

Dossier: On the 1917 commemorations

Revolutionary commemoration

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No more anniversaries!

Vsevolod Meyerhold¹

Fire and ice

On 18th March 1921 the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of the Paris Commune was marked in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). Newspapers were emblazoned with headlines decrying the brutal suppression of the heroic Communards by bourgeois reactionary forces just seventy-two days after its foundation. In Petrograd, Emma Goldman awoke from an anxious night's sleep to hear people marching through the streets singing 'The Internationale'. She, however, experienced the city that day as a 'ghastly corpse' and to her mournful ears the song's 'strains, once jubilant ... sounded like a funeral dirge for humanity's flaming hope.'² Her bitter reaction to this celebratory occasion was not a reflection on the fate of the Paris Commune itself but a response to more recent events. Just one day before, the guns of Kronstadt, the echoes of which had resounded across the streets of Petrograd for the past twelve days, abruptly stopped. Sailors from the Baltic Fleet based in the fortified city on the island of Kotlin had mutinied in solidarity with workers' demonstrations and strikes in the former capital. Many who had fought enthusiastically for the Revolution, and been recognised by the Bolsheviks for their loyalty, were now demanding reforms and accusing the Party of betrayal. The Politburo issued an ultimatum and a Red Army attack was

launched over the still frozen waters. After ten days the rebels surrendered.³ Brutal reprisals followed. As the Paris Commune anniversary banners moved past Goldman's window, the corpses of Red Army soldiers sent to quash the rebellion, in what Victor Serge described as a 'ghastly fratricide', still lay scattered across the blood-spattered melting ice.⁴

Admittedly Goldman and fellow American anarchist Alexander Berkman were unusual in how decisively they interpreted the events in Kronstadt.⁵ Years later Leon Trotsky not only reiterated the necessity for crushing the revolt but characterised it as a counter-revolutionary 'armed reaction of the petty bourgeoisie against the hardships of social revolution' and remained unrepentant about the severity of the attack against it, branding Goldman and Berkman sentimental pacifists.⁶ Nonetheless, the anniversary of the Commune and the suppression of the Kronstadt uprising clanged up against one another jarringly, creating an uneasy sense of (dis)analogy. In an ironic last gesture, the battleship 'Sevastapol', which had been taken over by rebellious sailors during the revolt, was renamed 'The Paris Commune' shortly after the mutiny was suppressed; a peculiar floating monument to the hypocrisy Goldman found so horrifying.⁷

Though framed as a lesson to improve upon rather than a model to replicate (the Parisian proletariat lacked a party; faux socialist 'petty bourgeois patriots' were too heavily involved; everything happened at the wrong time, etc., etc.), Trotsky, writing in 1921, like Lenin before him, placed the

October Revolution in a continuum with the Paris Commune.⁸ The Commune became exemplary as a kind of Communist origin story, a tragic yet inspiring landmark in a fledgling canon of leftist struggle that would soon, it was assumed, ricochet around the world. Andy Willimott discusses how young activists experimenting with new domestic arrangements and modes of living in the aftermath of the October Revolution turned to the Paris Commune as ‘a model of direct democracy, mutual cooperation, and collective reorganisation’;⁹ the Baku Commune of 1918 was framed as a ‘reincarnation’ of the Paris Commune, while a commune group based at the Stalin-grad Tractor Factory a decade later proclaimed their explicit intention of emulating the martyred Communards. Though Willimott stresses that Soviet activists tended to rely on a romanticised image of the past, the example of the Paris Commune nonetheless inspired concrete quotidian practices in the present. Soviet babies were even named ‘*Parizhkommuna*’:¹⁰ newly born and future-oriented yet linked to a revolutionary inheritance.¹¹

In the year preceding the fiftieth anniversary an enormous mass spectacle, ‘Toward a World Commune’, had been staged in Petrograd on the site of the former Stock Exchange, which enacted the history of the Third International, portraying the October Revolution as the last step before the ‘apotheosis’ of the proletarian struggles set in motion by the Paris Commune was reached. At the end of the scene depicting the defeat of the Communards: ‘workers remove the bodies of their fallen comrades and hide the trampled red banner for future battles.’¹² The past was bequeathed to the future. Similarly, the final intertitle of Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg’s 1929 film *New Babylon*, a tragic love story set on the Parisian barricades of 1871, proclaims ‘Long live the Commune!’; its final shots show the words ‘Vive La Commune!’ scrawled on a wall, implying that the dreams of the Commune outlive the slaughtered Communards.

The 18th March, commemorating the Paris Commune, was an official day of rest or *prazdnik* until 1929.¹³ If Paris between 18 March and 28 May 1871 functioned (for a time at least) as a legitimisation of, and kind of prototype for, the October Revolution,

ritualised and increasingly formalised commemorations of the October Revolution itself soon became central to the regime’s shifting master narrative.¹⁴ In Trotsky’s article on the lessons to be drawn from the Paris Commune, he concluded with a volcanic metaphor, noting that the ‘temperament of the French proletariat is a revolutionary lava. But this lava is now covered with the ashes of skepticism.’¹⁵ This contrast between the hot flowing lava of an original eruption and the dull grey ash that subsequently smothers it captures a contradiction common to revolutionary commemorations, one starkly evident in the coincidence of the crushing of the Kronstadt rebellion with the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the Paris Commune, but one which rousing future-oriented spectacles like ‘Toward a World Commune’ sought to avoid. By 1927 Trotsky would be participating in demonstrations against the official commemorations of the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution, which was used to help justify his expulsion from the Party.¹⁶ In the wake of the centenary year of the October Revolution (which was marked by little in the way of rousing future-oriented spectacles), and as we approach the fiftieth anniversary of May ‘68, can historic examples of revolutionary commemoration point towards an appropriate form for revolutionaries hoping to transform the present to reflect on revolutionary pasts? Or is the very notion of commemorating revolution a contradiction in terms?

