

ROCCO GANGLE
Endicott College

MESSIANIC MEDIA:
BENJAMIN'S CINEMA, BADIOU'S MATHEME, NEGRI'S
MULTITUDE

Messianic themes resound today not only in popular culture and global politics but also in academic theory. In contemporary thought the *topos* of the messianic serves as a kind of hinge for two otherwise distinct notions: the *event* as what happens irreducibly to local cause or determination; and *redemption* as what overcomes historical catastrophe and global loss. While the category of the event would open for thought the possibility of the new in general—*what comes*, that of redemption would give sense to that for which we hope—*what saves*. To the extent that in our contemporary constellation of social and political realities we can or must hope for something new, the idea of the messianic would promise a way to think and perhaps to meet the demands of our present condition.

In his study of messianic themes in Jewish mysticism, Moshe Idel helpfully distinguishes messianic *function* from messianic *persona*. The two are differentiated roughly as the form and the content of messianic phenomena in general. The messianic function would determine in principle how the messianic role is to be understood as such: What is a messiah, a *mashiya*, or “anointed one”? How does a messiah arrive? How is he or she anointed? In contrast, the messianic persona would fill the pre-established messianic role with some particular actor, thus fulfilling the messianic function in fact. Interestingly, Idel notes that a shift in emphasis from function to persona often corresponds to a decline away from practical and ethical considerations towards a more static orientation of mere belief.¹ It should be emphasized, then, that at its best the resurgence of messianic themes in contemporary philosophy and critical theory tends to represent an appropriation of the messianic function as abstracted from any and all *personae*. Seen in this light, the rethinking of such ideas may be understood not as a lapse into superstition, millenarianism or hero-worship but rather as a rigorous form of questioning into the formal conditions and real possibilities involved in redemptive events.

In particular, Jacques Derrida has attempted to bring a purely functional concept of the messianic into the heart of contemporary cultural and political philosophy. Drawing on themes essential to the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, Derrida has raised in his later works the question of a “messianicity without messianism”

¹ Moshe Idel, *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1998), 13-14. An earlier version of the present essay was presented at the “Authorizing Inscriptions: Religion, Aesthetics and Global Media” conference held at the University of California, Davis in April 2008.

which would present itself as an unconditioned waiting or “absolute hospitality” for the advent of the radically Other. This hospitality would in no way correspond to any particular tradition or event but would rather remain entirely indeterminate except in possessing a recognizably messianic form. As Derrida notes in “A Word of Welcome,” his late study of Levinas: “What announces itself here might be called a structural or *a priori* messianicity. Not an ahistorical messianicity, but one that belongs to a historicity without a particular and empirically determinable incarnation.”² In a similar way, in *Specters of Marx* Derrida identifies “a certain experience of the emancipatory promise; [...] perhaps even the formality of a structural messianism, a messianism without religion, even a messianic without messianism” — this experience or structure specifying, in Derrida’s view, the element in Marxist thought that is or ought to be common to all philosophy.³ By thus abstracting from any and all historico-empirical determinations, Derrida aims at the universality of a properly philosophical concept of the messianic *as such*. Yet by the same token, what Derrida’s transcendental approach to the question remains unable to configure adequately is any intrinsic relation that may exist between such messianicity and the particular mediations within which culture moves and develops.

Derrida is not alone. Others have followed the Derridean line in theorizing a contemporary messianicity on the basis of a rigorous *epoche*, or suspension of historical and cultural mediation. Perhaps most notably, Giorgio Agamben has linked Derridean messianicity to the “state of exception” involved in the political concept of sovereignty and its concomitant figures of exclusion such as the non-sacrificial victim of ancient Roman law or the “Musulmann” of the Nazi concentration camps as described by Primo Levi.⁴ For Agamben the “state of exception” which governed the inmates of the German camps is, to an increasing degree, the common condition of all of humanity as subjects of biopolitics in the contemporary world. According to Agamben, we find ourselves today living individually and collectively under a sovereign and universal “ban” in which no determinable “outside” exists from which to critique or revolutionize the given political order (or lack thereof) since that very order takes the form of a sovereign exception, a pure and self-cancelling Law. On such a view, political hopes and political praxis are reduced to a kind of pure waiting. Indeed, Agamben links

² Jacques Derrida, “A Word of Welcome” in Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, trans., *Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1999), 67.

³ Jacques Derrida, trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Specters of Marx* (NY: Routledge 1994), 59. Derrida emphasizes that this “emancipatory and messianic affirmation” should as much as possible be “[liberated] from any dogmatics and even from any metaphysico-religious determination, from any messianism.” 89. This Derridean theme is developed in detail *vis-à-vis* Heidegger and Levinas in Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press 1999), esp. ch. 5.

