

H-France Review Vol. 14 (September 2014), No. 143

Tzuchien Tho and Giuseppe Bianco, eds. and trans., *Badiou and the Philosophers: Interrogating 1960s French Philosophy*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 1 + 165 pp. Appendices and index. \$29.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1441195210.

Review by Tamara Chaplin, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

The French philosopher Alain Badiou should be understood, if we are to believe Tzuchien Tho and Giuseppe Bianco's new book, as "the allegorical representative for a whole generation" of philosophers--the generation that would rise to prominence in France following the radical socio-political upheaval that characterized the student revolutions of 1968 (p. xii). Their introduction to *Badiou and the Philosophers: Interrogating 1960s French Philosophy*--above all a book of English translations of the transcripts from nine of fifty-nine educational programs on philosophy produced for national broadcast in France by Radio-Télévision Scolaire between 1964 and 1970 under the title "Les temps des philosophes"--also situates itself as an intervention in the history of French philosophical thought, one that traces the shift from French "philosophy" to French "theory." [1] Interestingly, Tho and Bianco offer Badiou as illustrative of a *conservative* trend in this trajectory, one invested in the preservation of the past via French pedagogy, the national curriculum, and "the *École Normale Supérieure* as philosophical institution" (p. xii). Key here is the resurrection of Jean-Paul Sartre as a constant intellectual referent both for Badiou and, the authors seem to suggest, for postwar '68 philosophy at large.

The book is prefaced by an "Editors' and Translator's [sic] Introduction," followed by nine chapters each featuring one of nine program transcriptions. [2] As Tho and Bianco remark in their acknowledgments, French versions of seven of these--interviews between Alain Badiou and, successively, Jean Hyppolite ("Philosophy and its History"), Georges Canguilhem ("Philosophy and Science"), Raymond Aron ("Philosophy and Sociology"), Michel Foucault ("Philosophy and Psychology"), and Paul Ricoeur ("Philosophy and Language"), as well as two additional shows, "Philosophy and Truth" and "Teaching Philosophy through Television," (group discussions between Badiou, Canguilhem, Foucault, Hyppolite, Ricoeur, Dina Dreyfus and, in the latter show, Aron)-- were all previously published in the journal *Cahiers Philosophiques*, Hors Série (June 1993). A two-part appendix containing short biographies of the participants, as well as a translation of Badiou's 1993 reflection on these historic broadcasts, "The Critical Value of Images," (previously published in French in volume 55 of the *Cahiers*--also in June 1993) concludes the present volume. Since the majority of this work already exists in French, the principal value of Tho and Bianco's book is that it brings English translations of these previously edited texts, along with the transcriptions of two hitherto unavailable broadcasts (on "Philosophy and Ethics," with Michel Henry and on "Model and Structure," with Michel Serres), to an Anglo-American audience for the first time.

Beyond rendering these materials accessible in English, Tho and Bianco also provide via their introductory essay a brief biography of Alain Badiou, who--though now considered an intellectual giant in philosophical circles--remains less well-known outside of France than are the scions of French theory. In testament to his status (as Alan D. Schrift notes in his recent review of Badiou's *The Adventure of French Philosophy*), some twenty-five English translations of Badiou's work have appeared since 1999.

Indeed, Schrift reminds us, that “A general consensus has emerged [among philosophers] that following the passing of Foucault, Deleuze and Derrida, Alain Badiou remains, in the words of Slavoj Žižek...the one final ‘figure like Plato or Hegel [who] walks here among us!’”[3]

The introductory essay in *Badiou and the Philosophers* offers us the essential elements of Badiou’s intellectual itinerary. Born in Rabat (Morocco) in 1937, relocated to the *métropole* during the war, and son to Raymond Badiou (once socialist mayor of Toulouse), Alain Badiou was trained in philosophy at France’s *École Normale Supérieure*. A disciple of Sartre, Badiou became politically active in the 1950s during the debacle over Algerian independence, and like Sartre, he supported the latter and opposed the French colonial system. During the 1950s and early 1960s, Badiou was influenced by the work of Gilles-Gaston Granger, Jules Vuillemin, Roger Martin and Claude Lévi-Strauss on analytic philosophy, the formal sciences, mathematics and structuralism, as well as by literary experiments (such as those on the “new novel” visible in the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet and on constraint and permutation explored at *OuLiPo*, *L’Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, the Workshop of Potential Literature).

