

ALAIN BADIOU

CINEMA





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To my friends from *L'Art du cinéma*, and to my son,  
André Balso-Badiou, in particular.

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ALAIN BADIOU

Texts selected and  
introduced by  
Antoine de Baecque

Translated by Susan Spitzer

Polity

First published in French as *Cinéma* © Nova Editions, 2010

This English translation © Polity Press, 2013

Polity Press  
65 Bridge Street  
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press  
350 Main Street  
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-5567-3 (hardback)

ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-5568-0 (paperback)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10.5 on 12 pt Sabon  
by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Group Limited, Bodmin, Cornwall

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Chapter 14 is an excerpt from Bruno Bosteels' translation "Rhapsody for the Theatre: A Short Philosophical Treatise," in *Theatre Survey*, 49: 2 (2008), pp. 187–238. Copyright American Society for Theatre Research, and reproduced with permission of Cambridge University Press.

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Chapter 21 was translated as "Philosophy and Cinema," in Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy*, eds. and trans. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), pp. 83–95. The slightly revised translation is reprinted with the kind permission of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

Chapter 26, with minor revisions, is Alberto Toscano's translation "Dialectics of the Fable," in *Science Fiction Film and Television 1: 1* (2008), pp. 15–23, Liverpool University Press.

## FOREWORD

“Cinema is a Thinking Whose Products are the Real”

For Alain Badiou, cinema is an education, an art of living, and a thinking. He has written of his relationship with “the seventh art” in about thirty different texts, dating from the late 1950s to the present. This in itself amounts to a comprehensive vision and interpretation of cinema, even if most of these articles deal with individual films or groups thereof. Such an approach is in fact one of the characteristic features of Badiou’s thought: thinking on a case-by-case basis, deriving a whole system from one particular work of art considered in its specificity. As a result, these texts offer a wide-ranging survey of the cinema of the past fifty years, from filmmakers of modernity (Murnau, Antonioni, Oliveira, Tati, Godard) to a few contemporary American films (*The Matrix*, *Magnolia*, *A Perfect World*), by way of a few unique experiments (Guy Debord, the cinema of ’68, the militant films of the Groupe Foudre, and so on).

Like quite a few thinkers of his generation (Rancière, Genette, and Deleuze, for example), Alain Badiou was brought up from an early age on the cinema as a vector of thought. His cinephilia was boundless, and he turned to writing about it right from his student days, when he contributed to *Vin nouveau*, the journal of young leftist Catholics at the École Normale Supérieure, in 1957. Beginning with his ambitious, important first text, “Cinematic Culture,” a few specific ideas emerged that would run throughout his subsequent work: cinema does justice to the human figure inscribed in the contemporary world; cinema considered in terms of its “subjugating” relationship with the other arts; cinema as an imaginary voyage and a thinking of the Other. With his turn to militant commitment and a political philosophy, Badiou pursued his critical work, contributing to *La Feuille foudre* and *L’Imparnassien* in the 1970s and early 1980s. The latter were militant journals in which a judgment was issued, the

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judgment of a political tribunal of sorts. The verdict would come down: such-and-such a film was “revisionist,” or such-and-such films merited more respect and consideration. In the line of fire were the French leftist fiction films, while among the few filmmakers admired enough to be spared the sentence were Bresson and Godard.

In 1981, along with Natacha Michel, Badiou founded the biweekly journal *Le Perroquet*, the intellectual core of anti-Mitterrandism, and for ten years staked out an altogether remarkable critical itinerary in a number of articles he wrote about films of interest to him. Some highly stimulating analyses of the features of the French comedy film, the filmmakers of “the second modernity” (Godard time and again), and Swiss cinema as the emblem of “cinematic neutrality” are also worth noting.

These were followed by more extensive, theoretical texts, published over the past fifteen years in the journal *L'Art du cinéma* as a rule and written in clear, simple language – one of the hallmarks of Badiou’s philosophical writing style – on “the dialectics of the fable,” film as a “philosophical machine,” and cinema as a “democratic emblem.” In these essays, the philosopher develops the idea of cinema as a “producer of a truth of the contemporary world” and of film as a “sensible configuration of the truth of the world.” Films think, and it is the task of the philosopher to see them and transcribe that thinking: What is the subject to which the film gives expressive form? This is the question at the root of Badiou’s thinking about cinema. In many of these texts, cinema becomes an impure art cannibalizing its times, the other arts, and people – a major art precisely because it is the locus of the indiscernibility between art and non-art. It is all this, explains Alain Badiou in a clear and irrefutable way, that makes cinema the social and political art par excellence, the best indicator of a civilization, as were Greek tragedy, the *bildungsroman*, and the operetta in their respective eras. Last but not least, included in this book is the text of a seminar given by Alain Badiou in Buenos Aires in 2003, “Cinema as Philosophical Experimentation,” in which he develops his thinking of cinema at length and in great detail, illustrating it with many new examples from Mizoguchi, Ozu, Rossellini, Visconti, Hitchcock, Godard, Lang, Hawks, and Anthony Mann. This text can be read as a veritable manifesto of cinema as conceived by Alain Badiou.