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1998). See also Primo Levi, trans. Stuart Woolf, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1996).

the absolute character of Law explicitly to messianism and argues that our age must be understood as politically messianic in its very essence.⁵

A remarkable consistency and ineluctable logic characterize the Derridean and Agambenian notions of messianicity. Yet their vision depends upon a particular interpretative decision for the meaning of messianicity itself, one that may not be sufficiently self-critical. Briefly put, Derrida and Agamben agree in conceiving messianicity in terms of an unforeseeable rupture of absolute Otherness in history. The limitations of such a view may be registered on at least two counts: (1) in characterizing the messianic primarily through absolutism, discontinuity and hence human powerlessness; and (2) in tending to identify messianic form with the very event or advent of what comes, rather than through any subsequent working-out of its potential effects. Both of these characteristics tend to minimize, if not entirely to preclude, considerations of how messianicity might be correlated with specific media of cultural production and communication. In particular, the emphases on powerlessness and immediacy tend to limit any positive and constructive role for specific cultural forms in shaping the features of messianic advent or outcome.

In what follows, we will develop an alternate understanding of messianicity, one which allows for some degree of messianic continuity and creative human potential. We will elicit this image of messianicity from a set of determinate concepts (allegory, fidelity and *kairos*) as they are developed in the work of three very different thinkers: Walter Benjamin, Alain Badiou, and Antonio Negri. Each of these thinkers uses his particular concept to provide a specific implementation of messianic possibilities within a given cultural form (cinema, matheme, multitude). In each case, a conceptual pairing thus organizes a specific model of messianicity by combining an abstract subject-formation or concept and a particular historically-conditioned cultural medium: allegory reads the transfigurative technology of cinema; fidelity enforces the generic universality of the matheme; and *kairos* instigates the multitude in a disalienated power of naming. Coordinated in this way, the ensemble of Benjamin, Badiou and Negri will be shown to have outlined a notion of messianicity distinct from that of Derrida and Agamben, one in which messianicity is in part a function of the invention and translation of forms of media themselves.

Benjamin: Allegory in Cinema

The theme of the messianic redemption of history is explicit throughout much of Walter Benjamin's work as a complex enchainment of political, theological and cultural categories. From the early study of redemptive motifs in German Baroque *Trauerspielen* to the analysis of Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* in "Theses on the Philosophy of History" to the refrain of the aporetic and explosive "dialectical image" in the unfinished *Arcades Project*, Benjamin consistently develops messianic concepts alongside cultural and aesthetic

⁵ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 57.

analyses.⁶ For Benjamin, theologico-political messianism is linked always to historically determined forms of cultural production and aesthetic mediation.

It is perhaps most forcefully in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) that Benjamin raises the possibility of a unique cultural and technological invention that would constitute an epochal break in and with the historical past.⁷ Linking cultural media to messianic political hopes, Benjamin identifies film, in the crucial period of Fascism’s upsurge, as the new medium whose very form opens the possibility of historical rupture and renovation. Here the messianic invention and implementation of a new cultural and technological *medium* substitutes for the dialectical concept of historical *mediation*. In consequence historical messianism becomes understood no longer in terms of the content of an event but instead as the technological and historical emergence of a new cultural form.

As the title of his essay suggests, Benjamin is concerned with how artworks are transformed both in their production and their reception under the conditions of a specific historical epoch, that of mechanized industry. Under such conditions – the factory, but also the urban crowd and the space of advertising – Benjamin notes that artworks are increasingly produced according to mechanically reproducible processes, such as the repeated prints that may be made from a single photographic negative. This transformation in artistic media affects the way artworks themselves are received and interpreted culturally, above all according to Benjamin through a diminishment of the “auratic power” of art, that is, the sense of distance and otherworldliness stemming from the unique and irreplaceable character of traditional art. It is for this reason that Benjamin diagnoses the “decay of the aura” as the primary event of art in the mechanical age.

The aura of art and its cultural decay are matters of perception. Benjamin links the aura’s decay in art to a social and political phenomenon: “the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life.” This in turn corresponds to an increased abstraction in the modes of perception characterizing contemporary culture. As Benjamin writes:

To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose “sense of the universal equality of things” has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction. Thus is manifested in the field of perception what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing importance of statistics. The adjustment of reality to the

⁶ Walter Benjamin, trans. John Osborne, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (NY: Verso 1998); “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in Harry Zohn, trans., Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations* (NY: Schocken 1968); trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard 1999).

