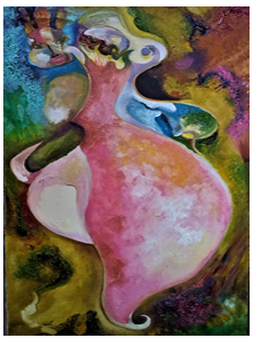

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Angelaki
Journal of the Theoretical Humanities

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cang20

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on badiou with tarkovsky

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To cite this article: Melanie McMahon (2020) LIKE A *STALKER* TO THE ZONE, Angelaki, 25:6, 51-71, DOI: 10.1080/0969725X.2020.1838724

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2020.1838724

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ANGELAKI
journal of the theoretical humanities
volume 25 number 6 december 2020

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In the 1972 science-fiction novel, *Roadside Picnic*, by the Russian brothers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, aliens have used Earth as a rest stop on the way to another, presumably grander, destination. Not unlike the complexes of toilets, concrete tables, and vending machines adjacent to human highways, the aliens land at the site – afterward referred to as the Zone – engage in their titular period of relief, deposit their litter, and depart as abruptly as they came. This occurrence comes to be known as "the Visit," which is alluded to but not staged in either the novel or Tarkovsky's celebrated film adaptation, *Stalker* (1979). These texts open onto the scene some thirteen and twenty years later, respectively. In each, the Zone has been cordoned off, heavily fortified, and placed under armed guard. Entry is strictly forbidden. Few would enter willingly anyhow, as the Zone behaves in dark, threatening, and scarcely predictable ways – ways that only a curious breed of poacher called a stalker is willing to hazard, and even they demonstrate limited success. In the novel, the objects of alien refuse have enormous value, especially for use in the research arm of the military–industrial complex that has sprung up among the peripheries of the Zone. On the black market, this so-called "swag" is priced accordingly, since stalkers become irrecoverably maimed or worse by their encounters with the Zone. In the early stages of the novel, the reader understands the protagonist-stalker, Redrick Schuhart, to be a form of hustler, interested only in the money to be gained from his prowess in negotiating the Zone, collecting swag, and selling it to the IIEC, or International Institute of Extraterrestrial Cultures. Perhaps because this characterization is not entirely consistent (it becomes

ISSN 0969-725X print/ISSN 1469-2899 online/20/060051-21 © 2020 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2020.1838724

clear, for example, that the money is for his wife and the care of their mysteriously afflicted child), it is absent from the film. Though Schuhart bears such proclivities in the original text – "Like many others, he profited from the Zone" (Strugatskys 69) – by the time Tarkovsky shoots the film for the second time (the first is accidentally damaged), Stalker more closely resembles a supplicant enthralled to an awe-inspiring force than a smuggler seeking to exploit it. The Strugatskys' biographer writes of this evolution, "And so they made a crippled pilgrim out of a crippled criminal" (qtd in Tsymbal 276).

There is no shortage of books and articles interpreting Tarkovsky's masterwork, though most adhere to a version of the protagonist as a Christ-figure and Tarkovsky a metaphysician. According to Fredric Jameson, this refashioning of the Stalker character signals an unwelcome Tarkovskian interference in the original Strugatsky vision. Whereas Jameson has the highest praise for *Roadside Picnic*, which he calls an "incomparable novel," he condemns the film adaptation, citing the "chagrin one feels at seeing Tarkovsky's treatment of it" (91). For Jameson, the protagonist of the original was "still an attractive trickster and social deviant" whom Tarkovsky ruined by imbuing him with a "drearily suffering Christ-like solemnity" (92). And in his brief essay, "Fables of Desire," Daniel Kluger hesitates to refer to *Stalker* as a "film version" of *Roadside Picnic* at all, since the two have "surprisingly little in common" (415). What neither Jameson nor Kluger acknowledge is the fact that the Strugatsky brothers themselves were responsible for the multiple revisions of the screenplay in collaboration with Tarkovsky, and that while they sometimes expressed frustration at his communicative opacity, they never suggested he denuded the character or altered the spirit of the book in any way. In his research into the pre-history of the film, Evgenii Tsymbal calls the partnership between the Strugatskys and Tarkovsky "painstakingly close" (255). Boris Strugatsky counted nine rewrites, Arkady eleven, and Marianna Chugunova, Tarkovsky's assistant, twelve or thirteen over a period of nearly two years (Tsymbal 270). Because the film is "difficult," however, Jameson omits the involvement of the Strugatskys, whom he admires, and belabors his grudge against Tarkovsky, whom he does not. He insults those who do:

> This novel Tarkovsky made over into the most lugubrious religious fable, his camera and his actors moving if anything more slowly than real time itself, with a solemnity quite intolerable to any but the truest believers (in Tarkovsky, I mean). (Jameson 92)

Many commentators agree that Tarkovsky is inexplicable, if not willfully obscurantist. One writes, "It is hard to think of a widely admired filmmaker who seems more enigmatic than Tarkovsky" (Dempsey 12). *Stalker* in general and the final scene in particular – in which the Stalker's child moves glasses across a table telekinetically to the strains of Beethoven's 9th Symphony – is commonly considered "one of the more mysterious endings in Tarkovsky's oeuvre, concluding what is arguably the director's most mysterious film" (Pontara 303).

In this article, I contend that many of the misconceptions and confusions about the novel and especially the film, as well as their relationship to each other and the themes they invoke, can not only be clarified, but richly illuminated by recourse to the philosophy of the event according to Alain Badiou. The interaction of Badiou with Tarkovsky is fitting, because Badiou himself has been accused of obscurantism, if not mysticism. As one largely sympathetic reviewer of Badiou's *Ethics* explains, "[His] relative anonymity in the English-speaking world probably results in part from the difficulty of his thought […]" (Rothberg 478). Most of Badiou's major work has been concerned with elaborating his theory of the event, though it is articulated in its most accessible form in the *Ethics*. Here he explains that an event is a radical tear in the fabric of ordinary life. It cannot be explained according to the usual coordinates

of intelligibility. It is "totally incalculable" and "nothing leads up to it" (Badiou, *Saint Paul* 17). There are rare individuals who recognize an event as such, something which cannot be easily or convincingly re-inscribed into "what there is [*ce qu'il y a*]" (Badiou, *Ethics* 41). For the affected individual (which Badiou names a Subject), this event, this something new, so alters the mode of living that had proven acceptable up until that point that its occurrence literally changes everything.

After an event unfolds, two possibilities present themselves. The most probable is that the quotidian will reestablish itself and that forces of social reproduction will "write" the event out of existence, vigorously expunging its most disruptive elements. The other possibility is that the event will be "named" as such and, in effect, happen again through this nomination. It is through declaration of, and fidelity to, this event that a Subject is convoked into being (provided that the ensuing process determines the event to be an instance of "truth" and not a mere simulacrum). Events persist by way of their inscriptions upon the Subjects who declare them. So, too, do Subjects find their own consistency through the fidelity to the event that founds them.

For most human animals (in the Northern hemisphere), to live well and as comfortably as possible comprises the full spectrum of life ambitions. Badiou refers to the human animal in this regard as a "being-for-death" (*Ethics* 12). He quotes Bichat, who notes that life is nothing other than "the set of functions that resist death" (*Ethics* 11). Even in resisting it, the human animal is oriented toward death and thus remains preoccupied by her animal interests, that is, her principle of surviving (comfortably). To "persevere in being" is not the least bit remarkable in that it is simply what all biological organisms are impelled to do. For Badiou (and Kant before him), what is striking and noteworthy about the human animal, however, is that it alone has the capacity to be something *other than* this "being-for-death." Badiou here suggests that it is possible to become *im*mortal, insofar as each human animal has the potential to overcome this entrancement by her own death:

> The fact that in the end we all die, that only dust remains, in no way alters Man's identity as immortal at the instant in which he affirms himself as someone who runs counter to the temptation of wanting-to-be-an-animal to which circumstances may expose him. And we know that every human being is *capable* of being this immortal – unpredictably, be it in circumstances great or small, for truths important or secondary. In each case, subjectivation is immortal, and makes Man. Beyond this there is only a biological species, a "biped without feathers," whose charms are not obvious. (*Ethics* 12)

Specific to the human amongst animals is the capacity to exceed pure interest, and to participate in what Badiou calls "disinterested-interest" (*Ethics* 49). To overtake one's automatic perseverance-in-being in the service of an event is akin to partaking of immortality, since one's interest is otherwise resolutely entangled with her status as "mortal and predatory" (*Ethics* 12). An important aspect of Badiou's philosophy is that unlike others, he does not fix on language as the distinguishing, "redemptive" feature of the human animal. The human may participate in immortality *in spite of* language, not because of it. It is only the human capacity for seizure by a truth-event that "redeems" her mortal state. In fact, despite a certain emphasis on naming and declaring, Badiou displays profound reservations in regard to language. This is apparent in his insistence that persons are "seized" by truth-events, rather than "convinced" by logic, arguments, or persuasion (i.e., language) in favor of them. His most elaborated example is that of Paul, around whom he has produced a sort of handbook of militancy – in part, because Paul is headed to Damascus as a "zealous Pharisee" with the aim of persecuting Christians when he is struck by a "thunderbolt, a caesura" (*Saint Paul* 17). One would be hard-pressed to describe this happening as a "conversion" in the usual sense, since Paul is not won over by representatives of the Church, nor

compelled by an especially cogent presentation of the Gospels. Rather his goals are interrupted; he changes thereafter.

