

THE ROLE OF ALAIN BADIOU'S INAESTHETICS IN VISUAL CULTURE:

AN INTERVIEW WITH ADRIAN JOHNSTON, PH.D.

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I interviewed Dr. Johnston to ask him about the French Marxist philosopher Alain Badiou and his theories on the visual arts in relation to politics and history. We began our discussion with Badiou's approach to visual culture and his trans-historical method, in which he perceives art as being simultaneously a contextual phenomenon, as well as containing universal Truths that occur.

HE: How do you think Badiou as a Marxist approaches art in regards to the idea of the Event, which he introduced to the field of philosophy?

AJ: It is essential for him. He set the framework for his system in 1988 when he published his Magnus Opus, the book *Being and Event*, and in a short popularized version in 1989. In these works he talks about how philosophy is conditioned by four conditions in which Truths arise. It is then philosophy's task to make these conditions cross-resonate with one other. One of his provocations is to declare himself a Platonist in twentieth-century continental philosophy, which is a context dominated by anti-Platonism. Following in the footsteps of Plato, he talks about art, science, politics, and love as the four domains of generic Truth production. In these fields truths are produced. It is philosophy's task to open itself to what is being produced in these areas and make these things connect with each other.

There have been a number of criticisms that have been put forward in response to this. Some scholars have suggested that there could be more than just these four conditions. These critics ask why Badiou claims, in what seems to be a very dogmatic fashion, that there are these four, and only these four, conditions. Not only does Badiou insist that philosophy is not in the business of producing truths, but rather all the grist for its mill has to be furnished from outside of it in these extra-philosophical domains. He does at moments insist upon the autonomy of each of these conditions with respect to each other.

In his work from 1988 on, which is really the Badiou we still know today, he insists that art and politics in relationship to one another are separate freestanding domains unto themselves. He acknowledges that art can put itself in the service of politics. When we look at the explosion of artistic activity that surrounded the Russian Revolution of 1917, we can see art conceiving of itself as operating in a way that definitely involves a certain political commitment, or set of implications. Badiou wants to say that they should not be confused with one another even if there can be some cross-resonances that can be recognized between art and politics.

What he wants to avoid at all costs is something that in his first manifesto for philosophy he calls the danger of suturing things to each other. He claims that a lot of the twentieth-century rhetoric about the death of philosophy—it having reached its end—is due to the fact that different sorts of twentieth-century philosophers performed a suture between philosophy and one of its four conditions. He talks about German philosopher Martin Heidegger trying to reduce philosophy into art, in terms of his later preoccupations with poetic thinking, as really the only way to do fundamental ontology after the end of metaphysics. He talks about Anglo-American analytic philosophy as genuinely trying to collapse philosophy into science, be it mathematics, logic, or biology. He speaks of his own earlier work, prior to *Being and Event* as having involved suturing philosophy to politics.

He was a French-Maoist of a certain stripe, and his previous major philosophical work before *Being and Event* was a book he published in 1982 entitled *Theory of the Subject*, which consisted of a series of Jacques Lacan-style seminars he gave in the late 1970s. There he insists in a Marxist mode that philosophy ultimately reduces down to politics. Politics is a condition

or discipline, even for the most abstract and theoretical thinking. He then, in a self-critical gesture, identifies Marxism, including his own earlier Maoism, as having fallen prey to this suturing of philosophy to politics. But he also wants to avoid inter-condition sutures, in terms of suturing art to politics or vice versa. He is always careful to stipulate that although art can put itself into relationship with politics, it should maintain a sense of its own specificity and autonomy as a particular procedure, or a way of operating with sensible materials. Although it can convey the force of certain political ideas, it adds something specific to that that is not to be found in politics proper.

