

Alien Badiou; Towards an Ethics of Universal Justice

'We do not fundamentally need a philosophy of the structure of things. We need a philosophy open to the irreducible singularity of what happens, a philosophy that can be fed and nourished by the surprise of the unexpected. Such a philosophy would then be a philosophy of the event.' Alain Badiou.¹

The popular 1950s genre of the 'alien arrival' film has frequently been analysed in political terms, most commonly as a thinly veiled anti-communist narrative, but also as a critical engagement with the scientific rationalism of Fordist management systems.² While not wrong, these arguments reduce the major protagonist in these films – the alien – to a position entirely relative to the American society it threatens, and limit its significance to the existing cultural fears it seemingly embodies.³ What such criticism fails to address, and what the films themselves so beautifully reveal, is an ethics, and a politics of the alien *as such*. In this sense the alien arrival is an event that marks the enigmatic appearance of something outside of thought *which must be thought*. This event of ontological emergence calls forth an ethics of contact which is invariably developed in the action that follows.

The recent work of the French philosopher Alain Badiou provides a useful account of thought's genesis in an alien arrival, and the ethical demands placed upon it by the radical otherness of this event. For Badiou the event provokes thought and provides its criteria of truth. First of all then, what is truth? Badiou starts 'from the following idea: a truth is, first of all, something new. What transmits, what repeats, we shall call *knowledge*.'⁴ How can we know anything about that which arrives from beyond?⁵ The problem for Badiou and for alien arrival films is not what we *know* of this event – nothing – but how it can be *thought*. How, in other words, can we think the truth of the alien itself? 'If a truth is something new, what is the essential philosophical problem concerning truth?' Badiou asks, 'It is the problem of its appearance and its 'becoming'. A truth must be submitted to thought, not as a judgement, but as a process in the real.'⁶ The event, for Badiou, cannot be thought *in itself*, for by definition it is the irruption of the outside as such. But thought can bear witness to this event by producing a new truth, a truth which is adequate to the event's radical exteriority, and marks its obscure appearance.

How then, as a 'process of the real', does truth emerge? Here we can turn to those alien arrival films which explicitly figure this process in a protagonist who must, in the face of knowledgeable disbelief, proclaim the truth of the alien event. Steve in *The Blob* (Irvin Yeaworth, 1958), John Putnam in *It Came from Outer Space* (Jack Arnold, 1953), Dr. Bennell in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956) and the



Alien arrival: *The Blob*

boy David in *Invaders from Mars* (William Menzies, 1953) must all announce the truth of the aliens' arrival, without – as yet – being able to prove it. Even in those films where such a character does not appear, the problem subsists in the impenetrability of the alien to scientific analysis, from the super-hard metal of the spaceship in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Robert Wise, 1951) to the immortal line of Dr. McCoy, "It's life Jim, but not as we know it."

'The undecidability of the event,' Badiou writes, 'induces the appearance of a *subject* of the event. Such a subject is constituted by an utterance in the form of a wager. This utterance is as follows: "This event has taken place, it is something which I can neither evaluate, nor demonstrate, but to which I shall be faithful." To begin with, a subject is what fixes an undecidable event, because he or she takes the chance of deciding upon it.'⁷ This decision appears as an axiom, a simple statement of truth such as 'Aliens exist'. The verification of this axiom provides the initial narrative thrust of alien arrival films, as the subject formed in the event's appearance must force his or her community to confront its outside. The paradoxical ontology of the alien appears in the difficulty of this process, for the alien's arrival is the addition of a founding subtraction, an event of the unknown that can only appear as an axiom verified in the language of the situation.⁸ The simultaneous appearance of the alien and the subject in an axiom of the event suggests an alternative reading of arrival films that does not simply explicate a series of more or less interesting dialectical relations between the human and its other, but instead explores the ontological emergence of truth.⁹ The subject does not appear as the positive term to which the alien serves as negation, a negation that will eventually be itself negated in the climactic moment of the film, at least not

yet. The emergence of the human/alien dialectic occurs only after the initial verification of their founding event, and must be understood in terms of this event.

The philosophical framework of the alien arrival film is therefore the examination of a radical outside as the nevertheless immanent condition of truth. Although this problem of articulating the truth of the event structures all alien arrival films, I will concentrate on two, *The Blob* and *It Came from Outer Space*, as they state the problem according to its two possible ethical trajectories. In the first the event is betrayed by an evil (because moralistic) will to truth, and in the second the event provokes an ethical affirmation of universal justice. In both films the alien is an arrival of the outside, and establishes as the film's initial problem the truthful appearance of this event. Can the truth of the alien's arrival appear? Can the subject remain true to the foundational subtraction that begins the film, as it does Badiou's ontology? This question is answered by *The Blob* and by most alien films in the negative, because they choose instead to develop it dialectically, positioning the alien outside as the boundary defining our own humanity, and reducing the ethics of contact to "kill or be killed". Science fiction is generally a conservative genre, both in its narratives and in its politics.¹⁰ Nevertheless, a few films suggest an alternative, an ethical opening to the outside produced by the subject's fidelity to his founding event. I will examine the finest of these, *It Came from Outer Space*, a little later.

Nevertheless, in most films the opening problem of verifying the truth of the event gives way to the real narrative: killing the alien. Once more, this transition appears very clearly in *The Blob*. The initial action concerns the fact that Steve is the only one to have seen the murderous vitality of the Blob in action, and he must convince the town's inhabitants of its existence before it is too late. Despite the undoubted heroism of his decision, his axiomatic declaration requires verification in order to be regarded as truth.¹¹ The process of verification in both *The Blob* and in Badiou is the same, involving 'the examination, within the situation, of the consequences of the axiom that decided upon the event.'¹² This process of examination demands 'an exercise of fidelity' because nothing determines its course in advance, the truth of its axiom being unsupported by any rule of established knowledge. Once more, the death of the doctor confirms this point. This makes the process of verification especially difficult, because there simply is no word with which the alien can be described, for as ontological subtraction it cannot be 'counted as one', the first requirement – according to Badiou – of any linguistic naming. Steve experiences this difficulty directly when he first attempts to warn the town's police department about the alien's arrival. He begins with 'Doc Hallen's been killed', a statement well within the shared juridical language of this situation. The problem comes when he must be more specific. 'This thing, it killed the Doc' is the best he can do, and this obviously falls well outside any explanation acceptable to the police. When pressed he claims 'it's kind of like a ma..... it's kind of like a mass that keeps getting bigger and bigger.' The stutter here is a vocal ellipsis, an enforced silence interrupting his explanation

from the outside, a gap in language that he immediately tries to fill by clicking his fingers, a non-vocal sound standing in for the pure unnameable event of the Blob.¹³ The cops, more and more incredulous, tell him to 'make sense', and the most cynical, now turned sarcastic, asks, 'Maybe the thing you saw was a monster?' Steve, at a loss, deadpans back, 'Yup, maybe it was.' Finally Steve is reduced to an appeal to empirical evidence, and implores them to 'C'mon over to the Doc's, you can see it for yourself.'

