

CAN CINEMA BE THOUGHT?: ALAIN BADIOU AND THE ARTISTIC CONDITION

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ABSTRACT: Alain Badiou's philosophy is generally understood to be a fundamentally mathematical enterprise, his principle categories of being, appearing, and truth being themselves thought only through specific scientific events. However the event itself is contrarily thought not through mathematics but through art. And yet despite the fundamental role art plays in his philosophy Badiou's 'inaesthetic' writings seem unduly proscriptive, allowing room principally for the expressly 'literal' arts while eschewing for the most part those manifold arts which have little recourse to the letter. Badiou's polemical writings on cinema are both symptomatic and serve as the most extreme example of this position, his cinema being one which wavers precariously on the border of art and non-art. This paper accordingly questions whether cinema can truly occupy a place in Badiou's inaesthetics. Through a consideration of Badiou's writings on cinema I argue the hegemony of the letter in his inaesthetics to be both one of convenience and symptomatic of his mathematical leanings. I further argue that if cinematic truths are to be registered Badiou's understanding of cinema as (what I interpret to be) an art of dis-appearance must be rejected. I conclude by contending the oppressive literality of Badiou's philosophy results in his regrettably neglecting by and large those manifold illiterate arts that might otherwise serve to augment his thought.

KEYWORDS: Badiou; Inaesthetics; Cinema; Idea; Letter; Matheme; Deleuze; Appearance; Movement

I. THE ART OF THE MATERIALIST DIALECTIC

In his recent *Logiques des mondes: l'être et l'événement*, 2, Alain Badiou names the tension integral to his philosophy—namely the one which runs between being and event, knowledge and truth—a 'materialist dialectic'. It is on the basis of this peculiar dialectic that he opposes his own philosophical project to the contemporary 'democratic materialism' which more and more defines our epoch (prescribed as it is by the master signifiers 'relativism', 'democracy', 'terror' and the like). In contrast to the apparent sophistry of this democratic materialism—whose principle assertion is that 'there are only bodies and languages'¹—Badiou's materialist dialectic proclaims 'there are only bodies and languages, *except that there are truths*' (LM 12). Or again: there are only worlds in which

1. Alain Badiou, *Logiques des mondes: l'être et l'événement*, 2, Paris, Seuil, 2006, p. 9 (henceforth LM).

beings appear (of which the pure multiple figures being qua being) *except that there are truths which can come to supplement these worlds (and which are universalizable)*. Such is Badiou's philosophical axiom, within which we find the three principle strata comprising his thought, namely, the ontological (the thinking of the pure multiple, of being qua being), the logical (the thinking of appearance, of being-in-a-world) and the subject-ive (the thinking of truths, of *thought* itself). Yet these three terms alone are meaningless without an (albeit subtracted) fourth, which is of course the 'abolished flash' that is the event (LM 156). Already we can discern here a clear conditional divide between the first three terms (ontology, logic, thought) and the fourth (event), insofar as whilst the former are themselves thought mathematically by virtue of three distinct scientific events—respectively the Cantor-event (set theory), the Grothendieck-event (category theory), and the Cohen-event (genericity or forcing)—mathematics can say nothing of the event itself. On this point Badiou is unequivocal, for

if real ontology is set up as mathematics by evading the norm of the One, unless this norm is reestablished globally there also ought to be a point wherein the ontological, hence mathematical field, is de-totalized or remains at a dead end. I have named this point the '*event*'.²

Simply, mathematics can think the event only to the extent that it can think its own real qua impasse. Or again, mathematics thinks the event insofar as it axiomatizes its own aporetic structure (as we see for example in Gödel's theory of incompleteness or in the axiom of foundation). Contrarily, the event, of which science must remain silent, and on which the concept of truth relies absolutely, is thought solely under condition of art.

Given then the evental importance of art (coupled with the fact that Badiou is an accomplished novelist and playwright in his own right) it is surprising to observe the relative scarcity of critical reflection on Badiou's conception of art (when compared to, say, the abundance of works considering Badiou's understanding of politics).³ Indeed it follows that—insofar as it is art and art alone that thinks the event—the real nexus of Badiou's dialectic lies with the artistic condition, or, to be more precise, with the 'subtractive' poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé.⁴ Thus Badiou notes immediately after introducing his dialectic that in its principle assertion ('there are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths') 'one will recognize here the style of my master Mallarmé:

2. Alain Badiou, *Briefings on Existence: A Short Treatise on Transitory Ontology*, trans. Norman Maderasz, New York, SUNY, 2006, p. 60 (henceforth TO).