HE: *So art and politics can influence each other, and they can still be identified as individual elements.*

AJ: Yes. There is something there that you won't find in the field of politics as its own specific domain that is over and above the political, despite that certain sorts of art can be intimately related to politics in a deliberate and self-conscious fashion. Badiou's key treatment of art on its own terms is the 1998 *Handbook of Inaesthetics* that appeared as a part of a trilogy in which he discussed art, politics, and then general issues in ontology. The other two volumes were *Metapolitics* and *Short Treatise on Transitory Ontology*.

To define his concept of "Metapolitics," we can draw a nice parallel between art and politics and Badiou's treatments of them; he wants to distinguish between what he calls his Metapolitics versus what is traditionally called "political philosophy." He argues that by and large political philosophy in the western philosophical tradition designates a conception of philosophy where the philosophers formulate what the politician should put into practice. Philosopher kings come up with the idea of what justice is, what the good life collectively substantiated looks like, and they tell the political practitioners that it is their task to apply this, to realize it as best as one can given practical material constraints. Badiou's definition of political philosophy is a model where philosophy puts itself in this position of formulating the truths about politics, which are then imposed in a top down fashion on practitioners of politics.

By contrast he feels that philosophy is not in the business of manufacturing its own truths that are then exported elsewhere, but rather only receives

them by importing them from these conditions externally, what Badiou calls his reflections on politics, which is *Metapolitics*. This philosophical thinking lets itself be dictated to by what transpires on the ground of political practice outside of philosophy, like German philosopher Hegel's owl of Minerva.¹ *Metapolitical* reflection, as philosophy in relation to politics, only spreads its wings at dusk after the events of the day are done. That is when the *metapolitical* reflector can ponder the implications of what has happened politically outside of philosophy and do things with that, but in this more passive, receptive position. Badiou established the same contrast between what he calls philosophy of art and what he describes as his *inaesthetics*.

HE: Could you define what inaesthetics is for Badiou?

AJ: With traditional philosophy of art, like with traditional political philosophy, standard aesthetics would involve philosophers determining what beauty is, what good form amounts to, and then would measure or judge artistic works by how close they approximate these conceptions that the philosophers have formulated. Badiou wants to reverse this and says what really would be proper is for the philosopher as a practitioner of *inaesthetics* to receive what there is to be received. Badiou has certain preconceptions of what great art really is in terms of an evental order of magnitude that represents a rupture with previous ways of working with those mediums. Those moments for him are the key ones that the philosopher as the *inaesthetician* focuses on and considers the implication of and puts into relationship with other truths from other domains.

One could see a bit of this in his relationship to poetry. His taste is rather classical in terms of his French background. Arthur Rimbaud and Stéphane Mallarmé are two of his favorite poets. Badiou reads post-Cantor transfinite Set Theory as a domain in the area of science he considers crucial for his philosophical project.² This shows that he is extracting certain broader notions from it on the basis of combining Set Theory with his Marxist conception of politics and with certain sensibilities that he claims to have gotten from poets like Mallarme and Rimbaud. Badiou wants to claim that *inaesthetics* is in a very passive receptive position and waits to be furnished—the truths of art by art itself. Nonetheless it seems difficult for Badiou to avoid beginning his survey of art with certain preconceptions that he has about what art is important and what art is not.

A few months ago a book collection of interviews with him was published, and the interviewer pressed him in talking about music and the music that he identifies as important is quite classical. The most contemporary references that he is willing to indulge in would be Wagner and Schoenberg. The interviewer asked him about developments in rock music and Badiou dismisses it as ear-candy of no true importance. And no matter how innovative it seems, he insists it is just made for the purposes of fun and there is nothing to it more serious than that. The only non-classical mode of music that he dignifies with the status of being worthy of true philosophical attention is jazz. Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor W. Adorno was notoriously conservative and turned his nose up at jazz. Badiou is slightly more open than Adorno and believes that jazz is worthwhile, but does not go beyond that. There is a conservatism that is evident in some of the ways that he talks about certain genres of art.

HE: He seems to favor the Russian Minimalist painter Kazimir Malevich. Would that be representative of his approach to inaesthetics?

