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‘Keep Going!’ Cinema and Badiou’s Ethics of Truths

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Abstract:

In his “Cinema as Philosophical Experimentation”, Alain Badiou argues that cinema, like philosophy, stages the emergence of novel syntheses from an encounter between irreconcilable terms. For example, as a mass art, cinema is itself the product of the collision of two incompatible terms: the aristocracy (historically the patrons of ‘high’ art) and democracy. Cinema thus constitutes a philosophical situation, for as Badiou writes, “A philosophical situation is an encounter between terms that are foreign to each other”. But what are the implications of cinema for moral philosophy, or ethics? Using the example of John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956), I explore Badiou’s claim that because cinema thinks in images, it does not merely represent ethical conflicts; it thinks these conflicts out, enacting them in images much the same way that ethics thinks the relationship between Good and Evil through concepts. Exploring the question of cinema’s relationship to the emergence of truths and the democratization of knowledge, this essay asks: does cinema proffer the mere simulacrum of a Badiouian event? Or, might it reveal important truths about the relationship between reality and images? I conclude by suggesting that cinema is perhaps the most ethical of artforms in Badiou’s sense of the term, as it articulates the ethical imperative: ‘keep going’! Despite what Badiou perceives to be its many weaknesses, cinema at times miraculously overcomes its impurity, yielding unique ideas and novel truths.

Introduction

This essay considers the implications of Badiou's concept of an 'ethics of a truth' for his reflections on cinema (and, in turn, the significance of his work on cinema for our understanding of Badiou's ethics). In "On Cinema as a Democratic Emblem," (Badiou 2013/2005) Badiou notes that one of the ways that we can 'think' cinema philosophically is by exploring the ethical dilemmas it presents. We can understand cinema, Badiou writes, "as a reservoir of figures of conscience, as a popular phenomenology of every situation in which a choice has to be made" (2013/2005: 236). Cinema does more than merely represent ethical conflicts, however. Following Gilles Deleuze, whose work on cinema explored the medium's capacity for thought, Badiou argues that cinema contemplates these conflicts using sounds and images to constitute "cinema ideas," much the same way that ethics thinks the relationship between Good and Evil through concepts. In what follows, we will explore this dimension of cinema using the example of John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956). I argue that a reading of *The Searchers* using the framework of Badiou's ethics allows us to make sense of the film not only as a moderately progressive condemnation of the pathology of white racism, but also as staging one man's effort to remain faithful to the eventual process of a truth.

Badiou on Cinema

Badiou's engagement with cinema is longstanding. The recently published *Cinema*, a collection of his work on the medium, includes writings and lectures spanning the course of the philosopher's career, from "Cinematic Culture," written by Badiou in 1957 when he was twenty years old, to a piece published in 2010 on Clint Eastwood's film *A Perfect World* (1993). Also included are selections

dating from the 1970s and 1980s written for the Maoist publications *Feuille foudre* and *L'Imparnassien*, reviews Badiou wrote for the biweekly that he cofounded with Natacha Michel, *Le Perroquet*, and more recently published pieces that originally appeared in *L'Art du cinéma*. And yet, despite this wealth of material, as Alex Ling, author of *Badiou and Cinema* admits, “we would be forgiven for concluding that, at least at first glance, far from serving to condition his philosophy, cinema is of little consequence to Badiou” (2010: 32). This is because, compared to Badiou’s work on poetry and theater, for example, his engagement with cinema has been fairly sporadic. And, as we will see, at times Badiou seems to waver as to cinema’s status as art. Because Badiou’s writings on cinema are more piecemeal than his work on other artforms, we should first establish some basic tenets of his philosophy of the medium. We will then discuss these in relation to the ethical principles that he advances in *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*.

Badiou regards cinema as an *inessential and impure art*. What does this mean? First, he refers to cinema as the “plus-one” of the arts, by which he means that it partakes of the various arts, such as music and dance. It borrows elements of these and transforms them into what Badiou calls “cinema ideas”: “Cinema is the seventh art in a very particular sense,” writes Badiou in “The False Movements of Cinema” (Badiou 2013/1994). “It does not add itself to the other six, while remaining on the same level as them.” Here Badiou refers to Hegel’s designation of the six principle art forms: architecture, sculpture, painting, dance, music, and poetry. As Ricciotta Canudo posited in 1911, cinema is indeed the “seventh art” but, unlike the other six, it is inessential; “It operates on the other arts, using them as its starting point, in a movement that subtracts them from themselves” (Badiou 2013/1994: 89).

Cinema is also an impure art for other reasons. Because it is the product of mass production, Badiou argues, it is never the product of a single, individual vision (here, as elsewhere in Badiou’s writings, it

is evident that “cinema” for him refers to commercial, mass-produced films exhibited in theaters). More important for our purposes, Badiou argues that cinema is impure because it necessarily incorporates that which is not art; that is, the sounds and images of contemporaneity: “[C]ars, pornography, gangsters, shoot-outs, the urban legend, different kinds of music, noises, explosions, fires, corruption, everything that basically makes up the modern social imaginary” (2013/2003: 229). For Badiou, cinema assembles and purifies these sounds and images, which he holds in decidedly low regard as “non-art.” Whereas other arts start from what we might call the “purity of the void,” (the blank page, or the empty canvas) and attempt to preserve this purity in the emergent work, cinema—or, at least what Badiou would identify as “great” cinema—is a subtractive art form; it starts from the excesses of the world and transforms them, thereby producing purity.

