhat imprecise from a philosophical perspective in relation to the other cited authors. For instance, some conceptions attributed to Kant are not settled points, and it would be beneficial to clarify which authors or commentators Govrin relies on to adopt certain positions regarding the philosopher. It is understandable that a work with such a well-defined scope may not have sufficient space to address areas of tension in the thought of other philosophers; however, it would be more enriching to know the starting points from which Govrin derives certain stances, particularly on Kant but also on Aristotle. That said, it is important to reaffirm that this critique may reflect an excess of rigor, as an overabundance of detailed sources is not necessarily required for the determination of philosophical archaeology.

On this point, one final observation is warranted. As evidenced by the analysis of the notes in the first chapter, all references to Kant are drawn from Agamben's own work; however, the chapter's organization does not make it entirely clear that the Kantian conceptions presented are filtered through Agamben's interpretation. In other words, the

proposal to produce a contextualization of the concept of philosophical archaeology is, in a sense, provided by Agamben himself, and this should be made more explicit. Perhaps, if this aspect were emphasized — namely, that the references to Kant and Nietzsche are, in fact, the result of a thorough mapping of Agamben's own work — the first chapter could be presented as an archaeological exploration within Agamben's oeuvre, rather than within the history of Western philosophy, as is suggested. In the preface, Govrin states: "this course (the emergence of philosophical archaeology) is highly interwoven with Agamben's oeuvre" (xiii). However, it is not merely an interwoven connection but rather a derivation.

There is, however, one exception among the authors referenced in constructing a history of philosophical archaeology: Foucault. The differentiation Govrin establishes regarding genealogy is one of the central passages of the chapter, as it reinforces Agamben's thought through its contrast with the French philosopher. At this point, the analyses of Foucault's thought are rigorous, dense, and faithfully reproducing its complexity, the author navigates with fluency and mastery through the distinctions between archaeology and genealogy, as well as the moments when Agamben either aligns with or diverges from Foucault's way of defining concepts.

Because of these considerations, the sequence of the chapters might hold a different meaning. At first, the first chapter should provide the contextual foundations, allowing the second to delve into the specificities of Agamben's thought on the philosophy of history and his own contributions. However, much of the theoretical references in *The History of Philosophical Archaeology* are drawn from Agamben himself. In this sense, the two chapters appear as two sides of the same theme — namely, how Agamben relates to other thinkers and, above all, to the history of philosophy itself. From this perspective, the first chapter offers an analysis of the Italian philosopher's perspectives on his peers, while the second chapter is properly focused on the movement of thought within the history of philosophy. To this end, Govrin shifts his analysis toward the temporal aspects, or the multiple temporalities through which Agamben establishes his conception, suggesting a unique way of thinking about the relationships between past, present, and future.

First, Govrin identifies in Agamben's thought what he defines as the "fundamental contradiction of modern man," which is characterized by a disjunction between the way time is experienced and a particular conception of history. As the author states, "thus man is split between his being-in-time (as an elusive flow of instants) and his being-in-history

(as the original dimension of man)" (Govrin, p. 42). This disjunction is lived through the tension between the continuity of time and the discontinuity of history — the same opposition between *chronos* and *kairos*, where the former is marked by an idea of temporal progress, while the latter emerges from its untimely quality. The development of these two notions of time and the conflict surrounding history, presented in terms of redemption — particularly by Marx — is contrasted with the idea of messianic time. Through a carefully articulated description, Govrin demonstrates how a dimension of anticipation exists. Precisely because it differs from eschatology and prophecy, messianic time is situated between times — between the end of history, where the conception of time is grounded in the idea of salvation or humanity's destiny, and an ordinary notion of time, based on the succession of what precedes and what follows. Through his sophisticated analysis, Govrin successfully underscores the singularity of the concept of "halting time" or contemporaneity within Agamben's perspective.