3. This is further compounded if we consider Badiou's own efforts to tie the question of art to that of political emancipation. For example, in his 'Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art' Badiou states that 'the question of art today is a question of political emancipation, there is something political in art itself. There is not only a question of art's political orientation, like it was the case yesterday, today it is a question in itself. Because art is a real possibility to create something new against the abstract universality that is globalisation', *Lacanian Inc*, vol. 23, 2004, p. 107.

4. Badiou says as much on numerous occasions. To pick but a single example: 'Mallarmé is a thinker of the event-drama, in the double sense of its appearance-disappearance ... and of its interpretation which gives it the status of an "acquisition for ever;"' Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham, London, Continuum, 2005, p. 191 (henceforth BE).

nothing will have taken place but the place, except, on high, perhaps, a constellation' (LM 12).⁵ So the sequence of scientific events (Cantor-Grothendieck-Cohen) principally conditioning Badiou's philosophy is supplemented by the Mallarmé-event, exceptional in its singular, non-mathematical and axial status. Of course this separation—of poetry and mathematics—is far from innocent, being on the contrary illustrative of a fundamental antagonism lying at the (voided) interval of art and science.⁶ Accordingly within Badiou's artistic system or his 'inaesthetics'—inaesthetics being namely his approach to art which restricts its considerations to 'the strictly intraphilosophical effects produced by the existence of some works of art' (LM 12)⁷—the 'imperial poem' takes pride of place. Indeed, it is the expressly *literal* arts—those arts of the letter: of poetry as much as theatre and the novel—which command Badiou's closest attention, to the extent that, as Jacques Rancière has remarked, 'ultimately only two arts are required in Badiou's system of the arts: the poem as affirmation, as inscription of a disappearance, and theatre as the site wherein this affirmation turns into mobilization.'⁸ In point of fact, beyond these expressly literal arts art becomes for Badiou both decidedly less artistic and less amenable to inaesthetic consideration. Hence in Badiou's eyes dance for example falls short—undeservedly, one hastens to add—of artistic status, serving instead as its metaphor (or rather as the metaphor of real thought). Painting, on the other hand—though clearly itself an art (in *Logique des mondes*, for example, painting exemplifies artistic truth)—by virtue of its decidedly non-literal form, proves itself (as we shall see) somewhat difficult to justify artistically (to say nothing of sculpture or architecture, let alone the myriad other 'illiterate' arts).

II. CINEMA DECONDITIONED

In considering Badiou's inaesthetics this paper will however take as its focal point the case of cinema, insofar as Badiou's typically polemical writings on the subject appear symptomatic—and arguably serve as the most extreme example—of the decreased amenability to inaesthetic discourse presented by the illiterate arts. Indeed, Badiou's writings on the subject of cinema are distinguished foremost by their deep ambivalence: in his eyes film rests somewhat precariously on the border of art and non-art (although one's immediate impression is that it leans somewhat toward the latter). Simply, cinema

5. cf. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, trans. Henry Weinfield, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994, pp. 142-144.

6. Indeed, Badiou notes that in their subjective (true) dimension 'science proves to be the opposite of art, which explains the spectacular isomorphism of their eventual traces', LM, p. 84.

7. Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano, Stanford, California, Stanford UP, 2005, p. xiv (henceforth HI).

8. Jacques Rancière, 'Aesthetics, Inaesthetics, Anti-Aesthetics,' in Peter Hallward (ed.) *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, London, Continuum, 2004, p. 235. I am of course aware that in describing theatre as a 'literal' art I am essentially ignoring its fundamentally performative nature. It should be noted however that whilst Badiou clearly recognizes performativity to be vital to theatre's artistry, his writings on the subject (or at least those which have been translated into English) tend to focus on the texts themselves (outside of the singularity of their performances).

is for Badiou an art ‘both parasitic and inconsistent’ defined first and foremost by its own impurity (HI 83). This impurity hinges as much on cinema’s inherent bastardry (film being the product of an unsanctioned union between theatre, photography, music, literature, painting, vaudeville, and so on) and compromised nature (cinema being a collaborative medium governed for the most part by capitalistic concerns), as on its artistically ‘porous’ nature, that is, its peculiar status as a ‘place of intrinsic indiscernibility between art and non-art.’⁹ Indeed according to Badiou

no film strictly speaking is controlled by artistic thinking from beginning to end. It always bears absolutely impure elements within it, drawn from ambient imagery, from the detritus of other arts, and from conventions with a limited shelf life.¹⁰

Insofar as cinema figures as something of a grey area between art and non-art Badiou contends that artistic activity can be discerned in cinema only as a ‘process of purification of its own immanent non-artistic character.’¹¹ Yet at the same time he consents to the fact that such a process can never be completed (as such cinematic ‘purity’ might be at best approached only asymptotically). Badiou’s overall position regarding the artistic status of cinema would then appear to be the following: the impurity proper to cinema forecloses from the start any possibility of its attaining true (pure) artistic status.

