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### **Published**

2012

### **Journal Title**

Minerva - An Internet Journal of Philosophy

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## Badiou and Žižek on Mallarmé: The Critique of Object-Art

*Daniel Hourigan*

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the differences between Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek's articulations of 'impossibility' in their readings of the French experimental symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé. The discussion will focus on how Badiou and Žižek diverge in their respective understandings of impossibility as a hallmark of the Lacanian Real in Mallarmé's oeuvre. This difference is framed in light of the way that Badiou and Žižek consonantly turn to the modernist poet Mallarmé to understand the conditions under which the subject can attempt to access this imperative/idea. Herein it will be shown that two relations become apparent: 'subtraction' and 'purification'; 'subtraction' as the removal of the imaginary contents from the subject's self-relation in an attempt to access the future antérieur and 'purification' as the attempt to purify the pure idea by locating the opaque core of the aesthetic object as the point of failure in the relation with the object.

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The ontological repercussions for maintaining a naïve trust in the experience of the life-world are elaborated upon by both Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek using the example of Stéphane Mallarmé's experimental poetic modernism. However, the discussion I am about to pursue is not a purely textual engagement with Mallarmé, Badiou, and Žižek. Instead, it is a reading of Badiou and Žižek *vis-à-vis* the philosophical ramifications they draw from their selective citing of Mallarmé. As we shall see, this raises not only questions of poetry and art but also of existence.

Let us begin with Žižek's position. Žižek's engagement with Mallarmé is woven with the formulation of enjoyment as an imperative in the post-modern universe of the developed, decadent Western world.<sup>1</sup> As an imperative, this argument about the formal structure of duty in the post-modern universe constitutes the particular mode of enjoying (*mode de jouir*) that values the variety of objects and activities able to be taken up by the subject. With this configuration of propriety supporting his argument,

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<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*. (London: Verso, 2002) 231-233.

Žižek is specifically interested in two features of Mallarmé's work: the future perfect and the failure of sustaining identification.

The future perfect (*futur antérieur*) tense of Mallarmé's famous 'nothing takes place but the place' (*rien n'aura eu lieu que le lieu*) is read by Žižek to be "dealing with a utopian state which, for a priori structural reasons, can never be realized in the present tense."<sup>2</sup> This first aspect suggests that far from merely being an ignorant stasis, the post-modern subject's naïve trust in phenomenological experience has a powerfully conservative political direction and fetishist economy of value. The presence of an ideal point in the present constellations of value and social links in the life-world encourages the identification of the subject at the same moment that the subject can never realise this identity beyond merely a token gesture, a marker of the yet-to-come. And this tension remains an extant simulation of the future proper. Put simply, ours is an era hollowed out by a passionate identification with that which cannot be realised.

Žižek takes up a second aspect of Mallarmé's work where this failure of identification is its justification, "his entire writing is nothing but a series of failed attempts to produce 'the Book'."<sup>3</sup> In the case of Mallarmé this repetition of failure constitutes the justification of "modern art as 'experimental'."<sup>4</sup> Such a formulation of the tension between 'what is' and 'what ought to be' is a shift into a symbolic universe where transparency is impossible. This impossibility is included within the bounds of the symbolic universe with the advent of an ethical agency, "of an irreparable symbolic debt which undermines the 'regression' to the fetishism [sic] that pertains to the status of the traditional work of art."<sup>5</sup> Fetishism therefore disappears from the symbolic universe, only to emerge as a little piece of real-value that animates and disrupts the continued attempts to constitute a symbolic totality. To rephrase the interlinking of

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<sup>2</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute – Or Why the Christian legacy is Worth Fighting For* (London: Verso, 2000) 31.

<sup>3</sup> Žižek, 2002: 110

<sup>4</sup> Žižek, 2002: 110

<sup>5</sup> Žižek, 2002: 111

these two aspects of Mallarmé in the terms of a critique of the object-orientated perception of art: it is not that the representation reifies art objects as tools for performing the identity we experience in our life-world but that art is staged as a claim to identity where you can be anything, anywhere, at any time, but only where the subject *is not* present.