⁷ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in Harry Zohn, trans., Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations* (NY: Schocken 1968).

masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope, as much for thinking as for perception.⁸

Thus under conditions of mechanical reproducibility, forms of abstract organization in art, society, perception and thought tend to substitute for material singularity. Abstraction replaces aura.

The title of Benjamin's essay speaks of "the artwork" (*Das Kunstwerk*), yet in the body of the essay Benjamin focuses less on artworks in general than on the specific medium of cinema. What does the new medium of the projected "moving picture" have to do with the universal "decay of the aura" and its new, abstract modes of perception and thought? In film visual narratives are expressed by means of close-ups, cuts, montage and similar effects, all of which serve to fragment space and time. These fragmentations offer new, abstract ways of seeing. As Gertrud Koch has noted, "Benjamin constructs the recording apparatus of film as a kind of demiurgical eye that is capable of approaching the bodily quality of the physical world in a manner that remains inaccessible to the embodied human eye." It is the new modes of perception opened by the cinematic medium that disclose what Koch has rightly called "the Messianic-prophetic power of the camera" for Benjamin, a power that "does not establish a realm apart from the physical world, but instead explodes the prevailing world into rubble, piercing the veil of dissimulation."⁹ In other words, by submitting our everyday perceptual habits to the torsions and breaks of film editing, slow motion and unusual angles, the limits and discontinuities of our everydayness quite literally come to light for us.

The cinematic medium is messianic in form for Benjamin insofar as it embodies a kind of technological allegory. The theory of cinematic lived perception offered in Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay indeed identifies a unique medium of allegory in the sense of this concept that Benjamin developed earlier in his study of German baroque tragedy-plays (*Trauerspielen*).¹⁰ In these early modern theatrical works that are something like a cross between medieval morality plays and melodramatic opera, images of fragmentation and ruin dominate. Benjamin reads these images as allegories. In them he recognizes the strange power of absence in figurative expression – its finitude, inextricably linked to death. Benjamin follows the Romantic critics in distinguishing allegory from symbol, yet where the Romantics privilege the participatory dimension of the living symbol, Benjamin simply displays the bare, "petrified, primordial landscape" of allegory:

⁸ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", 223.

⁹ Gertrud Koch, trans. Nancy Nenno, "Cosmos in Film: On the Concept of Space in Walter Benjamin's 'Work of Art' Essay" in Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, eds., *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience* (NY: Routledge 1994), 210.

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, trans. John Osborne, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (NY: Verso 1998).

Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face –or rather in a death’s head.¹¹

Where the symbol appears redemptive through a making-present of the infinite in and through the spiritual participation of the finite, allegory speaks instead the harsh and unconsoling letter of an unbridgeable distance between finite history and infinite hope. Thus Benjamin asserts: “Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.”¹² Allegory substitutes an emblematic and signifying relation for the living essences of symbol. The allegorical image functions “not so much to unveil material objects as to strip them naked.” What is represented in allegory is thus not an essence that would become visible through and “behind the image,” but rather is “[dragged]... out before the image, in writing, as a caption [...]”¹³

Despite all this, death and ruin do not necessarily speak the final word in allegory. Benjamin points to a unique reversal in perspective inherent in allegory’s very finitude, its aporetic need and melancholy death-fixation:

The bleak confusion of Golgotha [...] is not just a symbol of the desolation of human existence. In it transitoriness is not signified or allegorically represented, so much as, in its own significance, displayed as allegory. As the allegory of resurrection.¹⁴

Here, as Benjamin himself glosses, “the direction of allegorical reflection is reversed; on the second part of its wide arc it returns, to redeem,” thus “[solving] the riddle of the most fragmented, the most defunct, the most dispersed.”¹⁵ How is the riddle solved? Through the invention of technologies of allegory, new media of abstract perception such as cinema.

As an allegory for mass perception, cinema for Benjamin revealed – in the 1930s – revolutionary and even messianic possibilities evolving within popular culture and imagination (alongside, of course, the worst). For Benjamin, film appeared as the new condition for a kind of cultural hieroglyph, a technological emblem of collective human industry as forged and transformed in the era of machinic arts. Human beings *identify* with cinematic images. There are of course merely imagined identifications: our desires expressed in the mode of Hollywood fantasy. Yet we also have real identifications: Benjamin’s own vision emphasized the ability of film to document our common social, industrial and

¹¹ Benjamin, *Origin*, 166.

¹² Benjamin, *Origin*, 178.

¹³ Benjamin, *Origin*, 185.

¹⁴ Benjamin, *Origin*, 232.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

political realities. Instead of providing mere fetishes of our alienated desires, film can picture us from the perspective of exteriorities we ourselves can never directly experience. We can thus document and witness reality in a new, relatively abstract mode.

