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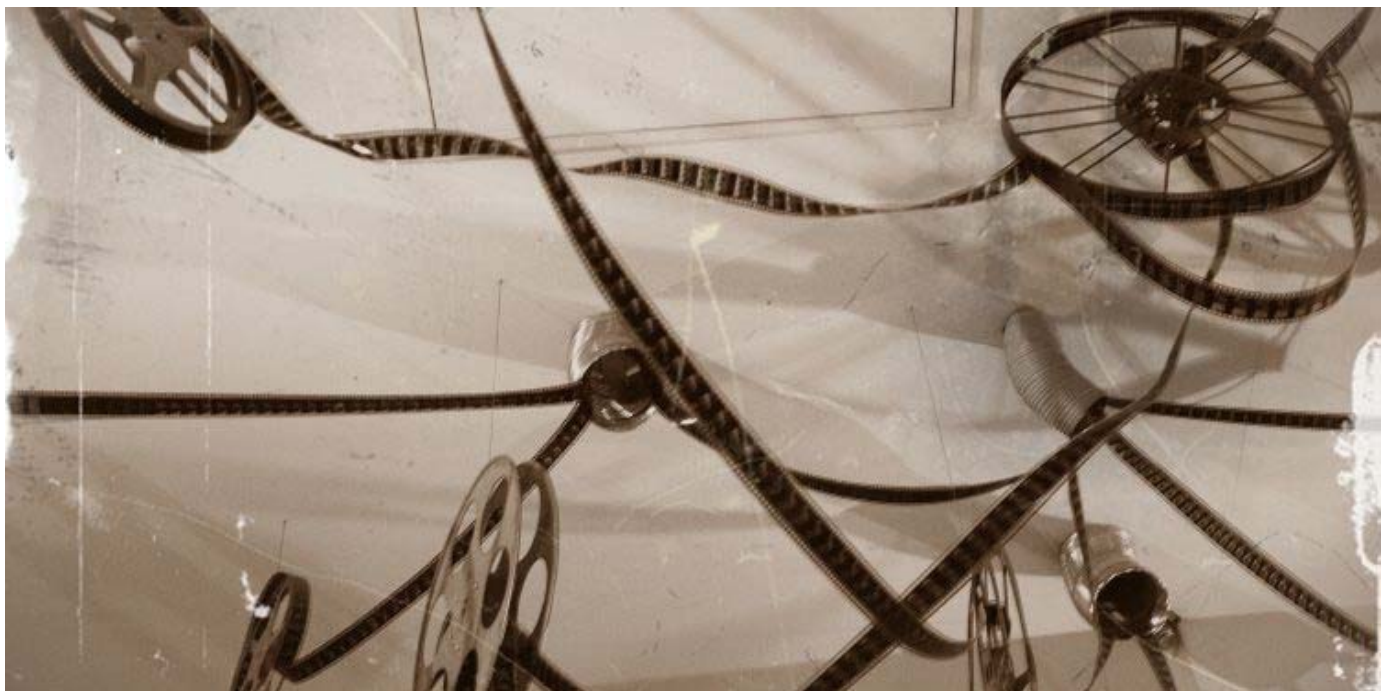
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What Can Cinema Teach Philosophy?

