

Review: Alain Badiou (2010) *Cinéma*. Paris: Nova Éditions. 419pp.

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This rich volume composed of thirty-two articles, interviews, essays and conference papers written between 1957 and 2010 bears witness to the intensity and durability of Alain Badiou's love for the cinema.<sup>1</sup> In these pages he repeatedly declares his love: 'Cinema is essential in my existence' (Badiou 2010, 13). He cannot conceive cinema without love: 'I think there is an intimate relation between cinema and love' (Badiou 2010, 343). He admires films which affirm 'yes to love, otherwise loneliness' (Badiou 2010, 279). But he also understands that to love the cinema is an obligation for the courageous. Cinema 'must be loved' since it instructs us to uphold that 'The worst of worlds shall not engender despair' (Badiou 2010, 373). From existentialism to the critique of deconstruction, from Maoism to the denunciation of the Mitterrand mirage, the cinema appears as a regular companion in the trajectory of the militant philosopher.

*Cinéma* reveals that Badiou's cinephilia has not been exclusively oriented towards the construction of a film theory. This collection of writings does not assemble a philosophy of *le septième art* as such but it maps out Badiou's personal, political, intellectual commitment to the cinema. A large number of the texts here included are entitled 'Notes on', 'References for' or 'Considerations about'. Badiou's relation to the cinema resembles an investigation (what the French Maoists call *enquête*) that never exhausts itself. Obstinacy and interruption are the fundamental characteristics of this lifelong *philia*.

*Cinéma* registers one significant hiatus in Badiou's attention to the cinema; there is no text written between 1957 and 1977. Badiou was

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<sup>1</sup> The large majority of the texts included in *Cinéma* are yet to be translated. The exceptions are: 'Cinema as a Democratic Emblem' published in *Parrhesia* (N6, 2009), 'The False Movements of Cinema' published in *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (Stanford University Press, 2005) and 'The Dimensions of Art, on Udi Aldoni's Film Forgiveness' (available online in [www.lacan.com](http://www.lacan.com)).

certainly driven by more urgent passions during *les années rouges*. Telling examples of his militant vigour during those years are a series of pseudonym texts from the late seventies written in the context of *La Feuille Foudre*, a collective and a journal ‘for a Marxist-Leninist intervention in cinema and culture’ (Badiou 2010, 23). Beyond representing a time that is over, these period documents are also fascinating for their uncompromising assemblage of activism and cinema. The main objective of *La Feuille Foudre* was ‘the production of critical norms to judge films militantly’ (Badiou 2010, 25) with the only two possible verdicts being ‘revisionist’ or ‘progressive’. Badiou presents his arguments in a decree-like classificatory mode; a technique of writing he describes as ‘my Chinese style’ (Badiou 2010, 35). In this context the article ‘Le Cinéma Révisionniste’ is best understood as an instruction manual to identify reactionary films. ‘L’Art et sa Critique’ defines with a doctrinary precision what a progressive film is: a film ‘not only compatible with Maoist politics but preparatory to its comprehension and practice’ (Badiou 2010, 77). In an introductory interview with Antoine de Baecque, Badiou admits that ‘one can laugh’ (Badiou 2010, 25) at the dogmatism of these texts-verdicts. However, he also emphasizes that to sentence or absolve films was never a simple task. The tribunal-like structure of *La Feuille Foudre* was the trigger of passionate discussions about political and cinematic details which were, according to Badiou, similar to a lovers’ dispute. The experience of *La Feuille Foudre* cemented the militant core of Badiou’s long-lasting engagement with the cinema. He learned that what matters in a film ‘is not the story, the plot but how a film takes sides and through which cinematic form it does so’ (Badiou 2010, 27).

In the texts he wrote for *La Feuille Foudre* Badiou makes a distinction between two types of reactionary cinema. This distinction exemplifies another key characteristic of Badiou’s approach: to connect the singularity of films with the contemporary. There is the cinema of the old bourgeoisie, represented in his writings by the work of Ingmar Bergman or ‘the obnoxious and ugly *Barry Lyndon*’ (Badiou 2010, 64). And there is the cinema of the new bourgeoisie: the films of Costa-Gavras, Bertrand Tavernier, Claude Sautet. Whereas the *leitmotif* of crepuscular cinema is ‘Everything is vanity’, the films of the new bourgeoisie develop the ignominious cinematic form to be known as ‘leftist fiction’. Leftist fiction films are the primary target of *La Feuille Foudre* because ‘their reactionary dimension is not obvious’ (Badiou 2010, 26). In the eyes of the Maoist collective, a leftist film places ‘cinema, as ideological mask or manufactured artefact, within a consensual discourse of an electoral kind (right against left) and doubles it with a largely academic style of filmmaking’ (ibid.). Following these parameters Badiou writes vehement and systematic critiques of celebrated films by leftist *auteurs*. In various articles he reveals how these films are to all intents and purposes

'harmful' (Badiou 2010, 95, 111). Without ceremony he condemns Volker Schlöndorff's *Circle of Deceit* (*Die Fälschung*, 1981) as a reactionary illustration of 'colonialist arrogance' (100). He dismisses Jacques Demy's *Une Chambre en Ville* (1982) because it 'makes us believe there is no crisis in the people or in the cinema' (Badiou 2010, 111). His analyses are primarily focused on narrative questions, *the moral of the film*, and very briefly on cinematic operations. The purpose of these texts is for the most part to denounce leftist fiction cinema as a form of propaganda whose half-hidden purpose is the electoral victory of the new bourgeoisie from the Socialist and Communist parties. It is to the credit of Badiou and *La Feuille Foudre* to have initiated this critique well before Mitterrand's triumph in 1981.