His differentiation between the representation of time and its experience — the chronological conception versus the "time within time" — as Govrin demonstrates, is inspired by Agamben's interpretation of Pauline letters. Rather than the expectation of future salvation, the view that the manifestation of the Messiah has already occurred, encapsulated in the term *parousia*, suggests a particular relationship with time: it reflects the irrevocable integration of *chronos* and *kairos*. In other words, it is the coexistence of the fullness of the instant with the simultaneous non-belonging of time itself. This complex notion, fundamental to Agamben's thought, is remarkably articulated, along with its theoretical underpinnings, by Govrin, who successfully maps out the references and connections in the Italian philosopher's thinking.

The difficulty inherent in Agamben's work — namely, the structuring of reasoning through images, metaphors, citations, and his unique method of engaging in dialogue with other thinkers — is adeptly addressed by Govrin. Rather than merely writing *about* Agamben's thought, Govrin takes on the challenge of composing his book *with* Agamben's thought, adhering to the very principle of coexistence that permeates the latter's philosophy. Thus, Govrin's work arguably presents a far more ambitious proposal than merely offering a theoretical exposition of a given author's thought. His work serves as a demonstration of how to engage with philosophy, presenting though not as something finalized, but as something in motion — a quality intrinsic to Agamben's philosophy, which Govrin successfully reproduces in practice.

From this perspective, the *philosophical archaeology* that gives Govrin's book its title is, beyond a concept, a mode of producing concepts or the very articulation of their field of production. The title, therefore, suggests the archaeological modes of constructing philosophy itself, demonstrating how this idea is applied in Agamben's thought while not being confined to it. Philosophical archaeology is not merely a definition but a way of producing meaning through a particular positioning in relation to the history of thought. In this sense, Govrin does more than introduce Agamben's thought; he presents the very field in which meaning is produced within it.

Undoubtedly, the book demonstrates a clear progression across its chapters. Although the first chapter's proposal does not appear to have been as thoroughly explored, as noted in previous observations, the second chapter — and particularly the final one — clearly illustrates how philosophical archaeology operates in both concept and practice. The final chapter, however, stands out as the most brilliant, with an interest that seems to expand the boundaries of Agamben's thought. It is here that Govrin synthesizes the conceptions developed thus far to venture beyond the Italian philosopher's framework, as suggested by the book's title.

While the first two chapters are more closely tied to Agamben's thought, reconstructing the foundations of his philosophy, the chapter titled *Ar(t)chaeology* provides an overview of some structural aspects of contemporary art that are deeply influenced by the concept of archaeology. However, before delving into an analysis that moves beyond Agamben, Govrin carefully conceptualizes his notion of aesthetics, setting the stage for this intellectual leap.

Especially about poetry, but not exclusively, Govrin expands the concept to aesthetics. Agamben finds in poetic language a 'prolonged suspended hesitation' (Govrin, p. 89), a moment in which language 'communicates itself' (ibid.), that is, a dispossession of norms and conventions marked by biopolitical operations, allowing for a disembodiment. At this point, Govrin, in a remarkably bold manner, integrates the temporal and historiographical conceptions developed in the previous chapters. Thus, poetry is that which offers itself to itself. In the author's words: 'The reserve of potentiality is not a transcendental condition with respect to the empirical world, but that which prevents the world from undergoing final reification' (ibid.).

Just like messianic time, there is the emergence of a world that reclaims its existence. However, this always occurs within a dynamic of appearance and concealment, as its manifestation only happens through the recognition of its absence. To this end,



Govrin demonstrates how Agamben's notion of beatitude, influenced by Spinoza and especially Deleuze's reading, is both its own cause — due to its absolute immanence — and a potentiality for the manifestation of the visible. In other words, it exists, like philosophical archaeology, independently of empirical manifestation. However, it is only through this existence that it can manifest itself, not as potentiality, but as act. This paradox is fundamental to understanding Agamben's thought, and it is also through this paradox that the notions of time, history, and art intertwine.

