

The Visitation of the Idea: Badiou on Film and Communism

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The Oxford Handbook of Communist Visual Cultures

Edited by Aga Skrodzka, Xiaoning Lu, and Katarzyna Marciniak

Subject: Literature, Literary Theory and Cultural Studies, Literary Studies - 20th Century Onwards

Online Publication Date: Oct 2019 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190885533.013.36

Abstract and Keywords

This article discusses the life and work of the French philosopher Alain Badiou in the context of a broader meditation on the relationship between film, philosophy, and communism. It draws in large part from the author's own experiences codirecting and coproducing a feature-length documentary film about this octogenarian communist philosopher. It further juxtaposes this film with several other films on communism, as well as their analyses by Badiou himself and other leftist critics. Ultimately, by foregrounding the historical intersection between film, communism, and critical thought, the article argues that in the process of making the documentary *Badiou*, the author became an ambivalent participant in the production of late-communist visual culture.

Keywords: film, documentary, philosophy, Alain Badiou, communism, late communism, lateral montage

A truth cannot be a German truth. A truth cannot be a French truth. A truth cannot be a white truth, or a black truth. A truth is something which transits from a world to another world. And there is a fundamental relationship between the Idea of communism and the Idea of truth. Because if you cannot have any truth, there is no hope to unify, really, all humanity under the same Idea. There is no possibility to be uniquely under the law of Being. Always you return to differences of existence. And it is why a truth is universal.

This is the point, the radical point. The very maxim of communism is not, first, no private property and so on. All that is a consequence in some sense. Possible consequence, material consequence. The point is the recognition of humanity as such. That is, radical equality.

—From *Badiou* (2018)¹

This text comes to us in the form of a lecture in the final act of our film *Badiou* (2018). The film examines the life and philosophy of the communist philosopher Alain Badiou. By

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this point in the film the viewer has already gone through Badiou's major life events—his birth in Morocco in 1937, coming of age in Paris in the 1950s and 1960s, his participation in the student-worker uprisings of May 1968, and finally, his twilight years as a nomadic public intellectual, traveling the world and giving lectures on his philosophy and views on politics, art, love, and mathematics.

Badiou narrates this passage just after a scene in which he shows us a photograph depicting his political work with undocumented migrant workers (*sans papier*) in France. This "militant photo," as he calls it, depicts Badiou with his partner Judith Balso (two white bodies) sitting at a table with six black African workers in a house. Speaking over the photograph, he explains the solidarity that he, an intellectual, feels with them, uneducated workers coming from Mali and Cameroon. Badiou describes the moment as "something glorious. It is something exceptional, something remarkable." As we are about to find out, he associates this experience of solidarity and comradeship with the Idea of communism, its universal and radical truth. This was something he first felt in May 1968. For Badiou, his "philosophy is completely a result of this experience."

Then we come to the scene in question: "A truth cannot be a German truth. A truth cannot be a French truth. A truth cannot be a white truth, or a black truth ..." Accompanying these words are a set of images that explore the multiplicity of the picture that Badiou placed in front of the camera previously. The montage functions "laterally," cutting across different regions of the picture in close detail, emphasizing the contrasting pigments of the people in the photo, their different bodily compartments and expressions. Toward the end of this montage sequence we begin to hear the distant rumblings of a large orchestra. It is playing the closing lines of Richard Wagner's *Faust Overture* (1855). The music pulls the montage away (once again, laterally) from the picture of Badiou and the workers and pushes it in a different cinematic direction. "*The truth is something which transits from a world to another world.*"

Now we are positioned inside a metro train car in contemporary Paris. We are looking out the rear window, perceiving an underground station with two smooth lines of tracks gliding underneath. Soon we are enveloped in the darkness of a subway tunnel, only to emerge above ground, now looking out the side window at the passing cityscape. As the music builds, we cross the Seine, then pass over a busy road and a large, oddly shaped office building. "*And there is a fundamental relationship between the Idea of communism and the Idea of truth.*" Slowly we begin to descend underneath the city once again. The train car allows us to perceive the transition from above ground to below ground, the threshold between lightness and darkness, outside and inside. Now we are back in the tunnel. It looks like a darkened cave (this is significant, as we will see). The perspective changes from the train's exterior to its interior. "*And it is why a truth is universal ...*" We see the inside of an empty train car, then a multitude of anonymous riders getting on and off, jostling for space, coexisting among, if not with, their fellow travelers. "*The point is the recognition of humanity as such. That is, radical equality.*"

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We are visiting with the Idea, the Idea of communism as politics of radical equality. This makes our film Badiouian not merely in content but in form. For the concept of visitation is central to the poetics of film in Badiou. As he writes:

The entire effect of this poetics is to allow the Idea to visit the sensible. I insist on the fact that the Idea is not incarnated in the sensible. Cinema belies the classical thesis according to which art is the sensible form of the Idea. The visitation of the sensible by the Idea does not endow the latter with a body. The Idea is not separable—it exists only for cinema in its passage. The Idea is itself visitation.²