AJ: Badiou's relationship to Minimalism, and the visual arts especially, reveals something about his overall philosophical orientation—one of the things that makes him stand out as an anomaly in relation to his French philosophical background. And one has to consider that he came of age with a cohort that included Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze. Badiou is very atypical in a number of respects and one is his avowed Platonism. Much of continental philosophy in the twentieth century is dominated by the imperative that Nietzsche spells out, that the task is to overturn Platonism. And in the Marxist tradition Plato can be seen as the arch idealist anti-materialist who has to be dealt with accordingly. Much continental philosophy is very anti-platonic and Badiou claims to be a Platonist. Right now he is giving his third and final year of a seminar on Plato at the École Normale Supérieure. He is working on a creative and inventive retranslation of Plato's *Republic* in French, and is changing some of the scenery and putting it in a contemporary setting. He is also trying to put together a film on the life of Plato and he has joked that he would like to have Brad Pitt play Plato. More and more this has become something he emphasizes about his work, his fidelity to Plato.

In regard to art Badiou emphasizes the Platonic notion of the participation of the forms or ideas in the visible realm of this imminent material reality. He wants to salvage of Plato the philosopher who is not the textbook metaphysical realist; who posits this transcendent otherworldly heaven of the forms or ideas that stand over and above entirely separate from this world that we inhabit, one that we are in contact with through our senses. Let us take the standard Platonic example when talking about art—beauty. Typically it seems that what Plato is saying is that you have the form of beauty with a capital “B” and this is something that at best can be discerned by the mind’s eye. One can have a concept of it but not a percept of it. You don’t directly perceive beauty in and of itself as the pure form or idea that you catch a glimpse of as it shines through in particular beautiful things. That would entail that beauty with a capital “B” is separate and distinct from any particular beautiful thing. But Badiou wants to claim that although one should not just perform the anti-Platonic gesture of treating beauty in a nominalist fashion—that there are only particular beautiful things—there is no beauty as such. Instead beauty only exists as it is incarnated in terms of particular sensible things.

Badiou still preserves the notion that there is something to it as an idea, not just as purely sensible. And given this Platonism, one reason why he favors Minimalism, when it comes to visual art especially, is that you have an attempt to use sensible materials to reduce what is sensible down to its bare bones; something conceptual shines through with the greatest transparency when presented in this paired down very bare skeletal fashion—that idea of art as entirely bound up with the sensible but in such a way that it is worked with sensible material that forces one to go beyond pure sensibility. That particular kind of Platonic participation of the non-sensible and the sensible leads Badiou to favor more Minimalist approaches especially when it comes to visual art.

HE: Would that indicate that he is concerned with the viewer’s experience of the work? For example in expressionistic art it is the action that is the art, and the object is the evidence of it.

AJ: Yes, like with Pollock. It is violent movement that then leaves this mark or record. Badiou does not talk much about either the viewer or audience that stands before the work. Nor does he talk about the artistic producer—

the biographical individuals who are responsible for generating these works. For instance when Badiou talks about the subject of art, his general theory of subjectivity is rather idiosyncratic. For him the subject of art is an ensemble of works. So you would have a subject of art in terms of the collection of works that constitute the corpus of Cubism, Impressionism, and etc. The subject of art dies off when a certain artistic sequence has been saturated and has basically produced all the innovation it can produce and it becomes a cliché of itself, repeating its old forms. Badiou claims he is working on the third volume of the *Being and Event* sequence, entitled the *Immanence of Truths*. It is in this volume that he says he wants to offer a rich phenomenologically satisfying account of how we human beings are affected by confrontations with events and truths, including when you are sitting in an auditorium listening to a Wagner opera, or you are at a museum in front of a Malevich painting and pondering it. Badiou wants to talk about what is involved in that experience in a way in which we are incorporated into the truths that are there and, at least in a transitory fashion, we experience a certain becoming with a post-evental truth and its embodiment of certain subjects.