Antoine de Baecque

## “CINEMA HAS GIVEN ME SO MUCH”

An Interview with Alain Badiou by  
Antoine de Baecque<sup>1</sup>

*The first thing that struck me when I was assembling all your texts on cinema for this volume is how spread out over time they are, as if the cinema had accompanied you throughout your entire intellectual life. The last text, on Clint Eastwood, dates from 2010; the first, “Cinematic Culture,” was published in June 1957 in the journal *Vin nouveau*, when you were twenty years old. Cinema would seem to be a very important art in your education.*

Cinema has played an essential role in my existence and my apprenticeship of life and ideas. I’m all the more convinced of this because, even though that first published text dates from when I was twenty, I’d already been involved with cinema before then, having participated in and run that organization which was so invaluable back then, the high school cinema club. First in tenth grade and then in eleventh, I frequently took part in commenting on the film being shown. Cinema’s presence in my life goes way back and has been geared for ages toward the idea that it’s something other than mere entertainment. I remember a lecture I gave at age eighteen in Toulouse, when I was in my first year of the preparatory class for entrance into the *École Normale Supérieure*. It was a lecture on Orson Welles’ *Othello* and had to do with the relationship between cinema and the other arts. I boldly argued that Welles’ film was on a par with Shakespeare. I was fascinated by Welles’ voice, which I thought was cinematic in and of itself. When I became a student at the *École Normale Supérieure*, the *Cinémathèque française* was only a few dozen meters away, on the rue d’Ulm, and I used to go there nearly every night. I had the feeling that, of all the arts, cinema was the one that really guided your entry into the contemporary world, and, basically, something like my own delayed entry into the century. At the

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Cinémathèque I of course began seeing the films of Stroheim, Griffith, and Chaplin, which Henri Langlois<sup>2</sup> projected in abundance. And at the same time as I was going to see those movies I was also going to museums, concerts, and operas.

But these apprenticeship experiences are not all the same: films, even the classics of the silent era, afford an idea of the world that is always contemporary, something that's no longer provided by a Tintoretto painting or a Beethoven quartet. I still feel this difference: there's something about cinema's relationship with the world that educates and instructs in a unique way. Now I can learn about the geography of some countries I know nothing about, some languages I don't speak, some social situations that are at once very specific and completely universal, simply by watching films. Cinema captures that. Its only possible rival might be the novel, but films have a more intense availability, circulation, ability to capture the imagination. It's hard to find a Kazakh novel that has been translated only a year after its publication, whereas several times a year you have a chance to see a Kazakh, Armenian, Kurdish, Syrian, or Senegalese film, or a film from Bangladesh or Indonesia, in a Paris movie theater. As a result, since 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.

*So were you a cinephile?*

Between 1950 and 1960 I was a passionate cinephile, but a little like everyone was back then. It wasn't anything out of the ordinary . . .

*It does in fact seem as though a whole generation of intellectuals was educated at the movies. Jacques Rancière, Gilles Deleuze, Gérard Genette, and so on have all acknowledged their debt in this regard. But there were also Rivette, Truffaut, Godard, and Douchet close by – the first generation of the Cahiers du cinéma. Did you hang around with the cinephile crowd?*

I wasn't an organic cinephile, so to speak, during those early years of my education. I was an isolated one, who didn't show up on the

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map of little cinephile circles or groups. It was only much later that I really became part of some cinephile groups, by way of politics, with a different perspective. Back then, I was a perpetually amazed young provincial – who’d nevertheless already been somewhat exposed to cinema – discovering, in Paris, at the Cinémathèque or in the Latin Quarter movie theaters, an abundance of films that was sufficient unto itself. In those days, you could make the cinema, its history as well as its contemporary dimension, your own with the greatest of ease by going to it often. But it was more of a solitary sort of education, even if there were, of course, the usual café discussions about the films several people had gone to see. That’s an important point, though. The cinema has always been the subject of everyday conversations and that reinforces its role as a form of ongoing, informal education. In a certain way, it’s a very broad-based kind of education, or at any rate it once was: lots of people go to see films and talk about them. That’s why you can almost speak of popular education when it comes to cinema. It’s a shared art form: we know that when we see certain films, we’re seeing them along with millions of other people. But that fact doesn’t tell us anything about the film’s value, either positive or negative; rather, it tells us that we’re dealing with a sort of school for everyone. The role of extending culture to everyone that was played by the novel, or even poetry, in the nineteenth century was taken over by cinema in the twentieth century. So I did feel that sense of amazement you get from cinema, but I wasn’t involved in any organized form of cinephilia.