Truth in cinema is the visitation of the Idea. It cannot be objectified or totally captured in any particular image we see or sound we hear, isolated from the movement through which the Idea presents itself. The movement itself becomes the medium of the Idea's expression. Badiou insists that this is how the cinema *thinks*, making it unique as a form of art: "it is not what is said in the film, it's not how the plot is organized that counts; it's the very movement that transmits the film's thought."³ In our film the Idea of communism is embodied both in Badiou's philosophy (through what he calls a "truth procedure") and in his biography (as a "body-in-truth"). Both are movements in their own right. But in the scene described earlier the representation works more indirectly. The scene is one of many instances in the film where the Idea of communism pays us a visit. Here, it is moving along with the train, transiting among the passengers, across virtual (cinematic) and actual (urban) space, passing in and through the words Badiou says and the notes of Wagner's musical score. But this truth is not objectified in any one of the specific words, images, or sounds in this scene. The words were originally recorded in an entirely different context, that of a series of academic lectures for a public audience. And the images of Paris are just historical inscriptions, particular to their time and place. Finally, truth is not in the music we hear; we cut off the last 240 seconds of the Wagner piece and added it to our digital montage. Instead, the universal is more fleeting and mobile and for all that more potent and radical in cinema. It is not imposed from above (as in transcendental truth), but rather emerges immanently from the cinematic image itself, allowing thought to emerge and difference/ change/ transformation to become imaginable, and thus, possible. Truth in cinema, as Badiou writes, is about the visitation of the Idea. And in this particular scene it is about the contingent combination—the music, the words, the images, the movement—how these elements come together, how each raises the power of the other individual moving parts, while also amplifying that of the whole. The visitation becomes an invitation to think.

At least, this was our hope and intention as filmmakers. And it is why we put this sequence all the way at the end, to give the viewer something to go home and keep thinking with.

This essay serves as an addendum of sorts to our film *Badiou*, which was codirected and coproduced by Gorav Kalyan and myself from 2014 to 2018 (see Figure 1). But this essay also continues to keep thinking with the film. I look back on the filmmaking experience, offering a few juxtapositions with various films and philosophers that in part influenced

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our approach to making *Badiou*. Ultimately I argue that in the process of making this particular film about this particular subject, we were ambivalent participants in the production of late-communist visual culture: a communist film made in the long aftermath of the fall of communism.



Figure 1 One of the world's leading communist philosophers. *Badiou* (2018).

Film capture © Gorav Kalyan and Rohan Kalyan

The Idea of Communism in Badiou

For someone like Badiou, the last two centuries have produced only one political Idea, that is, an Idea worthy of unconditional fidelity to its universal truth. Badiou's Idea of communism is both simple and complex. It is about radical human equality and collective emancipation through politics (that is, through ideological and mass struggle). In this sense, it is a hypothesis that can never really be proven false once and for all, even if it is tested over and over again in the political field. For here even "failed tests," like that of Stalin's Russia or Mao's China (to take the most famous—or infamous—examples), are not final indictments of the Idea itself. Rather, "failure is nothing more than the history of the proof of the hypothesis, provided that the hypothesis is not abandoned."⁴ In this sense, even historical failures of communism provide lessons for future struggles.

Badiou continues by complicating the picture somewhat, adding three mutually interwoven, yet analytically distinct, elements. All three "are needed for the operation of the Idea of communism."⁵ An interesting thought exercise might be to identify these three elements in our film. Following are some rudimentary definitions:

- 1. Politics:** that communism is a political idea should hardly be surprising to anyone. But for Badiou it is *the* political Idea. Radical equality and universal human emancipation are the only true universals worth striving for in politics. For its committed militants the political Idea of communism serves as a kind of regulative ideal through which present-day injustices can be perceived and used as rallying calls for the pursuit of progressive change. To put this in Lacanian terms (and Badiou insists on the relevance of psychoanalysis for understanding capitalist ideology and resistance to it), the universal truth of the political Idea is approximate to the order of "the real,"

which in Lacan, is tantamount to saying “the impossible.”⁶ But the Idea’s traumatic impossibility in the political scene is precisely what necessitates that it be continually pursued by ideologically and organizationally committed militants of its truth. When it comes to truth, impossibility is not the same thing as futility. Politics is the mediation of the (im)possible.

2. History: But for Badiou the historical context in which the political Idea operates matters deeply. Here, history is about the local situatedness that a truth encounters, translates, and transforms into its own becoming universal logic. For we cannot hope to institute communism’s radical thesis, of unconditional human equality, without an understanding of concrete differences that shape the texture and dynamics of equality claims. In Lacanian terms, this constitutes the symbolic order through which any political subjects pursuing equality and emancipation signify their claims and engage in concrete, local struggles. But these claims, if they are to be truly progressive ones, must always travel in the same direction, from the particular to the universal. Such an emergent, militant universalism is not imposed from above but emerges through concrete struggles, including negotiations and discussions (i.e., movement politics) among historically situated collectives and organizations. Thus, the movement of the political Idea comes into fruition in the movement of the collective subject of historical struggle.