The appeal to empirical evidence and the naming and appearance of the alien as a monster are both important narrative devices by which alien arrival films deal with the problem of verification. Both elements, which are often connected in a dramatic *unveiling* of the alien's monstrosity, do not however guarantee the event's verification, nor do they guarantee fidelity to its truth. Quite the opposite in fact, for the common appeal to an empirical visual verification (an appeal to a *common sense* approach that assumes an existing structure of human consciousness) and the accompanying emphasis on the alien's monstrosity, tends to move the film away from the ontological problem of the alien and towards the moral defence of the human. Indeed, when verified empirically the radical subtraction of the alien event and its appearance as verified truth tends to be subsumed by our pre-existing knowledge of the monstrous.¹⁴ The empirical verification of the alien as monster effectively transforms the unnameable event of alien arrival and its demand for an ethics of truth into the threat of the monster-alien to humanity, and the justification of its eradication in the name of the known.

Indeed it is the moment when Steve names the Blob as a monster that the film segues into the horror genre (a moment elegantly marked by the film's subsequent shot of the Doc's place as a haunted house) and its narrative stalls at the problem of the alien's extermination. This is the point at which the *The Blob* – but it is a moment typical for alien arrival films – abandons the ethics of truth as Badiou describes it, and moves towards its negation: Evil. Badiou argues that the process of verifying a truth involves the elaboration of a new subset within the situation. This subset is what Badiou calls a 'generic truth', an infinite and interminable subset that is nevertheless new. 'Invention and creation remain,' Badiou writes, 'incalculable. So the path of a truth cannot coincide in infinity with any concept. Consequently, the verified terms compose, or rather will have composed, if we suppose their infinite totalization, a generic subset of the Universe.'¹⁵ The alien is a generic truth, it is universal in the same way as Badiou's examples of 'the physical' or 'revolutionary politics', but it is nevertheless always the result of a local process, of, to return to our example, Steve's fidelity to the event, to the arrival of the Blob. This subjective creation of the generic truth must be accepted by the community in order for the truth of a local and singular event to be *forced*. In other words, Steve's problem is to make the generic truth of the alien accepted, so that he can force the town to believe in the existence, and of course the danger, of the Blob itself.

This in fact is precisely what happens, but once more only

by twisting the event from its verification as an alien arrival, to that of verifying its existence according to the pre-existing category of the monstrous. How? First Steve calls upon his friends at the local cinema. They have already accepted the generic truth of the monstrous, as announced by the soundtrack of the film they are watching – ‘Daughter of horror’ – which declares; ‘Yes, I am here, the demon who possesses your soul. Wait a bit. I am coming for you. I have so much to show you.’ Dragging his friends out of the show Steve asks them; ‘Would you believe me if I told you there was something inside of that rock we found, something that could wipe out the whole town?’ He tells them he saw ‘this thing’ kill Dr. Hallen, and when asked what it is he tells them he doesn’t know, ‘but if it can kill Dr. Hallen it can kill somebody else.’ Primed by the film to accept Steve’s tales of the Blob sight unseen, they ask Steve what should be done. ‘We’re gonna find this thing,’ Steve declares, ‘and we’re gonna make people believe us.’ The kids then rush off to try to awaken the town to this as yet invisible threat. This fails to work because people either find their claims of a monster ludicrous, or banal: ‘Look, I have monsters in here all the time, so beat it,’ the barman tells them. People laugh. This situation leads to one of the best lines in the film: ‘How,’ Steve asks, ‘can you protect people from something they don’t believe in?’ The problem remains how to establish the generic truth of monsters, in order to force the truth of the Blob. The kids start blowing the horns of their cars in order to bring the people of the town to an impromptu town meeting. Steve announces the presence of a ‘monster’ and the danger it presents to the town, a claim the police chief finally accepts. Steve has successfully managed to achieve an acceptance of the generic truth of the monster, and therefore to *force* the truth of the Blob, leading to the town now uniting behind him, and despite some further vacillations of fortune, they succeed in defeating it. The storyline of *The Blob* therefore follows Badiou’s trajectory of truth quite closely: ‘The *construction* of a truth is made by a choice within the indiscernible. It is made locally, within the finite [i.e. with Steve’s fidelity to the event]. But the *potency* of a truth depends on the hypothetical forcing. It consists in saying: ‘If we suppose the generic infinity of a truth to be completed, *then* such or such a bit of knowledge must imperatively be transformed.’¹⁶ The town’s disbelief of monsters is transformed, and they are forced to believe in the Blob.

Badiou now adds an element to his argument that is crucial to our understanding of how the Blob stops being an alien and becomes a monster. The problem, he argues, is whether any forcing of truth is total. My answer is that there is *always*, in any situation, a real point that *resists* this potency.¹⁷ There is, he says, a point that is unnameable within any situation and that remains unforceable. ‘The unnameable is something like the inexpressible *real* of everything a truth authorizes to be said.’¹⁸ This would be the real of the alien *in itself*, the real of the event as foundational subtraction. Once we try to name this unnameable singularity, to say everything, we slip into a totalitarian attempt to measure the infinite. This, Badiou provocatively claims, is the appearance of Evil. ‘Usually it is said that Evil is lies, ignorance, or



Horror: *The Blob*

deadly stupidity. The condition of Evil is much rather the process of a truth. There is Evil only insofar as there is an axiom of truth at the point of the undecidable, a path of truth at the point of the indiscernible, an anticipation of being for the generic, and the forcing of a nomination at the point of the unnameable.¹⁹ This is a forceful declaration of an ethics of truth, an ethics of philosophy itself, and for us, an ethics of the alien. It means that any genuine truth of the alien must include its unnameable singularity, as what cannot be forced. This is an evocative idea in terms of alien arrival films, and alien films in general, which are almost always stories of an alien’s death.²⁰ To understand this death beyond the rather simplistic reduction of these films to anxious symptoms of a society under threat is to see them as the expressions of an evil will to truth.