An event cannot be easily "translated" into the language of the everyday – which Badiou calls "opinion" – and this partly defines it. The event resists opinion, which is to say that it resists its own absorption into explicability or narrative. As he notes, "Opinion is beneath the true and the false, precisely because its sole office is to be communicable. What arises from a truth-process, by contrast, cannot be communicated [*ne se communique pas*]. Communication is suited only to opinions," which, he acknowledges, we cannot do without, lest we be consigned to an unfathomably "depressing silence" (*Ethics* 51). Yet language, that is, opinion, is not equipped to account for truth. Instead, Badiou uses words like "encounter" to describe what is otherwise unknowable as measured by the realm of opinions:

> In all that concerns truths, there must be an *encounter*. The Immortal that I am capable of being cannot be spurred in me by the effects of communicative sociality, it must be *directly* seized by fidelity […] To enter into the composition of a subject of truth can only be something that *happens to you*. (*Ethics* 51)

Tarkovsky also intuits this dimension of evental truth, expressing it through a minimal use of language. He emphasizes soundscapes, human silence, music, long takes, and images. Ambivalence bordering on distrust in regard to language marks an affinity between Tarkovsky and Badiou. As Tarkovsky writes of his film, "It would be good if at the end the spectator came to doubt whether he had even seen a story" (qtd in Bird 163). An event abides in its non-narrativity. What Jameson regards as an inexcusable ponderousness is in fact characteristic of a certain incommunicability that surrounds the truth-event for the Subject it invokes. Far from marking a failure (of Tarkovsky, of the militant), this opacity must be seen as an unavoidable element of evental truth.

When the character, Redrick Schuhart, appears at the beginning of Tarkovsky's film, he has no such name, but only the eponymous function, Stalker. The viewer senses a tension between the ill-defined and unusual purpose of a Stalker and the domestic scene in which he is inserted when first we meet him. He is in bed with a sleeping family; he arises to brush his teeth, put on his trousers. He moves quietly so as not to wake them. This scene contains in microcosm the drama of the stalker, just as it is the drama of all subjects to truth: how will one reconcile her rupture with the *doxa*? The mortal has no inkling of the truth, as she is forged in opinions, whereas the immortal must continually negotiate both: the world of opinions (and "beings-toward-death") alongside her constitution as a Subject to truth. She can never be fully one or the other, but always the two at once. The line between them is neither obvious nor guaranteed. As Badiou writes,

> We must recognize that the "myself" engaged in the subjective composition is identical to the one that pursues his interest: there cannot be, for us, two distinct figures of the "some-one" […] This ambivalence of my multiple-composition ensures that interest can no longer be clearly represented as distinct from disinterested-interest. (*Ethics* 54)

Because they look similar (myself as animal, myself as Subject) and because there is overlap between interest and disinterested-interest, there remains a measure of confusion. We soon come to understand that the Stalker is preparing himself to return to the Zone, much to his wife's dismay, as he has presumably made feeble promises not to. Is he going out of interest, such as money-making? Is he going because he is insensitive to his promises, to marital discord, to his disabled child? Or is he going because he is incapable of staying away? Is he going in the hope that Writer and Professor – the pilgrims he will soon escort into the Zone – may also be "seized and bewildered," as he has been (*Ethics* 45)? At this point there is no way to know, and from the outside, as it were, these things look identical.

This same ambivalence between interest and disinterested-interest is also an indicator of

hope. Each mortal, no matter how ensconced in her animal interests, retains the capacity to exceed this state. It is why Badiou says the event is addressed *to all*. One way to test the validity of a truth-claim is to gauge the extent to which it is either properly universal,[1] or whether, by contrast, it obscures the part-of-no-part. Badiou's contemporary, Jacques Rancière, refers to the part-of-no-part as those who, for a host of reasons, elude the count (i.e., the marginalized, the wretched, the invisible). From the point of view of the *doxa*, the part-of-no-part is literally those who "do not count." From the perspective of the event, however, they constitute the supreme position, the very site of the truth of any given situation. Žižek defines the part-of-no-part as the "local instance that acts as a stand-in for the universal," in that "it consists in a conflict between the structured social body where each part has its place and the 'part with no part' which unsettles this order […]" (qtd in Rancière 6). The part-of-no-part is not barred without reason. Rather its barring is the necessary basis – the sine qua non – on which the stability and coherence of the whole is maintained. To count the uncounted is dangerous. It topples the whole – and once this happens, nothing can proceed as it once did.

A Stalker, it should be said, is not a seeker. He *already knows* the truth by which he is constituted. He is not looking for anything. He has already been made a Subject to the event. The Visit makes Redrick Schuhart into a Stalker, but prior to that, he had been no more and no less than a human animal, a "being-for-death." A Stalker is made in conjunction with the Zone. He does not preexist it (Badiou, *Ethics* 43). But so must the Stalker carry on living in the not-Zone, the mortal world of opinions, amongst those whose lives and livelihoods (i.e., *Writer* and *Professor*) are literally built upon language. By contrast, the Stalker speaks very little – for what is there to say? – and the language he does employ is mostly confined to giving Writer and Professor instructions. Writer and Professor, meanwhile, constantly verbalize and demand verbalizations in return. They comment unendingly, engage in cynical interrogations, and call for explanations. A Stalker has no special language with which to impress those who accompany him. All he can do is escort them to the Room inside the depths of the Zone. He transports them there bodily, and he cannot be sure until they physically approach the Room whether or not his companions will be seized as he has been seized, or if the journey will have been for naught.

Aliens land. For the novelists, the depiction of an exogenous force, whether metaphorical or not, removes any doubt as to the source of the Zone. For Tarkovsky and the Strugatskys-as-screenwriters, however, the origin of the Zone remains indeterminate. As early as the title card, the viewer is introduced to undecidability as a central theme. The quote is tentative, interrogative, and finally unknowing:

> What was it? A meteorite? A visit of inhabitants of the cosmic abyss? One way or another, our small country has seen the birth of a miracle – the Zone. We immediately sent troops there. They haven't come back. Then we surrounded the Zone with police cordons … Perhaps that was the right thing to do … Though, I don't know … (From an interview with Nobel Prize Winner, Professor Wallace (*Stalker*))

It is our entry into the film. In some translations, the word "miracle" is used multiple times. Some *thing* has happened. It is without precedent and without explanation. A certain violence takes place, though it is not clear who is aggressor and who victim. The humans react defensively, erecting security barriers to protect the citizenry from the Zone and the Zone from the citizenry. Where the film begins with undecidability, the novel is its opposite. If a resident of Harmont has any doubt as to the nature of the Visit, she can read the "immense banner, already faded," strung up above the Zone, which reads: "WELCOME TO EARTH, DEAR ALIENS!" (Strugatskys 20). It is a semi-comical expression of human belatedness. Such a banner would

have to have been made and mounted after the fact, and so addressed to no one in particular, since the aliens had already landed, made their pit stop, and vanished.

