

Lenin and the Image in Time

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Abstract: Lenin has been represented in photographs, film, paintings and in other modes. Beginning from some of the discussions about adequate portrayals of Lenin, whether in time-based or more 'auratic' media, the politics of aesthetics and concomitant aesthetics of politics is here investigated as standing in broader relation to the politics of time, dialectics and mobility and what genius means. After some observations on various considerations of Lenin in relation to Western Marxism and avant garde aesthetics, another context, derived from a short review by Walter Benjamin of Lenin's letters to Gorky, excavates the constrasting dialectical context of 'Creative Indifference' (Salomo Friedlaender/Myona). Benjamin's review attempts to place Lenin in relation to post-Nietzschean and absurdist strands of thinking that transform both the assumptions conveyed by the Westernness of Western Marxism and the modes of avant gardism typically associated with Bolshevism. Conclusions about the reactionary nature of a demand for genius and the collapse of public and private life into something prior to both are what Walter Benjamin draws from his Lenin lessons.

Keywords: Image; Walter Benjamin; Dialectics; Trotsky; Stalin; air-brushing; Friedlaender

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Eternal Returns in an Image

Lenin's time came and went. His time is always coming and going. His name lingers in small parties that arise and fall: Marxist-Leninists, communists, revolutionary communists, new communists. At demonstrations, sometimes, there are tight phalanxes of large placards bearing an image – photography or sketch – of his face. In London, these appear most abundantly in May Day demonstrations, when migrant militants crowd the streets around Clerkenwell. They appeared recently too on placards at demonstrations against Israeli violence in the Middle East. Sometimes Stalin or Engels or Marx are represented too, their large heads bearing serious expressions. The image of Lenin on the placard is often a version of an image of him caught on camera in 1920. He is bald, bearded, looking intently forwards, bearing a gaze that might be termed steely. Sometimes he is shown looking slightly to one side, his eye on a future that is promised, discerning, for everyone else, a new world to be brought into being through revolutionary action and will.

This consistency of image on the placards, and among the front papers of Progress Publishers's cheap Marxist Library paperbacks, is curious, if one adopts the avant garde stance articulated by those image makers most forcefully attracted to Lenin and Leninism at the time of the revolution: Constructivists, Productivists and Futurists such as

Mayakovsky, Rodchenko or El Lissitzky. What they appreciated above all - their political revelation in relation to Bolshevism – was that Lenin was motile, mobile, in movement, unfixed, oriented towards change, revolutionary at his very core. Any image of him would need, through photomontage, serialism or other means, to portray such openness, its eventuality of existence. Rodchenko reflected on the photographic legacies of Lenin in his April 1928 essay, 'Against the Synthetic Portrait, For the Snapshot', published in *Novyi levyi front iskusstv* (New Left Front of the Arts), in Moscow.¹ There he derives a theory of Lenin and a theory of art from this bequest. He observes how Lenin was snapped by cameras as he moved swiftly from scene to scene attending to revolutionary tasks. 'He had no time', notes Rodchenko. This constant recording produced a large file of photographs. Taken together, these photographs have been the basis of artistic depictions of him in the years after his death. But for all their attempts to capture a synthesized portrait, not one attached to a particular moment or situation, none has succeeded:

A large file of photographs exist of Lenin. There are also ten years of efforts to make images of him in the USSR and elsewhere. None of these attempts to depict him are able to claim: 'this is the real V. I. Lenin'.

There is not one. And there will not be. Why not? Not because, as many think, "We have not yet been able to, we haven't had a genius, but certain people have at least done something." No, there will not be—because there is a file of photographs, and this file of snapshots allows no one to idealize or falsify Lenin. Everyone has seen this file of photographs, and as a matter of course, no one would allow artistic nonsense to be taken for the eternal Lenin.²

