Enemies of the People (2010) was broadcast in July 2011 on More4 in the United Kingdom under a different title (*Voices from the Killing Fields*), having won a number of high profile international awards globally, including the Special Jury Prize at Sundance 2011.

In *Enemies of the People* we are told early on that it is the filmmaker’s painful obsession and a need to deal with his profound mourning, which drives this project. Thet Sambath is the victim of genocide, having lost his whole family in the atrocities committed by Khmer Rouge; his desire is to understand how the killers could have killed. That desire leads him to commence a 10-year mission to find the killers first and then learn on camera as much as possible about them, their motives for the murders and the exact forms these have taken. In order to achieve this goal, Sambath does not hesitate to conceal his true motives from those whom he tracks down. He does not tell them he is a victim of their killings. ‘I smile’ he says ‘so they tell me everything. I smile outside but there is pain inside’. Sambath is a character in his own film, we see him and hear his feelings and thoughts, recorded both as a kind of video diary and also by a British filmmaker who is credited as the co-director of the film and who turned up a lot later in Sambath’s journey, helping him create a film out of his footage.

Sambath Thet’s patient recording of the killers’ testimonies, through his tenacious and persistent engagement with those who were responsible in some ways for the disappearance of his whole family, appears to be his main reason for his living in the last 9 years. The most astonishing is his relationship with Khmer Rouge second in command — if Pol Pot was the ‘First Brother’, he was the Second Brother — Nuon Chea, a ‘very secretive man’, says Sambath, who spends 10 years of his life trying to get close to him in order to obtain the testimony.

Was Sambath’s project an ethical enterprise?

Does Sambath’s stated project of searching for the truth excuse his deceptions in actually obtaining the

testimonies? In order to interrogate this further, I will now engage with the ethics of closeness, which Bauman (2007:88) also called the ethics of proximity, or the relational ethics linked to what Martin Buber called ‘the I –Thou’ ethics, and mostly with the work of Emmanuel Levinas, who breaks with the Cartesian supremacy of the ‘I’ in favour of intersubjectivity, albeit asymmetrical. I will look briefly at Kant’s categorical imperative, which demands the truth at all times (see for example Zupancic 2011 [2000]: 46) and also investigate Lacan’s call ‘ not to give up on one’s desire’ (Lacan [1959-60]1992: 321) in this context.

The Ethics of Proximity

The ethics of proximity is not a school of philosophical thought with an established tradition. One could argue that it is Emmanuel Levinas with his groundbreaking publication *Totality and Infinity* (1961) who put the ethics of proximity on the map. Cooper points out that Levinasian ethics is articulated ‘through critical dialogue with the western philosophical tradition’ (Cooper 2005:16). In Cooper’s reading Levinas ‘uncouples‘ the relationship between justice and ethics through the face of the Other ‘Levinas’s understanding of the visage is pivotal to his gradual re-thinking of the way in which subjectivity is constituted ethically by questioning ontology in a manner that shuns the light of justice without making either sphere invisible’ (ibid. :17).

Levinas draws from Martin Buber’s ideas of the ‘I – Thou’ relationship (Buber 1923). However, in Buber the ‘I – Thou’ relationship is reciprocal and reversible, and, to put it simply, depends, or at least might depend, on how the Other treats us. Levinas’s notions are emphatically different and more exigent.

Levinas’ originality lies in the depiction of the ‘I-Thou’ relationship as asymmetrical, beyond or outside, or prior to the logic of reciprocity (see for example Reinhard in Zizek, Santner, Reinhard 2005: 48). It is therefore prior to any choices (Kierkegaard) – it is pre-voluntary and pre-conscious. As we have seen already, in a documentary encounter the ‘asymmetrical ‘ element is important: one person makes a film about the other; one person has the power of the media apparatus behind them, one person is using the technology – in short, one person, i.e.

the director, is more powerful than the other about whom the film is made..

In Levinas the infinite responsibility for the Other is set in motion by the Other whose arrival impacts on the ‘I’. The ‘I’ therefore, the ego, is not the prime mover – the power of the decision-making is shifted from the ‘I’ to the Other. In other words, the freedom of the I is constituted as receiving a challenge, an appeal from the other and that appeal is then transformed into a demand which organizes, or should do, the world we live in.

