

## Novelty in Badiou's Theory of Objects: Alexander and the Functor

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**Abstract.** Alain Badiou's treatment of objects in *Logics of Worlds* is both rich and highly technical, though its terminological challenges are softened by his use of illuminating examples. This article takes a twofold approach to the topic. In a first sense, the theory of objects developed in *Logics of Worlds* by way of an imagined protest at the Place de la République in Paris exhibits two questionable aspects: (1) the notion that the object is a bundle of qualities (found proverbially in Hume, but also in Kant's "transcendental object=X"), and (2) the ultimately idealist assumption of a possible isomorphy between appearance and reality. But in a second sense, Badiou's transcendental account of worlds leads him to a fascinating theory of exemplary entities, one that is immune to the critiques of onto-theology made by Heidegger and Derrida. This can be found in his account of the "transcendental functor" in Alexander the Great's decisive victory over Darius III at the Battle of Gaugamela in 331 B.C.E.

**Keywords:** Alain Badiou; Objects; Events; Idealism; Transcendental Functor.

### [es] La novedad en la teoría de los objetos de Badiou: Alexander y el functor

**Resumen.** El tratamiento que Alain Badiou hace de los objetos en *Lógica de los mundos* es a la vez rico y muy técnico, aunque sus desafíos terminológicos se ven suavizados por el uso que hace de ejemplos esclarecedores. Este artículo aborda el tema desde una doble perspectiva. En un primer sentido, la teoría de los objetos desarrollada a través del relato de Badiou de una protesta imaginada en la Plaza de la República de París conserva dos aspectos cuestionables de las posiciones existentes en la filosofía occidental: (1) la noción de que el objeto es un conjunto de cualidades (que se encuentra proverbialmente en Hume, pero también en el "objeto trascendental=X" de Kant), y (2) la suposición en última instancia idealista de una posible isomorfía entre apariencia y realidad. Pero en un segundo sentido, el relato trascendental de los mundos de Badiou le conduce a una fascinante teoría de las entidades ejemplares, que es inmune a las críticas de la ontoteología realizadas por Heidegger y Derrida. Esto puede verse en su relato del "functor trascendental" en la decisiva victoria de Alejandro Magno sobre Darío III en la batalla de Gaugamela en el 331 a.C.

**Palabras clave:** Alain Badiou; objetos; acontecimientos; idealismo; functor trascendental.

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### 1. Introduction

Alain Badiou's career-long meditation on events qualifies him as perhaps the most interesting philosopher of novelty ever to have lived<sup>2</sup>. His chief rivals for the honor would be his fellow French thinkers Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze<sup>3</sup>. But among these three finalists, I would award the prize to Badiou for a simple reason: Bergson

and Deleuze are too inclined to place creativity in the fabric of reality itself. It is often difficult to locate anything banal or stationary in their models of the world; reality is creative and mobile simply by virtue of existing. Today, this general strategy of proclaiming change and motion to be an inherent ontological feature of the cosmos can be found almost anywhere Deleuzian influence is found<sup>4</sup>. In this connection William Watkin refers

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<sup>2</sup> For an encyclopedic account of Badiou's career prior to *Logics of worlds* see P. Hallward, *Badiou*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> One should also not overlook Thomas Kuhn's contribution to this topic, which is so overly familiar to the reading public that we lose sight of its continued freshness. Cf. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions: 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. for instance M. Austin, "To exist is to change: A friendly disagreement with Graham Harman on why things happen", *Speculations* 1, 2010, pp. 66-83; J. Bennett, *Vibrant matter*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2010; R. Braidotti, *Nomadic subjects*, Second Edition, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011; C. Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze*, London, Routledge, 2001; T. Nail, *Being and motion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018; R. Raud, *Being in flux*, Cambridge, UK, Polity, 2021.

both amusingly and accurately to “Deleuze’s feverish affirmation of every small perturbation as a potential line of flight [...]”<sup>5</sup>. The obvious advantage of Badiou’s frank dualism between situations (or worlds) and rare events consists in his greater ability to do justice to both sides of the opposition. If novelty is held to be present at all times in every least scintilla of the universe, then no work is needed to show how innovation comes about. By acknowledging the existence of relatively stable worlds within which truths appear, Badiou compels himself to do the work. To cite Watkin once more: “Why has there never been an adequate theory of real change in Western thought? Because there has never been an adequate theory of absolute stability [...] Badiou’s rather astonishing observation is that [...] consistent stability is the only potential for there to be a lasting theory of the event”<sup>6</sup>. It is hardly even astonishing; the failure to account for stability is a glaring defect in most philosophies of flux<sup>7</sup>.

