Badiou, Derrida and *The Matrix:*

Cultural Criticism between Objectless Subjects and Subjectless Objects

> Il arrive que quelque chose arrive. Que quelque chose nous arrive. Et ces points d'exception, dont toute vérité procède, l'art a pour mission de les garder, de les faire briller, de les détenir, stellaires, dans le tissu reconstitué de notre patience.[1]
>
> …dès lors que l'humain n'est plus le fin mot de l'histoire…[2]

Post-Theory and Posthumanism

This essay takes Alain Badiou's philosophical ideas to the movies. In doing so, it follows a lead provided by Badiou himself who recently published his thoughts on *The Matrix*.[3] For Badiou, art, and by implication all creative cultural signifying practices, are one of the four possible "truth-procedures" (the other three being politics, science and love) through which a subject (of truth) can "arrive".

This article pursues a combination of several interests: in the context of the latest wave of apocalyptism about theory, that is the increasing intensity of the talk about "post-theory", what can be done to defend the acquisitions of theory against a simplistic anti-theoretical backlash on the one hand and a post-theoretical desire to outdo theory by some kind of simple linear succession and repression, on the other? The current candidate for this, a seemingly "straightforward" succession is "posthumanism." In the face of these two current "post-theoretical" options it seems important to defend theory against both reaction and succession in the face of the "event" or advent of what is sometimes referred to in a rather too celebratory fashion as "posthumanity" or "posthuman condition."

Instead, adapting Bruno Latour's phrase from another but not unrelated context, it will be argued here that "we [may] have never been theoretical [enough]."

What seems extremely desirable in this context is a return to a political thinking about the subject, aided by for example Alain Badiou's philosophical model, and which would be based on a renewed critical practice extended to all cultural forms, to evaluate and create possibilities for intellectual interventions in the current ideological debate about the future of "humanity" and the new situation arising after the supposed event of the posthuman. It is true that posthumanism in this respect plays an ambiguous role in the present argument: on the one hand it is a discourse that comprises the controversial discussion about the increasing "prosthesisation" of the human, the gradual replacement of essentialist humanism by "man's" technological other, his successor (with its focus on techno-scientific and late capitalist or postmodern cultural practices which often leaves theory uncalled for and therefore somehow needs to be recaptured and rejoined by thinking and theoretical/philosophical questions), on the other hand, posthumanism may also be seen as the current or most advanced form of a (post-)theory, namely as the latest wave and the most radical critique of the liberal humanist subject.[4]

The Subject of Science Fiction – Philosophy Goes to the Movies

Using Badiou for a reading of *The Matrix* will here serve to explore the possibility of a cultural criticism that is re-theorised and ready to engage with the posthuman subject. *The Matrix Trilogy*[5] has almost instantly become a cult movie series and has had enormous

influence on the general "cultural imaginary." Taking Badiou to the movies means testing his thoughts on critical practice, on a reading of cultural forms even if this may be against some of Badiou's own principles about "truth-procedures."[6] The fundamental conviction that informs this double reading is that change – be it political or cultural – can only occur through critical subjects performing critical and theoretically informed readings. Badiou's notion of the subject of truth is important for cultural criticism because it will add (following Heidegger, Lacan, Deleuze, and, to some extent, Derrida) a very particular focus on truth as an event for a subject in a singular but concrete situation which nevertheless is not fixed but remains to be fulfilled. This notion of the event is, in psychoanalytic terms, very close to being "traumatic," on the one hand, while on the other it is certainly not unrelated – despite Badiou's refreshing but also in many ways troubling polemic against all forms of "ethics" that involve notions of heterological otherness – to an ethico-political thinking that sees the event as a dis-propriation of the subject. This subject is separated from its (imaginary) identity and identity therefore forms an untenable ground for any (political) decision without the acknowledgement of the irreducible precedence of a radical other.

The kind of reading of *The Matrix*, through Badiou and others, suggested here, attempts to show, however, that a reconciliation between a political philosophy of the truthfulness of the event and an ethics of alterity can be productive for cultural criticism. It thus proceeds by introducing a Derridean fictional "as if" (*comme si*) into the argument and the reading. This reading of *The Matrix* is informed by a thinking of the event along Badiou's lines but at the same time produces critical insights into Badiou's work, philosophy and theory and about "culture," as the sum of its signifying practices.

Science fiction (film) is of course a very specific form of fiction (a very specific form of the "as if") – a visualisation of what remains to-come *and* what is already thinkable, envisageable. Like any fiction SF narrates stories about the transformation of subjectivity. It transposes these stories into an "other" place (*u-topos*) and an "other" time (*u-chronos*), which means it is concerned with a presence that always differs from itself and is already always deferred (very much like Derrida's *différance*). It thus repeats and activates the original trauma of identity formation (as understood in Lacan's explanation of the mirror stage); hence the persistence of its "nostalgic" closures, its self-protective "returns" to the "self-same" in the form of transformed/transfigured/purified "humanity." What is at stake in the particular "economy" of SF is the reappropriation and repression of the "essence" of "man." A posthumanist reading of SF, strictly speaking, must therefore be a deconstructive reading of these moments of negation – negation of the otherness and the monstrosity that "shows" in the inhuman, the non-human, the trans-human – and instead must affirm this dangerous monstrosity unconditionally.

