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## Cinema, philosophy and *paideia*

### A Badiouan analysis of the Iranian movie “Hit the Road”

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#### ABSTRACT

I here read the Iranian film *Hit the Road* through the eyes of the French philosopher Alain Badiou. In doing so, I hope to illuminate the triadic link between cinema, philosophy and *paideia* (ethical-political education). To explore, I adopt a philosophical methodology with the double ambition to reveal the latent pedagogies of the film and to acquire insights on the distinctiveness of a Badiouan conception of cinema. My questions are to what degree and in what ways cinematic experience can be said to promote ethical-political formation. I start by portraying Badiou’s cinematic philosophy. Next, I expose how *Hit the Road* confronts us with a hidden real. Third, I close the paper by considering Badiou’s idea of cinema as an influential form of ethical-political education.

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I here read the Iranian film *Hit the Road* (Panahi 2021) through the eyes of the French philosopher Alain Badiou. In doing so, I adopt a philosophical methodology with the dual ambition to explore the pedagogies of this film and to acquire insights on the distinctiveness of Badiou’s conception of the triadic link between cinema, philosophy and *paideia* (ethical-political education).

*Hit the Road* tells a story of a family of four on a mysterious road trip. ‘We’re being followed,’ mother whispers as she looks in the side mirror. The grumpy father in the back struggles apparently with a toothache and a broken leg, while the silent elder son drives the car. A sick stray dog<sup>1</sup> rests in the trunk, while an energetic six-year-old brother leaps around, babbling his observations on life, the universe and everything. His numerous whims drives his family to distraction, but some of his jabber is reminiscent of Psalm 8:2 ‘Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies ... ’

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This funny, tragic and moving film is written and directed by Panah Panahi, son of the distinguished Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi who recently was imprisoned for six years in a campaign by the Iranian authorities to silence this form of art (Zeydabadi-Nejad 2010). The Iranian authorities thus seems to consider the ethical-political power of cinema as quite strong.

My experience of watching *Hit the Road* illustrates such a power. I first watched the film at an International Film Festival<sup>2</sup> in February 2022. With no prior expectations, I was deeply touched by the film's story, which was told through brilliant acting, humorous and emotionally subtle scenes, well-chosen music, and beautiful landscape shots. In short, *Hit the Road* portrays the essence of Iranian life, with its numerous secrets, impossible dilemmas and conflicts. Set in today's post-revolutionary Iran, the film helps to understand the human aspect of living in a violent theocratic regime. In 1979, the 'Islamic Revolution' abruptly changed the political system and the destiny of millions of people. Opponents are being executed, hijab for women violently enforced, and freedom of expression severely repressed. However, despite of a ruling regime that is doing everything to prevent them, most Iranians strive for freedom. Today, we witness various forms of revolt, from open street protests and postings on social media<sup>3</sup> to quieter, more subtle forms of dissent. *Hit the Road* portrays many such silent dissents, which to an outsider may be invisible or incomprehensible.<sup>4</sup> *Hit the Road* is therefore not a typical political film that focuses on the terror of a violent regime or people's explicit resistance against a suppressing system. The film does not explain the regime. Neither does it put the characters' rebellion to the forefront. More important is the way in which the film wonderfully portrays easily recognizable human emotions, reactions and interpersonal companionship. In this sense, the film is meta-political as it moves beyond the rhetoric of the political discourse. By leaving the regime's political repression in the background, the film throws light on some very well recognizable aspects of human existence. In portraying the characters' sensations, doubts, connectivity, loss and longing, *Hit the Road* elucidates, enlarges and acknowledges vital aspects of what it means to be human. So, when I first watched the film, the cinematic sensation did not only create a sense of deep connectivity with fellow human beings, across the borders of very different political regimes and cultures. It also moved my way of thinking contemporary life in Iran. In other words, my cinematic experience does not adhere only to my 'liking' of the film, neither to my judgements of its cinematic qualities. Rather, my cinematic sensation adheres to an experience of a displacement of thought, of seeing, not what I already knew, but getting to know what I did not know. This is the reason why I picked this particular film, among the numerous films I have watched, to illustrate the circuit between cinema and *paideia* qua ethical-political education.

So what may be the latent pedagogy of this film? To what degree can we link the experience of watching this film to *paideia*? To explore, I start by briefly introducing Badiou's description of cinema as an impure art revolving around

the contradictions of the contemporary world (Badiou 2013, 2015, 2022). Next, I expose how the narrative of *Hit the Road* confronts us with ethical-political paradoxes while concurrently uncovering a silenced or hidden existence (Badiou 2022). Third, I further examine Badiou's idea of cinema as an influential form of ethical-political education. Today, young people worldwide stream and watch films as never before, be it via their smartphones, computers or television sets (Schuman and Strand 2021). Cinema is for everybody and everybody has access. Moreover, there are no distinctions between elitist and vulgar forms. In this way, cinema is a mass art in line with the Greek tragedy or the German *Bildungsroman*. Badiou thus characterizes cinema as 'a democratic emblem' (Badiou 2009a).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, he encourages us to 'go to the cinema' and 'participate in this form of contemporary education' (Badiou 2015). However, before further explaining Badiou's radical conception of cinema as *paideia*, let me briefly leave a comment on why I here use the term *paideia*.

