The Defining Moment: A Response[1]

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Defining moments, like events are defined in and through the activity of thought and interpretation. In this respect, the theme for this year's Humanities Postgraduate Connection conference at the University of Southampton both complements and complicates theories of the event. In *Being and Event*, the French philosopher Alain Badiou defines the event as that unforeseen happening that escapes thought. The event marks a definitive break in a situation, and heralds a new phase in history. For Badiou, examples of events include the French revolution, the Paris commune, the Russian Revolution of 1917, or the political events in Paris of May 1968. Crucially for Badiou, an event is defined by its relevance, and its relevance must 'be thought within the context of our present-day situatedness'. As Antonio Calcagno explains: 'If there is no present-day relevance, then the event of May 1968 falls into the factuality of nature or history. The event merely becomes an historical fact that scholars can debate and clarify.'[2]

There are of course problems with the way in which Badiou frames the political event, chief among which is the question of who gets to define a relevant event, and from what situation. Are the events of 11 September, 2001 in the United States more or less relevant than the events of 11 September, 1973 in Chile? And is the French revolution more or less relevant than the revolution in Haiti? Relevance, in other words, would seem to depend on the historical and geopolitical situation in which it is framed. The papers by Roger Hansford, Emilie Sibbesson, and Dan Varndell address such problems in quite different ways. For Hansford, the cultural fusion of Chinese and western musical traditions in the digital recording of Lily Yuan performing *The Rain Falls on the Leaves of the Banana Tree* is a defining moment in cultural hybridity for the post-modern, post-colonial musicologist. Sibbesson's archaeological research into the transition from foraging to farming questions some of the prevalent assumptions in contemporary debates about anthropogenic climate change, which hold that the transition to agriculture in early human societies is the origin of what some scientists and historians have called the anthropocene. Against contemporary demands for archaeologists to pass judgement on the transition to farming, Sibbesson suggests that academic freedom is crucial to the archaeologist's assessment of the past. Varndell's approach to the defining moment addressed the technological reproducibility of the artwork in his Lacanian reading of the significance of Hollywood re-makes such as *The Vanishing* (Sluizer, 1993) and *Psycho* (Van Sant, 1998) for conceptions of time and subjectivity. Varndell's suggestion that the remake troubles the historicity of any single, defining moment parallels what Freud called the temporal structure of trauma as deferred action (*nachtraglichkeit*), in which the subject of trauma assumes the traumatic event to have happened in the past, even though the cognition of that trauma only becomes clear to that subject in the future after several psychoanalytic sessions.

The traumatic experience of the event as a defining moment is also crucial to much scholarship in Holocaust studies and postcolonial studies, as the papers by Jaime Ashworth, Diana Popescu, and Denise Greenfield make clear. For Ashworth in 'After Auschwitz', the physical sites of memory for commemorating the Shoah raise important epistemological and ethical questions about the historiographic value of these sites for comprehending the conditions of life and death in the Nazi death camps. Popescu approaches such questions in a different way in her paper on the 2003 exhibition, *Wonder Years: New Reflections on Nazism and the Shoah*, at the Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst (NGBK) in Berlin. This exhibition of work by contemporary Israeli artists included art works that were critical of the commemoration and commodification of the Holocaust, and also used strategies of irony and humour to confront the 'unrepresentable' trauma of the past. Such strategies are exemplified in Boaz Arad's engagement with the voice and image of Hitler, as Popescu explains in her analysis of the exhibition. For Greenfield, the trauma of the history of slavery in the United States and apartheid in South Africa raises questions about the temporality of trauma, and the impossibility of defining a coherent narrative, which makes sense of a present that is continually haunted by a past that cannot be understood in straightforward terms. Through readings of Toni Morrison, Achmat Dangor and J.M. Coetzee, Greenfield considers how the female body is a site that resists the inscriptions of patriarchal nationalism.

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[1] Stephen makes references to two conference papers that are not included in the journal: Dan Varndell's *Alien Interspecies Rape: Lacanian Jouissance in the Trans-national Hollywood Remake* and Emilie Sibbesson's *The Dawn of Civilisation or the Worst Mistake in History?* – ed.

[2] A. Calcagno, *Badiou and Derrida: Politics, Events and their Time* (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 85.

The question of what constitutes a relevant or meaningful political event is pressed further by Jude Jones's archaeology of the English parish church in post-Reformation Sussex and Hampshire, an approach that complicates historical assumptions about the fate of the Catholic Church in Reformation England. Through close readings of the sites and spaces of the rural parish church, Jones pieces together a rich and complex micro-history of the negotiations between recusant Catholic families and state Protestantism. Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature* (1977) has argued that cultural formations can be understood in terms of a dynamic relationship between the dominant, the emergent and the residual. Such a framework does not only account for the ways in which cultural practices complicate stadial narratives of historical events such as the Reformation, but can also help us to understand why certain practices such as the 'Picturesque' in eighteenth-century English music lag behind the Picturesque in gardening and painting, as Stephen Groves explains in his paper on the apparent belatedness of the Picturesque in English music.

The emergence of a new body of knowledge may involve returning to that which we think we already know. Yet in the re-articulation of that field, a new set of relations can emerge, which question and complicate the foundational assumptions about that field. A genealogy of the defining moment can, in other words, reveal the event to be something other than what it appears to be. And it is precisely this intellectual project that links together this community of emerging scholars in the humanities.

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