The violence of this will lies in its refusal of a new truth, and its forcing of this truth into the pre-existing realm of knowledge. This occurs when Steve accepts the name ‘monster’ for what he saw, and this integrates the Blob, and Steve himself into a field defined by the very law he had been in conflict with. This integration also marks the defeat of youthful rebellion and sexuality that is from this point on reintegrated into the community entirely on the community’s terms, as Steve saves the very thing that he began the film resisting. Indeed the film initially goes out of its way to identify Steve and his girlfriend, as well as his young friends, with the Blob. The film opens with a passionate, even rather *wet* kiss, one stolen we soon learn, without the girl’s full permission, outside the city limits, and in the back of an automobile that will later confirm Steve’s virility by winning a drag race with the local hoons. Nothing strange in that, perhaps, but it does place the teenagers under the sign of a sexuality not entirely controlled by social rules, and sharing with the Blob a certain throbbing energy threatening to get out of control.²¹ Of course it is all very gentle, but there are clear echoes of the more serious concerns of *The Wild One* or *Rebel without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955). Unlike the protagonists of those films, however, Steve will become the defender of the community, and community values (the film ends in classic horror fashion, with the re-constitution of

the nuclear family, even if this is Steve, his girlfriend and *her young brother*...), defeating the very thing he initially valued, a freedom existing on the outside, an exteriority associated with something new. In uttering this word: 'monster', Steve speaks the words of his nasty all-white, middle-American community. Words which seek to articulate the alien in terms which are already utterly understood, words which articulate nothing less (but also nothing more) than the destruction of any outside to the conservative "heartland" of small-town Amerika.

We have arrived at the inevitable conclusion of most alien arrival films of the 50s: extermination. But rather than this being an extermination of evil, Badiou's work enables us to see how it is this extermination itself that is evil because it is a betrayal of an ethics of truth. This is precisely the view of *It Came from Outer Space*, which shares the 'truth trajectory' of *The Blob*, along with the event of 'alien arrival' that is its genesis, but resists the term 'monster' and the violence it requires. In *It Came from Outer Space* the subject formed by the alien's arrival – John Putman – succeeds in maintaining his fidelity to this event. This fidelity explores an ethical alternative to Steve's betrayal of the truth in *The Blob*, and wards off what the film, in terms very close to Badiou's, explicitly figures as Evil. *It Came from Outer Space* elaborates an ethics of the alien opposed to *The Blob*'s morality of the monster.

It Came from Outer Space explicitly rejects extermination as an appropriate response to the irruption of the unknown, and despite the horror of the alien's appearance John Putman remains committed to protecting the monstrous aliens against the local law enforcement officer – Matt – who wants to deal with them Western style, all guns blazing. Unlike *The Blob* the confrontation between John as event-witness and the police is not resolved in favour of the cops. As the film nears its climax the sheriff Matt, angered by the xenomorphic aliens' subterfuge of hiding in the forms of humans, asks, 'Why don't they come out into the open?' To which John replies, in a statement of the film's critical position, 'Because they don't trust us. Because what we don't understand we want to destroy.'

Whereas *The Blob* projects the alien as a pure threat, a monstrous outside we are morally justified – and in fact compelled – to destroy, *It Came from Outer Space* explores an alternative scenario to alien arrival in which contact necessarily involves communication. In *The Blob* the outside appears as a monstrous hostility, and its defeat proves that "our" communal values are right. Contact is imagined simply as a conflict we win or in which we die. *It Came from Outer Space* rejects this formula as both simplistic and stupid, and suggests that understanding the unknown can transform hostility and fear into cooperation. Opening up to the outside, *It Came from Outer Space* argues, is the only way to avoid the cultural violence of small-town American values. In this sense the film poses the same question as that asked by Badiou: 'if our only agenda is an ethical engagement against an Evil we recognize a priori, how are we to envisage any transformation of the way things are?'²²

Rather than a defence of the human (or of the American, which as we know amounts to the same thing...) understood according to essentialist and xenophobic principles, *It Came from Outer Space* posits humanity – what it is to be human – as constituted by an openness to the outside and its transformative power. Furthermore, this 'outside' is not reducible to the abstract category of 'the Other', but appears in the singularity of an event, deploying its universal truth to political effect. The consequence Badiou draws from of the event's universal address is explicitly figured, as we shall see, in the most important scene of *It Came from Outer Space*: 'the other doesn't matter'.²³ This means the 'real' ethical question, for Badiou and for John Putman, 'is much more that of recognizing the Same'.²⁴

But before we can understand Badiou's rather startling and typically provocative statement, we must catch up with its development in *It Came from Outer Space*. The film begins just like *The Blob*, with a pair of lovers, John Putman and Ellen Fields, observing what they take to be a meteor falling to earth. Whereas in *The Blob* this arrival interrupted a kiss outside the city limits and of typically teenage enthusiasm, in *It Came from Outer Space* the lovers are chastely discussing their future married life together. This establishes the opposed trajectories of the films: centripetal in *The Blob*, where the event will bring the teenagers back to their community, and centrifugal in *It Came from Outer Space*, where the lovers will end up isolated and alone in defending an outside they are ethically committed to.²⁵ This distinction is emphasised by the films' depiction of the event. Unlike the faint and fleeting shot of the alien's arrival in *The Blob*, in *It Came from Outer Space* the meteor arrives immediately, exploding in our faces and establishing the alien's arrival as the central problem of the film for us, the shot being from our point-of-view rather than John and Ellen's. In *It Came from Outer Space* the alien arrival is an eruption of the unknown, in *The Blob* it is an interpellation, a device used to police the known.