The remaining question is whether Badiou calls upon the human subject to do too much of the labor, in such a way that the object in its own right serves as the incarnation of mere inertia or sub-evental gradualism. This may sound surprising given that he bends over backwards to differentiate his theory of the object from those of Kant and Husserl. True enough, he does sound more realist than they do on certain points. But I am certainly not the first to have raised this question, even among those who appreciate Badiou’s contributions. Adrian Johnston opposes his “quick dismissal of apparently gradualist measures of seemingly minor political adjustments and reforms [...] in the spheres of legislation and socio-economics while awaiting the quasi-divine intervention of the system-shattering evental rupture ushering in an uncompromisingly «perfect» revolution”<sup>8</sup>. Johnston’s plea on behalf of incremental sub-revolutionary change is matched by complaints that Badiou either grants human thought a monopoly on novelty, or fails to account sufficiently for the constraints posed by situations. In the first category we find the objections of Ray Brassier and Quentin Meillassoux that major cosmic events prior to the existence of human beings seem to mean nothing to Badiou<sup>9</sup>. In the second we have Slavoj Žižek’s typical lament that Badiou (“more Jacobin than Marxist”) omits economics from his theory of events<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> W. Watkin, *Badiou and communicable worlds*, London, Bloomsbury, 2021, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 154, 10.

<sup>7</sup> For more on this topic cf. G. Harman, “Conclusions: Assemblage theory and its future”, in M. Acuto & S. Curtis, (eds.), *Reassembling international theory*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 118-131.

<sup>8</sup> A. Johnston, “The Quick and the Dead”, *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, 1.2, 2007, p. 26. Frank Ruda seems to be contesting Johnston’s claim without naming him, in F. Ruda, *For Badiou*, Evanston, IL, 2015, Northwestern University Press, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> R. Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 114; Q. Meillassoux, “Decision and Undecidability of the event in *Being and Event* I and II”, A. Edlebi, (trans.), *parrhesia* 19, 2014, p. 27. For more on this point cf. G. Harman, “Concerning the COVID-19 event”, *Philosophy Today* 64:4, Fall 2020, pp. 845-849.

<sup>10</sup> S. Žižek, *The Parallax View*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2006, p. 55. For Badiou’s own relation to Lacan cf. A. Badiou, *Lacan: Anti-philosophy* 3, K. Reinhard & S. Spitzer (trans.), New York, Columbia University Press, 2020. Cf. also my review of the latter book,

In what follows I will develop a similar critique but with an affirmative conclusion, through a consideration of the role Badiou grants to the object in the scholium in *Logics of Worlds* on what he calls the “transcendental functor”. In one sense I am sympathetic both to the position that great events occur in the non-human sphere (Brassier, Meillassoux) and to the forebodings about a pure politics untethered to non-subjective constraints (Žižek)<sup>11</sup>. In addition, I have recorded elsewhere some reservations about the proclaimed novelty of Badiou’s theory of objects in *Logics of Worlds*, given its excessive proximity to the assumptions of Hume and Kant<sup>12</sup>. The price Badiou pays for ignoring the theory of objects of Husserl (“who is a great classic, if a little late”)—and its surprising forerunner in Aristotle’s theory of primary substance—is that he is led back to something like a “bundle of qualities” (Hume) or “transcendental object=x” (Kant) in which the object itself has little if any room to differ from its qualities<sup>13</sup>. This lacuna is not filled by Badiou’s account of the variable intensity of objects, which demonstrates only that some bundles are more maximally themselves than others: consider his reflections on the anarchist at the Place de République who meets all five proposed criteria, as opposed to those lesser peers who only meet four or fewer criteria on the checklist<sup>14</sup>. Nonetheless, Badiou’s account of the relations between events and objects provides us with valuable new tools, some of them likely to outlast the waves of interest in Maoism and set theory triggered by his work. Although he presents all these topics as part of a systematic package, it is not the fate of philosophies to be accepted or rejected *in toto*.

## 2. Event and Object

We begin with a quick survey of what Badiou says about objects in relation to events, a topic also covered in my forthcoming article “Event and Object”<sup>15</sup>. In a sense these terms are practically opposites for Badiou. The object belongs to a specific world where it *appears* as one rather than being something unitary in its own right; here Badiou is far as can be from the tradition of Aristotle, the Scholastics, and Leibniz, to which I am generally sympathetic. To develop his theory of objects Badiou gives a magnificent, even entertaining description of an imagined protest at the Place de la République in Paris. He even calls this description a “phenomenology”, with the caveat that whereas Husserl treats the subject as constiator of the world, for Badiou himself the subject

Graham Harman, “Alain Badiou, *Lacan: Anti-philosophy* 3”, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, May 21, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> On the necessity of a politics mediated by things see G. Harman, *Bruno Latour*, London, Pluto, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. G. Harman, “Event and object”, unpublished manuscript.

<sup>13</sup> Badiou’s remark about Husserl can be found in A. Badiou, *Being and event*, O. Feltham, (trans.), London, Continuum, 2005, p. 7. But quite to the contrary, it is unclear how Husserl could have come any earlier than he did, given the intimate dependence of his central insights on the stimulus of both Franz Brentano and Kazimierz Twardowski. The latter was born seven years later than Husserl himself!