3. Subjectivity: this brings us to the last of the three elements that Badiou binds to the Idea of communism, that of subjectivity. The subjective decision and the desire to pursue the radical consequences of the political Idea of communism, to intervene in a given local symbolic order in the name of the impossible real, and to remain in fidelity to the impossible (because unimaginable) truth that the real represents, all this requires the mediation of a militant or ideologically committed subject. And in Lacanian terms this is where the imaginary order comes in. It is always located in-between the (impossible/virtual) real and the (possible/actual) symbolic orders. Subjectivity for Badiou is the decision to remain in fidelity to the Idea and requires a certain amount of courage (and even defensiveness) to ward off the anxiety of living in capital’s vacuous, precarious, and destructive symbolic orders.

Politics, history, and subjectivity work interdependently as an *operation* that is continually in process. This is what makes the Idea of communism not merely a truth but what Badiou calls a “truth procedure,” a process of transformation and realization that changes the very conditions from which it emerges.⁷ This process is political (oriented toward a universal truth), historical (particularized to local coordinates, material realities), and subjective (engaged in transforming concrete individuals into subjects through the mediation of revolutionary events).

In Badiou’s philosophical system, politics forms but one of four “conditions” of philosophy. It is philosophy’s unique task to analyze and evaluate the truths that these four procedures continually advance, to apply their universal relevance to the various worlds that subjects inhabit. The four conditions are the truth procedures of politics, love, mathematics, and art. All four begin with events that are unpredictable and unexpected: a revolt, an interpersonal encounter, a scientific discovery, an aesthetic creation. We deal with

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each of these truth procedures and the events that inaugurate them in our film. But since ours is a cinematic treatment, it is the artistic truth procedure that attains prominence in *Badiou*. Within the space of art, truths are singular and immanent to particular works and media.⁸ But for Badiou, cinema holds a special significance as a generator of singular, immanent truths. The shorthand for this complex process is “the visitation of the Idea.”

Cinema as an art form holds a special place, according to Badiou, for several reasons. First, cinema is by necessity an art of the contemporary, whatever time period we are talking about. Cinema not only comments (consciously and unconsciously) on contemporary situations coeval with its long twentieth-century development, but it also has the ability to conjure past situations, as well as distant situations, into the “here” and “now” of the audience. As Badiou comments,

cinema is a profound art form—hybrid but profound nonetheless—we learn quickly and in depth that we’re contemporaries of Kazakhstanis or Bangladeshis. This doesn’t have anything to do with documentary footage; on the contrary, it’s usually fictional films, which are quite complex and remote from us by definition, that are the ones we learn the most from.⁹

Yet, if cinema is a hybrid art form, it is also for that reason more “impure” than the other arts. For Badiou, however, this impurity is more a strength than a weakness, for it frees the cinema to borrow freely and unabashedly from the other arts— theater, music, literature, dance, painting, sculpture, other films and audiovisual media—and to fold their heterogeneous elements into its own creative praxis. Badiou’s formulation of this thought is evocative:

It is effectively impossible to think cinema outside of something like a general space in which we could grasp its connection to the other arts. Cinema is the seventh art in a very particular sense. It does not add itself to the other six, while remaining on the same level as them. Rather, it implies them—cinema is the “plus-one” of the arts. It operates on the other arts, using them as its starting point, in a movement that subtracts them from themselves.¹⁰

In *Badiou*, this is what we were trying to accomplish by inserting Wagner’s music into the scene about the Idea of communism. For even if we just used a small fragment of the original piece, its effect nevertheless was to amplify the images and words it accompanied in a uniquely cinematic way. “All the arts flow through cinema,” Badiou writes, and in the case of music, cinema raises this art form “to a simultaneously impure and heightened formal power that affords it a new timelessness.”¹¹ In *Badiou*, Richard Wagner, long associated with German fascism, is “impurely” subtracted from that context and added into a radically different one: his sweeping musical score moves dramatically with the Idea of communism and amplifies its affective capacity.

In addition to its contemporariness and impurity, cinema as an art form stands out from the others because of the intensity with which it conjures truth through its audiovisual movements. Of all the arts, Badiou writes, cinema

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thinks all by itself and produces truth. A film is a proposition in thought, a movement of thought, a thought connected, so to speak, to its artistic disposition. How does this thought exist and get transmitted? It is transmitted through the experience of viewing the film, through its movement. It's not what's said in the film, it's not how the plot is organized that counts; it's the very movement that transmits the film's thought... . Of all the arts, this is certainly the one that has the ability to think, to produce the most absolutely undeniable truth.¹²

This undeniable truth is the visitation of the Idea. It is not the subjective representation or objective embodiment of the Idea but its movement through the film, its passage from frame to frame, cut to cut, between audio and visual materials, actual and virtual spaces, between light and shadow, interior and exterior, that intersubjective space between screen and audience.