The lovers immediately rush out to see the 'meteor', taken to the crater by a friend in a helicopter. They're the first there, and John rushes down to check it out. At the bottom he finds the alien's space ship, as in *The Blob* looking like a golf-ball, only this time big, dwarfing John. The door is open and he peers in, an action we see from within the ship, from the point-of-view of what John sees, which quickly retreats as he comes forward – peering – until the door slides shut in his face. What is so remarkable about this first contact is that it is shown from the alien's point-of-view, a fact indicated by concentric and slightly distorting circles appearing over the screen and seeming to project into its space. This will be the consistent sign used by the film to indicate that we are seeing with the alien's eye (it turns out to only have one), and the first example in cinematic history of the alien point-of-view shot.²⁶ That this is the alien's point-of-view is further emphasised by the electronic 'alien' music that consistently signals their appearance throughout the film and by the up-close sound of breathing that corporealises the camera, and turns it subjective.²⁷

John scrambles back up to Ellen and their friend just as the



The Kiss: *The Blob*

crater around the space ship collapses in on itself, covering the alien craft. This disappearance marks the emergence of the subject formatted by the event, and the ethical trial that he must undergo in maintaining his fidelity to it. This event introduces nothing less than a radical outside to established knowledge – a new truth – that John must convince the others he saw. ‘It’s like nothing we’ve ever seen before’ he announces, a statement the helicopter pilot doesn’t believe, and Ellen clearly has her doubts. Nevertheless, he excitedly presses them: ‘What would you say if I had found a Martian down there?’ ‘I’d say hold them for the circus,’ his cynical friend responds. ‘And I’d say wait,’ John implores with all the earnestness that typifies his character, ‘and find out what they’re doing here first.’

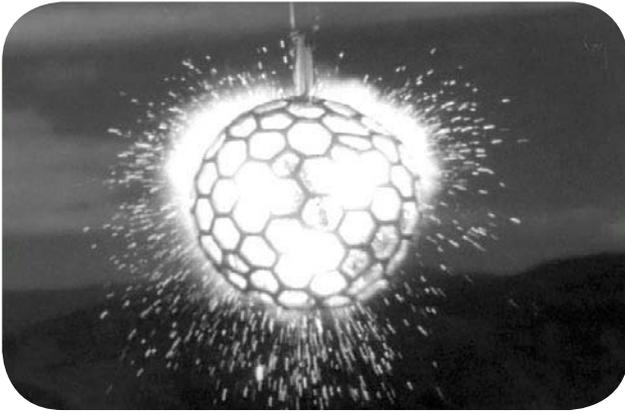
The immediate problem, however, is that no-one believes him, least of all those entrusted with extending the limits of our knowledge. John confronts Dr. Snell, a scientist from the university who is at the crater conducting some tests. Dr. Snell refuses to dig for the ship as he’s satisfied that it was merely a meteor that landed. John’s disappointed: ‘I expected you to be more open to the idea [of aliens] than the others. You’re a man of science.’ This, Dr. Snell explains cruelly, only makes him ‘less inclined to witchcraft.’ ‘Not witchcraft,’ John replies, ‘imagination. A willingness to believe there are lots of things that we don’t know anything about.’ After John leaves Dr. Snell and his assistant continue the discussion. John is ‘odd’ the assistant comments ‘More than odd,’ Dr. Snell replies, ‘individual and lonely, a man who thinks for himself.’ This placing of John outside of accepted belief in both a moral and intellectual sense is immediately amplified by John’s next conversation, this time with the town’s sheriff Matt. Matt has a paternal concern for Ellen, on account of her being the daughter of Matt’s old boss, and he ‘means to keep an eye on her.’ But this warning to leave Ellen out of things contains another more sinister one. The town, Matt explains, doesn’t understand John, in fact he frightens them, ‘and what frightens them they are against one way or another.’

The lines are drawn, quickly and starkly, between the

subject – John – formed by the event he is the sole witness to, and the community – both Sand Rock and that of science – who understand neither him nor his fidelity to this event, and who are against – on principle – both. Both Matt the cop and Dr. Snell the scientist patrol and protect the border of the known, and both make it clear that any attempt to open this border onto the outside will not be tolerated. These relationships articulate the political dimension of the film, one that pits the fidelity of John *to the outside* against the “protection” by the law *of the inside*. Badiou develops this conflict between the law and the event in terms of thought: ‘The law is what constitutes the subject as powerlessness of thought.’²⁸ The law is “statist” according to Badiou, meaning it enumerates, names, and controls the situation according to the pre-existing rules defining a community, and acts against the creative thought introduced by an event. Such is the role of the police, celebrated in *The Blob* and denounced in *It came From Outer Space*. The event opposes the law by creating a subject existing outside of communal reality, and ‘since the event was excluded by all the regular laws of the situation – compels the subject to *invent* a new way of being and acting in the situation.’²⁹ John Putman as subject of the event must step outside the law and the community it polices in order to step towards an alien outside that has emerged as a new truth. John’s attempts at communicating with, and finally helping the aliens is what Badiou calls an ‘emancipatory project’ because ‘what every emergence of hitherto unknown possibilities does, is to put an end to consensus.’³⁰ The event is an ‘illegal contingency’, a ‘lawless eruption’³¹ and founds a truth and a subject which arrives from outside and is necessarily militant. ‘Truth is either militant,’ Badiou claims, ‘or is not.’³²

The conflict between the law and the militant is over the philosophical status of truth, and is embodied by the relationship of John and Matt. The crucial moment comes when John returns from having spoken to the aliens, and discusses what he has learnt with Matt. ‘Why,’ Matt wants to know, ‘don’t they come into the open?’ Meaning, of course, why can’t they be revealed within the situation, and therefore understood according to its existing knowledge and values. ‘Because they don’t trust us.’ John explains, ‘Because what we don’t understand we want to destroy.’ Matt naturally rejects this criticism of himself and humanity, claiming ‘I kill only what tries to kill me.’ But John immediately rebuts this claim with a practical demonstration. Why, he asks, is Matt afraid of the spider conveniently crawling close to them? Is it because it is so different, so monstrous even? What, John asks, would Matt do if it came towards him? ‘This’ Matt says with a certain satisfaction, and immediately walks over to it and crushes it with his boot. ‘Exactly,’ John says, ‘as you’d destroy anything you didn’t understand.’ Matt is not convinced, and wants to form a posse immediately. ‘When,’ John asks in a rhetorical question that nevertheless sets the stakes of their debate, ‘are you going to stop being a badge and become a human being?’ ‘That’s my job,’ Matt stubbornly insists, ‘a thing is wrong, you set it right.’