Badiou’s thesis that cinema parasitically partakes of elements belonging properly to other arts suggests the philosopher’s adherence to the medium specificity thesis; that is, the supposition that certain aesthetic forms have inherent capacities and limitations determined, in part, by their materiality. In “Medium Specificity Arguments and Self-Consciously Invented Arts: Film, Video and Photography,” Noel Carroll provides a cogent overview of the use of the concept in the history of film criticism (1984/5:127-53). Medium specificity arguments usually appear in writings about recently established, artforms, explains Carroll; artforms such as film and video, for example, that are predicated on the development of new technologies. These arguments are used, notes Carroll, to legitimize the recently established artform and to differentiate it from those forms from which it borrows or appears most similar. Thus, in the 1930s, critic Rudolph Arnheim argued against those who claimed that cinema was little more than “canned theatre” by noting that, due to its limitations as a recording device, the cinematic apparatus alters the appearance of that which it records. More than simply an apparatus for recording of theatrical performance, then, Arnheim argued that the

camera, in recording such events imperfectly, creates a uniquely “cinematic” representation. It follows that in order for cinema to achieve its full potential as a unique artform, it should exploit this capacity for novelty or difference: “The strategy was, therefore, to describe the differences between the images we obtain when looking at the physical world and the images perceived on the motion picture screen,” noted Arnheim in 1974, reflecting on his early film criticism. “These differences could than be shown to be a source of artistic expression” (Arnheim qtd. in Carroll 1984/5: 128).

Badiou’s contention that cinema is the “plus-one” of the arts is nearly the obverse of Arnheim’s. In fact, in raising the possibility that cinema lacks sufficient novelty as an artform, Badiou’s claim is more akin to those of the critics of cinema against whom Arnheim argued. But what both Badiou’s and Arnheim’s arguments have in common is the supposition that in order to qualify as an art, the form must achieve something unique. Noel Carroll compellingly argues that the medium specificity thesis is not only of limited usefulness to both critics and artists, but is also conceptually flawed. It arbitrarily identifies one of the myriad aspects of a medium’s material attributes as determining its “essence.” And as Carroll writes, “even if media have essences, which is itself a controversial issue, it is far from clear that an ostensible essence of a medium has any directive force over how the medium is used, let alone how it should be used” (1984/5:39). For our purposes, I would simply note that medium specificity claims are almost always prescriptive and delimiting. For example, Soviet film theorists of the 1920s, such as Lev Khuleshov and Sergei Eisenstein, argued that montage is the essence of cinema. Their claim was based, in part, on the idea that the shot is the most elementary unit of the filmstrip, and that the juxtaposition of shots is a unique capacity belonging to the cinema. However, Soviet theorists’ premise that montage is the soul of cinema precluded them for recognizing that, although the work of Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov are indeed great, so too are the films of directors like Roberto Rossellini and Orson Welles, who tend to rely

less on editing and more on the use of long takes and staging in-depth. In posting *a priori* conditions for the achievement of cinematic artistry, then, the theory works against one's ability to understand the art of cinema rather than abetting it.

For his part, Badiou's adherence to the idea that, for example, melody belongs "properly" to the art of music, and choreographed movement belongs "properly" to the art of dance, and that their use in cinema results necessarily in their debasement, creates quite a conceptual bind. As we will see, due to the constrictive parameters of his own theory, Badiou has difficulty demonstrating that cinema is a unique and powerful artform, though he clearly wants to. He discovers a way out of this quandary by arguing that, upon borrowing what he calls "ideas" proper to the other arts, cinema transforms these into unique and novel "cinema ideas." However, at least one commentator (Ling) has noted the inadequacy of this rhetorical sleight of hand.

For the moment, however, let us take as given Badiou's contention that cinema is an impure art. Because cinema is an impure and inessential artform, however, it is also a *democratic art*: "It is clear that cinema retains from the other arts everything that is popular about them, everything that once isolated, filtered, separated from those arts' aristocratic requirements, *might* enable them to be addressed to the masses," states Badiou (2013/2003: 237). Badiou claims that appreciation of art qua art requires years of education in aesthetic discernment, an assertion that, as I discuss below, should be questioned. However, for Badiou, cinema makes the other arts accessible to the masses in a way that he believes they initially are not. Cinema is also a mass art precisely to the extent that it achieves a universal appeal that transcends cultural difference. Thus, in explaining the global appeal of the character of Charlie Chaplin, he writes, "Charlie's character, although perfectly situated in a particular context, is representative of generic humanity for an African, a Japanese, or an Eskimo"

(2013/2003: 207). Badiou does not provide evidence of Chaplin's cross-cultural reception, however; in this we must simply take him at his word.

