Theater, Politics, Queerness: Badiou’s Repeatable Event

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In his “short philosophical treatise,” *Rhapsody for the Theater*, Alain Badiou names three prerequisites for theater to occur: a public gathered to witness the spectacle, actors physically present in a space defined as the spectacle’s site, and a text whose representation every performance must repeat. He begins, in fact, by referring to theater as “this strange public place, where fiction is consumed as a repeatable event” and explicitly excludes from its purview what he calls “unrepeatable improvisation.”¹ I want to focus my remarks today on this concept of a “repeatable event” in order to consider its implications for theater, for politics, and for Badiou’s account of the relation between the two as depending on their common commitment to creating occasions where thought can take place.

If this reference to a repeatable event could suggest, on the one hand, the verifiability of empirical observation, where truth is defined as what stays the same when the same conditions are repeated, then that notion of sameness is certainly not what the “repeatable event” of theater is meant to signify for Badiou. In the *Rhapsody*, after all, he invents a persona identified as the Empiricist who plays the part of the philosopher’s antagonist—the one who opposes what the philosopher calls his own “taste for the a priori” (197). Though resisting philosophical abstraction, empiricism is not entirely dispensable for philosophy. The Empiricist’s role in the dialogue enables philosophy as dialogue to occur. But when Badiou identifies theater as a “repeatable event” he proposes something other than truth as demonstrable and verifiable; he proposes, instead, that the theatrical event repeatedly, though in different circumstances, with different actors, and under different

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direction, gives life to the theatrical text, inducing the serial “resurrect[ion]” (212) of what otherwise remains inert.

The truth that the theatrical event occasions involves making present multiplicity within what seems to be one and the same, producing, for example, with each new production that genuinely thinks Shakespeare’s play, one of the infinite multiples latent in the character of Hamlet. In this way theater insists that every representation of things as they are, like the text from which theater is made, has the status of the Lacanian not-all and depends on what exceeds it: on the being whose multiplicity breaks open the totalization of meaning. Theater, for just this reason, especially from the perspective of the State as guardian of a particular naming of what is, operates, to quote Badiou, as “heresy in action” (187). Such heresy, of course, signals theater’s incitement of the spectator to thought; by announcing, as politics does as well, that the State’s account of the situation is, like the theatrical text, not-all, theater invariably refutes the presumptive solidity of every State. It thus invariably engages politics, which finds its origin, Badiou remarks, “in this visible event of the State’s being given a final notice for proving its legitimacy once more” (191). To the extent that it gives “final notice . . . once more,” though, theater “once more” turns out to be a “repeatable event.”

How can we think together the event, which is always without any precedent, and the repetition compulsion or death drive allowing the resurrections that theater performs? What sort of politics does “repeatable event,” that innocent phrase, inscribe? Repetition denotes, in French, both repetition and rehearsal, the latter describing the laborious practice by which the company prepares, through repeated assays, for the moment of theater as such. For the realization of that event, however, the spectator’s presence is required; indeed, Badiou calls the theatrical event “that which interrupts the rehearsals” (189). But only insofar as by doing so it interrupts repetition as well.

In numerous contexts Badiou identifies repetition as such with death, perhaps most clearly in his work on Saint Paul when he discusses the famous meditation on sin that appears in the Book of Romans. With regard to that text Badiou writes: “What is sin, exactly? It is not desire as such, for if it were one would not understand its link to the law and death. Sin is the life of desire as autonomy, as autonomism. The law is required in order to unleash the automatic life of desire, the automatism of repetition... The law is what, by designating its object, delivers desire to its repetitive autonomy... The law’s prohibition is
that through which the desire of the object can realize itself involuntarily, ‘unconsciously’, . . . which is to say, as a life of sin. As a result of which, the subject, de-centered from this desire, crosses over to the side of death... If the subject is to swing over to another disposition, one wherein he would be on the side of life, and sin—that is to say, the automatism of repetition—would occupy the place of the dead, it is necessary to break with the law” (Saint Paul, 79-81). Here, as in his earlier description of theater’s difference from rehearsal, the event induces a break with the law through an interruption of “repetition” that summons the subject into being.