Lenin is, the argument goes, eternal as a political principle, but not as a consistent image. Lenin is in time, but has no time. There exists only the fragment of a moment between acts of historical significance. Lenin's existence is connected to the moment that is outside himself and full of potential for change. One capacity of the quickly snatched photograph is its delineating not just the sharp outlines of sharply focussed world, but also the passage of time itself, registered as blur, of one conceives him in relation to this photographic language. Lenin is a blur, multiple, as fragmentary, as self-negating. Photographic media are mobilised as an art of the fragment, the partial, what is still to be done in the moment of its doing. Or its being undone. Rodchenko rails against synthesis, which would be the summary, averaging rendering of any individual, extracted from time and dispersed across time, losing all specificity. Instead, each moment is superseded by the possibilities in the next. Each truth is set in motion in history, temporary, revisable. This is made manifest in the sources mobilised to confirm what is happening:

Now people do not live by encyclopedias but by newspapers, magazines, card catalogues, prospectuses, and directories.³

Even in death – as in, for example, *Funeral of V.I. Lenin* (1924) - Rodchenko depicted Lenin as multiple, various points in a broader landscape of mobilised people, twisting and turning in response to the challenges of history and the sudden opportunities that open up. Art has taken the place of religion. It is the opium that subdues and consoles a suffering people. Instead, the real must flood the plane of representation, but as a real in all its contingent transformability. Anything else is Lenin become an icon.

To think of Lenin as image, specifically as a photographic image, is to be compelled to think of Stalin's war on history through the resources of airbrushing. Airbrushing is the synthesising of image into generality that is also, most definitely, in its generalisation, a lie. One photograph of Lenin shows the wooden podium in front of the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow in May 1920. Lenin is part way through delivering a speech to soldiers who are about to depart to fight Marshall Pilsudski's troops in Ukraine. On the steps of the podium stands Trotsky, fully present on that moment, and, behind him is Kamenev. Various versions of the image circulate without Trotsky and Kamenev. One widely-reproduced version crops the image closely around Lenin, eliminating the two others by default. In another version photographic manipulation makes them merge with the stairs on which they are standing, fading to absence. An oil-painted version of the scene, from 1933, by Isaak Izrailevich Brodsky, substitutes them with two newspaper reporters. This may be ironic mendacity, with the addition of pseudo-reporters made to be present for recording a pseudo-event. The various versions of the image demonstrate something about the contingency of reality. The crowd of soldiers and onlookers – in the photograph not revised for the 'historical' record - look in different directions. Some seem to be looking directly at the camera itself, which in its own way stages a reality. A young man and woman are gazing at each other. Some members of the audience have their mouths open, for they are mid-conversion. Not everyone is observing the leader of the Russian Revolution. Brodsky's painting ignores all this, oil brushes it from reality. He is unwilling to depict such everyday waywardness. In his painting, everyone focusses their attention on Lenin. Everyone is in line, accepting the line.

With a photographic metaphor, Nikolai Sukhanov, a chronicler of the Russian Revolution, characterised Stalin's activity in 1917 as 'a gray blur, sometimes emitting a dim and inconsequential light. There is literally nothing more to be said about him.'⁴ Unsurprisingly, Sukhanov, who had witnessed revolutionary events as they occurred, was arrested in 1931 and 1939, and he was murdered in the Gulag in 1940. A canvas by Mikhail Solokov, oil-painted in the 1930s, depicts Lenin's return to Russia in April 1917. The momentous event is captured in the eternalising form of portrait painting. Lenin carries with him his 'April Theses', which argued

that the revolution should be pushed forward, the bourgeois provisional government overturned and a system of rule by workers' and soldiers' soviets established. Alighting at the Finland Station in Petrograd, Lenin greets the rapturous waiting crowds. What is to come is already known. Behind and above him, in the doorway of the train, Stalin stands, at his back. Stalin has his back and he will come forward when the man before him goes. Though Solokov drew on Sukhanov's eyewitness account of that event, the insertion of Stalin was fictionalised. Sukhanov's written record was not the only one to testify to Stalin's irrelevance in the most key revolutionary years. He is absent in a photomontage where more than sixty Bolshevik leaders' heads gaze out of a photographic album commemorating the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920. In its survey of the years since 1917, there is not a single reference to the dictator to be. It was all this absence, all this blur of invisibility and disappearance, that Stalin and his supporters had to overlay and brush out with more or less covert image interventions. In order to carry through the counter-revolution in revolutionary garb, Stalin had to invent a myth-history of himself as hero and as Lenin's collaborator and his only credible successor. The most notorious falsification of images in Stalin's Russia was political deletions of those who fell from favour. The legend of infallibility decreed only Stalin could be correct. He had to be photographed and imaged so that he might be always have been and always still be present. But this need to photograph in order to glorify leads to problems when the past that is represented is not in line with the past as prised through the present line. As the purges took off, today's truth becomes tomorrow's blunder, tomorrow's inconvenient truth, and another round of retouching, deleting and expunging begins.

