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Review of: Alain Badiou, *Cinema*, selection and foreword by Antoine de Baecque; trans. Susan Spitzer (Malden, MA & Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013).

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Cinephilia and Waste

Whatever else it might be, Antoine de Baecque's selection of Alain Badiou's thinking on cinema is testament to the philosopher's lifelong engagement with the medium. The excellent translation is by Susan Spitzer and the book contains thirty-one texts: occasional pieces, conversations, theoretical discussions and appreciations of individual films, the earliest dating from 1957 (the next from twenty years later), and the most recent—apart from the new interview that opens the volume—from 2010. Some of the pieces have not been published before, while several have previously appeared in *L'art du cinéma*, the journal founded by Badiou together with Denis Lévy in 1993, or other dedicated film venues. Many of the earlier texts, on the other hand, appeared in militant reviews. In his foreword, de Baecque suggests that the collection 'can be read as a veritable manifesto of cinema as conceived by Alain Badiou' (x), and he describes Badiou's ideas on cinema as 'amazingly consistent over time' (7). Badiou himself however, in the opening interview, is careful to contextualize his cinema interests in relation to his political activities and discussions, and indeed the pronouncements in polemical texts like 'Revisionist Cinema' (34-39) or the programmatic 'Art and its Criticism' (40-47) seem quaint removed from their original setting of Maoist publications like *La Feuille foudre*. Many of the more recent texts are commissioned pieces (intended

for publication or oral presentation) that attest to Badiou's prestige as a *maître à penser* enjoined to pronounce, often in aphoristic or in abstract terms, on a cultural phenomenon like the cinema.

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It is, of course, Badiou's intellectual celebrity that motivates the compilation of his writings on the theme, even if the volume is also evidence of the status cinema has acquired in certain philosophical discourse following Gilles Deleuze's two books on the theme.¹ The publication of Badiou's *Cinema* is moreover an index of the rise of the approach known as 'film-philosophy', and the most substantial essays in the volume exemplify film-philosophy's attention to 'the ways in which films develop and contribute to philosophical discussion'.² In its less interesting modes, film-philosophy tends to use films to illustrate philosophical positions, or to use philosophy to confirm a prior canon of 'great' films. Badiou is not usually guilty of the former, but a certain standard-issue cinephilia means the second is found *passim* in *Cinema* in the tone, content, and points of reference (predominantly canonized directors) of the discussion.

Nico Baumbach has suggested that *Cinema* offers 'a backdoor entry into Badiou's intellectual trajectory':³ the vexed question of his cinephilia is part of this trajectory; it underpins the philosophical account of cinema articulated over the course of the book. It is really not so surprising that Badiou's ideas on cinema might be 'consistent over time' given that he exemplifies the version of cinephilia that was born in France in the 1950s, became politicized in the 1960s and radicalized in the 1970s, and which came to view itself as philosophy in the wake of André Bazin and Deleuze. Mid-century French

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (London: Athlone Press, 1986 [1983]); *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (London: Athlone Press, 1989 [1985]).

² I take this statement from the website of the journal *Film-Philosophy* <<http://www.filmphilosophy.com/index.php/f-p/about/editorialPolicies#focusAndScope>>.

³ Nico Baumbach, 'Philosophy's Film: On Alain Badiou's *Cinema*', *LA Review of Books*, 22 September 2013, available at <<http://lareviewofbooks.org/review/philosophys-film-on-alain-badiou-cinema>>.

cinophilia opposed the individual to the industry of cinema, and so we have Badiou's default conception of cinema in auteurist terms—in terms, that is, of great directors and their films. Familiar names recur: Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, Orson Welles and especially Jean-Luc Godard (Badiou is flattered by his brief appearance in Godard's *Film Socialisme* of 2010 [6]). The gauche but brilliant earliest essay in the volume—in which Badiou writes for 'taste' and the 'cultured spectator' against escapism and entertainment—already posits the art/industry opposition that haunts and bothers the volume. Cinema, writes the twenty-year-old Badiou, 'struggles each and every day against the black and white world of producers, of the commercial industry' (33). The opposition remains the key problem for the philosopher (a 'philosophical situation' of incompatible terms) and Badiou tries to make a virtue of it in his notion of cinema as a 'democratic emblem' (233).