For Badiou, the term “mass” or “masses” has a political valance—it is roughly synonymous with the phrase “the people” as it was used, for example, in the United States during the Popular Front era of the 1930s and 1940s. Art, however, has historically been the province not of the masses, but of elites, requiring as it does the privilege of an education in aesthetic appreciation. Thus the term “mass art” is oxymoronic: it combines a progressive political category with that which is bound up with the preservation of the political status quo, i.e., the reproduction of already existent social inequality. This is precisely why Badiou regards cinema as constituting a “philosophical situation”: “There is philosophy,” writes Badiou, “only insofar as there are paradoxical relationships.... Philosophy is the violence done by thought to impossible relationships” (2013/2005: 233). The “violence” that cinematic “thought” affects is, as we will see, the source of cinema's uniquely political power as an art. Indeed, we might even say that cinema has an ethical responsibility to stay true to its inherently political character; that is, to speak to the masses.

However, as suggested above, in reading his collected writings on cinema one is apt to question cinema's status as an art in Badiou's philosophy. Badiou identifies four “subjective types”: the artistic, the political, the scientific, and the amorous. By “subject,” he refers not to the psychological or Cartesian subject; instead, he defines subject as “the bearer [*le support*] of a fidelity, the one who bears a process of truth” (2001: 43). The subject of art, then, is not the artist, but rather the artwork or series of artworks that s/he produces. In the case of cinema, the subject is a film or series of films made by a filmmaker faithful to a cinematic event. The “event,” in this context, is something that happens, “something that cannot be reduced to its ordinary inscription in ‘what there is’” (2001: 41).

Thus, the event constitutes a radical break with the existent; it is novel or unique. Examples of cinematic “events” include the French New Wave in France in the 1960s and Cinema Novo in Brazil in the 1960s and 1970s. These movements broke with existent film form and film style; after the appearance of a film like Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless*, for instance, any filmmaker “faithful” to the event of the French New Wave could no longer make films the way he or she did prior to the event’s occurrence. To be faithful to the event means “to relate henceforth to the situation *from the perspective of its eventual [evenmentiel] supplement.*” (2001:41). Such fidelity to the event is that which facilitates the emergence of a truth. As Badiou (2001) writes, “I shall call ‘truth’ (*a* truth) the real process of a fidelity to an event: that which this fidelity *produces* in the situation” (42). A truth, then, emerges as a result of the individual’s fidelity to the event.

Immediately, we become aware of the importance of novelty to Badiou’s concepts of the event, truth, and the subject. An event or truth-process “is heterogeneous to the instituted knowledges of the situation”; it “punches a ‘hole’ [*trouée*] in these knowledges” (2001: 43). A “truth” is that which emerges as a result of the event. It cannot be assimilated to knowledge as it existed prior to the event; it is, rather, the source of new knowledge. Now, the question of cinema and its status as a subjective “type,” that is, as art, concerns precisely this question of novelty. How is it that cinema, which, as we have seen, is for Badiou the “plus-one” of the arts, is capable of producing novel truths? If cinema exists solely in the assemblage and democratization of other art forms (for example, music, painting, and dance), wouldn’t that which emerges as a result necessarily lack novelty?

The suggestion that cinema is incapable of yielding novel truths may seem a damning condemnation of the form. However, it is important to note that Badiou claims the same to be true of philosophy

(note that “the philosophical” is not one of the four subjective “types” that Badiou identifies). This is one reason why he claims that philosophy and cinema are analogous, and, indeed, why he sees the future of philosophy in decidedly cinematic terms. As he states at the conclusion of his essay, “On Cinema as a Democratic Emblem,” “After the philosophy of cinema must come – is already coming – philosophy *as* cinema, which consequently has a chance of being a philosophy of the masses” (2013/2005: 241). Like philosophy, cinema re-thinks ideas that properly belong to the other arts; it perhaps even re-thinks ideas originating in other subjects, such as love or science. In so doing it democratizes access to the truths these subjects yield, making new knowledges widely available. Yet another reason why philosophy and cinema are analogous is because, as noted above, Badiou identifies a philosophical situation as one in which there occurs a confrontation between two incommensurable terms; for example, the political terms “mass” or “masses” and the aristocratic term “art.” As we will see, cinema is the medium *par excellence* of such contradictions.

But what about the question of cinema’s status as art? At the conclusion of “The False Movements of Cinema,” Badiou proffers what appears to be a bleak assessment: “Cinema,” he writes, “is the ‘plus-one’ of the arts, both parasitic and inconsistent.” If art is one of Badiou’s four subjective “types”, by virtue of its relationship to the singular, non-commensurable event, then cinema, as a parasitic form, would appear to exist outside or even below art. Yet Badiou proceeds, “But its force as a contemporary art lies precisely in turning – for the duration of the passage [*passé*] – the impurity of every idea into an idea in its own right” (93). Although cinema may indeed, borrow (or steal) ideas proper to other arts, which, Badiou admits, results in the degradation of their aesthetic force, it is capable of combining these ideas in such a way as to constitute uniquely cinematic truths. It is through this process of assemblage that these ideas attain a force that is novel or unique. Because it is an artform of the masses, in creating new cinema ideas from the material of the other arts, cinema

democratizes access to truth and contributes to the expansion of knowledge. Despite cinema's impurity as an artform, then, it is capable of purity, or rather, of purifying the assemblage of ideas and images it comprises to yield something novel or unique.

