

Eternity or infinity? Badiou's *Point*

Juliet Flower MacCannell

Department of English and Comparative Literature, University of California at Irvine,
CA 92697, USA; e-mail: jfmaccan@uci.edu

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Abstract. I argue for a psychoanalytic approach to spatial questions. I then examine whether the topological (philosophical and mathematical) work of Alain Badiou is compatible with such an approach. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, whom Badiou cites, also deployed topology, but I argue that Lacan's use of topology is fundamentally antithetical to Badiou's. As illustration, I analyze Badiou's treatment of The Paris Commune (also contrasting it with the work of Walter Benjamin on the same subject). I then draw out the implications for social and spatial thinking of Badiou's concept of the *site* (the locus of an *Event* which is, according to Badiou, the place of the advent of *truth*).

Over the past ten years I have argued that spatial thinking and psychoanalysis must be brought together for the fullest understanding of subjective, social, and political forms, and cultural forms. I have bridged the two domains through a series of analyses marking the critical importance of space in psychoanalytic theory and practice. The key result of my research has been the conceptualization of what I have named the 'spatial unconscious', based on the argument that the theories of Freud and Lacan implicitly and explicitly rely on a *spatiality* that has been largely overlooked by their followers and critics alike. In my practical examinations of architecture, urban and suburban planning, and capitalism and territoriality [eg Emilio Ambasz (MacCannell, 2007a), Freud's consulting room (MacCannell, 1996; 2005a), Las Vegas (MacCannell, 2001)], as well as in my studies of psychoanalytic theory, I have set aside the Kantian opposition of time to space in favor of exploring the uniquely spatial nature of the unconscious, which Freud defined as *timeless*, a place of unchanging fantasies of impossible drive-satisfactions. For Freud-Lacanian (if not for all psychoanalysts) this unconscious is the *after effect* of temporal existence—of language, history, and social discourse. The forms of the social tie that shape conscious perceptions also ground our *unconscious*.

Freud and Lacan brought something new to the knowledge of language and thereby of social form that permitted this argument. This was their appreciation for the fact that only around a void, an empty space, are meaning and sense formed. (This is also the elementary Saussurean discovery about the structure of signification, the gap between signifier and signified, that Lacan restated in his theses on the Freudian unconscious.) 'Void' space, the space of the unconscious, is where societal rules and norms are fantasmatically overturned by 'drives' demanding (forbidden) satisfaction.⁽¹⁾ Even in its spatial manifestations, the foundational *social* form is language. There is no society without language and no language without society.

The knowledge of unconscious drives comes from exploring their effects on everyday life. Our expressions indicate something of the fantasy scenarios elaborated in the

⁽¹⁾ Lacan calls 'fundamental fantasy' the unconscious space where the subject first takes on the role of the One-who-enjoys; Freud calls it the 'primal scene'. The goal of a psychoanalysis is to access the scene—indirectly (see Freud, 1955; Lacan, 1977).

unconscious that are their hidden support. The 'spatial unconscious', I thus argue, is a necessary supplement to the understanding of the scenes of subjective, social, and political representations. But, make no mistake, the site of this unconscious is less Freud's onetime model, the excavations at the Forum in Rome (with its layers of buried memories), than his '*andere Schauplatz*' (the 'other scene') that appears in his studies of hysteria. The 'other scene' of the unconscious intervenes in and can often be read on the surface of cultural expressions: in the famous Freudian slip, of course, but also, I believe, in even the faintest warps, the smallest deformations embedded in spatial forms that index unconscious distortions at work, often at cross-purposes to the intentions of their makers. They are legible signs of unknown problems that are hidden, so to speak, in plain sight—like Poe's purloined letter. To read the purloined letters of the spatial unconscious is to disclose the forgotten links between social forms and the unconscious that is both their cause and effect. I also believe that great artists and architects work with these warps, turning them from their roots in fantasy to important discoveries that open new horizons.

To undertake spatial research in psychoanalytic work is, of course, not easy. It requires challenging the field's emphasis on time and the individual. One might therefore imagine that my own psychoanalytic spatial research would find a logical and sympathetic fellow traveler in contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou, a professed admirer of Lacan. Badiou, after all, orients himself in the mathematical field of *topology* which so intrigued Jacques Lacan. Topology is a branch of mathematics that bypasses the customary numerical means of measuring even invisible space via algorithms. This new way of 'measuring' the immeasurable, the algorithm, is made up not of numbers with assignable values but of *letters*. (Topologically speaking, there is no '1': there is only a leap from nothing to all, from (0) \rightarrow to (an 'infinite') 2, thereby rendering the number system that starts with 'one' fallacious (MacCannell, 2005b, pages 140–141).⁽²⁾ Topology assisted Lacan to map the unmappable: the unconscious. He deployed algorithms to measure the impact of the unconscious on social discourse, on which the drives have always stamped their enigmatic contours. Lacan's 'four discourses' are formulated as letter-based algorithms, each with four constant elements (S_1 , $\$$, a , S_2). The varying placement of these elements in the discourses (which slowly or rapidly rotate over time) yields different social outcomes. Lacan says each discourse encounters an 'impossibility' (1991, page 50); in every social, economic, and political system the key element is, thus, precisely what the discourse *cannot say*, or account for, or treat (eg its truth)—the excess, surplus, or waste that is its by-product.

Badiou, however, disappoints any psychoanalytic hopes. Indeed, although he would seem to chime with the 'late Lacan', who engaged with the object a ('the little letter a ') more than with the symbol, I believe Badiou fundamentally works against the psychoanalytic grain. He disavows the unconscious (as expected of a philosopher and man of mathematical science) and he denies the purchase of language on the *subject*.⁽³⁾ In his treatment of the spaces unavailable for empirical examination (that is, which lie beyond knowable, the thinkable, and recognizable social and linguistic boundaries) Badiou locates them not in the Freudian unconscious, but in what he calls the 'universal'. In the present essay, therefore, I will try to lay out Badiou's essentially

⁽²⁾ This 'One' is what Lacan called the phallic *signifier*, which lays the ground rules for (and the limitations on) the thinking of Being. Badiou argues that since Being's real multiplicity cannot be thought from within the confines of language, we truly 'think ontologically' only when the thought of Being is freed from the hegemony of a logic (*logos*, language) that depends on the 'One'.