Clearly these demands are almost impossible to carry out and yet we are asked to try and keep trying. Critchley in his study of the ethics of proximity *Infinitely Demanding* (2007) stresses that, despite the apparent and stated passivity, in truth the Levinasian subject is never passive as his ‘ethical experience is activity, the activity of the subject (…)’ (Critchley 2007:14). Therefore, despite the responsibility for the other being there a priori before anything else might take place, what takes place might be the choice of the subject.

In his ethics Levinas lists two elements, which happen to be strikingly important in any documentary: the language and the face. The idea of the face, the ‘visage’, appears to have created another controversy amongst the scholars. Cooper argues that it is not an actual face and insists that ‘the face cannot be seen since vision is not a relation of transcendence’ (Cooper 2005:17). But many writers have taken ‘the face’ very much as the face so perhaps for our purposes it is fine to take it both literally (at face value) and as a metaphor of the Other. The point is, and Cooper agrees, that through the face the asymmetrical relationship is established: ‘the face takes us out of the very relation it simultaneously creates: the other always exceeds the idea I have of it, escapes my grasp, and thus breaks with the spatial symmetry that would equate my position with its own’ (ibid:18).

Significantly, Levinas states that one of the aims of his work is to demonstrate that the relation with alterity is language itself:

> ‘We shall try to show that the relation between the same and the other – upon which we seem to impose such extraordinary conditions – is language. For language accomplishes a relation such that the terms are not limited within this relation, such that the other, despite the relationship with the same, remains transcendent to the same. The relation between the same and the other, metaphysics, is primordially enacted as conversation (…)’ (Levinas 1961: 39).

Levinas uses the terms ‘conversation’ and ‘discourse’ synonymously in *Totality and Infinity* (1961). Conversation is a relation that maintains separation between self and Other but is also the indispensable link. Through the approach of the Other, my spontaneity is limited: ‘The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics’ (ibid.: 43). The spontaneity is reduced by the infinite responsibility for the Other, confirmed in the conversation.

In *Enemies of the People* the faces of of the subjects of the films haunt the audience; the former killers, including Brother number two, are now characters in the film. There is something uncomfortable about the project and the spectators are invited to share in the complicity of obtaining truth by deception.

In terms of the ethics of proximity, another thinker, Knud Logstrup, Levinas’s contemporary at Freiberg introduces the notion of ‘trust’ to the ‘I –Thou’ encounter which he also views as asymmetrical.

‘Trust’ is an idea that is vital in documentary film and Logstrup urges us to be very careful about what that trust might involve:

> ‘(…) No one has the right to make himself the master of another person’s individuality or will. Neither good intentions, insight into what is best for him, nor even the possibility of saving him from great calamities which would otherwise strike him can justify intrusion upon his individuality and will’ (Logstrup in Jodalen 1997:87).

In many a documentary encounter, the issue of trust becomes an uncomfortable burden: how do we interview a person who has committed bad things and yet he or she trusts us with their life story, and sometimes more, with their actual lives? How can we possibly do our work if the search for the truth involves a breach of the trust somebody invested in our encounter? How do we get that crucial testimony if at the last moment the witness simply says ‘no’ and cries? In the Levinasian system, the answer is not difficult to anticipate: the minute your extraction of testimony causes unbearable pain, you must stop. For Levinas, or for a Levinasian, *Enemies of the People* is clearly NOT an ethical project, despite its quest for the truth.

There could be other philosophical paradigms one could deploy which might offer remedies to the infinite demands of the responsibility for the Other, such as the epistemological drive or the Kantian quest for the universal truth. Surely, we, society, history, culture, have a right to demand the truth from the witnesses; do we not? If we do, then clearly the scene was ethical. Kant calls that which would produce the power to act ethically and morally, the motivational force that would dispose the self towards the good, ‘the philosopher’s stone’ as arriving through the fact of reason, which can be shared universally (see Bennett 2010:74, Bauman 2007: 37,Critchley 2007:26). Truth and duty are the highest values. He further states ‘autonomy in ethics entails universality: the only norms upon which I can legitimately act are those, which I can consistently will as a universal law’ (Critchley 2007: 32-33). Such is the argument for the categorical imperative in Kant. On the other hand, wouldn’t Samabath’s deception towards the former killers disqualify his effort as unethical – he is lying after all?