Ling is ultimately dissatisfied with this defense of cinema's capacity for novelty, however. He writes: "Badiou's cinema would appear to remain fundamentally didactic (and in this sense classically Platonic), inasmuch as his cinema is, as we have seen, ultimately non-evental, and thereby fails to register truth as such...." (48). As discussed above, this difficulty is attributable to Badiou's unnecessary adherence to the idea that an artform achieves its status as such by virtue of its unique attributes. Yet despite cinema's status as the "plus-one" of the arts, cinema in Badiou's philosophy is, in fact, capable of novelty (and indeed, Ling, too, remains convinced of cinema's import in Badiou's work). Cinema's capacity to yield truth despite its "plus-one" status and what Badiou regards as the aesthetically banal sounds and images that constitute its source material is in fact one reason why he characterizes it as being of the order of the miraculous: "This is one of the miracles of film," writes Badiou, "to proffer the grace of elevation – I would almost say redemption – to what everywhere else would only be corrupt images" (2002/2013, 163). As we will see, Badiou's faith in the power of cinema to yield novel truths has implications when considered in terms of Badiou's ethics of a truth, the maxim of which is "keep going!" despite all impediments.

Badiou's "Ethics of a Truth"

Having delved into the question of cinema's relationship to the emergence of novel truths, we can now move on to consider Badiou's "ethics of a truth" so as to better understand the ethical implications of cinema as an art form. We can begin as we did in our discussion of cinema; that is,

Keep Going!

by identifying some basic characteristics of the ethics of a truth that Badiou advances. Badiou's essay on ethics is highly critical of the prevailing ethical model in the contemporary western world. Ethics, he argues, is the branch of philosophy currently most in vogue. It is today "plebe-and public-cited, press-released, televised, even mentioned in government speeches" (2001: 1). Yet this model of ethics (which informs a variety of specific ethical doctrines, from bio-ethics to the ethics of communications and that of human rights) is, Badiou argues, conservative and nihilistic. As we will see, contemporary ethics denies the power of truths and warns of the dangers of fidelity to the event. Against such an ethics, then, Badiou proposes an "ethics of truths" defined by certain characteristics. First, an ethics of a truth is specific: "Rather than link the word to abstract categories (Man or Human, Right or Law, the Other...), it should be referred back to particular *situations*," Badiou writes (2001: 3). Any ethical doctrine that privileges such abstractions over the singularity of the situation is, in fact, antithetical to the ethics that Badiou proposes. Contemporary medical ethics is in this regard exemplary: "The doctor won over to 'ethical' ideology will ponder, in meetings and commissions, all sorts of considerations regarding 'the sick', understood as an abstract category, the 'totality of subhuman entities'" (2001: 14). This conceptualization of the sick will facilitate the withholding of treatment by the doctor should an individual patient lack residency papers, for example, or fail to be a contributor to social security. As Badiou sarcastically quips, "'collective' responsibility demands it" (2001: 14). For Badiou, the truly ethical action would be to treat the patient "to the limit of the possible," disregarding all non-medical imperatives.

In this example, Badiou ostensibly privileges the preservation of human life above all else. However, it is important to note that for Badiou this is not the ethical imperative of the situation per se. In fact, Badiou disparages modern ethics for maintaining that the safeguarding of biological life is the ethical imperative *par excellence*: "if we equate Man with the simple reality of his living being, we are

inevitably pushed to a conclusion quite opposite to the one that the principle of life seems to imply.” For, as Badiou provocatively states, “this ‘living being’ is in reality contemptible, and *he will indeed be held in contempt*” (2001: 12). Badiou imputes such contempt to liberal humanitarianism, which posits an abstract understanding of people impacted by such things as famine, drought, and genocide as mere victims, they who are decidedly “Other” to the liberal human subject in the West. Far from arguing the unimportance of human life, then, Badiou contends that actions carried out in the name of the principle of life often achieve its obverse, which is nihilism and death. The preservation of biological life is therefore not the ethical imperative of the medical situation described above; it is rather a consequence of the actual ethical imperative, which is the pursuit of the medical (i.e., scientific) situation to the limit of the possible. In so doing, the doctor becomes something more than a human animal—or, as Badiou puts it, paraphrasing Plato, “a ‘biped without feathers,’ whose charms are not obvious” (2001: 12). In his or her pursuit of the medical situation, there perhaps occurs an event, a medical breakthrough that will be the source of new knowledge in the medical profession. Thus the doctor becomes “‘some-one,’ a human animal among others, which nevertheless finds itself *seized* and *displaced* by the evental process of a truth.” That is, the doctor transcends his or her corporeal existence, achieving a kind of immortality (2001: 91).

We can at this point identify two interrelated principles of Badiou’s ethics of a truth: 1) the ethics of a truth refers back to specific *situations*. Rather than proffer abstract terms such as “Man, or “Rights,” which, as we have seen, reduce persons to the subhuman status of victims, Badiou’s ethics maintains that we must attend to the situation at hand irrespective of all other considerations; and 2) within a given situation, a truth must be pursued to the limits of the possible. Thus, the hypothetical doctor in the example cited above must pursue a medical solution without regard to extraneous concerns such as cost. Likewise, the highly esteemed artist must follow the thread of truth in his

work even if the path seems obscure, even if his renown would be more safely secured were he to simply repeat previously deployed aesthetic formulas. This is the meaning of Badiou's ethical imperative, "keep going!" The "some-one" who is "seized and displaced" by a truth must not allow concerns extraneous to that truth (for example, money, or fame) to impede his or her pursuit; he or she must pursue that truth to the limits of the possible. Both principles amount to the same thing: namely, recognition of the singularity of the event and fidelity to the process of a truth (i.e., the event). This brings us to a third principle of Badiou's ethics, which we will now consider. "Rather than make of [ethics] merely the province of conservatism with a good conscience," Badiou states, "it should concern the destiny of truths, in the plural" (2001: 3). This third principle is, like the previous two, also aptly encapsulated by the Badiouian imperative, "keep going!"