*In Toulouse when you were young, then later in Paris when you began your studies at the École Normale Supérieure, were there any films that played a more specific role than others, in terms of helping to raise your consciousness, for example?*

You have to make a distinction between what was a matter of cultural catching-up – my discovery of entire continents of cinema, the great silent films, for example – and what I used to go see, with no less passionate enthusiasm, in terms of the current films that were being shown in the nearby theaters. I was enthralled by a lot of silent films – Chaplin, of course, but it was probably Eisenstein, Murnau, and Stroheim who made the deepest impression on me. Naturally enough, it was their obvious artistic power that struck me. There’s nothing at all unusual about that, but in my case it was very important. What

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struck me was how versatile that power was. As far as the more contemporary cinema was concerned, I didn't see a lot of American films, as opposed to classical cinephilia, the *Cahiers du cinéma's* cinephilia, for example. So it was French films that left their mark on me, not the “French quality” ones that were condemned by that same cinephile school, but rather Tati, Bresson, Franju, rather oddball, pre-New Wave filmmakers. A bunch of oddballs.

*At the very same time, in “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema,” François Truffaut contrasted the French “quality” films that he denounced with the filmmakers you're talking about (adding Renoir and Becker to the list), calling them “auteurs.”*

Without having read that piece at the time, and quite unconsciously, I felt the same way about that contrast. I had the same opinion as Truffaut, if you like. I experienced the beauty of Bresson's cinema very deeply. *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé* (*A Man Escaped*), *Pickpocket*, *Au Hasard Balthazar*, and so on, are genuinely moving esthetic memories for me. And I've always been a great admirer of Tati, as a comic genius but also as a researcher: there are formal propositions about space and sound in his work, particularly in *Play-time*, that fascinated me. So those were my first preferences in cinema: the vast expanse of silent films and a few French mavericks.

*Did your love for the cinema go hand-in-hand with other discoveries, in other arts?*

In my own personal case, I remember perfectly well how my discovery of silent film and my reading of Greek tragedies occurred simultaneously. I would argue rather paradoxically that they were mixed up together: Aeschylus' tragedies and Murnau's films, Griffith's *Intolerance* or even some of Méliès' shorts ultimately had the same effect on me. There's this extraordinary feeling that an emergent art form immediately sets a very high standard, regardless of whether it's a tragedy or a film. It's not because something's ancient that it's good but because it's truly extraordinary. The audacity of those artists, who had to deal with an elaborate apparatus – the choruses, the masks, the staging, in the case of Greek tragedy; the shots, the extras, the sets, in the case of silent film – testifies to an intensity of an art form's emergence that borders on an eruption of genius. The great silent



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cinema, representing as it does an amazingly stubborn and concerted effort to push the art to its limits, affected me powerfully. That megalomaniacal feeling of being in control of the whole universe seemed indistinguishable to me from the birth of an art form. With that cinema, you could imagine you were controlling all the visible elements, which created an absolutely wonderful purity of dramatic violence. That’s why I loved a film like Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms* so much.

*You weren’t a “card-carrying” or an organic cinephile, so why, already at that time, did you feel the need to get into writing about cinema?*

I wrote for *Vin nouveau*, a Catholic journal that was recruiting heathens, heathen mercenaries! It was a journal run by young Christian École Normale students: I was friends with them, and they asked me to write for them. What I learned from the experience was that, thanks to writing, you could present your ideas in all the different styles made available to you by the diversity of your tastes. As a philosopher, I could venture to talk about cinema not because I was an expert in it but because it was something that mattered to me. What’s more, I also wrote about poetry in *Vin nouveau* (a piece on Senghor’s poems), about music and opera (an account of a trip I took to Bayreuth), about song (an article about Brassens), and of course about politics. So it wasn’t so much the desire to write specifically about cinema as it was the real discovery that it was possible to write about anything that interested you without, however, becoming too eclectic in the process. The truth is, behind all this can be glimpsed the silhouette of the person who was my role model at the time, Jean-Paul Sartre, Sartre and his “Situations,” Sartre and his political interventions. That sort of philosophical writing about everything and anything, which was occasionally very harshly criticized, didn’t bother me in the least – quite the contrary. A stimulating conception was then emerging of philosophy as an activity conditioned by tastes and interests that precede it. A career in philosophy is made up of the combination of all these various points of view and, in my case, it went from cinema to contemporary mathematics by way of music and radical political action. It’s this multi-faceted dimension that creates the possibility of philosophy. So I started writing about cinema there, in *Vin nouveau*, at age twenty, and, with only a few interruptions, I have continued to do so right up until today, as a natural

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component, shall we say, of my philosophical temperament, with one special aspect that I felt, and still feel, particularly strongly about: cinema is associated in an intense, unique way with the contemporary.