It is this latter tendency that may be especially relevant to our present cultural situation. We recognize exponential variations of the abstract, documentary power of film today on the digital networks of the Internet, on sites such as Youtube or Wikipedia where a democratic ability for all to participate produces a sense of the collective self-regard of a potentially limitless "community." Such phenomena give us new ways to understand Benjamin's claims concerning the demise of "aura" in art under conditions of mechanical reproduction. It is perhaps not simply that aura disappears, but that the distance characterizing it becomes manifest in different registers: no longer productive of transcendence, its distancing appears instead as lateral and serial, fully immanent. The new auratic power that emerges in Youtube clips and cultural mash-ups such as Danger Mouse's "Grey Album" differs from the aura that Benjamin diagnoses in that it is not dependent upon the material singularity of the work. Not subject merely to the aura-destroying powers of reproducibility, the oft-noted "viral" quality of Youtube videos points in our day instead to a kind of *hyper*-reproducibility of the work and perhaps to a new kind of aura. Such a new "immanent aura" would enter through the editing power of the collective processes of distribution and dissemination. As videoclips and audio tracks circulate digitally, they accumulate layers of commentary and corruption and supplementation not unlike medieval manuscripts or Talmudic texts. These encrustations, which are not merely external but are brought into the heart of the work itself, produce a new "distance" - one that is not alienating, but which draws the work directly into its own historicity.

Badiou: Fidelity to the Matheme

Mathematics is seldom conceived as a cultural medium in the same sense as film or newsprint or ballet, still less as a medium of messianic hope. Yet in the philosophy of Alain Badiou the formalism of mathematics is proffered as the sole means of adequately representing being, subjectivity and truth such that we may understand the processes or procedures through which subjectivity is called to truth within being. Badiou names the generic form of such procedures "fidelity."

In modeling a faithful subject, mathematics becomes for Badiou the medium of a new form of thinking. It is thus important to distinguish Badiou's unique use of mathematics in relation to philosophy from the many traditional streams of this connection throughout philosophy's history, from the Pythagoreans and Platonists in ancient Greece to Descartes's invention of algebraic geometry in early modern Europe. For Badiou the philosophical function of mathematics is situated definitively in relation to the formal characteristics of post-Kantian subjectivity, drawing heavily upon the structuralist employment of the matheme in the work of Jacques Lacan. This fundamental orientation towards a formal Lacanian or post-Lacanian subject remains true even for Badiou's "pure"

ontology – the equation of being *qua* being and set-theoretic multiplicity asserted in *Being and Event*.

Lacanian psychoanalysis treats the most general structures of subjectivity as representable through specific “mathemes,” that is, rigorously formal functions which model the processes of signification, desire, repression and so forth within the psyche. Badiou applies this Lacanian psychoanalytic understanding in the context of an ontological interpretation of post-Cantorian mathematics. To illustrate this connection we may take as a paradigmatic example Badiou’s psycho-analysis of algebraic groups. Badiou, following Lacan, takes this highly general mathematical structure and interprets it as a model of the difference-in-unity of subjective identity. As Badiou puts it, “the group works as a *matheme* for a thought on the Subject. It is formally adequate to what Freud and, later, Lacan attempted to record as its fleeing identity.”¹⁶ In particular Badiou shows how the symmetry and order-independent associativity characteristic of mathematical groups correspond to the Lacanian “empty signifier” at the heart of psychic life, the disjunctive inseparability of desire and death in human subjectivity. The structure of the mathematical group does not so much *represent* subjectivity as *perform* it in a strictly universal, formal register. As a universal instance of the subject, the mathematical group-structure expresses both the fate and the potential of subjectivity as such.

From one perspective, then, the abstract structure of the group signifies only inertia and death – here Badiou seems to repeat Benjamin’s evocation of the “death’s head”:

The death’s head is the emblem of the identity of inertia, akin to a tomb at which the only thing engraved is the name. Indeed the [mathematical] group says it all: at death, like at its birth, there is only the vacuity of the letter left (“let a group G ”).¹⁷

From this perspective the *matheme* simply models death. Yet just as we saw with the function of allegory in Benjamin’s thought, the group *matheme* in Badiou – the dead letter of a purely formal and relational symbol – is, from an alternate perspective, the very condition of a sort of subjective (and formal) resurrection.

The taking of this second perspective is what allows, as in the process of psychoanalysis, “the subject to bear its proper name.” Badiou writes:

What the modest and radical aim of psychoanalysis is all about involves provisionally separating enough isomorphisms from the subjective tress so that the living effectivity of self-identity does not take place at the risk of a permanent return of inertial identity.