When Badiou writes that ethics has become "the province of conservatism with a good conscience," he is referring to, among other things, a paradigmatic phenomenon of the contemporary age; namely, the denial of radical political possibility. Contemporary ethics denies the possibility of the event and the emergence of novel truths; that is, it "designates above all the incapacity, so typical of the contemporary world, to name and strive for a Good" (2001: 30). In politics, for example, those who acknowledge the flaws of western liberal democracy, but who nevertheless argue against its dismantling, often do so for professedly ethical reasons: "The Soviet experience, on top of the rise of fascism, reminded my generation rather forcibly that man was, indeed, imperfect, and that the corruptions of power could unleash great evil in the world," writes Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. (1949: xxi). Schlesinger's 1949 book *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* is paradigmatic of the kind of "ethical" refutation of radical political possibility that Badiou disparages. For liberals like Schlesinger, as well as former leftists, the rise of Stalinism belied the very possibility of a radical and emancipatory politics, what Badiou elsewhere refers to as the "idea of communism" (2010: 1). As

Andrew Ross and other scholars have documented, during the 1950s, when the full extent of Stalin's crimes became known, leftist intellectuals and erstwhile "fellow travelers" repudiated their radical political pasts, particularly their activities during the 1930s (Ross 1989: 42-64). Prostrating themselves before the public, they laminated their youthful boldness and political naiveté. For his part, Schlesinger (never himself an ally of the Communist Party) argued that the idea of communism (that is, the idea of a revolutionary, progressive politics) was founded on the faulty premise of the perfectibility of man. Arguing that, inevitably, "the totalitarian left and the totalitarian right meet at last on the murky grounds of tyranny and terror," Schlesinger advocated a conservative, centrist politics (1949: 1x-x). Thus, for professedly "ethical" reasons, he and many others of his era renounced the pursuit of radical politics as such.

Badiou describes contemporary ethics as articulating "conservative propaganda with an obscure desire for catastrophe," suggesting that such an ethics is not merely conservative or defeatist; it is also potentially destructive (2001: 38). Badiou accuses modern ethics of nihilism; indeed, we have already seen evidence of this critique in Badiou's claim that actions taken in the name of the "principle of life" often achieve its obverse, which is death. In *Ethics* Badiou comments on the lurid fascination of the French media with the atrocities of the Yugoslav wars. Noting the irony of commentators' preoccupation with the events' proximity to Paris, Badiou asks why matters of geographical location are of any interest to professed adherents of contemporary ethics. Surely, the location in which an atrocity takes place is irrelevant if, as the modern ethicist contends, such abstractions as the "Rights of Man" are indeed universal: "Ethics feeds too much on Evil and the Other not to take silent pleasure in seeing them close up..." maintains Badiou. "For at the core of the mastery internal to ethics is always the power to decide who lives and who dies" (2001: 34-35). Because ethics denies the possibility of truth, it effectively says, "the only thing that can really

happen to someone is death” (Badiou 2001: 35). In positing that the preservation of biological life is its defining imperative, modern ethics necessarily, albeit unintentionally, exalts the status and meaning of death. In the name of “ethics,” then, we deny the possibility of truths, as the pursuit of such truths, especially in the political realm, might jeopardize life (and indeed, history attests to this possibility). Yet for Badiou the pursuit of truths is precisely what makes an individual become “some-one”; that is, a being that transcends both life and death.

The Question of Evil

Some commentators have expressed unease at what, for lack of a better term, we might call the “ethical implications,” of Badiou’s philosophy. In “The Idea of Communism” Badiou reflects on the statement of a reporter for the British newspaper, the *Observer*, critical of his admittedly “positive take” on the event of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Noting the reporter’s pride in the “workaday Anglo-Saxon empiricism” that he attributes to himself and his readers which, he argues, prevents them from falling sway, like Badiou, to political abstraction, Badiou writes: “What he was basically taking pride in is the fact that the dominant imperative in the world today is ‘Live without any Idea’” (2010: 1-2). Indeed, Badiou disparages modern ethics, which professes to value life above all else; yet as we have seen, this is not because Badiou does not value life, but rather because actions taken in adherence to the principle of life frequently achieve life’s obverse; hence ethics’ lurid preoccupation with death. Similarly, in defending the event of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (at least, as he says, as it existed from 1965 to 1968) Badiou is not ignorant of or indifferent to the evils carried out in its name. This brings us to the question of Evil, which for Badiou exists only as a function of man’s capacity to become “some-one,” that is, to take part in the becoming of a truth.