The question that follows is whether the transformation of subjectivity – dissolution, displacement and re-subjugation/coagulation of subject positions – involved in SF is the expression of the desire for a "finally objectless subject" (as anticipated by Badiou, but also in the Nietzschean arrival of the "more (human)-than-man," the overman), or rather the fantasy of a "finally subjectless object" (a world thoroughly

cleansed of everything human, for example in the sometimes dystopian, sometimes euphoric *Terminator* scenario in which humanity has been replaced by its machinic other)?

SF constitutes "a mode of awareness" that hesitates between the "belief that certain ideas and images of scientific-technological transformations of the world can be *entertained*" and "the rational recognition that they may be *realized*", and, on the other hand, "the belief in the immanent possibility… of those transformations" and the "reflection about their possible ethical, social, and spiritual interpretations".[7] SF seems caught in the middle of a politics of science – the possible, the inevitable, and an ethics of truth, following Badiou – the advent of a subject to a truth-process necessary for the writing of the situation that saves the event. It seems therefore that the event of posthuman technology at once promises to overcome, domesticate or eliminate the nonhuman and at the same time helps incorporating it into the very essence of human truth. Science is thus that "fictional" event (of an "as if") that constitutes the posthuman truth of what Baudrillard names our hyperreal condition as the "derealising" of human space.

In many ways, *The Matrix* is a philosophical film: it asks old philosophical questions and emplots philosophical scenarios. In doing so it also poses ethico-political questions. *The Matrix* is a "philosophical film" and in a sense the film of philosophy as the quest truth and especially the truth about (social) reality (Plato's cave, Descartes' evil demon and Baudrillard's evil demon of images constitute one filiation of *The Matrix*, while marxism, (Christian) messianism and Greek mythology are its ideological inventory). More precisely, however, *The Matrix* is a film about the "event" (of truth and

its transformatory power). One could say that what Badiou, science fiction, theory and posthumanism share is a certain irreducibly utopian thinking – a messianism with or without messiah,[8] and a certain pre-occupation with the "*comme si*" and the trans- or performative. Fiction represents a reality of the "as if;" speculative theory about the event (either as traumatic or fatal) does the same. In this sense, both areas share a recognition that the virtual is always at the heart of human reality, or as Derrida would say, an "as if" is always possible. It is always possible to assume an "as if," whose performative force in fact creates the event by pre-empting it. Derrida claims that it is with the history of the "as if" – in its undecidable performative and constative aspects – that the "humanities-to-come" will have to engage.[9] But theory would have to deconstruct the performativity and constativity of the "as if" whose dominant discourse occurs through fiction (as "what *figures* but also what *makes*").[10] This is why fiction or literature, including science fiction, of course, must be one of the main sources and targets for theory which questions the event by evaluating the possibilities of its arrival. The question is: can anything arrive from (science) fiction's "as if," and from its underlying posthumanist notions of virtuality?[11] What *arrivant* lies beyond the virtual? This is the question that informs *The Matrix*, and many other post-representational science fiction films – i.e. films whose posthumanism propels them towards imagining a future where cinematic representation even of the most virtual and technologically sophisticated form threatens to break down and render obsolete the filmic logic as such.[12] While keeping in mind the usually conservative turn given to these science fiction scenarios at their points of resolution, science fiction can undoubtedly inform the thinking of the event (the "as if") and the subject in terms of its inventing an imaginary other space through which cultural change

may arrive, as long as the distinction between the performative and the constative remains meaningful. But what if, as Derrida asks, the belief that an event usually takes place by breaking through the order of the "as if," and that therefore the place of the real is sufficient to displace the logic of the "as if," what if "the place itself becomes virtual, freed from its territorial… rootedness and when it becomes subject to the modality of an 'as if'?"[13] In that context, the only event possible must be the "as if" itself. Derrida therefore, logically, pushes the logic of the "as if" to its extremes – by positing that "only the impossible can (truly) arrive:"

> No surprise thus, no event in the strong sense… the pure singular eventness of *what* arrives or of *who* arrives (which is what I call the *arrivant*), it would suppose an *irruption* that punctures the horizon, *interrupting* any performative organization, any convention, or any context that can be dominated by conventionality. Which is to say that this event takes place only to the extent where it does not allow itself to be domesticated by any "as if," or at least by any "as if" that can already be read, decoded, or articulated *as such*… It is too often said that the performative produces the event of which it speaks. One must also realize that, inversely, where there is a performative, an event worthy of the name cannot arrive.[14]

A reading of science fiction and posthumanism is thus concerned with its own impossibility and its unthought, its "real" so to speak – where the logic of the "as if" must break down and something altogether other *will have* arrived. This future anterior regulates the question of the "event" as it is being thought in theory today. Badiou, Derrida and Baudrillard all play with this apocalyptic logic, of how to speak so that the

event can arrive: or, how to break out of the matrix – whether it be interpreted as capitalism, metaphysics or hyperreality. The only hope of establishing a meaningful link with truth and reality lies in renouncing any link in exchange for a mere possibility of the truthful event ("as if" this were possible). The only subject thinkable under these circumstances is that "Thing," that entity, that void which establishes a link by cutting itself off (in a process of *déliaison*), by subtracting it(s)self.