And yet Badiou clearly recognizes cinema to have been an art, his frequent citing of the ‘thinking cinema’ of Griffith, Welles, Murnau and Eisenstein (as much as Godard, Kiarostami, Visconti, Oliveira and the like) amply attesting this fact. Indeed, cinema’s artistic status would seem to have been confirmed far in advance of Badiou’s own inaesthetic incursions, insofar as it has served to condition philosophy, most notably that of Gilles Deleuze. As Badiou explains,

film buffs have always found it difficult to make use of [Deleuze’s] two hefty volumes on the cinema, for, however supple the individual film descriptions may be in their own right, this malleability seems nevertheless to function in philosophy’s favour, rather than to fashion, in any way whatsoever, a simple critical judgement that film enthusiasts could draw on to enhance the authority of their opinions.¹²

Deleuze’s apprehension of film’s intraphilosophical effects would thus seem at first glance an absolutely inaesthetic operation (this being accordingly incongruous to any philosophical thinking of cinema—namely any other consideration of cinema whatsoever—which simply fall into the thoughtless and self-interested realm of opiatry). And yet Badiou proceeds to isolate Deleuze’s conceptual understanding of cinema as an example—or rather, as *the* example—of Deleuze’s ‘monotonous’ production of concepts insofar as his cinema books propose in the end ‘a creative repetition of concepts and not an apprehension of the cinematic art as such’:

9. Alain Badiou, ‘Philosophy and Cinema’, in *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens, London, Continuum, 2004, p. 111.

10. Badiou, ‘Philosophy and Cinema’, p. 111.

11. Badiou, ‘Philosophy and Cinema’, p. 111.

12. Alain Badiou, *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, trans. Louise Burchill, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000, pp. 15-16 (henceforth D).

let us understand that, under the constraint of the case of cinema, it is once again, and always, (Deleuze's) philosophy that begins anew and that causes cinema to be there *where it cannot, of itself, be*. (D 16)

Which is to say that those concepts found in cinema are in fact not so much found as re-found.¹³ Thus the Deleuzian screen—mediated as it is through the thought of Badiou—is stripped of its genitive powers, revealing a space through which Deleuze deploys concepts which, whilst certainly immanent to cinema, are fundamentally anterior in nature.¹⁴

By thus attesting to the (conceptually as much as manifestly) re-representative nature of cinema Badiou implicitly determines film to not in fact condition Deleuze's philosophy: the concept is not borne of cinema, rather, it endures as a passage through the works themselves. Hence as Badiou, as Badiou explains, in Deleuze's philosophy

concepts, which are never 'concepts-of', are only attached to the initial concrete case in their movement and not in what they give to be thought. This is why, in the volumes on the cinema, what one learns concerns the Deleuzian theory of movement and time, and the cinema gradually becomes neutralized and forgotten. (D 16)

Can we not discern a certain structural (as much as conceptual) homology between this assertion and Badiou's own inaesthetic conception of cinema as 'the passage of the idea, perhaps even of its phantom'? (HI 77) As with the idea, the concept merely passes through the concrete case, meaning that, insofar as it evinces not 'the sensible creation of the Idea' (LM 27) but rather serves only to signify its ephemerality, cinema once again falls short of its artistic aspirations. In fact, we might (provisionally) say that cinema remains for the most part in Badiou's writings a fundamentally Deleuzian edifice, the peculiar twist or torsion here being that this 'Deleuze' is a distinctly Badiouian 'Deleuze' (and indeed Badiou's writings on cinema clearly constitute an implicit dialogue with Deleuze, as can be seen for example in Badiou's thesis regarding the 'false movements of cinema').¹⁵

III. IDEAL IMMOBILE MOVEMENT

As we have seen, Badiou's materialist dialectic hinges on the question of the event

13. One can judge for oneself whether this conception jars with Deleuze's explicit assertion—cited by Badiou—that 'a theory of cinema is not a theory 'about' cinema, but about the concepts that cinema gives rise to', Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinsom and Robert Galeta, London, Continuum, 2005, pp. 268-269.