October in Novembers

In his introduction to *October*, published to mark the centenary of the October Revolution, which follows the upheavals of 1917 month-by-month, China Miéville includes a short ‘Note on Dates’. Although he observes that some historians of the Revolution have opted to use the Gregorian calendar and thus date the Storming of the Winter Palace to November, he justifies his decision to follow the Julian calendar, then still in use in Russia, by stating his desire to remain in sync with the ‘the story of the actors immersed in their moment.’¹⁷ The Gregorian calendar was adopted in the RSFSR in 1918. Unlike Miéville, Soviet officials retroactively plotted revolu-

tionary time on the newly introduced calendar, synchronised with, yet hostile to, the capitalist world. Hence, 7th November became the official holiday for celebrating the anniversary of the October Revolution. (Today it remains an official public holiday in Belarus, Kyrgyzstan and the *de facto* state of Transnistria.)

In 1918, with the Civil War ongoing, the occasion of the first anniversary of the October Revolution was marked by a mass feeding of the population of Moscow, with children given priority, and an emphasis placed on providing women with a break from domestic labour. Prisoners' food rations were raised for a day and factory committees promised their workers extra cigarettes.¹⁸ Cafes and restaurants stayed open, serving free meals.¹⁹ Elaborate spectacles were organised in multiple locations. The Moscow Organising Committee of the anniversary celebrations announced that at 9pm on 7th November a ritual burning of the 'Old Imperial Order' should be organised in every region with a symbol of the 'New System', 'to be decided by local regional comrades', taking its place.²⁰ Richard Stites contrasts the exuberant, flamboyant, carnivalesque May Day celebrations that took place in Petrograd that year with the stiff solemnity of the heavily orchestrated anniversary commemorations in Moscow, in which, he claims, playful and vividly coloured artistic contributions were 'lost in the forest of mass-produced discs emblazoned with the new hammer and sickle.'²¹ Stites imagines Lenin's opprobrious frown scowling over and eventually displacing the lively and chaotic celebrations of frolicsome utopians, like ash settling over lava.²² Focusing more on the formal than the informal, Frederick C. Corney traces how the anniversary celebrations shifted over the decade following 1917, describing the emergence and stabilisation of a revolutionary narrative, script and set of rituals overseen by 'official arbiters.'²³

The twentieth anniversary celebrations of 7th November 1937 coincided with the height of the purges and a period, in the aftermath of the First Five Year Plan (1928-1932), in which many people in the Soviet Union were materially worse off than they had been in the 1920s. A new narrative of the Revolution emerged positioning Stalin as Lenin's

heir at the moment many who had participated in the Revolution were being arrested, imprisoned and killed, including the very cadres who had heretofore been relied upon to create and organise celebratory mass spectacles and commemorative exhibitions. The October Revolution was no longer positioned between the Paris Commune and the victorious global proletarian revolution; the anniversary reflected a major reappraisal of Soviet history that plotted a less internationalist historical trajectory, instead valorising aspects of the imperial past and lauding heroic individuals, including Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible.²⁴ Tsarist ceremonies were even resuscitated as part of the celebrations, such as the distribution of keepsakes to children.²⁵ A shift away from the masses in favour of the elite was demonstrated by the decision to pay for a lavish anniversary curtain at the Bolshoi theatre rather than provide funding to build clubs and theatres in peasant villages.²⁶ But the repudiation of Stalinism under Nikita Khrushchev involved a return, revalorisation and re(re)conceptualisation of the October Revolution, even if the militaristic form of the main 7th November parade remained relatively consistent. The fortieth anniversary celebrations in 1957, a year after Khrushchev's 'secret speech', saw Mao Zedong join the First Secretary of the Communist Party atop Lenin's Mausoleum with replica Sputniks featuring heavily in the civilian parade. Such snapshots provide insights into official Soviet culture in each anniversary year, and indicate the malleable meaning of 'October', but a more meaningful question would be to ask what these rituals meant to the people who participated in them.

An uneasy relationship between transformation and stability, routine and rupture, the interruptive and the habitual, the spontaneous and the conscious in revolutionary anniversary celebrations coursed through Soviet life and thought. It might be tempting to casually characterise the former as revolutionary and the latter as reactionary or to plot a linear shift from one mode to another, but the conflict was evident from the very beginning.²⁷ As early as 1919 a newspaper article spoke anxiously of the 'initial revolutionary upsurge' giving way to 'the revolutionary quotidian.'²⁸ It is, however, also possible to find

exceptions to narratives of ever-increasing hierarchy and regimentation. As Lynn Mally observes in her analysis of Soviet amateur theatre, in a mass spectacle organised in 1927 for the tenth anniversary celebrations called 'Ten Octobers', amateur performers took a far more active and vocal role than they had in the famous mass spectacles of 1920, indicating that history never flowed intractably in one direction.²⁹ Katerina Clark sees this paradox between the new and the extant at work within the mass spectacles of 1920, which she notes functioned simultaneously as a 'celebration of iconoclasm *and* a ritual legitimisation of the status quo.'³⁰ Although the latter may not conform to the ruptural logic of revolution, legitimisation of an existing social order is only politically dubious if the order being affirmed is oppressive and the legitimising process is coerced. It is one thing to condemn the concrete example of the 1937 anniversary celebrations as a chilling spectacle (invoking a feeling similar to that experienced by Goldman in 1921), but it is quite another to argue that marking an occasion like an anniversary is inherently antithetical to communist politics in the abstract.