This movement of desire from death to life, from the autonomy of unconscious repetition (whereby we are subordinated by the Law to the “general passivity, the symbolic invisibility” [191] of the real) to active assumption in and as the process of subjectivization, relies not only on Lacan’s account of this passage from Saint Paul, but also on his well-known revision of Descartes in “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious” (“I am not, where I am the plaything of my thought; I think about what I am where I do not think I am thinking”). Badiou revises that revision in his *Rhapsody for the Theater*, maintaining that there is “a cogito of the actor, which is much closer no doubt to that of Lacan than to that of Descartes: I am not where one thinks that I am, being there where I think that one thinks that the Other is.” Later Badiou revised his revision of Lacan’s revision of Descartes and put in the mouth of Ahmed, his mimetic rendition of the actor as philosopher, in his own writings for the theater, *Ahmed Philosophe*: “What you have to say, if you want to be precise in philosophy, is this, write it down in your little notebooks. It’ll make a big impression in the middle of all the chitchat. Bring it out over dessert, and, you’ll see, everyone’ll be blown away: ‘Where I think, I am not. And where I am, I don’t think.’ There’s a snazzy maxim!” This chain of revisions dramatizes what the “repeatable event” of theater might mean since what the event repeats is precisely the interruption of repetition, the interruption, that is, of the de-centering of the subject from the real of his desire, from the place where the subject is and is in excess of whatever he thinks he means.

The event that calls into being this subject through an act of resurrection (the figure Badiou deploys in his *Rhapsody* as well as in his book on Saint Paul), the event that gives life to what the law would condemn to lifeless repetition, can seem to affirm as an absolute value the privileging of life over death. Hence Slavoj Žižek differentiates Lacan’s position from Badiou’s and offers a critique of Badiou that focuses on the latter’s reading of the passage from Romans. Arguing that Lacan rejects the positivity entailed in the Truth-
Event and so “implicitly changes the balance between Death and Resurrection in favour of Death,” Žižek goes on to assert that Lacan, in doing so, “parts company with St. Paul and Badiou: God not only is but always-already was dead—that is to say, after Freud, one cannot directly have faith in the Truth-Event; every such Event ultimately remains a semblance obfuscating a preceding Void whose Freudian name is death drive.”

This criticism, however, presupposes that the Truth-Event is positivized for Badiou and so is affirmed as the site of a content other than the insistence of “a preceding Void whose Freudian name is death drive.” Does Badiou’s event, as Žižek asserts, really obfuscate such a Void or is the event as Badiou invokes it precisely the Void’s persistent eruption? Is the truth-procedure that the event initiates exhausted by the content it affirms as universal or does it linger in the form of the event itself, in the radical interruption of the law’s particularity by the unnameable element the event discloses? Insofar as the event insists on the latter, the Void or death drive is another name for the repetition that makes the event, like theater, a repeatable event—an event that is never once and for all, that never announces truth’s completion or our capacity to comprehend it, but that always insists on the not-all of its given articulations. “Theater, which requires writing, never ceases to unwrite itself,” writes Badiou. And in this he refers to Lacan once again, recalling what the psychoanalyst variously formulated as “ce qui ne cesse pas de s’écrire” (that which does not cease to write itself) or “ce qui ne cesse pas de (ne pas) s’écrire” (that which does not cease to not write itself). Though apparently contradictory, these formulas describe the same phenomenon, the encounter with the real, but as seen from two different perspectives that reflect the constitutive division of the subject between being and thinking or doing.

The symptom, Lacan says in the Third Discourse of Rome, can never cease writing itself from out of the real (“ne cesse pas de s’écrire du reel”), but the real as such is what never ceases not to write itself, remaining perpetually inaccessible. Later Lacan will associate the necessity punned on in “ne cesse pas de s’écrire” with the sinthome, the knot by which the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real are bound together, beyond the precariousness of the Borromean knot, by virtue of the subject’s construction in terms of the necessary, but meaningless, particularity of his access to jouissance. This jouissance, as Lacan’s reading of Joyce makes clear, is destructive of language as meaning but has the effect, as Joyce intended, of moving scholars to try to make sense of it for the next three hundred years. Here, too, we see writing and unwriting combine, allowing us to recognize in
theater’s repeated unwriting of the written text that it requires the ceaseless negativity of an erasure that insistently gestures toward the universal element, the point of contact with the real, that can never be written or named. What Badiou calls the theater’s repeatable event is not distinct, then, from what Žižek refers to as the death drive. And this has crucial consequences for thinking politics in relation to theater, for inherent in politics, Badiou suggests, is a structuring antagonism similar to theater’s repetitive interruption of repetition.