⁽³⁾ Badiou writes: "If one would point to a cause of the subject, it is less necessary to return to the truth ... as to the event. Consequently, the void is no longer the eclipse of the subject [as it is for Lacan, the eclipse of the desiring subject]" (1992, page 15).

nonpsychoanalytic program, while questioning if his effort to go beyond the dualized or split subject of language and its unconscious can attain the wholeness that European philosophers have pursued at least since Montaigne's recognition of his own subjective duality.

Badiou wants to think of *experience* as the fulcrum of his work. This is not empirical experience, recounted and given a symbolic name and address. What counts for him is undergoing a singular, unarticulated, nonverbal *experience*, by means of which a subject becomes a whole subject—and, more, the multiple subject. A subject no longer split by language into a conscious and an unconscious portion (as in Freud's *Ichspaltung*, and Lacan's 'castration by the signifier').

This *experience* consists in having been, together with others, witness to a particular *Event* which has taken place at a particular site, but the memory of which has entirely vanished. A crucial hint of it remains, however, in the form of a *fidelity* to the *truth* communally sensed in/at this *event*. The *Event*, that is, splits time in two, into a before and since the advent of a truth, with the second moment at a higher stage not of consciousness but of nearness to the truth of the subject. It is only around the critical kernel of a people's collective faithfulness to their truth that group or communal life can form.⁽⁴⁾ The collectivity absorbs each individual who has undergone this experience at the same time and at the same site as others into a 'multiple-subject' or 'we-subject', a "new man—anti-predicative, negative and universal" (Badiou, 2003a), produced entirely by a common history of a collective recognition of its own shared Truth, and not by traditional historical social forms (Badiou, 2001, page 51). Of Badiou it is safe to say that there is literally no objective 'society' involved in the formation of the 'we-subject', or at least not society as we know it to be formed by laws, rules, norms, common history, common language, etc. Instead, for Badiou all collectivity must be based strictly on the commonality of the singular subjective experience of the *Event*. Badiou's collective subject thus develops solely from those who have together undergone the same truth *Event*.

And it is only from the *Event* forward that *ethical* behavior is instituted. According to Badiou, *ethics* no longer follows in the wake of specific social contracts or from the laws of society and language which he believes fail equally at being *universal*, fail to universalize the we-subject. Ethics flows instead, he argues, from a fidelity to the *truth* of the communal experienced in/as the *Event*:

"The Immortal that I am capable of being cannot be spurred in me by the effects of communicative sociality, it must be directly seized by fidelity. That is to say: broken, in its multiple-being, by the course of an immanent break, and convoked, finally, with or without knowing it, by the evental supplement. To enter into the composition of a subject of truth can only be something that happens to you" (2001, page 51).

What counts, Badiou says, is

"the possibility of the impossible, which is exposed in every loving encounter, every scientific re-foundation, every artistic invention, and every sequence of emancipatory politics, [it] is the sole principle—against the ethics of living well whose real content is the deciding of death—of an ethics of truths" (page 39).

⁽⁴⁾ Badiou perpetuates the long-standing European (and religious) *topos* that a 'doubled' subject is the figure of evil, even the mark of Satan: the 'new man' is a *collective Subject*, a "being without one" (2001, page 25)—without being split, as the psychoanalytic subject is, by the signifier: "the new man is a real creation, something which has never existed before, because it emerges from the destruction of historical antagonisms ... This conception of the new man—anti-predicative, negative and universal—traverses the [20th] century" (2003a, page 113).

Thus, a first contrast with Lacan's cardinal and epigrammatic postulate that language can only 'half-speak' the truth. Badiou here dethrones language as the centerpiece of analytic thinking,⁽⁵⁾ and along with it the space of an unconscious formed around what it is that language can never fully say—the *truth*—the truth hidden or embedded in the scenario of every unconscious fantasy staging. Badiou's '*Event*', with its link to immortality and to universal *Being*, is strictly formulated by his rejection of language as the key factor in subjective, historical, social, and political life. Badiou rejects the role of language as the foundation of subjective life, just as he rejects number (which counts from 'One') as the foundation of mathematics. He also calls for freeing philosophy from its captivity by language rules. (MacCannell, 2005b, pages 141f) To put it another way, Badiou does away with the dialectic between 'meaning' (an artefact of language) and 'Being' so central to Lacan, in favor of the longstanding philosophical and religious dreams of a permanence of Being and curing the duality of the subject.

A second contrast lies in their respective definitions of 'the subject'. Now, the *subject* for Lacan is, let me be clear here, never any subject other than the subject of the *unconscious*, the Freudian unconscious that he so carefully linked to language and to the little letters (the *a*-objects) that convey it. In psychoanalysis the work of the unconscious is indexed only by the way it writes itself on the individual and social body. Badiou, on the other hand, sees the unconscious as simply the diametrical opposite of consciousness, defined as the bearer of knowledge. Badiou envisions a new and heady place where 'available knowledge' will disappear into a burgeoning new kind of thinking propelled by new intensities that he calls 'unconscious thinking' (MacCannell, 2002). Its value will lie in its yield of subjective truth accessed through mathematically exact truth-procedures: "[M]athematics is precisely the thinking which has nothing to do with the experiences of consciousness. Thinking which has no relation to *reality*" (Badiou, 2002, page 10, emphasis in original). 'Unconscious thinking' for Badiou thus exists outside the regime of language and speech, in a universal space formed out of mathematical truths that emerge only 'in the 'void' of the language system.

If one were to imagine Badiou's experience of the truth to be something like the experience of, say, the World Wars (or even of Paris in May '68) one would be quite mistaken. Badiou aims much higher than simply enumerating and describing such instances of heightened emotion or unusual communality. As his work on the Paris Commune demonstrates, such moments are for him in fact historically inert and without value except where Badiou can extract from them the formula for designating their featureless unnameability as *Events* from which life-in-common and ethics have 'truly' been born.

Where does that leave us regarding the question of Badiou and space? Although Badiou's communal group requires a *site* for the transformative experience known as the *Event* to take place, we shall see that Badiou regards this *site* ultimately as a *vanishing point*—the vanishing point of the *being* of the *Event*: "the event has as its being, disappearing" (1992, page 15). I argue that, even though his followers busy themselves with topological renderings of current events (I recently heard a paper by a follower of Badiou that topologically described the movements of the Paris police during the 2005 riots as unwittingly describing an anus), the only crucial spatial element in Badiou's theory is this vanishing point.