This scene dramatically enacts the conflict between a violent and repressive moral law acting on predetermined



Alien Arrival: *It Came from Outer Space*



Horror: *It Came from Outer Space*

and seemingly self-evident assumptions about humanity, and a militant ethics determined to maintain fidelity to the truth of the event, to the power of the outside to wrest the situation from the control of the police and re-invent it. As Badiou has it: 'There is only one question in the ethic of truths: how will I, as some-one, *continue* to exceed my own being? How will I link the things I know, in a consistent fashion, via the effects of being seized by the not-known?'³³ Matt experiences this not-known as a threat, especially the fact that the aliens are able to take the form of humans, which completely upsets his criteria of truth. 'They could be all around us and we wouldn't know it,' he complains, the outside already puncturing his humanity. John is a militant committed to truth, an ethical commitment that, as Badiou puts it, 'compels so considerable a distance from opinions that it must be called literally *asocial*'.³⁴ The film began by deliberately locating John's house outside of town,³⁵ and telling us that the town was 'afraid of' and 'against' him. It is no surprise, then, that at the climax of the film the militant John's and the policeman Matt's conflict becomes violent, and although John succeeds in disarming Matt before he can shoot an alien in town, Matt's response is to immediately call up a posse to kill the aliens.

This final, inevitable, split between Matt and John can be understood in terms of Badiou's understanding of evil. Badiou argues that evil is formed through the same process as truth, through an event that forms a subjective fidelity creating something new. But the 'evil' event is not the appearance of the void but of a "full' particularity or presumed substance of that situation', which, Badiou claims, is 'a *simulacrum of truth*'.³⁶ Badiou is writing here about National Socialism, which was founded on a fidelity to an event which named 'not the universality of that which is sustained, precisely, by no particular characteristic (no particular multiple), but the absolute particularity of a community, itself rooted in the characteristics of its soil, its blood, and its race.'³⁷ No doubt the analogy between Matt and the Nazi's is stretched, for Matt merely wants to maintain existing social borders rather than redefine them according to an essentialist event.³⁸ Nevertheless Matt's subjectivity emerges in the fidelity he shows to the closed set of a 'truth', the presence

of which he remains faithful to, and that is constructed and maintained, just as the Nazi's was, by "voiding' what surrounds it.'³⁹ Matt's alien 'Other' must, according to his dialectical logic, be destroyed in order to maintain the presence of human truth. 'And as this presence is that of *the Truth*,' Badiou argues, 'what is outside of presence falls within an imperative of annihilation.'⁴⁰ In this sense, Matt and John are both subjects formed by the same event, but whereas John attempts to retain a militant fidelity to the void of truth, Matt attempts to void this void – 'the void 'avoided' [*chassé*]' as Badiou puts it – in order to maintain the universality of his simulacral 'event-substance'. 'Hence fidelity to the simulacrum,' Badiou writes, 'has as its content war and massacre.'⁴¹ War and massacre are the natural and necessary complements to any cinematic evocation of the term 'monster', a term which appears as a universal truth only in order to justify its extermination as the guarantee of what is truly human, all too human. Finally, despite 'mimicking' the truth process, Matt's violent reaction to the unknown is the opposite of John's. As Badiou puts it:

'the enemy of a true subjective fidelity is precisely the closed set [*ensemble*], the substance of the situation, *the community*. The values of truth, of its hazardous course and its universal address, are to be erected against these forms of inertia.

Every invocation of blood and soil, of race, *of custom, of community*, works directly against truths; and it is this very collection [*ensemble*] that is named as the enemy in the ethic of truths.'⁴²

What is most interesting about *It Came from Outer Space* is the film's refusal to accept a dialectical relation of human and alien, and its refusal of any simulacrum of truth that would justify aggression against the outside. This produces a view of the alien that is very different from that of the 'monster' that appears in *The Blob*. We can track this difference further by considering the alien point-of-view shot in *It Came from Outer Space*, which, although placing us within the outside, exists in the film only to be gone beyond. Initially the alien point-of-view appears ambiguous, as we-the-alien observe John attempting to see us, with the shot retreating back into the ship, and behind the closing door. There is a sense



Your Otherness is my own: *It Came from Outer Space*

of anxiety proper to a being that has crash landed and is confronted not just by a strange world but by its prying eyes. This feeling of sympathy is quickly tempered, however, by a menacing tone (not the least that of the theremin) the point-of-view takes on once the aliens venture out into the world. This is amplified once the aliens start taking over humans, which involves (us in) either sneaking up on people (most notably early in the film, when a ghostly hand reaches out to grab the fleeing linesman's shoulder), or totally freaking them out (in the memorable shot of Ellen's screaming face, perfectly framed by the concentric circles of the alien-eye). But this threat is at the same time allayed, most notably, when an alien-in-human-form explains; 'Don't be afraid. [...] We cannot, we would not, take your souls, your minds, your bodies. Don't be afraid.' Not only are its friendly intentions declared here, but the alien articulates a fundamental understanding of life, neatly divided into soul, mind and body that is shared with humanity, and this common point-of-view will be further elaborated in the film's most important sequence.

John confronts the aliens-in-human-form, and explains: 'Whoever you are, whatever you are, I want to understand you, I want to help you.' They reply, equally friendly: 'We don't want to hurt you [...]. We don't want to hurt anyone.' Once the reciprocal non-violence of John and the alien's has (once more) been established, and their shared suspicions about the violence of Matt made clear, their next encounter

will finally play out the non-dialectical consequences of the event. Ellen has been taken by the aliens, and John and Matt are both worriedly arguing about what to do next. John receives a call from the aliens summoning him to the desert, and he leaves immediately with Matt. He is then led by a mysteriously glamorous Ellen to the old mine shaft by which the aliens enter and leave their ship. Here, facing the black hole of the shaft, peering into it and once more trying to catch a glimpse of the aliens who have successfully evaded his sight, he cries: 'Come out in the open, come out where I can really see you.' Here the void of the event appears before him in its literal form. The heavy darkness of the shaft from which the alien's disembodied voice reaches him seems nothing but a cosmic black hole. An effect no doubt amplified when seen in its original 3D.⁴³ The alien refuses, which simply makes John more insistent: 'Let me see you as you really are.' The aliens explain that they are repairing their ship and need John's help, but John is suspicious and accuses them of kidnapping and stealing, and perhaps of murder. The alien seeks to reassure him by once more emphasising a shared values system: 'We have souls, and minds, and we are good,' it maintains. 'Then why are you hiding?' John asks. 'Because you would be horrified at the sight of us.' John refuses this appeal to the monstrous, and finally conditions his co-operation on this revelation, this empirical ratification of what has been withheld from the community. The alien tries one last time: 'Let us stay apart, the people of your world and ours. For if we come together there will only be destruction.' But John isn't accepting this: 'I've got to see you as you really are. Come out or I can't take the responsibility of protecting you.' 'Very well,' the alien replies, finally acquiescing, 'You asked to see this, so you shall.'