Furthermore, anniversary commemorations were not confined to the Soviet Union but also played an international role. Invitations to foreign Communist Party leaders and members were extended

and delegations of revolutionaries and Soviet allies, including women's and youth delegations, travelled from across the world to the USSR to attend the annual Red Square parades. (Although, the famous 1963 photographs of lava-like Fidel Castro surrounded by ash-like members of the Politburo on Lenin's mausoleum were taken on a May Day celebration rather than on November 7th.)³¹ Official and unofficial commemorative events were also hosted abroad. Images of the African American singer and actor Paul Robeson attending an October Revolution anniversary celebration at the Soviet embassy in Washington DC in 1950 circulated in the US Press as part of a campaign by the State Department to brand him a dangerous 'black Stalin' figure, whose radical influence might act as a 'deadly contagion' encouraging the spread of decolonisation.³²

Anniversary rituals may have ossified into routine affirmations of an oppressive society in one context, but elsewhere they were still charged with a disruptive energy. Writing on the occasion of the twenty-second anniversary of the Revolution, in the immediate aftermath of the purges, C.L.R. James recalled how its example had reverberated globally, 'across the oceans and mountains from continent to continent.'³³ James acknowledged the 'monstrosity of Stalinism', but despite the contemporary situation



in the Soviet Union declared that the October Revolution remained an inspiration to oppressed people across the world, specifically to black people fighting colonialism and the afterlives of slavery:

Broken and besmirched, attacked from without and betrayed from within, yet it lives. From the great peaks scaled in its early years, it has fallen far. But it remains a basis and a banner, a banner torn and bedraggled, stained with crimes and blood, carried by treacherous hands, but still a symbol of the greatest effort yet made by downtrodden humanity to rid the world of economic exploitation and political tyranny. To rid the world, not only Russia. Today Negroes, weighed down by still heavier burdens than those they carried on November 7, 1917, must celebrate that never-to-be forgotten anniversary, must reflect on what the Russian Revolution has meant, and still means, to them and to all mankind.³⁴

Commemoration can function as a form of resistance, remembering what the ruling class wants forgotten.³⁵

In capitalist countries outside the Soviet Union commemorations of the October Revolution were animated by a distinct temporality; oriented as much to the future as to the past, and intent on asserting the necessity to break with the prevailing society. Often taking the form of pageants or performances inspired by Soviet mass spectacles, theatricality functioned more as a rehearsal for revolutionary praxis rather than a reproduction of historical events.³⁶ As Larne Abse Gogarty observes in her analyses of Edith Segal's work with the Needle Trades Workers' Industrial Union Dance Group in the USA, dance became a 'weapon in class struggle' preparing workers for the antagonisms of the picket line.³⁷ In New York City the eleventh anniversary of the October Revolution was marked by 'The Giant Pageant of Class Struggle', which saw 25,000 people descend on Madison Square Garden. A year later, for the 1930 anniversary celebrations, the Workers' Laboratory Theatre performed a pageant called 'Turn the Guns' at the Bronx Coliseum.³⁸ In 1937, on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary, Lillian Shapero choreographed a dance inspired by Dziga Vertov's film *One Sixth of the World*, which included a ballet celebrating electrification performed to Marc Blitzstein's 'Moscow Metro'.³⁹ Mobile, malleable and de-

tached from the historic and geographical specificities of the events that unfolded in Petrograd in 1917, commemorations of the October Revolution could be experienced as politically meaningful events of their own.

Counterfeit Lenins

In Gustave Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* (1869), the events of the revolution of 1848 are experienced by the novel's protagonist as though they are happening on stage:

The drums beat the charge. Shrill cries arose... Frederic was fascinated and enjoying himself tremendously. The wounded falling to the ground, and the dead lying stretched out did not look as if they were really wounded or dead. He felt as if he were watching a play.⁴⁰

This passage functions both to emphasise the superficiality of the character and to characterise the historical events he is witnessing as phony and inauthentic. In the case of commemorations of the October Revolution, however, forms of fictionalisation, symbolism and theatricality were not necessarily deemed antithetical to authentic experience. Indeed, re-enactments, reproductions and representations often sought to improve upon, intensify or heighten the original historical events in the hope of inspiring genuine surges of emotion in audiences or participants. As Corney discusses, the emphasis of the early mass spectacles was on physical attendance that would stir 'a primarily sensory experience in the individual'.⁴¹ The events were 'vivid but ephemeral', like revolutions themselves.⁴² Similarly, Clark notes that the directors of spectacles sought to 'revive the pathos of revolution, its élan, and its collectivist, iconoclastic spirit' through forms of re-enactment.⁴³ The emphasis was not on passively recalling the past through accurate reconstruction, but on actively and creatively conjuring revolutionary feeling through a interweaving of the past with the present. Corney traces how relatively subdued aspects of the events of 1917 became more dramatic in their re-telling, dating the 'storming' [*shturm*] of the Winter Palace to 1920 rather than 1917, when that term became established and the location was

retroactively enshrined in the official narrative as an equivalent to the French Revolution's Bastille.⁴⁴ Similarly, a Soviet state television broadcast of the seventieth anniversary celebrations in 1987 traces its legacy back to the first anniversary parades of 1918 before mentioning the actual revolutions of 1917, as if the former were the historic event being commemorated.⁴⁵

