

October
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The Sidings of History

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In China Miéville's telling, the story of the Russian Revolution ends with the Bolsheviks stumbling out of the Second Congress of Soviets in Petrograd, having assumed full control of the government, blinking in the light of "a new kind of first day, that of a workers' government, morning in a new city, the capital of a workers' state. They walked into the winter under a dim but lightening sky" (304). *October* as a text, however, ends elsewhere. Though he has taken care to make nothing up in his telling of the two revolutions that rocked Russia in February and October of 1917, Miéville suggests in his introduction that the story of the revolution hasn't yet concluded, that "[i]f its sentences are still unfinished, it is up to us to finish them" (3), and he finishes his book with a speculative turn:

By the forest shacks are the points, the switches onto hidden tracks
through wilder history.

...

Onto such tracks the revolutionaries divert their train, with its contraband
cargo, unregistrable, supernumerary, powering for a horizon, an edge
as far away as ever and yet careering closer.

Or so it looks from the liberated train, in liberty's dim light. (320)

The book ends with the revolutionaries working in the present tense, not the past. For readers of Miéville's fiction, the image of a revolutionary train both liberated

from time and trapped on a horizon is a familiar one.¹ It is the avatar of an impossible future that might yet one day be manifest.

In *October*, the image of a train diverted by revolutionaries does other work as well. In the Epilogue, Miéville recounts an instance of the term *switchmen* being used as a slur for Bolsheviks. The provenance of the term and how it came to be derogatory is a mystery to the Western witnesses who recount having heard it deployed in a speech to the Duma. Miéville finds the key to unlocking this little linguistic puzzle in the glossary to the English translation of Chaim Grade's Yiddish memoir *Der mames shabosim*. There the term Forest Shack is defined as "the switchmen's booths along the railway tracks in the vicinity of Vilna. Before the Revolution of 1917, the area around the Forest Shacks was the clandestine meeting place for the local revolutionaries" (318). Miéville assumes the Bolsheviks must have garnered this nickname from their clandestine meeting place. When used by Bolshevik critics whose commitment to liberalism was based upon the belief "epochs must succeed one another perforce, like stations along a line" (319), Miéville claims the derogatory nature of the term becomes clear. The Bolsheviks' leap from Russian feudalism to communism without a stop along the line for liberal capitalism flew in the face of their critics' "stageist dogmas." "What could be more inimical to any trace of teleology," Miéville wonders, "than those who take account of the sidings of history? Or who even take them?" (319).

The teleology Miéville imagines the revolutionaries refusing as they shunt their train off onto secret tracks is two-fold. The Bolsheviks refuse the teleology of liberal capitalism as a necessary stage on the path to communism, and Miéville seeks to tell the story of their revolution in a way that refuses the logic that "October lead inexorably to Stalin" or that "the gulag [is] the telos of 1917" (315). He calls the revolutions of 1917 a "torqueing of history" (1) and by ending his book with what might have been possible rather than with what actually happened, he torques their telling. He is, of course, a novelist, not an historian. And by his own account he is a novelist who begins each project by starting "from the presumption the impossible is true."²

For this reason, the most interesting way to read *October* isn't for any simple insight into the political machinations of today.³ (Although it is hard not to conjure up contemporary American politics when reading about how "[t]he Romanovian method becomes one of appointing adventurer after incompetent after nonentity to grand office of state" while "liberals and the sharper-witted right grow ever more apoplectic," or how a representative to the Duma lambasts both the tsarina and her latest appointee as prime ministers by punctuating his speech to the body with the repeated question, "Is this stupidity or is it treason?" [36].) Nor is the most useful way to read the text to do so for new insight into the actual facts of the Revolution, though the average American reader will find two-hundred-odd pages of new information about the development of the soviets, the splitting of the Marxists into the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks, the existence of a non-Marxist agrarian communist party, the invention of the Duma in its varied permutations, what votes were taken when

and by whom, and how those votes confounded previous ones and/or the will and expectation of party leaders. Indeed, the story reads with all the force and intrigue of a thriller, if thrillers could be written about endless committee meetings. Miéville conveys the confusion and contingency of each revolutionary moment, noting at one point that in response to an uprising beyond their control the “Soviet leaders and their parties gathered in emergency session. They were not even certain what it was they needed to discuss or debate. The situation was tense but incomprehensible” (221). As a revolution via committee would likely be.