This dynamic of art in Žižek is unusual given that, in the categories of Lacanian psychoanalysis, ‘art’ appears along the vector from the Imaginary to the Real as the realisation of a fantasy decoy that promises the total perfectibility of identity and only alludes to the successful constitution of ‘my place in the world’. When I attempt to locate myself in this imaginary scenario it dominates me, renders my identity a merely ‘re-presentational metaphor’ of who I am and not ‘the real me.’ As a fundamentally symbolic object, identity is herein set against the symbolic universe as a space of meaningless formulae unable to be integrated into our vivacious life-world. *Inter alia*, as the realm of nothingness the symbolic universe therefore constitutes the *techne* of art only to immediately dissolve its activity where this *techne* cannot serve the life-world of the subject, and thus identity is short-circuited from within the very processes that constitute it. Identity herein becomes a void place. And it is this paradox of the placelessness of the promise of place sustained by art as a symbolic construct that is the target of our critique herein.

This void place of nothingness enlists the fascination of both Žižek and Badiou. Žižek however does not seek to go beyond the structural dialectic of Lacan and Mallarmé wherein the vanishing of an object and the traces of its disappearance “sustains the whole scene itself.”<sup>6</sup> Bruno Bosteels has suggested that from this disappearance a chain of effects emerge where each effect is divided by “the mark of the lack” that causes it.<sup>7</sup> Thus the subject emerges as the one who pays heed to these marks of a

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<sup>6</sup> Bruno Bosteels ‘Alain Badiou’s Theory of the Subject: The Recommencement of Dialectical Materialism?’ *Lacan: The Silent Partners*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2006) 138.

<sup>7</sup> Bosteels, 2006: 139.

vanished object, “the unspeakable vacillation eclipsed in the flickering intermittence between two such markings.”<sup>8</sup> The subject therefore emerges as an interval between the knowledge of these marks and the ideal point of some absent cause within the structural dialectic.<sup>9</sup> As Badiou notes, in philosophy such antecedent causation is elaborated as idealism.<sup>10</sup> And within Žižek’s intellectual project it is apparent that he is trying to salvage something of the subject from this German Idealist position on antecedence.<sup>11</sup>

How is it then possible for Žižek to avoid the danger of obliterating the descriptive life-world of the subject given this subtractive idealism? Strictly speaking, the subtraction of the life-world to its inadmissible element is the result of a categorical overwriting in the transposition of symbolic nihilation onto the imaginary scene where ‘place’ is purely staged through subtraction and purification. As Žižek notes in a commentary on these concepts as they appear in the work of Badiou who reifies Mallarmé’s modernist *oeuvre*, subtraction and purification are constituted in different ways.<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, purification seeks to “isolate the kernel of the Real by violently peeling off the imaginary reality that conceals it.”<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, subtraction begins free from all determinate content in the Abyss, “and then tries to establish a minimal difference between this Void and an element which functions as its stand-in.”<sup>14</sup> This analytic difference gives us some clue as to why Žižek seeks to reconfigure Mallarmé, because the mode of Mallarmé’s experimental modernism puts subtraction ahead of purification, i.e. Mallarmé’s unfulfilled life-long devotion toward writing “*the Book*.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Badiou in Bosteels, 2006: 139.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (London: The MIT Press, 2006) 89.

<sup>12</sup> Slavoj Žižek ‘From Purification to Subtraction: Badiou and the Real’ *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. Peter Hallward (London: Continuum, 2004) 165-181.

<sup>13</sup> Žižek, 2004: 165.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.; one should note that Žižek’s use of the term ‘Void’ is interchangeable with ‘Abyss’ due to its context and the relationship between this Abyss and the void-subject.

<sup>15</sup> Žižek, 2002: 110.

The reconfiguration of Mallarmé's experimental modernism by Žižek takes place along the lines of the demystification of imaginary semblances or 'art'. Simply put, Žižek is reconfiguring Mallarmé's Symbolist idealism to move with the flows of dialectical materialism. Like Badiou, Žižek's ideology-critique is taken with the focus on the Idealist *topos*. And because of this similarity it is possible to read Žižek's comments on Badiou's materialism back into Žižek himself; as Žižek imputes to Badiou: "how can the 'transubstantiation' from the pleasure-oriented life of an *individual* to the life of a *subject* dedicated to a Cause occur?"<sup>16</sup> By focusing on the Idealist *topos* from within his materialist frame Žižek is contrary to Mallarmé's experimental modernism because Žižek puts purification ahead of subtraction, critical demystification ahead of reductive isolation. But this is not all. Žižek's method of ideology-critique is nuanced by an attentiveness to the way the formal structure of dialectical materialism finds itself always-already attempting to establish a minimal difference between the Abyss and the imaginary semblance (the work of art) standing in for it when it is intervening in and demystifying an object, e.g. Mallarmé's *the Book* or Malevich's *White on White*.<sup>17</sup>

Herein it can be contended that Žižek is following the logic of the Moebius strip articulated in the later work of Lacan. The use of this logic denotes that when the subject attempts to locate themselves at the heart of a signifying order as the agent who structures the symbolic universe they find that this place of super-egoic enthronement is always just beyond the grasp of the subject in the Symbolic. Compositely, this would suggest that Badiou's enthronement of Mallarmé as *the* poet of the Event means that Badiou recognises in Mallarmé's *oeuvre* an acute awareness of this antecedent displacement. What at first appeared to be the powerful arbitrary designations of an 'authoritarian personality' becomes historically necessary and beyond the reach of the lust for power.