14. In his 'One, Multiple, Multiplicities' Badiou is much more direct: 'I cannot register any kind of caesura between *Difference and Repetition* and the more detailed philosophical texts to be found in the two volumes on cinema', in *Theoretical Writings*, ed. and trans. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano, London, Continuum, 2004, p. 70.

15. cf. HI, pp. 78-88. To take a simple example Deleuze asserts that as a consequence of the supersession of the movement-image by the time-image 'time ceases to be derived from the movement; it appears in itself and itself gives rise to *false movements*', *Cinema 2*, pp. xi-xii.

which is thought solely by art (and which finds its immediate coordinates in the poetic thought of Mallarmé). Further, his inaesthetic conception of art accordingly allows room principally for the literal arts, making it difficult to properly grasp those arts which fall outside of this category. Having seen then how Badiou grants cinema an artistic *past* (which paradoxically take the form of ‘presents’, that is, as specific artistic configurations) whilst ultimately undercutting its conditional status we might wonder whether—insofar as it fails to produce any ‘intrap philosophical effects’—cinema can truly occupy a place in Badiou’s inaesthetic system. Indeed, can concrete cinematic art be identified at all? The opening lines of Badiou’s essay on ‘Philosophy and Cinema’—in which he asserts ‘there is no ‘objective’ situation of cinema’¹⁶—would seem to suggest not. Here Badiou appears to deny from the first the very possibility of there being any truth to (contemporary) cinema for the simple reason that in Badiou’s philosophy truth, by virtue of its generic nature, must affect the entirety of the situation: if there is no coherent situation there can be no truth *of* the situation. Nonetheless Badiou acknowledges that select cinematic situations (plural) might be derived on the basis of previous identifiable artistic configurations (or subjects), which he does not shy from cataloguing: ‘the films of Oliveira, of Kiarostami, of Straub, of the early Wenders, of a certain Pollet, of some Godards, etc.’¹⁷ Yet even though we can identify multiple cinematic situations in which truth is thinkable—where the ‘new new’ (the contemporary subjects of cinema) can come into a dialectic with the ‘old new’ (as delineated by the Oliveiras, the Kiarostamis and the like)¹⁸—cinema’s ineradicable impurity would seem nonetheless to ensure its position as properly antithetical to truth. Badiou’s stance is after all that a filmic work is both contemporary and universalizable (that is to say, capable of truth) inasmuch as it purifies its own intrinsic non-artistry (plus all the ‘visible and audible materials of everything which binds them to the domination of representation, identification and realism’, as much as ‘spectacle’ and its various operators),¹⁹ which is of course, as he readily admits, an ultimately impossible task. Clearly then a novel cinematic thought—an ‘artistic’ cinema (or rather one recognized as such by Badiou)—should appear as a sequence of subtractive or dissociative gestures built upon—and recognizable as entering into a dialectic with—those prescriptive works of Straub, of Godard, of Pollet and so forth. That is, cinematic thought would appear, like any other artistic procedure, as a body of works which constitute themselves as finite points of an infinite, albeit anterior, truth (for unlike truth one cannot force an event).²⁰

16. Badiou, ‘Philosophy and Cinema’, p. 109.

17. Badiou, ‘Philosophy and Cinema’, p. 110.

18. ‘The new does not enter into a dialectic with the old, but rather with the old new, or the new of the preceding sequence’, Badiou, ‘Philosophy and Cinema’, p. 110

19. Badiou, ‘Philosophy and Cinema’, p. 114.

20. Badiou thus implicitly argues that an artistic cinema would constitute a fundamentally anti-statist cinema (statist cinema being all cinema in the service of representation, identification, spectacle and the like). We might then infer that, insofar as statist cinema is clearly the dominant filmic guise (qualitatively as much as quantitatively), any artistic cinema would necessarily present itself paradoxically as an anti-cinema. On this point Badiou would be in clear agreement with another of his favoured artistic exemplars Kazimir

However cinema's impurity presents a further difficulty, one which concerns any speaking of film qua film, insofar as 'when the film really does organize the visitation of an Idea ... it is always in a subtractive (or defective) relation to one or several among the other arts' (HI 86). Which is to say when an idea 'visits' us cinematically, it is necessarily brought forth by way of an intrafilmic complication of the other arts (for example an ostensibly cinematic idea might be indebted to a certain musical evocation, an actor's peculiar theatricality, and so forth). On this point Badiou concedes nothing to romantic notions of an essence peculiar to cinema: for Badiou there is nothing artistically singular in film per se; 'cinema is nothing but takes and editing. There is nothing else' (HI 86). Which is why cinema is for Badiou nothing other than a sequence of (false) *movements*, meaning that any truth specific to the cinema must relate this movement or passage of the image to the idea itself (or more specifically, to the timeless *immobility* of the idea thus brought forth). Indeed, Badiou goes so far as to state that such ideal immobile movement constitutes the imperative proper to cinema:

by means of the possibility that is proper to it—of amalgamating the other arts, through takes and montage, without presenting them—cinema can, and must, organise the passage of the immobile. But cinema must also organise the immobility of a passage. (HI 87)

