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Shaw, I. (2010) *WALL-E's world: animating Badiou's philosophy*. Cultural Geographies, 17 (3). pp. 391-405. ISSN 1474-4740

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/54392/>

Deposited on: 2 August 2011

# WALL-E's World: Animating Badiou's Philosophy

## Abstract

This paper illustrates the philosophy of Alain Badiou through Pixar's 2008 animation 'WALL-E'. The fictional story tells of a toxic planet Earth long abandoned following an ecological disaster. Humanity now exists in a floating brave new world; a spaceship whose passengers' everyday existence is drowned by a consumptive slumber. That is, until a robot named WALL-E comes aboard and changes things forever. The purpose of making this connection between philosophy and film is not to trivialize Badiou's work, but rather to open it up, pull it apart, and synchronize it with a movie that is saturated with Badiouian themes. Beneath the complexities of *Being and Event's* set-theory and the *Logics of Worlds'* algebra, lay a set of ideas that are fizzing with creativity and disruptive potential. WALL-E gives these political and philosophical ideas a lived expression to a wide audience. The central motif of the paper is that the finitude of appearance in a world is constantly overrun by the infinitude of being, and this requires a new theorization of site-based geographies. From the miraculous discovery of a plant growing on a dead Earth, to the tumultuous arrival of WALL-E onboard a spaceship that he never belonged to, the stability of a world is always threatened by a 'point of excess', called the site. Three interrelated concepts of Badiou's will be animated in this paper, each occupying their own respective section: *worlds, sites, and subjects*.

**Key words:** Badiou, worlds, sites, subjects, truths, atony.

## Introduction

'I am sometimes told that I see in philosophy only a means to re-establish, against the contemporary apologia of the futile and the everyday, the rights of heroism. Why not?'

Alain Badiou<sup>1</sup>

'After all, cinema is the last place populated by heroes'. Alain Badiou<sup>2</sup>

The film WALL-E<sup>3</sup> opens by presenting the audience with the infinity of the universe, that most endless of all backgrounds where a million stars blink, far-away galaxies swirl, and planets lazily roll in the blackness. Such a tranquil view is soon interrupted as Earth enters the picture. Blanketed by orbiting satellites long decayed, the green shades of terra firma and the

deep blues of the ocean are vanquished by a far more hostile hue of rusted metal. As the camera zooms in and cuts through the hovering clouds, each of which serves to hide the death of a lonely planet below, an unrecognizable landscape unfolds in all its ugliness. Consisting of a multitude of mountains, whose cone-shaped constitution is not rock, but instead an assemblage of discarded waste, this is the toxic home humanity has bequeathed to the most unlikely of all heroes. Life can only be found in the singularity of a mobile trash compacter called 'Waste Allocation Load Lifter Earth-Class' or simply, WALL-E. This robot, protagonist of the film, and for reasons that remain miraculous, possesses a personality. And he is lonely.

Written and directed by Andrew Stanton and produced by Pixar Animation Studios, the film WALL-E was released in 2008 to widespread critical acclaim and success,<sup>4</sup> grossing nearly \$500 million at the box office.<sup>5</sup> Following a highly profitable lineage of Pixar films that began in 1995 with the release of Toy Story, Stanton's most recent creation was penned over a decade ago and is a computer-generated animation that fuses elements of science-fiction, Charlie Chaplin (the first half an hour of the film has no dialogue), and old-fashioned romance. Even if the movie is aimed principally at children, this is perhaps Pixar's darkest and most mature of all releases – and not because of its ability to incorporate adult humor, as Shrek and its ilk have done. As Denby from the New Yorker writes 'WALL-E blends two kinds of science fiction—the post-apocalyptic disaster scenario and the dystopian fantasy derived from Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World," in which people are controlled not by coercion but by pleasure'.<sup>6</sup> There are many themes that run throughout the movie and perhaps the most obvious is WALL-E's 'ecological' message centred on the stark warning that endless consumption will lead to an environmental disaster on planet Earth. In this sense, Pixar's production animates a lot of the

themes already articulated by the work of geographers, notably the roll of capitalism in shaping both place<sup>7</sup> and nature.<sup>8</sup> Other conceptual undercurrents that lie just beneath the surface of the storyline include critiques of technology, automatism, obesity, and surveillance – themes which have drawn attention from conservative critics.<sup>9</sup>

[Figure 1 about here]

This paper engages the film WALL-E to animate the philosophy of Alain Badiou.<sup>10</sup> The purpose of doing so is not to trivialize Badiou's work, but rather to open it up, pull it apart, and synchronize it with a movie that is saturated with Badiouian themes. Beneath the complexities of *Being and Event's* set-theory<sup>11</sup> and the *Logics of Worlds'* algebra,<sup>12</sup> lay a set of ideas that are fizzing with creativity and disruptive potential. WALL-E gives these philosophical ideas a lived expression to a wide audience, from the millions that saw the film in the cinema, to the hundreds of thousands that have the DVD nestled away in their homes. It is precisely this possibility of confronting Badiou through popular culture that allows the paper to unravel a type of politics based on the appearance of a previously excluded 'site'. The central theme of the paper is that the finitude of appearance in a world is constantly overrun by the infinitude of being, and this requires a new theorization of site-based geographies. From the miraculous discovery of a plant growing on a dead Earth, to the tumultuous arrival of WALL-E onboard a spaceship that he never belonged to, the stability of a world is always threatened by a 'point of excess' called the site. Three interrelated concepts of Badiou's will be pursued in this paper, each occupying their own respective section: *worlds*, *sites*, and *subjects*. Taken together, they provide a blueprint for what it means to 'live', which is for Badiou 'to live for an Idea'.<sup>13</sup> Before

these concepts are pursued in more depth, I first present a brief outline of the plot of WALL-E, and then argue that the Oscar-winning animation embodies ‘mass cinema *qua* mass philosophy’ through its presentation of the ‘cinematic idea’.