⁽⁵⁾ Many contemporary Lacanians, such as Žižek and Miller, focus more on the *a-object* than on the signifier. However, one must not forget that Lacanian theory regards the *a* as strictly the after-effect of the linguistic signifier not as autonomous. The *a-object* is an ambivalent, half-realized fantasy object.

Let me briefly contrast this vanishing point of the Being of the Event with the vanishing point of traditional, Renaissance perspective. The latter is located on an ever-receding horizon that, if pursued, rounds us back on our initial starting point—in other words, it is a figure of *infinity*. The logical end of Badiou's vanishing point is the subject's *point* of entry into a new *level* (universality) that leaps out of (infinite) time into eternity—what Badiou calls 'immortality'. It is for this reason that I think it fair to say Badiou's is a *vertical*, not a horizon-tal perspective. [For more on eternity and vertical time see MacCannell (2007b).]

I will draw out as quickly as possible the implications of Badiou's 'vanishing point' for his political *positions* (he counts himself as being to the left of the left, though what this means in practical terms remains to be seen, as his recent quarrels about Jews will make clearer below) and for the *stance* he occupies to make his analysis of the *site/situation/Event/Being* constellation, which constitutes his main contribution to ethics and to politics. The question is, is he *of* the *Event* and is he located at its *site*—or somewhere else? If the latter, from what standpoint is he (alone) able to pinpoint the critical point of the *Event*? The answer, of course, lies in his possession of the topological method for doing just that.

Inside out: the place beyond as the space of the subject that 'exists by itself'

"A site is a multiple that happens to behave in the world with regard to itself as with regard to its elements, in such a way as to be the support of being of its own appearance."

Badiou, (2003b, page 141)

Let me begin a more detailed discussion of Badiou and space by turning to another key spatial concept, *the site*. In its origin and its structure, the *site* differs fundamentally from the 'scenes' of the social and of the unconscious in psychoanalytic theory. In the place of the resonance (and the unconscious after-echoes) produced by linguistic signifiers, Badiou attempts to posit a liberated, autonomous, self-defined, and self-organized being that comes to exist beyond and outside the spaces fashioned by language. The new *site* displaces the role/rule of the equivocal signifier (forever split between meaning and being, signifier and signified, like the subject it shapes) in favor of the rigorous 'pursuit' of having 'postulated [an] existence'. The *postulate* dislodges the split subject with an eventual *being* raised to universal truth and certainty.

In order to be an *Event*, Badiou says, the *Event* will have—indeed, must have—birthed its own self: *A site is a being that happens to exist by itself* (2007, page 274). This means that it will have forged its own identity through a process of having produced, formalized, and remained faithful to *prescriptives* it has articulated for itself and that construct its *postulates*. The *Event's* political value is accrued without the support either of society or of history.

Badiou insists: the *political* element in any *Event* is something that must be extracted from it and divorced entirely from its 'sociality'.⁽⁶⁾ As a concrete illustration of his stance on this, we can look at Badiou's denunciation of his fellow Althusserian Jacques Rancière for being naive about universalizing a social concept like 'equality', that is, the simple-minded effort to define equality as a universal human right. Rancière, Badiou complains, subjects the concept of equality to the vicissitudes of time and the accidents of history [Badiou dismisses these as "simple scrawls on the parchment of proletarian history" (2005a, page 113)]. Badiou's counterclaim is that it is only by moving itself to a plane *above* actual social life and history that the universal concept can be attained:

⁽⁶⁾ Badiou's approach excluding sociality recalls the 'new criticism' in the United States. See also Badiou (2005a, page 113) for his harsh critique of Rancière.

“We must reach agreement on the claim that equality has nothing to do with the social, or social justice, but with the regime of statements and prescriptions, and is therefore the latent principle, not of simple scrawls on the parchment of proletarian history, but of *every* politics of emancipation. Yes there can be, there is, here and now, a politics of equality, one which it isn’t simply a matter of realising but, having postulated its existence, of creating here or there, through the rigorous pursuit of its consequences, the conditions for a universalisation of its postulate” (2005a, page 113, my emphasis).

Badiou’s clear ambition, then, is to achieve a universality (in ‘*every* politics of emancipation’) independent of individual or social desires, through the strict formulation of its ‘latent principle’ in ‘statements and prescriptions’ that construct a *postulate*. The nature of that *postulate*, *directive*, or *dictate* is, for Badiou, that of a pure speech act articulating and universalizing the latent principle. The enunciation is necessarily closed on itself; it does not put itself into narrative circulation nor does it enter into any dialogic relation. It exists in itself, a speech act that supersedes the social symbols (‘equality’) and voids the power of its linguistic signifier (‘emancipation’) to speak ‘universality’.

The first corollary, then, of Badiou’s rejection of language as the central factor in individual and communal subjective life is his supplanting of the ambiguity and multivocality of the linguistic signifier (and the infinite network it creates) with the certainty, sparseness, and clarity of the *mathematical* letter, the letter that designates, precisely, a particular *point on a line* that becomes, in his operations, the ‘strait gate’ through which one gains eternity. So let me now look more directly at the spatialization Badiou conceives in figuring the *site* (‘the figure of an instant’), the *situation*, the *Event*, and the *universal*. We find it wholly dependent upon locating the particular spot, the particular ‘point’ of origination, that also incorporates and embodies the destination of the *Event*. If reducing the rich variety of human experience to a single point is reductive, it has nonetheless had a manifest appeal to those anxious for certainty in our uncertain times.

To determine such a precise point is, of course, the aim of any mathematician worth his or her salt: the plotting of a point along an emergent line. Badiou reduces the spatiality of a *site* (that is, where the subjective, transformative *Event* occurs) to just such a singular point, which sums up its value and its permanency. The *site* does not derive its worth from its relation to the actual lives of human beings, then, but from its importance to a topologically conceived ‘universal’ that transcends all known times and spaces. Badiou intends his work on the *site* to reassure us of the primacy of reason, and to underscore his thesis that consciousness and the certitude of the universal truths (grounded in a new mathematics) are of far greater use than language for mapping human subjective space.