HE: Badiou has given the Chauvet cave paintings as an example of a certain truth, and he offers Picasso as a break from that truth.

AJ: And this is very traditionally Platonic. In *Logics and Worlds* he discusses an aesthetic form that has to do with horses and compares Picasso's horses with those in the cave paintings. I address this in an undergraduate seminar I am teaching now. In his structuralist orientation anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss talks about how one can identify these mythemes, which are the lowest common denominators that link together a whole series of different versions of a single myth. He can then string together everything from the Oedipus story as a certain myth. There is the Sophoclean version in Athens, circa 400 BCE, and then there is the Freudian version in Vienna in the early twentieth century. It is not that the first version is the true version and then all of the others are derivative or secondary. Lévi-Strauss wants to say that the true version is basically the invariant aspect that gets reiterated again and again, despite all of the permutations. It appears in various guises across the whole span of different variants that are produced over the course of diachronical time.

And I think that even though in this connection in *Logics and Worlds* Badiou makes no direct reference to Lévi-Strauss, there is similarity in this approach. You have the artistic rendition of a horse on a cave wall that was produced by an anonymous painter, or group of painters, many centuries ago. Then we have much more recently this rendition from Picasso, and Badiou wants to say that there is a lowest common denominator; although it is not transcendent, it is not as though there is this form of the artistically rendered horse which stands over and above all of these incarnations running from the cave paintings to Picasso. Nonetheless imminent to that series of variations on the artistic approach to the acquiescence, there are these various renditions of it and something that binds them together. One could identify these things as attempts to approach the same form, or the same essence.

HE: Badiou is concerned with putting the formal before the political in regard to the aesthetic, and it is about the joining of the two. How is this particularly a twentieth-century concern?

AJ: One of the read threads throughout the span of *Logics and Worlds* is a sustained Plato-influenced polemic against a very dominant twentieth century tendency to always historicize, as exemplified by Frederic Jameson's injunction "Always historicize!" (Jameson is very well known for his Marxist work particularly with regard to aesthetic issues, especially literature.) Badiou feels that to some extent this must be resisted. He thinks this has become an instinctive reaction, and whenever we are confronted with a form we want to describe it as peculiar to a given context that emerges out of a specific backdrop. Its validity and status is bound up with its place in time. To speak of these diagonal lines, which cut across vast swaths of history from the cave paintings up through to Picasso, is viewed as a heresy for a sensibility that is so attune to and so careful to always speak of history as a matter of particularization. There is a resistance to any kind of positing of anything universal, anything trans-temporal, anything that smacks of the old eternalists that philosophy seems so preoccupied with. Badiou wants to plead on behalf of these things.

In politics he still speaks nowadays of what he first referred to in a short text on ideology—from 1976 that has yet to be translated—what he calls

“communist invariance.” This would be history as the practice of true politics in his sense, a kind of radical emancipator and generally leftist sort of politics. There are certain lowest common denominators, from Spartacus and the slave revolt in the Ancient World, through the struggle of Chinese peasants under Mao’s direction, and everything in between. This is also related to a cause dear to Badiou’s heart, the struggles of the undocumented workers in France, *les sans papiers*, of North African origin for recognition. Badiou says that these different movements, despite of all of their differences, and even though of course there is much that is contextually specific about each of these struggles, that one will find the same sorts of basic core concepts or causes motivating and justifying the rightness of these revolts. And he consistently does this with art and politics.

This is one of the many ways in which he and Slavoj Žižek form a united front. Badiou jokes in *Logics of Worlds* that they form a politburo, one in which it is a question of who will be the first to extract from the other an appropriate self critique before having him executed. There is a certain kinship between them, in part because both of them have drawn our attention to some of the drawbacks involved with pan-historicism, similar to Fredric Jameson, or an always historicizing kind of approach. There are babies we have thrown out with the bath water in terms of becoming more critical of very traditional philosophical ways of approaching these matters.