The principal plot underpinning WALL-E is not typical Disney fodder, and is certainly the most political animation Pixar has produced.<sup>14</sup> At the dawn of the 22<sup>nd</sup> century, mega-corporation Buy N Large has monopolized every economic activity on planet Earth. This company’s unchecked production and consumption has covered the entire surface of the globe with mountains of trash. Too toxic to inhabit, humans abandon the planet in luxury spaceships, leaving an army of robots behind to clean up the noxious mess. Yet what was meant as a temporary voyage for humanity turns into a 700 year absence aboard these floating cruise liners, and, of the legion of robots programmed to clean up the trash, only one now remains in service: WALL-E. About the size of a dog, and with searching blue eyes, WALL-E spends each of his days collecting garbage, compacting all of humanity’s rubbish into mini cubes, and then stacking them high into skyscraper-sized mounds. He is a worker bot, unknown to the universe, and appearing to nobody. Unlike other robots, however, WALL-E has quite miraculously developed a rather eccentric personality – hoarding the most unlikely of objects in his quaint home, and spending his dark nights watching the classical musical ‘Hello, Dolly!’ Everything is predictable, routine, and lonely in this dusty dystopia.

One day WALL-E comes across a tiny green plant, and amazed that life can still grow in this poisonous landscape, he keeps a curious hold of it, placing it in an old brown boot. Also unexpectedly, a robot called EVE (Extraterrestrial Vegetation Evaluator) arrives on the planet from one of humanity’s luxurious spaceships called the Axiom which is scouring the universe for

signs of life. A lonely WALL-E falls in love instantly, but EVE is only interested in her sole directive of bringing back any organic life to the Axiom. In a frantic decision, WALL-E hitchhikes his way onto the spaceliner chasing EVE, a move that will bring revolutionary consequences. Onboard the vessel, he discovers a capitalist 'utopia' full of neon-lights, super-sized shopping malls, computer-generated sports, and total automation. Over-dependent humans are now unable to stand and are transported around the ship in hoverchairs. These unrecognizable creatures are so glued to their personal television screens that they fail to see one another. This bleak scenario changes when the plant is brought onboard, since this signal of life automatically triggers the Axiom to shift its intergalactic pathway and head home to repopulate Earth. However, the authoritative auto-pilot (named Auto) seizes control of the entire ship and disperses security bots to prevent the Axiom from changing its course. What follows is the struggle between WALL-E – the most unlikely of revolutionaries – and 700 years of machinic enslavement. The resounding message of the film is that political hope is found in what '*inexists*'<sup>15</sup> within each and every world: the excluded site.

### **Cinema as Mass Philosophy**

'After the philosophy of cinema must come—is already coming—philosophy *as* cinema, which consequently has the opportunity of being a mass philosophy.' Alain Badiou<sup>16</sup>

The fact that WALL-E is a robot, an assemblage of circuitry and metal plates, pays not only homage to Badiou's 'anti-humanist' ethics,<sup>17</sup> that is, his affirmation of our ability to transcend the human-animal, but also makes nods towards the 'more-than-human'<sup>18</sup> and machinic subjectivities.<sup>19</sup> Pixar's production simultaneously subverts one of the reigning motifs

of Hollywood that: 'Today, an American actor is dominated by the imperative of sexual visibility, by confrontation with extreme violence and by millenarian heroism'.<sup>20</sup> Replacing this Schwarzenegger-esque logic of bicep-bound butchery is the minute figure of WALL-E; a gigantic harbinger of truth, and the film's primary unfigurable Real point. Badiou argues that cinema is an entirely impure medium, and that what is happening on-screen is never intelligible without summoning other arts (such as theatre, novels, music, and paintings). In his words: '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'.<sup>21</sup> As a mass-art,<sup>22</sup> on a scale which few other artistic enterprises share, cinema is thus the gathering and transmission of ideological and cultural fragments of the epoch: 'Even its most obvious artistic successes comprise an immanent infinity of wretched ingredients, of obvious pieces of non-art'.<sup>23</sup> However impure its elements, each film may also incorporate the passage of a 'cinematic idea'; an encounter with the 'Real' revealed by the event. Against the finitude of what a film authorizes then, is the infinite excess that exists within the cinematic world. WALL-E perfectly animates this Badiouian paradox, and in doing so offers itself as the 'mass philosophy' Badiou prophesizes.

It is therefore the argument in this paper that WALL-E is the vehicle for the cinematic *idea* – the presentation of the 'inexistent site', an idea this paper explores later. Even if WALL-E is himself gendered, the film is not bound to Hollywood's insistence on the Oedipal family as the locus of narrative and structure,<sup>24</sup> since WALL-E's story is driven by the disruptive emergence of sites – from the fragile discovery of the plant on Earth to WALL-E's dramatic emergence onboard the Axiom – both are events, and both are cinematic moments of the Real