Dire l'événement, est-ce possible?[15] Only as its impossible-possibility. In accepting the pertinence of this question one must be allowed to project Badiou's specific problematic of "being and event" and their relation onto fiction and in particular science fiction. Cultural critcism's task in this specific context would then become a reading of the event and its impossible-possibility as articulated through the "as if" of (science) fiction. Both Derrida and Badiou share to some extent at least the idea of the event as incomplete inscription process, with on the one hand, a traumatic truth-to-come, as a kind of Kantian regulative idea, and on the other, a singularity and situationist specificity of a truth-for-a-subject that provides a possibility for an *ad hoc* and unpremeditated "*lien social*" – Badiou's "(la) politique"[16] – in its very structure of general *déliaison*.[17]

The Matrix, *Posthumanism and the Event*

What is the event in or of *The Matrix*? There are in fact two cases of "eventuality," occurring in the two central scenes, which together have the structure of an anastrophe and a catastrophe in this cosmic drama. The first event would probably not fulfill

8

Badiou's criteria – it is Neo's moment of recognition, realizing the true extent of human oppression by the machines. The second, the properly apocalyptic or catastrophic moment and event of truth, is Neo's "becoming" posthuman, his definitive entry into and embodiment within the matrix cyberspace. It may be possible to read Neo's resurrection and second coming as an event in the context of current posthumanist thinking, i.e. as an event that creates the situation out of which the posthuman subject must derive its fidelity to the event as a truth-process. The question that theory may thus put to the text of science fiction is: in what sense is this advet of the posthuman an event? What happens to its subject? What happens to its body? What is its truth? And what is its real?

To start with the first event scene: it is a fairly standard occurrence of recognition. It is an induced event in which Morpheus, the gatekeeper of reality and figure of benign paternal authority, proposes a choice to Neo, whom he believes to be the "One,"[18] or the future savior of humanity: Neo's choice is between the blue pill of forgetting, of acceptance of continued enslavement in hyperreality, and the red pill of recognition, resistance and truth. Greek mythology, Christian messianism and marxist notions of ideology are all at play in this moment of recognition; Plato's cave, the question of faith and knowledge, and the ambiguity of subjectivation coincide in this "choice" that Neo is offered. The red pill initiates a tracing process necessary to find out the exact location of Neo's real (his unimaginable true self), his body. The scene of Neo's death in virtuality and rebirth into reality is a kind of inverted mirror stage. He is literally liquified and turned inside out, and melts into his own mirror reflection in a form of psychotic self-annihilation and identification with the other. The next thing one realizes is the apocalyptic scenario of mankind's true condition. The world that the *Terminator* films

had merely anticipated has already been and gone, the apocalypse has already taken place without, as usual, arriving completely. Humanity has lost its battle against its successor, the machines, and is now, in turn, being exploited as a provider of natural and environmentally friendly human battery cells. In a later scene Morpheus holds up a battery to Neo which looks, somewhat reassuringly, like "Duracell" – some things evidently last longer than others (a clear similarity with the endurance of other brands in SF like Coca Cola in *Blade Runner* for example). As a result of Neo's awakening, his now conscious body has become useless to the machines and is flushed out of its cocoon and recuperated by Morpheus's group of cyberrebels, who greet him with the ominous words: "welcome to the real world" (thus anticipating the later reference to Baudrillard's "desert of the real").

The event structure of this scene of course has nothing to do with the significance given to the term in either Badiou's or Derrida's (or Lyotard's) thought. A simple Althusserian reading of the subject's interpellation, misrecognition and ideology's necessary overdetermination would be sufficient to analyze this scene. Nevertheless it is an event that is based on a decision, not by a free subject, but rather a decision of the ideological other (under the conditions of the subject-supposed-to-know). It is a decision which clearly changes the subject's place in the imaginary and symbolic order and also displaces his real, even though it merely exchanges one master signifier for another. For Neo, it is an *Er-eignis*, a Heideggerian *enowning*, through which a change if not in true subjectivity, then at least in identity takes place. It is a moment when the self rebuilds itself through an appropriation of its own other, a moment of "secretion" in which the otherness of this other is ejected and made "obscene." Neo's former virtual existence in

the matrix now becomes the new real (unimaginable, unspeakable) of his real life among the rebels. The electronic sound sequence heard during the liquid mirror scene, just as the mercury-like liquid is about to engulf Neo's interior (a scene which seems almost like the inversion of the final moments of the T 2000 model in *Terminator* 2), indicates the expiring of the (digital) ghost in the machine, Neo's virtual existence. Virtuality, from now on is what structures Neo's desire, the void of his truth. In this sense Neo (re)becomes similar to the proto-posthuman living at once in and out of cyberspace, and which is celebrated by so many posthumanist texts. Ironically, it is now that Neo's situation now resembles more closely our own, in facing an uncertain future of posthumanity, the impossible-possibility of a real encounter with death in virtuality. Only the previous recognition of his virtual condition as loss, however, can allow him to experience the reality of his desire. Although there is nothing that may be objectively called truth here – all this happens in a SF that anticipates a dystopian future; for the viewer the moment before Neo's recognition is just as real or unreal as the moment after – the basic logic of identity formation holds, whether fictional or not. This is the peculiarity of the fictional "as if." The question however is, can and should this logic be resisted? Is it 'false' and should it thus be ignored or overcome?