*If you analyze that first article in Vin nouveau a little, the first thing you notice is that there's something of the manifesto about it.*

As is usual in a case like this – it's an article by a young man.

*For you, cinema seems to be the manifesto of “human presence.”*

That was my intra-humanistic – or existentialist, truth be told – way of enhancing cinema's value back then: by saying it was a “culture.” Cinema thereby becomes the witness, the vector of human experience, in its immediacy. Cinema supplies a formal power, which is put at the service of a universal value: human existence, freedom. Cinema's formal power is put at the service of the mode of presence of someone who exists, who makes a choice, even if that mode of presence is somewhat off-kilter, odd, unsettling . . . Cinema enables you, all of a sudden, to say: “Here, there's someone . . .” Even the most contemporary cinema, even Godard, if you like, is bound by this law. Ultimately, in *Passion*, for example, there's a way of filming a face that does justice to human presence. Of course, the overwhelming majority of cinematic productions don't do justice to anything at all. But, as Conrad wrote of the novel, its task is to do justice to the visible world. And that's even more the task of cinema! This notion can be defined as follows: in bad films, human presence is wasted, it's marshaled to no avail, whereas in a good film, even if it's only for a couple of seconds, that presence is made visible. That's what happens, for instance, with me in *Film Socialisme*, Godard's latest film. People have sometimes said to me: “Hey, you're in the film, but we don't see a whole lot of you!” But I don't agree, because, in just a few seconds, in the scene where I'm working at a desk, I've never before seen images of myself where I'm so much myself. So I'm pleased with the mode of presence attributed to me in that shot. The fact that it only lasts a few seconds is not the important thing, since this shot by Godard did justice to me. The article in *Vin nouveau* is after something quite similar: to be able to say about a “cinematic culture” – in other words, the films I'd seen over the course of the

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year – that it renders human presence visible, which testifies in no uncertain terms to human freedom.

*The other important idea in the text, an idea that's very dear to your heart, is, as you expressed it back then, “the interpenetration of cinema and the other cultures.”*

That has to do with the fundamental impurity of cinema. Cinema's very name, “the seventh art,” which defines it as having an intimate relationship with all the other arts, must be taken very seriously. It's even quite possible that cinema recapitulates the other arts and – as Hegel would say – heralds their closure. In any case, cinema is always related to the other arts, without exception. Its conflict with painting is a conflict of passion; its affinity with the theater is so obvious as to be blatant; the presence of music in it is more than essential; and the use of choreography is absolutely crucial as an intrinsic element of the *mise en scène*. All the arts flow through cinema. It doesn't just use them or intermingle with them; it defies them and presents them with challenges that are very hard to meet: to achieve by themselves, on their own, what cinema is able to do with them. Cinema uses and magnifies them, according them a distinctive emotional power. There's a power of revelation of the arts, a power of subjugation of the arts in cinema that truly makes it the seventh art. When Visconti uses a Mahler symphony, all honest people have to admit that they only remember that Mahler symphony now via Visconti. There has been a permanent leap forward in that capture by cinema: it raises music to a simultaneously impure and heightened formal power that affords it a new timelessness.

*What's so striking about this first text of yours is that your ideas on cinema seem to be amazingly consistent over time: cinema as the affirmation of human presence, cinema as the transformation and magnification of the other arts. In over fifty years of doing philosophy you haven't changed at all.*

As I was rereading that text I thought: Bergson's right, unfortunately; our thinking never changes! The die is cast very early on. Afterwards, you develop, you expand your ideas, you expand them some more. Those two issues – cinema doing justice to the human figure and cinema considered in terms of a subjugating relationship to the other

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arts – amount to constants in my philosophical relationship with films; other issues have since glommed onto them, as it were. Even the idea of the cinema as an imaginary voyage, as an instrument for a thinking of the Other, was also present very early on and continues to make me feel deeply grateful to cinema. Yesterday, with Ford, the cinema did justice to American farmers; with Mizoguchi, it did justice to Japanese prostitutes. Today it does justice to Chinese factories, to little Indonesian hustlers, to history’s lost men in Rumania, to the complexities of interpersonal relationships in Argentina, and so on. For each country, it provides an extraordinarily profound and illuminating center of gravity. In France, where we’re under the illusion that we live without workers now, we’re aware, thanks to the cinema, that workers still exist in China. A great Chinese cinema has grown up around this very question: What is becoming of our factories and our workers? Such testimony about the world is unique to cinema; no documentary-style reporting can ever be a substitute for it.