Which is to say that if cinema is in any way to facilitate the passage of an idea it must concurrently ensure that the idea thus brought forth does not itself pass. Thus in other words the unenviable task Badiou demands of any properly artistic cinema would appear to be nothing short of the presentation of immobility *in* movement. However this formulation itself raises a number of questions (to which Badiou offers little by way of answer). For example, how exactly might this peculiar immobility be realized? Badiou's own example taken from Jacques Tati's *Playtime* (1967)—of the dialectic established 'between the movement of a crowd and the vacuity of what could be termed its atomic composition' (HI 87) as spatially accounting for the passage of the immobile—achieves little by way of clarification: how precisely does Tati's sequence effect the immobility of a passage (to say nothing of the precise status of the dialectic established therein)? Furthermore, what exactly is the idea that Tati is mobilizing (and if the idea is that of the immobile itself how does Tati's sequence differentiate itself from other seemingly equally re-presentational cases, such as are found in the contemporary cinemas of Terrence Malick or David Lynch)? In addition, if as Badiou states cinema is itself 'nothing but takes and editing' we might wonder what the ultimate result of a purging of its non-artistic content might be? Lastly we might question whether the very concept of immobile movement is itself consistent with the remainder of Badiou's thoughts on cinema, which

Malevich and his contention that 'cinema ... must realize that art can exist without the image, without everyday life, and without the idea's visage', Kazimir Malevich, 'And Visages Are Victorious on the Screen', in Oksana Bulgakowa (ed.) *Kazimir Malevich: The White Rectangle; Writings on Film*, trans. Oksana Bulgakowa, San Francisco, Potemkin Press, 2002, p. 43. One does tend to wonder however exactly how Badiou can resolve such a thinking of artistic cinema with his realization that "'pure cinema" does not exist, except in the dead-end vision of avant-garde formalism'. Badiou, 'Philosophy and Cinema', p111.

is to say, can Badiou's conception of cinema as both a potential passage (of the idea) and an inexorable passing (of the image) be reconciled with the idea of immobility itself?

IV. ILLITERATE CINEMA AND THE REMAINDER OF ART

In considering these questions let us first restate the difficulties encountered in Badiou's writings on cinema are to a large extent symptomatic of its imagistic nature, insofar as it is plainly more conducive for philosophy (which is, after all, a fundamentally literal medium) to consider those arts which themselves find concrete support in the letter. The fact of the matter is that, outside of formal exegesis and the subjective fleetingness of affect, the image does not lend itself well to the letter. This is of course not to say that that artistic inscription itself is directly at issue—on the contrary it is inscription (of the in-existent of a world) which serves as the overriding imperative of art qua generic procedure—but rather to highlight the problem of transmissibility, which might be formulated as follows: how might the non-literal be transmitted by way of the letter?²¹ Take for example Badiou's recent words on Claude Monet's *Nymphéas*:

the goal of Monet is to directly inscribe on the artificial surface of the painting the light and colours as the process of division of light. But light and its division does not exist at the surface of water ... So Monet has to force the painting to express the in-existent, the in-existent which is not things in light, but light as a thing ... and finally when we see the painting we understand that it's not really light as a thing, it's the impossibility of something like that. But this failure is the victory of painting. This failure is the glory of painting as such.²²

We can clearly observe here the difficulty—faced by artist and philosopher alike—of articulating the image through the letter in Monet's expressing 'light as a thing' (indeed, it is the necessary failure of such an inscription—pictorially as much as literally—that designates for Badiou its true artistry). This difficulty is one Badiou does not shy from acknowledging. On the contrary, Badiou is refreshingly forthcoming about the problem the visual arts present philosophy, admitting

of all the arts, it's the one that intimidates me the most. Its intellectual charge is the greatest ... So turning to visual art philosophically has always been rather difficult for me. It's not a feeling of ignorance at all, but a feeling that the mode in which intellectuality proceeds irreducibly into complex and powerful sensory forms ... really, painting intimidates me ... What's more, I've never been very satisfied by the attempts of my predecessors to place themselves under the condition of painting. Nor have I ever found a regime of prose adequate to talk about painting.²³

21. On this point we cannot help but think both of the Lacanian concept of the 'pass' and of the ultimate aim of the analytic cure, which is to render 'a knowledge that is wholly transmissible, without remainder', Alain Badiou, 'The Formulas of *l'Étourdit*', *Lacanian Inc*, vol. 27, 2006, p. 81.