The second scene, could be read "as if" it fulfilled the criteria of Badiou's notion for an event. It is an event without decision, something absolutely unforeseen happens: an apotheosis. Neo's physical death is reversed, he becomes the One, the Subject to truth who determines the situation by changing the matrix. In the process one could say that he becomes "posthuman." Badiou's event is closely related to the idea of a political subject: what seems appropriate here to claim the advent of subjectivity for Neo is his very

function as messiah, as the One. Badiou himself uses the resurrection of Christ as narrated by Paul as example of an event and of the advent of a subject to truth. Neo's subjectivity, his specific and singular future anterior lies in determining the universal truth out of the multiplicity that may constitute his being in the posthuman situation. Neo's subjectivity is that which he will become as the result of the event and his fidelity to it; and the event is that which acts as a supplement to Neo's being and forces him towards a truth process that remains truthful to the event-supplement. In that sense, Neo's subjectivity (re)creates the event, which is ultimately depending on faith. Outside of this subjectivity, the event strictly speaking does not exist. Neo's subjectivity depends on his own belief, as the Oracle (and also the little boy whose mind bends the spoon) explains. The event is also that which makes the world, i.e. the matrix, meaningful for the subject and thus open to change and militant action. The structured but multiple character of the new situation we might call posthuman is the result of the (unnamable) event, which calls for truth and the universal. One could argue that the knowledge of the matrix's existence for Neo unfolds a situation which is interrupted by his becoming posthuman, by that which exceeds his being, his not or no-longer being (which is not death). This event seems to develop *ex nihilo*. The event is therefore the truth of the situation, its previous void or real which leads to a complete restructuring of the matrix – the matrix or the system turned against itself just like Neo was turned inside-out before. What has been defining Neo as subject is his fidelity to the event. Although, strictly speaking, the "Neo-subject" comes after the event, and is a result of it, the truth process demands a trauma-like re-inscription of its traces within the situation, very similar to what Slavoj Žižek refers to in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, as the traumatic logic of the symptom, which

again shows the affinity between science fiction, posthumanism, theory and philosophies of the event.[19]

The subject, however, cannot completely appropriate truth because it exceeds him or her in its irreducible multiplicity and eventfulness. The truth-event's repositioning makes it possible for the subject to perceive the hitherto blind spot of the real; in Neo's case this is his being neither virtual nor physical but in-between. This "existence without existence," or spectrality, may however be the inevitable *différance* (deferred difference) of any ontology based on the idea of presence and origin.[20] The posthuman event thus cannot be a revelation but rather constitutes an act of interpreting (re)in(ter)vention. As Slavoj Žižek claims: "Event is the traumatic encounter with the Real… while its denomination is its inscription into language… In Lacanese, Event is object a, while denomination is the new signifier that establishes… for Badiou, the new readability of the situation on the basis of Decision".[21] Badiou's subject, like Althusser's and Lacan's, is therefore never outside ideology but is always ideological and hence political rather than ethical. Neo's transubstantiation and apotheosis could thus serve as a sign of the immortality and universality that the subject has access to through his fidelity to the event.

Badiou's subject is the wager of a subject without an object, pure subjectivity that does not constitute itself "on the back of" an object. Badiou's starting point here is the claim that "the form of the object cannot in any way sustain the enterprise of truth,"[22] only a subject can. Badiou therefore wants to "de-objectify the space of the subject" and his version of the post- or trans-humanist subject is "the very same subject dissociated or subtracted from reflexive jurisdiction, un-constituting, untied from all supports unrelated

to the process of truth."[23] Does not cyberspace promise to be precisely the ideal location for a finally objectless subject?

On the other hand, of course, cyberspace is of course part of the ongoing deterritorialisation, delocalisation or dislocation of the subject which contradicts Badiou's notion of truth for a subject; he calls "subject the local or finite status of a truth. A subject is what is *locally born out.*"[24] Truth always precedes this local subject in the sense that "the subject is woven out of a truth, it is what exists of truth in limited fragments." Truth arrives through the subject, it passes through it. Truth, for Badiou, following Lacan, is "making a hole in knowledge."[25] The subject therefore is a (pre-ontological) "void"[26] that constitutes the "very gap filled in by the gesture of subjectivization."[27] Badiou's axioms for a truth-event-subject complex are the following: a truth is "post-eventual" (a process that works its way backward from a naming of the event as a void, in our case, that would be the moment "we" became "posthuman"); the process of a truth is fidelity to this event (Neo's posthuman subjectivity lies in his fidelity towards the name and the event of his "becoming the matrix"); the name of the event is connected to the "terms of the situation" which nevertheless ultimately remains "infinite" and can never be fully present (Neo's spectrality therefore seems structurally necessary as symbolic of a new "posthuman" cyber-subjectivity); as long as the knowledge of a situation does not exceed its "infinity", that is as long as the situation is "open" and accepted in its irreducible multiplicity there will have been truth (as long as the posthuman remains untotalisable as event, fidelity to its truth remains possible and "universal"). Neo remains a (posthuman) subject as long as his substance remains multiple or undecidable, as long as he resists the transcendental position of totalised experience as presence, as long he remains the generic subject of a

truth process, as long as he is not seen as either the result or origin but rather as in excess of the posthuman situation, or, indeed, as long as he remains a "faithful connection operator" between truth and the event as name. Neo's transubstantiation, his becoming (part of) the matrix could thus be described, following Badiou, as his "sujectivisation:" "the emergence of an operator that is consecutive to the interventional naming that decides the event."[28]

It does not seem irrelevant that Neo's advent and subjectivization is in fact first triggered by the treason of a false operator, Cypher who plays the Judas part in the story. Symbolically one could say that it is the treachery of the void or the number, the digit that nearly spoils the posthuman event, or at least wrongly names it. Badiou, however, would resist the looming metaphysical closure involving truth, knowledge and subject here by positing that truth must ultimately remain unknowable to its subject: "If a truth is something new, what is the essential philosophical problem concerning truth? 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."[29] The event remains undecidable in the very decision of the subject of which it is an effect: "The undecidability of the event 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."[30] Neo, as posthuman subject, is a "local moment of the truth" which necessarily transcends his finality in being infinite: "every truth transcends the subject precisely because its whole being consists in supporting the effectuation of

that truth."[31] However, this subject is confident through belief (which takes the form of "event-knowledge") and the generation of "namings" that only have referents in the future anterior.