## Paideia

Despite its somewhat problematic connotations, I here adopt the Greek term *paideia* (παιδεία) to designate an ethical-political formation of humanity. Generally, *paideia* alludes to a broad conception of education, denoting those phenomena through which a society preserves and renews itself (Jaeger 1965). To the ancient Greeks, *paideia* referred to the development of society through a refinement of the youths' civic virtues.<sup>6</sup> A civic education of and for today, however, cannot allude to an archaic hierarchical model of *polis* (the ancient Greek city-state). Nor should we call for an old-school education that aims at raising conformist citizens obedient to a dated Greek ideal. In line with Badiou and other contemporary philosophers of education, we may rather embrace *paideia* as a normative critique of today's instrumental take on education (Badiou 2017; Castoriadis 2012; Nikolakaki 2012; Nussbaum 2010; Säfström 2019; Zovko and Dillon 2018, 2021). My ambition is to put the ethical-political aspects of a broad conception of education at the forefront and to demonstrate that we should not limit educational phenomena to instrumental, formal or scholastic pedagogies. As a striking contrast to neoliberal and instrumental notions of education, *paideia* highlights the hidden pedagogies of communal narratives, values, and world-views that shape people's aspirations and ways of being in the world. The norm is not individualism, but a communal humanism. Cornelius Castoriadis explains:

I will name *paideia* anything that in a given society, within its public domain, goes beyond what is simply functional or instrumental and, most importantly, presents an invisible dimension, positively vested by the society members. In other words, *paideia* is what pertains to the public presence of this society's imaginary, *stricto sensu*, and the imaginary of the poetic, *sensu lato*, as this poetic imaginary is substantiated and

embodied in works, attitudes and actions that go beyond what is functional and instrumental. (Castoriadis 2012, 72)

In short, *paideia* puts the ethical-political aspects of a general and often hidden pedagogy to the forefront. As does Badiou in his reading of the latent pedagogy of cinema.

### Badiou on cinema

With the startling statement that ‘today, we cannot do philosophy without referring to cinema’ (Badiou 2015), Badiou claims that cinema<sup>7</sup> is a philosophical experiment.

Cinema has a unique relationship with philosophy: we could say that it is a philosophical experiment. This raises two questions. First, ‘How does philosophy regard cinema?’ Second, ‘How does cinema transform philosophy?’ The relationship between them is not a relationship of knowledge. Philosophy does not enable us to know cinema. It is a living, concrete relationship, a relationship of transformation. Cinema transforms philosophy. In other words, cinema transforms the very notion of idea. Cinema basically consists in creating new ideas about what an idea is. To put it another way, cinema is a philosophical situation (Badiou 2013, 202).

To Badiou, it is the paradoxical attributions of cinema that makes it a philosophical situation. Let me explain: Any film is deeply paradoxical because it inevitably combines contradictory features or qualities. In fact, it is an untenable relation between something very real and something completely artificial. A film portrays simultaneously a copy of reality and the entirely artificial dimension of that copy. With artificial intelligence and advanced technologies, today’s cinema even produces artificial copies of false copies of the real, or even false real copies of an artificial reality. Next, these paradoxes, or let us say impossible relations between something total artificial and something very real, invite philosophy. Because ‘each time there is a paradoxical relation, that is, a relation which is not a relation, [...] philosophy can take place’ (Badiou 2009c, 15–16). In this way, cinema is a philosophical experiment, carrying potentials to contest and transform thinking. Badiou even claims that cinema ‘... has become the immediate form of an ancient paradox, that of the relations between being and appearing’ (Badiou 2009a, 1).

Badiou’s idea of cinema as a philosophical situation goes well with the school of thought initiated by Gilles Deleuze’s seminal books on cinema (Deleuze 1986, 1989). Here, Deleuze reversed the relation between cinema and philosophy, arguing that we should never read or use cinema to illustrate philosophical ideas. On the contrary, cinema is an art that produces new ways of thinking that may be generative for philosophy. The cinematic platform can create valid philosophy (Baumbach 2019; Herzogenrath 2017; Shamir 2016). ‘The cinema can, with impunity, bring

us close to things or take us away from them and revolve around them, it suppresses both the anchoring of the subject and the horizon of the world [...] With the cinema, it is the world which becomes its own image, and not an image which becomes world' (Deleuze 1986, 64). Consequently, cinema is not a cave of illusions. Contrary, cinema is 'a metaphor for contemporary thought' and a 'philosophical experiment' (Badiou 2013, 17). So, cinema is not the production of false images, but rather a struggle to affirm true images. As can be illustrated by the opening scene of *Hit the Road*.