Such an apex or high point shows up most clearly in Badiou’s anatomy of the Paris Commune and its later, mournful history (2007). Badiou challenges all the Leftist accounts that have inserted the Commune into the line of Marxist history, with his assertion that the Commune cannot be judged by its historical setting and its subsequent assessment (as a failure) by history. The true extent of its significance can be measured only by calculating the structure of its internal logic, which will determine if it does or does not qualify as a *site* worthy of being placed into a universal context. Badiou argues that on this basis the Commune was an unqualified, albeit unacknowledged, success. It is instructive to detail Badiou’s arguments and compare them with those of the Marxist (and occasionally Freudian) writer Walter Benjamin, in the latter’s remarks about the same event/site.

Being and the Site

"History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*] ... The awareness that they are about to make history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action. The great revolution introduced a new calendar. The initial day of a calendar serves as a historical time-lapse camera. And, basically, it is the same day that keeps recurring in the guise of holidays, which are days of remembrance. Thus the calendars do not measure time as clocks do; they are monuments of a historical consciousness of which not the slightest trace has been apparent in Europe in the past hundred years."

Benjamin (1969, pages 261 – 262)

Badiou says the *site* "gives itself an intensity of existence": intensity operates a "torsion of Being" that turns a *site* (an *instant*) into a *situation* (granting it permanence, or *durée*), so that it becomes thereby an *event* worthy of taking its place in 'the universal' (2007, pages 274f) (see also MacCannell, 2005b, pages 146f; 149).⁽⁷⁾ Bearing this definition in mind, Badiou's treatment of the Paris Commune can be seen as exemplary of his approach. Badiou provides a very vivid rendering of the historical Parisian revolt but only as a preliminary to a much more microscopic examination that will allow him to locate the *point* that makes it into an *Event*. In his blow-by-blow account of the actions of the government and the odd lot of rebellious Parisians that made up the Commune, Badiou offers a new perspective that clashes with the historical Left's—Marx, Lenin, the Chinese, even Brecht—view of the Commune as a high point of a failed revolution. Badiou rejects any Benjaminian notion that the motive force behind the Left's highlighting of this instant is the Commune's contribution to the Left's historical consciousness, to its sense of *making history*.

Rather, for Badiou, only a logical distilling of the Commune's essence, performed outside the domain of historical consciousness, beyond verbal accounts and commemorations, secures it a role as a real *Event*—even, he says, as a real *revolution*. Not a leftist revolution: for Badiou, the Commune was never actually *of the Left* that has adopted it, but was instead a *break with the Left*. This is because for Badiou the 'Left' is precisely a *political position* inherently unable to break with established authority. Here Badiou's disdain for the 'Left' (I am unaware of any critique of the Right by him) seems to be an echo of 1968, where French Communists and Moscow itself criticized harshly the student–worker alliance for being the 'running dog lackeys' of capitalism. Rather, with historical consciousness-raising out as the cardinal virtue of a 'revolution', Badiou regards the overturning of a regime of appearances, of available knowledge, of current values as a 'revolution'—even in the absence of the participants' knowledge that theirs is a momentous turning point, as he will show in his study of the Commune. What, then, was it that the Commune's 'revolution' accomplished?

Evental being-there as the space of 'revolution'

What precisely can we say as to the sociopolitical implications of Badiou's universal—located as it is in the beyond of society and language—and that he formulates as the antithesis of the Freudian unconscious? The Freudian unconscious, which also lies beyond society and language, is yet intimately and inextricably linked to both, whereas Badiou pictures his 'beyond' as entirely *new* and thus independent of such

⁽⁷⁾ Badiou tries to dissuade *psychoanalysis* from its original objective (the subject of the unconscious, discovered by listening to what people *say* and *fail to say*) to orient it towards topology, the methodical measurement of invisible matter(s). Conversely, Badiou uses elements of psychoanalysis to persuade *philosophy* to reorient itself toward nonverbal thinking.

linkages: “the invention of a *possibility*”, he says (page 6, emphasis in original) and his truth-process is a “search for an absolutely new possibility” (page 6). In short, for the revolutionary. A revolution formed of an absolute *break*: “an eventual fidelity is a real break (both thought and practised) in the specific order within which the event took place ... It is thus an immanent break” (2001, page 42, emphasis in original). Badiou’s hostility to language-in-theory and its correlative unconscious, together with his biting critique of all ‘particularisms’ against the value of the universal, gives Badiou’s revolution or ‘invention of a possibility’ the distinctive political profile I explore below.

It also affects his philosophy. Badiou, a poet and playwright, insists on separating aesthetic work from philosophical work, including his own (Badiou, 1999), while expressing his desire to lead philosophy back from the brink of Heidegger’s dead-end of aestheticization. Yet Badiou owes more to Heidegger than he might wish, including his distinction/linkage between being and being-there (MacCannell, 2005b, pages 151f).

His promotion of revolution has earned him a measure of popularity. Yet, even though Badiou operates under the banner of the ‘new’ (the ‘absolutely new possibility’), and even though he often recycles the language of the revolutionary political movements of the first half of the 20th century (along with some well-worn left and/or right clichés of the era; see below) his presumed break with the past is more rhetorical than real when it comes to philosophy, where his express desire is to return philosophy and its concepts to the pre-Nietzschean age when concepts like truth and beauty were still taken in their classical, Platonic sense. Badiou defines himself in “*Lacan avec les philosophes*” (1992) as a defender of true philosophy against its demolition by ironization at the hands of Nietzsche and those who follow, especially Heidegger and the deconstructionists.⁽⁸⁾

Badiou says revolution inserts an eventual moment’s *being* into its *being-there* by means of a simple speech act whose *truth* flows from its fulfilling the criterion of grounding a new *postulate*. The *postulate* has no metaphoric power or narrative impact, no effect on consciousness or emotions. The Commune qualifies as eventual, as the “historical appearing of a politics ... when a world finally comes to be situated—from what becomes of the site in it—and is placed between singularity and fact, then it is down to the network of consequences that it comes to decide” (1992, page 283). Unless something like a new *order* is instituted as the consequence of the postulates grounded by an *Event*, it is no true *Event*, and its *site* does not qualify as a true *site*.

What specifically in the Commune qualified it as an *Event*? Badiou notes that the *site* (of the Commune) is “a figure of an instant. It appears only then to disappear” (1992, pages 279–280). This is again reminiscent of Benjamin: “the true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again” (Benjamin, 1969, page 255).