<sup>14</sup> A. Badiou, *Logics of worlds*, p. 220.

<sup>15</sup> G. Harman, “Event and object”.

is produced by a truth, making his standpoint purportedly less subjectivistic than Husserl's own<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, he takes care to note that "[t]he transcendental that is at stake in [*Logics of Worlds*] is anterior to every subjective constitution, for it is an immanent given of any situation whatever"<sup>17</sup>. Yet it is worth noting that a subject need not "constitute" the world for a philosophy to count as too idealist in spirit. Just consider George Berkeley, arch-idealist of the Western tradition, where it is God rather than the subject who is responsible for the structure of appearance<sup>18</sup>. Beyond this, there is a significant sense in which Husserl's theory of objects is less idealist than Kant's, though I would never claim that Husserl was a realist. Particularly if we focus on the *Logical Investigations* rather than Husserl's more explicitly idealist period, we find a counterpoint to Husserl's idealism in the drama underway between unified intentional objects themselves and (a) their shifting qualities from moment to moment [*Abschattungen*], and (b) their truly central qualities as obtained by the eidetic reduction. In both cases, the Husserlian object has an internal unity and internal strife entirely lacking from Badiou's model, and to some extent even from Heidegger's. In view of the widespread tendency to focus too much on Husserl's idealism (or lack thereof), his pivotal challenge to the Humean tradition of objects as bundles is generally ignored. No adequate theory of the object can proceed without recognition of this challenge. Husserl's undeniable idealism has less to do with any language of subjective constitution than with his *a priori* rejection of anything like a thing-in-itself; on this point Badiou is no different from Husserl<sup>19</sup>.

To reject the in-itself means to miss the distinction between an object and the appearance of that object. Far from claiming to avoid such blurring, Badiou places their indistinctness (in his "materialist postulate" about "atoms of appearance") at the center of his theory of objects<sup>20</sup>. Badiou often uses the phrase "objective phenomenology" to describe his theory of appearance, and in this way he means to distance himself from Husserl and even Kant. But the word "objective" should not deceive us: it is objective only in the sense that Hegel's "objective idealism" is objective. Badiou and his circle are openly annoyed with the dominant continental trope of "finitude", and deeply committed to restoring philosophical discourse on truth (Badiou) or the absolute (Meillassoux)<sup>21</sup>. Such annoyance should not be mistaken for a proof that finitude is unworthy of further acceptance. Badiou's case in *Being and Event* hinges on his identification of ontology with mathematics. Žižek tends to defer to the findings of German Idealism about the nullity of the thing-in-itself, as well as to Lacan's

remarkably de-realized conception of the Real<sup>22</sup>. With Meillassoux this happens through reducing the question of the in-itself to a purely temporal one, as if it were only necessary to account for an archeofossil that predates and an unnamed futural equivalent that outlasts the existence of human thought (a gesture that Badiou salutes in *Logics of Worlds*)<sup>23</sup>. But in the wake of such procedures, the core of the problem remains: it is not the *appearance* of the anarchist that stones the windows of the bank, but the anarchist herself. Badiou is aware of the issue, and this motivates his "materialist postulate" concerning the identity of an atom of appearing and an atom of being. However, this is too big a step to be justified solely with the claim that the human subject does not constitute the appearance of the anarchist insofar as it is somehow given anterior to any subject. This is too close to Husserl's exclamation that the thing-in-itself is an obviously absurd notion, whose purported absurdity lies in the fact that it would pose problems for knowledge if there were a Berlin-in-itself that differed from Berlin as it appears<sup>24</sup>. A similar presumption haunts the anti-realist effort of William James to efface the difference between a flame and the appearance of that flame, and slightly earlier in Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory*<sup>25</sup>. Central problems of this sort cannot be defined out of existence, and indeed, much of Heidegger's value consists in his rejection of the Husserlian version of the postulate<sup>26</sup>.

Since the purpose of this article is evaluative and comparative rather than expository, I will not follow each step of the argument in the way Badiou makes it himself; nor will I introduce the whole of his terminological apparatus. *Being and Event* is an ambitious treatise of ontology, which for Badiou is not different from mathematics. It follows—given that Badiou is a Platonist realist in this sphere, just like most practicing mathematicians—that the various "multiples" discussed in that book are real<sup>27</sup>. The relevant terms in *Being and Event* are "being", "ontology", and "situation". For set theoretical reasons, every set has the empty set as a subset, and hence every multiple contains the void even though it can never appear to us<sup>28</sup>. *Logics of Worlds*, by contrast, deals with the appearance of multiples in a specific context. The applicable terms here are "existence", "logic" (or "phenomenology"), and "world". Whereas multiples

<sup>22</sup> S. Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, London, Verso, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> A. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, p. 119. For a critical discussion of Meillassoux's treatment of the in-itself cf. G. Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux*, Second Edition, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2015, pp. 81-82, 108.