22. Badiou, 'Arts Imperative: Speaking the Unspeakable' *Lacan.com*, vol. 26, 2006, <http://www.lacan.com/issue26.htm>.

23. Alain Badiou & Lauren Sedofsky, 'Being by Numbers', *Artforum*, Oct, 1994, <http://www.highbeam.com/library/docFree.asp?DOCID=1G1:16315394>.

Returning then to the case of cinema it is clear that we encounter in fact not one but two complicated passages: of the idea through the image (the artistic or aesthetic passage), and of the image through the letter (the philosophic or inaesthetic passage). This in mind we might conclude the apparent hegemony of the letter in Badiou's inaesthetics to be ultimately one of convenience, resulting as it does from the simple fact that the non-literal consistently fails to render a wholly—or even partially—transmissible knowledge. Yet, however problematic it may be to express literally, as we have seen painting is for Badiou clearly an art whereas cinema remains artistically unclear (a fact which appears all the more strange given that Deleuze's two cinema books spend a great deal of time addressing this very problem).²⁴

There is of course another basis for the hegemony of the letter in Badiou's inaesthetics. Simply, given the fundamental role played by subtraction and the void in his philosophy—and given that it is art and art alone that thinks the event (which itself issues forth from the void)—we might conclude that the more artistic a work is then the more intimate its relation to the letter qua matheme (this being again an asymptotic approach: art, be it literal or otherwise, can of course never be properly reduced to the mark of the void). Which is to say that Badiou's inaesthetic conceptions are themselves profoundly affected by—and indeed are symptomatic of—his mathematical leanings: if art thinks the event (at the precise point at which mathematics itself falters) it does so only by virtue of its relation—or rather, non-relation—to the matheme. Thus for Badiou the artistic work would seem to be ultimately inseparable from its mathematization. And yet, as we saw above, Badiou contends that in their subjective dimension 'science proves to be the opposite of art' (LM 84). Indeed, the fact that mathematics and poetry in particular admit a strained relation is, according to Badiou, of maximal importance for philosophy in general. Badiou stating 'let us struggle for this flash of conflict, we philosophers, always torn between the mathematical norm of literal transparency and the poetic norm of singularity and presence'.²⁵ Which is to say that art has a more ambivalent relationship to the question of transmissibility—whose ideal form is of course the matheme—than first assumed. Indeed, we might go so far as to rewrite the imperative of art—namely, the (decidedly political) need to 'to inscribe the inexistent'—as the necessity to, via the process of subtraction, *approach* the purity of the matheme.²⁶ We say 'approach' rather than encounter because as we have seen the mark of real artistic 'success' according to

24. In Deleuze's words 'cinema is not a universal or primitive language system ... It consists of movements and thought-processes (pre-linguistic images), and of points of view on these movements and processes (pre-signifying signs)', Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 251. Hence, for Deleuze, 'if ... a semiotics based on linguistics worries me, it's because it does away with both the image and the notion of the sign,' Deleuze, *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin, New York, Columbia University Press, 1995, p. 57-58.

25. Alain Badiou, 'Language, Thought, Poetry', in *Theoretical Writings*, ed. and trans. Ray Brassier & Alberto Toscano, London, Continuum, 2004, p. 241.

26. We might of course further contrast the apparent literality of art to Badiou's assertion that 'what, amongst the processes of truth, singularizes art, is that the subject of truth is drawn from the sensible ... [whilst] the subject of truth in science is drawn from the power of the letter,' Alain Badiou, *Circonstances, 2: Irak*, foulard, Allemagne/France, Paris, Léo Scheer, 2004, p. 98.

Badiou paradoxically coincides with the very failure of inscribing the inexistent or voided content of a particular world (a failure that would itself fail were the work in question were to purify itself to the level of the *matheme*).²⁷ Clearly then in its (non)relation to the *matheme* art proves itself a fundamentally subtractive—as opposed to purificatory or purely destructive—programme, insofar as its aim is ‘the staging of a minimal, albeit absolute, difference; the difference between the place and what takes place in the place, the difference between place and taking-place.’²⁸ Which is to say, the point of the artistic endeavour is nothing less than to yield a *real remainder* which would ultimately mark the ‘minimal difference between [the] void and an element which functions as its stand in.’²⁹ And indeed on this point we can perhaps understand why in Badiou’s writings poetry holds pride of place while cinema remains in aesthetically questionable: of all the (literate as much as illiterate) arts cinema would surely appear the least capable of such a task.