By 1963, Badiou was teaching high school in Reims and working on a literary trilogy, the first volume of which, *Almagestes*, brought an invitation to appear on France’s premier television book show, *Lectures pour tous*, on April 22, 1964. In the same year—when Badiou was only 27—Dina Dreyfus (who was then Inspector General for Philosophy for the Academy of Paris, the ex-wife of Claude Lévi-Strauss and the producer of the broadcasts) invited him to be the “Socratic interlocutor” for “Les temps des philosophes.” Filmed, as I discuss in my own book, in black and white under the direction of Jean Fléchet, lasting about half an hour each, and intended for viewing within high school classrooms, these shows were open-circuit programs that could also be watched by the French public.[4] Over the next five years, Badiou interviewed a stunning ensemble of France’s greatest living philosophers for these broadcasts. Meanwhile, his own intellectual work continued apace. Indeed, by 1969, informed by his growing interest in mathematics, logic and Lacanian analysis, Badiou produced his first philosophical monograph, *Le concept du modèle* (*Concept of Model*).

Tho and Bianco assert that by the late 1960s, Badiou had become *the* transitional figure in the history of contemporary French philosophy. Why? Because while he had rejected the “hegemonic” model of the philosopher as embodied by Sartre and Bergson and become a “politically engaged *theorist*” (the emphasis is theirs) à la Althusser (another key influence), unlike many of his cohort he also evolved into a critic of both analytic and postmodern thought (p. xxxii). Tho and Bianco trace the seeds of three moments of Badiou’s mature work to the television broadcasts whose translated transcripts they provide: 1) Badiou’s stance that science, love, art and politics are the “productive and constructive sources of truth”; 2) his “eventual theory of truth as both localization and eternity”; and 3) his “skepticism of philosophical discourse about universal or general ethics” (pp. xxxiii-xxxvii). While shying away from overarching assertions that would read Badiou’s participation in “Les temps des philosophes” as determinate either for Badiou’s own intellectual trajectory or for the history of French philosophy at large, Tho and Bianco clearly want to suggest that these broadcasts were nevertheless of vital significance to both. While there is no doubt that their claims have some inherent interest, it is my sense that their focus on Badiou blinds them to the central philosophical and socio-cultural importance of the broadcasts in which he appears: the series survives as one of the most sophisticated and radical efforts ever made to marry philosophy and television.

To this end, and given that *Badiou and the Philosophers* provides a translation of the majority—but significantly not all—of the 1993 two-part coverage in the *Cahiers philosophiques* on “Les temps des philosophes,” it is interesting to note which essays from the original publications were omitted. There is no discussion of director Jean Fléchet’s brilliant reflections on the challenges of representing thought, nor of Camille Pernot’s incisive argument about the synthetic unity of voice and embodiment, nor of Pierre Trotignan’s observations about television’s capacity to produce “properly philosophical objects.” Nor is there substantive engagement with Dina Dreyfus’ own extensive examination of the challenges

and possibilities of televising philosophy.[5] Not only do the translations of these texts not exist in Tho and Bianco's book, there is no mention of their critical absence in the body of their introductory essay. I call this absence critical because, while it is true that *Badiou and the Philosophers* is a book about Alain Badiou and Badiou is admittedly not present in the omitted material, *Badiou and the Philosophers* is also a book about the television programs called "Les temps des philosophes"—and hence, it should also be a book about the *televising* of philosophy. Barring Tho and Bianco's translation of Badiou's own short reflection on the topic and their inclusion of the transcript of "Teaching Philosophy through Television," it is the question "how does one televise the mind?" that is the main preoccupation of the material they pass over.

And this leads me to my central criticism, which is, I suggest, a problem of translation. In "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin famously insists that, "a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language." [6] Thus, according to Benjamin, a good translation should have some memory of its original language. In this particular instance, I argue that "the language of the original" is not only French but it is also—and importantly—audiovisual.

My complaint, to be precise, is that in basing the majority of their book on the French transcripts provided in the 1993 *Cahiers philosophiques*, Tho and Bianco have unwittingly utilized materials that were themselves failed attempts at translation. It is like giving the words to an opera without playing any music. Neither the original French transcripts nor Tho and Bianco's English renditions of the same contain any effort to render the explicitly *audiovisual* aspects of "Les temps des philosophes" present for their readers. Both versions ignore the *mise-en-scène* (not to mention the "mise-en-image") that in my own work I insist is essential to our understanding of the televising of philosophy. [7] The shame is that when they took on this project, Tho and Bianco had a unique opportunity to provide additional descriptive information (audio and visual, describing action, sound, sets, et cetera) to the extant French transcripts in order to more fully communicate the contents of these shows. When they fail to provide this information, they also lose the opportunity to analyse its presence.