Retouching and reworking images underlies the cynical version of the contingency of truth. The passage of time generates different associations, a retrospect knowledge. A photomontage by Gustav Klutis from 1930 - 'Under Lenin's Banner' - portrays a shadowy face of Stalin looming up behind Lenin. Designed to confect an intimacy and line of descent between the two men, it reveals rather, to a critical eye, Stalin's appropriation of the revolution in the 1930s. One doctored image in David King's extensive collection of manipulated photographs - a photograph taken after the 16th Party Congress is interpreted as expressing Stalin's contempt for the ordinary worker. On the steps of the building, an attendant directs the ways for Stalin. When the same picture was published in *Projector*, the worker had disappeared. No worker can point a direction for the supreme leader of workers. The supreme leader is the only one to lead and direct the way. The photographic instant is compelled to deliver untruth through acts of masking and confection. But there has to be a lot of backroom work to obliterate the relation between photograph, moment and contingent truth. Historical truth might yet be found in analysis of the gaps between the images, if an 'original' survives

to attest to the indexical moment. The defacement is as much a part of the historical record. Truth is revealed in the lie. Placed side by side the photographs become peculiarly active. And in relation to photography's time axis, is it possible to say in photography only the negative is true. They meet our questioning gaze. They give an opportunity for some dialectical investigation.

Dialectical Notebooks

History is time. Image samples time and time accumulated around the image makes it become other to itself, or to what it was. Image is not static. A photograph does not equal a photograph. A is not A, as Trotsky argues in 'The ABC of Materialist Dialectics' in 1939, and is the grounds of the non-identity of the apparently identically reproduced:

But in reality 'A' is not equal to 'A'. This is easy to prove if we observe these two letters under a lens—they are quite different from each other.⁵

'Under a lens': the enlarging techniques of lenses, photographic or otherwise, will access specificity, particularity, and will show that, in everything, there is always a part of difference. And there is the passing of time, 'any given moment', in which all things change:

How should we really conceive the word "moment"? If it is an infinitesimal interval of time, then a pound of sugar is subjected during the course of that "moment" to inevitable changes. Or is the "moment" a purely mathematical abstraction, that is, a zero of time? But everything exists in time; and existence itself is an uninterrupted process of transformation; time is consequently a fundamental element of existence. Thus the axiom 'A' is equal to 'A' signifies that a thing is equal to itself if it does not change, that is, if it does not exist.⁶

In his *Second Notebook*, Trotsky contemplates photographs of Lenin. The photographs were reproduced in Soviet journals and illustrated history albums, and they were produced at a time when Trotsky was still active in the Russian revolutionary movement. He kept the images with him in exile. His notebook reflections on dialectics, consciousness and perception sat alongside descriptions of the snapshots of Lenin, in prison, in action, at rest, and he made some notes for a major biography of Lenin. In the context of Stalin's and the Stalinists' manipulation of the historical record, Trotsky's contemplation of snapshots of Lenin provided the first stimulus for the Lenin biography. Despite his suspicion that photography is a non-dialectical form, a form that rips things from their interconnections, Trotsky hoped that scrutiny of Lenin's celluloid imprint could reveal some truth about him and about the state of the revolutionary movement. It

would reveal not a personal truth, but a social and revolutionary one. The photographs are an aide-memoire, but they also appear as predictive. In their imaging of Lenin's pose, and in the look on his face, Trotsky hopes to read the direction of history, a history he too had passed through. Of some snapshots of Lenin from 1915 reproduced in a magazine, Trotsky writes:

The photograph is not stagy, like a portrait, but contingent, accidental. This is its weak side. But it is also sometimes the very source of its power. The features of the face acquire a definition that they did not have in reality. The total absence of a beard accentuates even more the sharpness of the features of the face. The face is not softened by irony, slyness, good nature. In its every feature there is intelligence and will-power, self-confidence and simultaneously tension in view of the enormity of the problems of 1915.