However, returning to the problematic of those in/aesthetic passages specific to cinema—of the idea through the image; of the image through the letter—might we not just as easily argue the contrary, affirming cinema to be instead, by virtue of its very form, eminently capable of realising this passage toward the ideal of the *matheme*? Indeed cinema, which is after all as Badiou states ‘nothing but takes and editing’, is a fundamentally subtractive medium, being one whose (imaginary) presence is in truth (real) absence, and whose essence is accordingly void.³⁰ Film theoreticians have in fact spent a great deal of time establishing this precise point (to take but one example, what does Metz’s famous ‘imaginary signifier’ mark if not the void itself?).³¹ This is of course not to suggest that cinema finds any (real or otherwise) relation to the *matheme* but rather simply to say that cinema exhibits an intrinsic *formal* affinity with the concept of the mathem(e)atical concept. Such a correspondence remains, however, unacknowledged in Badiou’s writings for the simple fact that he understands cinema to be ‘an art of the perpetual past, in the sense that it institutes the past of the pass’ (HI 78). Or again, film’s formal relation to the *matheme* breaks down for Badiou insofar as he understands cinema, in its movement, takes and editing—and in decided opposition to his attestations regarding cinema’s immobilization of the idea (and vice versa)—to be an art of *loss*: cinema is for Badiou an art not of subtraction but of *purification*, and hence of destruction (or again, an art not of the void nor the voided, but rather of *voiding*). Simply, if cinema is ultimately a mechanistic process of loss—as opposed to a subtractive passage issuing a remainder—it can in no way hope to facilitate so much as the passage of the idea,

27. Whereas true art inscribes what is voided (and is thus, while universal, necessarily situated), the *matheme* marks the ab-sense of the void itself (and is thus both universal and unsituated).

28. Badiou, *Le Siècle*, Paris, Seuil, 2005, p. 86.

29. Slavoj Žižek, ‘From Purification to Subtraction: Badiou and the Real’, in Peter Hallward (ed.), *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, London, Continuum, 2004, p. 165.

30. This is a fact Badiou clearly recognizes, as each of the three ‘false movements’ Badiou identifies (the global, the local, and the impure) which together allow for the passage of the idea operate by way of subtraction (the image is subtracted from itself, etc.).

31. cf. Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzzetti, London, Macmillan Press, 1983.

let alone inscribe the inexistent, for the simple reason that everything which appears in its field only does so only in order to immediately disappear: cinema is for Badiou ultimately an art of dis-appearance. And such a dis-appearing cinema can of course yield no remainder, for what finally ‘remains’ *is* void (hence Badiou’s differentiation between subtraction and purification). Thus Badiou’s contention regarding the immobility of the idea (that if cinema is to facilitate the passage of an idea it must concurrently ensure that the idea thus brought forth does not itself pass) would seem ultimately inconsistent with his overall conception of the filmic art: in Badiou’s cinema, everything passes.

The entirety of Badiou’s considerations on film are then governed in the final analysis not by his attestations to its inherent impurity (a necessary factor), nor by its incoherent situatedness (a contingent factor), but rather by his presupposition that ‘cinema is visitation’ (HI 78) (the immediate upshot of which is that—in the case of cinema—the idea can have nothing other than an equally transitory existence). Indeed, the peculiar understanding of cinema mobilized through the use of the term ‘visitation’ (as much as ‘passage’, ‘past’, ‘pass’ and the like) would seem to constitute not only Badiou’s real point of departure from Deleuze’s writings on cinema—whose concept of the crystal alone stands in direct opposition to such an insistently linear chronology (to say nothing of duration or experience)³²—but also from all hope of establishing any thought proper to cinema. Accordingly, if any cinematic truths are to be registered whatsoever Badiou’s understanding of cinema as an art of dis-appearance—which is itself a contention arguably grounded less in philosophy than in subjectivity—must be rejected as being in all senses of the word fundamentally anachronistic.³³ Film is neither a mechanism of dis-appearance nor a process of becoming. Cinema is not a passive art; it does not simply *pass*. Nor however is it an accumulative process of coming-into-being.³⁴ Rather, real cinema is in both form and content a subtractive procedure insofar as, like all art, its aim is to yield a remainder (which would of course present the minimal difference between the void and its stand-in). Or again, real cinema must be, contra Badiou, nothing other than an artistic process whose aim is to inscribe the voided or inexistent elements of a world, to realize ‘the difference between place and taking-place’. Perhaps then it is in this precise sense that we should reinterpret Badiou’s two principle demands of cinema, that is, that it purify (or rather subtract) itself of all non-artistic content (as much as its incidental

32. Of course, the concept of the crystal itself does not bear on Badiou’s philosophy insofar as he has himself no recourse to the virtual.