The crucial scene of empirical validation of the alien however, is very different from that in *The Blob*, as it avoids the dialectical opposition of the human and the alien, of the inside and its outside as the structure of a human, all too human thought, and posits instead what Badiou calls 'an infinite alterity.'⁴⁴ What makes this scene all the more remarkable is that it makes its point entirely cinematically, in a fine example of the way that cinema thinks. The dialogue between John and the alien we have just recalled has been organised in a shot-counter-shot rhythm, showing a blackness John cannot see into, and the view out of the blackness, the alien seeing John not seeing. As the alien moves forward into the light we get an alien point-of-view shot (with concentric circles) of John peering into the darkness from which it emerges, then John's point-of-view as something emerges from the void. We see with his eyes as the alien appears, approaching the camera until it is seen in half-length, then CUT and we see John in half-length backing away, then CUT to the alien's head in close-up, then CUT to John's head in close-up as he screams, hides his face and turns away. There is a perfect symmetry between the alien's and John's point-of-view's as the film moves from one subjective shot to the other. But more importantly, halfway through the sequence, as the alien is revealed to John, *the alien point-of-view frame disappears*. This is most remarkable as it had been used only a moment before as the alien moved toward John, and

it is the more remarkable considering the alien point-of-view shot is the film's "gimmick", one it uses over and over to indicate a difference now suddenly disappears. Why then, should it be suddenly taken away, and why exactly at this moment of empirical contact and verification of the alien's truth?

Clearly, at this climactic moment the otherness of the aliens, an otherness so obviously insisted on by the alien point-of-view shot, has just as obviously been erased. This erasure serves to emphasise the violence of John's horror, and his gesture of turning away. When we see his horror we see it from the alien's point-of-view, but this point-of-view is now indiscernible from our own, its otherness, in other words, has become our own. Otherness has not disappeared here, and indeed John's horror establishes it once again, but its register has been altered by this symmetrical sequence of shots in which both elements – human and alien – are shown to be as other as each other, and whose points of view here converge *in reality*, at the moment when the alien *appears*. As it really appears, beyond the obvious indicator of its difference in the alien point-of-view frame, it is no different from us than we are from it. Its difference, we could say, has been equalised, or, as Badiou has it, equally distributed amongst an 'infinite alterity'.⁴⁵ The alien arrives.

This remarkable scene from *It Came from Outer Space* denounces any dialectically understood Other-outside and the evil announcement of its destruction as a 'monster', as seen in *The Blob*, in favour of an infinite alterity as the terrain of truth. In doing so it accepts the disruptive and impossible existence of the alien void (John *looks away*), while arguing that this "outside" exists *within* the infinite alterity of appearances as the immanent condition of the emergence of the new, of truth as such. At this point the usefulness of cultural studies in understanding this film ends, because here *It Came from Outer Space* states the problems of cultural difference according to the more fundamental question of the ontology of truth.⁴⁶ According to Badiou's ontology 'there are only multiples of multiples', an infinity of infinities constituted by differences without any form of unification. As a result, 'similar differences are what there is, and since every truth is the coming-to-be of that which is not yet, so differences are then precisely what truths depose, or render insignificant'.⁴⁷ The question then, and this is true of Badiou as it is for *It Came from Outer Space*, is not one of Otherness but rather of what is the same. As a result, the ethics of *It Came from Outer Space* are not concerned with the Other, with difference or a kind of liberal democratic impulse towards peaceful co-existence as espoused in *Star Trek*, but with truth, a truth 'indifferent to differences [... and] the same for all'.⁴⁸ This point is finally made in the most explicit way possible by the film, for after the erasure of the alien point-of-view the aliens appear in human form, most notably as John himself, with whom John conducts the final negotiation. Once more, this culmination of contact between human and alien is conducted as if this difference is banal, as if this difference was no more, but also no less, as Badiou himself suggests 'as between myself and anybody at all, including myself'.⁴⁹



Aliens R Us: *It Came from Outer Space*

It Came from Outer Space is such an interesting and unusual alien film because it understands the encounter with the alien as both an ethical and political event that erases the "Other" and the police force it calls forth in favour of a new truth that demands a universal justice.

The final evaporation of the alien Other in a point-of-view indiscernible from the human articulates an egalitarian and universal principle of justice that demands fidelity to its truth in order to be thought.⁵⁰ This is finally John's achievement, he both resists the unjust xenophobia of Matt, and escapes his own humanity in remaining faithful to the alien event. But this insurgency is in no way a declaration of the rights of an 'Other', and instead involves a banalisation of difference in the genericity of truth.⁵¹ This generic quality of truth proclaims its universality and takes us where no man has gone before by affirming – as the axiom of action – a radical equality. Finally, in *It Came from Outer Space* the truth involves the simultaneous becoming-other of the same (against the human), and the becoming-same of the other (against the alien), in a movement in which alien and man overcome their dialectical co-dependency in a shared fidelity to a universal justice. As we see both John and the aliens act ethically, we see their (and our) commitment to equality emerge despite the respective dangers it poses to both. *It Came from Outer Space* therefore extends Badiou's political philosophy beyond the domain of the human, while retaining its basic premise of an ethical action based not on individual interests but on universal truth. In this sense the actions of John and the aliens 'induce a representation of the capacity of the collective which refers its agents to the strictest equality'.⁵² This equality – once more beautifully expressed in the scene from the film we have analysed at length – 'is in no way a social program. Moreover, it has nothing to do with the social. It is a political maxim, a prescription. Political equality is not what we want or plan, it is what we declare under fire of the event, here and now, as what is, and not as what should be. In the same way, for philosophy, 'justice' cannot be a State program: 'justice' is the qualification of an egalitarian political orientation in act'.⁵³