This naming process forms the possible nexus between Badiou's thought, Christianity, science fiction and posthumanist utopia: such names, Badiou asserts, will have been assigned referents or meanings when that situation will have come into being in which the indiscernible, which is only represented (included), is finally presented, as a truth of the former situation. Would it thus be possible to argue that Neo's posthuman adventure presents the truth of his former recognition, of his void and the annihilation of his virtuality? Does the posthuman name a truth that will have been, that the apocalypse has already taken place, that the human never existed? This would return me to my starting point in terms of (post)theory. Could it now be said that the truth of the posthuman will have been in naming the radically human and will thus allow one to ask: have we ever been human (enough)? Again Badiou would probably resist closure here by claiming: "It is entirely impossible to anticipate or to represent a truth, as it comes to be only in the course of evaluations or connections that are incalculable, their succession being solely ruled by encounters with the terms of the situation."[32] But can one really have it both ways so to speak: a situation determining a truth which unfolds out of random encounters, or the "objectless" subject as either the "real" of a situation or a mere hypothesis: "a subject is… at once the *real* of the procedure… and that which uses names to make hypotheses about truth?"[33]

This is where I would like to return once more to the scene of the posthuman event in *The Matrix* and ask the question of its political and ethical implications: is not

Neo's (fictional, "as if") posthumanity also an invention and intervention of the other? It is, after all, through the encounter with agent Smith, the sentient program, that or who polices the matrix – that is with ideological "agency" as such – that Neo's posthumanity comes into being, as excess of the matrix, and therefore as its truth. It is not so much an encounter with agent Smith as imaginary other, as other-than-*me* (i.e. not his bodily similarity, his virtual humanity) but rather as other-than-other (agent Smith's unknown ontological status: who or what is "he;" his post-subjectivity and "void;" the undecidability between human-body and machine, but pure anti-representation, similar to the protean T 2000 model which can "inhabit" any human form) which needs to be appropriated by Neo in order to make truth in the form of political resistance arrive. It is clear from the start that it is not their difference that separates Neo and Agent Smith, it is their uncanny resemblance, their uncanny and ironic sameness which accounts for much of the viewer's fascination with Smith.

The real of the posthuman out of which Neo's emancipatory politics could evolve, the impossible of the situation, is thus in fact humanity's lack of being(-in-the-world). But what if the posthuman was just a perpetuation of this original lack? A renewed obliteration of the trace or the truth that long before the distinction between the human and the inhuman (the non-human, trans-human and post-human) already existed in a kind of (Derridean) arch-virtuality, the hauntology of a spectral origin, more virtual and more real than any cyberspace, any space at all, virtual or real? What if the matrix (as a kind of Baudrillardian object-world of seduction) always precedes the human or posthuman, and every event, every twist and turn of the subject (human or posthuman) has already been marked, written, codified following an absolutely irretrievable origin which would be the

birth of humanity, representation and space?[34] Would Badiou's (ethics of) truth be able to recognize this? Can one say, in the face of Badiou's imperative, "Keep going! (*Continuez*)," which he derives from Beckett's (absurdist) existentialism,[35] as that which ethics calls out to the subject, that: as long as we stay away from the three forms of evil, as long as we don't betray the event of the posthuman, as long as we don't confuse it with its simulacrum, as long as we don't succumb to the terror of its absolutization (by, like Morpheus, obsessively giving names to everything that arrives [cf. his insistent 'He's the One'], which Badiou identifies as the proper sense of religion)? Is there such a thing as localized posthumanity if it is true that there cannot be any humanity unless through "rooted particular truths?"[36]

In a sense, Badiou's objectless subject, as Peter Hallward points out,[37] seems diametrically opposed to Baudrillard's thought, for whom, it would seem, posthuman hyperreality is characterized by a disappearance of the subject, and the threat of an object without subject. It is clear that both – Badiou's and Baudrillard's – are options that are being taken up within current posthumanist thinking, and indeed are at work within the logic of *The Matrix*. For Baudrillard, the evil lies in the fact that in hyperreality the apocalypse can no longer happen. One could argue that in *The Matrix* Neo is just the kind of paroxyst that Baudrillard would have in mind. *The Matrix*, famously, cites Baudrillard in a scene towards the beginning when the hacker Neo illegally sells virtual experiences (the future of drug dealing) to a client. He stores these disks in a hollowed out copy of Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*[38] which opens at the starting page of the last chapter, "On Nihilism". So the film is at once inspired by and also comments on (i.e. fictionalizes or virtualizes) Baudrillard – the hollowing out of the book might be seen as

symbolic in this context. *The Matrix* describes *le crime parfait*: the elimination of the real world, of the original (fatal) illusion. In this sense the machines who (re)invented the world as illusion of an illusion, as a perfect copy, deprive humanity of its "evil." Neo could thus be seen, in Baudrillardian terms as a paroxyt-terrorist, who situates himself within this apparent impossibility of exchange of one world for another and thinks through this "undecidabilty between subject and object."[39] Neo in his exploding of the matrix from inside illustrates Baudrillard's impossible nostalgia for (theoretical) terrorism that tries to overcome the terrorism of the system and regain the possibility of finality, of death and hence for the possibility of a subject. In a sense Neo's final challenge to the matrix at the very end, when he promises certain changes to the reality program of the matrix could also be interpreted as resonating with the final sentence in Baudrillard's "On Nihilism". Neo's future realm may be that of the object, of immortal appearances independent from meaning which is "where seduction begins."[40]