*Let’s leave the late 1950s now. About fifteen years later, your relationship with cinema was expressed through a relationship with the political and even more so with politics as militant practice and ideology. In the present book, that relationship is represented by all the texts you wrote for La Feuille foudre in the mid-1970s.*

The general logic is different: those writings are texts of political intervention. In terms of the general logic of spectacle, we organized a group, *Foudre*, that would both express its opinion and, if need be, intervene concretely in certain productions, in order to create/promote them or, on the contrary, denounce/stop them, on the basis of and within the horizon of political categories.

*That’s the meaning of La Feuille foudre’s subtitle, “Journal for a Marxist-Leninist Intervention in Cinema and Culture.”*

It was a phenomenon of the times, even in the important journals and among the influential personalities. The *Cahiers du cinéma* converted to Maoism and the Great Cultural Revolution, as did an iconic filmmaker like Godard. It was a broad trend, in which cinema played an important role because it’s a mass art and one that can be put to use in a militant context. But this militant activity involving cinema is more complicated than people imagine today or even than can be

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gleaned from those journals, in which only a small part of the use we made of cinema appears. For one thing, we continued to do the work of criticism but by changing the standards, by introducing extremely divisive ones. For another, we used the showing of films in militant practice itself. And we pushed this logic to the point where we attempted to make, to produce films befitting that militant practice. That's why the examples from Soviet cinema took on fresh colors at that time: we realized that cinema, with its numerous complementary connections with politics, had already been of use at least once in history, in an exceptionally important way, at least in the 1920s. There were a lot of instances of such reactivating of history in the post-'68 period, and Soviet cinema lent itself wonderfully to that. Those revolutionary periods, paradoxically, are always periods of imitation of great predecessors, exactly the way the French revolutionaries constantly referred to the Romans. We referred to the earlier epics, to the Soviet, the Chinese, and even the French ones, with Year II of the Revolution and the Resistance. Cinema fit naturally into this reactivation of mythology because there were already precursors, knowledge, and references, and because the films were available, materially. *La Feuille foudre* was not really associated with any militant filmmaker collectives, even though we occasionally projected educational films in working-class locales. We were focused on the first of these activities, mentioned above: producing critical standards, a tribunal for the militant judgment of films. It was a work of evaluation involving discussions, often very long ones, which the journal did not really give an account of since only the final synthesis appeared in it. It should be pointed out that, even in the chaotic context of the moment, the question as to whether a film is progressive or reactionary is not an easy one. It's complicated. It was clear that this was the case, since, when people who shared pretty much the same values, the same books, the same references were prey, so to speak, to a film, things became complicated – and even more complicated the closer the film in question was to political subject matter. The more contemporary the politics, the more important the nuances. Two groups that appear to be similar when seen from a distance can turn out to be bitter enemies when viewed closer-up. Any given details can set them in violent opposition to each other, and real practice, in this case of cinema and criticism, always has to do with details. People always say, “Those splinter groups fought tooth and nail over ridiculous details.” No, you have to put things back in the correct historical perspective: for those groups, back then, those details were not ridiculous in the least but rather the very

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essence of their discussions and disputes. Nowadays, it's easy to make fun of them; even I do. But when you're in the thick of it, you know very well how important details are. They're the thing itself. We're much more willing to acknowledge such a thing in a different sphere: in our love lives, tremendous violence can spring from a tiny detail. In a certain way, we were involved in politics back then the way lovers are in a lovers' quarrel.

*When it came to cinema, those political disputes were very virulent. Was it basically another way of doing criticism?*

There were certainly a few summary executions, with no real debate, but I mostly remember discussions that were in fact very closely argued, very exhaustive. We'd watch the films, and the nature of those arguments, in which cinema and politics were intermingled, was nothing short of critical *disputatio*.

*One of your chief targets was what were then called “leftist fictions.”*

Yes, films like Tavernier's *The Judge and the Assassin*, Sautet's *Vincent, François, Paul and the Others*, in the same vein as Costa-Gavras' *Z*, or films by Yves Boisset. Our argument was based on the following reasoning: in our opinion, films like these need to be critiqued because their reactionary dimension is not immediately obvious. They're not horrible or trivial films, about which we would basically have nothing to say; they're “French quality” leftist films.