<sup>24</sup> E. Husserl, "Intentional Objects", in *Early writings in the philosophy of logic and mathematics*, D. Willard, (ed. & trans.), Dordrecht, The Netherlands, Kluwer Academic, 1994, pp. 345-387

<sup>25</sup> W. James, *Essays in radical empiricism*, Longmans, New York, Green & Co., 1958, pp. 27-28; H. Bergson, *Matter and memory*, N.M. Paul & W.S. Palmer, (trans.), New York, Zone Books, 1988. For a critical discussion of James's version of the argument cf. G. Harman, *Bells and whistles*, Winchester, UK, Zero Books, 2013, pp. 49-50.

<sup>26</sup> The *locus classicus* is the famous tool-analysis in M Heidegger, *Being and Time*, J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, (trans.), New York, Harper & Row, 1962. Cf. also Graham Harman, *Tool-Being*, Chicago, Open Court, 2002.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. W. Watkin, *op. cit.*, p. one hundred twenty-nine.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. also A. Badiou, *The Immanence of Truths*, pp. 56-57.

<sup>16</sup> A. Badiou, *Logics of worlds*, pp. 173-174.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 101.

<sup>18</sup> G. Berkeley, *A treatise concerning the principles of human knowledge*, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1982.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Badiou's anti-Kantian assertion of the knowability of being in A. Badiou, *Logics of worlds*, p. 102.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 218.

<sup>21</sup> Q. Meillassoux, *After finitude*, R. Brassier (trans.), London, Continuum, 2008.

need not appear and do not exist in relation to other multiples, when it comes to appearance (the realm of objects for Badiou) everything is thoroughly relational. Every world is organized by a “transcendental”, a term Badiou means without the usual Kantian subjectivist connotations of the term, though—as mentioned—we need not automatically take his word for it. In the book-ending glossary of *Logics of Worlds* we read as follows: “«transcendental» designates that a world, in which pure multiplicities appear in the guise of objects, is a network of identities and differences that concern the elements of *what* appears”<sup>29</sup>. Though his terminology frequently becomes difficult, Badiou’s examples are often helpful. When he considers the aforementioned gathering at the Place de la République, we can see how the world of the protest establishes what counts as identical objects, different objects, or not as objects at all. In the simplest case: “two loudspeakers, heard from a distance, seem to bellow identically. The «loudspeaker-fact» does not allow difference to appear at all”<sup>30</sup>. It would of course be different if someone were close to the loudspeakers and was able to hear and distinguish them clearly. It might be that one amplified speech was thoroughly Leninist while the other was made by an evangelical Christian, defining them as polar opposites. But given the world as it appears to a distant observer, all of the speeches are muffled and to this extent identical.

The same holds for two different groups of high school students, who might be mortal enemies if facing each other in an athletic event, but who are effectively identical in the world of the protest. Finally, there are the historically opposed Leninists and anarchists, who despite their mutual hatred may appear identically as “troublemakers” to a police officer ignorant of political divisions on the Left<sup>31</sup>. This is the sense in which the transcendental of the world defines objecthood when it comes to appearance. Also, Badiou delightfully considers the more intricate case of the interrelation between three protesting groups: Kurds, anarchists, and postmen. While each of these three groups obviously has a different sort of outrage to voice, each pair of the triad can be linked through certain shared features. The Kurds and anarchists both try to look fierce; the Kurds and postmen both wear uniforms; the anarchists and postmen share the same affected French masculinity. Yet these three groups clearly constitute collective objects in the world of the protest, all of them in relatively intense form. Contrast them now with a meek group of three librarians inveighing feebly against the increased price of art books, and you will see that they are a far more minimal object in the world of the protest<sup>32</sup>. But there is an even more minimal intensity on the scene than that of the librarians: “a closed shuttered window on the fourth floor of an affluent apartment building”<sup>33</sup>. (201) Yes, this window is at least minimally present in a way that Genghis Khan, Hercules, and the Loch Ness Monster are not. But

its presence is close to zero, since even the window’s negative attitude is hardly more than a dying ember. Although Badiou concedes freely that any of these objects might also appear in different worlds, their identification is so dependent on whatever world they inhabit that it is difficult even to speak of their invariant qualities from one world to the next. This is different from the case of Husserl, for instance, since (despite his idealism) it is axiomatic for him that an intentional object is unified in its own right, not as a result of the specific world that envelops it. Phenomenologists perform eidetic reductions by stripping away the inessential features of individual objects, and that means entirely reducing circumstantial or environmental factors when considering the intentional object itself.