Despite leaving most things unsaid, the opening scene of *Hit the Road* speaks a language that says it all. In the very first minute of the film, we watch an empty white screen while we hear gentle piano music playing. Then, we overhear traffic approaching and rushing by. Softly, the white screen opens to a picture of a plastered leg on which someone – apparently a child – has drawn tiny figurines and piano keys with a black felt-tip pen. A child's hand moves gently, rhythmic and accurate over the keys in tact with the music playing. As if the cast leg was an instrument to be played by the child to create this beautiful music. The image expands and we realize that the child playing is a six-year old boy, laying in his father's lap. The father grunts and strokes the boy's hair before closing his eyes to rest. We now understand that we are inside a car parked by the roadside. Through the rear side window, we get a dim glimpse of the elder son. We see him more clearly as he approaches the car, moves around it while checking that things are in order. He examines the rear-view mirror, looks to his sleeping mother in the front seat, and greets the dog in the trunk. Then he grabs a bottle of water and leans against the front of the car, sipping from the water bottle and observing the road that winds its way through a soft desert landscape. While we take in the tranquil scenery, the soft piano music, some cars passing by, and the back of the elder brother, the screen displays the title of the film – *Hit the Road* – and the name of the filmmaker. Unexpectedly, however, there is an electronic buzzing sound and the camera turns towards the mother, who now opens her eyes displaying a worried frown. She slowly turns her gaze, looks into the camera for a while, fixing her eyes in ours and asks, 'Where are we?' The boy in the back seat lifts his head. 'We're dead.'

This scene is imbued with paradoxical relations. Such as the relation between the sound of the gentle piano music playing over the radio and the images of the boy's fingers moving across the make-believe keys on the plastered leg. As if the child is the one playing the music. However, we should not read the opening scene as a production of false images, but rather as an attempt to affirm true images. Such as when the film invites our response by letting us, the spectators, meet the mother's eyes, encounter her direct question and the boy's witty, but yet disturbing reply. Through the mother's eyes and the child's response, we encounter a unique reality situated in the breach between story and history. So again, what may be the pedagogy of this film? In what ways may cinema contest and transform thinking?

## The cinematic sensation

Badiou explores, in more than 30 philosophical essays, films that have made an impression on him. These numerous case studies have helped him to generate, over a period of more than 50 years, a whole system of cinematic philosophy based on particular films considered in their specificity. 'Cinema has played an essential role in my existence and my apprenticeship of life and ideas' (Badiou 2013, 1). He places the cinematic production of thought at the forefront (Badiou 2013; Ling 2011). He explains:

... philosophy doesn't have to produce the thinking of the work of art because the work of art thinks all by itself and produces truth.<sup>8</sup> A film is a proposition of thought, a movement of thought, a thought connected, so to speak, to its artistic disposition. How does this thought exist and get transmitted? It's transmitted through the experience of viewing the film, through its movement. (Badiou 2013, 18)

Consequently, when studying a film, we should not start in theory, but rather in the experience of watching the film. Because a theoretical approach diminishes the cinematic sensation. Moreover, Badiou maintains that a clear definition of cinema reduces its complexities. Any film is a highly complex composition containing numerous dimensions, such as moving images; sequences; sound; music; narratives; dramatization; acting; shots; scripts; and editing. The history of cinema adds to this complexity by continuously expanding the media culture and reshaping this form of art. Cinema is a plastic art, always in the making. A clear definition limits these complexities with the risk of covering over the cinematic sensation.

In short, the exceptional power of cinema lies in the sensation of its complexities. Or, as Badiou says, cinema's 'impurity.' Badiou here refers to Canudo (1923), who labelled cinema 'the seventh art.' Canudo conceived cinema as an addition to and a synthesis of the six ancient arts; architecture, sculpture, painting, music, dance and poetry. It is thus impossible to separate a cinematic sensation from the experience of the arts flowing through the film. Let us say the music, the dialogues, or the shapes, lines and colors of the pictures projected on the silver screen. However, cinema is not a synthesis of these arts only. It is also a commentary on and a judgement of them. Cinema thereby creates some disputes by judging the filmic resistance of the works of art inscribed in the film. An example is the music accompanying the opening scene of *Hit the Road*, which is a piece by Schubert that is slightly amended to fit the cinematic narrative.

## An impure art

However, cinema does not only create a dispute between the arts. It also creates conflicts between the arts' pure existence and something else, namely the contemporary world. Therefore, in his strong emphasis on cinema as an 'impure

art', Badiou stresses the fact that the real world is always already present in a film. Just envisage how any footages of any film depicts a real. Therefore, on the one hand, cinema is an autonomous form of art that contains, synthesizes and judges the other arts. On the other hand, cinema is a non-art because it unavoidably depicts the real world. So, to Badiou, 'cinema is the art of the fight between art and non-art' (Badiou 2015). Again, take the opening scene in *Hit the Road*, in which the soft piano music accompanies, magnifies and contrasts the material images of what is going on inside and outside the car.

