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Between nothing and a promise of eternity

Reading Alain Badiou's *Black: The brilliance of a non-color*

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ABSTRACT

The book explores narratives of black: brings black into different contexts, compares it with white and other colours of spectrum, reflects on the underneath meanings hidden by black. It is a piece of art that is difficult to be classified by genre: it may be a collection of short stories, an autobiography, an essay. Belonging to both literary and philosophic contexts, this book is not “heavy”, both literally and metaphorically, but filled with unusual observations and reflections on meanings hidden behind the colours.

KEYWORDS

black; color; white; Alain Badiou; dialectics; philosophy

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The reviewed book of Alain Badiou entitled *Black: The brilliance of a non-color* (2017) is a quite unusual piece of art. An introduction starts from the debate justifying the choice of words used in the English translation: “black” versus “dark”, or “darkness”. While “black” refers to identity context, “dark” is more related to art, noir movies, literature, theatre.

This is the book that is read as if you were watching a movie, autobiographic one, with episodes appearing in a chronological order, but without any red line linking them, except, of course, black colour. It is full of unusual observations and will be admired by people, who are curious to take a different perspective on things we typically do not reflect much. One of the reviews provided on the cover, written by professor Claire Colebrook, suggests such a category for the book: “Black at once hearkens back to a style of personal philosophy that seemed lost with Blanchot¹, while also looking forward to a new mode of singular meditation that is perhaps necessary for twenty-first-century thought”. This term, personal philosophy, has an identity related connotation, and in the very end of the writing, Badiou comes to a crucial identity statement: “In the universal order to which humanity aspires, neither white nor black has the slightest right to exist. Humanity, as such, is colourless” (Badiou, 2017: 104). Four parts of this black — literally, with black based stylish coverage — book are drawn from memories of facing the black. First, named *Childhood and youth*, reminds about Leo Tolstoy’s coming-of-age trilogy, further parts, though, are not following this line — called *The dialectics of black; Clothing; Physics, biology, and anthropology*.

CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH

The whole Badiou’s idea of black being a synonym of non-colour, the absence of colour, is directly opposing a common notion of white symbolizing a fresh start (white sheet of paper, for example), non-colour, non-written story. Badiou does not, though, go further: black is also about childhood fear of darkness, contrast to light, matter of a mystery. He writes: “I kept to myself this genuine, nightmare-laden fear of the dark, most likely stemming from the distant past, from some nocturnal abandonment of the baby I’d once been, whose hopeless despair was revived by the sudden appearance of a night-dog” (Badiou, 2017: 6).

The theme of fears and fighting with them is an interesting one. “I was eight years old [...] But I was already interested in controlling the dark” — Badiou writes (Badiou, 2017: 6). Darkness may be of a different nature, and it is much easier to cope with a literal darkness than with metaphorical one: “This was in 1945 — can you believe?! What dark times those parents were

¹ Maurice Blanchot (1907–2003), French philosopher and writer.

from! And what a lot of soon-to be-dashed hopes were attached to the end of that darkness!” (Badiou, 2017: 7). Badiou himself at that time was eight years old, with other kids playing a game called “The stroke of midnight”, that started only in the dark.

Darkness may be induced, darkness may be manipulated, and the statement of Badiou is actually full of hope. Maybe you can see the light in the end of a dark tunnel, and dedicate too much hope to it, that may lead to disappointment further. What is more reasonable while struggling with darkness, is to remember that dark is dark, but there are different types of dark, and it leaves us hope. Moreover, controlled and induced darkness may be fun, a part of a consented game.

Images are important, while speaking about darkness, as well as allusions. The whole noir genre is based on this. Flirting with darkness in art creates suspense, even if actually in the light things are simple and hand-created. In *The hound of the Baskervilles* (Conan Doyle, 2012) the image of hound is being constructed through playing with darkness. The chapter *The black dog in the dark* covers Badiou’s childhood vacation and daily meetings with a dog happening while author was carrying milk from a distant farm, usually at the night: “I was gripped by fear: I knew that at a certain moment a big dog with a black coat and shining eyes was going to start following me, silently, and would try to bite my legs” (Badiou, 2017: 13).

Fears are often related to darkness, even more often than excitement and promise of some adventure. Maybe it is better to deal with a fear, to meet face to face and to get to the point where everything — or nothing actually — happens, and then to move on. But Badiou also refers to the idea of the ancient fear, some kind of a hidden unconscious legacy coming from the human past. “I kept to myself this genuine, nightmare-laden fear of the dark, most likely stemming from the distant past, from some nocturnal abandonment of the baby I’d once been, whose hopeless despair was revived by the sudden appearance of a night-dog” — he writes (Badiou, 2017: 14).