That may explain why Badiou asserts, referring to Lacan’s notion of knotting, that “theatre, in the circle of its provisional repetition, ... figures the knotted components of politics” (193). Repetition, that is, precisely in its always necessarily provisional status, constitutes the locus of theater’s figural involvement in the political. Badiou tells us that politics is never “unanimous, undivided, monolithic” (191), that “all politics exists against other politics” (192), but he also notes that politics, at the same time, “organizes a scission” (191). As the organization of a scission, though, politics attempts to suture the discord essential for politics at all. And this, we might say, is the scission, or point of the real, internal to politics. Mokhtar, the Arab factory worker with whom Paula, the subject of the truth event, bears a son in another of Badiou’s theater pieces, Incident at Antioch, declares: “In order to come into being as subjects, we must therefore abolish the very conditions of our own existence.”

But those conditions can never be abolished completely without abolishing the scission necessary for the subject’s coming into being—a coming into being accomplished by way of the negativity that destroys what is. As David, the son of Mokhtar and Paula, observes in the play’s final scene, referring to the darkness occasioned when an eclipse temporarily blocks out the light: “But it’s also darkness, on the stage, that signals that one act is coming after another.”

Bringing together politics, theater, and the structural necessity of a negativity expressed as repetition, this passage acknowledges that sequence, seriality, emerges from undoing or unwriting, from the acknowledgment of the necessity of the scission that figures the impossibility of totalization. Neither destructiveness alone nor the content of the acts that succeed it on theater’s (or history’s) stage can contain the “truth” of the event. For the truth that the event elicits—regardless of whether that truth concerns politics, science, art, or love—consists in the imperative that the event, though singular, be informed, by repetition: that the universality it announces lie not in truth’s closure or the totalization that its forcing would induce, but rather in the element always excluded from every representation, the element
of the real that opens onto Being’s multiplicity. “Politics,” Paula tells David in an effort to break his addiction to power, “is like an event, as unrepresentable as all the hard work in the theater that ends up making the play we see before us a mysterious one-time thing.” The hard work that the spectator cannot see and that remains unrepresentable is precisely the rehearsal that the spectator’s presence by definition interrupts—precisely, therefore, the repetition interrupted by theater as event. But the truth, like the event, is as unrepresentable as what it interrupts.

Always, in its singularity, a “one-time thing,” the event as, necessarily, the event of the not-all, and so of the Unnameable, is never the all in itself. Thus Paula, though called into being as subject by the event whose truth she proclaims, comes to oppose the purely destructive negativity of its appropriation as a vehicle of power. Recalling her earlier ideal of “a politics that was supposed to put an end to politics,” she perfectly captures the contradiction essential to politics, theater, and the event. To put an end to politics can never be the end toward which politics strives without producing a totalitarian structure that banishes discord or dissent. This would be the catastrophic consequence of forcing truth, once and for all; Badiou explains: “my thesis is that a forcing all the field of elements is real disaster, it's the destruction of the condition of truth itself, because it's the destruction of the real point of the field. It's not a moral question but one of destroying the point of the real which is finally the point of the real of the truth itself. So this sort of coercion is also a question of the possible continuation of truth's construction. Thus the disaster, the destruction, is a possible consequence of the truth, but that sort of consequence is the destruction of truth. By what? By truth. Truth is always the possibility of its proper destruction.”

To assure the possibility of truth’s construction, in the face of truth’s own impulse toward a self-destroying totality, the event must never be named completely, politics must never be brought to a halt, and theatrical acts, like theatrical events, must be punctuated by darkness. That explains why Badiou maintains that “the very essence of a novelty implies negation, but must affirm its identity apart of [sic, for “apart from”] the negativity of negation”; he then goes on to add, creation, the production of something new, “must be defined paradoxically as an affirmative part of negation.”