Cinema is always located on the edge of non-art; it is an art affected by non-art, an art that is always below or beside art with respect to certain of its features. In every era cinema explores the border between art and what is not art. That is where it is located. It incorporates the new forms of existence, whether they are art or not, and it makes a certain selection, albeit one that is never complete. (Badiou 2013, 210)

In short, cinema's unique relationships to the world makes cinema an exceptional form of art (Badiou 2022). Cinema attests to human presence. Cinema accepts the materiality of the images of the world, their impurity, their contemporary imagery, and reworks them towards a narrative. It is thus both the place of all imaginary creations and a comment to these creations. Consequently, cinema is *not* a representation of the world, but rather an image that by itself is a comment to and a new way of thinking our images – or representations – of the world.

To briefly sum up, cinema is fundamentally paradoxical. It contains the conflicts between art and non-art, between something completely artificial and something very real, between images of the world and the false dimension of those images. In short, 'cinema simultaneously offers the possibility of a copy of reality and the entirely artificial dimension of that copy' (Badiou 2013, 233). The paradoxical attributions of cinema are thus far more fundamental than the relations between the virtual and the actual, because cinema exhibits the ancient paradox between being and appearing (Badiou 2009a, 2013, 2022). In other words, a cinematic sensation transforms the thinking subject. First, because cinema doubles the real. Second, because cinema signifies an encounter with a unique, genuine existence worthy of recognizing. Third, because cinema invites our thinking into a hidden, closed and silenced place. This also goes for the experience of watching *Hit the Road*.

### ***Hit the Road* doubles the real**

By merging a historical and fictional world, *Hit the Road* doubles the real. Overall, the film tells a story about the loving bonds of a family of four traveling in a borrowed car from Tehran, past the dried-up Lake Urmia and towards the greener Azerbaijan province at Iran's northwestern border with Turkey. This is no conventional road movie, in which the car is



a mean for transportation. Rather, the car is a place in which interpersonal emotions, bonds and witty disputes unfolds. The film does not give away many details about the journey, but focuses on the mixed emotions and the many undisclosed secrets of this family. 'So many lies<sup>9</sup>', mother complains. The six-year old son, however, is still a free thinker and confident of his emotional impulses. Against his parents' permission, he has taken his cell phone with him. When the phone buzzes, mother discovers and quickly confiscates it, removes and destroys the sim card and buries the phone under a rock next to the highway. The boy makes a fuss. 'If I do not answer my calls, people will worry. I have serious matters to take care of'.

When the six-year old asks 'Is Bro going somewhere,' the father responds, 'He's going to get married.' Soon after, we understand that the parents do not trust the youngest son to keep the secret of where his brother is going. Because now the film reveals that the eldest son is about to flee Iran. The family have sacrificed their home and sold their car to pay a trafficker. The motive is not clearly stated, but the eldest son is of age to do his two years of mandatory military service. 'He has not received a summons yet,' father confides on the phone at a rest stop café. He is speaking with the trafficker, about the arrangement of signing over the house. The eldest son turns up the volume on the car radio to drown out the discussion that clearly anguishes him. However, the genius of this film is that it elegantly shifts from despair to hope, from deep sadness to joy, from seriousness to cheerfulness, from sincerity to playfulness. With the radio playing, the father closes the conversation with the trafficker, hides his cellphone inside the plastered cast, lights a cigarette and sings along. 'As soon the door opens/it's time for reunion/All the roads of the galaxies/lead to my heart/You are my everything/without you I can't breathe.' He walks to the door, takes in the scents from the garden, rests his eyes on his wife who sits in the shade of a tree, enters the garden and sits down beside her. He takes her hand and together, they sing, 'If I have you/I have everything I need.' This kind of exuberant lip-synching to Iranian pre-revolutionary pop music is actually a vital part of the story as it appears a few times during the film. The lyrics, the dance movements and the music supplements and expands the drama unfolding on the screen. Moreover, the music subtly reveals the rebellion of this little family within the confines of the car. Pop music is forbidden in Iran, so is women singing and dancing.

In this way, *Hit the Road* elegantly merges a historical and fictional world. In other words, it doubles the real. On the one hand, the film points to the essence of Iranian life, with its numerous secrets and lies, silent dissents, and impossible dilemmas. On the other hand, the film tells a universal story about the loving bonds of a family of four. In doing so,

*Hit the Road* interweaves two ontological sites that are opposite to each other. This opposition confronts us with impossible ethical-political paradoxes while concurrently uncovering a silent or hidden existence.

### ***Hit the Road* uncovers a unique existence worthy of recognizing**

The narrative of *Hit the Road* fluctuates between story and history. On the one hand, the film adheres to tangible and detectible historical-geographical events. Such as the reality of young men fleeing Iran, the problem of trafficking, and the contrasts between pre- and post-revolutionary popular culture. On the other hand, the film offers a fictional story that opens towards new imaginaries. Such as the wittiness and deep loving bonds of this family. 'If I have you/I have everything I need.' In weaving together this historical and fictional world, the film points to a unique existence worthy of recognizing. It does so by suspending the finitude of political rhetoric.