33. We might even go so far as to suggest his position remains ultimately untenable unless he were to concede that *all* art—painting as much as poetry, literature as much as theatre—are themselves (to varying degrees) finally nothing but visitation, insofar as all subjects of art invariably pass (the novel is finished, the play concludes, the poem is put down). Indeed, is this not the precise characteristic separating the subject of art from the truth it enters into: whereas the subject is finite, local and passing, truth is infinite and spatially unlocalizable (hence of truth and the subject only the former is properly immanent).

34. Of course we might discern here a certain (albeit limited) homology with Deleuze’s argument that ‘the chain of connections in cinema ... cannot be reduced to the simple association of images. There is always something left over’, Gilles Deleuze, ‘The Brain is the Screen’, in David Lapoujade (ed.), *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975-1995*, trans. Ames Hodges & Mike Taormina, New York, MIT Press, 2006, p. 284.

artistic content, or its internal complication with the other arts) and that it concurrently organize the immobility of a passage: to risk a Freudian analogy, with respect to its manifest content the impossibility of cinema's becoming wholly artistic would ultimately constitute the formal mark of its remainder (that is, its 'artistic kernel', or the element which keeps cinema from degenerating into the pure abstraction of 'takes and editing'), while in terms of its latent content the remainder would be finally nothing other than the very immobility of the passage itself (indeed, how else could the 'immobility of the idea' be conceived outside such an ideal remainder?).

Doubtless numerous complications arise with such a conception of cinema.³⁵ And yet, ultimately, whether such a conception is or is not in fact legitimate is in many ways incidental. Rather, given the fundamental importance placed on the artistic condition in Badiou's philosophy (insofar as it constitutes—in its thinking of the event—the nexal point of his materialist dialectic), the purpose of this paper has been less to establish the conditions of cinematic thought per se than to critically examine Badiou's inaesthetic programme by way of cinema. Thus we have seen how, whilst he in no way reduces the entirety of art to that of the letter, Badiou's cogent inaesthetic writings are nonetheless essentially prescribed by the relative literality—and hence mathematicality—of the arts (there are of course obvious exceptions to this rule, although these examples invariably relate to specifically formal ruptures such as those found in the cases of Malevitch or Schoenberg). This concurrently means that Badiou's philosophy, in being conditioned first and foremost by those literal arts, regrettably neglects by and large those manifold illiterate arts which might otherwise serve to augment his thought. Furthermore, we have seen how Badiou's conception of cinema falters at the point of irreconcilability between the relentless movement of the image and the idea of immobility itself. Which is to say that whilst Badiou may think cinema his considerations do not themselves allow finally for cinema to be thought. Furthermore it is at the same time clear that Badiou has as yet not engaged properly with Deleuze's writings on the cinema, choosing instead to short-circuit the filmic question through recourse to the 'monotony' of Deleuze's conceptual production (and to a lesser—albeit otherwise welcome—extent through an outright rejection of the virtual). Ultimately however it would seem that if Badiou is to maintain a certain coherency to his inaesthetic programme he needs either dispense with the idea of a 'thinking cinema' altogether (meaning film would be intrinsically incapable of presenting so much as the passage of the idea, let alone inscribe the inexistent) or otherwise reconsider his position on the inexorability of cinematic movement (meaning film cannot be a solely purificatory—or contrarily associative—edifice). In the event of the former, his inaesthetic programme would certainly become more hermetic (if more 'literally' curbed). In the event of the latter however Badiou might begin to allow for

35. The most immediate problem being knotted to the question of time, insofar as in Badiou's philosophy 'time—if not coextensive with structure, if not the *sensible form of the Law*—is intervention itself, thought as the gap between two events' (which is to say Badiou conceives of time solely in evental terms). BE, p. 210. Here the problem would reside in the discerning of what precisely would constitute cinematic time (be it evental, purificatory or otherwise).

new illiterate thoughts to condition his at present decidedly literal philosophy.

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