

Editor's Interview with Gorav Kalyan* and Rohan Kalyan**
Badiou (2018)

ED: How did you come to realize that this was a film you needed to make?

RK: So, this short film is part of a larger documentary project (entitled *Badiou*) that we completed this year and which has been in the works since July 2014. At that time a friend of ours (Jason Adams--who is co-producer of the longer film) put a call out looking for filmmakers to help with documenting a series of lectures by Alain Badiou in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Gorav and I offered our services in part because we had just finished a short film (entitled *Letter to the City Yet to Come*--featured in JNP in 2016) and were looking to work on a new documentary film together. But we were also interested in finding out more about Badiou and his philosophy.

GK: Jason's intention, at first, was only to have us document the lecture series. It was only after Rohan and I read up on him that we decided that we should take advantage of our time with him by making a proper documentary, and Jason was amenable to that.

The lecture series was also timed very well in my life. It was summer and I wasn't working. It was a chance to travel, to go somewhere I'd never been before, which I always am eager to do. And like Rohan said, we had finished a film, and were looking to make another. At the same time, we were both watching a lot of Adam Curtis and Chris Marker films, so Badiou's message resonated in a way, at least with me, that it may not have otherwise.

ED: What was the appeal of Badiou? Both of you mentioned *Letter to the City Yet to Come* and Gorav says that it 'resonated'. What is this resonance, if you could talk about that a little bit more?

GK: The resonating I meant was more about Chris Marker's and Adam Curtis's films than *LTCYTC*. Both of them are leftist filmmakers and Curtis in particular can be polemical in his

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Gorav studied philosophy at the College of New Jersey before moving to California in 2006, where he studied Film Directing at the California Institute of the Arts. He was a 2013 Film Independent Project: Involve fellow, and has made feature length films, documentaries, short films and music videos. He and his brother, Rohan, have collaborated on a number of documentaries. Their most recent film "Badiou," is a feature-length film about the radical French philosopher, Alain Badiou. He can be reached at gorav.kalyan@gmail.com

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analysis of liberalism, and I think it's kind of inspiring. But the draw of Badiou's philosophy for me personally was pretty gradual. At first, I was drawn to him as a kind of Sisyphian hero. And this view was inspired not by *LTCYTC*, but another film we had worked on called *Ka Wa Ma Hope: A History of the Future* (2010).

We had done this short documentary about Hawaiian independence activist/scholar Dr. Keanu Sai a few years before and the idea of this man fighting a fight that he will almost certainly lose with a tireless dedication that verges on delusion was simultaneously inspiring and absurd. Or more like inspiring because it was absurd. No matter the odds, he is convinced that he is right, and in a just world he would be right. But it's not a just world. His analysis of the Hawaiian situation, legally and morally correct as it may be, doesn't matter. And yet he continues. He agitates, he lectures, he files lawsuits. He acts. Unfortunately, we never were able to raise the funds for a full length treatment of Dr. Sai's story.

So, something like that was at first what drew me to Badiou and his stubborn belief in communism. Even after we first interviewed him in Grand Rapids, I saw him as something like a sympathetic fossil.

It wasn't until later, after many more hours spent reading, watching lectures online, discussing with Rohan, trying to understand his philosophy as we prepared to go to Paris to finish shooting with him, that I began to see his ideas not as relics, but as contemporary and relevant. And in fact they have only gained in relevance in my eyes since.

RK: I just want to say that I'm glad we are getting the chance to re-examine some of the origins of this project together, having just completed our work on it a few months ago and not really talking much about it since.

I think it is interesting what Gorav says about the connection between Alain Badiou and Keanu Sai. What we have are two activist-scholars who are earnestly (maybe fanatically) fighting for something they believe not only to be empirically true (i.e. provable, demonstrable through rational explanation, logical reasoning etc.) but just and worth fighting for as well. It is about the gap between the real and the true, and how to mediate this space in-between. I take this to be one of the central prerogatives of film, especially documentary, and it connects quite closely with politics.

In a sense, Badiou's philosophy begins and ends with the question of subjectivity: in what do we invest our time and energy, especially in the fields of politics, artistic expression, knowledge production more generally and even our inter-personal relationships with comrades, lovers, fellow travelers, etc.? To what/whom do we want to give our fidelity, our good faith, our dedicated struggle? What is worth fighting for and what is better off being left alone? How do we decide? On what basis? The inspiring and the absurd can come quite close together here, especially as the imagined world which one is fighting for seems to recede further away from the present, both in a time of rising neo-fascism as well as older, more familiar systems of oppression.

And this brings us back to *LTCYTC*. After all, that too was a film about people describing a world they'd like to see materialize (or one that has already passed) and struggling, in various ways, to change the one they currently inhabit. These are worlds that people want to construct that are decidedly *not* here now: they are true (insofar as they can be rationalized on logical, ethical or moral grounds) but they may not be real, at least not yet.

ED: Can we talk a little bit about the relationship between 'relics' – or the things of the past – and the way that past moves through the present and future in the film? Here, I'm kind of thinking about the way that subjectivity comes to be – through particular narrations about the past, about the construction of linear time – things like that.

RK: I hadn't really thought about our Badiou film in terms of such relics from the past as such, but I think it is quite apt in light of the broader relationship between cinema, time and subjectivity that informs some strands of scholarship in film theory, particularly those influenced by Gilles Deleuze (who was, coincidentally, Badiou's chief intellectual rival at the University of Paris VIII in the 1970s). Because much of our film's thinking revolves around the multi-faceted relationship between biography and philosophy, the various photographs from his life that Badiou positions in front of the camera can be seen as relics in their own right. They bring the past back into the present. But simultaneously, through the temporal movements peculiar to cinema, these relics allow us to transport the viewer back into Badiou's past.