Badiou resorts to *the people*, the political name par excellence, to activate the categorical distinction between reactionary and progressive cinema. For Badiou 'the cinema of the new masters' (Badiou 2010, 65) is easy to identify because it eagerly claims to represent the people. In essence this representation reduces the antinomies of *the people* to an apolitical unity. The counter-revolutionary populism of this cinema makes the people visible as a 'historical substance, but never as a direct political actor' (Badiou 2010, 70). At the end of a reactionary film, observes Badiou, there is always a massacre to spectacularly emphasize that 'the people know how to die admirably, united and taciturn' (Badiou 2010, 67). On the contrary, progressive cinema makes visible how 'the cinema of social eternities' (Badiou 2010, 125) incapacitates by presenting the people as the agent of change. It is worth mentioning that beyond the strategic distinction between progressivism and revisionism during the pre-Mitterrand years the question of the people does constantly haunt Badiou's cinema writings. For him the cinema is primarily 'the art of the masses' (Badiou 2010, 331). 'The art of the masses' is an important formula because it articulates the paradox at the core of the cinema: the rough cohabitation of art, an aristocratic notion, and the masses, a democratic category. The cinema is an impure conjunction: it is a 'shared art' (Badiou 2010, 16), a 'school for everyone' (ibid.), 'a form of advertising' (Badiou 2010, 218), it is 'stupid' (ibid.). The cinema is the paradoxical art 'of Saturday evenings, of the family going out, of the teenagers, of the cats on the walls' (ibid.). From the worker to the aristocratic cinephile the cinema entertains and educates everyone in the contemporary and in the joys and efficacies of impure love.<sup>2</sup>

In this sense Badiou's cinephilia is characterised by the multiplicity of genres, nationalities, categories it attends to. The erudite variety, but also the

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<sup>2</sup> For an understanding of cinephilia as a form of impure love see Rifkin, Adrian, 'JR cinephile, or the philosopher who loved things' in *Parallax*, Volume 15, Issue 3 August 2009, pp. 81-87

consistency of his approach, attest his fidelity to the impure mixture the cinema is. The variety of focus does not simply demonstrate the eclectic capacity of the intellectual; rather it reads as the result of an everyday engagement with the antinomies of the populist art of our times. Badiou admires the formal inventiveness of films from the first modernity (films by Erich von Stroheim, F. W. Murnau) or from what he calls ‘the second modernity’ (films by Marguerite Duras, Manoel de Oliveira). He appreciates little known documentaries such as Pierre Breuchot’s *Le Temps Détruit* (1985) or Jean Bigiaoui’s *Y’a Tellement de Pays Pour Aller* (1983) for allowing us ‘to re-think France’ (Badiou 2010, 141). He is attentive to what is habitually called ‘political cinema’ and to the representation of class struggles in films such as Bertrand van Effenterre’s *Erica Minor* (1974). He condemns the ideology at work in most of French comedies and calls for a new comic genre that kindles ‘a laughter of defiance, a pamphlet-like laughter, a laughter that makes visible the possibility of another world’ (Badiou 2010, 31). He analyses Hollywood blockbusters such as *Cube* (Vincenzo Natali, 1997) and admires the platonic fable *The Matrix* (Andy and Lana Wachowski, 1999). In very sensitive texts he explains his affection for the anti-individualism of neoclassical Hollywood films such as Clint Eastwood’s *A Perfect World* (1993) or Paul Thomas Anderson’s *Magnolia* (1999). For decades Badiou has in fact been putting the same questions to this wide range of films: how is this specific film contemporary of our situation? Does this film configure a formal alternative to our situation? The question of the contemporary is not to be understood simply as a matter of reading a film as a symptom of the state of the world. A film is contemporary for Badiou when it is ‘destined to everyone’ (Badiou 2010, 226). The demand of contemporaneity is for him the only possibility of making cinema and politics cross each other: ‘I do not see any mediation [between art and politics] other than what I call contemporaneity’ (Badiou 2010, 186).