Along with this relational component of his theory of objects, I mentioned that Badiou inclines toward the Humean (and even Kantian) view that an object is properly viewed as a bundle of qualities. This is seen most easily in his consideration of the anarchists at the protest. When speaking of ontological multiples it is always a simple yes-or-no question as to whether one set contains a given element or not, much as with Aristotle’s view that every horse is equally a horse: one may be faster or more beautiful than another, but no horse is more horse than another, and no human is more human than any horse is a horse. By contrast, in Badiou’s logic of appearance there is room for greater or lesser intensity, determined by how many distinct features an object possesses compared to its maximal form. By way of example, and without offering methodological rules for identifying such criteria, Badiou suggests there are five true features that any real anarchist ought to possess: “a) wearing a black jacket and having a menacing air, (b) shouting the usual anarchist slogans, (c) carrying a black flag, (d) taunting the Trotskyists, and (e) throwing stones at bank windows”<sup>34</sup>. Anyone missing one or more of these features would still be an anarchist, but a “less intense” one than the full-blooded, five-star anarchist. A similar deficiency obtains even for complete anarchists in cases where they display any surprising contrary features, such as “waving a red flag or sicking the stewards on any stone-throwers”<sup>35</sup>.

Yet there are genuine problems with bundle-theories of objects. One is their phenomenological falsity: in real life one decides whether any protestor is an anarchist or not in an immediate and more or less tacit way, prior to enumerating any checklist of desirable qualities. That is to say, if a world appears to me I carve it up into units intuitively, with any notion of “criteria” coming long after the fact; in most cases no list of criteria is ever enumerated, not even subverbally. An object appears to me as one object prior to any explicit awareness of a bundle; even if I later revise my assumption that a certain person is an anarchist, it is never the case that I can produce an exhaustive list of the factors that led to my decision. Note that even after having expelled Pluto from the list of planets in 2006, astronomers are still locked in dispute over what counts as a planet. Nor is

<sup>29</sup> A. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, p. 596.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 197.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 200.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 209-210.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 201.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 213.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 213-214.

this a rare or exceptional case, since the same thing has happened intermittently throughout the history of astronomy<sup>36</sup>. The current scientific definition of a planet is so imprecise and variegated as to sound almost *ad hoc*, as seen from the current NASA website which tells us that planets must (1) orbit the sun, (2) have sufficient mass to assume hydrostatic equilibrium and thus remain basically spherical, (3) have “cleared the area of [their] orbit” proving their gravitational superiority to any other nearby bodies<sup>37</sup>. A related problem, also encountered frequently in the history of science, is that counterexamples often have a retroactive effect on any explicit criteria we might employ. In terms of the protest under discussion, imagine that someone appears amidst the anarchists with a polite demeanor while wearing a denim jacket, watching quietly, carrying no flag, not taunting anybody, and throwing no stones at anything. Yet perhaps there is something in their air of calm command when walking amidst the more stereotypical anarchists that leads us to assume (correctly, let us suppose) that this is a highly respected anarchist leader with no need to engage in the usual stylistic features or edgy provocations of his group. Or maybe it turns out later that a new “denim faction” has emerged in the anarchist world, one that has decided to take a subtler approach to overthrowing the ruling order. Badiou does speak with admirable flexibility of something like a hard-to-pinpoint anarchist “style”. But he immediately glosses this style in terms of “family resemblance”, and there could hardly be a more dismally empiricist phrase than this one<sup>38</sup>. We are headed once more in the direction of a bundle of qualities.

Badiou also raises the crucial question of the smallest unit of appearance in a world. We know the answer for sets, since it was covered already in *Being and Event*. For one thing, every set comes to a halt with the void, since every set has the empty set as a subset. There are also singletons, meaning sets with just one member. But in the case of appearance we find an intriguing reversal. The smallest unit here is an individual: say, a specific anarchist. Naturally, we can mentally decompose this person further into their various bodily organs and personal data. But none of this would be relevant to the protest. At the protest one is either an anarchist or one is not; nothing else matters in this particular world, and any anarchist subcomponents would be irrelevant. Yet interestingly enough, Badiou insists that it is not the “smallest” or minimal anarchist who counts as an atom of appearance: the atomic anarchist is not the one who displays only one anarchic feature, or who performs divergent non-anarchist actions. The reason is that the minimal intensity of such an anarchist makes them somehow defective rather than an exemplary atomic instance. Instead, it is the five-star anarchist who embodies the atom in question. Since we are speaking of appearance and not ontology, we can also shift our perspective and speak of groups rather than individuals as the atoms of the protest. In this case we might treat the anarchists, Kurds,

and postmen as equally atoms of this world, while the half-hearted librarians are a less intense version: to the point that they almost blend feebly into the bourgeois pedestrians who pass the Place de la République with nothing but a passing glance.