Within the ethics of proximity this need to search for reason and truth, as any other need, must be subordinate to the infinite responsibility towards the Other. From that point of view, it might appear that any encounter, which carries in it a risk of hurting the Other, including interviewing, never mind putting the Other’s pain on public display, might be simply unethical and immoral. Kant famously gives an example in which a murderer enquires of the whereabouts of a potential victim. The respondent knows that if he tells the truth, the murderer might well kill that person. Kant still demands a truthful answer (MacIntyre 2010[1987]:188, Zupancic 2011[2000]: 46-47). This very cold intellectual stance, some say, can be a basis for horrific justifications of torture and genocide (see Zizek quoted below, for example).

In Levinas, a personal choice (which is a cornerstone of other philosophical systems such as Kierkegaard)[1] and indeed Lacan), is a little restricted as the ethics of responsibility for the Other overrides all other possibilities. Cooper stresses that in Levinas ‘there is no stable position of knowledge, comprehension, vision, perception or understanding’ (Cooper 2005:23) as ‘each of these activities is vulnerable to disruption’ (ibid.: 23).

To sum up, Levinas is interested in developing a reaction to symmetry, hegemony of the I and the Other. His thinking is thus in stark contrast to Buber in which the responsibility of the I is accompanied by the hope that the Other will reciprocate. There is no such hope, demand or expectation in Levinas. As we begin to see, the ethics of Levinas, whilst highly relevant to documentary, will put extraordinary pressures on the encounter.

For the startling conclusion of the Levinasian ethical paradigm, and also that of Logstrup, is that the documentary filmmaker should be in continuous fear of being unethical as her epistemological pursuit will almost automatically, inevitably and perhaps unconsciously put the Other in danger. It might even indeed be that it is close to impossible to make documentary films and be ethical towards the Other [2]

We will see directly how the Levinasian notion of responsibility for the Other sits uncomfortably with Lacan’s notion of Desire.

Love Thy Neighbour versus Desire

Lacan in his *Seminar VII on Ethics* questions the whole project of ‘love thy neighbour’ and wonders whether a human being is actually capable of an act of altruistic love at all, therefore appearing at complete loggerheads

with Levinasian ideals of the infinite responsibility for the Other. On the other hand, his command to follow through one’s desire has surprising meeting points with Kant – which I will elaborate on next.

Lacan reminds us that Freud has a problem with the Love Thy Neighbour notion and quotes from Freud’s *Civilisation and its Discontents*, saying that man’s innate tendencies lead us to ‘evil, aggression, destruction, and thus also to cruelty’. Lacan quotes Freud mercilessly lest we want to forget:

> ‘Man tries to satisfy his need for aggression at the expense of his neighbour, to exploit his work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to appropriate his goods, to humiliate him, to inflict suffering on him, to torture and kill him’ (Lacan [1959-60]1992: 185).

Why is it difficult to love one’s neighbour? For many reasons, but mostly, Lacan points to the drives, which are repressed and spill over to jouissance, a selfish and sometimes destructive enjoyment, always tinted with pain, and ultimately, with death as it spells out the limits of the momentary fulfillment – of desire.

The Ethics in Lacan

The issue of the ethics versus desire in Jacques Lacan is a complex matter. For the purpose of this discussion I will contain my interrogation to Seminar VII, on the ethics of psychoanalysis. In it we find Lacan’s notorious and controversial notion, or the call ‘not to give up on one’s desire’: ‘*ne pas céder sur son désir* ‘[3] translated as a confusing ‘not to give ground relative to one’s desire’(Lacan [1959-60]1992: 321) or as Zupancic (2000) and Zizek (1994[2005]) propose, as simply ‘not to give up on one’s desire’ or even as ‘not to compromise one’s desire’ (ibid.: 61).