The war. The International had collapsed. He had to start all the work over again, from the beginning.

Lenin in 1921 (in the same issue) is much more relaxed, less tense, one senses from the figure that part of its vast work is already behind it.⁷

The photograph divulges knowledge of wider historical developments, though not by mirroring apparent reality. It cannot show the actual pliability of Lenin's features or any subtle characteristics - irony, slyness, good nature - that appear when a real human being acts in time and in relation to others. The photograph is contingent and that may be a weakness - for it cannot be summarise, always remaining accidental, partial. Yet Trotsky seems to open the possibility that photographic seeing - at least an unstaged, contingent, snapshot type of photography - might allow access to something under the surface, and this non-superficial aspect might render something essential unbuffered by life and relations, something else radiates from the face, the pose, the stance. It is something that may not be seen in life, but presents itself to the camera eye. In observing this, Trotsky asserts something akin to Walter Benjamin's 'optical unconscious'.⁸

Lenin out of Time

In the preceding discussions of photographic and other images, Lenin was brought into connection with dialectical thinking and with Walter Benjamin - as well as with the avant garde movements represented by Futurism, Constructivism and other 'art into life-isms'. These are elements - movements, artists, collectives, critics - that avowed an interest in Lenin, and in horrified reaction motivated some Soviet partymen to wrestle Lenin away from the clutches of those who would displace him into philosophy and would be overly interested in questions of subjectivity and consciousness, art, representation, ideology and form. These were the

obsessions of what came to be known as Western Marxism.⁹ Detractors – and supporters – claim that this current of Marxism is concerned with consciousness, subjective matters, the retardation of revolution, and not the scientific application of laws of historically guaranteed class struggle moving towards Capitalism’s revolutionary overthrow through the application of shrewd political ruthlessness. From wherever it was theorised – Maurice Merleau Ponty (1955) Perry Anderson (1976) – advocates and critics of the concept perceived it as part of a rejection of Leninism. When active strains of Marxism were brought into philosophical discussions after 1968, in relation to new social movements and student revolt, it was assimilated under the tag of Western Marxism, a non dogmatic form of theoretical analysis. Perry Anderson influentially used the phrase to indicate strains of Marxist thought, going back to the 1920s, that did not forward revolution but rather accounted for its absence, as a result of more or less open manipulations of consciousness, the workings or fetishism, reification or separation. To think of this was determined as the antithesis of Leninism.

When Lenin was brought back into philosophical discussion in the wake of capitalist crises and economic crash of 2008, various commentators did a knight’s move and conceptualised Lenin himself as a kind of Western Marxist. This drew on the fact of Lenin’s annotations of Hegel’s writings from September 1914 onwards, as he retreated into study in the face of world war.¹⁰ Lenin used Hegel as a means to facilitate Marxism’s agile reinterpretation of the demands of the present. Kevin Anderson, for one, has drawn out the significance of Lenin reading Hegel in 1914 and 1915 and interprets Lenin’s notes on that reading as the key effort that he needed to shake off the Neo-Kantianism dominating Central European Marxism as exemplified by Plechanov’s Marxism.¹¹ Lenin’s study of Hegel allowed him to develop the political pre-conditions for the April Theses and new thoughts on the national question in the age of imperialism, both developed through dialectical method. The Leninist distinction between the reactionary nationalism of the oppressor and the progressive nationalism of the oppressed was one deployment of dialectical thinking derived from Hegel’s method.