Adopting a Badiouan terminology, we can say that the film uncovers something that has been covered-over. To cover over is to neutralize 'any detection of an infinite potentiality in a situation' (Badiou 2022, p. 198) by superimposing a kind of finitude over the potential infinities in it. Covering-over does not happen on the background of a brute denial of these potentialities. It is rather an outcome of the assumptions and considerations we derive from the initial situation and which next serve to conceal 'any supposition of infinity and render it [the situation] unrecognizable' (Badiou 2022, 198). Badiou states that 'the essence of covering-over by finitude is to assign every figure of what appears to be "that one," that thing, assigned its place and meaning by category of language' (Badiou 2022, 206).

In allowing an alternative narrative to take place, Panah Panahi's film produces something artificial that contests the covering-over operations embedded in the toxic conceptions of the world that it signifies. A wonderful example is the tragicomic conversation with the bike racer whom they gave a lift after crashing into him while he was in the middle of a race. It turns out that the prize is a large sum of money. 'I should have won the competition,' the cyclist whines. He speaks Farsi with an Azeri<sup>10</sup> accent. 'Wipe your tears,' father says. The cyclist complains that his leg hurts.

- Now you have to say goodbye to the world of sports? The six-year old wonders
- Nonsense, the cyclist replies. Armstrong stayed the world champion with cancer. He's my role model in life and sport. His name says it all: Armstrong. He demonstrates by lifting both arms and flexing his biceps. If only I could see him up close and kiss his arms, his legs . . .

- Come on, he was into doping. Father is upset. He caused a scandal! They took back all his medals and kicked him out [. . .]. He was dismissed as a dishonest prick. It was aired on TV.
- Fake news!

The discussion waves back and forth, engaging everyone in the car. Then, they start to explore to what extent it is possible to be honest in all parts of life.

- What do you mean you have never cheated, the cyclist asks. Done anything illegal? The problem is we create boundaries . . .
- Actually, we want our elder son . . .
- Shut up! mother sharply interrupts her husband.
- We create boundaries, the cyclist continues, to avoid thinking about transgression. Whenever we do, our mind just blocks. Why? Because we're sure we are good people. And it's true. We are good people, but the problem is not the boundaries we've created. We stop thinking and we push it all into the unconsciousness. So we can't analyze.

This example clearly illustrates how Panah Panahi's cinematic narrative describe the mechanisms and consequences of such covering-over operations while concurrently articulating the unnamable phenomena that have been silenced and covered over. In this way, the film invites our thinking into a hidden place.

### ***Hit the road invites our thinking into a hidden, closed and silenced place***

So, cinema does not come forward as a production of false images, but rather as a struggle to affirm true images. Because a true image always contains a contradiction between two incompatible elements, of what is and what is not. It is therefore never a representation. Neither is it in the synthesis of being and non-being, as a Hegelian scholar would like to believe. Nor is it a transcendent being, as a Heideggerian would like to believe. It is rather the very site of being at the edge of disappearance. It is an image that in itself is a comment on and a new way of thinking existence. In this regard, cinema offers a site in which a unique reality simultaneously can 'be held in the place where it is and in the place where it is not' (Badiou 2008, 251). *Hit the Road* thus leads our attention towards a being, or a generic humanity that, according to Badiou, may be 'the essence of all reality' (Badiou 2014, 137).

In a confidential dialogue between mother and her eldest son, when they both hide behind the rest stop cafe to smoke a cigarette, the son admits a fascination.

- What's the world's best movie for you?, mother asks

- The world's best movie?
- Whatever
- What kind of question is that?
- For one, give me a straight answer. And don't jerk me around.
- 2001: A Space Odyssey
- Is it beautiful?
- Mesmerizing. You know it's like Zen. It calms you down. Takes you deep into the galaxies [...] At the end, the hero is alone, in a spaceship. He goes deep into a black hole. He goes deeper and deeper. That's all you see for half an hour. Crossing the limits of time and space.

Here, Panahi's film offers comments on a viewer's experience of the cinematic artifice. To the elder brother, to watch Stanley Kubrick's *'2001: A Space Odyssey'* is like 'crossing the limits of time and space.' After a while, however, a reference to Stanley Kubrick's *'2001: A Space Odyssey'* crops up again in one of the many playful moments between father and his youngest son. The night after the eldest son left, the family camp in an open grassy field under a high sky sprinkled with stars. Father, wrapped in a foil sleeping bag, lies sprawled on the grass with the boy in his pajama resting on top of him. They contemplate the high starry sky above while having a playful conversation that also reveals a secret about the older brother's escape.

- Where is Bro? The six-year old asks.
- I forgot to tell you. He went off to marry a beautiful woman. When he returns, I asked him to bring you an original Batman mask, impossible to find here
- You mean, he will meet Batman?

In their world of make-believe, Batman is a superhero. In reality, Batman is the name of a city in Turkey, about 900 kilometers from the northwestern Iranian border. Until the 1950's Batman was just a small village, but after discovering oil in the region, the city grew with the industry and influx of workforce.