taking place. Indeed, the second half of the animation pivots on the chaos caused when these sites appear within the world of the Axiom spaceship. This notion of a transient and unsymbolizable Real is of course the favourite subject of one of Badiou's Lacanian allies. In Slavoj Žižek's recent documentary on cinema, the audience is (mis)treated to a rather perverse – if eminently sublime – psychoanalytic reading of Western movies.<sup>25</sup> An amalgam of best-loved classics and Hollywood cash cows from the Matrix to Star Wars, together with the more bizarre films of Hitchcock, Lynch, Chaplin and Tarkovsky, are subjected to a Freudian-Lacanian interpretation by the Slovenian cultural critic.<sup>26</sup> There are a panoply of psychoanalytic themes presented throughout the screening, all of which we have come to expect from Žižek's work – ideology, desire, fantasy, libido, and the pivotal Lacanian *Real*.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the documentary are the on-screen places from which Žižek conducts his commentary. The film's director Sophie Fiennes has cleverly inserted him into the fictional worlds of the movies he is analysing. So in one rather humorous shot we find Žižek onboard Melanie Daniels' boat from 'The Birds', and while drifting across Bodega Bay he muses to himself: 'I want to fuck Mitch!'<sup>28</sup> This geographical co-mingling of Žižek's on-screen figure and the cinematic landscapes he finds himself in signifies one of the documentary's key Lacanian themes: that fantasy supports reality.<sup>29</sup> Movies do not simply animate a rich set of geographies to consume, nor do they articulate and distort everyday life. Rather, they present reality in its phantasmagorical form. Žižek's on-screen dissolution into a supposed 'imaginary' world should be read as an illustration that reality and cinema are two sides of the same Möbius strip, and cinema presents 'what is in reality more real than reality itself'.<sup>30</sup> This tension between the 'real' and the 'reel'<sup>31</sup> has been scrutinized by geographers,<sup>32</sup> with Dixon noting

that ‘...one can no longer talk about film representing, or mimicking, reality, simply because there is no single, coherent reality waiting ‘out there’ to be filmed’.<sup>33</sup> There are thus three interrelated dimensions that constitute film: (a) those representational challenges posed by poststructural thought<sup>34</sup>, including cinematic representations of place, difference, nature, nation, race, sexuality, gender, and the city<sup>35</sup> (b) how these representations are ‘felt’ and ‘lived’ by audiences, exemplified through the recent attendance to ontology and affect in cultural studies,<sup>36</sup> and finally (c) ‘... the power of representations to intervene in the ongoing reformation of material life...’<sup>37</sup> Taken together, one is thus aware of the *topological relations*<sup>38</sup> that cinema feeds upon, distorts, and distributes. Likewise, if we are to accept Badiou’s possibility of ‘philosophy as cinema’, it is precisely because philosophy itself can only be understood as splayed across lived geographies Real and representational, and its ideas; as impure travellers in uncertain animations.

## **Worlds**

After WALL-E dramatically hitches his way onboard the Axiom spaceship chasing EVE, he is greeted by an altogether different space. In stark contrast to the decayed landscape he left behind, the Axiom is a brave new world, alive with consumption but dead with thought. Floating holographic screens demand that passengers ‘eat’; a multi-coloured labyrinth of neon lights creates an oppressive glow; and the unyielding reminder to purchase the newest product echoes from the Buy ‘N Large loudspeaker. Not that anyone even sees this world. The human animals that inhabit this space, overweight from centuries of physical inactivity, are too busy communicating with each other on their personal television screens, or arranging a game of

virtual golf. Their only real freedom is whether to dress themselves in blue or red. All the while, they are being whizzed around on hoverchairs to save them the trouble of ever walking: their routes pre-destined by the illuminated lines that striate the floor. Absolutely nothing deviates from this ubiquitous geometric pattern on the ground. The world is mastered by a transcendental law; limp in its homogeneity, suffocating in its routine. Or as Badiou would call the world of the Axiom spaceship: an *atonic world*.

[Figure 2 about here]

Before we explore the idea of what exactly an ‘atonic world’ is, it is necessary to first outline the general contours underwriting Badiou’s definition of ‘world’. In his recently published sequel to *Being and Event*, named *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou unravels a detailed logic of appearance. No longer is he solely concerned with ‘being-qua-being’ or the *ontological* status of multiples. This is only one side of the philosopher’s coin. The other side is the appearance of multiples within a world – their *phenomenological* status or ‘being-qua-appearance’. The central thrust of Badiou’s argument is the impossibility of referring to a singular and univocal ‘being’, given that being is always localized in the appearance of an infinite amount of worlds. Put simply, and in a way that a geographer intuitively grasps, being is always said as *being-there*. A world is just this immanent localization of being. From the mundane existence of life aboard the Axiom, to the horror of a toxic planet Earth, all the way down to WALL-E’s oh-so-cosy home, each world appears because being-qua-being is localized: it is given a certain phenomenological logic. So what exactly is this logic?

As Badiou replies: ‘...a world is not an empty place—akin to Newton’s space—which multiple beings would come to inhabit. For a world is nothing but a logic of being-there, and it is identified with the singularity of this logic. A world articulates the cohesion of multiples around a structured operator (the transcendental)’.<sup>39</sup> We can imagine the transcendental as the process through which beings are translated into beings-there, or to give a more Kantian definition, the passage through which the noumenal is manifest as worldly phenomena.<sup>40</sup> The transcendental is therefore responsible for the order given in appearance, as well as what appears and what does not. Appearance is organized by a transcendental ‘index’, which imposes on every multiple an order of identity, from a minimal to a maximal level of existential intensity. This logic is articulated by three fundamental operations: (1) the possibility of establishing a minimum level of appearance (2) the possibility of conjoining the appearances between multiples (3) the possibility of synthesizing or ‘enveloping’ all multiples within a world.<sup>41</sup> Crucially, and to repeat myself, what is not indexed by the transcendental is deemed ‘inexistent’, which it is to say it ‘is’ (has being) but it does not ‘appear’. It is this gap between being-qua-being and being-qua-appearance that is the source of political instability and revolution.