This seemingly novel idea is as promising as asymmetries usually are: whereas the ultimate element of a set or multiple is its *smallest* unit, the ultimate element of a world is the most *intense* version of a unit. There is a loose parallel with Husserl on this point, since his eidetic reduction is also meant to scrape away the various relational distractions that surround an intentional object, while Badiou’s objects also gain in intensity the less they are confused with other occupants of the world (such as the hypothesized anarchist who loses intensity by waving a mixed-message red flag rather than a black one). The difference is that for Badiou the intense anarchist can appear directly, while for Husserl this requires an intellectual/categorial act as opposed to a perceptive one. Even so, the common theme for both thinkers is that of an object stripped down to its own exemplary features rather than being smeared together with those of other objects. The true importance of the atom of appearing, however, is that Badiou means to use it as a bridge between the phenomenal object and the ontological multiple, and means it to such an extent that he ends up assigning objects to ontology as well, rather than to appearance alone. As he announces: “What we are moving towards is the retroaction of appearing on being. The concept of the object is pivotal to this reaction”<sup>39</sup>. The idea of retroactive effects of appearance on the real has obvious appeal, given its relative absence from previous philosophy. Plato gives us his famous dualism of the world of forms and the world of matter, but with no evident possibility of the latter being able to change the former. Beginning with Plotinus we do see a tradition of attempting to reverse the order and move from the shadows of the cave back upward toward the One, but this is only a movement of thought and entails no impact on the higher dimension itself<sup>40</sup>. Kant certainly does not empower us to change the noumena, even though our ethical actions somehow partake of the thing-in-itself.

Although Badiou rejects any distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal, his position does require a different status for being and appearance, ontology and phenomenology. In order to avoid the usual difficulties that accompany any sort of dualist model, Badiou needs to find a way for being and appearance to intersect, and he thinks he has found it with the atom of appearance. His more technical formulation of this wish runs as follows: “Given a multiple A which appears in a world, every element «a» of A identifies an atom of appearing, via the function of A to T defined by the degree of identity of every element x of A to the singular element «a». Such an atom is said to be real”<sup>41</sup>. Speaking more historically, he calls for “the overturning of Kant’s prudence” in favor of a concept of the object that “designates the point where phenomenon and noumenon are indistin-

<sup>36</sup> Cf. T. Kuhn, *The road since structure*, J. Conant & J. Haugeland, (eds.), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 205.

<sup>37</sup> NASA, “Planets.”

<sup>38</sup> A. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 221.

<sup>40</sup> Plotinus, *The enneads*.

<sup>41</sup> A. Badiou, *op. cit.*, p. 218, *emph. removed*.

guishable, the point of reciprocity between the logical and the onto-logical<sup>42</sup>. What reason does Badiou provide for turning our backs on both Kantian “prudence” and Heideggerian withdrawal? Here any reader who is not already a convert to the Badiouian cause is likely to be disappointed. For he proceeds with a series of borderline *ad hominem* remarks about Kant with respect to his “mathematical childishness” and “obscurantist attachment to pious moralism— which supposes the hole of ignorance in the real<sup>43</sup>. In similar fashion, one might also try to link Heideggerian withdrawal with the horrors of Nazism, though this would not be enough to negate Heidegger’s *bona fide* observations on how equipment hides during use. Badiou is more candid when he admits that his suture of being to appearing with the atom is a “speculative decision, for which there is no transcendental deduction”. He adds further that it is “not a mandatory consequence of the logic of appearing. Let us say that it provides its materialist version<sup>44</sup>.”

Now, although Frank Ruda has written an interesting book on Badiou’s unconventional brand of materialism, it is hard to see why stripping a given context of appearance down to its atoms is enough to have a retroactive effect on anarchists as a pre-worldly ontological multiple. And while it is certainly true that philosophical stances are ultimately based on subverbal intuitions that can be hard to reach or transform with explicit argumentation, Badiou abandons the path of argument too early when he makes a “speculative decision” against finitude. An opponent might easily flip the charge of Kant’s “pious moralism” into one of Badiou’s “pious rationalism” or “pious revolutionism<sup>45</sup>. I have given my reasons for holding –against recent trends– that the horizon of finitude is not yet surpassed, and will not repeat them here. But the speculative decision at work in the theory of logical and ontological atoms strikes me as insufficiently motivated. Moreover, Badiou’s declarations that appearance is not subjectively constituted makes an uneasy fit with the method of identifying objects through transcendental indexing to the world where they are found. After all, the latter entails major subjective contribution to the identity and difference of objects in any given world. A baby passing through in a stroller would be unable even to identify the gathering as a protest, while a tail-wagging dog might simply be elated to find so many humans in a single place. Thus it is simply not plausible to say that the world of “protest” presents itself immediately; whoever observes this world is simultaneously an organizing part of it, as Badiou acknowledges more openly in his discussion of Hubert Robert’s painting *The Bathing Pool*<sup>46</sup>. But all such criticisms aside, let’s return as promised to what is potentially most useful in Badiou’s theory of objects.