Badiou does not start to propose a specific philosophy of the cinema until the 1990s. It is then, in the context of his contributions to the journal *L’Art du cinéma*, that he transforms his stormy experience of the contradictions of the cinema into the affirmative axiom of his theory. Consequently the fundamental principle of his embryonic theory is that the cinema is an ‘absolutely impure art’ (Badiou 2010, 154). Badiou declares that cinema, the paradoxical art/spectacle, is ‘essentially innocent’ (Badiou 2010, 218) and hence it is not a matter anymore of developing a militant judgement but of thinking the positivity of cinema’s impurity. More precisely, Badiou locates the cinematic operations in several ways at the boundary between the pure and the impure. The cinema is first and foremost an industry and therefore ‘its conditions of possibility are part of an impure material system’ (Badiou 2010, 362). The starting point of the cinema is an impure infinity: a

material, technical, financial confusion and excess. The never-ending work of the cinema is to pull out fragments of purity out of this original chaos. Secondly, Badiou radicalises the call for a 'mixed cinema' made by Bazin in *What is Cinema?*.<sup>3</sup> The cinema does not only plunder the artistic operations of literature, theatre, painting but 'it defies these arts' (20). The work of the cinema is to *impurify* the other arts. Finally, in a larger sense, the cinema is for Badiou 'the location of the intrinsic indistinguishability between art and non-art' (Badiou 2010, 337). The cinema develops two operations of purification at the edge between art and non-art. There is the operation, of obvious Debordian inspiration, through which the cinema purifies itself by transforming into art its spectacular essence (pornography, violence). There is the operation that filters from non-art whatever can be reclaimed by the cinema as part of an artistic procedure, from the banality of a car (in the work of Abbas Kiarostami) to everyday sonic confusion (in the work of Jean-Luc Godard).

For Badiou the cinema cannot bring to a close these operations of purification and impurification. It is this very impossibility that defines the cinema:

My hypothesis is the following: it is impossible to dominate the infinity of the sensible. This impossibility is the reality of the cinema. It is a battle with the infinite, a battle to purify the infinite. The cinema, in essence, is this hand-to-hand fight with the infinite, the infinite of the visible, the infinite of the other arts, the infinite of music, the infinite of available texts. (Badiou 2010, 365)

This impossibility makes clear that the cinema does not incarnate ideas but 'It organizes within the visible the caress proffered by the passage of the idea' (Badiou 2010, 147). The elusive nature of the cinema, its movements of subtraction, determines its relation to philosophy. For Badiou philosophy is not a means to know the cinema; very differently there is a 'relation of transformation' (Badiou 2010, 323) between the two. The cinema transforms philosophy because a film is not the expression of an external determination but a fleeting movement of thought. Cinema's movements between the pure and the impure reveal that a true idea is a passage. This is the ultimate lesson of the cinema to philosophy: to give the idea of the impurity of every idea.

In his text 'Alain Badiou's Inaesthetics: the Torsions of Modernism', Jacques Rancière raises a reasonable objection to Badiou's hypothesis. Badiou assigns the filtration of purities and impurities to the essence of the cinema. The cinema becomes in his writings the unique art of the border, the impure art par excellence. But for Rancière these operations of impurification

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<sup>3</sup> Bazin, André, 'In Defense of Mixed Cinema' in *What is Cinema?*, pp.53-75.

and purification have countless precedents among the other arts: the opera as *gesamtkunstwerk*, the theatre as dance, as recital, as circus spectacle. Impurity is not the specific property of one art but a generic law of what Rancière calls the aesthetic regime. Following this critique, Badiou's characterisation of the cinema as a gate-keeper art at the edge of the pure/impure partition has at least two possible readings. On the one hand the cinema operates as the infectious border line where the proper and the improper of the arts can be policed. The philosopher appears as the only one capable of navigating cinema's 'unprecedented complexity' (Badiou 2010, 37) and clarify its propositions. Thus the assignation to the cinema of the monopoly on impurity twists but essentially confirms the modernist regime. On the other hand Badiou's writings on the cinema can be read as a throw of dice that refigures the proper/improper distinction, its regimentation of the arts and their relation. The cinema is the privileged art/non-art where Badiou finds the limit of his *inaesthetic* thought, where he can contest the modernist categories he puts to work in his own 'twisted modernism' (Rancière 2009, 70).

Badiou deeply admires the last sequence from Kenji Mizoguchi's *The Crucified Lovers* (*Chikamatsu Monogatari*, 1954), 'perhaps one of the most beautiful films about love ever made' (Badiou 2010, 326). In this scene two lovers condemned for adultery gently smile while they are paraded through the streets of a village to meet their death. For Badiou the smile of the lovers shows that 'between the event of love and the ordinary laws of life, the laws of the city, the laws of marriage, there is no common measure' (Badiou 2010, 327). The smile does not only represent a rupture in relation to the social law. It alludes to the fact that the social law can change or rather, Badiou insists, it compels us 'to think change' (*ibid.*). The cinema is not to be simply a filter art between the proper and the improper but an active commandment to think and act differently.

*Cinéma* is a most welcomed book that gives both courage and means 'to think the current state of the cinema without having to conclude that it is dying or dead' (Badiou 2010, 221). From the very first text the fundamental lesson of this volume is not to hesitate to love the cinema as a 'deep and illegitimate art' (Badiou 2010, 13). We must love the cinema as a key art/spectacle that, in its paradoxical assemblage of art and people, makes visible how our consensual regime can change.

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