The transcendental is immanent and unique to every world. Onboard the Axiom, the transcendental index of the world is illustrated vividly by the lines that pattern the spaceship’s floor. Every multiple, from gluttonous humans whizzing by on hoverchairs to subservient robots cleaning the ground, is localized by a network of differently coloured pathways. Their appearing in this world is completely bound to the law of appearance set by the Axiom. Indeed, the very stability and cohesion of the world is prescribed by a transcendental index, which is in turn

authored by the ominous figure of Auto. Those unfortunate robots with too much of a 'personality' are incarcerated in the medical deck. And it is precisely WALL-E's clumsy and chaotic arrival onboard the Axiom that causes humans to abandon their transcendental placing: one small step perhaps, but one giant leap for the revolution that will erupt in this world.

Having established the generic framework for what makes a world a world, Badiou introduces two specific types of worlds: 'atonic' and 'tensed' worlds.<sup>42</sup> Their difference is based on the relationship they have to 'points' and 'truths'.<sup>43</sup> Truths can be thought of as the process through which radical change is brought to the world. Badiou names a point the space of a decision or choice – when the truth procedure is tested, and indeed the very transcendental of a world is at stake. The relationship between truths and points is topological: the possibility of subverting the transcendental order of a world is spaced across a multitude of concrete points; a variety of acts and decisions that decide the fate of the truth. Without points, without decision, all hope of change is soothed by the numb soma of the status quo. For Badiou this is what the West dreams of: a happiness where nothing happens; and all points are veiled to save us from making fundamental choices.<sup>44</sup> Atonic worlds are thus worlds evacuated by truth; homogenous and simple, populated only with the flotsam and jetsam of 'multiple bodies and languages'. They are spaces with no points. Žižek adds, with typical Lacanese qualification, that these worlds lack '...the "quilting point" (*point de capiton*), the intervention of a Master Signifier that imposes a principal of "ordering" into the world, the point of a simple decision ("yes or no") in which the confused multiplicity is violently reduced to a "minimal difference"'.<sup>45</sup> In other words, the point is a place of truthful intervention, a space that behoves one to answer 'to be or not to be'. It forces those involved decide 'which side they are on'.<sup>46</sup>

The Axiom is a perfect illustration of an atonic world: a place where the transcendental is obeyed unthinkingly. It is a place where the only real decision one gets to make is whether or not to purchase the red or blue bodysuit and the most pressing existential dilemma is whether to sample the latest Buy N Large smoothie. It is the same place where a gigantic mega-corporation decides every facet of existence, from the syllabi that children are taught in school (as the teacher robot is overheard saying to a class of kids: 'A is for Axiom, your home sweet home. B is for Buy N Large, your very best friend'), to the regulation of cabin temperature and time of day. Moreover, and in a sublime twist, if one were to look up the definition of 'atonic' in a dictionary, one would discover a host of medical definitions pertaining to 'lack of muscle tone' or 'muscle that lacks stress or tension'. The fact that within the atonic world of the Axiom spaceship the passengers are *themselves* visibly atonic (incapable of walking due to generations of stress-free living and atrophied muscles) is really a poetic exaggeration of the politically alienated society Badiou is so scornful of.

Atonic worlds are countered by tensed worlds. Against the logic of what simply appears in a world (which is for Badiou no more than the co-mingling of different bodies and languages), tensed worlds are shot through with points: unstable, fomenting; everything is at stake. Each participant is making a constant wager that a new world is possible: replying 'yes' to the truth procedure, rather than finding solace in the status quo. The revolutionary potential of tensed worlds is exemplified in the closing scenes of WALL-E, when the Axiom dramatically shifts from atony to tension: bodies fly, foundations crumble, and security-bots disperse. Such is Badiou's lesson: 'Thus between atony and tension, we wager our worlds, according to opposite imperatives: to find peace within them or to exceed, point by point, that which in these worlds

merely appears'.<sup>47</sup> Beyond what 'merely appears' lies the inexistent 'site', the source of change and the event of worldly disruption. It is the site which we turn to now, which I believe is embodied in the minute robotic figure of WALL-E (a giant harbinger of truth).

## Sites

The site is pivotal to Badiou's entire philosophical oeuvre, and is pivotal to driving the dénouement of WALL-E. Badiou's ontological analyses already contain an explicit explanation of an 'event-site',<sup>48</sup> the philosophical conditions for what makes an event an event,<sup>49</sup> and the ethics of evental fidelity.<sup>50</sup> He previously defined the event-site as formalizing a 'measure' or distance from the errant 'state of the situation'. This was achieved by materialising an 'antagonistic Real' that punctured the One of the state of the situation into the Two of representation and un-presentation (e.g. the State and its void<sup>51</sup>). It is only post *Logics of Worlds* that he drops the 'event-site' in favour of the 'site',<sup>52</sup> defining the latter in terms of appearance and non-appearance. Here, it is worth noting that there are two components to Badiou's ontological reading of an event (which he now partly rejects). First, there is the event-site, the singular multiple 'on the edge of the void', none of whose elements are represented by the State. Second, Badiou requires that subjects name the event as an event. There is thus a two-fold schema of void and subject that provides a cumbersome definition of an event. Badiou, aware of this problem, states in *Logics of Worlds*: 'As we shall see, I am now able fundamentally to equate "site" and "evental multiplicity"—thus avoiding all the banal aporias of the dialectic between structure and historicity—and that I do so without recourse to a mysterious naming'.<sup>53</sup> The event is now cast as the *appearance* of a previously inexistent site, capable of causing

worldly dislocation and disruption. From inexistence to existence, the site makes its presence felt.<sup>54</sup> Badiou's defines it thusly: 'A site is an object of the world that globally falls under the laws of differentiation and identity that it locally assigns to its own elements. *It makes itself appear ...* Broadly speaking, an event is a site which is capable of making exist in a world the proper in-existent of the object that underlies the site. This tipping-over of the inapparent into appearing singularizes—in the retroaction of its logical implications—the event site'.<sup>55</sup>

There are three important characteristics of the site, all of which the film WALL-E illustrates with aplomb (and frequent humour). First, the site is 'autonomous'. Unlike other multiples in a world that are indexed against the transcendental – indeed require the transcendental for their own worldly appearance – the site indexes itself, and is therefore autonomous and singular with respect to the world it finds itself placed within. Second, because the site is autonomous, it follows that it is *in-existent* with respect to the world: it is invisible to the transcendental. Third, the appearance of the site causes a world to reconstitute its transcendental because it is unable to absorb the ontological excess of the site. That is to say, the appearance of the site is the evental *subversion of appearing by being*.<sup>56</sup> The dialectic between appearing and being, or world and site is the source of political torsion for Badiou, and in the movie WALL-E it is our metallic hero's encounter with the world of the Axiom that animates this dialectic. Below I animate each of these characteristics of the site.