### 3. The Transcendental Functor: Alexander the Great

Badiou’s example of the transcendental functor at work comes in a fascinating analysis of the Battle of Gaugamela in 331 B.C.E. This clash took place in what is now northern Iraq and saw Alexander the Great defeat Darius III, thereby more or less ending the Persian Empire of that era. Badiou will conclude from this example that “military genius is really the genius of the transcendental functor [...] the genius of the undoing of real syntheses and their conversion into inconsistency, into the rout of unbound multiplicities<sup>47</sup>. The genius of Alexander was to have aimed his strategy against the strong point rather than the weakness in Darius’s plan. Although the unprecedented use of war elephants was the most colorful aspect of the Persian army that day, its real strength was to have been the employment of scythed chariots, introduced in the previous century during the famous earlier wave of Greco-Persian conflict<sup>48</sup>. These deadly vehicles featured sharp scythes sticking out from the wheels and pointing downward from the driver’s seat. When such chariots were riding at full speed, the scythes could literally cut opposing soldiers to pieces. As usual, the Persians had greater numbers at their disposal than did Alexander’s Greek Army, and for this reason Darius sought a wide battlefield on open terrain. He also had his soldiers flatten and soften the field ahead of time to allow for smoother operations by the charioteers. Luckily for Alexander, he had advance notice of this strategy through the capture and interrogation of a number of Persian prisoners. His counter-strategy would prove to be both brilliant and victorious.

Badiou begins his analysis of the battle with a statement that might initially sound almost empty: “Generally speaking, the transcendental functor of a battle supports the differential evaluation of the capacity for combat of the different subsets of the two opposing armies<sup>49</sup>. But already we have an important insight, though one not explicitly stated as such. When Badiou speaks of the “different subsets” of an army, the language of “subsets” obviously means we are not speaking of the army as a whole. But the subsets in question are also not individual soldiers; Badiou shows as good a sense of the status of emergent components as he did in his earlier example of the protest. For not only is a single phalanx of infantry more than the sum of its parts: this sort of grouping clearly has different strengths and weaknesses from a unit of cavalry, a unit of archers, a unit of imperial guard troops, a unit of war elephants, and so forth. Even if all such units belong to a single army, all have different rates and styles of movement and are especially lethal under different kinds of circumstances. Badiou’s basic military intuition is that the path to victory does not involve just bluntly inflicting the large number of casualties, but entering into the enemy’s synthesis of forces and causing it to disintegrate into an incoherent multiple. A similar strategy has been discussed at length in a number of recent military authors, including in the

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 241.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 236, 241.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 219.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. A. Badiou, *The immanence of truths*, S. Spitzer & K. Reinhard, (trans.), London, Bloomsbury, 2022, pp. 554-586.

<sup>46</sup> A. Badiou, *Logics of worlds*, *op. cit.*, pp. 204-207.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 288.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Herodotus, *The histories*.

<sup>49</sup> A. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

American Marine Corps and Air Force. Indeed, the legendary Colonel John Boyd –likened by admirers to a modern Sun-Tzu– explicitly includes Gaugamela in his historical list of exemplary battles<sup>50</sup>.

At Gaugamela the Persian Army was arranged in symmetrical order, with Darius at the center and the scythed chariots in front. The Greek order of battle was far less conventional. Alexander was not at the center, but positioned over toward the right flank of his army. Even more significantly, the Greeks advanced in what looked like a diagonal line, with their right flank far out ahead of the left, as seen from Badiou's (helpfully) simplified diagram<sup>51</sup>. This gave the Greek Army a chance of enveloping the Persian left flank, putting the entirety of Darius's army in jeopardy. The Persian ruler reacted by rushing reinforcements to his left. Yet "[i]n doing so, [the Persians] create a break in their own infantry on the center-left and a charge from Alexander's cavalry displaces them"<sup>52</sup>. Most importantly, by slanting the battlefield away from the face-to-face horizontal arrangement anticipated by Darius, the Persian battle plan based on scythed chariots is thrown into disarray. In a fine phrase, Badiou proposes that a military commander makes "intellectual speculations" on the transcendental structure of a battle-world, so that a general is really attacking that structure rather than isolated enemy combat units<sup>53</sup>. It is interesting to note that the situation has to some extent reversed in our new age of "asymmetrical warfare" from Vietnam through Afghanistan and onward. Here, the strength of the asymmetrical (usually non-Western) force is precisely that it is already disintegrated in advance, not taking on ordered battle formations but dispersing like a vapor through the battlefield and even the enemy homeland itself. A present-day Alexander trying to break the enemy synthesis into disordered multiples would merely find a *fait accompli* on the part the enemy, and might even hope to perform the counter-Alexandrian maneuver of forcing the enemy to gather into larger formations.

Alexander's underlying tactical vision was to threaten the Persian left flank not only with envelopment, but also with a shift of the battlefield off the central ground prepared for the scythed chariots. This possibility led to panic on the part of Darius, who overextended his lines to the left and thereby weakened his center, against which the Greek infantry launched an attack. Alexander's forces also debilitated the scythed chariots with ranks of javelin-throwers and with swift movements to open holes in the Greek lines. As a result, the vaunted chariots passed through without inflicting much damage and were wiped out piecemeal toward the Greek rear. However, the price paid by these crafty maneuvers was a weakening of the Greek left, exploited early by the