We get a good sense of the power of such visitations in a film that Badiou particularly likes, Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin's 1972 film *All's Well* (*Tout va bien*). This film takes place in the post-May 1968 years in France, or what Badiou calls in our film "the red years" (see Figure 2). It is a film that has close resonance with Badiou's own life story and philosophical experience. Here I present parts of Badiou's analysis of this film in order to suggest an aesthetic and political influence on our own cinematic thinking in *Badiou*.



Figure 2 An image of the young philosopher. *Badiou* (2018).

Film capture © Gorav Kalyan and Rohan Kalyan

All's Well contains the three main ingredients for political cinema, according to Badiou. First, it is contemporary with its own times, covering the themes of working-class politics, the role of intellectuals in revolutionary struggle, and the beginning of the end of the revolutionary fervor in France that began with May 1968 but was beginning to show signs of waning four years later. More specifically, the film focuses on a wildcat strike at a food-processing factory. The event is witnessed first-hand by an American reporter and her French husband, a commercial filmmaker. The strike is led by a group of radical workers who disobey directives from their union leaders and take over the factory, holding the manager against his will. Thus, the film is contemporary with the situation on the left in

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post-1968 France, with apparent divisions among workers, workers' organizations, and radicals regarding the best means to organize collective action and progressive change.

Second, the film is notable for how it employs the "plus-one" formula that Badiou specifically identifies with cinema. Here the additional art form that the film borrows from and incorporates into its own thinking is that of the theater. Indeed, *All's Well* stands out in Godard's larger corpus of work for its innovative use of theatrical sets and explicit stage design to show a visually striking cutout view of the factory under siege by the striking workers. The view diagrammatically shows the different rooms and spaces in which the main action in the first half of the film unfolds. More pertinently, the view allows Godard and Gorin to show the workers as one mass that are nevertheless partitioned into different camps, showing us both the alienation of work space and the fragmented left, on the one hand, but also the potential for unification, on the other. The plus-one addition of theater into *All's Well's* aesthetic structure also allows for a Brechtian-style of intervention that features scenes in which characters address the camera directly, delivering long didactic monologues and ironical commentaries on the situations and events unfolding in the film.

All's Well is a film with only secondary concern for presenting the main narrative in clear and concise terms. For as is typical in Godard and Gorin's films (both in collaborations and separate projects), the narrative and character development are often muted, creating uniquely cinematic spaces for nonchronological mediations. While the film is notable for employing two well-known movie stars, the American actor Jane Fonda and the French actor Yves Montand, and the story between these two "protagonists" drives what is supposed to be the main narrative of the film, these plot points and characters become gradually subordinated to the nonsynchronous wildcat actions of the striking workers. The latter ultimately emerge as the real protagonists of the film. This becoming-collective subject, through its impossible and untimely movements, constitutes the visitation of the Idea of communism in this film.

Looking at the film from Badiou's perspective, one might note that this visitation is most striking in the penultimate scene. There is a long lateral tracking shot inside a modern supermarket. The single take unfolds over the course of several minutes. There is no voice-over narrative, nor any direct dialogue between specific actors. Instead, we only hear the cacophony of the supermarket space, as the camera, positioned behind the cashiers, moves smoothly and deliberately from left to right, crossing over several aisles and sections of the store before coming back. It repeats this back-and-forth movement several times. All the while we see and hear the action that unfolds at some remove on the other side of the cash registers. A group of young radical activists come running into the supermarket to "liberate" the consumer products, pushing the customers to exit the store without paying. Before long they (and some of the customers) get into confrontations with the police and cause a riot in the previously orderly commercial retail space. The movements and distances tracked by the mobile camera within the space of the supermarket, the depth of field between the action in the store and the camera at some remove, between the relative tranquility that preceded the riot and the chaos that ensued,

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all these participate in clearing out a cinematic space for the Idea of communism to pay a visit. It is not so much about the specificity of the actions undertaken here (whether we agree or not with the young radicals), as it is about the emancipatory potential of the action itself, its ability to change things in the name of a collective becoming. The mobile camera, the movement of the radicals, the confrontation with the police, all these present us with a visitation that forces us to think about something that was unimaginable before.

Badiou tends to privilege such didactic operations in art. This is perhaps why he is so taken with *All's Well*, which does little to hide or make subtle its political intentions. Yet in some ways this didactic approach seems to belie the radical implications of the concept of visitation that Badiou ascribes to truth in cinema. The purpose of the didactic operation in art is to instill in the audience a lesson that is unambiguous and clear. It is also one that lasts. Yet this "lasting" is dependent on a certain immutability in the lesson. The concept of visitation, on the other hand, seems to privilege a process of movement and change, of perpetual transformation. Far from "lasting" over a given duration of time, visitation changes the experience of time itself, rendering time otherwise. For truth as visitation is contingent on at least two things: a limited duration (an encounter) and a place amenable to the visit. In other words, a visit is precisely what is impermanent and constantly inviting change. As filmmakers, we were continually negotiating between two positions: Badiou's didactic take on art and our own instincts which ran counter to such didacticism. In wrestling with these concerns, we were also making a contribution to late-communist visual culture.