On May Day 1927 Sergei Eisenstein's film crew chose a parade across the Nikolaevsky bridge in Leningrad (as Petrograd had been renamed following Lenin's death in 1924) to act as a stand-in for the February Revolution of 1917 in his film *October*, which had been commissioned to mark the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution (although, due to Stalin's complaint at the prominence of Trotsky, the film was not finished in time for the 7th November celebrations). Demonstrators were enjoined to carry banners to help with a mass shot. Confused by the bourgeois slogans on display at the May Day demonstration, 'two men in leather coats' approached co-director Grigori Aleksandrov and he was taken away for questioning.⁴⁶ Aleksandrov's story highlights that processes of re-enacting the past unfold in a present of their own and exist as historical experiences in their own right with potentially serious repercussions. Aleksandrov notes that in casting the film they had given preference to people who had been involved in the revolutionary events over actors, in an attempt to come as close as possible to recreating the experience of the Revolution itself. Yet, without wanting to wade too deep into the intricacies Soviet aesthetic debates of the late 1920s, Eisenstein's film was criticised by many of his contemporaries, particularly those involved in LEF (Left Front of the Arts), for deviating too far from, or overly embellishing, historical events – the sailors smashing the Palace's wine cellars were too smartly dressed; they seemed too heroic; they were insufficiently engaged in drunken carousing, etc.⁴⁷ *October* featured the first cinematic portrayal of Lenin by an actor, which also met with strong objections. Vladimir Mayakovsky wrote to Eisenstein to express his outrage at the idea of a 'counterfeit Lenin',⁴⁸ while Osip Brik referred to it as a 'forgery'.⁴⁹ (Although it would not be long before cinematic Lenin replicas prolifer-

ated, Soviet theatres inserted 'Lenin plays' into their repertoires and Lenin busts and statuettes rolled off assembly lines.⁵⁰) Esfir Shub, whose 'compilation film' *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*, edited together from vast swathes of archival footage, was also commissioned as part of the tenth anniversary commemorations, objected to the triumph of metaphor-laden theatricality over documentary and newsreel in Eisenstein's film.⁵¹ But Eisenstein defended his approach. He was concerned with revolutionary mythology and insisted that romanticised rumours, even if apocryphal, had a historical weight and truth content of their own. As Yuri Tsivian notes, he preferred 'the popular legend to the true story'.⁵² Anne Nesbet observes scrupulously that Aleksandrov's anecdote may also be apocryphal. The question is: does it matter? The answer would necessarily be different today than it was to critics of Eisenstein's film in 1927.

Nesbet reads *October* as an attempt to make the experiences of history, which have a tendency to slip past in the lower-case blur of routine existence, properly 'Historical' through aestheticisation. But in contrast to Eisenstein's own pronouncements on the conceptual clarity of 'intellectual montage', Nesbet insists persuasively on the strange effects produced by the various doubles, copies and replicas that appear in *October*, on the queasy, slippery and unsettled relationships between past and present that the film depicts.⁵³ *October*, itself a kind of maquette of history with an animated model of Lenin at its centre, constantly contrasts real people and statues. Kerensky is juxtaposed with a statue of Napoleon, the revolutionary masses with a statue of Alexander III, a Bolshevik woman with a Rodin sculpture signifying springtime. Although the meanings of these juxtapositions might seem clear, Nesbet argues the film nonetheless expresses an anxiety that 'the gulf separating flesh from marble'⁵⁴ might not be as definitive as it seems; the situation might reverse, like the famous shot depicting the destroyed statue of the Tsar reassembling. The problem of the museum, framed as a troubling paradox for revolutionaries, is central to her reading of the film, which argues that *October* poses an uneasy question: 'How does one prevent these unreliable, fickle images of

the past from infecting the present?’⁵⁵ The Winter Palace and the bourgeois objects within it, Nesbet insists, seem disarmingly easy to repurpose; little seems to prevent them from returning just as swiftly to their former uses: ‘The lesson of *October* seems to be that objects and images can never be entirely tamed ... Eisenstein’s very interest in them argues that they are still too alluring to be considered harmless.’⁵⁶ But could the same be said of formerly revolutionary objects today? Does an object like *October* retain a threatening force or has it been rendered harmless by subsequent history?