HE: How would this approach relate to his ideas about democratic materialism?

AJ: He trots out this famous distinction in the early moments of the introduction to *Logics and Worlds*. He contrasts democratic materialism on the one hand, and then on the other, what he calls the materialist dialectic. With the materialist dialectic, one can see him reactivating aspects that were a part of his earlier works. He was a former student of Louis Althusser’s, along with Étienne Balibar, Jacques Rancière and a number of these figures who are now quite well known in France and also the United States. Althusser talks about the materialist dialectic in his collection of essays *For Marx*. One of Badiou’s earliest philosophical publications was a review of Althusser’s *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, published by Badiou in 1967. There is a recuperation of some of those ideas early in *Logics and Worlds*. One of Badiou’s best readers, who translated 1982’s *Theory of the Subject*,

traces how in that Marxist approach to dialectics in that work, even though it seems to go underground, Badiou taps back into that earlier phase of his work in *Logics and Worlds*.

When Badiou talks about democratic materialism, we have to have recourse to the Marxist idea that starts with Engels, that the history of philosophy can be seen as split into two camps—idealism versus materialism—and that this is the fundamental fault line of tension that organizes the history of philosophy, even though it is not usually read in this fashion. Engels articulated this in his *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*. And Lenin takes this up in his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.

At the start of *Logics and Worlds* Badiou is pointing out that within materialism is a mirroring of this sort of a split. But it is different than just a straightforward conflict between materialism and idealism. There are two very different senses of materialism that are really pitted against each other. This is where he sees a fundamental fault line of ideological tension, or a struggle at least, in the Western world especially. One can pick out certain philosophers he has in view that fit the bill. But one can also look at popular quotidian sensibilities in our societies that reflect this.

He defines democratic materialism as the notion that there are only bodies and languages. You have incarnate individuals whose bodies are particular entities. Then these beings are fully ensconced within the linguistic life-worlds of particular communities. All that is left then is a relativism of different people with different language games, and what perspectives you have is relative to which of these worlds you inhabit. Badiou wants to claim that there is another kind of materialism, which adds a qualification to the axiom, or the core tenant, of democratic materialism. In addition to the bodies and languages, the materialist dialectic states that there are truths that cannot be reduced to particular people, who are ensconced in particular social or cultural linguistic context, and to cut across these otherwise divided spheres that seem to present us with nothing but a fragmented multitude of partial perspectives. At the same time these truths are not transcending. Again they are not like Plato's metaphysical realism, in which pure forms or ideas exist in a timeless state of unchanging heaven of purely conceptual intelligible axis that we can only get a sideways glimpse of in this world. But rather his

idea is that you have produced certain things out of particular times and places that can survive an indefinite number of de-contextualizations and re-contextualizations.

Mathematics provides him with an easy and obvious set of examples. For instance for any given mathematical truth we can clearly identify the given time and place in which it arose. We can look back at ancient Greece for the genesis of the fundamental ingredients of arithmetic and geometry brought about by particular individuals living in that specific life-world. We can point to Kurt Gödel in the twentieth century, with his famous incompleteness theorem. But for Badiou those mathematical truths are true and they have a historical genesis, they arise in a particular time and place; certain people with certain languages forge them and they cannot be reduced to that contextual point of origin. They thereafter achieve independence relative to their site of genesis. And he wants to claim that this is something that is affirmed by materialist dialectics that democratic materialism denies. Democratic materialism compulsively historicizes and contextualizes, and denies that there is anything, which really does genuinely have that kind of trans-contextual, autonomous, and irreducible truth status to itself. And that is the fundamental thing he is after in *Logics of Worlds*.