And it's absolutely necessary to critique that fact precisely because such critique is not self-evident. Back then, we labeled these movies “revisionist” because the stories they told placed cinema, in the manner of an ideological mask or a technical artifact, in an electoral-type consensus discourse (the right versus the left), combined with a largely academic style of production. And all of our discussions were aimed at defining that mask and labeling these films for what they were.

*Which films were revisionist and which ones weren't?*

Contrary to what people may think, things weren't absolutely obvious to us. And there were disputes about this – it was never a trivial

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matter – between the extreme extremists and the reasonable extremists. And it forced us to come up with extraordinary, in-depth analyses, which were actually the springboard for the question that some of us would raise a little later on, in the journal *L'Art du cinéma*, which I'll come back to in a minute: What is the subject of a film? In my analyses of cinema in general and certain films in particular, that question, which arose from the critical sparring matches of post-'68 political activism, is still absolutely relevant for me: What does the film ultimately give expression to? Both in *La Feuille foudre* and later on, this assumed, with regard to any film, that the true nature of its artistic proposition had to be defined.

We often kept at it late into the night, discussing some shot or other, some editing principle, some use of narration. I have this memory of discussions that were totally focused on cinema issues, that had nothing to do with a strictly political tribunal. A film's subject is not its story, its plot, but rather what the film takes a stand on, and in what cinematic form it does so. It's from that precise site – its artistic organization – that it affirms its subject.

So this suggests that that's what will remain in the viewer's mind, sometimes without his or her even being aware of it. And the Groupe Foudre was determined to take a stand on that very thing: what remains in the viewer's mind when s/he leaves the movie theater.

*So your memory of that period, which was often decried as a dogmatic one, a period that made cinema take a back seat to politics, is positive instead. It's a sort of rehabilitation.*

There's no denying that we'd set ourselves up as a tribunal, that we issued judgments, and often summary ones, which the journal *La Feuille foudre* reported on. We were judges. But, for one thing, it was a sort of tribute to cinema to want to judge it that way, an acknowledgment that it was something important to us, something essential, in the great Soviet and Brechtian tradition. And, for another, the arguments exchanged were a lot more nuanced and in-depth than the judgments were. In that sense, they, too, paid tribute to the films, even the ones we denounced, because these arguments underscored the fact that every film was taken seriously and considered in terms of its artistic organization and the affirmation of its subject. Everyone knows the awful story of how Stalin called Pasternak in the middle of the night to discuss a few lines of Mandelstam's poetry with him.

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The dictator was frightening as hell, but in his own way he was paying tribute to poetry, by discussing it. You can hardly imagine Sarkozy waking Philippe Beck up in the middle of the night to ask him whether Michel Deguy is really a great poet or not! In a certain way, that’s what we, too, were all about: cinema was important enough for us to discuss it precisely and passionately as political militants. If you read those texts from *La Feuille foudre* or *L’Imparnassien* attentively, you can see this phenomenon at work in the coexistence of brutal, summary sentences that had to do with judgment and much more sophisticated, nuanced elements of analysis. Within our political parameters – which “put politics in charge” of our lives amid the great joy occasioned by its renewal, including its intellectual renewal – these texts expressed the continuity of a true passion for cinema in the context of an era (Maoist political activism). We sort of placed our extensive passion for cinema within the framework of the era’s revolutionary fervor. Nor were we the only ones to do so. Ultimately, it can be said today: assuming that during that fabulous period of time, between 1966 and 1976 or thereabouts, the “red decade,” we made some mistakes, as prevailing opinion today would have everyone think, those mistakes would have to do with political judgment and wouldn’t involve cinema’s development. Because, in a way, we kept French cinephilia alive – and was it ever alive!

*During that time, you yourself favored a few films, either militant ones or ones that rose above “revisionism” by virtue of their form. So, without disguising your admiration – even if you considered the form to be in the service of a nihilistic, depressing, almost anarchistic message – you wrote about Bresson’s Le Diable probablement (The Devil Probably) or even about Demy’s Une Chambre en ville (A Room in Town). And then there’s Godard. In “Reference Points for Cinema’s Second Modernity,” an important piece published in L’Imparnassien in 1983, here’s how you began: “Mention Godard first.”*

There were things I said about films and cinema in those texts, even the political ones, that I still stand by today. I could also have written about a film that I liked a lot back then, Van Effenterre’s *Érica Minor*, especially the wonderful opening sequence featuring the woman who has decided to go to work in the factory.