One human witness to the Visit runs himself to death out of fear. Other inhabitants of the vicinity go blind – not from a flash of light, but from the piercing sound. Nearby dwellings come to be known as the "Plague Quarter" due to the outbreak of an unspecified but generalized infirmity that lingers there. A hair-like algae grows on abandoned objects. Such vivid, piecemeal stories make up the fabric of the entire town. They are traded as social currency and comprise Badiou's opinions, which is to say that they provide a shared sense of meaning for Harmont's residents regarding the Visit, such as what to make of it and which vocabulary to deploy. Even horrors such as sudden blindness and death-by-fear are made commonplace. In taking on the form of opinions, the Visit becomes domesticated (which is, in some sense, the function of "opinions," that is, to make information intelligible by first making it standard, transferable, and ultimately of use). The characters in the novel proceed to inscribe this rupture in communicable, albeit shocking, terms. The alien becomes regular.

The Strugatskys satirize this normalization by setting the story somewhere in the North America of advanced capitalism – "Harmont" must have sounded typically American to them – rather than in the Soviet Union where the book was written. For the residents of Harmont, rapacious capitalism dominates everyday life, and social relations are governed by impersonal, monetary exchange and the subsequent longing for compensatory meaning. High-end picnics are thrown near the borders, where guides scatter horse bones into the Zone and convince tourists that what they are viewing from a safe distance is toxic, alien debris. The gatherings become an excuse for prostitution and sex parties. In bureaucratic terms, the Visit is subject to unnamed pursuits like "ongoing investigation." The Zone is enclosed by a seven-foot wall and patrolled with heavy artillery by men who are not unlike border agents. The Visit becomes a well-established fixture of the media landscape; the novel opens with a radio interview of a researcher who has secured his renown by theorizing a particular aspect of Zonal irregularity. The Visit is taught to schoolchildren as a fundament of their history and is thoroughly documented in the important volume, Stetson's *History of the Visit*. It is the stuff of jokes, gossip, local lore. The Strugatskys suggest that even something as profoundly extraordinary as an alien visitation can be duly commandeered to all the usual aims and codes. It becomes yet another resource of which to make financial and ideological use. Musing one night in a taxicab, Red Schuhart observes the following about his driver:

> […] He was one of the thousands who had recently flocked to Harmont looking for hair-raising adventures, untold riches, international fame, or some special religion; they came in droves but ended up as taxi drivers, waiters, construction workers, and bouncers in brothels – yearning, untalented, tormented by nebulous desires, angry at the whole world, horribly disappointed, and convinced that here, too, they'd been cheated […] A rare few became stalkers and quickly perished, never having made any sense of things […] The rest founded political parties, religious sects, and self-help groups […] From time to time they organized protests and petitions, staged demonstrations, went on strike – sit-down strikes, stand-up strikes, and even lie-down strikes – enraging the city police, administrators, and established residents; but the longer they stayed, the more thoroughly they calmed down and resigned themselves to things, and the less they worried about what exactly they were doing in Harmont. (Strugatskys 91)

The human animal gets by as best it can. For Tarkovsky (and Badiou), the source of fascination is the one who, improbably but definitively, does not "calm down and resign himself to things." One can consider the novel a prelude to the film, as the former highlights the Stalker's delinquent sensibilities and the latter his self-abnegating commitment to the Zone. Yet contrary to Jameson's critique, both tendencies had already

been at work within the single character. From book to film, the Stalker becomes ever more removed from the Visit as it is normalized by the residents of Harmont, for whom it cannot be called a "truth" at all, but only a representation without truth, that is, opinion, "the anarchic debris of circulating knowledge" (Badiou, *Ethics* 50). For Stalker, meanwhile, the remnants of the Zone populate his world and cohere around him such that the possibility of "calming down," of "resigning himself to things" or of subsisting in the world of opinions, can no longer present itself with much force.

One such Zonal revenant in the novel is Schuhart's long-dead father who rises from the dead and returns to the apartment. He simply appears one day, moving "slowly and woodenly, like a giant doll" (Strugatskys 152). He smells of earth and forges an immediate bond with Schuhart's child, his granddaughter, whose nickname "Monkey" is more apt in this medium, as there are no whites of her eyes and her body is covered in soft fur. Of these Zonal intrusions, Daniel Kluger writes that they are the price a stalker pays for "court[ing] danger" (416). To be "haunted by the walking dead," he writes, by "partially resurrected deceased friends and relatives" and to have one's children form non-human traits is proof that stalkers are "not left unscathed" by their visits to the Zone (416). Yet there is no sense in which the Stalker regrets these appearances or regards them as burdens or punishments. The opposite is true. They are extensions of the Zone and thereby of himself as Subject. It is said of Schuhart, in fact, that he gazed upon his (undead) father with "the most genuine, the most sincere love and affection" (Strugatskys 152). The Monkey is similarly inclined:

> [She] silently appeared by the table next to the old man and stood there for a while, putting her furry little paws on the table. Suddenly, in a completely childlike manner, she leaned against the corpse and put her head on his shoulder. (Strugatskys 155)

The gesture of her tilted head, resting for support, is repeated in Tarkovsky's final scene.

In both texts, Stalkers know that their children will be de-formed by the Zone in advance of giving birth to them. From the point of view of opinion, this is a wrenching and painful aberration. For a Stalker, however, these things are particularities of the Zone – of the truth – and therefore simply what there is to live for. Stalker attends to Monkey and the reanimated corpse of his father through protective acts that indicate not a process of othering, but an ethics of *indistinction*, that is, a relaxation of those boundaries that would separate one from the other. The novel includes like instances of mergence, such as the following auditory occurrence. Schuhart does not remember the first time he hears it until the sound is relayed again throughout the Zone, and it arouses the original memory:

> It was the middle of the night. He'd been awakened, horror-struck, by the same sound, mournful and drawn out, as if in a dream. Except that it wasn't a dream. It was the Monkey screaming, sitting on her bed by the window, and his father responding from the other side of the house – very similarly, with creaky drawn-out cries, but with some kind of added gurgle. And they kept calling back and forth in the dark – it seemed to last a century, a hundred years, and another hundred years. Guta also woke up and held Redrick's hand, he felt her instantly clammy shoulder against his body, and they lay there for these hundreds and hundreds of years and listened […] (Strugatskys 164)

Sound – and not necessarily language – uniquely *assembles*. As its vibrations reach its hearers, they do so across an equalizing plane, which is to say, sound tends to encircle its listeners evenly – bidden or no – and with little opportunity for initial refusal. One must hear something before she can refuse it and by that time, it is already too late. The reader may imagine the call-and-response between the disabled child on one side of the house and her zombified relation on the other as a different form of Immortal communication, just out of reach of the human animal, the being-for-

death, since in the novel, Schuhart has not yet experienced his "thunderbolt" and "caesura." The married couple lies awake in between these two "mutants" – immersed, we might say, in the sound of the part-of-no-part – enveloped by their keening and communing.

When Schuhart hears the sound again repeated in the Zone ("a long, mournful creak") – one suspects that this is the sound *of* the Zone, the sound the Zone makes (Strugatskys 163). He hears it just before he arrives at its heart and beholds what in the film will be remade as the Room, but in the novel is the "wishing machine," that is, the Golden Sphere.

In both texts, it becomes clear that there is a mysterious, troubling, and seductive object lying deep within the Zone. Rumors circulate about its nature. It is said that whoever can reach it in one piece will leave the Zone with her utmost desire granted. The Strugatskys provide a foreshadowing of Schuhart's encounter with this wishing object, the Golden Sphere, through an instance of infantile desire. In a childhood memory, he recalls "the buttons on his mother's jacket – amber, translucent, golden":

> He always longed to stuff them into his mouth and suck on them, expecting some extraordinary treat, and he'd take them into his mouth and suck and every single time would be terribly disappointed, and every single time he'd forget about the disappointment – not that he'd actually forget, he'd just refuse to believe his memory as soon as he saw them again. (Strugatskys 158–59)

A form of desire which never succeeds in overcoming this amnesia at the scene of consummation belongs to the child, though it is also the basis of capitalism. The Strugatskys suggest – in Soviet fashion, perhaps – that capitalism is structured around desire in its most regressive, infantile form. Capital can only cater to the same level of libidinal desire as that of the restless child hankering after candy. Of the Schuhart who "longed to stuff them into his mouth," he might well have outwitted this endless cycle, but when the time comes, he cannot will himself to interrupt it. (To some degree, this is true of all subjects of capitalist social formations, or else these societies would cease to exist.) As Badiou writes, "[…] No truth can be sustained through capital's homogenous expansion" (*Saint Paul* 11). But it is through homogenous expansion that capital continues to exist, and in this respect, capitalism is (always and structurally) anathema to the truth of the event.