¹⁶ Alain Badiou, trans. Norman Madarasz, *Briefings on Existence: A Short Treatise on Transitory Ontology* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press 2006), 150.

¹⁷ Badiou, *Briefings*, 151.

Psychoanalysis lifts the infinite life of the subject-group to the height of the letter naming it. It is a vivification of the letter.¹⁸

Mathematical formalism serves as the real condition of such “vivification” in and through philosophy. Like Benjamin’s cultural-historical analysis of film, Badiou’s ontological and political use of mathematics takes a given cultural medium and extracts from within its own form the promise of an epochal break with history and with past forms of thought – in Badiou’s case, this break constitutes the truth-event as such. Badiou’s use of the *matheme* in both a Lacanian and formal mathematical sense offers, paradoxically enough, a theory of atheistic immanence and truth that is in certain ways messianic in form, a messianicity symptomatic perhaps in Badiou’s readings of explicitly messianic and religious thinkers such as Saint Paul and Pascal.¹⁹ Badiou would almost certainly reject any association of his philosophy with the messianicity of Derrida or Agamben. It is possible that a different sort of messianicity appears, however, in the very structure of his employment of mathematics.

To grasp fully the coherence and comprehensiveness of Badiou’s thought, it would be necessary to read Badiou’s two essential works – *Being and Event* and *Logics of Worlds* – carefully and in conjunction. We point here only to the significance of one small detail of this pair of texts that is, however, symptomatic of Badiou’s overall systematic method. This detail consists in the way the two works are distinguished by their respective mathematical emphases: set theory in *Being and Event*, and set theory in coordination with category theory in *Logics of Worlds*.

The mathematical basis of *Being and Event* is set theory, often viewed as the foundational domain of mathematics as a whole. Set theory involves the abstract study of arbitrary collections of objects considered solely on the basis of the form of their being-collected as such, their sheer multiplicity. The origins of set theory are found in the work of Georg Cantor in the late 19th century, while later mathematicians including David Hilbert and Ernst Zermelo and, later, Paul Cohen formalized Cantor’s insights into a rigorous, axiomatic form and analyzed its relation to questions concerning the mathematical continuum.²⁰ In *Being and Event* Badiou takes the axiomaticization of set theory—particularly with the addition of the axiom of choice—to represent an adequate formalization of ontology, of being as such.²¹ Yet in addition to being for Badiou, there is also the

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ See Alain Badiou, trans. Ray Brassier, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press 2003) and trans. Oliver Feltham, *Being and Event* (New York: Continuum 2007), meditation 21.

²⁰ A useful source on the origins and development of set theory through Zermelo is provided by I. Grattan-Guinness, ed., *From the Calculus to Set Theory: 1630-1910* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2000). The clearest, rigorous theoretical introduction to contemporary set theory is F. William Lawvere and Robert Rosebrugh, *Sets for Mathematics* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2003). This text examines sets from a more general category-theoretic perspective.

²¹ Badiou, *Being and Event*, parts I-III.

event, the formal structure of which is presented in the matheme, heretical from the point of view of traditional set theory, $e_x = \{x \in X, e_x\}$, where X stands for the set of the “evental site” and e_x for the event itself.²² For Badiou, the event is a rupture in being. Even so, the event itself is not messianic in form. Instead, the essential messianic question is that of the possibility of fidelity to the event, that is, the formation of a subjectivity (whether individual or collective) engaged in working out the practical consequences of the event in a serial, situated and rigorous fashion.²³

As Badiou now admits, the analysis of *Being and Event* does not provide an adequate notion of how such subjectivity becomes manifest in a given “world.” His ontology lacks a phenomenology.²⁴ Without a logic of being’s appearance Badiou is left with nothing but a sort of structuralist fideism. Without an account of the localization of being, nothing constructive may be said about the actual work of faithful subjectivity; there is no way of describing the situated and enduring effects of truth procedures themselves. The radical incommensurability of being and event can never be mediated, and thus the subjective trajectory that is traced by the faithful subject bears no essential relation to the event itself in its concrete “being-there.”

For this reason, following the earlier suggestion of Jean-Toussaint Desanti, Badiou turns to category theory in his most recent work, *Logics of Worlds*.²⁵ To simplify greatly, in category theory relations among mathemes are simultaneous and structural rather than linear, as in the logical semantics derived from set theory. The distinction is perhaps best conveyed by contrasting the symbolic string with the iconic diagram. Category theory is intrinsically diagrammatic, moving from “internal” to “external” mappings of relationality and structure. Thus generalization is not semantic (covering a class of cases) so much as abstractive (revealing structural essences or self-consistencies). In category theory, the intrinsic structures of systems of relations are themselves “displayed” intrinsically rather than merely represented.²⁶

With *Logics of Worlds* Badiou offers his phenomenology, his account of the localized “being-there” of the abstract ontology developed in *Being and Event*. When Being is localized in a world, it appears necessarily according to a system of possible relations modeled by category theory which provide a general,

²² Badiou, *Being and Event*, meditation 17.