- Sure. If he's smart enough, he will get an appointment [with Batman], father replies. And if he is even smarter, he'll do it on a Sunday. Because Sunday is holiday.
- But Superman, no matter if Sunday or Monday, he doesn't save people. He is too lazy
- He's a bum
- He's not even a superhero
- He's an ass
- I have a question, though. Would Batman give him his car for a ride?

- Are you joking? Give that expensive car to your blind brother? To crash it? Not in his life. Batman's not crazy ...

Father and son continue to fantasize about the remarkable equipment and prize of this amazing Batmobile, which 'even has a fridge.' 'You can't find it on the market' the boy establishes, 'but I have done some math.' He reckons that the car is worth 600 dollars. Father envisions how 'Batman will snap' if his car is scratched. 'He will sit in the middle of the road and shout: Oh God!' Father bursts out in helpless gusts of laughter over their fantasy of Batman's despair and the drop in resale value on the scratched Batmobile. The film depicts their imaginary world, in which they are no longer father and son but astronaut and star-child floating in space, while tinkling music plays stars into being on the grass all around them.

Crossing the boundaries of reality and make-believe, between something completely artificial and something very real, between our images of the world and the false dimension of those images, this scene offers imageries that by themselves are comments on our way of thinking our images of the world. These incompatible, contradictory and paradoxical imageries refute calculative thinking. By contrast, they invite our thinking to follow an uneven path while concurrently thinking the obstacles to that path.

... if you are navigating a situation in a state of wandering and risk, it is only when you encounter a paradoxical phenomenon, a point of impossibility, that you are put to the test of the real of the situation. (Badiou 2022, 37)

Consequently, *Hit the Road* does not only contest our ideas about Iranian life. The film also guides our thinking into a place that challenges the orthodoxy of preconceived thoughts and leads our thinking towards a generic humanity. To watch *Hit the Road* is to sense the conflict between what is of value and what is not. This educative sensation, Badiou holds, is generated by acts of truths.

### Acts of truths

As already mentioned, when I first watched this film, I was touched by the brilliant acting, humorous and emotionally subtle scenes, well-chosen music, and beautiful landscape shots of this film. However, my cinematic experience also triggered a deep sensation in me that hardly can be linked to an intellectual exercise of demystifying the brilliant acting of the cast, the excellent methods of the film crew, or the outstanding art of the film's author and director, Panah Panahi. This deep sensation was rather like diving into the narrative, identifying myself with the characters and recognizing the dilemmas, conflicting values and worldviews inherent in the situation portrayed. I experienced a displacement of thought, of seeing, not what I already knew, but getting to know what I did not

know. Taking a Badiouan outlook, this deep sensation is generated by the acts of truths.<sup>11</sup> So, how does Badiou conceptualize these acts?

To Badiou, truths (in plural) are immanent exceptions that appear, emerge and disappear dependent on the situation from which they emerge. Badiou develops his theory of truths in his *Being and Event* trilogy.<sup>12</sup> In the first book, *Being and Event*, Badiou explains truths as subject to unpredictable events. Here, he exposes an ontological position that elegantly deconstructs the idealism and romanticism in Heidegger. *Being*, to Badiou, is inconsistent multiple. However, as we necessarily base our understanding of being on operations of thought that constitutes the features and elements of a situation, it is beyond our intellectual capacity to grasp the inconsistent multiplicities of being. Moreover, the inconsistency between being and appearing takes the form of an unexpected and unpredictable *event* that may bring to pass conventional outlooks, knowledge and opinions. As such, the event is an ontological 'impossibility' because it is concurrently situated and something that is conditioned by and goes beyond the situation. To Badiou, *truths* are subjects to such unpredictable events. These emerging truths reveal or unfold something entirely new, something that we cannot grasp or apprehend by the already established categories of thought. Accordingly, truths imply some kind of 'logical revolt' against the situation. This also goes for the sensation of watching *Hit the Road*.

In the second book of his trilogy, *Logic of Worlds: Being and Event II*, Badiou attempts to describe in more detail the appearing and disappearing of truths. 'I insist, since this is the very problem that this book is concerned with: truths not only are, they appear' (Badiou 2009b, 9). Truths emerge as immanent exceptions in tangible worlds. 'The world is the place in which objects appear. Or the "world" designates *one* of the logics of appearing' (Badiou 2009b, 598),.

Hence, during the 90s Badiou explored truths and their subjects as post-evental forms of being. After the turn of the century, however, he explored truths and their subjects as tangible processes in particular worlds, as existential forms that all the same has universal value. Yet, in his third book, *The Immanence of Truths: Being and Event III*, Badiou reverses the perspective by examining truths, not from the point of view of the worlds in which they are created, but from the point of view of truths themselves. Here, he systematically explores truths as immanent to, or integral of, a world in a threefold sense: First, truths are immanent creations of a particular world; second, they are exceptions to that particular world; and third, becoming-subjects are always immanent to a truth procedure.