If the child Schuhart is semi-cognizant of the distance between the desire and the sating of desire, he also intuits that his actual desire is *that the desire renew itself* and continue, not that it be sated. Precociously, he anticipates the disappointment – the inevitable failure of true satiety – before he even experiences it. In this way, the frustration of desire is accounted for within the process of desiring itself. He "refuses to believe his memory." He walks through the chain of desire each time anyway, because by discrediting his memory, he prompts desire to bound along the chain of signifiers in order to repeat itself all over again. Hence the accuracy of the "long-known fact that capitalism flourishes, not by covering existing needs but by eliciting new ones" (Streeck 13).

As Žižek explains, "The realization of desire does not consist in its being 'fulfilled,' 'fully satisfied,' it coincides rather with the reproduction of desire as such, with its circular movement" (*Looking Awry* 8).[2] If capital is not entirely responsible for this dynamic, it has certainly codified it into an entire social order. Capitalism is fueled by manufactured desires.[3] The belief that it is "a regime of rational action in response to material scarcity" is misleading at best, and it downplays the fabricated nature of all but the most basic of objective needs – which could actually be fulfilled relatively easily – while obscuring the enormous role in modern capitalist societies "of socially generated and sustained *imaginaries*, *expectations*, *dreams* and *promises*" (Streeck 4). This is why the "wishing machine" (the Golden

Sphere in the novel, the Room in the film) does not operate as a wishing machine "should." It does not grant conscious desires *but only unconscious ones* – those most intimate and opaque. The anxiety surrounding the proposition that we do not want what we think we want, but something far different, stems from the fact that we fear our hidden desires – so hidden they are even hidden from ourselves – will be irremediably bad. They are not conscious because they have been socially and psychically repressed (as disruptive, repulsive, shameful, or otherwise unacceptable). This fear does not seem to bear itself out in the novel or the film, but its unsettling possibility lingers. Žižek refers to the Room as an "Id-Machine" because it "materializes our unacknowledged fantasies" ("Inner Space" 221). Either they are deplorably dark – or as Žižek phrases it, "incestuous, destructive impulses" – or they are frivolous and shallow, mortifyingly so, once made public. Boris Strugatsky had the idea, and suggested it to his brother, that one of the characters consciously desire money but return from the Zone not financially enriched, but as a handsome fellow, which had in fact been "the secret dream of his whole life" (Tsymbal 271).

Badiou (and Lacan) suggest still another possibility – that the desirer continues to desire and fail at satiety because she is not really "there" at all. She is always elsewhere, on another scene, "decentered," such that desire is scarcely "owned" by any-one, but rather takes on a compulsive life of its own.[4] This is what the great religions mean by the term, "sin" – that is, a compulsion to repeat that happens apart from, and often in spite of, the will or ability of the bearer to restrain it. Sin (desire) emerges in coordination with the founding of the (religious) Law. Along with Freud and Foucault, Badiou equates the coming of the Law with the unending vicissitudes of desire to which it gives rise. It is in and through the Law that sin comes into being as autonomous and automatic.[5] As Badiou explains:

> *Sin is the life of desire as autonomy, as automatism*. The law is required in order to unleash the automatic life of desire, the automatism of repetition. For only the law *fixes* the object of desire, binding desire to it regardless of the subject's "will." (*Saint Paul* 79)

Desire is awakened in the child Schuhart automatically each time he sees the golden buttons. He knows he will be disappointed; he stuffs them in his mouth anyway as if animated by some force outside of his body (which, of course, he is). What would a desiring-machine deliver in this context, which is also our own context?

We assume Schuhart's animal "interests" will overtake him when he finally finds the Golden Sphere. This is certainly what happens to his companion – his alter ego – Burbridge the younger. Burbridge believes he is there to restore full use of his Father's legs to what are now shriveled lengths of worthless tissue. Because the trek is likely to be fatal, the goal is purportedly a matter of his "disinterested-interest." Yet once he is in the presence of the Golden Sphere, he goes mad with desire. He becomes hyperactive and reckless. He tears off his jacket and begins "yelling something, making faces, waving his arms" (Strugatskys 189). He goes skipping and dancing down the slope. He forgets the existence of Schuhart entirely: "[H]e forgot about everything – he went to make his wishes come true, the little secret wishes of a college boy […]" (Strugatskys 189). These wishes, we learn, amount to money, fame, and the power that will accompany first a Senate seat and then the Presidency. Despite being animated by such desires, he shouts discordant words, as if ventriloquized by an unknown speaker. Though the words seem to be addressed to the part-of-no-part, the narrator, and hence the reader, is privy to Burbridge's true desire (to be rich and famous). On the outside, interest and disinterested-interest look the same. Even though Burbridge utters almost the exact words Schuhart will utter later, they are *a simulacrum* of fidelity to the event and not fidelity itself. Burbridge's mistake is that he – like many well-meaning others – believes that he can maintain life while at the same time pursuing the course of

death. Perhaps the most overt expression of this "being-for-death" in the human animal is repose in what Badiou calls after Lacan, "the service of goods" (*Ethics* 80). He would like to believe that he can embrace the service of goods and glimpse "immortality" – not through the event but through the fruits of power and prestige and the objects these will afford him. He believes he is sensitive to and appreciative of the truth in the way one would be of an exquisite sculpture or impeccable wine. He fails to grasp the difference between an event and its simulacrum. The texts are replete with characters who cannot make this distinction, who attempt to straddle the divide between interest and disinterested-interest, between simulacrum and event.

Unlike Porcupine – another version of this character – it is not by his own hand that Burbridge hangs. The Zone intervenes directly, firstly by arresting the flow of his empty words, by rendering him silent, "as if a huge hand had forcefully shoved a gag into his mouth" (Strugatskys 190). Schuhart intuits what is about to happen and decides he will not look. The boy is "[jerked] up into the air" and wrung "like the laundry." A shoe flying off a "twitching foot" suggests he is dismembered by an invisible force, a "transparent emptiness" (Strugatskys 190). If Burbridge is made crazed by his own desire, consider by contrast Schuhart's response to the Golden Sphere:

> But at the same time there was something about it, and the longer Redrick looked at it, the clearer it became that looking at it was enjoyable, that he'd like to approach it, that he'd like to touch it or even stroke it. And for some reason, it suddenly occurred to him that it'd probably be nice to sit next to it and, even better, to lean against it, to throw his head back, close his eyes, and think things over, reminisce, or maybe simply doze, resting … (Strugatskys 189)

When the grand moment arrives, Schuhart the hustler, no longer seems to want anything. He becomes passive, almost somnolent. He is emptied of all desire, perhaps even the desire to persist-in-being. Žižek likens this response to Lacan's notion of "subjective destitution" ("Inner Space" 227). In subjective destitution, "reality itself is experienced as a confused whirlpool of shapes and sounds, so that we are no longer able to formulate our desire […]" (Žižek, "Inner Space" 227). It is not so much that Burbridge failed to rid himself of desire while Schuhart succeeded. Rather in the presence of the Golden Sphere, Schuhart is no longer able to mobilize the psychic equipment one requires to form a desiring self. Whatever he might have wished becomes lost in its insignificance, diffuse to the point of irrecoverability. Where Burbridge's desires magnify and proliferate as he approaches the Sphere, Schuhart is subdued and quieted. Žižek's use of "subjective destitution" suggests that desire becomes impossible to experience or assert when the consistency of the "desirer" is suddenly grasped as false and untenable.[6] Hence of Schuhart, it is said, "There wasn't a single thought in his head, and he somehow stopped being able to sense himself" (Strugatskys 190). The interests of Schuhart, the human animal, have dissolved into disinterested-interest, even though he continues to "apologize" for the former:

> He was covered in sweat and suffocating from the heat, but at the same time he was chilled to the bone, trembling hard all over, as if hungover, and the flavorless chalk dust was crunching between his teeth. And he was no longer trying to think. He just kept repeating to himself in despair, like a prayer, "I'm an animal, you can see that I'm an animal. I have no words; they haven't taught me the words." (Strugatskys 193)

Within the span of the novel – and one could say into Tarkovsky's film as well – these interests are never again reconstituted. In many ways, the entire novel is a prelude to this encounter with the Golden Sphere, but once there, he can never remember having wanted anything at all. He does not even remember that he is he. In the Zone, Schuhart overcomes the childhood entanglement with desire – and more so with the automatism and illusion of

(sated) desire – which the parable of the candy-buttons demonstrates. He overcomes desire before it can be initiated, before it can launch itself again and again.