²³ Badiou, *Being and Event*, parts V-VIII.

²⁴ See, among other comments, the preface to Alain Badiou, *Logiques des Mondes* (Paris: Editions du Seuil 2006). A translation by Alberto Toscano is forthcoming.

²⁵ See Jean-Toussaint Desanti, trans. Ray Brassier, “Some Remarks on the Intrinsic Ontology of Alain Badiou” in Peter Hallward, ed., *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy* (New York: Continuum 2004), 59-66.

²⁶ This brief description obviously does not convey category theory in any detail. The best introduction to the subject is F. William Lawvere and Stephen H. Schanuel, *Conceptual Mathematics: A First Introduction to Categories* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1997). For a more detailed analysis including topos theory, see Robert Goldblatt, *Topoi: The Categorical Analysis of Logic* (Mineola, NY: Dover 2006).

structural “logic” of the world in question. Following Kant, Badiou names this logic, or system that world’s “transcendental.” In distinction from Kant, however, Badiou recognizes a plurality of worlds (indeed, an infinite multiplicity), each world characterized by its own “transcendental.”²⁷ The most interesting result of the analyses of *Logics of Worlds* is Badiou’s formalization of the process through which the localization, or being-there of multiplicities within a particular world is able, under certain conditions, to affect not just other parts or aspects of that world, its “normal” changes (day turns to dusk, the spring brings another year’s flowers, etc.), but its very transcendental itself. The conditions under which this is possible are precisely those of subjective fidelity to a genuine event.²⁸

The strength of Badiou’s philosophy is its rigorous coupling of mathematical universality with an ontology in which the event can be thought in its essential relation to the subjectivity at work in “truth procedures.” Yet it is precisely the problem of the relation between the ontology and the subjective practices it engenders that remains the sticking point for Badiou’s thought. It was the inadequacy of the account of this relation in *Being and Event* that led to the supplementation of *Logics of Worlds*. Yet even with the second work added to the first, Badiou’s solution remains unsatisfactory. Instead of reformulating the central theses of *Being and Event* in light of the intricate logical difficulties raised by the phenomenological appearing of localized “worlds,” Badiou uses the insights of *Logics of Worlds* as little more than a kind of “patch” in an attempt to cover over the deeper issue. The basic form of the argument in *Logics of Worlds* is correct: it is indeed the mathematics of category theory with its emphasis on relation that best models the relationality of worldly appearance and the existential localizations of being-there. But in Badiou’s philosophy, the logic of relations remains subordinate to that of atomized multiplicity. Set theory ultimately remains privileged over category theory.²⁹ Beings – even in worlds – appear essentially as isolated terms, atoms, and the relations among them can never be anything but secondary and derived properties.

To put the point more clearly, in *Logics of Worlds* relations as such have no constructive power. In the end, the “logics” of the title remain static and representational. This is true despite the remarkable conclusions concerning the retroactive power of faithful subjectivity back into the transcendentals of worlds. This elegant solution actually does nothing more than displace Badiou’s original problem. What Badiou’s philosophy lacks is an account of mediation between the worlds we see and inhabit and the truths to which we would be faithful. Such mediation would seem to require an inversion of Badiou’s entire enterprise, putting the “logic” of his relational phenomenology prior to and thus inclusive of his ontology. But this would likely entail scrapping the set-theoretic ontology of

²⁷ Badiou, *Logiques des Mondes*, Livre II.

²⁸ The central role of the “transcendental functor” in Badiou’s logic appears here. See Badiou, *Logiques des Mondes*, 293-312.

²⁹ This is especially apparent in the technical analyses of Badiou, *Logiques des Mondes*, Livre IV, section 3.

Being and Event and working from the start upon the foundation of category-theoretic diagrammaticization.

Negri: *Kairos of the Multitude*

In the work of our third thinker Antonio Negri a messianic promise is seen to emerge from within transformations of planetary scope in contemporary politics and economics as driven by the communication technologies, knowledge practices and new media that shape and connect human beings in the 21st century. In his collaborative work with Michael Hardt, Negri provides a pair of correlated names for the new human collective that both controls and liberates life as mediated by communicative practices: *Empire* and *Multitude*.³⁰ While *Empire* represents the global system of privatization and counter-revolutionary control, *Multitude* subsists as *Empire*'s flip side, the networks of entangled communication and common production that open radically democratic political possibilities. This multitude, although based on specific communicative and technological figures like the Internet, remains irreducible in principle to any single cultural or technological form. All such forms are constituted by means of creative human interaction, labor in common. Thus in Hardt and Negri's work the human multitude may itself be understood as a new creative medium, one which coordinates and transforms other media as it constitutes its own potentializations from and within them.