Once Paula has dissuaded him from striving for power in Incident’s penultimate scene, David acknowledges the always penultimate status of the event. Rather than putting “an end to politics,” as he and his mother once thought, politics, he now comes to realize, “is about making politics exist.” In that alone lies the hope of preserving the point of the real from which the
universality of truth arises. Badiou calls this point of the real, which “limits the potency of truth” within any given situation and therefore cannot be forced, the “Unnameable within the situation” and “that which is excluded.” It is what, in my own work, I’ve identified with the negativity of the queer. The queer, too, figures what falls outside all legal and conceptual norms, what remains in perpetual discord with the order of things as they are, what holds the empty place of the excess that can’t be represented: the insistence of an element of the real that never submits to positivization and that doesn’t oppose the social consensus so much as it negates it. Not a type of person whose attributes could ever submit to substantialization but a designation, instead, for the subject produced at the point where political and sexual discord necessarily overlap (necessarily insofar as the libidinal element inheres in our every attachment), the queer, as I’ve argued, finds itself linked with the death drive and the sinthome; it carries the burden of figuring the impossibility of the sexual relation while insistently libidinizing, and also politicizing, all social and political relations. It trenches, therefore, on what Badiou suggests was Pasolini’s attempt “to inscribe sexual desire in political negativity,” to inhabit “the point where political determinations are linked with sexual situations.”

Like politics and theater both, that is, the queer reflects an encounter with the real that the law and the State would foreclose. Though each situation particularizes what counts for it as queer, attempting to name the Unnameable and so, by defining it, by filling the void that marks its place, to eliminate it as such, the relation to the real it condenses bespeaks a universal queerness, a queerness without any attributes but its insistence on the not-all. That doesn’t mean that queerness can’t be appropriated, like politics or theater, by those who would attempt to force its truth. Consider these words from Jasbir Puar, who echoes Paula’s repudiated call in Incident at Antioch for a politics that takes as its purpose bringing politics to an end: “The challenge then,” Puar declares, “is how to craft political praxis that does not mandate a continual reinvestment in its form and content. Don’t we ultimately want a world within which queer and anti-racist theory and activism no longer need to exist?” In calling for a politics that wouldn’t reproduce those versions of critique whose familiarity works against the possibility of thought’s occurrence, Puar, from my perspective, errs in blithely conflating the form and content of political praxis. It is precisely as form that politics requires a “continual reinvestment,” a reinvestment that evacuates particular contents but retains the negative moment by means of which politics proceeds. But that negative moment in which the universality of the real is affirmed through an act of undoing is precisely what Puar abandons in fantasizing a
“world within which queer and anti-racist theory and activism no longer need to exist.” What else, after all, would such a world be but one where the truth of a queer or anti-racist politics has been forced in a way that eliminates the unspeakable real that queerness or race stands in for. Such a fantasy reflects a desire for an ultimate instance of the law, for a world without division, discord, or politics, and so without race, without queers. We see here a necessary corollary of Badiou’s analysis of truth’s self-destructiveness, of its implication, as a consequence of our desire for truth, in the evil that undoes it. What the repeatable event, as political scission, interrupts, though without finality, is politics as the organization of scission to produce a total order. And it does so through the resurrection, as it were, of a vital negativity. This negativity requires both destruction and subtraction in order to be faithful to the truth whose multiple includes at least one element excluded, in its queerness, from representation, an element of the unnamed and unnameable real and so of a universality that insists in the discord inseparable from politics or sex, or from the theater that performs the repeatable event of unwriting, of unbecoming, that we might call becoming queer.

Notes


“Le déchiffrage se résume à ce qui fait chiffre, à ce qui fait que le symptôme, c'est quelque chose qui avant tout ne cesse pas de s'écrire du réel, et qu'aller à l'apprivoiser jusqu'au point où le langage en puisse faire équivoque, c'est là par quoi le terrain est gagné qui sépare le symptôme de ce que je vais vous montrer sur mes petits dessins, sans que le symptôme se réduise à la jouissance phallique.” Jacques Lacan, *La Troisieme*, transcription par P. Valas et cie de l'intervention au congrès de l'EFP à Rome, 1er novembre 1974. [http://www.valas.fr/Jacques-Lacan-La-Troisieme-transcription-par-P-Valas-et-cie-de-l-intervention-au-congres-de-l-EFP-a-Rome-1er-novembre-1974,011#outil_sommaire_2](http://www.valas.fr/Jacques-Lacan-La-Troisieme-transcription-par-P-Valas-et-cie-de-l-intervention-au-congres-de-l-EFP-a-Rome-1er-novembre-1974,011#outil_sommaire_2)

I quote with permission from Susan Spitzer’s remarkable translation of this as yet unpublished play. *Incident at Antioch*, in Spitzer’s striking translation, will be published in a bilingual edition by Columbia University Press in 2013.


11 Alain Badiou, “Destruction, Negation, Subtraction.”