Ruined dreams

In Miéville’s *October* everything seems to unfold in the present tense. The strength of this approach is its refusal to view 1917 through the prism of, say, 1937. (This is a temptation the curators of the Royal Academy’s centenary exhibition *Revolution: Russian Art 1917-1932* could not resist, even though it covered an earlier period.⁵⁷) Miéville does not take for granted that any particular outcome was assured and his avoidance of discussing subsequent Soviet history is a convenient, although perhaps too convenient, way to avoid sinking into melancholy or despair. The reader is submerged in the chaotic events as they are unfolding, which rush along giddily and unpredictably. Miéville is also adept at the telling detail, as in his amusing account of the almost farcical murder of Rasputin or his evocative description of the wandering Tsar’s lavishly decorated, opulent railway carriage, rattling incongruously around in the vast snowy landscapes.⁵⁸ His approach is closer to Shub’s ‘compilation film’ than it is to the intellectual montage and symbolism of Eisenstein. It is nonetheless significant that the most prominent English-language account of the October Revolution published to mark the centenary was written by a novelist rather than a historian: ‘it is precisely as a *story* that I have tried to tell it.’⁵⁹ This is not to accuse Miéville of falsifying or embellishing history, but to note that his approach advocates an aestheticised, emotion-stirring approach to the recounting of revolutionary events, similar in intent to the mass spectacles; a revolutionary commemora-

tion that wants to reach beyond the confines of past.

Despite the rousing effect produced by Miéville’s pacey prose, however, the book’s resolute confinement to a linear narrative of 1917 ultimately strains to make a claim on the present. After the excitement of the events of 1917, the book concludes underwhelmingly with a limp Epilogue. The mood is sombre; the light is dim. At least, Miéville ventures weakly, it is not completely dark. Miéville glosses over what happened next with the jarringly abrupt statement: ‘We know where this is going: purges, gulags, starvation, mass murder.’⁶⁰ Ultimately *October* tows a fairly standard Trotskyist line, repeating a narrative of progressive ossification that barely mentions the post-Stalin period at all. Although Miéville’s account lacks the undergirding and guiding teleology of an orthodox Marxist-Leninist account of history, there is a kind of submerged telos in the assumption that ‘catastrophe’ simply followed ‘dreamworld’ (to borrow Susan Buck-Morss’s terms), while a more uncomfortable and contradictory account would attend to overlaps, retreats and resurgences of both poles over time. Surely contending with Soviet history (which, after all, included a lot besides ‘purges, gulags, starvation, mass murder’, especially after Stalin’s death in 1953), must form part of any attempt to explore the potential significance of the October Revolution in the present, when we no longer know where anything is going at all. Doing so might not involve imagining ourselves as being in sync with revolutionaries of the past, but instead demand that we reckon with our distance and difference from them.

A far bleaker vision of the present underpins Enzo Traverso’s *Left-Wing Melancholia* (2016), which repeatedly reminds the reader that ‘the history of revolutions is a history of defeats.’⁶¹ Traverso treats communism as a dead object, a finished experience. He speaks of the paralysis of the utopian imagination, and observes the discursive displacement of the heroic ‘vanquished’ by the pitiable and passive figure of the ‘victim’. According to his narrative, radical political possibility disappeared with the Berlin wall. 1989 figures as an ‘internalised shipwreck that produced a blooming of memories’⁶² and the twenty-first century emerges as a ‘landscape of fragmen-

ted sufferings.’⁶⁵ Unlike the revolutionary defeats of the past, which spurred on future radical movements, he sees 1989 as a kind of final capitulation after which past struggles have no longer been understood as part of a future-orientated revolutionary continuum in which the October Revolution, Spanish Civil War, Cuban Revolution, May ‘68 etc., were strung together by a single red thread: ‘the eclipse of utopias engendered by our “presentist” time has almost extinguished Marxist memory.’⁶⁴ One of the book’s major contentions is that an obsession with ‘memory’, with its attendant discipline, ‘Memory Studies’, emerged with the collapse of ‘actually existing socialism’. For Traverso ‘left-wing melancholia’ is a repressed strain in Marxist thought, which retains a commitment to honouring the ‘vanquished’ of history absent from dominant liberal understandings of memory (and one which seems to demand an overbearing tone of ponderous solemnity⁶⁵), but he nonetheless seems to take for granted that the future is dead. In a rubble-strewn book dominated by ghosts, shipwrecks and ruins under an unchanging crepuscular light (which unlike in Miéville’s *October* never threatens to break into the hopeful glimmers of dawn), Traverso’s occasional references to possible redemption feel tepid and unconvincing, even to himself: ‘the loss appears irreparable.’⁶⁶ In this bleak landscape of endless ash and no lava, revolutionary commemoration is fixated on the past and severs all ties to political action in the present.⁶⁷

Traverso’s vision of the contemporary world as a landscape of ruins is a familiar one. After 1989 the archaeological metaphor emerges as a common motif, particularly in the work of those on the Anglophone left seeking to rescue something of the optimistic utopianism of the early twentieth century for the present, evincing nostalgia for a past that could still imagine the possibility of a radically different future.⁶⁸ Critiques of ‘Ostalgia’ and ‘ruin porn’ are well-rehearsed by now. The anxiety is that scrubbed and aestheticised fragments of the revolutionary past circulate shorn of historical context, drained of political meaning, reduced to nothing more than diverting relics, which pose no threat to the existing state of things. As Traverso writes:

We cannot exclude the possibility that our des-

cendants will remember the historical experience of twentieth-century socialism as an isolated monument in an empty square, a vestige of the past whose charm will lie in its ‘age value’.⁶⁹

Images circulate online as kitsch distractions: disinterred Lenin in the long grass, underwater Lenin encrusted with barnacles, Arctic Lenin submerged in snow up to his shoulders, desert Lenin among palm trees, mossy Lenin in parks full of other Lenins. The left-wing historian as archaeologist hopes that another kind of excavation might be possible; one that could reignite past hopes in the present and that would insist that the remnants of the past, like the threatening bourgeois objects in *October*, retain something of their original meaning. But this seems to imply that the excavated objects could be pulled whole from the rubble, that the cracks and holes caused by subsequent history could be erased or fixed. Revolutionary commemoration as a practice, as opposed to a scholarly theory or mode of curation, is less concerned with meticulous reconstruction, preservation or the placid cataloguing of remains than it is with looting the past for contingent political ends.