Late-Communist Visual Culture

Growing up in the United States during the Reagan years and their aftermath, we were bombarded with anti-communist visual culture at all times and from all directions. A formative memory I have regarding the visitation of the Idea of communism in popular visual culture was when I was a teenager and watched an episode of the 1990s American sitcom *Seinfeld*. In an episode called "The Race" (originally aired December 15, 1994), the character named Kramer, known for his unpredictable behavior and "alternative" lifestyle choices, suddenly takes to communism after meeting a labor organizer named Ned Isakoff.¹³ Kramer is temporarily employed as a shopping mall "Santa Claus" during the holiday season, and he soon attempts to radicalize his coworkers, convincing his friend Mickey, who is playing Santa's "Elf," to demand better working conditions from the mall. But, quite hilariously, Kramer also attempts to indoctrinate the children visiting Santa to ask for toys.

KID: I want a racing car set.

KRAMER: Don't you see, kid? You're being bamboozled. These capitalist fat cats are inflating the profit margin and reducing your total number of toys.

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The child, rather than innocently heeding the words of this ostensibly wise, old man, instead reports him to the authorities, having been already indoctrinated by the anti-communist ideology of the United States:

KID: Hey, this guy's a COMMIE!

MICKEY: Hey, kid, quiet. Where did a nice little boy like you learn such a bad word like that? Huh?

Growing up in the ideological center of the capitalist world meant growing up in a place where the hauntology of communism was strangely ubiquitous.¹⁴ That is, only in a country as ideologically committed to capitalism as America would the specters of communism need to be so routinely conjured away and exorcised, especially in popular visual culture. My brother and I, eager viewers of *Seinfeld* in the 1990s, inherited the show's intellectual ambivalence toward the Idea of communism. To take communism seriously, you had to be someone like Kramer, zany and odd and different from everybody else. This, of course, is in direct contrast with Badiou's argument that the Idea of communism is not only universally rational but universally relevant. The Idea transits from one world to another, and across all possible and impossible worlds. For Badiou, it is *the* universal political Idea, the only one that really matters.

"America is a monster!" Badiou exclaims in one scene that we unfortunately had to cut from the final version of *Badiou*. It is a shame in some ways because the scene is a humorous one. We put together a montage of Badiou visiting "typical" American locations, including a Walmart megastore just outside of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Badiou walks through various isles of the big-box store (which looks a lot like the supermarket in *All's Well*), observing the rows of products with slightly restrained and bemused disgust. He gazes blankly at a television screen showing a continuously running advertisement for Walmart. Then the camera pans to a wider shot that shows Badiou standing in front of a wall of digital TVs all showing the exact same thing. In the center of global capitalism, America and Walmart are places with no Idea of being, of existence-as-such, except existence through the mediation of money and commodities. "And the world knows perfectly the value of money. But, for us, it's the value of the human being which is the question, not the value of money." This is how Badiou puts it in another scene, one we actually decided to keep in the final cut and which appears near the very end of the film.¹⁵

At our most insecure moments (and filmmaking is full of them), we felt sure that Badiou saw us—two Indian American filmmaking brothers—as "little monsters," always chasing him around with cameras and microphones and pestering him for more interviews. Who were we, two brown, bearded guys that never really took communism seriously as a political ideology, to make a film about perhaps the world's most famous and influential communist philosopher working today? A certain amount of ambivalence and doubt was built into our project from the outset.

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We were originally invited by our friend Jaden Adams (who is co-producer of the film) to shoot a week-long lecture series titled “Badiou on Badiou” in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 2014. The lecture series featured Badiou speaking on his life and philosophy, and the relationship between the two. As we planned to shoot the lecture series, my brother Gorav and I decided to read up on Badiou, about whom we both knew very little. As we got immersed in the material, we became increasingly drawn both to his ideas as well as his larger persona. This attraction was only enhanced through our direct encounters with him in Grand Rapids (where we shot the lectures as well as many hours of sit-down interviews and b-roll footage), and later in Paris (where we did more of the same, albeit in his home city). Although a certain estrangement persisted between us, “little filmmaking monsters,” and our biographical/ philosophical/ cinematic subject, this space of estrangement became a productive site of ambivalence that informed many of our creative decisions when it came to thinking about our larger film.

Didacticism was not going to be the answer. Instead, we turned to an approach that reflected our own sense of openness to the encounter, uncertainty, and ambiguity, to coexist and move with the visitation of the Idea without closing it up in a timeless lesson. We wanted to turn the Idea of visitation less into a lesson to last for eternity and more into an invitation to think some more, to think differently than before. To think in a different time.

In closing this essay, I turn to another inspiration for *Badiou*, the documentary film *The Last Bolshevik* (1992), directed by Godard and Gorin’s fellow French New Wave filmmaker Chris Marker. The film is beautifully analyzed by Badiou’s contemporary Jacques Ranciere.¹⁶ Both Marker’s paradoxical visitation with the Idea of communism in this film, as well as Ranciere’s analysis of this ambivalent cinematic treatment, informed how we went about making *Badiou*.