'The immanence of truths' has this threefold sense: the immanence of production of truth to a particular world; the immanence of truth to a certain relationship between the finite and the infinite as a sign that it touches the absolute; and the immanence of any subject thus constituted, above and beyond its particular individuality, to a truth procedure. (Badiou 2022, 28)

The immanence of truths thus clearly strengthens and deepens the pedagogical theme of Badiou's philosophical system. In sum, in *Being and Event*, Badiou addresses the being of truths, claiming that truths *are*. In *Logic of Worlds. Being and Event II*, Badiou underlines that truths not only are, truths *appear*. In *Immanence of Truths. Being and Event III*, however, he addresses the *action* of truths, claiming the possibility of being subject to their effects. It is upon this background we should read Badiou's theorem that 'the only education is an education by truths' (Badiou 2005b, 14). Badiou thus explains the potential pedagogy of cinema by the acts of truths emerging from and immanent to the sensation of watching a film.

So, following Badiou (2005a), the potential ethical-political power of cinema can therefore not be captured through a didactic, romantic, or classical model of education. First, a *didactic* model is problematic because it holds truths as external to cinema, and thereby reduces cinema to a means of achieving an external goal. Cinema becomes an instrument of ethical-political formation, a device to 'shape' the youths within an already given template. Second, a *romantic* model is problematic because it glorifies cinema. It is here believed that cinema alone educates. A cinematic sensation is here believed to represent truth itself, without regard to the situation. Third, a *classical* model is problematic because it highlights the therapeutic function of cinema. It is here believed that cinema is incapable of – and also indifferent to – truths. 'Its essence is mimetic, and its regime is that of semblance' (Badiou 2005b, 4). Based on a criterion of 'liking,' cinema is here given the task of capturing, mirroring, and shaping communal desires. In short, the didactic, romantic or classical models seek to apprehend the ethical-political power of cinema through conventional schemes of 'schooling' (didacticism), 'Bildung' (romanticism), or 'meaning-making' (classicism). A severe pitfall is that these three models ignore the fact that the potential ethical-political power of cinema falls under the category of truths. To Badiou, cinema is pedagogical 'for the simple reason that it produces truths and because "education" (save in its oppressive or perverted expressions) has never meant anything but this: to arrange the forms of knowledge in such a way that some truths may come to pierce a hole in them' (Badiou 2005b, 9).

### **A vital form of ethical-political education**

To sum up, (2013, 2015) clearly claims that cinema is a vital form of contemporary ethical-political education. He substantiates this claim by first, pointing to the paradoxical features of cinema; second, portraying cinema as a mass art; and third, exploring how cinema helps to uncover something that has been covered over. Let me briefly recapitulate.

First, in regards to the paradoxical attributions of cinema, Badiou claims that cinema is a philosophical experiment, carrying potentials to contest and

transform thinking. Any film accepts the materiality of our images of the world and reworks them into a narrative. So, cinema does not represent the world. Cinema rather presents images that is a comment to, and a new way of thinking our images of the world. Such as when *Hit the Road* tells a story of an Iranian family without glossing over the material images. By merging a historical and fictional world, *Hit the Road* doubles the real. To watch *Hit the Road* is thus to engage with images of everyday life in Iran while concurrently immersing oneself in the cinematic comments to these images. The experience of watching *Hit the Road* is thus to experience the interweaving of two ontological sites that are opposite to each other. The paradoxical attributions of cinema are thus far more fundamental than the relationships between the virtual and the actual, between our images of the world and the world itself. Badiou therefore describes cinema as an ontological art that invites our thinking into a hidden, closed and silenced place.

Second, in substantiating the pedagogical potentials of cinema, Badiou emphasizes the fact that cinema is a mass art 'on a scale which suffers no comparison with any other art' (Badiou 2009, 2). Cinema is for everybody and everybody has access. The term 'mass art,' however, points to a paradoxical relationship between the two words 'mass' and 'art.' On the one hand, the term 'mass' designates the fact that cinema is a global phenomenon. Today, young people worldwide – from Sydney to Berlin, from Bangkok to New Delhi, from Warsaw to Cape Town – stream and watch films as never before, be it via their smartphones, computers or television sets. On the other hand, the term 'art' designates the fact that cinema, as a visual form of human creation, requires some means for reading the filmic creation. Different films speak to differential registers of taste, which "necessitates a differential education, a minimal proximity to the history of the art concerned and to the vicissitudes of its grammar (Badiou 2013, 235). As a 'mass art,' cinema therefore relocates the established rules of art. First, because cinema carries the potential to speak to people on a global scale. Next, because it opens the arts to everyone, independent of their individual education and register of taste. Cinema is for everybody and everybody has access. Cinema is accessible to everyone, in the same way that Greek tragedy or the German Bildungsroman were accessible to most people. Moreover, Badiou characterizes cinema as 'a democratic emblem' (Badiou 2009a) because there are no distinctions between elitist and vulgar forms. Cinema thereby displaces the established rules of *paideia*, giving it a distinct form different from the conventional notions of education that may be labeled "schooling, 'Bildung' or 'meaning-making.' To Badiou, the ethical-political formation instituted by cinema comes forward as an informal, transformative, open-ended and ongoing procedure instituted by the acts of truths.