Contemporary, immediate, up-to-the-minute

The statues are already defaced. Stripped of paint through centuries of erosion, they are beyond further damage. They’ve been torn out of context, inventoried, allegorised, eclipsed by their own exegetical apparatus. They can’t see, their eyes are vacant, they leave us cold – they can’t threaten or entice us. Blankly staring, their gaze has no more power to seduce. But let’s turn them sideways, just in case.

Rebecca Comay⁷⁰

Following the defeat of the Paris Commune, tourists visited Paris to see its ruins, but the status of those charred remains was ambiguous. Scott McCracken remarks of the ruins of the Palais des Tuileries:

The afterlife of the palace, a symbol of monarchy whose ruins became a symbol of its overthrow, corresponds to a recognisably modernist set of cultural responses to the reaction that follows a revolution’s defeat. The erasure of the event is never total. Traces

both material and textual are always left over, and the collection and rearrangement of these vestiges offers the same three possibilities as for the palace: restoration, the making of a lost connection with the past; reconstruction, a re-engagement with the past and an anticipation of the future; obliteration, the cutting off from the past to make a new future.⁷¹

In *Communal Luxury*, her recent book on the political imaginary of the Paris Commune, Kristin Ross cites a *New York Times* article that interviews an Occupy Oakland activist who gives her name as Louise Michel, a reference to the infamous Communard that the journalist failed to pick up on.⁷² ‘We call for a general strike around the country, and around the world’, the activist is quoted as saying just days before the blockade of the port of Oakland in 2011.⁷³ Unlike Traverso, who is dismissive of the disparate political movements that erupted at that time, Ross explicitly addresses her book to the possibility of political transformation in the present. She is not melancholic and resigned, but hopeful and engaged. It is these kinds of echoes, resonances and returns in which she is interested, not solemn, organised commemorative occasions, but improvised citations in which the past momentarily collides with and inspires revolutionary movements now.

The death of a teleological conception of history is nothing to mourn, its disappearance might create space for struggles from the past that have been historically marginalised by the orthodox left to fray the taut narratives of familiar red threads to weave something new. In contrast to Emma Goldman’s sorrowful account of the official commemoration of the Paris Commune in Petrograd, Ross describes the furtive and impromptu ways historical memory can form part of revolutionary praxis; fleeting dream-worlds constructed within and against the on-going catastrophe of life under capitalism. Ross suggests that revolutionary commemorations need not take the form of static statues to soberly contemplate in a dusty and unchanging museum of left-wing hagiography, but can be ephemeral, darting and disruptive acts. As Vladimir Mayakovsky wrote in the 1921 preface to his play *Mystery-Bouffe*, originally written to commemorate the first anniversary of the October Revolution in 1918:

Mystery Bouffe is a high road – the high road of the Revolution. No one can predict with certainty how many more mountains will have to be blasted away by those of us who are travelling that high road. Today the name of Lloyd George rings harshly in our ears; but tomorrow he will have been forgotten even by the English. Today the will of millions is surging toward the Commune; in another fifty years the airborne battleships of the Commune may be rushing to the attack of distant planets ... Therefore, all persons performing, presenting, reading, or publishing Mystery-Bouffe should change the content, making it contemporary, immediate, up-to-the-minute.⁷⁴

Perhaps it is only possible to access counterfeit versions of October, but revolutionary commemoration could involve re-reading the scripts of the past as inspiration for new improvisations; returning to history not as archaeologists or curators but as actors.

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Notes

1. Cited by Daniel Gerould in ‘Eisenstein’s “Wiseman”’, *The Drama Review: TDR*, 18:1 (1974), 71–76, 73.
2. Emma Goldman, *Living my Life* (1931), <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/emma-goldman-living-my-life>.
3. Alexander Berkman’s *The Kronstadt Rebellion* (1922) ends by noting the coincidence of the anniversary of the beginning of the Paris Commune and the supposed ‘victory’ over Kronstadt, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/berkman/1922/kronstadt-rebellion/ch7.htm>.
4. Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, trans. Peter Sedgwick with George Paizis (New York, NY: New York Review Books, 2012), 152. Serge provides an explanation of why he and his Communist comrades, ‘after many hesitations, and with unutterable anguish’, ultimately chose to side with the Party despite their sympathy with the uprising (*Memoirs*, 150). Paul Avrich’s historical account takes a similar view: ‘Kronstadt presents a situation in which the historian can sympathise with the rebels and still concede the Bolsheviks were justified in subduing them. To recognise this, indeed, is to grasp the full tragedy of Kronstadt.’ Paul Avrich, *Kronstadt, 1921* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), 6.
5. Avrich makes this point and argues that it was only in hindsight that this event acquired a more intense symbolic status, *Kronstadt, 1921*, 228.
6. Leon Trotsky, ‘Hue and Cry over Kronstadt’, *The New Internationalist* 4:4 (April 1938), 103–106, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/01/kronstadt.htm>.
7. Avrich, *Kronstadt, 1921*, 213.