In his book *Film Fables*, Ranciere uses Marker’s film on the communist filmmaker Alexander Medvedkin (a communist as out of place in Stalin’s Russia as Badiou is in contemporary neoliberal France) to ask two questions of high relevance to our film: what is documentary as a genre of fiction? And what is the relationship between film (as a key aspect of visual culture) and communism?

Ranciere thinks about these questions through the paradoxical memorialization of Medvedkin that *The Last Bolshevik* enacts.¹⁷ Medvedkin was a little-known Soviet filmmaker who was a contemporary of Vertov and Eisenstein and who passed away during the Perestroika. He was largely unknown outside of the USSR. Inside it, his films were mostly banned by the Soviet censors and thus largely unseen by the public. As Ranciere argues, however, the point of Marker’s film is not “to preserve Medvedkin’s memory, but to create it.”¹⁸ This is but a more rarified expression of what all documentary film theoretically does: not the preservation of actual memories but the creation of virtual ones. For Ranciere, memory is not the subjective storehouse of individual recollections. Otherwise there would be no such thing as collective or institutional memory. Rather, memory is socially constructed as “an orderly collection, a certain arrangement of signs, traces, and monuments.”¹⁹ Memory is an archive of documents, both real and imagined, discursive

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and material. But these documents do not speak for themselves. They must be made to tell a story, and thus to create a “fictional” account of the past. This is where Ranciere gets his concept of “documentary fiction,” which he argues Chris Marker uses to great effect in his film on Medvedkin. Here, “fiction means using the means of art to construct a ‘system’ of represented actions, assembled forms, and internally coherent signs.”²⁰ Both documentary and narrative films partake in the construction of fictions that look more or less coherent and feel more or less “real.” Yet documentary and narrative films differ in how they treat the real. As Ranciere points out, the “difference between [the two genres] isn’t that the documentary sides with the real against the inventions of fiction, it’s just that the documentary instead of treating the real as an effect to be produced, treats it as a fact to be understood.” This gives documentary a certain artistic leniency that fictional narratives do not usually enjoy, constrained as the latter are by the “real of fiction that ensures the mirror recognition between the audience in the theaters and the figures on the screen, and between the figures on the screen and those of the social imaginary.”²¹ Fictional narrative films often must turn to easy stereotypes, recognizable figurations, or simplistic representations of places and times in order to establish the broadly intelligible “reality” across which the “fiction” takes place. Documentary does not have to spend time establishing this fabricated reality, but can instead creatively play with the intelligibility of the real in ways that it took narrative films many decades to do. That is, documentary films have long deployed heterogeneous images (extracted from different archives, epochs, technological media, and durations) and stitched them together in montage form, as “a way of cutting a story into sequences, of assembling shots into a story, of joining and disjoining voices and bodies, sounds and images, of lengthening and tightening time.”²² Ranciere finds in Chris Marker’s *The Last Bolshevik* an exemplary demonstration of the power of documentary fictions to do something very specifically cinematic, that is, produce virtual images in montage:

Marker composes *The Last Bolshevik* with scenes filmed in Russia today, the accounts offered by the people he interviews, yesterday’s news items, and with film clips from different time periods and by directors with varying agendas, ranging from *Battleship Potemkin* all the way to Stalinist propaganda films. With incursions, of course, into the films of Alexander Medvedkin [*sic*] himself, all of which Marker reinserts into a different plot and binds together with virtual images.²³

What does Ranciere mean by “virtual images” here? I take this concept to resonate closely with Gilles Deleuze’s work on cinema, which itself is explicitly beholden to Henri Bergson’s philosophy of time and the virtual.²⁴ For Deleuze, cinema—especially modern, postwar cinema—generates a direct image of time through its nonchronological, or virtual, movements: cuts, edits, and depths of field that put different senses of time into juxtaposition and conflict.²⁵ Rather than time merely serving as a homogeneous, empty backdrop across which narrative movement and realistic action take place (this was emblematic of prewar, or classical cinema), the new cinema discovered novel ways to make time heterogeneous with itself, exploring nonchronological trajectories and relations, tapping into the virtuality of memory and decentered perception through technical creativity.²⁶ French New Wave artists like Marker, Godard, and Gorin (among others) used this virtual

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heterogeneity in time to push cinema in radical new directions, including within the genre of documentary film. But it was not the didactic operations of these films—valued by Badiou—that constituted the virtual and gave it an affective charge. Rather, a more ambivalent operation, one employing what I call (following the film critic André Bazin) “lateral montage,” departs from and challenges linear expectations and strictly pedagogical narratives, confronting these with something radically different.

Reviewing Marker’s 1957 film *Letters to Siberia*, Bazin locates the concept of lateral montage in the way Marker creates a space of poetic ambivalence between audio and visual elements, that is, between the narrative voice and the images used as illustration.²⁷ In this film about life and travel (visitation) in the far eastern reaches of the Soviet Empire, this ambivalence and creativity emerges between the unseen narrator whose words seem to impose a certain order over the images and the mute power of these images to signify otherwise. Ultimately, this opens up a nonchronological space for critical thought and reflection. Bazin nicely distills this innovative filmmaking technique: “it might be said that the basic element is the beauty of what is said and heard, that intelligence flows from the audio element to the visual. The montage has been forged from ear to eye.”²⁸

Overtaking, however improbably, the ocular-centrism of the cinema, Bazin notes how Marker’s film gives power and virtual presence to the nonvisible elements of the cinema’s visual cultural production: the gap between audible sounds and visible images opens up a space for multiple, contested meanings. Here the artistic work delivers not a didactic lesson but an invitation for thinking otherwise about the distribution of the visible.