Badiou and Rancière on Film

Emmanuel Alloa — December 19, 2016

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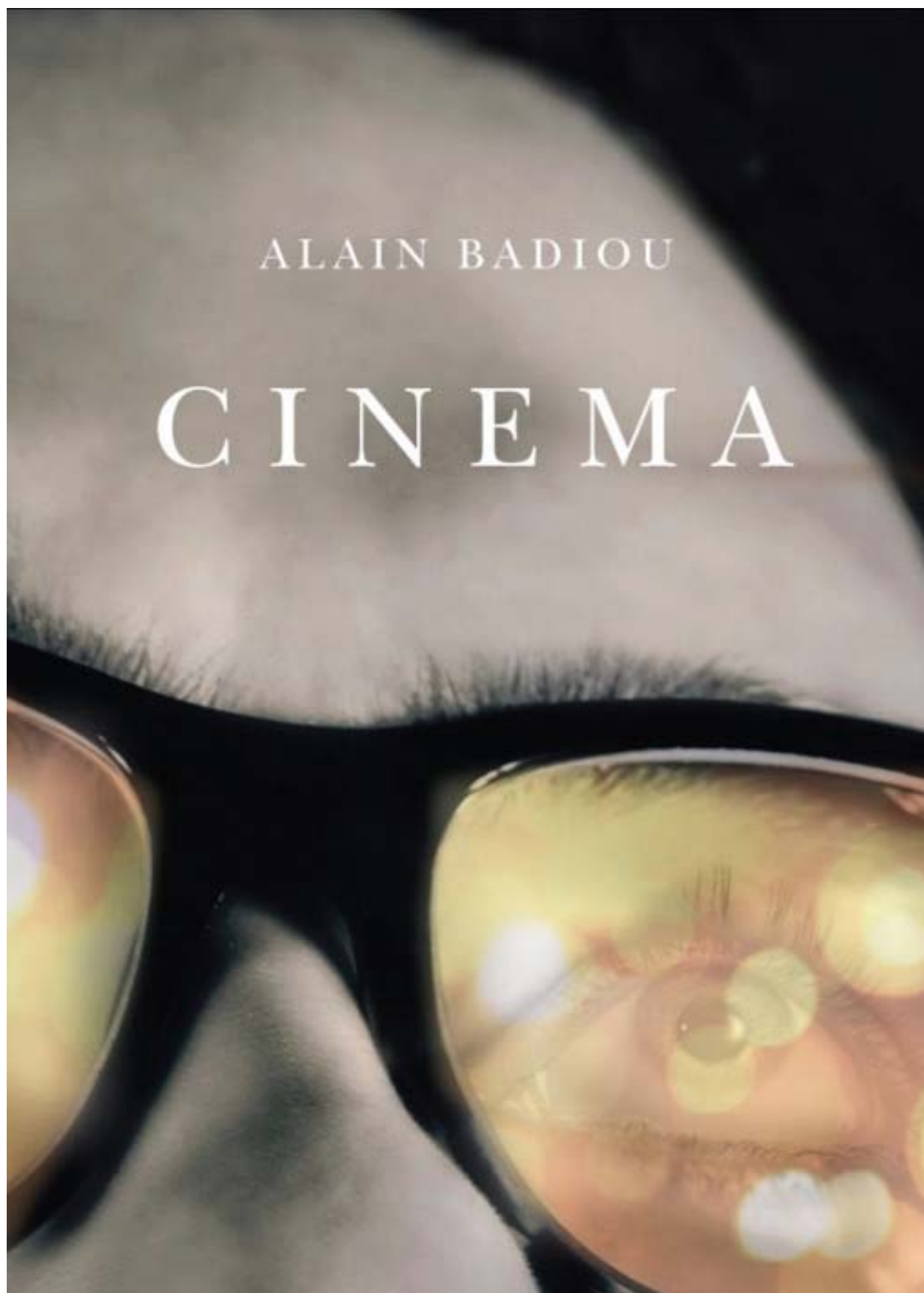


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Philosophy's general distrust of cinema is a thing of the past. Cinema no longer serves only as a placeholder for reproving wrong conceptions of time (Bergson on the

“cinematographic illusion”), as the incarnation of the distraction industry (Adorno), as a symptom of cultural depravation (Heidegger on the remove from “Japanese essence” of Kurosawa’s *Rashomon*), or as an extracurricular leisure activity (Wittgenstein, who allegedly preferred Western films and romantic comedies to “wash off his mind”). After pioneering work by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Stanley Cavell, and Gilles Deleuze, who were among the first to engage directly with film as a philosophical object, the philosophy of film has emerged in recent decades as a respectable topic and is currently among the fastest growing fields in philosophy. Affirming this shift, two internationally renowned philosophers, Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière, each recently published a book on cinema.

In the plainly titled *Cinema* (Polity Press, 2013), Badiou identifies two reasons for this turn toward a philosophy of film. The first is simply a default choice: if philosophy is to begin with commonly shared references, there are objective indicators for privileging cinema over poetry, drama classics, or mathematics. The second contends a space for questioning: as a discipline fueled by questions, philosophy must determine which questions to ask cinema.