First, WALL-E's autonomy is established in the opening Charlie Chaplin-esque scenes of the film. His self-sufficiency is in fact vital to his very existence. All around him on planet Earth are the decayed remnants of legions of other robots and lost worlds – now little more than rusting spectacles and dust-covered memories. For centuries it has been WALL-E that has

woken up in the morning, charged his batteries with his built-in solar panel, and gone to his daily vocation of collecting trash: the eternal and tireless worker. In addition, should WALL-E ever break a part of his robotic assemblage, he is able to fix it without recourse to anybody else. His existence belongs to nobody or no world except his own. Indeed, one of the most humorous moments of the film is when he discards a diamond ring in favour of the box it came in: his logic is in stark contrast to the world it originated from.

Second, when WALL-E makes his way onboard the Axiom spaceship, he remains inexistent for some time and is in no way bound to the same transcendental index of the other people and robots. As one robot exclaimed upon discovering the newly arrived WALL-E, 'foreign contaminant!' It is this alien existence that is illustrated most forcefully by his inability – or reluctance – to follow the same illuminated lines that everything else does. Earlier I noted how these multi-coloured striations represented Badiou's definition of the transcendental: all objects are localized and placed within the world by a certain set of operations. This gives the appearance of stability and cohesion within the world. WALL-E, however, does not obey this pattern, and is therefore inexistent. And what trouble this causes!

Third, WALL-E's appearance brings revolution to the Axiom. People start awakening from centuries of mindless slumber, robots rebel, and the very world of the Axiom is turned on its head, despite Auto's attempts to prevent widespread sedition. At the end of the film the entire dystopic foundation of the Axiom crumbles and fractures. In particular, the holographic signs are all powered down, and the naked potential of a new world is glimpsed. Even the Captain of the ship, previously confined to the atonic comfort of his hoverchair, rises to his trembling feet to announce 'We'll see who's powerless now!' The switch from atony to tension

erupts, and the passengers see past their personal television screens for the first time. As one of the humans called Mary humorously remarks 'I never realized we had a pool!' But what truth is it that drives this revolution? When Badiou notes that '...an event is a site which is capable of making exist in a world the proper inexistent of the object that underlies the site',<sup>57</sup> this should be interpreted as meaning that the truth of the site cannot be reduced to the corporeal shell of WALL-E, but rather what makes him a site in the first place, what *underlies* him, and that is *life*. For it is WALL-E that brings the small green plant onboard the Axiom, stored safely inside his body. It is this fragile sign of life that causes the Axiom to change its galactic course and return to repopulate Earth. It is this symbol of the Real, of the infinite and inconsistent excess of *being over appearing*, that WALL-E manifests. Against all odds, life grows, in the cracks and crevices of worlds toxic and dead. Its revelation at the site—eternal and humble—can uproot even the most powerful and ubiquitous of regimes.

## Subjects

'Several times in its brief existence, every human animal is granted the chance to incorporate itself into the subjective present of a truth'.<sup>58</sup> Alain Badiou

'I don't want to survive. I want to live'! Captain of the Axiom

The subject has always held a pre-eminent position in Badiou's philosophy and ethics.<sup>59</sup> From baptizing events to enacting a militant fidelity to them, subjectivity was the sacred link between being and event: the immortal and heroic form that transcended the fleshy finitude of the human animal. Prior to *Logics of Worlds* one was either a subject or

one was not. This reductive categorization was for many, including myself, an alienating binary. Now, however, although the spirit of what a subject is remains, that is, a support for eventual truth, there is much more analytic space for difference. Badiou outlines a formal theory of the faithful subject, the reactive subject, and the obscure subject, and all of these are types of material ‘forms’ and ‘operations’ that are related to truth. It is always worth recalling what a Badiouian subject is *not*, since one can easily slide towards an intuitive definition. First, a subject does not designate a register of experience, nor does it refer to a phenomenological and reflective Cartesianism. Second, it is not a category of morality. Finally, it is not an Althusserian fiction interpellated by the State (nor a Lacanian imaginary).<sup>60</sup> Instead, it is an immortal ‘form’, in the sense of the Platonic idea. A Badiouian subject is set of formal operations (illustrated below), and despite its finite existence, any human animal can enter into the eternal relation with a site.

WALL-E, EVE, the Captain, John, Mary, and the band of dysfunctional robots are all types of faithful subjects, since they battle for the construction of a new world, point by point. In order for this truth procedure to take place, there must first be an event – the emergence of a site – that leaves an eventual trace ( $\epsilon$ ) for subjects to affirm their belonging. The fragile green plant is here the de facto trace of the event, and its uncertain fate onboard the Axiom illustrates the hazardous course the event takes. Sometimes it falls into the hands of the State – the clutches of an uncaring Auto – and other times the entire body ( $\phi$ ) of passengers are rallied around it, desperate to keep it alive, desperate to keep this idea of another world growing. In other words, faithful subjects fight for the new present ( $\pi$ ) that the event has opened and the consequences it authorizes. Moreover, they subordinate (/)

their own personhood to this singular cause. If one now looks at Badiou's matheme for the faithful subject, expressed  $\epsilon / \varphi \Rightarrow \pi$ , one sees how the subject-body of rebels is always subordinate, or *beneath* the trace.