In his solo work, Negri has coordinated this far-ranging, systematic analysis of contemporary global politics and economics with a more purely theoretical study of the relationship between ontology and time. To grasp Negri's project as a whole and to see its relevance to a contemporary conception of the messianic, it is necessary to read the more widely known collaborations with Hardt in conjunction with the philosophy of time outlined in particular in the second half of *Time for Revolution*.³¹

In formulating his political ontology, Negri draws (perhaps surprisingly) upon terms alluding to Christian theology and messianism. Foremost among these is the concept of *kairos*, the "arrow-like" instant of time experienced and lived in the fullness of a moment. *Kairos* for Negri is the temporal structure of revolutionary collectivity; it is the act of *constitutional* power mobilizing the multitude as opposed to the static, *constituted* power proper to the State.³² Negri links the dynamic temporality of *kairos* to the long-contested Christian

³⁰ See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2001) and *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin 2004).

³¹ Antonio Negri, trans. Matteo Mandarini, *Time for Revolution* (New York: Continuum 2005). The second half of *Time for Revolution* revisits a series of texts Negri wrote several decades earlier.

³² Negri develops this distinction in detail in Antonio Negri, trans. Maurizia Boscagli, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1999).

theological notion of *kenosis*, or God's act of self-emptying: "*Kairos* is the Christ that empties itself so as to produce new being, it is temporality augmented by expression, it is *praxis* of the common name."³³ The traditional and yet always potentially heretical concept of *kenosis* has, since at least the 4th century CE debates of Arius and Athanasius, figured the becoming-immanent of the transcendent God. Breaking with this traditional interpretation, Negri conjoins *kenosis* with *kairos* to indicate not a movement from transcendence to immanence, but rather a trajectory within immanence itself, a trajectory in which the fullness of the present moment empties itself –through an act of collective naming –into the infinity of future possibilities to which that act potentially gives rise.

Language for Negri constitutes an ongoing common project of the Multitude – it is, in fact, the historical matrix of the Multitude's own creative power. For this reason instead of language as a representational medium, Negri emphasizes the active process of "linguistic co-operation" which forms "productive constellations" of subjective singularities.³⁴ Like Badiou's "event," the productive power of the multitude takes place through an act of naming that takes place at "the edge of being" and projects itself "beyond," thus "[innovating] being."³⁵ In other words, the co-operation of singularities in the commonality of language is onto-poietic, that is, constitutive of new being. Drawing again on Christian theological themes, this creative power for Negri is rooted in the virtues of poverty and love. In a political and social appropriation of traditional Christianity similar in some ways to that of the Italian Marxist philosopher, poet and filmmaker Pier Pasolini, these Christian virtues are evoked not as otherworldly spiritual ideals, but rather as actually constitutive of the multitude's socially-transformative ontological power in *this* world.

How are we to make sense of Negri's claim that being itself is immediately produced by the poor and loving multitude? What does it mean to say that communicative and cooperative relations generate being itself? The formal essence of Negri's conception may be clarified through an analogy with the mathematical theory of graphs. If we take a set of distinct points, say five points designating five different cities, the number of possible two-term relations between them (corresponding to roads one might build connecting any two of the cities) is much greater than five. As one considers more and more points (or cities), the number of such possible sets of networked relations increases much faster than the number of points or cities themselves. This accelerating divergence is even greater if we consider three-term relations.³⁶ In a system of ontological interdependence such as that of today's economic and political globality, individual entities may themselves be understood as complex

³³ Negri, *Time for Revolution*, 149.

³⁴ Negri, *Time for Revolution*, 214-215.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Here, a related study of the semiotic and mathematical analyses of C.S. Peirce with respect to triadic relations would provide an important supplement to the present reading of Negri.

relations.³⁷ Thus communication between entities is conceivable as relations formed between relations in an ever-expanding web or network of connectivity. Negri's claim about the multitude thus comes into focus: being is generated through the multitude's construction of new relations because the being of the multitude is relational in its essence.³⁸

Here in Negri we find an implicit critical reappropriation of the concept of communicative media. For Negri media are not channels or relays of information across spatial and, in a derivative fashion, temporal distances. Rather, acts or events of communication—the common name—are directly productive of new times, or better, new orientations towards the “to-come:”