In his inimitable half-provocative half-peremptory style, Badiou states his general claim: “cinema lacks a proper question.” Because philosophy enters when a question is lacking, it may open a debate about which kind of question cinema lacks. As such, philosophy defines the kind of question cinema is asking without yet asking it: for example, what is cinema? Is cinema an art? What is the real? How is time experienced?

Among film scholars, a certain weariness can be observed with respect to such bold questions. Noël Carroll has called for an end to “Grand Theories” concerning cinema, and in film studies, many welcomed a shift to “post-theory.” Film analysis, it was argued, should stick to internal analysis and to strictly localized film-based problems without making overarching theoretical commitments. Do these books by Badiou and Rancière suggest that Grand Theory is back? Such an assumption would be flawed.

Badiou’s and Rancière’s books do not compare to, say, André Bazin’s ontology of the moving image (*What Is Cinema?*) or Gilles Deleuze’s monumental theory of cinema (*The Movement-Image and The Time-Image*). Anyone opening either Badiou’s *Cinema* or Rancière’s *The Intervals of Cinema* (Verso Books, 2014) in search of something akin to those approaches will inevitably be disappointed: neither is conceived as a unified monograph, nor does either provide a comparably comprehensive systematic ontology of film.

Rather, both books are the result of their author’s long-standing interest in cinema and insistent confrontation with it dating as far back as their interest in philosophy. Beyond their common cinephilia, both authors have an intertwined generational trajectory: they were among the first whom Michel Foucault called on to compose the philosophy department at the newly founded experimental university Paris 8 Vincennes, in the aftermath of May 1968. Both authors also have shared inspirational filmmakers, such as Dziga Vertov, John Ford, Jean-Luc Godard, and the directorial partnership of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. But the similarities soon end. Although both authors write about cinema, the actual content of their books differs as substantially as do their author’s methods.

Having dedicated extensive texts to the seventh art, Rancière’s new writings on cinema came as little surprise. By contrast, Badiou’s engagement was unexpected: Badiou is a professed Platonist, whose declared ambition has been to fight Sophist trickery in all its

form. Indeed, in his recent retranslation/rewriting of Plato's Republic, the cave allegory has become a movie-theatre allegory, and his metaphysical interpretations of Matrix posit cinematic images as "deception of vision." Whence the surprise to see how fond Badiou actually is of the shadows on the screen: in Cinema, he is searching for truth at the very dark end of the cave. Nevertheless, in fairness to the author, there was never a deliberate attempt to write an entire book about cinema.

THE
INTERVALS
OF
CINEMA

JACQUES
RANCIÈRE

The texts composing *Cinema* stretch over a period of more than half a century, and most were written as tangents to other works. It was the idea of the film critic Antoine de Baecque to collect into one volume some of Badiou's many occasional writings on cinema, including early film critiques published in student journals as well as seminars and interviews conducted in recent years. Although the book cannot claim to be a general ontology of cinema, Badiou does not disappoint readers expecting some characteristic axiomatic claims. The Rancière case is very different.

Among all (not only French) contemporary philosophers, very few follow contemporary artistic production with the great care Rancière does. Unlike Badiou, Rancière maintains the greatest possible distance from metaphysical speculation. Instead, he unfolds his tactical conceptual reorganizations in an empirically and historically saturated field. What nineteenth-century worker's archives had been for his earlier work, artistic practices are now for his more recent texts. Yet, Rancière's philosophy proper does not lend itself easily to decontextualization; his claims thwart attempts at generalization beyond sectorial descriptions. Thus, despite his extended work on cinema (including a previous book, *The Cinematographic Fable*), anyone looking for a unified grand theory will be dissatisfied.

When Rancière writes about film, he does so in the same way he writes about visual arts or literature: cinema is the name of a field of operations. The philosopher becomes a cartographer, measuring a terrain and testing various projection methods to capture its topography, yet his cartographies are seismographic. Acknowledging existing meridians, Rancière indicates how fault lines hidden below accepted coordinates can cross the terrain in totally different and unexpected ways. Such are their differences in method; on the level of content, notable divergences are also found.