Daniel Bensaid drew Lenin closer to Western Marxism in another way through his connecting of a live tradition of communist activism with the work of the early Lukács and Korsch and an engagement across his various essays with Roman Rosdolsky, Pierre Naville, Lucien Goldmann and Henri Lefebvre. Bensaid’s theorizing of history drew him to analogies between Lenin and Walter Benjamin.¹² In orthodox forms of Marxism, as represented by Kautsky, for example, revolutionary capacity is tied to the constant growth of the industrial proletariat. A linear progress towards emancipation is set in train. Lenin breaks with this – the growth of the class is no longer in the foreground, and the working class is not seen in a monolithic way, but as heterogeneous, plural. In this circumstance,

political strategies take on an all-important role. A political revolutionary needs to have a feel for rips, discontinuities and the concrete historical moment. Such anti-automatic progressivism chimes with Benjamin's conception of history in 'On the Concept of History' (1939/1940), which itself post-dates Lenin, and has absorbed some of his revolutionary critical lessons, propelled as it is by a critique of the conformism of a German Social Democracy.¹³

Progress, Benjamin declares, is a phantasm lingering from nineteenth century ideology. The trust in progress affected philosophers and industrialists as well as Social Democratic reformists. Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' present a critique of progress as exemplified in a nineteenth century historiography, which had been produced by a bourgeoisie that, so he tells us, had reneged on a critical attitude, which no longer served a purpose for them. The bourgeoisie fantasised about infinite expansion, with the production of endless commodities to be sold in ever new markets. And the Social Democrats imagined that such expansion could, in the end, benefit the working class, for it would eventually lead to the enrichment of the lower ranks. This was tantamount to the gradual evolution to socialism, without the need for violent revolution. Benjamin notes a confusion that arose in Social Democracy at this time. It held a misguided understanding of the role of labour, which then turned into a fetish of labour, and a belief in salvation through technology, rather than through transforming the relations of production. The Social Democratic reformists were convinced that progress would occur, indeed was occurring, and they were so certain of the maintenance of their mass base, whatever circumstance, that they entered into deals with the political establishment. Benjamin identifies their bull-headed belief in progress and their faith in a mass base as the political will for 'servile inclusion in an uncontrollable apparatus'. Technological development, industrial production that 'outstrips human needs' (most noticeably in the production of newspaper copy and armaments) and the swooning crowds, mobilised but not 'active', had brought about something quite other than socialism: world war. And it threatened to do this twice. What Marx tried to head off in 1875 in his 'Critique of the Gotha Programme' outflows into all that that comes after – so lethally – and demands critique and revised analysis. That revision is a constant requirement. The moment is always a specific moment. Tradition demands to be reinvented.

Lenin as Expressionist. Creatively Indifferent

Another context of thought brings Lenin into a relationship with currents of thinking not deemed traditionally and orthodoxly Marxist. It need not negate the ways in which a 'Western Marxist' Hegelian frame emphasises movement, change and spiritual growth or retardation. It can be consistent with the avant garde idea of breakage, leap, the smashing

of tradition. But it allows a different context to well up that sets what is at stake in relation to more radical conceptualists of subject-object interfacing. It allows a less common philosophical alliance between strains of Expressionist Nietzscheanism and is made available through a review published by Walter Benjamin in *Die literarische Welt*, on 24th December 1926.¹⁴ Benjamin reviewed the book-length publication of Lenin's letters to Maxim Gorky, privately sent between 1908 and 1913. The collection had an introduction and notes by Lev Kamenev and was published by the Verlag für Literatur und Politik in Vienna in 1924. Kamenev, born in 1883, met Trotsky while a student revolutionary in Moscow in 1902 and married Trotsky's sister Olga Davidovna. He became close to Lenin in exile and joined him in the Bolshevik Party, after the split of the Russian Social Democratic Party. He was a prominent activist during the 1905 revolution, and, in 1908, he worked with Lenin on the journal of *Proletary*, published out of Geneva. Once back in Russia, after the overthrow of Nicholas II, he edited *Pravda*, along with Zinoviev. After some opposition to Lenin's call for insurrection in 1917, Kamenev joined in and became a member of the Politburo and chair of the Moscow Soviet. The introduction to the book of letters appeared in Germany at the time of his marginalisation from power in the Soviet Union for failing to be sufficiently loyal to Stalin.