This is the function of the wishing machine: to deliver the supplicant from the torments of his desires. We assume the way to be delivered is to have these desires granted. Yet this simply causes others to arise with equal virulence, at other sites and at other times. The Sphere (and the Room) conceive of a capitalist civilization turned inside out. Capital cannot monetize unreconstructed, unconscious desire, which both the Strugatskys and Tarkovsky strongly suggest is, at its base, *to be free from desire*. This is also, along with Badiou, to be free from the being-for-death. To be free from desire is (perhaps) a terrifying prospect to the mortal animal, because the presumption is that this would be a state resembling death. Yet the realm of death is otherwise, as Badiou so aptly reminds us: "The law is what gives life to desire. But in so doing, it constrains the subject so that he wants to follow only the path of death" (*Saint Paul* 79). He quotes from Paul's Letter to the Romans (7.11) by way of explanation: "For sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, seduced me and by it killed me" (qtd in *Saint Paul* 79). The drama of the wishing machine entails the struggle of the protagonist to name the perfect wish, the only one that will suffice, which is to say, *the last one*.

Suddenly and without warning, Schuhart understands the only thing this could be. About this realization, about this seizure, Badiou writes:

> At a given moment, everything he is – his body, his abilities – is called upon to enable the passing of a truth along its path. This is when the human animal is convoked [*requis*] to be the immortal that he was not yet. (*Ethics* 40)

The Strugatskys signify the triumph of disinterested-interest at the base of the Golden Sphere through the final words of the book, written in all capital letters. Semi-hysterical, the Stalker shouts his wish as loudly as he can: "'HAPPINESS,' he yells, 'FREE, FOR EVERYONE, AND LET NO ONE BE FORGOTTEN!'" (Strugatskys 193).

As the Stalker and his "monstrous" brethren are uncounted – i.e., not accounted for, unaccountable, incalculable – within the order of established knowledges and opinions, they trace a truth-process whose strength is weakness. It is in the final scene of the novel that Schuhart proclaims the part-of-no-part as locus of the truth-event and realizes Badiou's statement that, "only the event allows the subject to be something other than a dead Self" (*Saint Paul* 90).

Tarkovsky's film picks up some time later. He and the Strugatskys change the Golden Sphere into the Room, so that it is no longer a dazzling object that must be approached but a space to be entered. No one in the film does enter it, however. A Stalker is not allowed to do so. All he can do is escort supplicants there. The Room still encapsulates the same inverted form of desire as the Sphere, because it too unfixes conscious desire from its commodity-object and grants instead what the desirer did not know she desired. In this sense, the Room (like the Sphere) has the power to release the supplicant from manufactured, compulsive modes of desire and deliver the opposite. In the film, the Stalker has always already been seized by the event and his companions, Writer and Professor, are always yet-to-be-seized. On the journey through the Zone to get to the Room, Writer and Professor become increasingly aware of the nature of desire offered by the Room, and as they try to decide what it is they consciously or unconsciously wish for, they become ever more apprehensive.

Writer *already has* what Burbridge desired before he even meets the Stalker, which is power, fame, and money. At the meeting point, he is accompanied by a clearly rich and glamorous woman. There is something "repetitive" about her, something excessive, rather than singular, which is demonstrated by his

failure to remember her name. Her fur coat and the luxury sports car in which they arrive provoke a stark contrast to the shabby appearance of the Stalker, the dingy bar where they congregate, and the entry point to the Zone. Furthermore, she is not welcome to join them. When she asks, with champagne glass in hand, "Are you a real stalker?" he answers: "Get lost."

This suggests that Writer is a shallow adventurer, a daring form of cultural tourist. Still a stalker hopes, but cannot know beforehand, if his companions will be seized by the event, or if their journey to the Room will prove only to have been a form of posturing, of interest thinking of itself as disinterested-interest, or of interest pure and simple. This unknowingness, this confusion between mortal and immortal, is largely responsible for producing simulacra. What the Writer seeks in the Zone ends up being no more than the *simulacrum* of art as a truth-event. Yet the possibility always exists that he will be transformed by his immersion there, and that his fidelity to art as an event will overwhelm his fidelity to art as a simulacrum.[7] This is not what happens. Professor, meanwhile, represents the intellectual who positions himself against the irrational realm of fidelity. He aims to destroy the Zone with science – a twenty kiloton bomb, to be precise – and would have done so, we assume, if he had not become convinced that the Zone does not "work" in the way he had expected it to and is therefore no real threat to scientific civilization after all. Professor's reason for pulling out the bomb at its threshold is that the Room may fall into the "wrong" hands. This proves to be a distorted, even paranoid line of reasoning, since, as Stalker assures him, the Room cannot grant one's desire at another's expense. In Badiou's terms, the truth can be known by the extent to which it is addressed to all. Otherwise it is mere simulacrum. Desire is maintained through simulation and simulacra.

Professor tries to project his own cynicism and animal interest onto the Stalker, accusing him of fooling them in some way, of rendering up to them a useless Room for a wasted fee. No one is less deserving of this attack than the Stalker, who has said, "Let them be helpless like children, because weakness is a great thing, and strength is nothing" (*Stalker*). No one looks more sick-at-heart, and no one less interested in (or good at) animal self-preservation than he. His appearance amplifies the sense of weakness – Tarkovsky tied a piece of gauze around his neck to further depict this "infirmity" – and he is at his most sickly looking just outside the Room, his ostensible source of strength. Such contrapuntal imagery will be dramatically repeated in the final scene. At the heart of the Zone, his skin has gone paler; it is covered with a sheen of moisture. He borders on shortness of breath. His eyes are red-rimmed, and his brow furrows as if he might suddenly weep. He instructs his companions on what they should do next, but his language is halting and broken. It is no grand speech. Fittingly, he says, language is not necessary. Only belief. Language, one might say, belongs to opinions. It is language that Writer and Professor demand. Writer asks, "Why do you think that this miracle really exists? Who told you that wishes actually come true here? Have you seen a single man who has been made happy here? Was it Porcupine?" He directs the next question to Professor: "As a matter of fact who told you about the Zone?" He responds, "He did," indicating the Stalker, adding, "Then it makes no sense to me at all. What's the use coming here?" (*Stalker*).

In the novel and film, Schuhart embodies subjective destitution. Yet subjective destitution is repulsive to Writer, who, when Stalker encourages him to enter the Room, responds, "Don't you feel how shameful the whole thing is? Humiliating yourself, sniveling, praying?" (*Stalker*). It is when Stalker asks Professor if he is ready that he reveals the bomb he has smuggled in, saying, "This place will never bring any happiness to anyone." He refers to it as a "plague." Both Writer and Professor turn on Stalker, and neither will enter the Room. In the novel, they are literally tossed asunder and crushed by their "mortal and predatory" interests. In the film, the process will

take a lifetime. They skulk and brood. At the entrance to the Room, Writer declares he will neither enter it, nor "put my neck into the noose, like Porcupine I'd rather drink myself to death in my mansion in peace and quiet" (*Stalker*). It is the expression of the triumph of the service of goods.

Porcupine, too, sought repose in the service of goods, even though, as Stalker says, he was one of the best stalkers there ever was and a kind of mentor to him. Still Stalker suggests that Porcupine finally went to the Zone for a "mercenary" reason. The truth is fragile and the temptation to retreat from it always formidable. As Badiou writes,

> All the material of human multiplicity can be fashioned, linked, by a "consistency" – while at the same time, of course, it opposes to this fashioning the worst kinds of inertia, and exposes the "some-one" to the permanent temptation of giving up, or returning to the mere belonging to the "ordinary" situation, of erasing the effects of the not-known. (*Ethics* 48)

Of Porcupine, Stalker says, "He was my teacher. He opened my eyes. He was called Teacher then, not Porcupine. Then something happened to him, something broke in him" (*Stalker*).