Lacan in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* discusses at length the apparently self-destructive choices of Antigone and her father Oedipus in terms an ethical act which, once undertaken, demands to be seen through, no matter what the consequences. It is Oedipus’ unstoppable quest for knowledge, which is ultimately at the heart of his tragedy. And yet, according to Lacan, that relentless pursuit of the truth is rewarded too:

> ‘It is important to explore what is contained in that moment when, although he has renounced the service of goods [the Symbolic], nothing of the preeminence of the dignity in relation to the same

> goods is ever abandoned; it is the same moment when in his tragic liberty he has to deal with the consequence of that desire that led him to go beyond the limit, namely, the desire to know.
>
> He has learned and still wants to learn something more’ (Lacan [1959-60]1992: 305) (my emphasis).

This is thus a radical definition of ethics: if you willfully betray your readiness as to keep discovering what your desire might be, or somehow submit to the demands of ‘the service of goods’[4], your very compromise is unethical. This is what Lacan goes on to say: ‘And it is because we know better than those who went before how to recognize the nature of desire, which is at the heart of this experience, that a reconsideration of ethics is possible, that a form of ethical judgment is possible, of a kind that gives this question the force of a Last Judgment: Have you acted in conformity with the desire that is in you? . . . Opposed to this pole of desire is traditional ethics’ (Lacan [1959-60]1992: 314]. And a few pages later, he repeats again, positioning the analytic encounter in the same terms: ‘I propose then that, from an analytical point of view, the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one’s desire. Whether it is admissible or not in a given ethics, that proposition expresses quite well something that we observe in our experience’ (ibid.: 319] (my emphasis – please note a different translation of the French, as mentioned previously).

Eleanor Kaufman’s (2002) illuminating paper stresses that in Lacan ‘desire may be not always self-evident; the important thing is not to give up on the quest to encounter it’ (Kaufman 2002: 141). Fink (1999) in his paper on *Seminar VII* reminds us that ‘human desire is very unwieldy, unruly, and unmanageable. First of all, we spend a great deal of time and energy pretending it is not there, pretending that what we want is not really what we want, keeping our desire out of sight-keeping it from others and from ourselves. (…) Lacan teaches us that our desire is such a precious thing to us that when faced with a possibility of its satisfaction, we often run the other way, preferring to remain unsatisfied so as to keep our desire alive ‘(Fink 1999: 532). Fink also points out to the fact that our desire is often initiated by the Other – so as we uncover these desires in the analysis they might feel foreign, strange, not our own. Given that ‘desire comes from the Other ‘(Lacan 1996: 419) Fink poses the question again, ‘how am I to know what I really want?[5] (Fink1999: 533), which remains the key question of Lacanian psychoanalysis throughout his work.

Fink also stresses Lacan’s suggestion that guilt arises when ‘I do not act on my desire – when I slip by the occasions to express my hostility, when I swallow my pride instead of lashing out.’ ‘The only thing one can be guilty of’ Lacan says’ is giving up on one’s desire’ (Lacan [1959-60]1992: 319) Fink goes on to say that in a clinic it is important to bear in mind that Lacan ‘tells us not to act in accordance with what we believe to be the good of our fellow man or woman’ (Fink 1999: 536). Fink reminds us that in Seminar VIII Lacan too urges the analyst not to aim at what he or she considers to be the analysand’s own good, but rather ‘at the analysand’s

greater Eros.’ (ibid. :536) Eros of course is a broader notion than desire and will indeed include love. The ethics of the psychoanalysis is constituted in *Seminar VII* and *VIII* by the psychoanalyst’s work in helping the analysand’s uncover their desire – and ability to love. Fink concludes ‘the analyst must thus, from a Lacanian vantage point, direct the treatment not in accordance with some preconceived notions of the analysand’s good or best interest, but to facilitate the analysand’s greater Eros. (…) If Lacan provides anything by way of a possible ‘solution’ to the paradox of desire and satisfaction, I would argue that it is not via sublimation, but rather via a changed relation between desire and the drives in each of us’(Ibid.: 544).