The ‘figure of an instant’ is the *point* that Badiou disengages as marking where there is something that *decides*, makes a rupture, a break. It achieves “veritable duration” only where this *site* opens or founds what “pertains only to its consequences” (Badiou, 1992, page 283). To gauge the truth of the *eventality* of an *Event* like the Commune, Badiou boils it down to a single *point* that went virtually unnoticed at the time and has since been entirely overlooked by historians and commentators. As Steve Corcoran puts it: “Badiou figures the truth-event not just as the eruption of Being in the situation, but as an emergence that transforms in a revolutionary manner the logical structuring of the appearing of bodies in that situation” (Corcoran in Badiou, 2007, page xix). Only on the basis of this singular point can the Commune be said to have forged a new politics.

⁽⁸⁾ Lacan, however, valued Plato less for being a *true* philosopher than for being a close enough student of ourselves to grasp the perplexity of human—and inhuman—desire.

Badiou says that the “figure of an instant” and its exact “consequences” were the result of a “strong intensity of existence on the day of March 18 1871”. This intensity combined with “an implicitly disastrous degree of existence of political discipline in the worker camp two months later”, and “a desire (though unfortunately abstract) to bring the value of the consequences of a politics in course level with the power of existence of its disappeared origin”, formed a new *postulate*. A brief, declarative pronouncement bears the Commune's entire momentous being, despite its mouthpiece knowing nothing about it:

“It is only with the sword of circumstances hanging over their heads that they end up deciding, as Édouard Moreau—a perfect nobody—will dictate to them the morning of March 19 to ‘proceed to elections, to provide for the public services, and to protect the town from a surprise’. With this act ... they directly constitute themselves, against any allegiance to the parliamentary Left, as a political authority. In so doing, they invoke ‘March 18’ as the beginning of that authority, an authority as a consequence of March 18” (page 275).

Moreau's dictate redefined the *Fact*, the *Singularity*, and the *situation* of the Commune.

In Badiou's view, Moreau's simple proclamation achieved the status of a *dictate* (in the old Roman sense of the word of the ‘dictator’, who arises in a crisis, to set forth decisively new terms for order). The emphatically humble M. Moreau, without realizing it, created not what Marx anticipated (the *dictatorship of the proletariat*) but only the *singular dictatorship of a single proletarian*: a solitary individual, lacking the least sense that he is ‘making history’. Instead, by dictating his new terms for order, Moreau attained the quasi-sainthood of a universal—and thus the ‘immortality’ of which Badiou speaks in *Ethics* (2001, page 51).

What of Badiou's ‘intensity of existence’? It is clearly, from the element (Moreau's dictate) he selects to illustrate it, neither emotional nor conscious. It might be instructive to contrast Badiou's delineation of how the Commune's site became an Event with Benjamin's concept of it as one of those exceptional, revolutionary moments that blasts open the continuum of time.⁽⁹⁾ While this at first sounds close to Badiou's concept that the Event partitions time into a before and since, Benjamin takes care to locate the epoch-making event in clearly marked spaces. Even long after its participants are gone the spaces tell their tale: the empty streets of Paris photographed by Atget are for Benjamin ‘the scene of a crime’; the caves where artists dedicated their work to long-forgotten gods still retain the aura connecting them to the unseen deities they addressed; the Parisian clocks simultaneously fired upon by the July revolutionaries demonstrate the rebels' sense that they were stopping and restarting time. Even the stifling confines of the present that the ‘destructive character’ finds a ‘way through’ are given a clearly spatial frame by Benjamin.

This is because, for Benjamin, the revolutionary moment opens a hitherto unknown *space* in what is otherwise experienced as empty or homogeneous chronological *time*: it makes a breach more perhaps than it makes a break. The Benjaminian ‘blasting open’ of time leaves traces that mark it as special and apart, traces found in the holiday calendars that ‘do not measure time as clocks do; they are monuments of historical consciousness’ that commemorate the instant where new histories began. And they

⁽⁹⁾ Benjamin writes, “The great revolution introduced a new calendar” (1969, page 266, number 14). He is characteristically ambiguous. If his final, complaining sentence seems a straightforward endorsement of reviving the more vivid past, his chosen example is not without a hint of sarcasm (it is mere fashion):

“To Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate. It evoked ancient Rome the way fashion evokes costumes of the past ...” (1969, page 261, §14).

began, for Benjamin, solely as the result of a *realization* on the part of its participants that, in that moment, they were *making history*, initiating a new calendar through revolutionary action and heightened historical consciousness.

Badiou does not connect his 'evental' or exceptional time with a legible political calendar and he eschews historical consciousness as operative in revolution. What Badiou celebrates in and as a true revolution is its own *ignorance* of its revolutionary character—like the obtuse Moreau's. The humble pronouncement made by an obscure nobody who had no understanding of its importance articulated the moment of the Commune to the *universal*.

Badiou's *Event* might at first seem parallel to Benjamin's 'blast', but Badiou's *Event* not only is experienced unawares—it has no self-consciousness about making history—but also is itself destined to be overlooked, an unremembered moment whose truth is perpetuated not only by an *ethical* fealty to the (unrecalled) truth of those who experienced it without knowing it. While it may have made a new scene of representation possible, the speaker's postulate that opened the way for the event has no privileged place in that scene which will not have opened a new stage of *human time*; it will have secured a permanent place for itself only in the logical time (the eternal) of the universal, which becomes known only through Badiou's truth-process. At best, Moreau's speech act permitted the "unfolding of [March 18's] logical consequences" (which have nothing to do with the accounts, images, theories, memories, and repetitions, like May '68) of the event of the Commune.

"The Commune ... must be extracted from leftist hermeneutics" (Badiou, 2007, page 273). To insert its uniqueness into a *political* context misreads the essential of the Commune: the establishment of a humble proletarian's *evental* dictatorship that situates the Commune in universal being: "The Commune is a site—ontology of the Commune" (page 274). The Left has forgotten it seems, according to Badiou, the question of Being, a forgetting that Badiou remedies for the Commune: the Commune is a *site* because it enunciated its own being-there as its *being*.

While this might seem to run contrary to my thesis, in opening this paper, that Badiou rejects the formation of the Subject by language, in reality it does not, for Moreau's minimal enunciation is reduced entirely to a single effect: it qualifies the Commune for and as a site as

"a singularity because it evokes its being in the appearing of its own multiple composition It makes itself, in the world, the being-there of its being ...

This means the site gives itself an intensity of existence" (2007, page 274).