However, these temporal notions are not confined to history or archaeology; they constitute relational modes or methodological paradigms that enable an interdisciplinary approach. In the case of contemporary art, this issue unfolds in the relationship between creation and time, or how history weighs on artistic production. On one hand, art is tied to history; on the other, there is the creative aspect, understood in terms of Agamben's conception of origin. In other words, between the artist, the artwork, and its place of circulation, there lies a contested territory that disrupts historical predetermination while opening the possibility for another time. Archaeology, in this sense, encompasses both aspects by representing precisely a method, or a mode, of relating to history that emerges from the tension between the visible and the invisible, between what is and what is yet to become — a quality that Agamben attributes to contemporary art.

The contemporary is one who exists between times, and archaeology emerges as a mode of mediation. Given the existence of a temporal conflict, history is worthy of questioning. Under Benjamin's influence, the problem with history lies in the fact that it narrates only what remains — that is, the documents that were written and preserved, the archives, photographs, and so on, everything that was not destroyed. The preservation of these documents is not merely a testament to history but evidence of a specific history: that of those who won the struggle against oblivion and managed to leave their traces. However, there is an entire layer of testimonies that were not documented, which raises questions about the extent to which history can account for events that left no records, such as genocides, for example. Archaeology, in turn, unfolds over what is not visible; it does not seek to discursively organize the data of the past but rather to materialize it.

This is an example of how discourse on the past a contested terrain is. However, perhaps counterintuitively, this contestation must be maintained as a critical engagement with history, and art serves as a field where the creative process is constantly reshaping power dynamics. This becomes particularly evident in the way Govrin maps certain exhibitions, demonstrating the conflict between the artist as a man of his time — a

refractory tool — and as someone who enables the opening of time itself to new forms of relation, thereby addressing the very temporality of art. *Ar(t)chaeology* is, therefore, a chapter that moves beyond direct references to Agamben, incorporating thinkers from various disciplines to construct a reflection on the paradigms of contemporary art. In doing so, it extends the discussion beyond the boundaries of philosophy, even questioning the very existence of such boundaries.

## 2.0. Final Considerations

Despite the observations regarding Chapter I, it is undeniable that the theoretical construction of philosophical archaeology, as well as the demonstration of its conceptual foundations, is crucial for Agamben's temporal conception, developed in Chapter II, and his notion of aesthesis in Chapter III. In this way, there is a solid and progressive construction that allows for a comprehensive and well-grounded understanding of the Italian philosopher's thought. It is a well-crafted, cohesive work that, despite being introductory, prompts reflections beyond the themes discussed. In addition to offering an entry point into Agamben's thought, it is also a valuable contribution to contemporary studies in history and art. Due to its highly didactic writing style, despite addressing the philosophy of one of the most prolific thinkers of our time, this book is not confined to the academic sphere.

Overall, Govrin's work presents Agamben's concepts with clarity. Beyond the extensive bibliography and the ease with which the author articulates central and complex aspects of the philosopher's thought, the detailed notes and abundant references provide a secure, direct, and precise entry point into Agamben's ideas. It is a highly illuminating book, whose merit lies in presenting extremely dense themes in a condensed manner while maintaining the necessary theoretical depth to avoid superficiality. Most importantly, it succeeds in reproducing the movement of Agamben's thought, along with its constellation of concepts and neighbouring ideas. In this way, Govrin applies philosophical archaeology to Agamben, producing an exceptionally concise and well-crafted book, whose methodology aligns seamlessly with the subject matter addressed. Providing valuable resources for readers who wish to delve deeper into the subject. The review concludes that, despite minor shortcomings, Govrin's work successfully elucidates the core of Agamben's philosophical archaeology, particularly its relationship with origin, time, and the non-linear construction of meaning.

## REFERENCES

Govrin, Ido. (2023). *Philosophical Archaeology: With and Beyond Agamben on Philosophy, History, and Art*. New York : State University of New York Press.