Benjamin was excited by the letters because they allowed an approach to Lenin's personality, which draws closer to what Kamenev terms 'his spiritual appearance'.¹⁵ Benjamin underlines that this does not mean closer to the true and unified Lenin, but to something else. Most crucially, for Benjamin, the letters reveal a collapse of the bourgeois distinctions of public and private:

It would be most erroneous to conclude from these words that the letters are not also thoroughly political. For they are heartfelt precisely to the extent that a political imprint marks the most human connections within them. Here, 'private' and 'public' do not bash up against each other like bedroom and consulting room in the home of a doctor. Rather, they are integrated within each other. Where the most private aspects issue into the public realm, so too decisions about public matters are made in private, and, consequently, introduce a physical, political responsibility, which is something quite unlike the metaphorical, moral one. It holds the private person accountable for their public deeds, because this person is fully to the fore in them.¹⁶

For Benjamin, the letters from Lenin to Gorky are revolutionary, in that they underscore questions of accountability. This amounts to standing and acting within history not in the manner of a private individual, but as a figure dissolved into the public and with the public dissolved into the private figure. The two become inseparable. Private and public are

thoroughly intertwined. Another way Benjamin phrases it is that ‘Lenin must have been at one with existence’, because his hatred of the ruling order was founded on ‘creative indifference’. The phrase stems from Salomo Friedlaender’s 1918 book of the same name. Friedlaender, in a move drawn from his interpretation of Nietzsche’s ‘will to power’, argued that thought and volition must occur within an indifference that exists prior to all polarity and before any apportioning into subject and object. Polarity exists and contradiction characterises phenomena. A creative, productive actor sets out from the point of polar tension, not from one side or another: ‘All existence is polarisation of the indifferent insistence’.¹⁷ For a long time, so the argument goes, polarisation in the hands of theorists took more notice of the poles than of their indifference, in which is located the creative will, the polarising itself: ‘creatively polar’.¹⁸ Creative means here not the making of art or something connected to fantasy, but, rather, a fertility, a demiurgic ability to bring something into being. The notion found its way into Gestalt therapy.

Friedlaender was fascinating to Benjamin and he read his fantastical, slapstick, science fictional stories, composed under the name Myona, a reversal of anonym, German for anonymous. Friedlaender took anonymity into political principle, for action within the world is drawn from a pre-individual, pre-partisan position. Creative indifference as concept implies an anonymous position. Something is wrested into being not as a dialectical play between elements but more fundamentally as something that develops its determination through the force of polar energies. Benjamin identified something here that relates to Lenin, as a figure beyond private and public, or prior to it, who acts to bring something into existence through absorbing all the social energies that exist. Perhaps his affinity to the concept related also to Benjamin’s own burgeoning interests. A dialectical embrace of polarity is embedded in Benjamin’s conception, according to a claim in a letter to Gershom Scholem in 1925: ‘I want to work in a polar climate’. He indicated with this an interest in writing on Romanticism and political matters, instead of continuing to operate within what he perceived as the ‘all too temperate’ climate of his Baroque project on mourning plays.¹⁹ Benjamin drew close to the margins of the world and things, bringing into constellation or proximity polar edges, creative principles that were unreconciled, contradictory forces out of which being is made. At another time, in the draft of a response to Gershom Scholem’s baffled query as to whether he was peddling a ‘communist credo’, he described his own convictions as ‘a contradictory and mobile whole’.²⁰ This ‘contradictory and mobile whole’ is at the point of indifference between the pole of communist criticism, as antecedent to revolutionary overthrow and the construction of new life on earth, and the pole of ‘redemption’, a transcendent reference for the rescue of the potential available in each present, a cosmic, mystical, otherworldly intuition of the proximateness of different life.