The common name is the teleological trace (a teleology of the instant, the *telos* of the event) that unites the events in the construction of a community: it is thus the ontological composition of the events that expresses itself as power and imagines itself as reality *to-come*.³⁹

It is important to distinguish the “to-come” in Negri's sense from the homonymous concept in Derrida and Agamben. Negri's “to-come” is anything but an absolute unknown to which subjectivity can and must extend an “absolute hospitality.” Rather, Negri's “to-come” is both immeasurable in its future potential *and* relatively determinate with respect to current actual conditions. It is immeasurable in its potentialities, but it is determinate in its ineluctable *relation* to specific material-subjective constellations. In radical distinction from Derrida and Agamben, Negri's “to-come” is *produced* in the world, not simply awaited. As actual historically-specific relations are constructed in the present, the future's eternity itself *changes*. The eternal “to-come” is amplified. This is not to say that the “to-come” would thereby be fully in our control, quite the contrary, since the immeasurability of the “to-come” necessarily exceeds its actual constitutive determinations by an infinite degree.

³⁷ See the essential article by Randall Dipert, “The Mathematical Structure of the World: The World as Graph” *Journal of Philosophy*, XCIV, 7, 1997, pp. 329-358.

³⁸ In comparison with the social and communicative focus of Negri's work, the poverty of the mathematical image is thrown into relief. Relations between lines and points may increase at a certain rate, but they can never achieve the complexity of linguistic and cultural media. In fact, the critique of economic relations can be conceived on this basis. Money and global finance does create relations, even quasi-universal ones (anything can be bought and sold for a dollar). But a dollar itself cannot unfold into greater complexity. Consider the alternate case of language: language too is a quasi-universal medium (almost anything can be said), but language itself is also self-operative and self-transformative. Poetic works, new idioms, etc. give language a function of internal variation as well as external combination. The complexity and creative potential of the new relations such processes make possible is thus infinite and incalculable. No one can say today what a 23rd century novel will look like. One of the consequences of Negri's strong reading of Marxian “real subsumption” of economic and social reality in postmodernity is that we have the power to make money work like a language.

³⁹ Negri, *Time for Revolution*, 149.

Yet for Negri the productive communicative relations that generate the “to-come” do give it a minimal shape by anchoring the infinity of what is “to-come” in the actual present relations constituting future possibilities and, in exponential prolepsis, the further relations that will be constructed among and through those future relations themselves.

Conclusion

If today in philosophy and elsewhere an adequate culturally-situated model of messianism requires a transformation from metaphors of waiting to technologies of constitution, from absolute hospitality to actual communicativity, then the various forms of media transmitting the concepts, images and materials of messianic promise must be considered in their real specificity and irreducibility. In a certain sense the theories of messianicity found in Derrida and Agamben do remain more philosophically “pure” than those of Benjamin, Badiou and Negri. Each of these three latter thinkers, at least as they have been interpreted here, entangles in a concrete assemblage two otherwise distinct modalities of thought: one abstract, conceptual and analytic; the other historically-specific, mediatic and synthetic. In Benjamin, the concept of allegory interprets the medium of cinema. In Badiou, fidelity to truth is traced in the wake of the post-Cantorian and Lacanian matheme. In Negri, the infinite fullness of *kairos* is realized in today’s global multitude. Such transcendental-empirical meshing (when productive and not merely representational) can and should be viewed positively. Foregrounding the species of material and mediatic supports for messianic thinking provides the necessary traction and impulse for concerted ethical and political participation. The “impure” specificities of determinate media open onto possibilities unguessed-at by sheer indetermination or transcendental evasion.

Discernable in Benjamin’s allegory, Badiou’s matheme and Negri’s multitude is a common demonstration that cultural mediation and messianic function need not be incompatible. On this basis, the unique messianic possibilities of particular cultural forms may be conceived and realized as such. In place of the reduction of diverse media and thoughts of messianic potential to one all-embracing medium of transcendental reflection or—its dialectical complement—to some indeterminate affirmation of multiplicity, difference or eventality as such, the thinking examined here offers a different kind of hope, one in which determinate proliferations of artistic, cultural, intellectual and technological media may hold out on their own terms the differentiated promises of , at the very least, potent and unexplored worlds.

ROCCO GANGLE is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Endicott College. His work engages philosophies of immanence -- especially Spinoza, Deleuze and Laruelle -- in connection with issues for phenomenology of religion and philosophy of science. He received his PhD from the University of Virginia in 2007.

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Gangle, Rocco. "Messianic Media: Benjamin's Cinema, Badiou's Matheme, Negri's Multitude," in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 10 no. 1 (Winter 2009): 26-41.