For both Badiou and Baudrillard, in a sense, the event has happened and it is now just a matter to imagine it, if we can or dare. Hence the inevitable doubling of the event as described in *The Matrix*: the moment of recognition – that the event has taken place, and the moment of action – what to do with the event, or bringing about/driving home (the truth of) the event. *The Matrix*, however, is part of the symptom (not in the sense of pathology but of the underlying structure of the unthinkable real). Neo, by incorporating the other (Agent Smith), becomes the Other, he becomes the matrix, and, paradoxically, he embodies the matrix and thus truly becomes the digital self he always was. The question is whether this is still human, already posthuman, or merely inhuman?

In terms of *The Matrix*'s dénouement it may be worth recalling Slavoj Žižek's account of a virtual catastrophe, and linking it to Neo's Baudrillardian gesture of overreaching:

> The prospect of the accomplished digitalization of all information… [cf. Neo's instant access to the matrix, he is no longer relying on being materially jacked in] promises the almost perfect materialization of the big Other: out there in the machine, "everything will be written," a complete symbolic redoubling of reality will take place. This prospect of a perfect symbolic accountancy also augurs a new type of catastrophe in which a sudden disturbance in the digital network (an extra effective virus, say) [cf. Neo's virus-like threat to infect and thus to change maybe even destroy the whole matrix] erases the computerized "big Other," leaving the external "real reality" intact [cf. Neo's achievement of humanity's liberation and rebirth into reality].[41]

Žižek's scepticism, however, should warn us against Neo's idealism, namely that the denegation of this virtual catastrophe may not lead to the desired result: "although, in 'real life,' nothing whatsoever happens, and things seem to follow their course, the catastrophe is total and complete, since 'reality' is all of a sudden deprived of its symbolic support…"[42]

Conclusion: Bad-you

What is most curious about Badiou's thought, maybe ironically, there is literally no space for a significant other (no "you") in Badiou's subjectivity. Badiou's political thought is a

20

thought of I's and We's, not you's. It seems however that something like the truth as attainable for a subject should require a combination of elements which, nevertheless do not necessarily form a dialectic. It is not a question of fusing or collapsing the two moments referred to in *The Matrix* but which may rather be true for any narrative involving subjectivization, i.e. in fact for any narrative. The moment of recognition analyzed in terms of an ethics of truth, as formulated by Badiou, whose ethics nevertheless asks political questions about a subject and its access to the truth in a specific situation, produces a post-evenemental subject that involves agency and a universal notion of truth. It is not strictly speaking dialogic and turned towards the other. It may constitute a *déliaison* rather than a *lien social*. It cannot escape a certain violence, and Badiou's ethical imperative of the "keep going", of the demand of the subject to be true to himself and to honor the fidelity to the event (like Lacan's injunction to never give up on your desire), is interestingly close to Camus' Sisyphean existentialism. As Simon Critchley rightly objects, it is the heroism which makes this ethical attitude vulnerable to the most reactionary forms of humanism.[43]

On the other hand, everything Badiou says about the potential conservatism of an ethics of alterity translated into multiculturalism, communitarianism, or "silly left culturalism" and identity politics is absolutely pertinent and true (and a lot of cultural criticism has to acknowledge responsibility here).[44] As mentioned above, Badiou's subject has the structure of a trauma; its goal is to remain true to the traumatic event and to speak its truth. But as the reading of *The Matrix* tries to show, the actual moment of recognition and return is indeed necessarily a moment of radical alterity and leads to an inevitable forgetting of the real. This is where Baudrillard's "desert of the real", Lacan's

void and Badiou's event differ somewhat from Derrida's notion of otherness. "*Tout autre est tout autre*"[45] does of course mean that radical alterity is tautological and hence beyond any logic and philosophical enquiry, but it also means that this universalism is precisely not pure (e.g. mystical or anti-philosophical) because it is at the same time specific and singular, situated, one might say. The concrete other which is always other to a self and also other to any other only arrives through this structural opening. It is always a concrete other that is foreclosed by a subject. This makes the other specific while remaining other. It is thus the second moment, the moment of self-appropriation as action-transformation – the event-apotheosis-miracle proper – that needs to be supplemented by an ethics of alterity – which is, strictly speaking not a simple ethics, as Derrida says in his reading of Levinas, but an "ethics of an ethics", a specific kind of meta-ethics that prevents (Levinasian) ethics from drifting off into theology (or non-philosophy, as Badiou would say). Derrida returns ethics towards philosophy and towards politics. The best illustration for this is a statement by Derrida in *Altérités*:

> Of course, in order to respect the entirely other of alterity, alteration itself — which always presupposes a contact, or an intervention, a socio-political, psycho- etc. transformation — alteration itself would have to be impossible. If the other remains at an infinite distance, and this is the condition on which the other is other, not only can the other not touch me, or affect me, but the other cannot even alter anything. This relation to the entirely other would ultimately leave everything unchanged, unaltered. And it is of an irrefutable logic that pure alterity should be incompatible with the logic of alteration. There is a moment, I feel, when one must re-start negotiating — this is of a political, or

historical concern. This means that if one restricts oneself to the pure respect

for this alterity without alteration, one always runs the risk of lending oneself

to immobilism, to conservatism, etc., that is to the obliteration of alterity

itself… There is no reasonable, rational response to this question. There is no

logic.[46]

To return therefore to my initial question: why is it that at this historical moment,

just when technologically we are about to invent a global public sphere for all humanity,

this humanity disappears and is reflected back to us as the inhuman, or the posthuman?