This seems to be getting us closer to the situation the filmmaker can find himself in with his subject in a documentary encounter. Does this seeing through one’s desire give one a right to do what one wants? It is a little more complicated as we will see directly. Zizek (1994[2005]: 67) says that ‘the saint is ethical (he does not compromise his desire) and moral (he considers the Good of others) whereas the scoundrel is immoral (he violates moral norms) and unethical (what he is after is not desire but pleasures and profits, so he lacks any firm principles). Zizek then points out that the relationship between the horizontal lines could be far more interesting: for example, the hero could be immoral, yet ethical –‘that is to say, he violates (or rather, suspends the validity of) existing explicit moral norms in the name of a higher ethics of life’ that include the fidelity to his desire (ibid.: 67). Zizek (1994[2005] and Zupancic (2011 [2000]) take an even more controversial example of an ethical stance which would be utterly immoral, namely that of the Marquise de Montreuil and Valmont in *Les Liaisons Dangereuse* (1782): they have struck a pact in which Valmont seduces women and abandons them as a kind of proof of his love for the Marquise de Montreuil. It is in the end the Marquise who, in her consistency and fidelity to her desire, is the most ethical character in the novel, despite being also despicably immoral. Valmont, on the other hand, gets confounded by the unexpected love he feels for Madame de Tourvel, but he cannot see it through for the fear of humiliation in the eyes of Madame: he therefore fails on every count being neither ethical nor moral.

Zizek also makes a point similar to Fink, explicating the relationship between guilt and desire. Zizek clarifies that Lacan posits a relationship of ethical exclusion between the ethics of desire and the superego. The feeling of guilt ‘is not a self-deception to be dispelled in the course of the analysis: we really are guilty: superego draws the energy of the pressure it exerts upon the subject from the fact that the subject was not faithful to his desire that he gave up. Our sacrificing to the superego, our paying tributes to it, only corroborates our guilt’ (Zizek 1994[2005]: 68).

Lacan makes references to Kant, in part developing the link between Kant and Sade, which he suggests first in the same seminar (*Seminar VII*) and then in the *Écrits* ‘Kant with Sade’ of 1963.

Zizek reflects on the importance of this connection and suggests that ‘A lot-everything, perhaps-is at stake here: is there a line from Kantian formalist ethics to the cold-blooded Auschwitz killing machine? Are concentration camps and killing as a neutral business the inherent outcome of the enlightened insistence on the autonomy of Reason?’ (cf. http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/articles/kant-and-sade-the-ideal-couple/)

These are dramatic statements, which are highly pertinent to my interrogation with the testimony of a traumatized victim at its heart. Kant’s has a disdain for a desire *vis-à-vis* duty – a desire that is often pathologised in Kant as giving in to low instincts, which have nothing to do with his lofty ideas of pure ethics (see for example MacIntyre 2010:77).

Lacan in his *Seminar VII* analyses Sade’s devotion to his fantasy of the ultimate succumbing to the desire and going beyond the limit. Zizek insists however that the focus of Lacan is always Kant, not Sade: what he is interested in are the ultimate consequences and disavowed premises of the Kantian ethical revolution. (cf. Zizek in http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/articles/kant-and-sade-the-ideal-couple/)

Is this in any way relevant to documentary filmmaking? It might be relevant to documentary filmmaking or any activity profoundly fuelled by desire, to the exclusion of a moral consideration for what might be good for other people. In the same paper Zizek continues, giving an example of an artist ‘absolutely identified with his artistic mission, pursuing it freely without any guilt, as an inner constraint, unable to survive without it.’ Zizek gives also an example of another artist: Jacqueline du Pré, who ‘confronts us with the feminine version of the split between the unconditional injunction and its obverse, the serial universality of indifferent empirical objects that must be sacrificed in the pursuit of one’s Mission’:

Du Pré’s unconditional injunction, her drive, her absolute passion was her art (…) She thus occupied the place usually reserved for the MALE artist-no wonder her long tragic illness (multiple sclerosis, from which she was painfully dying from 1973 to 1987) was perceived by her mother as an “answer of the real,” as divine punishment not only for her promiscuous sexual life, but also for her “excessive” commitment to her art…’ (Zizek in “Kant and Sade, The Ideal Couple”, web reference as before; capitals in the original).