Cinema is truth, Jean-Luc Godard famously said, and it is truth 24 times per second. Although both Badiou and Rancière address cinema's truth-claim, they do so in extremely different ways. For those unfamiliar with the Badiousian conceptual edifice, there are four truth procedures — science, politics, love, and art — each of which is completely irreducible to the others. As a result, rather than producing a discourse about art, aesthetics must become "inaesthetics," i.e. fleshing out truths that are given nowhere else than in art and which, at best, have indirect side effects on other truth procedures. Such a conception has consequences: to produce truth, cinema must become an art in

its own right.

However, not content with elevating cinema to another name for art, Badiou takes a further step. When asking what cinema thinks that nothing but it can think, he answers: “Of all the arts, [cinema] is certainly the one that has the ability to think, to produce the most absolutely undeniable truth.” The “truth specificity” of the cinematic medium, Badiou explains, is possible because cinema is “steeped in the infinite of the real.” This ontological privilege also defines cinema’s task: doing justice to the visible world at large and to human presence in particular. Making human presence visible is, thus, a way of testifying to “human freedom.”

Badiou takes yet another step following this surprising vindication of humanism: the “truth specificity” of the cinematic medium, he claims, must be explained through a peculiar feature — the fundamental impurity of cinema. Rather than being the seventh art, cinema is the “plus-one” art, permanently traversed by the others. In an almost Hegelian fashion, it magnifies the other arts; it recaptures them and turns them into a new synthesis. Hence the role cinema could play for philosophy: “if we are able to create philosophical concepts from cinema it is by changing the old philosophical syntheses by bringing them into contact with the new cinematic synthesis.” Philosophy’s synthetic manifold — the images used in thinking — must touch (and be touched by) cinema’s images.

Badiou’s axiomatic definition of cinema has been contested from various sides. Film scholars have argued that film critic Ricciotto Canudo first put forward the idea of cinema as an art of synthesis in the 1920s, whereas Bazin made the idea of impurity topical to film studies when he published the essay “Pour un cinéma impur” in 1952. Despite, or perhaps because of, its history, Rancière also discusses the impurity claim. According to Rancière, Badiou’s idea of the impure remains suspiciously pure, and it secretly presupposes to endorse a Modernist vision of the arts. Indeed, ten years before *The Intervals of Cinema*, Rancière had already argued in *Malaise dans l’esthétique* that such an understanding would consign cinema with the task to “purge what can be purged from non-art.”

Rancière’s arguments could easily be multiplied with regard to Badiou’s Cinema. Cinema, of all the arts, is most deeply steeped in the real, yet it is also the art that creates a double of the real. At times, Badiou seems to revert to a strange didactic Platonism, which he swaps for a neo-Pythagoreanism when he states that digital cinema proves all

there is can be reduced to number. Such claims, however, are of limited use for describing the cinematographic experience.

Moving beyond such descriptions is the simple idea that cinema is associated with the contemporary insofar as it is appreciated at the time of its creation, just as Greek tragedy was during the fifth century bce and the Bildungsroman was in the current nineteenth century. Unlike those arts, the influence of cinema is on a global scale, as the Chaplin example shows. Thus, cinema's (further) truth is its "intense, unique" association with the contemporary.

Whereas Badiou makes cinema's claim to truth a task philosophy should embrace fully, Rancière reads it as one of many "cinematographic fables" that would be wrong to narrow down to realist truth. After all, filmic avant-garde was as much about defending self-referentiality as it was about the documentary imperative. For Rancière, writing about cinema means taking competing claims into account and eliciting their respective promises of emancipation: cinema figures as both a realist and an idealist universe, an art that speaks about a world out there and also negates there is anything outside of its own boundaries. Cinema bespeaks the possibility of laboring the real while at the same time claiming to be the only standard of truth. Under one and the same name, we find an art that addresses the rebellious: "tomorrow belongs to us," which signifies the only tomorrows it offers are its own.