The final words spoken by the Stalker in the Zone reveal his longing to insulate himself from these temptations, to protect his militancy from the fluctuations of language and of opinion, and to avoid the lure of belonging once more to the "ordinary" situation:

> STALKER: How quiet. Do you hear? (sighs). So, perhaps I should leave everything; take my wife, the Little Monkey and move over here. For good. There's no one here. No one can hurt them here. (*Stalker*)

And yet to do so – to live out one's life in the Zone – would be to deny the mortal that one is obliged to remain. Tarkovsky hints throughout the film that it may not be possible to exist permanently in the Zone (though there are rumors of shepherds in the hills). The militant is forced to live with a portion of herself in the mortal world. She can never transcend her animal interests entirely. Neither can she remove herself from opinions or language, however ardently she may wish to ("How quiet. Do you hear?"). Without the persistence of the animal, the immortal (the Subject) cannot exist either. And the temptation to indulge in the reverse is even greater; that is, to deny and to forget the Immortal part of the subjective split:

> What I am then exposed to is the temptation to betray a truth. Betrayal is not mere renunciation. Unfortunately, one cannot simply "renounce" a truth. The denial of the Immortal in myself is something quite different from an abandonment, a cessation: I must always convince myself that the Immortal in question never existed, and thus rally to opinion's perception on this point – opinion, whose whole purpose, in the service of interests, is precisely this negation […] Consequently, I must betray the becoming-subject in myself, I must become the enemy of that truth whose subject the "some-one" that I am (accompanied, perhaps, by others) composed. This explains why former revolutionaries are obliged to declare that they used to be lost in error and madness […] Since the process of truth is an immanent break, you can "leave" it (which is to say, according to Lacan's powerful phrase, return to the "service of goods" [*service des biens*]) only by breaking with this break which has seized you. (Badiou, *Ethics* 80)

There is no way to retreat into the being-for-death again without renouncing the event altogether, by proclaiming that one was in error, that there was no event, that it never existed in the first place. A lapsed militant is like one who engages in a simulacrum. Both must come to deny the event as truth and themselves as Subjects, and this action can only be figured as a betrayal (*Ethics* 80).

Writer and Professor will not relinquish their objectal, automatic path of desire – the "carnal path of death" – and more importantly, they have no wish to do so. This is why the Room is unenterable (impenetrable) when

they reach it. They translate this as no longer wanting to enter, and in accordance with Badiou, they presumably tell themselves as much: *There is nothing worth investigating here after all; there never was. Let us leave.* The Room is nothing; there is no truth-event.

A "good" militant introduces obstacles, so to speak, in order to extend – indeed *to reproduce* – her militancy, since the mantra of the militant need be no more complex than "keep going." Hence, "For the Immortal, if I recognize its existence, calls on me to continue; it has the eternal power of the truths that induce it" (Badiou, *Ethics* 80). The Stalker places the Monkey in this position, since he might betray himself as Subject, but he will not betray the child. To withdraw from the Zone, and to deny the event, would be to deny her, too. The Strugatskys and Tarkovsky make it known that the Zone begets the Monkey, that somehow she is inseparable from it and the Stalker from her. As Tobias Pontara writes of the sonic and visual aspects of Tarkovsky's final coda: "Monkey's poor health as well as her extraordinary powers are in some sense caused by the Zone's radiation and her father's frequent excursions into it" (308). Indeed, he notes the more "subtle relationships pertaining to the image and soundtrack – a connection that would permit us to say that Monkey is actually *like* the Zone or even in some respects can be regarded as *equivalent* to the Zone" (Pontara 308).

Stalker deposits the non-militants where he originally collected them. They are quite pointless now. Then something extraordinary happens. As Stalker reenters the world beyond the barbed wire – the lifeworld outside the Zone – all has become saturated with color. Prior to this scene, only the Zone had appeared in color; the outside world was cast in sepia. We also become aware of Artemyev's score – the soundscape of the Zone – which can now be heard, for the first time, beyond its bounds. Then Knyazhinsky, the cinematographer, includes only the Monkey's face within the frame. He shoots a close-up from her left side, obscuring her body, and panning in sync with her subtle movements. The viewer had been vaguely aware that Monkey's legs were damaged, though one cannot now be certain if she is ambulating herself on her crutches or if, perhaps, the Stalker entered the Room and made a wish after all – that she be restored to physical health, such that now she is walking on her own. Žižek speculates as much when he notes, "When they finally reach the Room, the writer and the scientist fail to pronounce their wishes because of a lack of faith, while the Stalker himself seems to get an answer to his wish that his daughter get better" ("Inner Space" 226). Yet Tarkovsky stresses the fact that Stalkers themselves do not make wishes, and it is more fitting that Stalker should bend the world to fit Monkey rather than bend Monkey to fit the world.

The brown lace cloth wrapped around her head is reminiscent of religious modesty, the struggle for warmth in the frigid winter, and the bandages of convalescence. As the camera pulls back, it becomes clear that Stalker is carrying her on his shoulders. The fabric shrouds and obscures his own upper body, too, and makes the two of them appear to be one lumbering entity. Color, score, and image correlate to suggest that this time, Stalker brings the Zone back with him. *This*, we may conjecture, would have been his wish, if indeed he were allowed one: that the Zone exceed its own bounds and reach what is outside of itself, so that all which is not-Zone is becoming-Zone.

The third section of the coda is a return to the house – sepia again – where Stalker collapses in dejection and exhaustion. Guta, his wife, ministers to him. There is anguish involved in having been surrounded by the living, almost belligerent, examples of beings-for-death, that is, the Writer and Professor. Despite the only efforts he knows how to make – i.e., personally delivering them to the Room – they remain unmoved, ensconced in their animal interests, and smugly so. His despair comes from not having succeeded in "converting" them. As we have seen, the truth is not communicable in the same

manner as opinions are communicable, even though the former must draw upon the same common language – there is no other – and yet Badiou is insistent that this does not mean therefore that truth can obtain in a purely private realm of "unutterable utterances" (*Saint Paul* 51). The idea of bearing the "silent and mystical intimacy" of things only "experienced by the subject who has been visited by a miracle" is entirely contrary to the philosophy of the event (*Saint Paul* 51). Stalker, in neither book nor film, could have nursed an "inner" faith while carrying on outwardly as any other (non-faithful) inhabitant of Harmont. Rather, militancy must be

> accomplished in weakness, for therein lies its strength. It shall be neither logos, nor sign, nor ravishment by the unutterable. It shall have the rude harshness of public action, of naked declaration, without apparel other than that of its real content. (*Saint Paul* 54)

To negate any inkling of privacy, of "private conviction," Tarkovsky gives the Stalker an outward mark of the Zone. The physical mark of the process – of this sustained, bodily tribulation – is a patch of white hair on the left side of his head. Being skewbald is the Zone's impression on his person. The actor who played Stalker, Aleksandr Kaidanovsky, had the idea for this particular visual marker, which the make-up artist constantly reapplied with hydrogen peroxide as a form of impetigo, "the stamp of the Zone" (Tsymbal 271).

The Stalker does not return to his home "triumphant." In fact, he falls to the floor, echoing his wife's earlier collapse when she realizes at the beginning of the film that he is returning to the Zone. It is as though the animal body is hardly up to what is asked of it. (There are several scenes of the characters lying supine in the Zone as well.) And, of course, it is not up to it – it is *mortal*, but called upon to be immortal, or at the very least, in Badiou's words, to allow the course of immortality, the "moment of eternity," to pass through it. To demand of the mortal body that it carry the weight of an event is a tall order. This is another sense in which an event can scarcely be borne by one – there is no private conviction – but must be dispersed amongst the bodies of others. Stalker's fidelity is social(-ized) and distributed. It extends to Guta, first of all, who is a militant for the event in her own way.

In the fourth section of the coda, she breaks the fourth wall. Arguably the truth-process of love is what strengthens and enables all the other truth-events; perhaps this is why love is the only truth-event that is usually expressed as a *coupling* rather than a singular pursuit. Love is the one process that is always in the service of another. Its nature is definitionally selfless, that is, other-directed, and therefore self-effacing. It is manifested in attention to another. Love sutures Guta to Stalker and thereby to the Zone. To the camera, she tells of her love in its infancy:

> You know, my mother was against it. You've probably noticed already that he's not of this world. All our neighborhood laughed at him […] My mother used to say: "He's a stalker, he's doomed, he's an eternal prisoner! Don't you know what kind of children the stalkers have?" And I didn't even argue with her. I knew it all myself, that he was doomed, that he was an eternal prisoner, and about the children. (*Stalker*)

She arises, walks closer to the camera, sits in the windowsill and says, "But then he approached me and said: 'Come with me.' And I did, and never regretted it. Never" (*Stalker*). This too must be understood as an expression of the event, as within the language of opinions (embodied by the voice of her Mother), the union makes no sense. *The child will be disabled, your husband a prisoner, etc.* In the novel, Guta's mother urges her to abort the child and abandon the man. The scene that ends part one of the book is an emotive and playful interchange between the pregnant couple who cohere around fidelity to an event of love. Badiou includes love as a truth-process, because "the lovers as such enter into the composition of one loving subject, who exceeds them both" (*Ethics* 43).