Could it be possible that cinema's subjective shot, the faithful

point-of-view, achieves its greatest political militancy in *It Came from Outer Space*

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Notes

1. Alain Badiou, 'Philosophy and Desire', in *Infinite Thought, Truth and the Return to Philosophy*, p.56., O. Feltham and J. Clemens (trans. and ed.) (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).
2. For the former reading see Peter Biskind, 'The Russians Are Coming, Arn't They? *Them!* And *The Thing*', in S. Redmond (ed.), *liquid metal, the science fiction film reader*, pp.318-324. (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2004). For the latter see Mark Jancovich, 'Re-examining the 1950s Invasion Narratives', in S. Redmond (ed.), *liquid metal, the science fiction film reader*, pp.325-336. For a bit of both see J. Hoberman, 'Nearer My Pod to Thee', in G. Rickman (ed), *The Science Fiction Film Reader*, pp.140-144. (New York: Limelight Editions, 2004)
3. This understanding of the alien is consistent with the generally accepted framework for science fiction criticism, in which the genre is defined as a process of estrangement from 'empirical' reality that allows a critical interrogation of that reality. This definition of sci-fi as a critical dialectic between 'estrangement and cognition' was first proposed by Darko Suvin in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) For an interesting development of the theoretical background to this position see Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 2000).
4. Alain Badiou, 'Philosophy and truth', in *Infinite Thought, Truth and the Return to Philosophy*, p.61.
5. That we know nothing of the alien is the starting point for many but not all alien films. There are a significant number of films which use the alien to assure us of the universality of 'human' values. Examples include *E.T.* (Steven Spielberg, 1982), *Starman* (John Carpenter, 1984), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Robert Wise, 1951), *Contact* (Robert Zemeckis, 1997).
6. Alain Badiou, 'Philosophy and truth', in *Infinite Thought, Truth and the Return to Philosophy*, p.61. For Badiou philosophy is the thinking of being, 'truth' is only ever the name of that through which thinking and being correspond to one another in a single process.' 'Platonism and Mathematical Ontology', in *Theoretical Writings*, p.53, R. Brassier and A. Toscano (trans. and ed.). (London and New York: Continuum, 2004)
7. Alain Badiou, 'Platonism and Mathematical Ontology', in *Theoretical Writings*, p.62.
8. The axiom, Badiou writes, 'has no basis other than the presupposed vanishing of the event. Thus every truth passes through the pure wager on what has being only in disappearing.' 'On Subtraction', in *Theoretical Writings*, p.112.
9. 'The most crucial requirement for a subtractive ontology,' Badiou writes, 'is that its explicit presentation take the form

of the axiom, which prescribes without naming, rather than that of the dialectical definition.' Alain Badiou, 'The Question of Being Today', *Theoretical Writings*, p.43-4.

10. The literature making this point is extensive. See, for example, Carl Freedman, 'Kubrick's 2001 and the possibility of a Science-Fiction Cinema' in *Science Fiction Studies*, 25 (1998); Neil Badmington, *Alien Chic, Posthumanism and the Other Within* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); Jan Mair, 'Rewriting the 'American Dream': Postmodernism and Otherness in *Independence Day*', in *Aliens R Us, The Other in Science Fiction Cinema*, Z. Sardar and S. Cubitt (eds.) (London, Pluto Press, 2002).
11. This decision is one that cannot be taken for granted. There is a lovely scene early on in Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* where the crews of two aircraft observe a UFO, and when both are asked by those in an airport's control tower if they would like to report it, they reply that they would not.
12. Alain Badiou, 'Philosophy and truth', in *Infinite Thought, Truth and the Return to Philosophy*, p.62.
13. The necessary relation of this vocal ellipsis to the event is explained by Alain Badiou: 'one of the phenomena by which one recognizes an event is that the former is like a point of the real [*point de réel*] that puts language into deadlock.' *Saint Paul, The Foundation of Universalism*, p.46, (italics added) R. Brassier trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).
14. These problems of fidelity to an alien truth are hilariously illustrated in John Carpenter's 1982 remake of *The Thing*, where the alien has no form of its own, and exists only by occupying those living beings it comes in contact with. But the fact that it occupies various beings *simultaneously* and merges them into a single mass merely provides ample opportunity for graphic and grisly special effects displaying its monstrous physical fluidity. It is as if this horrific visibility is a response to the fact that *in itself* the alien has no form, and is a necessarily invisible addition that denies (subtracts from) the ontological consistency of the beings it occupies. Furthermore, the film famously registers the way the problem of truth tends to evaporate in the empirical verification of the alien: upon seeing a human-head-becoming sprout spider's legs and scuttle out the door, one of the characters explodes: "You've got to be fucking kidding!" Here empirical evidence provokes the rejection of truth rather than its verification, for it announces a slippage from an ethics of the alien to a human, all too human morality of the monster. For an interesting discussion of *The Thing*, and this line in particular, that connects the problem of verification to that of spectator belief, see Steve Neale, "You've Got to be Fucking Kidding!": Knowledge, Belief and Judgement in Science Fiction', in *liquid metal, the science fiction film reader*, pp.11-16.
15. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul, The Foundation of Universalism*, p.64.
16. *ibid*, p.65.
17. *ibid*, p.66.
18. *ibid*, p.66.
19. *ibid*, p.67.
20. The wonderful exception to this, and indeed the most Badiouean alien film in this regard, is *2001, A Space Odyssey*.
21. This dangerous sexual element also appears in the scene in a garage with two mechanics. The one under the car explains to the other that he's going on a 'hunting trip' and intends to get so 'roaring, stinking, no good drunk that I won't be able to see.' He invites Marty, who declines because 'Martha' wouldn't like it, to

which the other tells him to make up a story: 'Tell her your going away so that you'll love her more when you get back.' His friend leaves while the other continues, explaining that if he didn't 'cut loose' once and a while he'd 'blow a gasket'. This repressed sexual energy is then directly connected to class warfare. The two mechanics are the only working class characters we see in the film, and the one under the car ends his tirade by exclaiming: 'When I get in on Monday, if Mr Johnson looks at me funny just once, JUST ONCE, I swear I'll...' The response to this open rebellion? The Blob delivers instant death. The Blob may be a monster, but obviously it hates class insubordination as much as anyone.