The cinematic technique of lateral montage is one that I find compatible with Badiou’s notion of visitation of Ideas and truths in cinema. In the sequence about the universal truth of communism with which I began this essay, where the visitation of the Idea is actualized through a variety of assembled movements (the view from the mobile train car, the actions of the passengers riding the train, the words of Badiou, the music of Wagner), lateral montage allows Badiou’s words to hover virtually over the images and sounds and shape them without completely determining them. More generally, we used lateral montage to create conceptual spaces to allow the philosophical content to crystallize outside of the dominant temporality of Badiou’s biography. The latter organizes the chronological meta-structure of our film. But there are various moments throughout where this biographical story is interrupted or traversed by dense conceptual and theoretical terrain. These conceptual spaces are lateral in the sense that they create an open (virtual) space for the viewer to reflect on philosophical matters in (another) time with the film.

In one such conceptual space, Badiou discusses his concept of ontological multiplicity, and we use various photographs already featured in the film up to that point (pictures of his mother and father, himself as a young man, as an infant) and explore the multiplicity within each of these images, locating subtle patterns and small details that escape our immediate attention (see Figure 3). The voice-over from Badiou is spoken in French:

The experience of the world is a constant experience of multiplicity. For, and this is my philosophical thesis, Being is multiple. If you find yourself reading a book,

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you're dealing with multiplicity. If the book bores you, you'll notice that you still have 123 pages to read. That is an experience of multiplicity. If you want to go to somewhere in Paris, you cross many unknown streets, and there you are in multiplicity. And if I look even closer I see that each of these things is itself a multiplicity. So we are dealing with multiplicities of multiplicities of multiplicities. At every moment the world is multiplying itself on different scales of our observation. I would even say that it is the first thing a baby discovers when he's born. He cries because he discovers the multiple. He understands that he and his mother are not the same thing. And after that it never stops. It never stops.

Badiou's thesis of multiplicity articulated here may seem to contradict his Idea of communism, as the latter has historically been defined by forms of collectivism, mass organization of space and time, group thought, and totalitarian states. Yet, for Badiou, the Idea of communism is less about the instantiation of particular political and institutional forms and more about the Idea that another world is possible, a world beyond the one that dominant ideologies of capital construct as natural, inevitable, and immutable. That is, the Idea of communism is about the multiplicity and alterity inherent in different worlds, for the Idea is precisely what traverses these different worlds and brings these worlds together through the universality of its truth.



Figure 3 The philosopher as an infant. Badiou (2018).

Film capture © Gorav Kalyan and Rohan Kalyan

Another example of a conceptual space assembled through a montage of virtual and actual images is when we get Badiou's interpretation of Plato's cave allegory. We illustrate this passage indirectly with shots of Paris seen from a boat gliding up and down the Seine. The cavernous river walls, built of stone and holding the city's buildings back at some remove, become the cave walls of Plato's famous allegory. The boat passes under old stone bridges, from light to dark and back again, like shadows flickering across the walls. It is a dark, rainy day. Badiou describes the world inside the cave, filled with "oppression, division, rich and poor, and so on." The cave is "the world as it is," Badiou tells us. But "you can find an exit," and after this event, "Plato describes magnificently, you see the trees, you see the sky, and finally you see the sun. And the sun is the metaphor of the Idea." At this moment the boat emerges from underneath another bridge, and the Eiffel Tower suddenly comes into view. Now we exit the cave and the perspective jumps from the boat to an elevator inside the tower itself. As we ascend, we see Paris through the

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tower's intricately patterned metal beams. From the top we get a series of panoramic views looking back down at the river and the sprawling urban space of Paris. Once we exit the cave, we are able to ascertain "the true nature of the cave ... the true nature of the world." But then we must return to the cave, Badiou tells us. After finding the truth of the sun, it is one's duty to go back down and "to organize the exit of all the people of the cave." We descend back down to the ground floor in the elevator, back into the cave to teach and organize those still enveloped in the darkness. "And this movement is politics."