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<sup>16</sup> Žižek, 2004: 169.

<sup>17</sup> Žižek, 2002: 10-11.

Such a critical evaluation of the symbolic universe demystifies it at the same moment that it reveals the principles and axioms that guide art as standing in for a blind horrific necessity which deprives the subject of their subjectivisation as autonomous individuals. Art functions here as a stand-in for a normative necessity outside the subject's private history, or, in Hegelese, 'the negation of the negation of art' is autonomous because its causality is exterior to the identity of the subject. This is exemplified by Žižek's allusions to Stalin's appeal to historical necessity wherein "we, the Communists, are people of a special mould. We are made of special stuff."<sup>18</sup> And what is the Lacanian name for this 'special stuff' but the "*objet petit a*, the sublime object, the Thing within a body."<sup>19</sup> Hence we come upon the procedure of subtraction where the kernel or trace (*tracé*) of the Real is found in the work of art standing in for the Abyss by stripping away all the descriptive (imaginary) content to access the hard core of its semblance, that which makes its existence necessary and Real (in the Lacanian sense).

It is at this impossible point that Žižek seems close to Badiou, between the recognition of subjectivity within the bounds of an imaginary scenario staged in the Abyss and the Pyrrhic elucidation of the kernel of the Real. Peter Hallward has suggested that Badiou endorses a move toward condensing the imaginary semblance into a complex pure, singular, and sublime object whereas, for Žižek, the Abyss disappears when we remove the simple/fundamental imaginary stand-in (there is literally Nothing to orient the subject).<sup>20</sup> But Badiou's enthronement of poetry by way of Mallarmé troubles Hallward's reading here.

With Mallarmé Badiou develops poetry as a procedure capable of providing us with generic truths, and herein Mallarmé becomes "a thinker of the event-drama."<sup>21</sup> In Mallarmé's work, Badiou finds a double sense of the "aleatory event" of coming upon

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<sup>18</sup> Stalin in Žižek, 2002: 257.

<sup>19</sup> Žižek, 2002: 257.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 149.

<sup>21</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005) 191-198.

truth: “the staging of its appearance-disappearance, and of its interpretation which gives it the status of an ‘acquisition for ever’.”<sup>22</sup> In Mallarmé’s writings one often finds references to traces of an absent cause, an antecedence that directs the critical gaze toward the truth that something has indeed occurred. It is not a refusal or ignorance of the Abyss, but a more subtle method of its expression in service to the revelation of truth.

Badiou gives this peculiarly Idealist configuration of antecedent causation and revelation in the paradox of the site of an event:

The paradox of an evental-site is that it can only be recognized on the basis of what it does not present in the situation in which it is presented. Indeed, it is only due to it forming-one from multiples which are inexistent in the situation that a multiple is singular, thus subtracted from the guarantee of the state.<sup>23</sup>

Badiou is here signalling that, although under different terms, the singularity of the fantasy decoy in the imaginary scenario is a complex lure drawing us toward the kernel of the Real at the same moment that it keeps us at a distance from this kernel. In effect, Mallarmé could not write *the Book* so long as art retains a relation to Real-Truth. The kernel of the Real is always just beyond the apprehension of the subject, as per Badiou’s deployment of the axiom of infinity, e.g. “the ruin of any elementary conception of the One, and thus the definitive proof of God’s ‘nonexistence’.”<sup>24</sup> In his analysis of Mallarmé in *Being and Event*, Badiou remarks that this kernel of the Real is absent, “for every event, apart from being localized by its site, initiates the latter’s ruin *with regard to the situation*, because it retroactively names its inner void.”<sup>25</sup> And we find precisely such a paradoxical and retroactive ruin of the site of truth in Mallarmé’s poem *A Cast of Dice Never can Annul Chance*: “the master... hesitates...

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<sup>22</sup> Badiou, 2005: 191.

<sup>23</sup> Badiou, 2005: 192.

<sup>24</sup> Hallward, 2003: 149.