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*Another interesting aspect of these texts is your use of pseudonyms: they're not usually signed Alain Badiou but James Strether. It's reminiscent of the way certain noms de combat were used during the Resistance.*

Don't forget that we were often arrested by the police, after all. I don't want to play the martyr here but I was arrested sixteen times, taken into custody almost as many times, and given a suspended jail sentence of sixteen months. So it wasn't all just a question of Resistance mythology – we really *were* arrested, frisked, interrogated. We had to take certain precautions, and the pseudonyms helped us cover our tracks so that the guy sitting across from us at the police station wouldn't have a ready-made file on us with the texts we'd written and be able to say “You wrote this, this, and this . . .” We'd each made a habit of having several different pseudonyms, which were used according to the type of activity and writing we were doing. In my case, “Georges Peyrol” wrote political or literary texts (Peyrol being the name of the hero of Conrad's last novel, *The Rover*) and James Strether (an allusion to my admiration for Henry James because Strether is the name of the hero of *The Ambassadors*) dealt with cinema, theater, and music. Although the context was obviously a lot less stressful than under the Occupation, we were nevertheless living under the threat of being tracked down at any time. That was no small thing, after all.

*One final legacy seems to date from that period in this collection of your texts: the importance you attach to farce and comedy film. That constitutes a major genre for you, and it's also a potent political, social, and esthetic weapon.*

The idea of daring to stage a comic take on the contemporary dominant world order has always been close to my heart. And the idea that comedy in the cinema was a way of showing working-class life, its resistance to the powerful of this world, its potential victory, is an important one. That seemed to me to be lacking in the cinema, especially the French cinema, of the 1970s and 1980s, whereas it exists in silent film, in auteur cinema (Tati, obviously) but also in the theater, where there's a true French tradition of defiant laughter, of pamphlet-like laughter, of laughter as the vision of another possible world. This idea has been with me for a long time. In *Vin nouveau*, for example,

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I wrote a piece that dealt in a farcical way with the discourse of power on the Algerian War. That mocking-the-powerful dimension, requiring as the agent of the comedy the presence of what I call a “diagonal hero,” someone who embodies the positive aspect of the laughter, the force of resistance in it – that dimension was lacking in French cinema back then. There was no longer any effective, man-of-the-people character embodying laughter, a Charlie Chaplin, for example. Yet that’s important: when very great art intersects with social critique via comedy.

*In particular there’s the text in L’Imparnassien from 1983 entitled “Interrupted Notes on the French Comedy Film.”*

In that text I tried to isolate the French comedy film from the underlying tradition of reason and seriousness in French cinema in general. But it wasn’t easy to do because the French comedy film too often overlaps with another typically French traditional genre, the intimist family comedy. Louis de Funès is a fairly typical example of comedy of this sort, which, in France, never manages to free itself from the straitjacket of the family film. De Funès owes all his box-office hits to the latter, whether it be the series of *Gendarme* films, in which he’s also and above all a father, or the large number of films he made that were based on boulevard comedy. There’s a kind of unexploited comic potential in De Funès, probably because he never found the directors who could exploit his explosive, “nasty” side. Only Valère Novarina was able to reveal De Funès’ true comic resources, but that was in a text, *Pour Louis de Funès*, and the actor had died shortly before. At that time, however, in the early 1980s, the French comedy film was given a new lease on life by a genre that I was more interested in: cabaret, café theater. A movie like *Le Père Noël est une ordure* (*Santa Claus is a Stinker*) was of interest to me because of the violence of its satire, because of its virulence. But it never went very far because there was no formal passing of the torch, as far as either directors or actors were concerned. The French cinema of that time lacked someone like a Tati or a Jerry Lewis to exploit its comic potential.

*You next began another stage of your writing on cinema, of your writing in general, with the experience of Le Perroquet, throughout the 1980s. You were more than just a contributor to it since it was*

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*you yourself who founded that biweekly journal with Natacha Michel, and you both served as its managing editors.*

We started the journal in Autumn 1981 in the context of Mitterrand’s election, with the stated objective of denouncing the Socialists in power. It was an anti-Mitterrand journal. We had absolutely no doubt that Mitterrand and his government were not what they claimed to be and that they had no right to claim to be on the left, if “left” meant a real desire to change the very idea of what politics was capable of.

It soon became clear that on a whole series of issues – the right of asylum, immigration policy, the control of financial speculation, France’s role in Africa, the alignment with the American model – Mitterrand was instituting a very conservative politics, which was cloaked in leftist rhetoric. It was this hypocrisy that we denounced most vehemently. Right from May 1981 the conversion to a neo-liberal system, which would ultimately remain the hallmark of Mitterrand’s politics, was underway. *Le Perroquet* tirelessly denounced that fraud and did so as a generalist journal of current events with a cultural orientation, combining articles of political analysis with chronicles of cultural events of a theatrical, cinematic, literary, or philosophical nature that mattered to us. But, provided they shared our defiance toward Mitterrand, the range of contributors was quite broad, and the *Conférences du Perroquet* that we organized on a regular basis at the Palais de Chaillot, thanks to Antoine Vitez’s extraordinary support, included a considerable portion of the French intelligentsia. *La Feuille foudre* and *L’Imparnassien* were militant journals, but *Le Perroquet* was an open, welcoming journal that published a wide variety of people opposed to Mitterrand.