22. Alain Badiou, *Ethics, An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, p.13-14. Translated by Peter Hallward. (London: Verso, 2001).
23. *ibid*, p.27. As Badiou elaborates, 'The truth is that, in the context of a system of thought that is both a-religious and genuinely contemporary with the truths of our time, the whole ethical predication based upon recognition of the other should be purely and simply abandoned.' *Ethics, An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, p.25.
24. Alain Badiou, *Ethics, An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, p.25.
25. This centrifugal motion has already been established in the film's beautiful opening shot, where the camera flies over a rocky outcrop to reveal a town as the voice-over tells us: 'This is Sand Rock Arizona, of a late evening in early spring. It's a nice town, knowing its past and sure of its future, as it makes ready for the night and the predictable morning.' As the shot fades into one of the empty desert we know, already, that this *security* of the 'predictable' is about to dramatically change.
26. At least according to the documentary accompanying the DVD release of the film. The alien point-of-view shot enjoys a rich and varied history, and following *It Came from Outer Space* is consistently indicated by a distortion of the camera's lens to indicate the alien's look. Such distortions had, of course, already been used to indicate extreme subjective states such as drunkenness, but the extension of the subjective shot to aliens marks an important philosophical extension of this device.
27. The music featured the theremin, which was to become the standard alien instrument, most notably in *Forbidden Planet* (directed by Fred McLeod Wilcox, 1956).
28. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul, The Foundation of Universalism*, p.83.
29. Alain Badiou, *Ethics, An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, p.41-2.
30. *ibid*, p.32.
31. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul, The Foundation of Universalism*, p.81 and 84.
32. *ibid*, p.88.
33. Alain Badiou, *Ethics, An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, p.50.
34. *ibid*, p.54.
35. This is achieved very economically in the opening shots. After the helicopter shot of the town already mentioned we get a fade to a travelling shot of the desert, followed by another fade to John's house.
36. Alain Badiou, *Ethics, An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, p.73.
37. *ibid*, p.72.
38. Badiou's argument about the Jews and National Socialism runs as follows: 'But the name 'Jew' was the name of names, serving to designate those people whose disappearance created, around the presumed German substance promoted by the 'National Socialist revolution' simulacrum, a void that would suffice to identify the substance. The choice of this name relates, without any doubt, to its obvious link with universalism – to what was in effect already *void [vide]* about this name – that is, what was *connected to the universality and eternity of truths*. Nevertheless, inasmuch as it served to organize the extermination, the name 'Jew' was a political creation of the Nazis, without any pre-existing referent. It is a name whose meaning no one can share with the Nazis, a meaning that presumes the simulacrum and fidelity to the simulacrum – and hence the absolute singularity of Nazism as a political sequence.' *ibid*, p.75.
39. Alain Badiou, *Ethics, An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, p.74. Badiou also discusses Stalinist communism in these terms, as well as other 'flaccid and insidious forms' such as '[t]he civilized man of imperial parliamentary democracies', for whom Matt is undoubtedly the strong arm. See, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, p.132. Translated by N. Madarasz. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).
40. Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, p.130.
41. Alain Badiou, *Ethics, An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, p.74.
42. *ibid*, p.76. Italics added.
43. Jack Arnold's intelligent use of this effect has often been commented on. Rather than throw things out of the screen at the audience as most 3D films tended to do, Arnold prefers, as in this scene, to use it to explore an interior depth. This approach was also used in Arnold's other well-known 3D film, *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954). See, Blake Lucas, 'U-I Sci-Fi: Studio Aesthetics and 1950s Metaphysics', in *The Science Fiction Film Reader*, p.75.
44. Alain Badiou, *Ethics, An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, p.25.
45. 'Infinite alterity is quite simply *what there is*. Any experience at all is the infinite deployment of infinite differences. [...] But what we must recognize is that these differences hold no interest for thought, that they amount to nothing more than the infinite and self-evident multiplicity of humankind, as obvious in the difference between me and my cousin from Lyon as it is between the Shi'ite community of Iraq and the fat cowboys of Texas.' Alain Badiou, *ibid*, p.26. It should be pointed out that Badiou is in the process of working on a logic of appearance that would qualify these statements somewhat. For an idea of this see 'The Transcendental' in *Theoretical Writings*, translated from the forthcoming *Logiques des mondes*.
46. Badiou is at his most provocative on this point, arguing that 'post-modern' ethics rests on the untenable position of a 'radical Other' as it is understood by Emmanuel Lévinas. The 'ethics of difference', 'multiculturalism' and any other political practice based on the recognition of otherness appeals to Lévinas' theory of the Other as '*a principle of alterity* which transcends mere finite experience.' Lévinas calls this the 'Altogether-Other', and, Badiou claims, 'it is quite obviously the ethical name for God.' (*Ethics*, p.22) Badiou makes atheism an absolute condition of truth, which cannot rest on any transcendental outside. Nevertheless, alien films have sometimes explored the theological dimension of Otherness, most notably the cloven hoofed aliens that finally help to re-install Mel Gibson's faith in *Signs* (directed by M. Night Shyamalan, 2002), and the debate

between science and faith that receives its resolution in the divine aliens of *Contact* (directed by Robert Zemeckis, 1997). Despite the opposing roles for aliens in the two films (baddies and goodies respectively), both argue for the necessity of faith in a transcendental Other as the (religious) consequence of the phenomenal appearance of aliens.

47. Alain Badiou, *Ethics, An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, p.27.
48. *ibid*, p.27.
49. *ibid*, p.26.
50. In this sense *It Came from Outer Space* poses the same political question as Badiou: 'Can there be a just politics? Or a politics which *does justice* to thought?', 'Philosophy and politics' *Infinite Thought*, p. 69. See also, 'Politics as a Truth Procedure', *Theoretical Writings*.
51. For Badiou this makes the production of truth an 'infinite production' irreducible to established knowledge and 'determined only by the activity of those faithful to this event, it can be said that generic thinking is, in the widest sense of the term, militant thinking,' *Manifesto for Philosophy*, p. 81.
52. Alain Badiou, 'Philosophy and politics', *Infinite Thought*, p.70.
53. *ibid*, p.72.