The most interesting way to read *October* is as a window into the political work Miéville hopes narrative — and perhaps art more broadly — is capable of. Miéville hasn’t written a history; he’s told a story, and it’s clear he’s told it in a way he hopes might intervene in history, might open up alternative endings to a story that isn’t finished yet. The Bolsheviks’ failure to achieve the new world their Revolution aimed at is only part of the story for Miéville. Though the revolutionary moments he celebrates “are snuffed out, reversed, become bleak jokes and memories,” he insists, “it might have been otherwise” (317). Tied to the events of history as he is in *October*, Miéville can only gesture speculatively toward what might have been, but, in his fiction, he is utterly free to imagine what that otherwise could be. While much of Miéville’s speculative fiction takes place in worlds organized in ways that differ from our own, his most recent novella, *The Last Days of New Paris* (2016), not only imagines an alternative history but dramatizes art’s material intervention in that history. By reading his nonfiction story of the Russian Revolution with and against his entirely fictive account of an alternative non-ending to World War II, Miéville’s project in *October* and his understanding of the potential for art to intervene in politics both become clearer.

In *The Last Days of New Paris*, Miéville conjures a Paris of 1950 still occupied but not yet subdued by Nazi forces. This Paris has been sealed off from the rest of France to contain the living manifestations of various works of Surrealist art brought to life by the accidental detonating of an imagined S-bomb. The war-torn arrondissements are a patchwork of Partisan-held territory, Nazi-controlled spaces, and terrain that can’t be claimed by either side because it is “too completely made of recalcitrant art for anyone to take” and will “shelter no one but the partisans of that art — the Surrealist stay-behinds, soldiers of the unconscious” (17). The living art of New Paris does what it wants, and though it cannot be counted on to act for the benefit of French freedom fighters, it constantly thwarts Nazi efforts to control the city streets.

In New Paris, only real art is manifested by the S-bomb, and real art, what Miéville elsewhere calls “the god stuff,” almost by definition isn’t made by Nazis.⁴ True Surrealist art can’t be compared to “a poem by some stupid American, or fascist scrawls, or Derianist crap” (52). It’s important to note, however, that what art manifests and what art doesn’t isn’t predicated on the political position of the artists who made it but rather on the quality of the art itself. Nazi art doesn’t fail to manifest because

Nazis made it, but because it is bad art: stupid scrawly crap. Nazis just happen to be capable of little else.

The most powerful manifestations are exquisite corpses, images made by chance as the Surrealists “play foolish games to thumb their noses at perpetrators of mass murder” (115). What gives these images the potential to leap off the page and into life, and therefore to intervene in the war being waged block by block throughout Paris, is the fact they are “neither evolved nor designed” but rather, “[c]oagula of fleeting and distinct ideas and chance... chimeras for this era” (116). The Surrealists produce “beasts of collective unconscious” (116). The very most important thing about a work of true Surrealist art is that it is free from the intention of any individual creator and free to wander the streets of New Paris without loyalty or obligation to anything or anyone. The “chimera for this era” are, in fact, not solely the products of famous Surrealist, though often they are.⁵ The manifestations wandering Paris are also the products of “hundreds of women and men never heard of and never to be heard of but who were the spirit of this spirit, the inspirations behind and unsung practitioners of this ferocious art” (117–18). For Miéville, Surrealist art represents an expression not of a person but of the people, just as the Russian Revolution, in the moments it is most true to its ideals, is a spontaneous uprising of the people, a revolution that has its own life antecedent to, and superseding the wishes of, any political party or political structure.

There is, of course, something wonderfully egalitarian in this way of imagining Surrealist art. It is not the status of the artist that confers status on the work but the collectivist spirit with which it is conceived and brought forth. The manifestation of a collective unconscious feels far freer than anything made by just one person for just one purpose. In the novel, the primary evil the Nazis commit in New Paris is to attempt to force life into their own terrible art, Frankenstein’s monster-style, and to control and direct these manifestations for their own purposes. No less a monstrous figure than Josef Mengele is the murderous mind behind the creation of Nazi manifestations.

Certainly it would be hard to argue with the notion that Mengele is bad and the collective spirit of French Surrealists is good, but it’s possible to imagine a world in which the collective unconscious of a population, if it is a population primarily made up of Nazis, isn’t much better than Mengele. Indeed, in *October*, Miéville reminds readers that the revolution was always under threat from anti-revolutionaries. Even in the heady early days, Miéville points out “ideologues and true believers like the murderous Black Hundreds — ultra-monarchist pogrom enthusiasts, proto-fascists and mystics of hate — skulked and schemed behind closed doors, biding their time” (107). Later, as a revolutionary government failed to consolidate the power to govern through the Soviets, “malcontents on the right pined for reaction, dreaming ever more loudly of a dictatorship” (195). From Miéville’s account of what aligns good art on the side of freedom, it is unclear what would prevent the collective unconscious of proto-fascists and pogrom-enthusiasts and those dreaming of dictatorship from

manifesting something deeply inimical to freedom as such. In a novel that attempts to fully animate the political potential of art, Miéville replaces an ideological with an aesthetic commitment, sweeping any kind of political commitment off the page. The manifestations of New Paris are outside of politics entirely, reducing art's political interventions to nothing more than happenstance.