8. Leon Trotsky, 'Lessons of the Paris Commune' (February 1921), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1921/02/commune.htm>. Lenin discusses the Paris Commune at length in the third chapter of *The State and Revolution* (1917). He is said to have danced in the snow on the day the Bolsheviks' time in power outlasted the Paris Commune.
9. Andy Willimott, *Living the Revolution: Urban Communes and Soviet Socialism, 1917-1932* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 42.
10. Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 111. Stites lists numerous new baby names that came into use after the October Revolution, some more conceptual (Joy, Spark, Electric, Rebel), some based on revolutionary figures (Marx, Engels, Robespierre, Rosa Luxemburg).
11. On the 'happy child as icon of Soviet transformation' see Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades: Revolutionising Childhood in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932* (London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2001), 163.
12. James von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917-1920* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 186.
13. Irina Shilova, 'Building the Bolshevik Calendar through Pravda and Izvestiia', *Toronto Slavic Quarterly*, 14 (2007), <http://sites.utoronto.ca/tsq/19/shilova19.shtml>.
14. See, Jay Bergman, 'The Paris Commune in Bolshevik Mythology', *English Historical Review*, 129:541 (2014), 1412-1441. On the Paris Commune's shifting status as prototype for the 1905 Revolution and both the February and October Revolutions of 1917, see Casey Harison, 'The Paris Commune of 1871, the Russian Revolution of 1905, and the Shifting of the Revolutionary Tradition', *History and Memory*, 19:2 (2007), 5-42. Harison notes that the annual anniversary marches to Père Lachaise in Paris were reinvigorated following the October Revolution; revolutionary inspiration did not only flow in one direction (24).
15. Trotsky, 'Lessons of the Paris Commune'.
16. Michael David Fox, *Revolution of the Mind: Higher Learning Among the Bolsheviks, 1918-1929* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 116, 231.
17. China Miéville, *October: The Story of the Russian Revolution* (London: Verso, 2017), 3.
18. Frederick C. Corney, *Telling October: Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004) 52-56.
19. Von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals*, 95.
20. Corney, *Telling October*, 58.
21. Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 91.
22. Von Geldern similarly describes a tension in the anniversary celebrations between 'artists' iconoclastic exuberance and the organisers who wanted to tame that exuberance', *Bolshevik Festivals*, 93.
23. Corney, *Telling October*, 104.
24. On the 1937 anniversary, see Karen Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous Comrades: Celebrations in the Time of Stalin* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2000), 149-174. On the centrality of artistic debates in that year (which was also the centenary of Pushkin's death), see Katerina Clark, *Moscow, The Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931-1941* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 79-80. On shifts in historiography that attended the fiftieth anniversary celebrations another thirty years later, see Robert V. Daniels, 'Soviet Historians Prepare for the Fiftieth', *Slavic Review*, 26:1 (1967), 113-118.
25. Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous Comrades*, 158.
26. Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous Comrades*, 153.
27. For a discussion of the 'dialectic of permanence and transformation' in Soviet thought considered in the *longue durée*, see Galin Tihanov, 'Continuities in the Soviet Period', in *A History of Russian Thought*, ed. William Leatherbarrow and Derek Offord (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 311-339, 331.
28. *Ural'skii rabochii*, 81, 7 November 1919, 6, cited in Corney, *Telling October*, 92.
29. Lynn Mally, *Revolutionary Acts: Amateur Theater and the Soviet State, 1917-1938* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), 106.
30. Clark, *Petrograd*, 130 (my emphasis).
31. A forthcoming collection edited by Jean-François Fayet, Valérie Gorin and Stefanie Prezioso will explore international commemorations of the October Revolution: <https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/book/echoes-of-october>. For a typical itinerary of a foreign politician, culminating in attendance at the anniversary celebrations, see AS Kochetov, *The Guest from Ethiopia* (1980). Synopsis here: <https://www.net-film.eu/film-8452/>.
32. Kate Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters Between Black and Red, 1922-1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 250.
33. C.L.R. James (under the pseudonym J.R. Johnson), 'The Negro Question: The Greatest Event in History', (1939) <https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1939/11/greatest.html>. Originally published in *Socialist Appeal*, 3, 87, 14 November 1939, 3.
34. Ibid.
35. On how the French state repressed the popular memory of the Paris Commune, for example, see Colette E. Wilson, *Paris and the Commune, 1871-78: the Politics of Forgetting* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2007).
36. Clark notes this was also the purpose of 'Toward a World Commune' which was performed before a military audience and intended as inspiration for the army's upcoming operations against the Polish. Clark, *Petrograd*, 131.
37. Larne Abse Gogarty, 'Cells in Organisms/Cogs in Machines: 1930s Proletarian Performance and Jazz', *Cesura/Accesso 2* (2017), 20-39, 22.
38. Ellen Graff, *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928-1942* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 34-35.
39. Julia L. Mickenberg, *American Girls in Red Russia: Chasing the Soviet Dream* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 224.