Here we get very close to the film we are focusing on, *Enemies of the People*. The documentary film maker’s ‘excessive commitment’ to his work through the fidelity to their desire would definitely make them ethical in the Lacanian system. However, that does not necessarily mean that they are moral – they might well be immoral, meaning, causing pain and havoc in people’s lives.

Badiou

Badiou in his *Ethics; an Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (2002[1993]) offers an approach to the issue of ethics which, by his own account, draws from Lacan’s ‘don’t give up on your desire’ but is clearer and more exigent . It also stresses the notion of evil. Badiou’s move is to dissociate himself in the strongest possible term from the Levinasian ethics of the responsibility of the Other, placing the personal decision of the I at the heart of his ethics, which he call ‘an ethic of truths’ (or sometimes an ethic of a truth process). He is very insistent that ‘there can be no ethics in general, but only an ethic of singular truths, and thus an ethic relative to a particular situation’ (Badiou 2002[1993];IVI)), although he did accept that one has to take into account the network of relationships it sustains.

Peter Hallward, in his introduction to the book, points out that the system of thinking that Badiou attacks has a couple of preliminary assumptions; first the assumption of an a priori evil (totalitarianism, violence, suffering), which Badious questions; then the imposition of an essentially defensive ethics, a ‘respect for negative liberties’ and ‘human rights’. Badiou argues that operating in the realm of consensus, this is intrinsically conservative ethics. Badiou lists two prevailing ‘philosophical poles’: first a ‘vaguely Kantian pole is grounded in abstract universality, general human attributes and some kind of vague acceptance of truth’. The second one is vaguely Levinasian attuned to the irreducible alterity of the Other. Badiou’s proposes a more radical move. His translator, also a philosopher, stresses: ‘The whole tangled body of doctrine associated with the Other (…) is here simply swept away. Gone is the complex “negotiation” of a multiplicity of shifting “subject positions”; (…) Gone is the whole abject register of “bearing witness”, of a guilt-driven empathy or compassion ultimately

indistinguishable from a distanced condescension’.

The Immortal Versus the Victim

In his introduction Badiou mentions Hegel’s subtle distinction between ‘ethics’ *[Sittlichkeit]* and ‘morality’ *[Moralitaet].* Hegel sees ethics as involving immediate action whereas morality is reflexive. Hegel, and Badiou after him, puts emphasis on ‘immediate firmness of decision. (ibid. :2) Badiou’s insistence on linking ethics to particular situations (ibid. :3) seems helpful in discussing an encounter in documentary film.

Badiou states that the reduction of a human being to the status of victim ‘equates man with his animal substructure’ (ibid. :11). Badiou then makes the point that many torturers of man begin to treat people as animals also because the victims begin to think of themselves in this way.[6] Badiou makes a point that any resistance to annihilation doesn’t lie in his fragile body but rather ‘in his stubborn determination to remain what he is’ – i.e. something other than the victim. (ibid. 110-11)

Badiou then introduces the notion of an Immortal, the rights of the Infinite, ‘exercised over the contingency of suffering and death’ (ibid. :10-11). For Badiou this is not a religious thought, as he says later in the book that there is no God – it is rather that the notion that the human being is more than the sum of his or her most basic needs; this is crucial in Badiou’s ethic of truths.

It is in his introduction that Badiou sets out a devastating critique of the ‘Western’, meaning capitalist, ways of thinking about the world: he gives an example of a doctor about to tend to a patient in distress, when he or she stops and begins to wonder whether he or she should treat the patient, due to his or her insurance status for example. Badiou says that a situation like this is a simple matter: of course you must treat the sick patient

whatever the circumstance. The point is that the emphasis in Badiou is always on the I and the decision, which is still a decision, that everybody has to make for themselves (ibid. :15). ‘For the faithful to this situation means, to treat to the limit of the possible. Or if you prefer: to draw from this situation, to the greatest possible extent, the affirmative humanity that it contains. Or again: to try to be the immortal of this situation (ibid. :15).