*What sort of texts on the cinema did you write for Le Perroquet?*

I did art criticism, in the tradition of opinion journals, a sort of “symptomal analysis.” Usually it was based on a movie (Volker Schlöndorff’s *Circle of Deceit* or Pierre Beuchot’s *Le Temps détruit*, for example) and I would explain what the film as a subject could tell us about the state of the world. What I was interested in was: what does the film bear witness to in the debates of the moment? So it was the symptomal function of critical writing that interested me at that time, often in an attempt to understand questions of history, political issues, or problems linked to the then-current

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climate of public opinion. It was a way of reactivating film's witnessing role, using a style of writing that was free of militant rhetoric, a free-associative kind of writing. So I'd describe it as a sort of free-wheeling exploration of cinema, which I found very stimulating.

*Your next “period” corresponded to the journal L'Art du cinéma, for which you have been regularly supplying texts for the past fifteen years, and even most of your recent texts on cinema.*

*L'Art du cinéma* grew out of the activity of Denis Lévy, one of the members of the Groupe Foudre, who wrote for *La Feuille foudre* and then for *L'Imparnassien* and taught at Vincennes and later at the University of Paris-VIII at Saint-Denis with me. Denis Lévy is a very important, underappreciated theoretician. He has written some essential things about the notion of the “subject” of a film, about genres, and about classic Hollywood cinema.

In the early 1990s, after the experience of *Le Perroquet*, we had no journal to write for anymore, so Denis Lévy, Dimitra Panopoulos, and Élisabeth Boyer, in particular, and I decided to start a new group that would be completely devoted to thinking about cinema. Denis Lévy in fact had some interesting cinema and philosophy students at Saint-Denis, and it seemed important at that time to bring these forces together. At first, it was a matter of showing films, which were followed by a public debate, and then later we moved on to the journal. *L'Art du cinéma* came out of this, in a cinema context that had changed and in which a more formal analysis of films and directors was possible again, without it being either militant judgment or free-wheeling criticism. We then went into the question of the real subject of films in greater depth.

*It was starting from that time that you began to develop a thinking of cinema on a continuous basis.*

Right. I didn't suddenly become a theoretician of cinema; it felt more to me as though I were continuing my relationship with cinema but in a more committed, more sustained, more focused way, with the awareness that I was providing a more continuous type of thinking. I was carrying on, as it were.

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*You sometimes even enumerate the arguments, ideas, and concepts; that type of enumeration is often used in your writing, like something irrefutable, something very concrete in the argument.*

That's what I call my “Chinese style”: “the five modernizations, the seven stages of industrialization, etc.” It's a thinking that classifies things. I saw how important and useful it was in the analyses of Lévi-Strauss, who made it a key feature of what he called “the savage mind.”

*While I was reading your texts, I wondered whether cinema wasn't a metaphor for thought for you, kind of like Nietzsche's expression about “choreography as the very movement of thought.”*

More to the point, I would say that cinema is a metaphor for *contemporary* thought. I've always been convinced that tragedy was a metaphor for Greek thought and it may very well be that the cinema is playing the same role for the contemporary world: a thinking that's grasped in the mobility of its reflections, a thinking that absorbs human presence in something that exceeds it, that takes it over and projects it all at once. A representation of the world in which human presence is affirmed over against an extremely powerful exteriority. Cinema is drawn toward a representation of exteriority whose power is so enormous that man is always on the verge of being imperiled by it. The standard plot of a terrifying exteriority, against which the hero rises up in order to confront and vanquish it, is so prevalent in cinema of any kind that we have little choice but to think that that's really what cinema is all about, that that's its very subject. Exactly like when Godard suddenly shows the beautiful indifference of the outside world: the sky in *Passion*, the sea in his latest movie, *Film Socialisme*, the better to make us feel human turmoil struggling against and with that power in the shots that follow. Cinema testifies to this in an exemplary way because it's able to show in one and the same shot, as Godard would say, the indifference of nature, the aberrations of History, the turmoil of human life, and the creative power of thought.

*Would cinema be the indicator of a civilization, of our “democratic age,” the way tragedy was for Greek civilization or the operetta was for bourgeois civilization?*