HE: *That seems similar to Althusser's idea of relative autonomy.*

AJ: Absolutely. To bring it into context with art, part of what is involved in an artistic work that has a truth to it is that it is not in principle closed to anyone. It is not as though only if you are from that community, you are that kind of person with that sort of linguistic, cultural, social, etc. background can it speak to you. But for Badiou any truth, whether it is artistic, amorous, political or scientific, has something in it that is at least potentially, if not actually, universal. It addresses anyone and everyone without discriminating amongst its addressees based upon their background or based upon particular characteristics or differences that mark them. There is that insistence on the universality of artistic truths as with all truths.

Also it would not be to deny that given works of art emerge from particular times and places; specific people embedded in a particular cultural horizon fashion these works. If they really are artists worthy of being paid attention to philosophically in his view, they manage to produce something in a

sensible medium that can survive being exported out of that particular context in which that artistic product was first produced, despite being something ensconced in a particular life-world. And that for him is very essential. He strongly opposed any kind of cultural relativist approach to artistic analysis. He acknowledged form as a twentieth-century concern, and even though there are certain concerns that emerge in a particular time and place, that does not mean that if we look back at formal features, or become preoccupied with the pre-twentieth century that it should just be denounced as anachronisms. He would hesitate to endorse that sort of caveat to qualifications.

HE: How have Badiou's theories of inaesthetics been received?

AJ: Outside of philosophy, the people who I have the most contact with in the wider academic world that know of his work tend to be in language and literature departments. In terms of aesthetics as literary theory it does seem as though there is growing interest here. I know that there is a group of graduate students in more theory-oriented comparative literature programs who are doing dissertation work that is influenced by Badiou. I think you are going to see a generation of new scholars who are going to be openly using Badiou to talk about literature, among other fields. And I should mention that Badiou's earlier publications are not philosophical but literary. He has published some novels, poetry, and has written and produced a number of plays. So he does himself maintain a very direct relationship to art and does speak from a position that is different than a lot of philosophers who speak of art but have not themselves engaged in the actual attempt to practice it. The theater is something Badiou has a special love for and he has written a bit about film, too. I anticipate that literary connection to be seen in his retranslation of Plato's *Republic*. There is a more literary quality to Plato's text than many of the canonical works in the Western philosophical tradition. The snippets that Badiou has trotted out thus far from that work indicate that it will have a very dramatic quality to it; it almost will read like the script of a play. So that will be an interesting experiment. Despite him wanting to keep philosophy and art separate from each other, he will really be blending them or be forced to blend them in an interesting way. He is forecasting it to come out this year.

HE: It seems that one could argue that Badiou would agree with labeling theater and the written word as a form of art, or visual culture.

AJ: Badiou would object to equating art with “visual culture.” For Badiou, as for many others, visual art is one kind or variety of art, the latter being a much broader category encompassing, in addition to visual art (such as painting), non-visual forms of artistic creation involving things other than images (for example, language and/or music). So, although he definitely considers drama and literature to be types of art, he almost certainly wouldn't subsume them under the label “visual culture.”

What's more, Badiou would take issue with the word “culture” in the context of this discussion here. He associates the concept-term culture with the notion of life-worlds—as assemblages of bodies and languages without universal truths—he links to the democratic materialism stringently criticized in the opening pages of *Logics of Worlds*. For Badiou art isn't reducible to culture; hence visual art, as art in the strict Badiouian sense, is to be distinguished from what one might call “visual culture.” If a piece of art worthy of the name bears within itself something (i.e., a truth) that can be exported beyond the culturally localized/situated site of its production, something that is (at least in principle) open to everyone and is able to address an incalculable multitude others situated in an indefinite plurality of different cultural life-worlds, then an authentic instance of art proper is, in fact, a/non-cultural (insofar as it cuts across cultures, being de-contextualized out of the culture in which it was fashioned and re-contextualized in any number of cultures distinct from its culture of origin).

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NOTES:

¹ The owl of Minerva is a symbol from Greek and Roman mythology that represents wisdom. The German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel used this as an example to argue that philosophers understand history or historical events after they are over.

² In 1874 the German mathematician Georg Cantor created what is called Set Theory, which was intended to prove mathematically that there are multiple infinities.