Nowhere is this subordination of the body more perfectly illustrated than in the closing scenes of the film. WALL-E is desperate to place the plant inside a machine that, once inserted, will redirect the galactic pathway of the Axiom back to Earth. But Auto thinks otherwise, and begins to lower the same machine under the floor. Desperate to stop this, WALL-E attempts to prop up the machine with his own tiny body. As the machine slowly lowers, WALL-E begins to break, with the plant placed above him. He is willing to sacrifice his own mortality for the immortality of the subject he has become. This animated image, of WALL-E trembling underneath the plant, is a perfect illustration of the matheme of the faithful subject. And it is only those subjects involved in this rebellion that are truly 'alive' for Badiou. In his words: 'It is only by working out an organization for the subjectivizable body that one can hope to "live", and not merely try to'.<sup>61</sup>

The reactive subject, conversely, refuses to incorporate itself into the present, despite itself being affected by the trace: it therefore says 'no' to the event. Auto is obviously the reactive subject par excellence, but we can also add the security bots that are dispersed to try and quell the uprising and restore the 'pre-revolutionary state of things'. Indeed, the world of the Axiom (as total as it is), is constructed with the underlying *expectation* that revolution is inevitable, through its extensive security and surveillance system. In one significant moment in the film, we see the faithful subjects confront the reactive subjects. On one side is the swirling body of WALL-E, EVE, and the rebellious robots,

and on the other, a perfectly aligned regiment of security bots. Their ominous order to the rabble: 'halt'.

This moment is a point. The tensed world has presented the faithful body with a decision: halt and return the world to its atonic state (and extinguish the truth procedure) or smash through the security lines (and change the transcendental of the world forever). The rogue robots charge! Their determination for a new destiny is made the instant they attack the reactive body that stands in their way. This point decided; the world presents a host of other points, which as Badiou insists, are always places that test the truth procedure. Badiou's politics is thus a mixture of a radical type of contingency and militant fidelity, and understanding this is crucial, since it prevents Badiou's philosophy descending into a (potentially conservative) politics of 'waiting' for the event. Each time the faithful rogues must answer to the violent reduction of the world into a determinate 'yes' or 'no'. As Badiou adds: '...crucial clashes in a battle, which as we saw expose the political subject-body to the points of its successive decisions, present in the place (the 'field' of battle) a concentrate of war understood as a world. Thus points rather naturally provide something like the topological summary of the transcendental. They space out the world'.<sup>62</sup> The tensed world of the Axiom is therefore spaced out by various points that the faithful subject-body must battle with and answer to (from security bots to rescuing the plant from oblivion). It is topological to the extent that the once concrete loop between being and being-there (or what exists and what does not) is now fractured and uncertain: the site brought into the world the inexistent idea of life, and the Axiom's transcendental was overrun.

[Figure 3 about here]

## Conclusion

Using film to illustrate philosophy is one thing, but to animate Badiou with WALL-E seems, on the surface, counter-intuitive. Badiou's use of set-theoretical mathematics, algebra, and axiomatic thought can act as a barrier to the geographer (or indeed anyone) inclined to explore the ideas contained across his challenging, but also innovative work. It has been precisely the wager in this article that the cinematic world of WALL-E not only acts as a translational medium (it feels as if the film's Director, Stanton, had wrote the script while thumbing through *Logics of Worlds*), but also opens up Badiou's philosophy to mass cultural critique, diverse imaginaries, and popular discourse. And in doing so, the passage of the 'cinematic idea' is lived and felt by audiences across the globe, from children chanting 'WALL-EEEEEEEE' to adults quietly enjoying what they thought was another popcorn throwaway. Clearly the cinematic idea in WALL-E is none other than the Platonic idea, in the sense that it is timeless and universal. It is the idea that within any world, however hopeless, lifeless, and atonic, lay the secret whisper of the site. For beneath what is presented and what belongs, roams the inexistent site – a perennial source of political instability that is radically contingent. Symbolized by the turbulent fate of the plant in this film, the dialectic between site and world, or between being and appearing, is an exciting concept for cultural and political geographies.

The concept of site is an interesting one, and has already been touched upon by human geographers.<sup>63</sup> Badiou's site builds upon the ontological foundation it was constructed from, but adds a distinct phenomenological twist. If the event of *Being and*

*Event* shattered the consistency of presentation, then the event of *Logics of Worlds* shatters the rules of appearing. The regulation of the world is disrupted, destroyed, remade. A figure whose value in a world was weak, suddenly acquires a maximal level of existential intensity. The site tears the very fabric of existence and introduces, through a brutal and often violent transformation, the appearance of the inexistent. This radical political emancipation is more than just a subtraction from the previous rules of the world. It is precisely because the previous transcendental is undone that a new world is immanently constructed from the dead logic of the old. As Žižek reinforces: ‘...insofar as...a true Event is not merely a negative gesture, but opens up a positive dimension of the New, an Event IS the imposition of a new world, of a new Master-Signifier (a new Naming, as Badiou puts it, or, what Lacan *calls vers un nouveau significant*). The true evental change is the passage from the old to the new world’.<sup>64</sup> And In Badiou’s own words, which provide a summary of his main argument in *Logics of Worlds*:

‘When the world is violently enchanted by the absolute consequences of a paradox of being, all of appearing, threatened by the local destruction of a customary evaluation, must reconstitute a different distribution of what exists and what does not. Under the pressure that being exerts on its own appearing, the world may be accorded the chance—mixing existence and destruction—of another world. It is this other world that the subject, once grafted onto the trace of what has happened, is eternally the prince’.<sup>65</sup>

WALL-E’s conclusion, ironically enough, is presented to the audience while the credits roll. Just as the film closes a new world opens. A montage of artistic stills show the new

world created on the surface of a previously dead planet Earth. In the closing shot of the animation, all of this happy activity – from farming to fishing – is traced back to the emergence of that same tiny, fragile, plant: growing in an old brown boot. The ecological message here seems deafening. But the cinematic idea is more profound: it is from the discarded that new worlds sprout. How they grow, is a matter for fidelity.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge the detailed and helpful comments of three anonymous referees. In addition, I would like to thank Sallie Marston for re-watching the movie with me in London, as well as John Paul Jones III, Vanessa Massaro, Anne Ranek, and Georgia Conover.

### **Biographical Note**

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<sup>1</sup> Alain Badiou, *Logics of worlds*, (London, Continuum, 2008), p. 514.

<sup>2</sup> Alain Badiou, 'Cinema as a democratic emblem' *Parrhesia* 6 (2009), pp. 1-6.

<sup>3</sup> *WALL-E*, Directed by Andrew Stanton, Pixar Animation Studios, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.oscar.com/oscar/night/winners/?pn=detail&nominee=Wall-E%20-%20Best%20Animated%20Feature%20Film%20Nominee>

<sup>5</sup> Thomson Reuters, "'Wall-E", "Milk", "Benjamin Button" earn film honors', <http://www.reuters.com/article/filmNews/idUSTRE4B87SC20081210>. Accessed 28 December 2008.

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- <sup>6</sup> David Denby, 'Past Shock: "The Dark Knight" and "WALL-E"', *The New Yorker*, [http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/cinema/2008/07/21/080721crici\\_cinema\\_denby?currentPage=2](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/cinema/2008/07/21/080721crici_cinema_denby?currentPage=2). Accessed 28 December 2008.
- <sup>7</sup> David Harvey, *Justice, nature, and the geography of difference* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1996); David Harvey, *A brief history of neoliberalism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005).
- <sup>8</sup> Neil Smith, *Uneven development* (Athens, GA, The University of Georgia Press, 2008).
- <sup>9</sup> Patrick Ford, 'WALL-E's Conservative Critics', *The American Conservative*, <http://www.amconmag.com/blog/2008/06/30/wall-es-conservative-critics/>. Accessed 28 December 2008.
- <sup>10</sup> Other geographers that have engaged the work of Alain Badiou include: John-David Dewsbury, 'Unthinking subjects: Alain Badiou and the event of thought in thinking politics', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32 (2007): 443-459; Keith Basset, 'Thinking the event: Badiou's philosophy of the event and the example of the Paris Commune' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26 (2008): 895-910.
- <sup>11</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and event* (London, Continuum, 2005).
- <sup>12</sup> Alain Badiou, *Logics of worlds: being and Event, 2* (London, Continuum, 2009).
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p.510
- <sup>14</sup> Notwithstanding Disney's age-old commodification of cultural stereotypes, see for example: Kent Ono and Derek Buescher, 'Deciphering *Pocahontas*: unpackaging the commodification of a native American woman' *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18(1) (2001), pp. 23-43.

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<sup>15</sup> This concept will be unravelled later in the paper, but a short definition is that inexistence is a type of existence that has no official recognition (e.g. the *sans papiers* in France).

<sup>16</sup> Badiou, *Cinema as a democratic emblem*, p.5.

<sup>17</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics* (London, Verso, 2001). In this particular book, Badiou deploys an ‘anti-humanist ethics’ (derived in part from Lacan and Foucault), which pivots on the idea that subjects are not reducible to their bodies, but are types of ‘immortal forms’ that are in a specific relationship and operation with the event. Later this idea will be more clearly defined in the section on ‘subjects’.

<sup>18</sup> Bruce Braun, ‘Modalities of posthumanism’, *Environment and Planning A* 36(8) (2004), pp 1352-1355; Sarah Whatmore, ‘Materialist returns: practising cultural geography in and for a more-than-human world’, *Cultural Geographies* 13(4) (2006), pp. 600-609. Particularly in scenes later on in the film onboard the Axiom, the fluidity in which humans and non-humans interact is a point of interest, as well as humanity’s absolute reliance on technology for basic muscle movement and the role of virtual reality in consumption.

<sup>19</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, cyborgs, and women: the re-invention of nature* (London, Free Association, 1991).

<sup>20</sup> Alain Badiou, *Infinite thought* (London, Continuum, 2005), p.93.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p. 84

<sup>22</sup> In 2005’s *Infinite thought* Badiou denies cinema is an art, whereas in his 2009 *Parrhesia* article he calls it a ‘mass art’ that hovers between art and non-art.