Many of the texts contained in *Cinema* are accounts of single films that Badiou admires. These tend to be perceptive appreciations, an approach he describes as 'explication de film', 'a genre that is not a critical but a didactic one' (151). As such, they are distinguished from the fulminations characteristic of the militant (or militant-cinephile) period, when he denounces middlebrow political films or popular comedies. But likely to be the most read texts in the book are those in which Badiou explicitly develops his theoretical account of cinema: 'The False Movements of Cinema' (88-93), portions of the interview 'Thinking the Emergence of the Event' (105-28), 'Can a Film be Spoken About?' (94-99), the relatively long 'Cinema as Philosophical Experimentation' (in which he also discusses Deleuze [202-32]) and the redaction of that previously unpublished piece in the subsequent essay, 'On Cinema as a Democratic Emblem' (233-41).

For Badiou, cinema is the ‘plus-one’ of the arts: ‘it operates on the other arts, using them as its starting point’ (89). He sometimes follows Deleuze in seeing cinema not as a matter of representation but of thought in images instead of concepts (223). However, while cinema can produce truth, the Idea (upper case his) is not made ‘sensible’, but is present in the ‘passage’ or ‘visitation’ (90)—by which he seems to mean the totality of one’s experience of the film (this is also a rationale for Badiou’s impressionistic analysis of films). Despite this, he suggests that cinema is ‘a place of intrinsic indiscernibility between art and non-art’ (139). Indeed he goes so far as to compare cinema to the treatment of waste: other arts (he argues) begin from purity, whereas cinema starts from impurity and, when great, achieves purity (229-30). The culmination of his thinking on cinema comes in his consideration of cinema’s democratic dimension as ‘mass art’: ‘cinema is a mass art because it shares the social imaginary with the masses’ (230). He argues that the greatest masterpieces of cinema are seen and appreciated as such at the time of their release by millions of people from all over the world (the films of Chaplin are his primary example). But as a ‘mass art’, cinema is paradoxical: for Badiou, ‘mass’ is a political category (or category of political activism) whereas ‘art’ is an aristocratic category (requiring education and culture unavailable to most). So, for Badiou, cinema is itself a philosophical situation: it forces ‘an encounter between terms [mass and art] that are foreign to each other’ (202).

In ‘Can a Film be Spoken About?’, Badiou suggests that the task of the commentator is to demonstrate ‘how a particular film lets us travel with a particular idea in such a way that we might discover what nothing else could lead us to discover’ (98). This raises the question of method; how, that is, can such a demonstration be performed? When Badiou speaks in less abstract terms—when he writes about actual films—his readings can aptly be described as impressionistic. He explicitly refuses the study of the means of cinema:

‘Formal considerations [...] must be referred to only inasmuch as they contribute to the ‘touch’ of the Idea and to the capture of its native impurity’ (96). So it is that elsewhere he writes that ‘philosophy does not enable us to know cinema’ (202). Badiou means to refer to philosophy’s modesty before the medium that is its object, and so distinguishes himself (if this were needed) from work in the analytic tradition, which is, precisely, about fixing and knowing its object.⁴ But such modesty also connotes a kind of aristocratic dilettantism. Other reviewers of *Cinema* have jeered at Badiou’s refusal to deal with the specifics of the medium: ‘[T]o suggest that aesthetics can safely dispense with any consideration of the formal means by which artworks achieve their impact is frankly preposterous, and speaks more of the rationalization of one’s own inadequacy than of any conceptual principle.’⁵ Actually, Badiou is a sensitive and perceptive viewer, and the book is dotted with uncommon insight (he is always good on Godard, for example, and the *explication de film* done on Michelangelo Antonioni’s ‘Identification of a Woman’ [1982] transcends the philosopher’s indifference to gender theory). All the same, the value of his impressionistic encounter with cinema is posited upon a conviction of the cinephile’s highly developed and aristocratic sensibility, on distinction in other words: the ability to distinguish wheat and chaff, and the capacity to distinguish oneself from the mere cinemagoer (there is no mention of Bourdieu in the book).

I am arguing this even though the popular character of cinema is a reiterated motif in *Cinema* and an obstinate challenge of which Badiou is conscious; but the mechanism of distinction remains. It is displayed unabashed in the witty 1983 essay ‘Interrupted Notes on the French Comedy Film’ (72-76). Many comic cinemas in national language

⁴ Consider the combative confidence of Noël Carroll’s account in *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), a book with which, however, Badiou might fruitfully have engaged (on page 207 Badiou explicitly asks ‘what is a mass art?’): Badiou’s account is exclusively Francocentric.