Does this announce a disappearance, a return or a re-invention of the human?[47] The

anxiety and desire of "becoming posthuman" may signal a certain necessity to

reconceptualise the human as long as theory keeps remembering the location of thought

and agency. As long as the subject is being thought as at once "emergent" (i.e. we have

always been posthuman *and* (therefore) never human enough), and as long theory does

not forget a certain historical materialism (e.g. of the body and its processes of

embodiment).[48] Subjectivity as both the process and result of an event, to return to

Badiou, is the unsurpassable of theory, of thinking, which nevertheless continually has to

be thought through every time. The subject of theory refers to both events that were seen

in *The Matrix*: the event of recognition which starts a process of self-reflection and

hybridization which always originates in the other and in the name of an absolutely

Other; and the event of apotheosis understood as the interminable project of purification,

becoming universal, immortal etc. Between these two poles, theory and reading, thinking

and culture, carry out their ongoing work of re-writing the event. Any posthumanism,

following Badiou, must be interrogated in terms of its betrayal of the event (disavowal,

imitation, ontologization).[49] As long as this fidelity to the event allows for a critical interrogation by the same subject that is also the effect of the event, whose task it is to be truthful to "its" event, theory has a place – a place between politics and ethics, between a truth-event, and the question of the other.

Finally: What does this mean therefore for my attempted return to cultural criticism and the current practice of theory? When speaking of post-theory and posthumanism in relation to the question of technology and the future of "man" we must avoid certain pitfalls staked out in this reading of Badiou, Derrida and others through the "symptomatic" productions (or texts) reflecting the current cultural imaginary (e.g. *The Matrix*, the posthuman, etc.). With Badiou we must ask how truthful posthumanism in theory and practice is to the event it represents in anticipation (i.e. our "posthuman condition"). Against Badiou, we must also recognize that any ethical moment of truth is always already split by an other, by an "as if." The posthuman must be interrogated both as to its truth and its other. This interrogation can only occur through reading, i.e. through the co-incidence of the subject and the event which *is* reading. Whether this is this an ethical or a political imperative, both or neither, remains undecidable.

---

[1] Alain Badiou, *Beckett – l'increvable désir* (Paris: Hachette, 1995), 79: "It so happens that something arrives. That something happens and arrives to us. It is the mission of art to protect, to let shine forth, starlike, these exceptional situations, out of which every truth emerges, and keep them in the reconstructed tissue of our patience." [All translations unless indicated otherwise are mine.]

[2] Jean Baudrillard, *Le Paroxyste indifferent – entretiens avec Philippe Petit* (Paris: Grasset, 1997), 15 : "as soon as the human is no longer the last and finest word of history…"

[3] See Alain Badiou *et al.*, *Matrix – machine philosophique* (Paris: Ellipses, 2003), 120-129. Badiou here produces a sketch of a philosophical analysis of David Cronenberg's *eXistenZ* (1999), Vincenzo Natali's

Cube (1999) and *The Matrix*. Badiou ends by stating that for him *The Matrix* is, from a philosophical point of view, the strongest of the three because it remains closest to Plato. Its main question is: "what is a subject who fights its enslavement by an appearance which is itself a subjectivated form of enslavement to biology?" (125).

4 Cf. Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, "What's Wrong With Posthumanism?" Rhizomes 7 ("Theory's Others," Fall 2003), http://rhizomes.net/issue7/callus.htm

5 *The Matrix*, dir: Andy and Larry Wachowski; prod. Joel Silver; cast Keanu Reeves, Laurence Fishburne, Carrie-Anne Moss, Hugo Weaving (1999); *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003).

6 See for example Badiou's hesitation when asked (by Peter Hallward) about the "autonomy of truth" in relation to the specificity of "a culture": "[d]oes the identification of procedures of truth always pass through philosophy, necessarily or unnecessarily, or is it a question of situation, of culture? It's an open question and a fairly complicated one." Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. & intro. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), 139. Later on he nevertheless seems convinced that: "[i]n the end, a culture, to the extent that it can be thought or identified by philosophy [or theory?], is a singular interconnected configuration of truth-procedures." (140)

7 Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., "The SF of Theory: Baudrillard and Haraway," *Science Fiction Studies* 18 (1991): 387.

8 On messianism without messiah, see Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*: *The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1995), *passim*; and "The Deconstruction of Actuality: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," *Radical Philosophy* 68 (Autumn 1994).

9 See Jacques Derrida, "The Future of the Profession or the University Without Condition (thanks to the 'Humanities,' what *could take place* tomnorrow," in Tom Cohen, ed., *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 52-53.

10 *Ibid*., 48.

11 Cf. Derrida's notion of the "invention of the other" (first in *Psychē – inventions de l'autre* (Paris : Galilée, 1987), 11-61) reiterated in "The Future of the Profession…," 54, where he refers to: "this thinking of the possible impossible, of the possible *as* impossible, of an impossible-possible that can no longer be determined by the metaphysical interpretation of possibility or virtuality."