In those times kids were using ink at school, what an example of the dualism, of complicated relations between black and white, when black is the one making white — white. Metaphorically speaking, an idea of the necessity of darkness contrasting light is not a new one, it is inscribed into the literary context, you can find it in Mikhail Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita* (Bulgakov, 2012). Ink is an example of a mean capable to make hands dirty, but at the same time is a provider of words, a creative tool. It is an evidence of creation accompanied by the risk or necessity of getting dirty: “I always felt caught between two kinds of black: that of the dirty and dirtying substance and that of the signs that miraculously emerged from it” (Badiou, 2017: 15).

Badiou’s writing is a narrative of casualty, short stories, with simple by form and deep by the meaning insights emerged from them. He points out

“the revolution” made by black markers, contrasting it with “the white revenge” — when whiteboards replaced the blackboards. This observation of whiteboards and blackboards is simple, but we rarely point it out, if ever. Typically, we do not pay attention to such things, but there may be paths of enlightenment hidden.

THE DIALECTICS OF BLACK

“Scientists confirm it: black is not a color. It does not appear as such in the spectral analysis of light [...]. Black is the absence of light and therefore the absence of any wave length in the analysis of what black negates” — with such words second part of the book starts (Badiou, 2017: 33).

Black is a pure absence, Badiou writes referring to scientific evidence, while white is a mixture of colors. There is no color. But does it mean that initially things are black, non-colored? For example, in some languages we are saying something like — let’s start a life from the white (or clean) sheet, that implies a hope for another chance. This is an interesting philosophical point: what color is better determined to refer to a new start, black or white? Maybe we should not be afraid of black? Sometimes there is a need to fill the space with color, but in other times we may be seeking to start things all over again, why not from black? “But isn’t that glorious light the pure whiteness of which black is merely the absence? Don’t we have to return to the fatal couple of black and white?” — Badiou writes (Badiou, 2017: 34). So, we have a couple of two, one is an absence, or let’s say nothingness, another is a mix of everything. That ruins all of the paradigm of white as a metaphor for innocence and purity, and black as a metaphor for evil-side. “Conventional wisdom implores us ‘not to always see the black side of everything’. But would it be any better to always see the white side of everything? What is missing from both snow and night is rainbow” — he says (Badiou, 2017: 35). And then continues, usually keeping the best metaphors and points of reflection till the end of the chapter: “Beware! Macbeth’s black witches and Hans Christian Andersen’s Snow Queen belong to the same world” (Badiou, 2017: 35).

There is an interesting analysis of black or dark contrasting white. White, associated with innocence and purity, is actually a sign of a lack of knowledge about the dark. Here Badiou provides an example of young brides dressed in white, where white symbolizes the innocence that is the absence of knowledge of life with a man. So, from this perspective, white is not necessarily “good” and dark is not necessary “evil”. Maybe it is better to know than not to know. Sophistication and knowledge implies the knowledge beyond “the white”. This whole discussion refers to a bigger question of how meanings inscribed to things limit our view on these things. The value of Badiou’s book is also in this,

it provides examples of unusual optics, or maybe unusual is not a precise word here, but our view may be quite banal, based on so-called common knowledge and cultural codes, on literature and art. That leads to another question. We relate education and well-roundness to inscription into the worldwide intellectual context, into culture and art, first, but then we may become “prisoners” of our own intellectual background, not capable to go beyond that. We perceive some meanings as given and ultimate, and are not trying to look at things differently. From this point, Badiou’s reflection is a great example of the intellectual exercise of going beyond inscribed meanings.

A curious illustration of dialectics of black is related to the flag theme. A black flag has a negative connotation: piracy, even modern radicals use black as a color base for their flag. Consequently, white has to symbolize something opposite, something good, but Badiou outlines another point. Is white flag really honorable, since it symbolizes capitulation? Maybe it actually does not imply goodness and peace aspirations, but weakness and inconsistency of intentions, simply stepping back from the goal stated before, declining your ambitions? Another statement, even more controversial, refers to political context: according to Badiou, “white” in a political narrative implies negative connotation, reference to counter-revolution and reaction. This is an interesting point for discussion, because, at least in Russian contemporary narrative, attitude to “white” and “red” is not unequivocal. It is more a matter of doubt and confusion, a question of non-negotiated past. On the contrary, reference to “merging opposites”, equalizing Stalin’s red and Hitler’s black, is a point featured in Russian contemporary discourse. Returning to color, Badiou speaks about nihilistic and death-related context of black in application to flags and political symbols, and he claims that at this point we do not face white contrasting black. No, this role is taken by red-black: nihilist black-black polarizing communist red-black.

This contrast is illustrated by example: if we look at church as an institution, black color is the one related to priests, while violet — to bishops. The Pope is associated with white, but the cardinal, who elects the Pop, is dressed in red. So, the colors symbolizing the power line and the hierarchy, are black, violet, red and white, in such an order. Black-black against red-black contrast is illustrated by literary example of Stendhal’s *The red and the black* (Stendhal, 2004) that is an incredibly obvious choice, but at the same time, again, an example of taking a different angle on the well-known things. “Black” symbolizing a career in church, priesthood, is a common interpretation of Julian Sorel’s dilemma, or, let us say, dialectics. But Stendhal’s “red” is typically interpreted as a sign of blood, and army as a life path. Badiou sees black here as a color of “bourgeois secrecy” and red symbolizing “high-spirited youth” (Badiou, 2017: 55). This may be also interpreted as the author’s sentiment toward revolutionary ideas and communism, with red’s symbolic meaning inside that paradigm.