Friedlaender conceptualises the fertile void out of which something might emerge and it is a location that bears no relation to individual self-interest. Creative indifference is angled by responsibility to tasks in history, responsibility to the movement of things and world in the direction of liberation, not, of course, as an inevitable progressive movement, and also not out of self-interestedness, but out of the ability to determine and direct a collective will. This is the context into which Benjamin places Lenin through the reading of his personal letters. It is perhaps an idiosyncratic reading in which dualism becomes polarism, another way of trying to work through dialectical concepts. It brings Lenin into Friedlaender's orbit, which circulated around Nietzsche's 'will to power'. As Benjamin observes of the letters, the main propellant of Lenin's theorising in the letters is his position against Gorky in the battle around atheism, and they express a number of 'fervid sallies', against social-religious movements, as propagated for a period in Russia, predominantly by Gorky's brother-in-law Lunacharsky, under the name of 'God Building' (богостроительство).²¹ Lunacharsky, who went on to become the first Soviet commissar of education, outlined his idea of God-building in *Religion and Socialism*, in 1908 – where he described Karl Marx as 'the greatest of the prophets'. God-building, a religious atheism, attempted to establish affinities between religion and Marxism and wrote of the new human, the transcendence of the dualism of spirit and matter, the importance of feeling and enthusiasm and the radical possibilities contained in religious sentiment. God was to be substituted by collective humanity. Lenin devoted part of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1909) to their critique. This supra-dualism might appear to have affinities with the stance Benjamin attributes to Lenin, but it is demarcated against it, as it refuses transcendence and stays with earthly concerns.

Benjamin cites Lenin's admonition of Gorky for his sympathy towards the god-builders: 'Well, isn't it horrible that such a thing should appear in your article?'.²² And he affirms an expressiveness in Lenin, repeated in all the letters, whether they are sent to Gorky's hermitage on Capri from Geneva, Bern, Krakow or Paris. Paris is identified as a place where Lenin later, as Benjamin's review puts it:

made it possible for fairy tales to come true when, as Giraudoux so beautifully put it, amongst such promises that grandmothers seem to make to sickly or dreamy children, at least one, one single one, was honoured. And that by virtue of Lenin and Trotsky. 'For, in a restaurant, the bread was served by Pushkin's great nephew and the granddaughters of Ivan the Terrible passed the salt'.²³

The revolution makes fairytales become reality. The split between waking and dreaming, fantasy and reality is lifted. The equalizing aspiration – between animals and humans, between rich and poor – that the fairytale

so often espouses, as argued by Ernst Bloch – is made possible by revolutionary imagination translated into practice through a sense of responsibility to something greater than themselves.

Benjamin concludes of the Lenin-Gorky letters:

These letters are not to be read as the private documents of a ‘genius’, in the sense of bourgeois history writing. Every undialectical construction of individuality – and the bourgeois one is just such a one – must abate. The dialectical, in contrast, crystallises around responsibility. A person is not unique and wide-ranging through the fullness of how he or she lives – he or she reaches as far as stretches the circle of things for which they are accountable: made to be held accountable, not that for which they feel accountable. Greatness, in the lexicon of historical materialism, is determined to the degree that a person’s ‘indifference’ becomes ‘creative’ through responsibility. Seen in this way, these letters, in which friendship presents itself under the dictation of political responsibility, are a new testament to the greatness of Lenin.²⁴

After Lenin’s death, Kamenev was alienated from the central committee by Stalin, despite his own siding with Stalin against Trotsky previously. That moment had passed. Stalin brought a new moment into being in which allies became enemies, again and again. In August 1936, Kamenev was executed after a show trial. Benjamin followed the Moscow Show Trials closely, as attested in his letters. A week after Kamenev’s death, Benjamin wrote a letter to Max Horkheimer:

I am naturally following events in Russia very closely. And it seems to me that I am not the only one who is at the end of his rope.²⁵