When the Nazis successfully manifest an Adolf Hitler self-portrait, described as “[a] poor, cowardly rendition, by a young bad artist,” (162) that threatens to destroy New Paris by turning it into an entirely depopulated watercolor of itself, a “Paris in pastel outlines... a simpering pretense... a cloying imaginary” (162) all is almost lost. Hitler's great crime in this world is his penchant for bad representational landscapes. Because the problem has become an aesthetic rather than an ideological one, the solution in the novel is similarly free of ideological commitment. The human protagonist of the novel happens to have been carrying around the severed head of the Breton *Exquisite Corpse*, which he hurls at the Hitler self-portrait in a state of panic. The *Exquisite Corpse's* head, by chance, falls on top of Hitler's head, covering it like a Halloween mask. Now, “[i]ts head was not chosen by its artist” (166). As the image is “randomiz[ed]” by replacing Hitler's head with another one, the image becomes an “exquisite corpse. It is remade. It is without artist” (166). Once cut off from its artist, the image becomes part of the “collective unconscious,” unable to wreak the destruction it has been intended to, but also unable to do anything else, really. It is just one of many images, staggering about the streets of Paris, outside of but not in any obvious way in opposition to the ideology of any of the warring factions.

The story of *The Last Days of New Paris* ends in a way quite similar to that of *October*. A great struggle has taken place and an important battle has been won, but the struggle is never ending and a new world has not yet come. The protagonist, afforded the option of escaping New Paris where the Nazis still hold power even after their Hitler self-portrait scheme has been thwarted, chooses to return to the battle. He returns because “*The Last Days of New Paris* needs writing. Even though these are not the last days,” and so, “bruised and tired, triumphant and unsure, [he] takes a deep breath and steps over the boundary, back into New Paris, the old city” (168). The story is over and yet the story is not over, might never be over. The work of narrative is to foreclose the foreclosure of anything.

In the closing paragraphs of his epilogue to *October*, Miéville recounts Marx claiming “[r]evolutions... are the locomotives of history.” In a note Lenin wrote to himself just weeks into the new world created by *October*, he admonished himself to “[p]ut the locomotive into top gear... and keep it on the rails.” “But how could you keep it there,” Miéville wonders, “if there really was only one true way, one line, and it is blocked?” (319). If the enemy of the new world Miéville longs for in his fiction and in his political writings is teleology of any sort, then the refusal of his narratives to foreclose any future and the refusal of art to abide by or do service to any ideology work against that enemy. In his fiction Miéville can imagine Surrealist trains that

emerge from a now-defunct Sacre-Coer “where tracks shook like lizard tails” on an utterly irregular schedule “hurtl[ing] along one or other of these evanescent tracks into the city” (75). These trains are driverless, more art than infrastructure, utterly indifferent and impervious to the transit needs of the people of Paris. This doesn’t prevent the protagonist and other humans from hitching a ride as a train howls out into the city on rails that “appeared before it and sank behind it into the earth. It explored and they hung on within” (76). This locomotive can’t possibly be deterred by a blocked line; it makes its own line. But it is also a locomotive that can be driven by no one, not the Partisans of New Paris, not the revolutionaries in the woods of Vilna, not even Lenin. If trains throw up their own track and throw off the dictatorial control of rail and engineer, they are the avatar of total freedom and possibility. By very definition their destination is unknown. Or perhaps more properly, they have no destination at all.

Reading *The Last Days of New Paris* with and against *October*, it is hard not to wonder if an ungovernable train with no commitment to anything other than its own freedom is the way a Marxist wants to finish the unfinished story of the Russian Revolution.

Notes

1. See China Miéville, *Iron Council* (London: Del-Rey, 2004).
2. China Miéville. Interviewed by J.J. Charlesworth. *ArtReview* 60 (2012). 18 June 2012. Web. 11 July 2012.
3. Miéville says it would “be absurd, a ridiculous myopia” to do so, though he also suggest a proper reading of the history isn’t irrelevant to our contemporary political moment (318).
4. China Miéville, “Guilty Pleasures: Art and Politics,” International Socialist Organization, *Socialism* 2012, 28 June 2012 <http://wearemany.org/a/2012/06/guilty-pleasures-art-and-politics>
5. *Exquisite Corpse* (1938) by André Breton, Jacqueline Lamba, Yves Tanguy is an essential character in the story.