Does such a '*site*' ('that happens to exist by itself') have any phenomenal existence, any tangible qualities? Not really. It is entirely focused onto that single point where it permits its own vanishing: Moreau's dictate. What makes this singular point so significant for Badiou is that it is not only the *vanishing point* of the *Event* into its universality, but also the point of entry, the strait gate through which the *Event* (eg, the Commune) makes its way out of contingent time, the accidents and vagaries of everyday human life and its history, and enters it into the zone where mathematical universals and eternal truths reside. Only where the *event* has gone against known laws, against received wisdom, and even against the way it has seemed to appear on the world stage does it become an *Event* that refers itself or raises itself to the universal.

Badiou's politics of the universal

By his identification with universalization against particularization, with *durée* over instant, with Being over being-there, Badiou tries (as would any philosopher) to rise *above* 'petty factions' and the endless disputations of human intercourse. He values the

individual and minorities only to the degree that they contribute to the universal. He is fiercely opposed to the idea that any particularism can gain recognition in social and cultural life. He has worked with undocumented immigrants in France (*sans-papiers*) perhaps because he views culture and the state as arbitrary impediments to the universality he aspires to.

Badiou takes a very assertive and even frankly aggressive stance vis-à-vis his critics. Badiou's harsh response to his critics is justified, he believes, by the correctness of his theoretical reasons and the moral superiority of universals over particulars. This is especially evident in his treatment of those who feel his theses could be used to endorse, wittingly or no, anti-Semitism. Badiou claims that the word 'Jew' (capital J) has lost its original value, for it has been divested of all its historical associations and stripped down to one fixed historical meaning: the *Shoah*. This narrowing excludes 'Jew' from universality and, Badiou argues, should therefore no longer be used by and about Jews. Instead, 'jew' (small j) he argues, now becomes the proper descriptive: it marks the destruction of the narrow particularism of a specific ethnic/religious identification. To psychoanalyst Jean-Jacques Moscovitz's and others' concern that this position is equivalent to asserting that the Nazis accomplished their destructive aims, Badiou's rejoinder claims that it saved what was good about the Jews for the universal:

"I laughed hard at seeing [his critics] ... taking offence to the fact that, with respect to those who've called themselves 'Jews', I valorize their contribution to universal history, and hence to all peoples. It is this same aspect that I valorize in any community: since this is how a community's particular destiny, the creations it has made possible, communicates with the universal interest" (2007, page 243).

What Badiou certainly does not consider is that the specific sociality of the Jews may have been crucial to their cultural productions, which he 'valorizes'. Badiou's problem is not that he *feels* anti-Semitic emotions, but that the very basis of his criticism that the 'Jews' have misread their true destiny in the universal, clinging instead to their particular identity, is one of the principal and unfortunate legacies of Pauline thought, which long fueled anti-Semitism: Paul rejected Jewish law as too specific to one group and insufficiently universal. He blamed the Jews for refusing to give up their law in favor of the universal law of love (see Badiou, 1997).

Badiou brooks no hesitations, no second thoughts, and he mocks those who try to grasp issues by considering them 'on the one hand, on the other hand'. (And certainly not on the infamous Jewish 'third hand'—the common American joke being that Jewish thinkers are complex and can never settle for simplistic oppositions.) Badiou, like many of his contemporaries, is weary of the equivocations and indecisiveness of 'liberal' politicians. His is a *decisive* style that implicitly and explicitly castigates those who question the truth and certainty of his propositions. Should this, however become a principle of political action?

This leads to my final question. How is the universal something that Badiou himself is able to see, to represent, and to judge? To answer, we need to understand how he stands firmly upon the certainty of his method. Philosophically, Badiou locates himself squarely in the classical tradition to which he aims to bring something new. [Very classical: I must admit that I can never really think of Badiou's *Eight Theses on the Universal* (2004) without recalling the dogged search for universals that animated the post-Cartesians of the later 18th century, like Antoine de Rivarol, who in 1784 won a prize for 'proving' the universality of the French language.] Indeed, attentive readers might well be startled by how traditional Badiou's philosophical concerns (and his approach) are: the Universal, the Subject, Thought, Truth. All the more so as the last fifty years of French philosophy has been so highly

influenced by Nietzsche's 'destruction' of philosophy and Heidegger's 'deconstruction' of metaphysics. Badiou's second and most compelling focus for his followers, on the *Event* that wrests itself from the stream of history and achieves a being beyond its original appearance, has clear resonances in the ecstatic temporality of Heidegger (his *Event* finds a *durée* beyond its 'instant' in an echo of Heidegger's *ecstasis*,⁽¹⁰⁾ with Bergson thrown in). I have already addressed the question of the subject and space in Badiou; now I want to look at space from the standpoint of Badiou's definition of the universal.

Badiou posits that the universal *is* 'thought' [*"L'élément propre de l'universel est la pensée"* (2004, page 1)], negating thus at the outset any other of the modern fields in which we have sought the basis for universality (anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis, and biology). Everything is reduced to the single term, 'thought', which he then declares to *be* the Subject: *"on appelle 'pensée' le Sujet"* (capital S in the original). The method Badiou deploys here is mathematical and frankly Cartesian in nature: you divide a problem, usually into two, in order to remake it as an undivided and non-divisible universal. However univocal this universal must be (2004, page 6), it is nonetheless not One, but *multiple*.

If in Badiou we appear closer to classical Cartesianism and even Hegelianism (the subject of absolute knowledge that emerges at the end of history) than anyone else in the past century, Badiou has readied his disclaimers. Elaborating the corollaries to his universal as Subject–Thought, we find that Badiou's Subject is indeed the Subject of a knowledge—but of a *savoir* that is not encyclopedic but instead 'transversal' to all available knowledge. Badiou further insists that his *pensée-sujet* has no transcendental constitution, à la Kant. To the contrary, this subject *is* each time, and then only by being called forth as thought in "a procedure where the universal gets constituted" (2004, page 1b). The implication that his/the Subject (of thought) would thus be content free and therefore a Cartesian thinking substance, or even a Kantian universal ethical subject Badiou counters by asserting that his universal thinking Subject is not the Full Subject of classical rational philosophy. His Subject–Thought emerges only from a *gap* in all knowledge: "We call 'thought' the Subject, insofar as it is constituted in a process that is transversal to the totality of all available knowledge, or as Lacan says, in the hole in knowledge."⁽¹¹⁾ Although Badiou invokes Lacan to support his assertion that his Subject–Thought is indeed not the classical Cartesian subject, I have tried to show how Badiou is not as close to Lacan as he implies (he even expresses regret that Lacan is still caught up with the classical Cartesian subject—of which Lacan has said that its enunciation of the Subject *as thinking* was the precise moment where the Freudian *unconscious* came into existence).⁽¹²⁾ Lacan's 'hole in knowledge' can be glimpsed only fleetingly and rarely (and then only in the context of a psychoanalysis) (see Lacan, 1973, pages 17f, 29f).