CLOTHING

Clothing is the shortest part of the book. “In Western eroticism, black is the sign of the offering of an object: white nudity, like Mallarmé’s² empty paper which its whiteness defends against being marked up by poetry, is a whiteness undefended, or eve offered up, only when marked with black” — Badiou writes (Badiou, 2017: 63). Black is indeed related to clothes, and particularly to elegance: black tie, black suit, small black dress, to which Badiou refers. When we say that something is “the new black”, we usually mean something more than fashion or style, but the essence of such a reference is image-related. Still, this point of Badiou is disputable, since dialectics of black and white here is not easily deconstructed.

Clothing part includes more remarkable contrasts related to black: black as a color of clothes people wear on funerals, symbolizing all of the spectrum of sadness, and at the same black as a color of jokes, black humor, something quite the opposite. Of course, in different cultures attitudes to funeral ceremonies may vary, but still, focusing on the European culture, this is a valid point of dialectics. In this brief part it is remarkable how Badiou implies a meaning to the black, as if it was “alive”, changing, gaining or losing power, having so many connotations in different spheres of life. He finishes this part by the sentence: “At any rate, during formal ceremonies, black, having lost its head, takes comfort in still having its feet” (Badiou, 2017: 72).

PHYSICS, BIOLOGY, AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Not black itself but close to it dark is often related to the absence of knowledge. “The dark ages”, “the black hole” are extreme examples of such a contextualization. “As usual, we black out whatever we don’t know” — Badiou declares (Badiou, 2017: 78). Black hole is not about the lack of knowledge in “the dark ages” way, it is not catastrophic, it is promising, as something not yet researched, some idea left for the future. This dialectic is also a dialectic of black: between nothing and a promise of eternity. “As usual, black — very apt here for its misnomer ‘hole’ — symbolizes, without distinction, both lack and excess” — he writes (Badiou, 2017: 77).

The space-knowledge example seems more convincing than “the green” metaphor provided later, with the green being based on the same black, but reflections about the blue being a contrast to black instead of white — as day and night colors, are poetic, “it’s blue’s task to establish the positive reverse side of black” (Badiou, 2017: 86).

² Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898), French poet-symbolist.

This book in general is purely poetic, and even if certain statements may be viewed as contradictory, they may be discussed further through the deconstruction and argumentation. It seems that the light of blackness in the text, literally, is in unusual moments of thought that could be found here. The aftertaste is in certain quotes and in this approach to look at things differently. This is an attitude to life, and probably for those readers who know French, it is better to read it in the original, not to miss these untranslatable peculiarities of metaphors.

The last paragraph, dedicated to the anthropology of blackness, is the most up-to-date from the stance of political philosophy and issues of humanity in general. “It is man and man alone who changed the black of the crow, or of the cat, into something evil. It is man who opened the case against black” — the end of the previous paragraph plunges into the waters of anthropology, race and discrimination (Badiou, 2017: 90).

Reflecting on slavery and African-American history, Badiou comes to two possible approaches of dealing with “so-called color”: first is a paradigm where black is a color, and races exist, but all of this is not a matter of discrimination, whatever color you are, you should be treated equally to anybody else, and in addition we can emphasize particular strengths of black, its unique beauty; second is a statement that was brought to the cover of the book, a non-color statement. In this paradigm we deny colors, they are not important. “This means that any overall judgment, whether positive or negative, of a supposed ‘community’ of color is rationally impossible” — says Badiou (Badiou, 2017: 96).

No color identity implied to human beings? Actually, this idea is more than a poetic metaphor or humanistic manifest, it is a very practice-oriented concept. Bringing it into political agenda, would lead to the discussion in many countries. Should we change particular minority policies when it comes to the university education? Review the frameworks and approaches? Or maybe it has to be done later, when inequality issues in certain countries will become less sharp. These are very peculiar questions, and many questions of such type get answers rooted in the accepted “ideological” choice. In this sense, Badiou explicitly stands on a position of radical non-color, although in this book he does not go beyond general philosophical reflections to program-oriented implications. With these words, Badiou’s exploration of color ends, leaving a space for private reflections on approaches preferable, approaches for which I would stand: “Blacks, Yellows, Reds, and especially Whites were nothing but false ‘objective’ bases for oppressive classifications [...] So we need to beware of any symbolization, collective assessment, political venture, or overall judgment that would purport to include a color, of any kind, in its system. In the universal order to which humanity aspires, neither white nor black has the slightest right to exist. Humanity, as such, is colorless” (Badiou, 2017: 104).

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