The Image After Time

Lenin’s *State and Revolution* has been characterised as an avant garde text, which proposes a politics of form, with Lenin’s insistence ‘that socialist power must involve a passage not simply from one class to another, but from one modality of power to another.’²⁶ There is no continuity, no tweaking of what has been in order to make it more equitable. Everything must be and look different. It has frequently been noted that Lenin did not extend this extensive transformation to culture. In that aspect – as in technology - there was room for continuity, even if, in differing ways, the social relations within which they exist are transformed. Critical remarks about avant garde movements were posthumously instrumentalised in the Stalinist era: *15 Years of Artists of the RSFSR*, in 1932, strongly favoured figurative painting.²⁷ Stencilled above the doorway of a small gallery presenting more experimental work were words from Lenin:

I am unable to consider the works of Expressionism, Futurism, Cubism and of the other 'isms' as the supreme manifestations of human genius. I do not understand them. They give me no sense of joy.²⁸

Perhaps the idea of human genius was the problem. Perhaps these works were not made by and for geniuses. Genuses need glorification – and that is how the image fell victim to Stalinism.

In the political retouchings, the fakers transform photography into painting, when they airbrush details, or fuzz over the edges of figures that have been moved into the image to hide the traces of figures that were once there. The photographs become soft-focus confections, and, conveniently, those who remain can only benefit from the airbrush's aestheticizing effect of placing a gauzy sheen to illuminate their faces. Such images, half-photo, half-painting fill up album after album of Party History, in richly illustrated books with names such as *The History of the Civil War in the USSR* or *Stalin on Lenin*, and generalizing captions such as 'How the fall of the autocracy was greeted at the front'. Much of the retouchers' work is dedicated to cleaning up photographs, ridding them of little details that get in the way of an unimpeded view of the great leaders, or debase the vista. Litter is cleaned up from around the feet of party bureaucrats. Clutter is cleaned away - for example, in an image of Krupskaya with Lenin. Lenin's telescope is pointing towards his wife's head, and it looks as if it is a gun. Even as late as 1980 a version of the image was retouched to manicure the past. Actuality, in all its arbitrariness, all its indifference to tendency, as the snapshot catches it, is feared. The split-second of exposure through the new, fast lenses mugs up the clarity of the story presented. Adjustments to the real, retrospectively turn all of history - and all of thinking - into one undialectical story.

- 1 Rodchenko 1976, pp. 250-4
- 2 Ibid., p. 252
- 3 Ibid., p.251
- 4 Medvedev 1989, p. 44
- 5 Trotsky 1973, p. 49
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Trotsky 1986, p. 82
- 8 Benjamin 1999
- 9 Linden 2007.
- 10 Leslie 2022
- 11 Anderson 2023
- 12 Bensaid 1990.
- 13 Benjamin 1968.
- 14 Benjamin 1991, pp. 51-3. It was published again in 1967 in the journal *alternative*, which was a publication associated with the New Left in Germany, from its appearance in 1964, under the editorship of Hildegard Brenner. In English, it is available as an insert, translated and with notes by Esther Leslie, in RAB-RAB Journal, issue #06, 2021.
- 15 Benjamin 1991, p.51
- 16 Ibid., pp.51-2
- 17 Friedlaender 2009, p. 530
- 18 Ibid., p.400
- 19 Benjamin 1994, p. 261
- 20 Benjamin 1989, p. 108-9
- 21 Benjamin 1991, p. 51
- 22 Benjamin 1991, p. 52
- 23 Ibid. This is a quotation from Jean Giraudoux's *Juliette au pays des hommes*, published by Emile-Paul Freres in Paris in 1924 (p. 204): 'Parmi toutes les promesses faites par les grand-mères aux enfants rêveurs ou malades, une du moins, la seule, était réalisée, du fait de Lénine et Trotsky. Le pain était servi par les petits-neveux de Pouchkine, le sel était offert par les petites-filles d'Ivan le Terrible.'
- 24 Ibid., p.52
- 25 Benjamin 1994, p. 533
- 26 Eagleton 2007, p. 56
- 27 Chlenova 2014, p. 147; Reid 2001
- 28 Zetkin 1929, p. 14; Lozowick 1935, p. 16; Mason 1933, p. 24

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