<sup>23</sup> Badiou, *Cinema as a democratic emblem*, p.4

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- <sup>24</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *In defense of lost causes* (London, Verso, 2008), p.52
- <sup>25</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The pervert's guide to cinema* (P Guide Ltd, 2006). This is a very fun and insightful movie; although a background in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is almost a pre-requisite.
- <sup>26</sup> See the following for a systematic treatment for Žižek's work and its relevance to geography: Paul Kingsbury, 'Did somebody say jouissance? On Slavoj Žižek, consumption, and nationalism', *Emotion, Space and Society* 1 (2008), pp. 48–55.
- <sup>27</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The sublime object of ideology* (London, Verso, 1989); Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* (London, Verso, 1999); Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (London, Granta Books, 2006); Slavoj Žižek, *The parallax view* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2006).
- <sup>28</sup> The joke here is Žižek's reenactment of Melanie Daniels' sexual attraction to the other protagonist of *The Birds*, Mitch Brenner.
- <sup>29</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, (New York, Norton, 2005).
- <sup>30</sup> Žižek. *Pervert's guide*.
- <sup>31</sup> Deborah Dixon, 'Film, geography and', in Barney Warf, ed., *Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (Thousand Oaks, Sage, 2006).
- <sup>32</sup> Stuart Aitken and Leo Zonn, eds., *Place, power, situation, and spectacle: a geography of film* (Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 1994).
- <sup>33</sup> Dixon, 'Film, geography and'.
- <sup>34</sup> Marcus Doel, *Poststructuralist geographies: the diabolical art of spatial science* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1999).
- <sup>35</sup> Tim Cresswell and Deborah Dixon, eds., *Engaging film: geographies of mobility and identity* (Oxford, Rowman and Littlefield, 2002); Gillian Rose, 'The cultural politics of place: local

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representation and oppositional discourse in two films', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 19(1) (1994), pp. 46-60; Gillian Rose, *Visual methodologies* (London, Sage, 2001); David B. Clarke, ed., *The cinematic city* (London, Routledge, 1997).

<sup>36</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the virtual: movement, affect, sensation* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2002); Nigel Thrift, *Non-representational theory: space, politics, affect* (London, Routledge, 2008).

<sup>37</sup> Wolfgang Natter and John Paul Jones III, 'Pets or meat: class, ideology, and space in Roger and Me', *Antipode*, 25(2) (1993), pp. 140-158.

<sup>38</sup> For a further explanation of this important Lacanian concept and its spatiality, see Paul Kingsbury, 'The extimacy of space' *Social and Cultural Geography*, 8(2) (2008), pp. 235-258.

<sup>39</sup> Badiou, *Logics of worlds*, p.102.

<sup>40</sup> Badiou is adamant however, in contrast to Kant, that his transcendental does not rely on any kind of thinking subject, and the passage from noumenal to phenomenal (or being to being-there) is a completely objective process. This assertion is based on his new and innovative theory of the 'object' in *Logics of Worlds*, pp. 191-241. Despite his protestations, the 'shadow' of Kant looms over Badiou's transcendental synthesis, according to Adrian Johnston, 'Phantom of consistency: Alain Badiou and Kantian transcendental idealism' *Continental Philosophy Review* 41 (2008), pp. 245-366.

<sup>41</sup> Badiou, *Logics of worlds*, p.103.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. pp. 420-424.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p.399-401.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p.420.

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<sup>45</sup> Žižek, *In defense of lost causes*, p.30

<sup>46</sup> Don Mitchell, 'Which side are you on? From Haymarket to now', *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 7(1) (2008).

<sup>47</sup> Badiou, *Logics of worlds*, p.424.

<sup>48</sup> Alain Badiou, *Theoretical writings* (London, Continuum, 2004), pp. 99-104; Alain Badiou, *Being and event*. pp. 173-190; Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics* (New York, Verso, 2005), pp. 141-152.

<sup>49</sup> Alain Badiou, *A manifesto for philosophy* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1999); Alain Badiou, *Conditions* (London, Continuum, 2008).

<sup>50</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*; Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: the foundation of universalism* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>51</sup> Prior to the structuring of presentation there exists an infinite horizon of inconsistency – which Badiou terms as the void. Itself a multiple, this endless void is the ontological 'stuff' of multiplicities and Badiou's definition of 'being qua being'. Each and every multiple, then, is drawn from operations first applied to the void alone. As such, since any presentation of the void is an *operation* rather than a 'window' to what actually exists, it follows that a ghastly remainder that was not captured by the operation of presentation is left over, and this remainder is included within each multiple. The void cannot be exorcised by presentation alone because the '... inconsistent multiple is both excluded from everything, and thus from the presentation itself, and included, in the name of...what the law does not authorize to think was thinkable: that the one is not, that the being of consistency is inconsistency' (Badiou, *Being and Event*, p.53). In this sense, the void authorizes presentation in the first

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place, without then in turn being presented. This schism created by presentation leads to a point of excess between the consistent multiple (situations) and the inconsistent multiple (the void).

<sup>52</sup> Alain Badiou, 'Logic of the site' *Diacritics*, 33 (2003): 140-150; Alain Badiou, *Theoretical writings*, pp.167-226; Badiou, *Logics of worlds*, pp. 355-380.

<sup>53</sup> Badiou, *Logics of worlds*, p. 361.

<sup>54</sup> As one reviewer of this paper observed, this emergence of an excluded site bears some resemblance to Freud's notion of the 'return of the repressed', e.g. Sigmund Freud, *The Unconscious*. SE, 14 (London, Hogarth Press, 1915), pp. 159-204

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p.452.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. pp. 317-321. I am referring here to Badiou's 'second constitutive thesis of materialism: subordination of logical completeness to ontological closure'. This thesis details just why those objects and relations in a world that are visible are not exhaustive of what 'is': there remains an excess of being-qua-being over being-qua-appearance.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p. 452.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p.514.

<sup>59</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. pp. 47-48.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p. 470.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. p. 416.

<sup>63</sup> Sallie A Marston, John Paul Jones III, and Keith Woodward, 'Human geography without scale', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 30 (2005), pp. 30 416–32; Keith

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Woodward, Sallie A Marston, and John Paul Jones III, 'The Eagle and the Flies, and Other Fables for the Micro', *SECONS: Socio-Economics of Space* 3 (2007), np.

<sup>64</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'On Alain Badiou and logiques des mondes', lacan.com, <http://www.lacan.com/zizbadman.htm>. Accessed 17<sup>th</sup> August 2009.

<sup>65</sup> Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, p.380.