

And the ship sails on

Alain Badiou, *Cinema*, Polity, Cambridge, 2013. 320pp., £55.00 hb., £17.99 pb., 978 0 74565 567 3 hb., 978 0 74565 568 0 pb.

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To call a book simply *Cinema* is to frame its contents as a contribution to the theorisation of cinema, and thus, for a certain readership, to identify it as something other than film criticism. It is, in other words, to announce its apparent participation in, or proximity to, film theory. In an interview conducted by a former editor-in-chief of *Cahiers du cinéma*, Antoine de Baecque, for the original publication in French, Badiou himself seems, however, by turns, relatively modest and occasionally self-congratulatory as regards any claim to make a major intervention in the field. His entertaining and informative account of his largely solitary *cinéphilie* of the 1950s and 60s, as a ‘young provincial’ frequenting the Cinémathèque (a few doors away at that time from the École Normale Supérieure on the rue d’Ulm), through to his work as a ‘heathen’ infiltrating the Catholic journal *Vin nouveau*, and on to his engagement with cinema through politics, contains both moments of self-regarding comedy and statements which identify certain of the tropes that will recur throughout the volume. Hence, of Jean-Luc Godard’s *Film Socialisme*, in which Badiou plays himself in a scene aboard a cruise ship, he comments: ‘in just a few seconds, in the scene where I’m working at the desk, I’ve never before seen images where I am so much myself. So I’m pleased with the mode of presence attributed to me in that shot’. The observation has its more obviously serious counterpart in a comment later in the interview where he states that Godard’s invitation to appear in the film touched him, ‘[b]ecause it seems to mean that I’m part of the present time, in a film that incidentally deals with the hubbub of the world’. At face value both comments seem innocuous enough, suggesting a philosopher flattered by a director he has long admired, and who is indeed of central importance to several of the texts collected here. Taken together, however, the two comments distil several of the core concerns one might have about Badiou’s *Cinema* as a whole. In particular Godard makes Badiou part of ‘the contemporary’ which furnishes the material which it is the role of cinema to ‘purify’.

In the thirty-one texts making up the book, of disparate length, significance and occasion (several are lectures or seminars transcribed), cinema is defined in many different ways. It is, *inter alia*, and in no particular order, an art of ‘general assembly’, an art of ‘the end of metaphysics’, an art of identification; it operates via ‘subtraction’ and ‘purification’; it comprises ‘great figures of humanity in action’, and, in its effectuation of a ‘movement from love to politics’, is an art in which one can, Badiou implies, locate a potential forum within which several of his own philosophical concepts might find themselves reflected or refracted. Cinema is an art of general assembly in so far as it is, in Badiou’s terms, a mass art; it is a democratic art as opposed to an aristocratic art such as painting or music (although Badiou will absolutely insist on excluding what is referred to as ‘the moaning of pop music’). Cinema, he tells us repeatedly, is something one goes to on a Saturday night; not requiring the apprenticeship or connoisseurship associated with other arts, cinema can be engaged with and understood by everyone.

The problem with this normative account of film viewing is that it leads Badiou, on the one hand, to propose some pretty dogmatic and indeed somewhat clichéd formulations regarding cinema spectatorship (no popcorn is mentioned, nor could it be, this being Paris), and, on the other, to an insistence on the presence in such mainstream films as *Titanic* or *Brassed Off* of the sort of ‘truth’ Badiou believes to be disclosed far more consistently in the work of ‘modernist’ directors such as Godard, Straub and Huillet, and Antonioni. Even these latter, he asserts, make films filled with the trite and the banal. Thus, in what is one of only three references to any other writings on cinema (by anyone), Badiou can affirm aspects of Bazin’s ontology of the cinematographic image: the trite and the banal are merely the imprint of the real (as opposed to the Lacanian Real, which itself makes a somewhat muted but nonetheless notable appearance, *à la* Žižek, in Badiou’s many references to pornography), and is a feature as much of *Titanic* as it is of *A bout de souffle*. (In order to shake off some of the banality of the imprinted world on their films, Badiou’s amusing proposal: that all great film artists should try to make films without cars, or else, as in some of the films of Godard and Kiarostami, employ them in a different way).

Linked to this (itself rather trite) claim that cinema is democratic because its banal *effets de réel* can be recognized (cinema is an art of identification) - though we will not find Badiou citing Barthes, or anyone else for that matter - is Badiou’s assertion of the presence in film of a ‘generic humanity’ in another form. In the only early text reprinted here, a 1957 essay from *Vin nouveau*, he refers to how cinema achieves ‘the presence of man’. The notion returns later, albeit shorn of its existentialist trappings, in the familiar guise of a humanity courageously persisting in the manner of a character from the world of Beckett. Badiou insists that this inherent aspect of cinema, played out on the screen in the shape of a ‘central conflict’ between characters and values, through which a ‘hero’ emerges, is very difficult to read as anything more than a snatch of some conversation one might participate in with any filmgoer whatsoever (on Badiou’s fabled Saturday night perhaps). This is of course partly Badiou’s point: the hero may fall or rise on the screen, but the viewer is by definition ‘on the rise’ (as he asserts in a text from 2005, originally published in the journal *Critique*, entitled ‘On Cinema as a Democratic Emblem’) by virtue of the very possibility of this mass democratic chatter itself.