This sequence is a combination of didactic and lateral operations in film. For, on the one hand, we are teaching a lesson on Plato's cave allegory quite directly but are doing so through Badiou's words and actions, illustrated with our B-roll shots in Paris—from the river (the cave) to the top of the Eiffel Tower (the Sun) and back down again. But at the same time, this is a story in miniature that detours laterally from the main vertical trajectory of the film: Badiou's biography told (more or less) chronologically from beginning to end. The lateral movements inject a certain difference and potentiality (a potential for unexpected change) into the film's narrative. Ranciere's argument is that documentary films can more readily conjure such lateral movements and bring their virtual powers to bear in cinema. Combining this claim with Badiou's insight on the relationship between film and truth, as the visitation of the Idea, we might say that lateral movements create conceptual spaces (between audio and visual contents, spatial and temporal coordinates) that allow for a thinking *with* the film, and not merely about it. This is a more ambivalent operation, one that comports with our own uncertain position as filmmakers in a fundamentally estranged relationship with our cinematic subject. But rather than seeking to hide this foundational ambivalence through clever editing and narrative strategies, we wanted to emphasize this gap between our world and that of Badiou's, the tension it produced. We wanted to preserve some of the strangeness of our encounter with the octogenarian philosopher so that it might transform into something different when diverse audiences encountered him through our images.

What would Badiou think about *Badiou*? This is, of course, an entirely different question from what the general audience might think. I would like to believe that he would affirm our overall approach, which attempts to balance the didactic operations he favors (evidenced in Godard and Gorin's *All's Well*) with more ambivalent techniques advanced in the films of documentarians like Chris Marker. Our film is both an homage to Badiou's way of thinking about film and philosophy but also a subtle challenge and immanent critique of the same.

More generally, I think that Badiou would appreciate the relationship between biography and philosophy that the film explores structurally. Any philosophy, Nietzsche once wrote (and Badiou likes to retell), is a biography of the philosopher. Badiou inverts the terms: "the biography of the philosopher, told by the philosopher himself, is a piece of philosophy."²⁹ I continue with words taken from our film's official website:

From his birth in Morocco, to the events of May 1968 in Paris, to his twilight years as a nomadic public intellectual, Badiou's own biography is perhaps his most com-

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plex and thought-provoking work... . By addressing the inherent contradictions in Badiou's life and work through cinematic means, the filmmakers are confronted by the inherent contradictions of cinema itself: thought vs action, interiority vs exteriority, presence vs absence... . They must ask a question as old as the medium: can cinema think?³⁰

Badiou would be more or less in agreement with all of this. Our film tells the life story of the philosopher and shows how Badiou's biography shaped his philosophy and vice versa. But it also attempts to go beyond this didactic lesson and pursue visitations with the universal truths and concepts of philosophy itself. These visitations invite the viewer to do two things: (1) think about the philosophical lesson contained in Badiou's biographical story, and (2) introspect on the impact philosophy and philosophical thinking has had on their own lives and biographies, potentially changing the way they think about the latter. Perhaps the most important conceptual space we create emerges toward the very end of the film, in the final act. I began this essay by describing the scene that deals with the Idea of communism as a sort of culmination of Badiou's various life events. Here the two trajectories of our film, the biographical and the philosophical, merge together in the visitation of the Idea of communism. We must leave it to the viewer to be affected (or not) by these cinematic movements, to turn the visitation into an invitation for further thought and action.

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Notes:

(1.) This text is from our film *Badiou* (codirected by Gorav Kalyan and Rohan Kalyan), which we began work on in July 2014 and premiered at the Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival in October 2018. Visit <http://www.badioufilm.net> for more about the film.

(2.) Alain Badiou, *Cinema* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 90.

(3.) *Ibid.*, 18.

(4.) Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis* (London: Verso), 7.

(5.) *Ibid.*, 230.

(6.) Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Hogarth Press, 1977), 167.

(7.) Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), 345–358.

(8.) Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

(9.) Badiou, *Cinema*, 2.

(10.) *Ibid.*, 89.

(11.) *Ibid.*, 7.

(12.) *Ibid.*, 18.

(13.) I write about both *Seinfeld* and Badiou's philosophy in a forthcoming essay with the journal *TV and New Media*.

(14.) Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (London: Routledge Press, 1994).

(15.) In fact, this line comes just after the speech about the Idea of communism that I referenced at the beginning of this essay.

(16.) Jacques Ranciere, *Film Fables* (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 157.

(17.) This sense of memorialization is more explicit in the film's French title, *Le Tombeau d' Alexandre* (Alexander's Tomb). The title *The Last Bolshevik* was used for the film's US release.

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(18.) Ranciere, *Film Fables*, 157.

(19.) Ibid.

(20.) Ibid., 158.

(21.) Ibid., 159.

(22.) Ibid., 158.

(23.) Ibid., 159.

(24.) Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (New York: Zone Books, 1990).

(25.) Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

(26.) Rohan Kalyan, "Ghostly Images, Phantom Discourses, and the Virtuality of the Global," *Globalizations* 7, no. 4 (2010): 545-561.

(27.) André Bazin's review of Chris Marker's film *Letters from Siberia* (1957) is accessible online at <https://chrismarker.org/andre-bazin-on-chris-marker-1958/M>

(28.) Ibid.

(29.) Badiou, *Cinema*, 110. Here he references the quote, but in our interviews for the film (in French) he expands on this relationship between biography and philosophy (in light of Nietzsche's original quote) at length. This specific segment of the French interview did not make it into the film.

(30.) Badiou official website, <http://www.badioufilm.net/badiou/>.

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