⁵ Stuart Walton, ‘Notes on Avoiding Fate’, *Review 31* [undated], available at <<http://review31.co.uk/article/view/163/notes-on-avoiding-fate>>.

traditions are unexportable products which employ and indulge local (regional, national) stereotypes; just as often, the cinephile elite in that country will deplore such productions as at once cause and effect of national conservatism and self-deluding complacency: this is precisely what we find in Badiou's essay. The French comedy, for Badiou, represents a 'sort of corny, old-fashioned eternity. The humorous intrigues of your good, decent folks' (72). 'It is always about fulfilling expectation. The aim of the French comedy is fulfilment' (74). Badiou's critique is typically astute but it is above all a performance of distinction that makes the familiar move of translating aesthetic distaste into moral and political disdain.

One film that dismays Badiou in the essay is the WWII-set comedy, 'La Grande Vadrouille' (1966). The film is significant because it was for several decades French cinema's highest grossing film and as such is a key exhibit in any account of the popular cinema of that country. David Platten writes of 'La Grande Vadrouille' as a carnivalesque 'reclamation of the German Occupation of France, which banks on being able to unite the nation in laughter at a common enemy'.⁶ Sophisticated in form, ambitious in scale, and utterly knowing in terms of its deployment of location, character and cliché, 'La Grande Vadrouille' is a pastiche and parody of standard adventure films and epics about the war which undercuts its own production values with farcical situations, gender confusion and comic personae (incarnated by Bourvil and Louis de Funès, two household names despised by Badiou) with their origins in the *commedia dell'arte*. Badiou, for his part, reserves particular ire for this and for other comedies about the Second World War: '[W]hat a riot it was, actually, this cinema suggests: just think, the defeat, the drubbing, the cowardice, the black market!' (74). With revealing vocabulary (though one

⁶ David Platten, 'Why Popular Films are Popular: identification, Imitation and Critical Mortification', in *Imagining the Popular In Contemporary French Culture*, ed. by David Looseley and Diana Holmes (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 123-61 (p. 147).

would ideally double-check the original French), he regrets how another film in the genre 'juxtaposes historical violence [...] and broad cabaret humour [...] in a truly vulgar mishmash' (75; my italics).

'Vulgar', we know, comes from the Latin for 'common people'. Badiou is here deploring the comedy of the common people as such. Against this aristocracy of taste, Platten, in his analysis of 'La Grande Vadrouille', is right to mention Mikhail Bakhtin, who theorized the carnivalesque as a celebratory mode involving the whole community – the vulgar, the common people – as participants.⁷ Comic film can be seen as quintessentially carnivalesque: as Victor Turner has suggested, while feudal societies had carnival or festival and early modern societies had carnival and theatre, 'electronically advanced societies' have film.⁸ There are moments in *Cinema* where Badiou seems almost ready to act on a similar insight. He has the traditional cinephile's respect for the 'right sort' of comic carnivalesque (Chaplin's tramp amok, say). In his appreciation of 'Histoire(s) du Cinema' (Godard's five-hour essayistic sublimation of his own cinephilia completed in 1998) Badiou regrets Godard's pomposity and high seriousness and reminds us that cinema has also been a 'Saturday night art, an art of the family going out together, of teenagers, of cats on walls. It has always oscillated between the broad comedy of the cabaret and the colossal bravado of the fair, both the clown and the strongest-man-in-the-world' (136). Cinema as an entertainment reminiscent of the 'fair'—this is Bakhtinian talk, as is the reference to participation in the following: 'the relationship with cinema isn't one of contemplation but of participation, solidarity, admiration, or even jealousy, irritation, or hatred' (231). For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque is an aesthetic of degradation, where all that is high is brought low, and the material (the functions of the body) is

⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

⁸ V. Turner, 'Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 6: 4 (1979), pp. 465-99 (p. 468).

asserted against the overbearing claims of the intellectual or spiritual; for Badiou, cinema is an ‘art of the general assembly [...] grounded in the fondness of all classes, ages, and peoples for the spectacle of an important man being doused with liquid manure by a tramp’ (137; the allusion is again to Chaplin).

The mistake Badiou makes—or so it seems to me—is to wish to rescue the cinema from the fair and from the participation of the vulgar. So I am unpersuaded when he argues that great cinema is an achievement of purity from waste, or when he argues that great cinema performs a process of elevation rather than degradation: ‘With cinema,’ he says, ‘*you have the possibility of rising*’ (239; Badiou’s emphasis). Cinephilia has always been embarrassed by the triviality of the object of its passion; its response has most often been to assert the transcendence of that triviality by the best examples and artists of the medium. This too, at root, is Badiou’s approach. The task of respecting and accounting for cinema *qua trivial* may be a philosophical challenge too far for the cinephile philosopher.