All of the behaviors just described are minimally "miraculous." Yet what can be said to

constitute a "miracle" for Badiou and Tarkovsky? For the latter, it is important that the miraculous, which is to say the Zone, have no determinate origin, that it cannot be pinned down to an exogenous force – extraterrestrial, theistic, or otherwise. This is the case for Badiou as well, in that the truth is *always immanent*. An event does not come from without. Rather it is composed of the elements of the situation, even though those may appear to behave in incomprehensible ways – ways seemingly foreign to it. In Tarkovsky's film, the Zone is not necessarily "alien" in the sense of "science fiction," but of being *unreadable* from the point-of-view of opinion and pre-constituted knowledge. Badiou's event is alien, too, because it is both unforeseeable and inexplicable from within the usual discursive networks and their cues. He writes,

> Essentially, a truth is the material course traced, within the situation, by the evental supplementation. It is thus an *immanent break*. "Immanent" because a truth proceeds in the situation, and nowhere else – there is no heaven of truths. "Break" because what enables the truth-process – the event – meant nothing according to the prevailing language and established knowledge of the situation. (Badiou, *Ethics* 42)

One can appreciate how the trope of an alien visitation as a stand-in for the event is fitting in terms of a radical break, a severance from the normal run of things. Yet one can also understand its limits. Badiou (and Tarkovsky) resist the reliance on an otherworldly entity to "deposit" the event from elsewhere or initiate some sort of Coming. Badiou is an atheist. To see the event as a Coming – as somehow *God* – necessarily entails the telos of an individual's redemption (i.e., judgment) in relation to this God. Such a dynamic cannot be separated from the impulses of animal interest, inasmuch as "I" am an "I" who hopes to be saved or redeemed. To see the event as immanent, by contrast – that is, as the *not-God* – is to embrace disinterested-interest and even to stand in opposition to notions of individual redemption and interest. The Stalker is ever aware that he may not survive (in) the Zone. He is equally confident that a certain continuation of fidelity is assured through the persons of others – through Monkey, through Guta, through the stalkers-to-come, and finally, through the Zone itself. This is all, finally, that Immortality can mean. Such immanent (and not transcendental) Immortality in itself presents us with a "miracle." Miraculous, not because an alien or a Messiah, but miraculous in the sense of rare and unintelligible from the perspective of opinion. For what else is a mortal animal that would relinquish its own perseverance-in-being (that is, its being-for-death) in the service of a truth-event, in the service of another, indeed, in the service of the "absolute Other," if not a miracle?

Jameson faults Tarkovsky for removing those generic elements from *Roadside Picnic* that would have identified *Stalker* as science fiction, such as the identifiably alien origin of the Zone. Despite Jameson's belief in the science-fiction purism of the Strugatskys, it is *they* who propose the omission of overt, extraterrestrial causes. Tarkovsky was long committed to a certain "time loop" sequence, for instance, one that the brothers finally convinced him was not worthy of the film, as it was little more than a technical stunt. Presumably he insisted on keeping a few Zonal eccentricities, such as the flying bird that disappears abruptly from the frame. Tarkovsky agreed to leave out the bulk of these, however, and with time, as Boris Strugatsky writes,

> He liked our general idea that there was to be as little as possible of the "fantastic" in the Zone, only a permanent expectation of something supernatural, a maximum of suspense fueled by this expectation, and […] nothing more. Green plants, wind, water. (B. Strugatsky 419–20)

In fact, the "fantastic" reaches its pinnacle outside of the Zone, not within it.

Of this final scene, Tobias Pontara points out that "the Zone, like the Stalker's daughter, is pervaded by a profound silence […]" (308).

And of the earlier entry to the Zone, he notes that the first thing the visitors comment upon is the "immense silence that pervades the place" (308). A Stalker's dilemma is most apparent when he must work through a language that is always already fractured by its communicability, which is to say, its emergence in opinions. In this way, the Stalker, too, assumes a stance of relative muteness. In fact, "the ethic of truths compels so considerable a distance from opinions that it must be called literally *a-social*" (Badiou, *Ethics* 54). Yet this "a-sociality" is also a kind of figurative muteness, an empathic muteness, which is not unlike that experienced by Monkey and Stalker's risen father in the novel, who do not speak so much as cry out, ululate, and otherwise commune in post-linguistic vocalizations. The "supernatural" elements in these texts are less about literal aliens than about the a-social, unnameable aspects of truth against opinion. The dead one rises, the child mutates, and the parents heed the sound as they cry across the house to each other in the night. Tarkovsky's iteration of this idea of the supernatural or the miraculous is, rather famously, the image of the child who transfers drinking glasses across the table without touching them.

Miracles may be those things that do not have language, or that continually resist language, which is to say, that which is not inscribed in "what there is." This is different from silence. In the final scene, what Pontara calls silence is in fact not the absence of sound but only of spontaneous human language. As Beckett writes, "Only the words break the silence, all other sounds have ceased. If I were silent I'd hear nothing. But if I were silent the other sounds would start again, those to which the words have made me deaf" (qtd in Smith 50). When we encounter the Monkey at the table, sounds such as birdsong are clearly audible. On a voice-over, she speaks, but it is to recite a simple love poem, presumably from the book we see her examining. Poetry is its own kind of miracle when we consider the chirruping and squawking out of which language comes. Silence, birdsong, and poetry all remain outside the realm of opinions, which Pontara calls "civilization." He notes,

> The transfiguration in the last scene places the Stalker's daughter firmly outside of civilization; her relation to the sonic icons of that civilization expresses in a radical way the possibility of overcoming and perhaps even negating that civilization. (Pontara 314)

These sonic icons to which he alludes include a foghorn, a jet whistle, and a running train, each of them hyper-symbols of commercial modernity or capitalism, whereas in the Zone proper, the landscape has been subsumed from the modern into the organic, so overrun is it "with grass, lichen, and other signifiers of the natural world" (Riley 22). It becomes possible to say that this "visual landscape represents a natural world that industrialization is incapable of industrializing, a landscape that modernization can no longer modernize" (22). The Monkey and her environs, the color that has bled over and replaced the sepia tones surrounding her, and her unfathomable power, all point to the idea that the Zone has exceeded itself and spread beyond its spatial confines.

When Monkey appears in the final scene, she is still swathed in her brown lace shawl, which covers her hair and spills down her shoulders. She lays her head down on the table, and as it begins to rumble with the vibrations of the passing train, she "moves" the jars across it toward the camera. Telekinesis would appear to be the miracle that has marked her as a result of her proximity to the Zone and the parentage of a Stalker. To what does this miracle attest? It is as attributable to an excess of radiation as it is to a glorious anointing. Has she been harmed, or has she been chosen? Both are hinted at. Yet the miracle's only function is in affirmation of itself. It "proves" nothing. It does not demonstrate that the child has been made "well" or "beautiful" or "holy" or even ambulatory as "miracles" are surely meant to and as the Zone is purportedly wont to do (insofar as it grants wishes). As miracles go – that is, as happenings that violate

the "laws of nature" – it exalts no one and glorifies nothing.

She lays her head down on the table. Glasses are made to slide across. The first jar half-filled with tea unnerves the dog, who having accompanied the Stalker from the Zone, whimpers plaintively offscreen. The tall thin glass looks fragile; it falls to the floor, though it does not even shatter. The third glass contains an eggshell and other bits of rubbish. With her head still on the table, her frail body is jostled by the violent tremors of the passing train. Tufts of white seedlings drift through the air like cottonwood fluff, though the child is sitting indoors. She has performed these miracles without ceremony. We hear the strains of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" combine with the rattling of the train. It is the vocal section of the Schiller poem, the entrance of the full chorus (Pontara 305) that sings – "*Alle Menschen werden Brüder […]*" – and this, too, combines human language with precision and meter in a way that is rapturous and outside of opinion. There is a disjunct between the celebratory swell of Beethoven's symphony and the "de-formed" female child. What should be made of the use of this grandiose music "which stands in a contrapuntal relation to the visual image of the Stalker's daughter?" (Pontara 305). Our answer to Pontara's question would be that Tarkovsky aligns music and image here to assert that the miracle is never what is due.