Badiou explicates three forms of evil: 1) simulacrum and terror; 2) betrayal of the event; and 3) the unnamable. Let's consider the first form of evil that Badiou designates, that of the simulacrum. This refers to man's fidelity to a false event. The example Badiou cites is the rise of National Socialism. Badiou explains, "not every 'novelty' is an event" (72: 2001). Badiou refrains from fully explicating why this is in the limited space provided by his essay on ethics, but for our purposes we need only note that unlike such legitimate events as the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, for example, the simulacrum of the event that was the rise of National Socialism promised to bring into being, not that which is universal, but rather that which is highly particular; namely, "the absolute particularity of a community, itself rooted in the characteristics of its soil, its blood, and its race." For Badiou, truths are universal; they are, as he states, "indifferent to difference." Thus "Every invocation of blood and soil, of race, of custom, of community, works directly against truths...." (2001: 76). The second form of evil that Badiou identifies, betrayal of the event, refers not to fidelity to a false event, but rather to the denial of one's faith in an actual event. It amounts to a refusal of the Badiouian ethical principle "keep going!" Such betrayal is evident when a former radical repudiates his or her past political allegiances, particularly if this repudiation is motivated by material self-interest. Finally, "the unnamable" refers to the form of evil that emerges as a result of man's attempt to assert the *total power of a truth*. As an example, Badiou cites the fidelity of the Red Guards to the event of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. For Badiou, the Cultural Revolution was indeed an event, and members of the Red Guard achieved a kind of immortality or transcendence by remaining steadfastly faithful to it. Yet the Revolution spiraled into disaster precisely because its adherents dogmatically asserted that its truth constituted Totality. This, Badiou says, can never be the case. The world exists, as he says, "beneath Good and Evil" (2001: 85); it can never be wholly displaced by a truth. Similarly, the "Immortal," that is, the "some-one" who transcends mere fleshly existence, can

never displace man the human animal. All attempts to make absolute the power of a truth invariably result, Badiou warns us, in disaster.

Cinema and the Simulacrum

One question that emerges in considering cinema's implications for Badiou's ethics of truths concerns the relationship between cinema and Evil. As we have seen, "the simulacrum" is the name by which Badiou designates one of the three forms of Evil he identifies. Although the example of the simulacrum that he explores in his essay on ethics concerns the subject of politics, a simulacrum of an event can emerge in any one of the four subjective areas that Badiou identifies: in politics, obviously, but also in love, science, and the arts. Throughout cinema's history critics have reflected on the relationship between the filmic image and what is sometimes referred to as "the real." This question is not unique to the modern era, however. Indeed, the question of the relationship between the phenomenal and the intelligible world has concerned philosophers since antiquity, and is explored, most famously today, in the allegory of Plato's cave. The question that emerges in consideration of the ethical implications of cinema is this: does cinema, as the "plus-one" of the arts, present merely the simulacra of artistic events? In short: is cinema the source of an artistic Evil?

For Badiou, the answer is, of course, no. As we have seen, cinema's capacity to yield artistic truths is of the order of the miraculous. Because it is the "plus-one" of the arts, it is, ostensibly, devoid of any source of novelty: it must borrow its ideas from the other arts, such as painting and sculpture. Also, cinema is in many ways excessive; whereas the other arts start from a place of purity and lack, suggested by the emptiness of the blank page or barren canvas, cinema begins with the excesses of the contemporary world. Through editing, the "take" and the "cut," cinema subtracts significance

from the jumble of sounds and images that make up this world. Cinema then assembles these elements in such a way as to achieve purity despite the fact that much of the raw material with which it works is, according to Badiou, aesthetically void. Yet despite all this, cinema does, at times, realize moments of aesthetic truth. Through the agency of filmmaker and spectator alike, cinema at times miraculously overcomes its many impediments, yielding uniquely cinematic ideas. Indeed, such a cinematic event is not merely the simulacrum of an event. Rather, for Badiou, great cinema accomplishes the exact obverse of the masquerade of the simulacrum: that is, it calls our attention to the distinction between the image and the real, the sensible and the intelligible. This distinction is precisely what Badiou contends it is the responsibility of cinema to reveal to the masses.

To follow Badiou's ethics of a truth one must possess "resources of discernment (do not fall for simulacra), of courage (do not give up), and of moderation (do not get carried away to the extremes of Totality)" (2001: 91). Only by adhering to the ethical maxim, "keep going!" can the individual facilitate the goal of Badiou's ethics, which is the emergence of truths. But how is it that cinema "thinks" ethical conflicts out, using sounds and images to produce new "cinema ideas?" It is to this question that we now turn.

On Cinema as an Ethical Emblem

In "On Cinema as a Democratic Emblem" Badiou argues that to "think" cinema philosophically is to force a relationship between the "obscure complex of paradoxical relationships" that cinema presents (235). As we have seen, for Badiou cinema's most significant paradox is that which is suggested by its status as a "mass art." There have been five major attempts, Badiou maintains, to think through the contradictions that define cinema. These are: 1) the study of cinema as an

ontological art, paying particular attention to the ostensibly contradictory relationship between the image and the world represented; 2) the study of cinema's paradoxical capacity to transform time, its ability to make time into the raw material of representation; 3) the consideration of cinema's relationship to the other arts; that is, its enigmatic status as both the seventh art and the "plus-one" of the arts; 4) the examination of the conflictual relationship within cinema between art and non-art; and 5) the study of cinema's ethical paradoxes, the conflicts between Good and Evil in which there can be no negotiation or compromise; the narrative moments when a choice must be made.