So the key principles of Badiou’s ethic of truths are the following 3 theses:

Thesis 1: ‘Man is to be identified by his affirmative thought, by the singular truths of which he is capable, by the Immortal which makes of him the most resilient [resistant] and most paradoxical of animals (ibid. :16)

Thesis 2: ‘our positive capability for Good’ and ‘our refusal of conservatism, including the conservation of being, that we are to identify Evil – not vice versa’. (Ibid.: 16)

Thesis 3: The final point is, again, about thinking through of the ethics of ‘singular situations.’

The Ethic of Truths and a possibility of an evil event

Badiou’s notion of the subject is connected to ‘something extra’, which wrenches a person through his or her being as a near animal. It is something that happened, something that cannot be reduced to its ordinary insicition in ‘what there is’ (ibid.: 41). This is what Badiou call an ‘event’ (ibid.: 41), which compiles us to decide a new way of being. Badiou lists huge historical events as possible ‘events’ in the way he uses them: the French Revolution, Galileo’s creation of physics, but also a personal amorous passion, the invention of the twelve-tone scale by Schoenberg (ibid.: 42). The key thing for Badiou is the ability on the part of the subject to hence with relate to the situation from’ from the perspective of its eventual (evenemeniel) supplement (ibid.: 41). Badiou calls this fidelity. He calls ‘subject’ the bearer of ‘a fidelity’, the one who bears a process of truth’ (ibid.: 43).

Badiou envisages though a possibility of a false event which is evil and which he calls ‘simulacrum’ (ibid.: 72-73). He gives a dramatic example which wipes out any confusion regarding it: namely the example of the Nazis and the ‘National Socialist revolution’: ‘they borrowed names –“revolution”, “socialism” –justified by great modern political events (the Revolution of 1789, or the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917). A whole series of characterizers are related to and legitimated by this borrowing: the break with the old order, the support sought from mass gatherings (…)’ (ibid.:72). Badiou stresses that such an ‘event’ might have formal similarities with a true event but the difference in this instance lies in its ‘absolute particularity’ (ibid.:73) of a community it only addresses itself too i.e. the Germans. A true event cannot have this kind of a restriction: ‘The void, the multiple-of nothing, neither excludes nor constrains anyone (…) although it is an immanent break within a singular situation, is none the less universally addressed’ (ibid.: 73).

Badiou calls such a mis-recognition of an event a ‘simulacrum of truth’ (ibid.: 73). It is here that Badiou and Zizek part ways, as the latter envisages a possibility of an act, which is ethical but immoral as previously stated. [7] Such a possibility does not exist in Badiou and he would certainly deem that pact between Valmont and Madame Montreuil not an event but a simulacrum: again, he does not use the word ‘pathological’ (neither does Lacan), but the pact between Valmont and Madame Montreuil stops them from a possibility of following a true event, namely the miraculous falling in love in the case of Valmont and Madame de Torveil. It is a sense of a closed set which privileges only a particular group: ‘Fidelity to a simulacrum, unlike fidelity to an event, regulates its break with the situation not by the universality of the void, but by the closed particularity of an abstract set [ensemble] (the ‘Germans’ or the ‘Aryans’)’ (ibid.: 74).

Badiou sees dangers in confusing the simulacrum with a true event and cautions again against any form of a closed set, which ‘works directly against truths’ (ibid.: 76). Having named love as one of the possible truth events, Badiou now says ‘we can see how certain sexual passions are simulacra of the amorous event’ (ibid.: 77). A person in the middle of a sexual passion might have a difficulty in telling the difference between a simulacra and ‘the event’ but love as an event in Badiou relies on a sudden experience of seeing the world differently together, through the event of love, and not just on a mutual desire.[8]

Concluding thoughts and questions

If we could be certain that we can qualify the position of the filmmaker as a true event, would that constitute an ethical act on the part of Sambath?

Some questions remain: was this really an event or was the filmmaker simply ‘acting out’ – acting out his pain so that it becomes bearable? Could other people ‘join’ in his event or was it ‘an ensemble’ of one, i.e. him driven by his extraordinary pain which perhaps had tinges of revenge? Was it then just ‘simulacrum’ – something which is fundamentally evil but pretends to be good? These question might well remain and it is important to keep raising them in our society today, which is driven to a large extent by images and their meaning, like in Guy Debord’s ‘society of spectacle’.