⁽¹⁰⁾ For Heidegger, *Dasein's* Being is enabled by 'ecstasies' of temporality.

⁽¹¹⁾ "On appelle 'pensée' le Sujet, en tant qu'il est constitué dans un processus transversal à la totalité des savoirs disponibles, ou, comme le dit Lacan, en trouvée des savoirs" (2004, page 1).

⁽¹²⁾ Badiou rejects Lacan's 'Cartesian' dualism, writing: "What still links Lacan ... to the Cartesian epoch of science is the thought that it is necessary to hold the subject in the pure void of its subtraction if one wishes that truth be saved" (2002, page 15); Badiou's *Pensée – sujet* is the subject not of unconscious thoughts, only thoughts that are not conscious of their own value as a void permitting fresh creation.

Conclusion: psychoanalysis or Badiou? The subject of linguistic space vs the subject of the site

Lacan also has a 'vanishing point' that differs rather strikingly from that of Badiou. He writes: "The vanishing point of the perspective is properly speaking what represents in the figure the eye that looks" (no date, page 242).⁽¹³⁾

He continues: "there is another eye point which is the one constituted by the line to infinity on the figure plane, and its intersection by something which is ... there, namely, the line through which the figure plane cuts the ground plane" (page 242). He concludes that "the vanishing point which is that point of subject *qua* seeing, and the point that falls in the gap between the subject and the figure plane ... is the one that I am calling the point of the looking subject" (page 242). This double vanishing point structures Lacan's key concept of *the gaze* (*le regard*) under which the subject who looks is also frighteningly also the subject looked at by the Other. How so?

Language already inserts any speaking being into an infinite labyrinth or infinitely radiating network of signifiers. It is only from time to time, however, that we are forcibly reminded of this. In the Renaissance, for example, it suddenly became possible to imagine an infinity of points on the horizon: to look upon and (in return) to be looked at from—an alarming degree of exposure. At the dawn of the Renaissance, Nicolas of Cusa created his famous metaphor for God as a sphere whose circumference was nowhere and whose center was everywhere. Within two centuries, Pascal had reduced the infiniteness of Cusa's infinities to just two: great and small. However terrifying Pascal's *deux infinis* (the abyss above our heads and the abyss beneath our feet) were, they were considerably less so than a universe composed of an infinite number of viewpoints behind, before, beside, beneath, and especially beyond us would be: Lacan called this being seen from where you cannot see yourself the *gaze*.

One response to the unnerving overexposure granted by the gaze that language brings in its wake is simply to reorganize perspective from a more restricted, specific point of view. Thus Pascal's invention is echoed again two centuries later in Foucault's adoption of Bentham's spatial solution, the panopticon. It is less threatening to be seen from a single, fixed location *above* you than to imagine yourself the object of an infinitized gaze issuing from anywhere and everywhere around you (see Azoulay, 2001, pages 130f).⁽¹⁴⁾ Badiou's conception of space—the sites, the situations, the being of being-there that all support his *Event*—in contrast depends, mathematically and logically, on reducing potential spatial perspectives to the singular *point*, eliminating the multifocal gaze (*le regard*) that arises in the wake of language.

I have in this essay tracked Badiou's efforts to define his space as *independent* of the *infinite* and *open network of signifiers*, of the big Other and the small other (Freud's *Nebenmensch*)⁽¹⁵⁾, and of the horizon-tality that opens onto the doubled vanishing point not only that one looks at but that *looks back at you*. Lacan put it this way:

⁽¹³⁾ Lacan writes: "The vanishing point of the perspective is properly speaking what represents in the figure the eye that looks" (no date, page 241):

"... there is another eye point which is the one constituted by the line to infinity on the figure plane, and its intersection by something which is ... there, namely, the line through which the figure plane cuts the ground plane" (no date, page 242).

⁽¹⁴⁾ Azoulay calls the reassurance that comes from presuming an overarching eye keeps you in view from above 'theological', and see also her discussion of Foucault's being caught in the same 'logic of the site' he theorizes (2001, page 145). I think something of the same applies to Badiou, however a-theist he may be.

⁽¹⁵⁾ The *Nebenmensch*, the neighbor, is the first spatially apprehended object for the infantile psyche, and it plays the key role in its foundation according to Freud's *Project for a Scientific Psychology*. Lacan (1992 [1986]) in *Seminar VII* sees it as analogous to his big O Other.

“the vanishing point which is that point of subject *qua* seeing, and the point that falls in the gap between the subject and the figure plane ... is the one that I am calling the point of the looking subject”.⁽¹⁶⁾

Badiou's multiple-subject is not to be found in the midst of history, nor of what he called the register of mere 'appearing' (where social values are presented and represented to us in everyday life). His disdain for the social and its inauthentic appearing is matched only by the Heideggerian and Nietzschean critiques of nihilism. Nor can he be 'found' in his political 'stands': he clearly wants to be to the left of the left (although he should be wary: the right-to-left-to-the-left-of-the-left line where he positions himself ultimately rounds on itself at infinity so its ends finally meet. For example, while Badiou firmly believes his theories initiate an entirely new politics, linguist Jean-Claude Milner accuses Badiou of reviving a Fascist outlook. It is also the case that Badiou is willfully tone-deaf to the historical associations and political contexts of the *words* he uses, which sometimes repeat those current in the polemics of the Europe of the 1930s and 1940s, that is, in the fascist period).⁽¹⁷⁾ Clearly, he would not wish to find himself in the midst of the network of signifiers and subject to the ominous omnipresent *gaze*.