In the short film featured here the picture takes us back to 1967, when Badiou traveled to Bolivia as an international observer with the Human Rights League. He was there to observe the trial of Régis Debray, a French militant intellectual and comrade of Che Guevara, who was engaged in an ill-fated insurrectionary campaign in southern Bolivia. Debray was captured several months before Guevara and subjected to a long, "enigmatic" military tribunal in the small town of Camiri. It was during this trial that, perhaps 80 kilometers away in an even more remote part of the jungle, Che Guevara was shot, captured and eventually executed while still in custody of the Bolivian military (with material support from the CIA). Badiou's narrative recalls how he and others from abroad were soon shuttled out of Camiri and taken back to the capital city of La Paz, before finally being ordered by the Bolivian authorities to leave the country and return to France. For the authorities, Badiou recalls, "it was better to have no persons, no witnesses near." They only learned of the true nature of Guevara's death (that he was executed in jail and not killed on the battlefield, as falsely reported in the newspaper) a few months later.

As a young man of twenty-nine at the time, this was Badiou's first international experience. But it was not just about travelling to a different part of the world; it was a different world altogether. A world of militant intellectuals and peasant uprisings, solidarity, emancipation and (ultimately) betrayal and failure, anti-communist hegemony and guerilla resistance. In the film, we wanted to evoke something of this enigmatic, uncertain time, when danger was certainly present, but so too was the radical possibility that something different might arise, something truly revolutionary.

This brings us to the idea of "sameness" that Badiou describes after relating the story of Che Guevara's murder. Badiou proceeds to reflect on how different that time was from today, when we accept (however begrudgingly) the dominance of global synchronic capitalism in our lives. Badiou signals this by holding up his own smart phone (another relic, but this one of our

present). With the world-wide domination of capitalist time, Badiou argues, alterity is no longer something which exists in the world in some uncontaminated form (in the jungles of Bolivia, for instance). Rather, radical alterity must be affirmatively created through revolutionary politics, anti-capitalist organization and collective action. This has been the life mission of Alain Badiou. Though this last point does not really make it into the short film featured here, it is one of the overarching themes of the larger documentary film we made.

ED: Along with the juxtapositions of temporality in the piece, there is also the strategy (or strategies) of narration and of aesthetics. Can you talk about how you made the narrative and aesthetic choices you did?

GK: In general, it's tricky to talk about the rationale behind aesthetic choices because we're so often going not for an idea or statement, but for a feeling, so it's difficult to put into words.

In this short excerpt from the film, we knew that we wanted to take Badiou's experience in Bolivia, which is historically and personally specific, and build it into something more abstract, universal and contemporary.

We tried to do this by building associations between images and ideas, and then toying with those associations, drifting away and coming back to them. For example, we tried to associate the idea of a chaotic, corrupt, militaristic situation with that of the forest. We see the forest canopy, which leads to a dark monolithic tree trunk--immovable, indifferent and menacing--when Guevara dies.

Later we break the fourth wall in order to pull the viewer out of Badiou's narrative and drop them back into their own world. The camera pans to the right and reveals a forest just outside the window. The menace, chaos and corruption of the preceding sequence are never far, no matter how secure we feel we are. Badiou repeats a phrase: "Something dangerous, something enigmatic, something obscure, we must be prepared for that sort of situation," over hypnotic music by Ryuichi Sakamoto.

This carries us over to a series of shots from India, France and the U.S., all in cars and all shot on an iPhone in slow motion. The idea in this sequence is to create visual rhymes between shots that tie these images together. The fast frame rate of the iPhone makes one car's clock an unreadable repeating series of blinking lights, later it affects a line of digital billboards until one can just make out an ad for a hatchback, which we saw drive past a pair of chewing cows on the side of the road in India in the shot before. "The world is everywhere the same," says Badiou. He raises his own iPhone ironically.

The sequence ends with an endless highway wall seen from the window of a moving car, interrupted by a drop of rain that lands directly on the lens of the iPhone, distorting, obscuring, blurring.

That's what we were going for, anyway.

ED: I want to close by asking you what you love the most about this film?

GK: My favorite part of the film was making it. It was an excuse to do many of the things that I love to do: to travel, to hang out with my brother, to watch new films, to play around with cinematic ideas, and to do something that I forgot how much I love, which is to read and think deeply about philosophy.

And I love the way we used the editing and imagery to create a kind of call-and-response with Badiou's interviews. In fact, one of my major insecurities regarding the film is whether or not this comes across. The film is us thinking (another Badiouian concept, though not his alone, is that cinema *thinks*). And I hope that this call-and-response continues with the viewer. They listen to Badiou, watch our wordless, audio-visual response to Badiou, and form their own responses. I hope that we've achieved something like this, that we've crafted an experience that is itself a kind of participation in a philosophical dialogue.

RK: What I love about the film is the way the visual experience of Badiou's story is punctuated by the musical soundtrack to create a strange kind of cinematic alchemy. I love the cyclical poly-rhythms that slowly, unevenly develop over time, complicating each image, word and sound. In a way, this audio-visual assemblage serves as a kind of aesthetic mediation between the biographical and the philosophical that is the larger theme of this *Badiou* documentary project. The point, as Gorav alluded to above, is to try and generate a space where the viewer can think *with* the film, and not just in relation to Badiou's life and philosophy but to their own stories, their own ideas. It is a joy and privilege to get to participate in this kind of creative process, especially with my brother.

* Editor's note: The full version of *Badiou* premieres October 27, 2018 at the Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival in the Czech Republic. For more information on the film, visit: www.badioufilm.net