The question of cinema's implications for Badiou's ethics concerns all five of these attempts; however, let's start with the most obvious point of entry: the study of cinema's ethical paradoxes. Badiou argues that cinema is an art of figures. In cinema, archetypes of Good and Evil battle to the finish. Heroism still exists in the movies, notes Badiou, this despite the widespread denial of heroism in the contemporary world: "Our world is so commercial, so family oriented, so unheroic..." laments Badiou. "However, even today no one could imagine a cinema without its great moral figures, without the Great American battle between Good and Evil" (2013/2005: 240-241). Badiou's derision of commercialism here seems misplaced: after all, it is the most commercial of family-friendly Hollywood blockbusters that are most likely to stage the Manichean struggle between Good and Evil that he praises. But regardless, as we have seen, contemporary ethics denies the possibility of the event and of truths; it maintains that the only thing that can happen to someone is death. By contrast, films featuring acts of heroism and ethical struggle attest to the possibility of man's becoming an Immortal in the pursuit of a truth; that is, they attest to man's capacity to transcend his or her corporeal being. Contrary to contemporary ethics, heroic narratives such as those epitomized by Hollywood suggest that the truth is worth struggling for, perhaps even dying for. Badiou acknowledges the simplicity of these narratives, describing them as "ridiculous," "dogmatic," and

“disgusting” in their hypocrisy. Yet he compares them to Greek tragedies, the “cinema of antiquity.” Undoubtedly, much of Greek drama was trite and uninspired, claims Badiou, yet these plays have not survived for posterity: “All we have are a few dozen masterpieces,” Badiou notes, comparing these to films of the likes of D.W. Griffith, Charlie Chaplin, and F.W. Murnau: “And we can no longer see the impurity and overwhelming banality of those spectacles” (2013/2005: 240). Despite their occasional aesthetic shortcomings, however, he attributes to both Greek drama and the cinema a common purpose: namely, to present ethical conflicts on an epic scale to the masses.

***The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956)**

As we might expect, the American genre film is today one of the most successful platforms for the staging of conflicts for the masses. Yet the genre film is capable of more than simply depicting archetypal struggles; it can also think these conflicts out, using sounds and images to produce “cinema ideas” just as ethics thinks the relationship between Good and Evil through concepts. By way of example, let’s consider a classic of the western genre and a film that Badiou would likely agree qualifies as a work of “mass art,” John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956). The ethical conflict in *The Searchers* concerns the clash between civilization and the frontier, a common theme in the American western. This, then, is the “impossible relationship between incommensurable terms” that the film attempts to “think out”. The film’s protagonist, Ethan Edwards, is gripped by two contradictory impulses: on the one hand, he wants to save his niece from the marauding Comanche who abducted her as a child and return her to hearth and home. Yet on the other hand, he has a murderous desire for vengeance that the film portrays as antithetical to the ethos of civilization. Not only does he want to kill the tribe’s leader, Scar, in an act of brute vengeance for the rape and murder of his brother’s wife, Martha (whom he secretly loved); he also desires to kill Debbie, who, by the time she

is found, has adopted the Comanche people as her own and become Scar's wife. Ethan's conflict demands that a choice be made: he can commit an act of savagery (which, ironically, is motivated by his hatred of what he regards as "savage," namely, the Comanche people), or he can perform an act of civility. At the film's climactic moment, Ethan captures Debbie, raising her above his head. In this instance neither Debbie nor we know what Ethan's intentions are: will he kill her in an act of racially charged hate, or will he bring her home? In one swift movement Ethan lowers her into his arms, and we know that he has made his choice: he will bring Debbie home.

Before proceeding to an analysis of this scene from the perspective of an ethics of truths, we should reflect on Badiou's comments on the contemporary phenomenon of the "ethics of difference," of which he is highly critical. Badiou's critique of multiculturalism, for instance, and other variants of the ethics of difference, is similar to his condemnation of humanitarian ethics—in both cases, these doctrines achieve the obverse of their professed intentions. As we have seen, actions carried out in the name of the principle of life frequently result in nihilism, defeatism, and death. Similarly, the ethics of difference, which professes "tolerance" of the Other, is in fact highly intolerant of real otherness; this is especially the case when the Other's ethical doctrine contradicts the principles of liberal humanism. Badiou's critique of the ethics of difference entails a complex philosophical refutation of the work of Emmanuel Lévinas. For our purposes, suffice it to say that, whereas Lévinas' philosophy maintains the "ethical primacy of the Other over the Same," Badiou argues that otherness, including cultural otherness, is of no real consequence for thought (Badiou 2001: 18-28). It is, rather, the concept of "the Same" that is of relevance to questions of truth (and thus of ethics). As Badiou writes: "Philosophically, if the other doesn't matter it is indeed because the difficulty lies on the side of the Same. The Same, in effect, is not what is (i.e. the infinite multiplicity of differences) but what *comes to be*." For Badiou, multiplicity and difference simply describe base

existence, below good and evil. What comes to be in the eventual process of a truth is that which is generic or universal; as he states, “*a truth is the same for all*” (2001: 27).