Thus, to take just two examples, what does it mean that in "Scene I" of "Philosophy and Truth" the conversation between Jean Hyppolite and Georges Canguilhem takes place in a taxi weaving its way through the streets of Paris (pp. 81-82)? Or in "Scene II" from "Philosophy and Language" that, after Michel Foucault and Paul Ricoeur finish discussing the relationship between philosophy and language (as they cross a hallway, mount stairs and enter a classroom), we cut to an image of Hyppolite and Canguilhem exiting their taxi and entering the same building (pp. 82-84)? To presume that this information—information that conveys to the reader what was actually happening in the films themselves—is extraneous is to completely ignore how and why these broadcasts were explicitly conceptualized *as* broadcasts. [8] In so doing, Tho and Bianco also ignore the questions that were at the heart of Badiou's own engagement with this project: in his words, "what does the body in its manifest presence bring to philosophical signification? What could be the privilege of an effectively incarnated speech?" [9]

In closing, I will simply note my surprise not to see my own 2007 monograph, *Turning On the Mind: French Philosophers On Television* (the only book-length publication in English or French to treat this subject and these broadcasts), referred to in their work. [10] Nevertheless, in providing skeletal versions of these important broadcast transcripts to English readers for the first time, and in bringing attention to Alain Badiou's critical place in the history of contemporary French philosophy, Tho and Bianco have performed a welcome service. There is little doubt that *Badiou and the Philosophers: Interrogating 1960s French Philosophy* will be of interest to a wide range of scholars of philosophy, media, and the history of contemporary France.

NOTES

[1] The original French transcripts from “Les temps des philosophes” appear in a special edition of the *Cahiers Philosophiques*, Hors Série (June 1993). The shows were also discussed at length in volume 55 of the June 1993 edition of the journal. For a complete list of these broadcasts, see J. Beaujean, et.al, “Inventaire des émissions de philosophie produites et diffusées par la Radio-Télévision Scolaire...” in the latter edition, *Cahiers Philosophiques*, 55(June 1993): 143-149.

[2] English translations are by Tzuchien Tho. Both Tho and Giuseppe Bianco penned the introduction.

[3] Alan D. Schrift, “The Adventure of French Philosophy,” in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews, An Electronic Journal*, 2013.01.08, <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/36677-the-adventure-of-french-philosophy-2/>, accessed January 23, 2014.

[4] See Chaplin, *Turning On the Mind: French Philosophers on Television* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2007), especially chapter three, “From Educational Television to Cultural Spectacle, 1964-1974” (pp. 87-129); and Tamara Chaplin Matheson, “Embodying the Mind, Producing the Nation: Philosophy on French Television” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67/2(April 2006): 315-341.

[5] See Jean Fléchet, “Réflexions sur les émissions de philosophie”; Camille Pernot, “Télévision et parole radiodiffusée”; Pierre Trotignan, “La réflexion philosophique et l’image télévisée”; and Dina Dreyfus, “L’enseignement de la philosophie et la télévision (présentation des émissions, décembre 1964),” *Cahiers Philosophiques* 55(June 1993): 83-141.

[6] Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet, eds., *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 79.

[7] See Chaplin, *Turning On the Mind*, especially, “Introduction: Televising Philosophy in Postwar France” (pp. 1-16), and “Conclusion: Philosophical TV in the 1990s” (pp. 226-239).

[8] For an analysis of this sequence that takes the audiovisual aspect of the source into account, see Chaplin, *Turning On the Mind*, pp. 106-111.

[9] Badiou, “The Critical Value of Images,” Appendix B in Tho and Bianco, eds., *Badiou and the Philosophers*, p. 160.

[10] Tho and Bianco do minimally cite my 2006 article, “Embodying the Mind, Producing the Nation” published under my previous name, Tamara Chaplin Matheson (*Journal of the History of Ideas* 67/2[2006]: 315-341).

Tamara Chaplin
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
tchaplin@illinois.edu

Copyright © 2014 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical

Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172