12 See for example Tom Cohen's reading of *Terminator* 2 as a fight against "the invasion, from a fantasized 'future', of an anti-representational and post-humanist logic"; in *Anti-Mimesis from Plato to Hitchcock* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), 260. What is at stake in posthumanism is the survival of representational logic in general. The question is whether the zero/one digital logic is still (too) "metaphysical" (death being the "absence of information"). How to symbolize the absence of information on a screen?

13 Derrida, "The Future of the Profession…," 34. *The Matrix* partakes in the whole logic of the virtualisation of (the end of) work that Derrida discusses in this context, by providing a particularly bleak prospect of "telework," within virtual communities and communication for a humanity "blissfully ignorant" of its own enslavement – a "disembodiment" of work which is hailed by some utopians, but which in fact merely constitutes a new phase in capitalist exploitation and alienation (43ff.). Cf. also Baudrillard, *Le Paroxyste indifférent* , 41-42 : "[I]n our new logistics of interaction, man-machine, there is no longer any question of work. Man and machine form an interface. There is thus no more subject of work."

14 Derrida, "The Future of the Profession…," 53-54.

15 A question addressed by Derrida in 1997, in Montreal, cf. "Une certaine possibilité impossible de dire l'événement," in *Dire l'événement, est-ce possible?* Ed. Gad Soussana, Alexis Nouss (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001).

16 Cf. Alain Badiou, *Peut-on penser la politique?* (Paris: Seuil, 1985), 12-13, 18.

17 For this notion of the "lien social" see Derrida in "Fidélité à plus d'un," in *Cahiers Intersignes* 13 (1998): 221-265; for Derrida's notions of "democracy-to-come" and "literature" see for example "This Strange Institution Called Literature – An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in Derek Attridge, ed., *Acts of Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992), 33-75.

18 Note, of course, the anagrammatic logic at work in neo, one and eon.

19 See Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso: 1989), 55- 84.

20 Cf. Derrida on "hauntology" and "spectrality" in *Specters of Marx*, passim.

21 Slavoj Žižek, "Psychoanalysis in Post-Marxism: The Case of Alain Badiou," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 97:2 (1998): 242.

[22] Cf. Alain Badiou, "On a Finally Objectless Subject," in Eduardo Cadava *et al.*, eds, *Who Comes After the Subject?* (London: Routledge, 1991), 24-25.

[23] *Ibid.*, 25.

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] As Žižek remarks in his critique of Badiou's combination of psychoanalysis and "post-marxism" in relation to (Oedipal) "inhuman excess" in the human: "Don't these lines expose the elementary matrix of subjectivity: you become 'something' (you are accounted a subject) only after going through the zero-point, after being deprived of all those 'pathological' (in the Kantian sense of empirical, contingent) features that support your identity, thus being reduced to 'nothing' – 'a Nothingness counted as Something,' which is the most concise formula for *subject*." Žižek, "Psychoanalysis in Post-marxism…," 256.

[27] Žižek, "Psychoanalysis in Post-Marxism…," 257.

[28] Badiou, "On a Finally Objectless Subject," 28.

[29] Badiou, *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy*, translated and ed. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens (London: Continuum, 2004), 61.

[30] *Ibid.*, 62.

[31] Badiou, "On a Finally Objectless Subject," 30.

[32] *Ibid.*, 31.

[33] *Ibid.*, 32.

[34] It would doubtless be possible to trace the idea of a "matrix" reality back to ancient forms of mysticism in cultures of "writing" like for example the Arabic notion of "mektoub" or similar Jewish notions that seem to constitute a proximity with many "Jewish" thinkers including Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida.

[35] This "absurd(ist) heroism," which worries Simon Critchley in his review of Badiou's *Ethics*, the imperative "*continuez,,*" seems in fact closer to Albert Camus' "Sisyphos" than to Beckett.

[36] Peter Hallward, in Badiou, *Ethics*, xiv.

[37] In "The Singular and the Specific: Recent French Philosophy", *Radical Philosophy* 99 (2000), 15a.

[38] Trans. Sheila Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

[39] Baudrillard, *Le Paroxyste indifferent*, 62-63.

[40] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 164.

[41] Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), 164.

[42] *Ibid.*

[43] Cf. Simon Critchley, "Demanding Approval: On the Ethics of Alain Badiou," *Radical Philosophy* 100 (2000): 16-27.

[44] Badiou, "Euroamerican Left and the myth of 'New' Capitalism," *The Red Critique*, www.geocities.com/redtheory/redcritique/Ma…/euroamericanleftandnewcapitalism.html (accessed 13 May 2002).

[45] Cf. Derrida, *Donner la mort* (Paris : Galilée, 1999), 114-157.

[46] Derrida, in Derrida, Pierre-Jean Labarrière, Francis Guibal and Stanislas Breton, *Altérités* (Paris: Osiris, 1986), 31 ; see my forthcoming translation and preface in *Parallax* 10.4 (2004).

[47] Cf. Baudrillard's cry of frustration, in *Le Paroxyste indifferent*, 39: "it's always the same. The moment one starts intellectualising a phenomenon it disappears into facts."

[48] Cf. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Postuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 193, 283-84, and 291.

[49] See Slavoj Žižek, "Psychoanalysis in Post-Marxism…," 239.