<sup>25</sup> Badiou, 2005: 192.

rather than playing as a hoar maniac the round in the name of the waves... to not open the hand clenched beyond the useless head.”<sup>26</sup>

Might we therefore say that Badiou is not so far from Žižek after all? The conceptual designation of the kernel of the Real in Badiou elaborated above appears to be consonant with Žižek’s supposition that the kernel of the Real resists integration in the symbolic universe/situation. But Badiou draws an important lesson from Mallarmé that may develop the path out of the dead-end between nihilistically chasing the kernel of the Real and the disintegration of the imaginary semblance in the Abyss:

On the basis that ‘a cast of dice never will abolish chance’, one must not conclude in nihilism, in the uselessness of action, even less in the management-cult of reality and its swarm of fictive relationships.<sup>27</sup>

Thus Badiou formulates a dare to critique and vigilantly reconstitute the world on the antecedent basis of the trace of the Real because we must make a decision to face the world or shy away from it by persisting in a smoothed-over fantasy that dangerously conceals paradoxes as hidden traps for the unsuspecting subject, threatening to dissolve their place in the socio-symbolic universe of meaning.<sup>28</sup> At a glance this ‘dare to critique’ gains some traction in Žižek’s consequentialist minimalism, but it is most certainly a procedural development on Badiou’s part.

Given Badiou’s tendency toward revelation in the case of Mallarmé what then does Žižek’s engagement with the French symbolist poet reveal of his ideology-critique and the place of art? Let us begin with the final point presented from the work of

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<sup>26</sup> Mallarmé in Badiou, 2005: 193.

<sup>27</sup> Badiou, 2005: 198.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

Badiou: “one must not conclude in nihilism.”<sup>29</sup> As a relational and transformative activity, the *techne* of art can serve many ends including nihilistic clearing.

Within Žižek’s ideology-critique it is possible to discern nihilism engaging the subject from without through Žižek’s morbid “fascination with a lethal Thing.”<sup>30</sup> The manifestation of the Thing leaves nihilism as an acerbic taste in the subject’s mouth as they are forced to ‘ingest’ their contingent basis under the rule of something resisting the instrumental machinations of the becoming-subject of the post-modernist universe, e.g. the predestination of necessity overwhelms the polymorphous performance/constitution of identity. As an explicitly subjective activity, *techne* therefore becomes subservient to the Imaginary-Real as it is subsumed by some sublime Cause.

Nevertheless, the subject persists in this ‘meaningless universe,’ and the way is open for the reconstitution of the normative conditions. This shift from negative annihilation to transformative affirmation is precisely the point where Badiou demands that we cannot conclude in nihilism.<sup>31</sup> Yet there is a certain shift that must take place here, from clearing customary determinate values to dedicating oneself to a Cause. This shift rests on the persistence of the subject, or to phrase it in terms of dialectical materialism: while everything ‘out there’ may objectively exist, where does my seemingly transparent subjective interiority fit in a world of opaque material? It is not enough for the subject to simply produce an object or perform an action, they must have a ‘frame’ through which this production or action can be understood.

This ‘frame’ is the positive law of *techne* inasmuch as the term traditionally designates art and craftsmanship, the ‘way’ something is produced or acted out. Herein *techne* performs the normative conditioning of the symbolic universe *after*

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) 181.

<sup>31</sup> Badiou, 2005: 198.

nihilism has cleared the customary traditions, determinate content, and so forth. Yet *techne*'s poetic positivity relies on the persistence of the subject that is itself a negation of the objective order of material that is crafted through *technics*. (A point for further elaboration elsewhere.)

In this way Žižek's intellectual project finds its point of difference with Badiou's thought. For Badiou focus is given to the event of truth that destroys and renews the conditions of my existential situation. Žižek, on the other hand, focuses on the occurrence of the Real in the paradoxes of everyday experience in the life-world of the subject. This differential formulation of Žižek's focus signals that thought may be reduced to "an ultimately passive and at best therapeutic form of engagement with the real"<sup>32</sup> in his ideology-critique, which emerges because Žižek affirms the fundamental role of inconsistencies in enabling life-world activities to be meaningful in an otherwise indifferent world or what Mallarmé called 'finding Beauty in the Void'. In both Badiou and Žižek there is a place for art, but it is the self-contradiction of the place of the subject in the perception of art as a fantasmatic object that opens Žižek's reading of Mallarmé to the possibility of thought and the understanding of the impossibility of Mallarmé's modernist failure to write *the Book*.

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<sup>32</sup> Hallward, 2003: 151.

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