Persian cavalry which "[managed] to isolate two units of the [Greek] phalanx and, penetrating the breach, to carry out a raid behind the lines all the way to the field camp, thereby paralyzing any advance by the Macedonian left flank"<sup>54</sup>. For Badiou this led to a situation of "near-stalemate", one that was finally resolved "through two decisive maneuvers"<sup>55</sup>. The first is the one most often discussed in historical analyses of the battle: the use of light infantry to confuse and scatter the Persian soldiers, breaking them into smaller configurations that could be dealt with in detail. Colonel Boyd treats this as an early version of what would become a typical military tactic from roughly 300 B.C.E. to 1400 C.E.: "Employ maneuver action by light troops with thrust action of heavy troops to confuse, break-up, and smash enemy formations"<sup>56</sup>. The second decisive maneuver was "a horse charge by Alexander himself with the heavy cavalry of his Companions, which crosses the entire battlefield behind the Persian lines [...]"<sup>57</sup>. This gallant charge is severely threatened by the Hyrcanian cavalry, to such an extent that some sixty of Alexander's elite troops are killed. But whereas the Greeks managed to survive the raiding of the field camp in their rear, the Persian army collapsed when Alexander got behind them and charged rapidly, threatening their entire position. The battle became a rout. The Persian baggage train was captured – one of the key elements of victory according to the celebrated Clausewitz– and Darius would eventually have been killed by Alexander if not that he was murdered by his own general Bessus a few months later<sup>58</sup>.

Reflecting on the battle, Badiou speaks of "a projection of the transcendental on the object"<sup>59</sup>. What he is after is the possibility of identifying a specific object that emphatically embodies the world in which it appears. This is already an interesting twist on the more familiar efforts to look for privileged objects in any given situation. Traditionally, these have taken the form of a search for individual beings that somehow incarnate Being itself: beings that would therefore be special in an ontological sense. Of course, such attempts have been fully exposed to the critiques of "onto-theology" by Heidegger and later Derrida, with their critical idea amounting to the notion that reality itself can never become fully present<sup>60</sup>. But onto-theology is obviously not what Badiou is up to here. And while I do think his materialist postulate that an atom of appearance is also an atom of being could be challenged by way of a Heideggero-Derridean critique, that is not the case with his notion of transcendental projection on the object. By asking for an object to embody a *world* rather than Being itself, he is not proposing that an object should incarnate an absence. Instead, the point is that a specific object might be the embodiment of its envelope, its conditions of ap-

<sup>50</sup> W. S. Lind et al., "The Changing Face of War," *Marine Corps Gazette*, October 1989, pp. 22-26; Col. J.R. Boyd, *A Discourse on Winning and Losing*, Maxwell AFB, AL, Air University Press, 2018. Cf. also G. Harman, "War, space, and reversal," in E. Demenchonok, (ed.), *Philosophy after Hiroshima*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge Scholars Press, 2010, pp. 132-148.

<sup>51</sup> A. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 281.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 282.

<sup>54</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 284.

<sup>56</sup> Col. J.R. Boyd, *op. cit.*, p. thirty-three.

<sup>57</sup> A. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, *op. cit.*, p. 284.

<sup>58</sup> C. von Clausewitz, *On war*, J.J. Graham, (trans.), London, Repeater, 2019.

<sup>59</sup> A. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. G. Harman, "The Missing Pieces of Derrida's *Voice and Phenomenon*," *Eidos* 6.2, 2022, pp. 4-25.

pearance. While we might still call this something like a “cosmo-theology”, it does not fall prey to the usual critiques of onto-theologies. Perhaps the reader will already have guessed which object Badiou identifies as the privileged embodiment of the world of Gaugamela:

The failure of the scythed chariots is the key to the (material, but also moral) collapse of the Persian general staff around Darius. Let’s not forget that it was for the chariots that Darius decides to have the battlefield levelled; that for that very reason, and on the basis of information gleaned by his impressive intelligence services, Alexander chooses to advance in an oblique formation, deploying his phalanx on two ranks, and drawing the Persian line towards their left, hoping to displace it vis-à-vis the primed terrain [...] It is therefore certain that of all the elements of the object “center of the Persian army”, such as it appears in the battle-world “Gaugamela”, the element “scythed chariot” possesses a synthetic value with regard to all the others. It is this element which, in the main, decides the subsequent

modifications of the object up to its terminal minimization<sup>61</sup>.

No determinism is implied, nor perhaps even possible. Darius might have won the battle, and in that case we would be reading today about the catastrophic defeat of the Macedonian army due to the Persians’ ingenious use of scythed chariots. There remains the question of whether the enemy is *always* defeated through their point of strength rather than their weakness. Whatever the answer to that question may be, the strength of Badiou’s analysis of Gaugamela lies elsewhere. By displacing the core of the battle from some hidden withdrawn reality toward the purely apparent background envelope of its world, he shifts the burden of causality from the depths to the outermost surface of appearance, an interesting break with figures as different as Heidegger and Deleuze. Whether or not Badiou really offers a new theory of objects, we certainly must ask whether he provides a new theory of causation.

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<sup>61</sup> A. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, op. cit., p. 286.



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