Badiou’s fidelity to such exchanges between screen and viewer, and within the conversing masses, is connected, seemingly paradoxically, to his privileged positioning of Godard – decidedly not a typical staple of the multiplex. There are many references to Godard as exemplar – like cinema itself, Godard is many things – and three texts devoted exclusively to his work. A consideration of the latter affords a way to think more generally about politics and cinema in Badiou’s thinking as these are mutually articulated throughout this collection. The most recent of the texts on Godard is about a film already almost 40 years old by the time Badiou came to write about it in 2005: *Tout va bien*, made in collaboration with Jean-Pierre Gorin in 1972. In Badiou’s retrospective account of how 1972 marked the beginning of the ebbing of revolt, the film becomes an allegory of *gauchisme* on the wane, and includes the observation that its ironic title is in fact a version of Mao’s ‘unrest is an excellent thing’. An earlier text, this time written closer to the historical juncture in question, finds much of interest in Godard’s 1982 film *Passion*, which in a similar way to the film from a decade before, evokes with incisive precision, according to Badiou, both the coming to power of the Left in France and the ‘Polish way’

offered by Solidarność. By contrast, in a text from 1998 on Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, cinema is itself, Badiou writes, 'summoned before the court of its historical responsibility and artistic destiny', leading him to ask: '[i]s this really fair to it?'. Godard's film, he suggests, clearly acts as a counterweight to that 'revisionist malady' of European cinema, including, notably, *Lacombe Lucien* by Louis Malle and *The Night Porter* by Liliana Cavani (Badiou does not cite Foucault who discussed both of these films in a 1974 interview with *Cahiers du cinéma* – translated in *RP* 11) which he castigates on several occasions. Yet it is, consequently, more than a little harsh, Badiou argues, in judging what he insists is still a mass art. Why? The reason lies in Badiou's insistence that in post-1972 cinema one finds 'a collection of precious victories', offering hope for the orphans of the revolution, for those who became weary, disenchanted or disengaged from the revolutionary path, or who (in this decidedly Francocentric narrative) quickly realised that the coming to power of Mitterrand would not for long be the source of much hope.

In a collection of such diversity it is tempting to find unifying threads. One such is offered when the opening interview refers explicitly to the Badiouian concept of 'inaesthetics', and to the notion of cinema as the 'seventh art'. A central text, the longest in the book, serves to outline in what ways cinema might be construed as a distinctive form of 'philosophical experimentation'. The text was not written for publication but is transcribed from a seminar in Buenos Aires in 2005. It offers an account of all of the major concerns articulated elsewhere in the collection, and among its notable features is a clear (and largely uncontroversial) account of Deleuze's books on cinema. What Badiou describes, however, as five ways of thinking cinema take as their own founding presupposition the always unquestioned claim that cinema is a mass art. In what is a rather comical slippage, Badiou makes no differentiation between what he thus proposes are five ways in which cinema has been thought (implicitly in the work of others, such as Bazin and Deleuze, as well as a great unnamed cast of film theorists) and the five ways in which *he* thinks cinema. Thus we return to cinema as semblance of the real (Bazin), cinema as making time visible (Deleuze), but then also cinema as the democratisation of the other arts, cinema as on the border between art and non-art, and finally cinema as affording what Badiou calls 'ethical genres, genres that are addressed to humanity so as to offer it a moral mythology'. What follows in the text is, finally, Badiou's own alternative to Deleuze's cinematic image, an array of provocations, which, frustratingly, are not subsequently reconsidered in the light of Deleuze's concepts of movement- and time-images.

Badiou ranges far and wide, both explicitly in film history and implicitly (without acknowledgment) in some of the terrain upon which traditional film theory treads. In his discussion of how genre works as a democratising force, for example, Orson Welles is of central importance. As Deleuze does in another context, Badiou gravitates towards Welles' *The Lady from Shanghai* and argues that montage is the 'destruction of metaphysics' whereas the still image is 'metaphysical'. Welles, he argues, is able to employ both. It is certainly true that Welles combines montage and a realism of the type affirmed by Bazin (the famed exploitation of depth of field, long takes, etc.). But, considered from the point of view of subsequent film history, he is hardly unique in this respect. More to the point: is metaphysics really what is at stake in *The Lady from Shanghai*? By Badiou's own account, is it not rather a matter of the worker-hero battling

it out against the capitalist boss and the bored wife (played by Rita Hayworth)? It might, in this context, be suggested that Badiou's interpretation only rather arbitrarily focuses on the theoretical construction imposed upon the film. And even if this is perhaps not intended to be taken entirely seriously, the decision draws attention to the often rather thin nature of the material collected here when considered across the book as a whole.

That so much of it is made up of interviews, transcriptions of unpublished work, some unpublished short pieces on individual films, and quite a considerable amount of repetition, does not of course necessarily diminish this book's worth. In particular, those interested in gaining an appreciation of how cinema is located within Badiouian aesthetics (and part of the book of that title is republished here), as well as of the notion of cinema as an 'impure' art, will doubtless find much to appreciate. Film scholars, however, may have to resign themselves to the fact that Badiou probably does not care too much about their objections. Instead, he is content to echo, as he often does, inadvertently, the words uttered by Samuel Fuller (playing himself) in Godard's *Pierrot le fou*: 'The film is like a battleground: love, hate, action, violence, death'. Above all, and to judge from the introductory interview, Badiou appears simply to be pleased with the way that the compiler of these diverse texts, Antoine de Baecque, has made him more visibly present, as Godard did in *Film Socialisme*, in discourse in and about cinema.

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