Maurice Blanchot in his *Infinite Conversation* (1993) touches upon the almost unspeakable notion of the link between language and torture (and he is mentioning it in passing as ‘these things can only be said in passing’ (Blanchot[1993]2008 :42): ‘Torture is the recourse to violence – always in the form of a technique – with a view to making speak. This violence, perfected or camouflaged by technique, wants one to speak, wants speech’ (Blanchot 2008: 43) (my emphasis).

Once we somehow excuse this ‘forced speech’ or ‘forced testimony’ for whatever reason, the path is open towards real horrors of people being made to speak in various contemporary chambers of torture all over the world – where, according to the executioners, torture is but a necessary evil used for the good of us all. There seems a chasm of difference between an enthusiastic filmmaker and the apparatchiks of various systems, and yet therein lies a profound obscene danger of documentary project, which at least one needs to be aware of.

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[1] It is worth mentioning a connection between Levinas and Soren Kierkegaard, the 19th century Danish philosopher, despite very serious differences, particularly regarding the notion of love for the Other which in Kierkegaard is equal but not greater to the love one has for oneself . Some scholars see the similarities in the question of singularity in the two philosophers particularly in contemporary world besieged by globalisation and commodification – ‘the Levinasian and Kierkegaardian insights continue to resound’ (Simmons &Wood 2008:4). It is also Kierkegaard who was the first one to bring up the concept of the idea ‘for which I am willing to live and die’ (Simmons 2007: 230) which resonates both with Lacanian ‘don’t give up on your desire’ and Badiou’s notion of fidelity In a classic text from 1935 Brock emphasises the Kierkegaardian notion of choice as crucial. The choice is what one does with one’s whole existence, this is what one must do if one ‘wishes to ‘exist’, that is to conduct, and not merely to be driven by life (Brock 1935: 78). Again this resonates with Lacan which I will discuss hencewith.

[2] Levinas does mention the Third but he is less interested in developing these ideas and delegates those to the duties of the state and the judicial system.

[3] It appears that Lacan doesn’t actually use this kind of invective but instead says: « La seule chose dont on puisse être coupable, c’est d’avoir cédé sur son désir» [the only thing you can be guilty of is to give up on your desire – my translation] See J. Lacan, Le séminaire livre VII, L’éthique de la psychanalyse, Seuil, 1986. p.329.

[4] ‘the service of goods’ in this seminar stands for society, which relies on exchanges of systems and commodities.

[5] The ‘what I really want’ is not an invitation for a senseless pursuit of hedonism but rather an urging to explore one’s core fantasy which, one could argue, defines the very subject hood of each person. Lacan

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repeatedly criticizes both notions of some kind of altruistic conduct or conformity to the requirements of goods and services. Please note that the concept of l’objet petit a only arrives later in Lacan’s work. Lacan leaves the notion of evil purposefully open.

[6] This resonates clearly with Agamben’s discussion of Muselmann. Badiou does not mention ‘Muselmann’ but sends the reader to another book about camps, i.e. Varlam Shalamov Stories of Life in the Camps, which focuses on the notion of surviving through a denial of accepting one’s position as the nonhuman. .

[7] Zizek appears to have changed his reading of Lacan’s don’t give up on your desire’ somewhat in his latest book and appears to have got closer to Badiou Zizek 2012: 121). He still however gives a status of an ethical act to Don Giovanni’s final refusal to repent or regret a life of broken promises and broken hearts, knowing that that decision will result in his eternal damnation. Zizek seems to appreciate the steadfastness of a commitment. (ibid.: 123-124) ‘If hedonism is to be rejected, is Lacanian ethics then a version of the heroic immoralist ethics, enjoining us to remain faithful to ourselves and persist on any chosen way beyond good and evil? (ibid.: 123) However, one could argue that that notion is not really spelled out in Lacan but is rather a Zizekian adaptation of the dictum. Badiou of course would see Don Giovanni’s steadfastness as simulacrum – a false event.

[8] For a reading of Badiou’s notion of love as the event which can happen in a non erotic situation see Lisa Baraitser’s reading (Baraitser 2009: 116-8).