Instead, it seems clear to me that Badiou wishes to find himself at the only place that *counts*, the place where the subject (the 'we-subject') arises. Of this *site*, Badiou writes, with some Heideggerian overtones, "It makes itself, in the world, the being-there of its being" (2007, page 274). The Site is where knowledge is voided to make room for an ethical stand. This *site* is found only at its own apex, its high point, which is also its vanishing point, and which makes the *site* into a *situation* whose structure and essence are the gateway to the universal—once its *durée* (constituted by the unfolding of its internal logic) is analytically reconstructed by Badiou.

Badiou's dream of a singular universe, made entirely out of self-made multiples that have galvanized and elevated the individuals which originally composed them into the higher status of a 'we-subject', eschews the infinitizing power of language and number, and believes it can achieve its universal imaginarily. A universal (w)hole without either inside or outside is multiple only when it is situated between two mirrors each reflecting the other's image in an endless *mise-en-abyme*. Mirrors, the realm of mere reflection not being or even being-there, do provide the only surplus that intensifies, overcodes, and more than doubles them, endlessly, eternally, without the assistance of language and historical narrative.⁽¹⁸⁾

While his admirer Slavoj Žižek burns with the fires of the almost-achieved, though inevitably lost, revolutionary cause, Badiou's indifference to historical success reveals

⁽¹⁶⁾ In *Seminar XIII* (no date, pages 240–242), Lacan also shows that projective geometry creates points of intersection for parallel lines that are not simply at or on the horizon, but 'beyond' it, above and below, etc. These lines will ultimately touch: the world is round and its extremes meet from every possible direction.

⁽¹⁷⁾ The appendix to Belgium's newspaper *Le Soir* of 4 March 1941, entitled "Les Juifs et Nous", is devoted to and strongly in favor of 'anti-Semitism'. Badiou would surely distance himself from these associations, yet his own polemical language retains overtones of discussions found in this issue of the newspaper, which is often called "*Le Soir volée*"—'stolen'—during the period it fell under Nazi control. Among *Le Soir*'s stated grievances regarding the Jews is that it was a Jew (Freud) who introduced psychoanalysis: "a subtle poison, destructive of all morality" ["un poison subtil ... un destructeur de toute morale ..."] (de Man, 1988 [1941], page 291).

⁽¹⁸⁾ If I am correct about the mirror (the imaginary) that undergirds Badiou's theses on the site, this may well be because, as opposed to having really found his way out of the limits of the law, language, and society, he has fully embraced the new kind of 'artificial' sociality Freud labeled in his *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* in 1922. Freud provides another perspective on the we-subject of Badiou.

that he has other than actual political aims. Badiou's fundamental dream is not that of a successful social revolution. Rather, it is that of *creating a formula—an algorithm—for revolution* which guarantees that it will not fail, because it will have participated in the principle that Badiou alone has discovered and of which he is the warranty: that the revolution that *works* will work only *as* that set of *procedures, postulates, prescriptives and their corollaries* that Badiou has demonstrated guarantees it access to its own being.

A final difficulty: Badiou's allegiance to philosophico-mathematical reflection as the guarantee of revolution still exploits and very much needs all the theatrical moves, the heroic posturing, and the excesses that characterize Badiou's approach. Despite his principle that only philosophy-as-mathematics can and will shake the status quo, Badiou engages strongly with those who disagree. His often embittered responses to his critics have the look and feel of the temperamental artist more than the lofty philosopher. His strenuous self-defense often seriously undermines his theoretical certainty at having attained his goal of universality. He seems likely to remain a European striving for yet unable to realize the universalism to which Europeans have aspired since late antiquity.

Badiou's space may well be the space of a mirror-staged negation of whatever lies beyond, behind, above the intense fraternity of the multiple-subject but I believe that both his theory and his own egotism tap directly into the dominant discourse of our time: the antidiscursive discourse of the *Group Psychology*, where the 'group' is created solely by mirroring a singular ego as a multiple set: a community of like egos.

In Freud's original view of the origins of collective life, the unconscious symbol [the (phallic) signifier of the 'dead father'] grounds group life. In contrast, what supports the 'group' life of the new society (Lacan will say of capitalist society) is that it is structured entirely by the *ego*, the site of mastery and control. The word-based bond or social contract cannot tie disparate egos together; only the image—or, in other words, the *mirror*—can. Each ego constituting the group, Freud says, must see itself mirrored exactly by its fellows ("Everyone must have the same and be the same") if the group is to cohere and be able to act in concert. Freud restricts his analysis to the group-ego artificial groups like the army, the church, and the bureaucracy, but clearly, by the present time, military styles, religious enthusiasms, and bureaucratic forms have come to dominate the shape of social life.⁽¹⁹⁾ [In his seventeenth seminar, Lacan (1991) enlarged the analysis of this group psychology to examine the social psychology of the dominant discourse of our era, the discourse of the university and of capitalism.]

Badiou's hope is to void the key space—the unconscious—that Freud and Lacan found constitutive of the human subject. Is this not a laudable dream, the dream of a universal cure? According to psychoanalysis, the unconscious must continually be rediscovered where it is at work warping our lives, and once this is done, it must address and articulate the unconscious fantasies of fulfillment that cause so much political and personal mischief if it hopes to limit their power to damage. As Lacan once put it, "In fact, to a certain degree, fantasies cannot bear the revelation of speech" (1992, page 80). Lacan's *Seminar VII* openly inspires Badiou, but Badiou envisions the 'other scene' not as fantasmatic but as a real promised land where the impossible suddenly becomes possible: by giving up the 'One' that structures the signifier and the social symbol, the destructiveness of the unconscious is mathematically defused (MacCannell, 2005b, page 141).

⁽¹⁹⁾ The 'group psychology' of the mirror fits nicely Badiou's quintessential definition: "The elements indexed by the transcendental of this situation is a site if it happens to count itself within the referential field of its own indexation" (2007, page 274; and, later: "a site is simply a multiple that happens to be an element of itself", page 278).

Badiou hopes instead that a more creative, future-oriented approach that refuses the unconscious its power will prevail. This is Badiou's sustaining faith (or, rather, his 'certainty')⁽²⁰⁾ that reason, mathematical truth, and universal harmony can prevail.

One is left to wonder if the negative, destructive historical regimes of representation which the split subject has created can be so easily transported to this universal region. Or if Badiou's theory is wishful thinking.

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⁽²⁰⁾ See MacCannell (2005c) for comment on why Badiou alters the translation of Saint Paul from the traditional 'faith' to 'certainty'.

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