Let's return to the question of the ethical implications' of Ethan's decision not to kill Debbie. As we have seen, according to a humanistic ethical analysis, the tempering of Ethan's racist hatred for the Comanche is merely a function of his acceptance of the primacy of the principle of life. As such, Ethan's "tolerance" of the Other is hardly admirable; like the tolerance of the Other professed by the ethics of difference, it is contingent; in fact, we have no reason to believe that Ethan's racism has abated. Conventional ethics would maintain that Ethan's decision to spare Debbie was the morally and ethically "right decision," but not for reasons that pertain to the pursuit of a truth. In contrast, a Badiouian ethical analysis would construe the narrative of *The Searchers* from the perspective of the event and in terms of truth's pursuit. Ethan, we might argue, has been seized and displaced by a truth process; namely, the love he shares with Martha. When Martha is raped and murdered by the Comanche, he attempts to stay faithful to this amorous event by seeking vengeance against the Comanche people. In so doing, however, he facilitates the emergence of Evil. The event that Ethan wishes to remain faithful to (the love he shared with Martha) has been displaced by the simulacrum of an event, which demands the eradication of the Other. "Fidelity to the simulacrum," Badiou writes, "is necessarily the exercise of terror," by which Badiou means the reducing of the Other to his "being-for-death" (2001: 77). A Badiouian ethical interpretation of *The Searchers* would therefore posit that, in the instant at which Ethan chooses not to kill Debbie, he renounces his murderous fidelity to the simulacrum of the event.

In his essay on Ford's racial politics, the always contentious critic Armond White is dismissive of *The Searcher's* widely praised racial liberalism: "*The Searchers* ennobles the idea of 'settlers' ambiguously

taking over a land already cultivated,” observes White (2000: 33). Similarly, citing the work of critics including Marty Roth and Douglas Pye, among others, historian Arthur M. Eckstein notes, “John Ford has recently been charged with complicity in Ethan Edward’s racism” (1998: 4). Detractors cite the film’s narrative, which is the story of the abduction of a white girl by natives who are then hunted and slaughtered by a posse of vengeful white men. Yet the dominant critical impulse has been to praise the film for its characterization of white racism as psychic pathology, a widely deployed strategy in postwar popular culture. While analysis of racial politics of *The Searchers* can be revelatory, a Badiouian analysis allows us to construe the film quite differently. Rather than interpret the film as either complicit in the racism it depicts, or as offering insight into the psychic underpinnings of prejudice, a Badiouian approach allows us to view *The Searchers* in the abstract, as staging one man’s pursuit of a truth and repudiation of its simulacrum.

Conclusion

As I have argued, Badiou’s adherence to the concept of medium specificity impedes his ability to fully understand cinema. For, despite ostensibly borrowing and degrading elements belonging “properly” to the other arts, cinema is nevertheless a potent form of aesthetic expression, something that Badiou recognizes but has difficulty explaining within the terms of his own aesthetic philosophy. And there are other difficulties that Badiou’s writings on cinema present. In his review of *Cinema*, Nico Baumbach defends the philosopher against the charge of elitism, writing, “...it is a misreading that confuses his insistence on the rarity of truth with its address” (2013: unpaginated). For Badiou, moments of truth in cinema are indeed rare; however the charge of snobbery that Baumbach addresses is not, I would argue, a misinterpretation of the philosopher’s insistence on rarity. For although Badiou maintains that a flash of cinematic truth may indeed punch a “hole”

["*trouée*"] in knowledge, challenging pundits to reassess that which they thought they new about cinema as art, he does not question the idea that the designation of art as such is a task that is properly the province of elites: "To say that 'art' is an aristocratic category is not a case of being judgmental," argues Badiou. Appreciation of art qua art, he explains, "...requires the means of understanding creation as such, necessitates a differential education, a minimal proximity to the history of the art concerned and to the vicissitudes of its grammar" (2013/205: 235). At no point does Badiou entertain the idea that such training in aesthetic discernment is little more than a means of buttressing, at the level of culture, the hegemony of the dominant.

Nevertheless, Badiou offers a novel way of critically approaching cinema, not as a reflection of ethical conflict, but as a system for thinking such conflicts through. And, I would argue, cinema as an artform is itself a model of ethical struggle. In "Why Badiou is a Rousseauist," an excerpt from *The Faith of the Faithless* published in the journal, *Badiou Studies*, Simon Critchley comments on the ostensible impossibility of legitimate politics as Badiou defines the term: "The formal conditions that define a true politics are so stringent and the examples given are so limited, that it is tempting to conclude that following the Paris and Shanghai communes and after 1968 any politics of the event has become impossible, or at least extremely unlikely" (Critchley 2012: 8). We might say the same thing about the manifestation of truths in cinema. How is it that cinema, that most impure of artforms, is capable of overcoming its degraded status as the "plus-one" of the arts to achieve moments of pure artistic expression? The answer is opaque, yet Badiou holds out hope, both for the possibility of a politics of the event and for the emergence of truths in cinema, and it is this unfailing, perhaps utopian persistence of faith that Critchley identifies as Badiou's greatest strength. Indeed, in his unabated faith in the possibility of political and artistic events, Badiou adheres to his own ethical maxim, "keep going!" And this is why I would argue that cinema is perhaps the most

ethical of artforms in Badiou's sense of the term; it, too, adheres to the ethical imperative: "keep going!" Despite its impurity, out of an assemblage of sounds and images of the modern world, cinema (sometimes) achieves something pure, a point of aesthetic truth.

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