Rancière and Badiou may both feature as dialecticians, but their conceptions of dialectics differ significantly. Against Badiou's modernist dialectics, Rancière brings a heterodox dialectics. Cinema is not the last stage in the historical process of the arts: what comes after literature is neither the return to a language of pure images, nor a kind of *retour à l'ordre* to the old mimetic regime of representation. Instead, there is what Rancière calls the fable, itself thwarted ("la fable contrariée"): the powers of cinema are often drawn from sources that work contrary to its powers.

The cinematic apparatus allows for both the greatest control, with its multisensorial, time-based structure, and the greatest abandonment. The dream of registering the real, in all its facets, is both a totalizing gesture and the most consummate form of relinquishing control, because the photographic apparatus will always see infinitely more than the person operating it. Hence, another "turn" to the dialectics of the aesthetic regime is necessitated: whether cinema produces some of the most dramatized narratives or some of the most abstract image sequences lies beyond an alternative

between artistic decision and technical automatism.

Rather, it is philosophy that must learn from cinema. This could be Rancière's anti-pedagogical lesson: as long as philosophy looks only to illustrate its own claims, it will find in cinema only what it was already looking for. Instead of asking how cinema thinks, Rancière is more interested in showing how it permanently "thwarts" thinking.

The Intervals of Cinema sweeps through a variety of issues and filmmakers (Vertov, Bresson, Minnelli, Rossellini, Straub/Huillet, Pedro Costa). In line with the gesture put forward in previous books, Rancière moves away from the classical Marxist approach of exposing the mechanisms of domination to the benefit of showing the aporias of emancipation. Cinema is many things: not only an apparatus producing and conveying ideology, but also a utopic horizon, showing how things that are deemed impossible could look. Cinema is a surface where positions are jostled and renegotiated, where what can be said and done is reconfigured. Yet, as Rancière also stresses, every reconfiguration produces its own exclusions, its own off-camera: just as there is no class that would establish the end of class struggle, there is no image that would have no outside.

Rancière is most merciless when he discusses the well-intended leftist filmmakers aiming to raise an awareness of exclusion who identify and fix the subjects of exclusion through their sociologizing portraits. But even some of film's greatest classics do not escape unscathed: critique of ideology should take place on the level of form, not of message. The problem with General Line is that its form contradicts its message, i.e. as dreamed-of ideograms of a revolutionary new filmic language, assigning each and every individual an already pre-established position.

Continuing his work on "homonymic effects," Rancière shows how very different things are grouped under one and the same term — such effects apply to cinema too. Though The Intervals of Cinema provides no new Grand Theory, its speaker takes a stance: cinema belongs to all those who have travelled, in some way or another, through the systems of gaps and distances contained in its name. As in other writings, Rancière distributes actors and objects on different stages, producing new arrangements through a multiplication of what he calls "scenes."

However, at the end of this complex scenography of critique where the competing "fables" lead to rearrangements of the field, Rancière has this surprising claim: of all the

arts, cinema has the greatest medium specificity. Despite the changes induced by television and digital supports, he asserts, the dispositive of cinema has remained largely identical. Whereas museums have become sites of the blurring of the arts, the *salle obscure* is a refuge for cinema's specificity. Coming from one of the sturdiest critics of the identical, the idea that the cinematic dispositive never fundamentally changed is somewhat strange (not to mention the fact that Rancière might be out of touch here given the exponential increase of home cinema and the like).

Ultimately, confronting Badiou's *Cinema* and Rancière's *Intervals of Cinema* presents a choice between axiomatic philosophy and scenographic philosophy. Their distinct discourses also practice different kinds of humor. Badiou's humor is deeply self-ironic; he likes to refer to himself as an impersonator of the orthodoxy of the nomothetical ideologue. Rancière's comicality is less obvious and appears rather surreptitiously. He states, "No combination of classical Marxist theory and classical thought on cinema enabled me to decide whether the ascent or descent of a staircase was idealist or materialist, progressive or reactionary."

As these distinctions begin to show, at a certain point, a theory is not so much about who has the right argument. At a certain point, truth becomes a question of style. If anything, this is where philosophy learns from cinema.

Alain Badiou, *Cinema*, trans. Susan Spitzer, London: Polity, 2013. 320pp.

Jacques Rancière, *The Intervals of Cinema*, trans. John Howe. London: Verso, 2014. 160pp.