Third, in substantiating the pedagogical potentials of cinema, Badiou points to how cinema helps to uncover something that has been covered over. To cover over is to 'superimposing a kind of mosaic of finitude over the potential infinity of a situation' (Badiou 2022, 193). In other words, to cover over is to point out a meaning or determine a *topos* for what occurs. And thereby neutralizing



the possibility of recognizing the infinite potential of an event. Such as the orthodox narratives on young people fleeing Iran. However, by weaving together a historical and fictional world, cinema points to a reality worth recognizing. As in *Hit the Road*, which allows an alternative narrative to take place. Thereby, the film produces something artificial that contests the covering over operations embedded in the toxic conceptions of the world that it signifies. Consequently, to watch *Hit the Road* is to sense the conflict between what is of value or not.

So, *Hit the Road* does not only contest our ideas about Iranian life. The film also guides our thinking into a place that challenges the orthodoxy of preconceived thoughts and leads our thinking towards a generic humanity. In other words, *Hit the Road* illustrates the potential powers of cinema to propose an ethical direction. Since the task of philosophy is to examine the contradictions of the contemporary world and propose an orientation, Badiou holds that philosophers of education should go to the cinema, take part in its democratic dialectics, and participate in this vital form of contemporary education (Badiou 2015).

## Notes

1. Ja'fari Shia Islam considers dogs as unclean, *najis*. So, dogs are not allowed in today's Iran. To care for a sick dog may thus be interpreted as a sign of rebellion against the current theocratic regime of Iran.
2. <https://www.tiff.no/>.
3. One example is the excessive civil unrest sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini in police custody in September 2022. The massive street protests, which lead to numerous arrests and executions, have now turned into a silent protest, in which thousands of women in Tehran abandon compulsory headscarves.
4. The family demonstrate many illegal activities; such as their caring for a sick stray dog, their enjoyment of pre-revolutionary pop music, and the mother's song and dance.
5. Referring to cinema as a 'democratic emblem,' Badiou simply postulates cinema as a mass art 'on a scale which suffers no comparison with any other art' (Badiou 2009b, p. 2). To avoid misinterpretations, however, I should underline that Badiou rejects an idea of a state-based parliamentary democracy because it 'is the principal organizer of consensus ... In fact, the word "democracy" concerns what I shall call *authoritarian opinion*' (Badiou 2005c, 78). As an alternative to a parliamentary democracy, he proposes a generic democracy based on an axiom of equality (Badiou 2020; Wright 2009).
6. Some authors compare the ancient Greek notion of *paideia* to the Latin *humanitas* and the German *Bildung*, which equally signify the processes and purposes of a general education cultivating humanity (Andersen 1999; Horn 2018; Straume 2014). In his trilogy on *Paideia*, the German classicist Werner Jaeger highlights how the German *Bildung* was from the outset inspired by the Ancient Greek tradition. 'The German word *Bildung* clearly indicates the essence of education in the Greek, the Platonic sense; for it covers the artist's act of plastic formation as well as the guiding pattern present to his imagination, the idea or typos. Throughout history, whenever this conception reappears, it is always inherited from the Greeks ...' (Jaeger 1965, p. 12). Nevertheless, it is today vital to recognize the historical situatedness of each of these concepts, as they

mirror distinct societal norms and educational ideals characteristic of their time (i.e. Masschelein and Ricken 2003).

7. In general, the term 'cinema' (from Greek *kinema*—motion or movement) denotes a movie theater, a film, the film industry, or cinematography, which is the art or science of motion picture photography. When Badiou speaks about cinema, however, he refers to cinema as a form of thinking at the edge of art and non-art.
8. Within Badiou's philosophical system, truths do not belong to philosophy, but emerge in non-philosophical spheres of life. The task of philosophy is therefore not to produce truths, but rather to identify, affirm and strengthen these emerging truths (Badiou 1999, 2011; Strand 2022).
9. All quotes are from the English subtitles of the film.
10. The Azeris constitute a substantial minority in Iran. They belong to the Turkic people and live mainly in northwestern Iran (Wikipedia 2022).
11. By articulating a new theory of truth, Alain Badiou adds to the modern theories that range from correspondence theories via coherence theories, to constructivist theories of truth. With an ambition to restoring the validity of the fundamental categories of truth, universality and objectivity, Badiou sets out to rescue philosophy from unfortunate orthodoxies, return it to its intrinsic conditions and revitalize what he conceives as philosophy's true mission (Badiou 1999, 2011).
12. Alain Badiou's 'Being and Event trilogy' contains three books on his logic. First, *Being and Event* (2005b), published in French in 1988; next, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II* (2009c), published in French in 2005; and third, *Immanence of Truths: Being and Event III* (2022), published in French in 2018.

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