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## **Book Review: Badiou, A. (2007). *The Century*, Oxford, UK: Polity Press.**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Badiou's book succeeds in its argument and the work is an important contribution to our self-understanding of history.

The twentieth century was a century of terror, destruction, and acts of barbarism on a scale never before witnessed in human history. The century began with Herculean acts of genius and the potential to transform the world into something just shy of paradise. Human beings were in charge. God was dead, and for the first time in human history mankind was unleashed from the shackles of superstition and "ignorance." Alain Badiou's book, *The Century*, concerns the question of what happened to derail the Enlightenment, Humanism, and all the promise of a Prometheus that was now unchained.

The ghost of Nietzsche is everywhere in Badiou's work. Therefore, to make sense of the narrative developed over the course of the book's 13 chapters we must begin with the central Nietzschean premise. Our essential relation to the world, the lens by which we invigorate life with meaning and which serves as the wellspring of activity, is aesthetic. This position is central to Badiou's writing and is highlighted by the numerous references to the works of nineteenth-

and twentieth century artists, playwrights, and poets. Art serves as a signpost, a symptom, of any age. When we deconstruct its images we see ourselves reflected back to us in a way that is transformative and cathartic. Even religion served this function, as a poetic, interpretive text that was contextually bound and historically driven, even as many of its most ignorant adherents misappropriate its participation in the construction of truths, asserting them as the fixed immutable laws of a deity.

With the death of God as the supreme motivator in Western society, the forces of society are transformed. It was the poetics of God, as the provider of meaning in an interpretive framework of integration, that brought the chaos into a reified totality.

God's death unleashed the terror of the twentieth century but this was not because this event meant the loss of contenders in the push for absolutes.

Communism, Nazism, and Liberalism are twentieth-century ideologies that stepped in to fill the void created by the collapse of the old truths. Each sought to satisfy the passion for the real. The aesthetic appeal to the sublime had been usurped. For communism there was historical inevitability, for Nazism the truth of nationalism and state power, and for the liberal order, the naturalism of the market. Each had to reconfigure the subject in the image of what made its dominance appear rational. All oppressive agents of power require absolutes, which they then assert through acts of terror, as the measure of the civilized.

Badiou invokes the twentieth-century acts of domestic purification to illustrate his point. Stalin's purges, the Nazi extermination camps, and the McCarthy era in the United States were

all acts of purification in the name of the semblance that was both illusory and unattainable. The search for an empirical real, manifested in “new man,” led to the imposition of the fabrication through destruction and horror.

But Badiou asserts that God’s death meant man’s death. The ability to construct a Meta-narrative of the subject, a transcendental human essence has passed from the realm of the possible in the contemporary age. The project of humanism could not survive the disintegration of its epistemological validation in the age of scientism. The aesthetic has been pushed into the realm of the irrational in the antihumanistic age.

To Badiou, the nineteenth century still had residue of a European romanticism. In this time the role of poet-guide still had some meaning. Humanism needs to be seen as a romantic construct, the meaning of which is contained in its poetic potentiality rather than in its empirical presence as a matter of fact. By the twentieth century the aesthetic framework for the construction of value has dissipated. With human beings now occupying the center of the universe, armed with an epistemological model of positivism, science and technique reign supreme in the service of a pseudo-truth, what Badiou calls an “absoluteness,” that is itself a fiction masquerading as the real.

Subjectivity is transformed in a milieu in which progress is measured by the ability of the social order to provide more; more pleasure, more profit, more power, and more reality. The “new man” of the age has the paradigm of war as its condition. He must be at war, both

internally and externally, as the purity of the new order of “more” requires purification of the social order at home and abroad.

In the last chapter, Badiou looks forward. Where are we today, as we move into the twenty-first century? The “passion for the real” now turned back on man, reducing him to one more animal within a natural order of the world. Echoing and augmenting Baudrillard (the will to truth now reduces man to the code of DNA), Badiou argues that scientism as a means of truth production is now connected with an emergent anthropomorphized conception of nature. This position Badiou calls “animal humanism,” an ideology now emerging as the stance of the petty bourgeoisie. Badiou could develop this further, because if an anthropomorphized nature is assigned an identity and a will as part of this new ideology it will eventually clash with the ethos of consumption that resides at the core of liberalism.

Taken in its entirety, Badiou’s analysis is both insightful and powerful. Following in the footsteps of Nietzsche, Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Althusser, and others, Badiou touches on the sources of what can only be described as an intellectual crisis in Western culture. In the Nietzschean sense, Badiou laments the loss of the balance between the aesthetic and the empirical. The aesthetic paradigm is not just to bear witness, but to bring an association, a “we” back to the processes of existence, a sublime vision that gives significance and connection. However, the will to truth always contains the danger of absolutist appropriation. A return of the aesthetic must also represent a contextualization of truths to prevent the abominable outcomes found in the twentieth century.

Today the West is adrift in a nihilist void of self-indulgence at the expense of the rest of the world that has been transformed into “other.” However, the “otherness” to which Badiou refers also has a context that is given very scant attention. Art is addressed in the context of its creation within a variety of ideological formulations, but the question of its connections to material interests lurks in the underdeveloped recesses of the work.

Therefore, while there is great sensitivity to the broad cultural issues of aesthetics, and cursory discussions of rich and poor, there is no systematic attempt to engage the construction of the aesthetics within the materially driven interests of class politics. If Badiou is interested in moving beyond or outside class, then he should not invoke the Nietzschean question of, “Who Speaks.” Badiou says in the first chapter that within the new age “profit will tell us what to do,” but then fails to address the significance of that for the construction of a bourgeois political culture and an imperialistic relationship between the West and the rest of the world. If Badiou is interested in the residue of a narcissistic culture, then more attention should be paid to the material elements generating the expressions which are the source of his critique.

Nevertheless, it is impossible to dismiss the work on these grounds. The work’s larger mission is to bring us to an understanding of the modes of thinking that made the twentieth century such a destructive and murderous century. In that task Badiou succeeds and the work is an important contribution to our self-understanding of history.