40. Gustave Flaubert, *Sentimental Education*, trans. Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 1964), 286.
41. Corney, *Telling October*, 91.
42. Corney, *Telling October*, 93.
43. Clark, *Petrograd*, 132–133.
44. Corney, *Telling October*, 90.
45. 'Soviet October Revolution Parade, 1987 Part I', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1SmuBMANFKw>.
46. GV Aleksandrov, *Epokha i kino [Epoch and Cinema]* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1983), 104.
47. The first objection was voiced by Sergei Tret'iakov, the second and third by Osip Brik, see Yuri Tsivian, 'Eisenstein and Russian Symbolist Culture: an Unknown Script of October' in *Eisenstein Rediscovered*, ed. Ian Christie and Richard Taylor (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), 75–104, 89. Thanks to Alex Fletcher for recommending this essay.
48. Anne Nesbet, *Savage Junctures: Sergei Eisenstein and the Shape of Thinking* (London: IB Taurus, 2003), 78.
49. Jeremy Hicks, *Dziga Vertov: Defining Documentary Film* (New York, NY: IB Tauris, 2007), 102.
50. On Lenin plays in the 1930s see Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous Comrades*, 166. On the deification of Lenin, see Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! the Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).
51. See, Esfir Shub, 'We Do not Deny the Element of Mastery', *Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents*, ed. by Ian Christie and Richard Taylor (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 185–186. On Shub see, Esther Leslie, 'Art, Documentary and the Essay Film', *Radical Philosophy*, 192 (2015), 7–14.
52. Tsivian, 'Eisenstein and Russian Symbolist Culture', 92.
53. Nesbet, *Savage Junctures*, 77. Corney also discusses *October*, specifically the antagonisms between people who had been involved in the revolution in the film's development, *Telling October*, 205–208.
54. Nesbet, *Savage Junctures*, 87.
55. Nesbet, *Savage Junctures*, 89.
56. Nesbet, *Savage Junctures*, 89.
57. The exhibition ended with a 'Room of Memory', devoted not to artworks but to photographs of people arrested or killed in the Stalinist purges.
58. Miéville, *October*, 37, 64.
59. Miéville, *October*, 2.
60. Miéville, *October*, 307.
61. Enzo Traverso, *Left Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016), 32.
62. Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*, 232.
63. Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*, 18.
64. Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*, xiv.
65. See also: TJ Clark, 'For a Left with No Future', *New Left Review*, 74 (2012) or Walter Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat: on National Trauma, Mourning and Recovery* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 2013). In his review of exhibitions in London commemorating the centenary of the Revolution, Clark, like Traverso, privileges 1989 over 1917 as the key landmark with which the contemporary left must reckon. Unlike the sure-footed sombre tone of his earlier piece on the supposedly moribund left, however, this review strikes a more anxious and uncertain note (eight of the ten sentences in the opening paragraph end with a question mark). Clark seems less concerned with the status of revolutionary history today than he does with his fraught relationship to his past political commitments. See, TJ Clark, 'Reinstall the Footlights', *London Review of Books*, 39, 22, 16 November 2017.
66. Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*, 48.
67. Walter Benjamin's 'Left-Wing Melancholy', a scathing review of a book by poet Erich Kästner, which Traverso skims over briefly, addresses a very specific phenomenon that he identifies in the supposedly radical literature of Weimar Germany. Despite proclaiming themselves sympathetic to the working class, poets like Kästner, Benjamin claims, address themselves to a 'middle stratum' of society; these self-proclaimed left-wing intellectuals 'are the decayed bourgeoisie's mimicry of the proletariat.' Distant from political action, these writers render forms of political struggle as pleasant objects to consume for the titillation and amusement of a bourgeois public. The left-wing melancholic is a reactionary figure, politically complacent and nihilistic, who reifies political struggles in which they have no direct involvement. (See Walter Benjamin, 'Left-Wing Melancholy', *Screen 15:2* (1974), 28–32, 28.) Wendy Brown's analysis of 'left-wing melancholia' is a clear critique of the tendency although her characterisation of the post-89 left elsewhere is ultimately not so dissimilar from Traverso's.
68. See, for example: Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2001), 78; Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: the Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 68; T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes in the History of Modernism*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 1; Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990), 12; and Owen Hatherley, *Militant Modernism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 8 (with apologies to Owen Hatherley who I know would probably not make the same arguments now). Traverso also sets out to 'excavate', *Left-Wing Melancholia*, xv.
69. Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*, 43. Obviously such observations do not account for the status of that past *within* the former Soviet Union (especially in former Soviet Republics other than Russia) or in other parts of the former Eastern bloc, as policies pertaining to the removal of literal monuments from the Communist era clearly demonstrate, indicating the limits of Traverso's 'we'.
70. Rebecca Comay, 'Defaced Statues: Idealism and Iconoclasm in Hegel's *Aesthetics*', *October* 149 (2014), 123–142, 124.
71. Scott McCracken, 'The Author as Arsonist', *Modernity/Modernism* 21:1 (2014), 71–87, 80.
72. Kristin Ross, *Communal Luxury: the Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (London: Verso Books, 2016), 16 (epub).
73. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/02/us/oakland-activists-regroup-and-call-for-general-strike.html>.
74. Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Plays*, trans. Guy Daniels (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 39.