In his concluding vision, it is the enfeebled child who surpasses even her father's devotion to the Zone. So expansive is his fidelity to the event that it extends beyond his own body and literally engenders another. She did not convert or "choose" to be thus but simply is. To become a Subject to the event was for the Monkey a birthright, understood in advance ("Don't you know what kind of children the stalkers have?"). This presents a special kind of militancy – without it, she (and Stalker and Guta) would not exist. Though the film is called *Stalker*, Tarkovsky ends not with images of the protagonist but of his offspring. It will not be the able-bodied man who carries on, he seems to say, but the "crippled" girl child, who here signifies the triumph of the least, the part-of-no-part. The child embodies the miracle of the Stalker, which is to remain an animal, mortal and predatory, who nevertheless exceeds her own interests in favor of the part-of-no-part.

Badiou argues that this was Nietzsche's great misunderstanding in regard to Paul the militant. Nietzsche believed that Paul hated life and exalted death, which Badiou insists is a misreading. To reject the being-for-death is to reside in joy. Joy is plentiful, unstinting, hence the use of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy," which has also been called the Marseillaise of Mankind and the official "gospel of a classless world" (Buch qtd in Pontara 309). The miracle of "subjective destitution" need not be ascetic. Badiou writes: "Is there renunciation when a truth seizes me? Certainly not, since the seizure manifests itself by unequalled intensities of existence" (*Ethics* 53).

The Stalker lies exhausted in the next room, Guta is on the verge of tears, but the child reposes *in color*.

There is no "assignable" reason for an event (Badiou, *Saint Paul* 77). It exists in perfect "gratuitousness" (76). This is another definition of "miracle": it is that which happens for no discernable reason. For Badiou, it is not that the reason is hidden, but that there is no reason at all. In this way – and he implies, *only* in this way – is the event truly addressed to all. "Grace," he says, or fidelity to the truth-event, "is the opposite of law insofar as it is what comes *without being due*" (77). We are quite used to being faced with a capitalist discourse of duty, rights, and being given what is due. What one has earned and is thus entitled to is what comprises one's desires and desserts. Yet Badiou writes,

> *That which founds a subject* [of fidelity] *cannot be what is due to it* […] The polemic against "what is due," against the logic of right and duty, lies at the heart of the Pauline refusal of works and law: "To one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a grace but as his due" (Rom. 4.4). But for Paul, nothing is due. The salvation of the subject cannot take the form of a

> reward or wage. The subjectivity of faith is unwaged (which, in the final analysis, entitles us to call it communist). It pertains to the granting of a gift, *kharisma*. (*Saint Paul* 77)

Tarkovsky gives no explanation for the Monkey or for the Zone because both are *kharisma*, gifts. Indeed, he says, "The Zone doesn't symbolize anything" (qtd in Smith 46). Miracles are also *unwaged gifts*. To transcend desire and serve the least – these are as close to nonmortal as possible. Tarkovsky's Room at the heart of the Zone shows us that the ultimate desire is to be free from desire, and that the content of the miracle is non-functional, gratuitous, unwaged. The thrust of Badiou's work is to tell us that this is not nothing. It is the triumph of the (otherwise despicable) human animal over death, over its own being-for-death. It is neither nihilistic nor ascetic. In fact, it allows us to ask alongside Paul, almost breathlessly and "with a sort of savage joy: 'O death, where is thy victory?'"[8]

disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

notes

1 A Frenchman extolling the virtues of universalism may give us pause, if only because it recalls the "*mission civilisatrice*." Indeed, Badiou has been criticized for refusing to accept cultural difference as a site of political transformation. His hostility toward "capitalo-parliamentarianism" is well established. In the interview appended to the *Ethics*, Peter Hallward asks Badiou directly how he will take account of the fact that where persons are oppressed, they are oppressed "*as* women, *as* black," and so on. In response, Badiou asks what is meant by "woman" or "black." We know, for instance, what is meant by "French" when it is used by Le Pen. Any meaning ascribed to a particularity must be, he insists, "intelligible to all." If it is not, then it cannot properly be called political. Rather he writes,

> I would call "political" something that – in the categories, the slogans, the statements it puts forward – is less the demand of a social fraction or community to be integrated into the existing order than something which touches on a transformation of that order as a whole. (Badiou, *Ethics* 109)

An identarian politics may lead to something more transformative, but on its own, it is a form of "syndicalism," a "demand that one's particularity be valued in the existing state of things" (109). Whereas this is important, Badiou explains, it is not within the realm of a radical overhaul of the system itself.

2 Commonly Žižek maintains a distinction between desire and drive. The shift from desire to drive is the movement from "goal-oriented activity into an end-in-itself" – for instance, the gap between a desire such as hunger in relation to the oral drive. The goal may be to "eliminate hunger, but its aim is the satisfaction provided by the activity of eating itself (sucking, swallowing)." He gives the example of an invalid infused with nutrients through a hospital feeding tube who nonetheless misses the experience of eating, so that despite being "full," the oral drive remains unassuaged. The reverse is also true: when "a small child sucks rhythmically on the comforter, the only satisfaction he gets is one of the drive" (Žižek, *Living in the End Times* 73). It is this loss (of oral enjoyment in the first case and nutritional benefit in the second) that becomes the locus of a fixation. It is in this constant non-identity – nourishment without orality, oral succor without sustenance – that the drive becomes "stuck," out of sync with itself. This gap "'eternalizes' the drive, turning it into the endlessly repetitive circular movement […]" (73). In the case of the child Schuhart, the buttons deliver some aspects of candy: the sensation of sucking, the proximity of the mother, if only through her garment, but the dopamine rush of sugar is always lacking.

3 Jodi Dean writes,

> Desire and drive designate relations to *jouissance*, ways that the subject structures her enjoyment. Desire is always a desire to desire, a desire that can never be filled, a desire for a *jouissance* or enjoyment that can never be attained. In contrast, drive attains *jouissance* in the repetitive process

> of not reaching it. Enjoyment comes from the process itself, not from fulfilling an ultimate goal. (3)

The problem with Dean's account is that she presumes a subject that preexists the snares of desire/drive, one who risks becoming "captured" by drive.

4 Lacan attributes the circular movement of desire to the death drive, or simply "drive." Even though, as Žižek notes, Badiou derives much from Lacan, there is a significant parting of ways here. For Lacan, there is no way to "escape" drive or desire. Though he does theorize a "beyond the Law," this can only be a negational turn, a certain "clearing of the ground" (a Void) for what will, in effect, be filled by a different Master-Signifier. Žižek criticizes Badiou, therefore, because the latter conceptualizes the Truth-Event in terms of a "New Beginning." Though Žižek invokes "subjective destitution" to describe Schuhart's response at the Golden Sphere – as might Lacan – he departs from Badiou in that he would not characterize this seizure by a Truth-Event in terms of this "New Beginning."

5 Badiou is drawing less on Lacanian drive than alluding to Foucault on the "repressive hypothesis." In his *History of Sexuality*, it is the mechanisms of repression which cause not so much censorship and proscription as explosive proliferation:

> But more important was the multiplication of discourses concerning sex in the field of exercise of power itself: an institutional incitement to speak about it, and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause *it* to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail. (Foucault 18)

6 Another difference between Badiou and Lacan asserts itself here in regard to the matter of the subject, as Žižek explains:

> Badiou's main point is that the subject should not be identified with the constitutive Void of the structure, since such an identification already ontologizes the subject, though in a purely negative way, turning the subject into an entity that is consubstantial with the structure and thus belongs to the order of the necessary and a priori ("no structure without a subject"). To this Lacanian ontologization of the subject, Badiou opposes its "rarity" – the local-contingent-fragile-transient emergence of subjectivity […] Lacan, however, introduces a distinction between the subject and the gesture of subjectivization (or what Badiou describes as the process of subjectivization, in which the subject's engagement with and fidelity to the Event occurs, versus subject as the negative gesture of breaking out of the constraints of Being that opens up the possibility of subjectivization). The subject prior to subjectivization is the pure negativity of death drive prior to its reversal into identification with some new Master-Signifier. ("Psychoanalysis in Post-Marxism" 253)

7 This is important for Badiou, because there are various venues through which to reach the truth. Both art (Writer) and science (Professor) can be such venues, along with politics (Stalker) and love (Guta, Stalker's wife). Of the four categories of truth-process, each is represented in Tarkovsky's film.

8 Qtd in Badiou, *Saint Paul* 71.

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