

# The Haunting of the October Revolution

Jean-Jacques Lecercle

**Abstract:** The essay analyses the haunting of the October revolution as the effect of two incontrovertible facts (the more than temporary success of the revolution, whereby capitalism became aware, once and for all, of its mortal state; and its eventual failure, which haunts the contemporary struggle for emancipation). The haunting is described through the analysis of three photographs documenting the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the spring of 2016. It takes the form of haunting by repetition (Marx), by trace (Bloch and Benjamin) and by farce (Marx).

**Keywords:** Annunciation; Black Lives Matter; farce; haunting, invisionary force; repetition; trace; Utopia

## 1. Two Hauntings.

From its inception, or should I say its *incipit*, in the first sentence of the *Communist Manifesto*, communism has been granted the status of a ghost, whose only locus of existence was in the hopes of the oppressed and whose only mode of existence was discursive – one recalls the miserable failure of Cabet’s attempt at creating a communist commune.

Thanks to the October revolution, the ghost materialized for a number of decades, if not strictly as communism, at least as “really existing socialism”, before going back to its preferred ghostly existence, as an “idea” (Badiou and Žižek’s “communist idea”)<sup>1</sup> or even an “idea of reason”, an idea both necessary and constitutively unattainable.

The question is: how has such temporary materialization affected the mode of being of our ghost? And the answer is: by duplicating the ghostly character of the ghost, as it is now the ghostly inscription of two incontrovertible, and potentially paradoxical, facts.

Indeed, this text could/should itself have two *incipits*, inscribing the two incontrovertible facts:

(i) A ghost haunts capitalism, the ghost of the October revolution.

(ii) A ghost haunts the contemporary struggle for emancipation, the ghost of the October revolution.

There was a pristine innocence in the first avatar of the ghost of communism, the innocence of Utopia, in spite of its scientific grounding in historical materialism. Now the time of experience has come, as the ghost is no longer floating in the limbo of our hopes and aspirations, but firmly anchored to the two incontrovertible facts. A *Janus bifrons* of a ghost, a ghost with a past, tarred with the brush of actualization of the virtual, as a result condemned to two different sorts of haunting.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Badiou & S. Žižek, 2010.

The first incontrovertible fact is that capitalism had the fright of its life, and even now, when the cold war has been won and history has come to an end (or so they say), it is aware, at the very moment of its triumph and expansion to the whole of the earth, that it is mortal. The ghost of communism, in its new vestments of the Russian revolution, may be repressed, or apotropaically deprecated, it cannot be ignored, and it returns as traces, to speak like Ernst Bloch, in our culture as in our political life.

The second incontrovertible fact is that the October revolution not only gave rise to the most blatant form of tyranny, but ended in miserable failure, not with a bang but a whimper, at a time when, to speak like Enrico Berlinguer, it had thoroughly exhausted its emancipatory potential. As a result of which the ghost haunts not only late capitalism but the current struggle for emancipation: how can we re-invent a communism that will not give rise to the disaster that followed the October revolution?

Because the duplicated ghost produces a double haunting, which is paradoxical - if not as a logical paradox (the incontrovertible facts are both true), at least as a political paradox. I propose to do that by looking at three photographs.

## 2. Three Photographs.

In the spring of 2016, the killing of a number of black men by the police in the United States gave rise to various protests and demonstrations and the Black Lives Matter movement. The three photographs I want to look at reflect this conjuncture.

The first photograph was taken during one such demonstration, from a vantage point slightly above the participants and at close range (so close that the two characters in the foreground, a policeman and a young woman, are seen only from their shoulders upwards). The left half of the picture shows a row of helmeted policemen, complete with prominent batons. The visors of their helmets are down, and reflect the light, which hides their faces and gives the impression that they are machines rather than men. On the right side of the photograph, we see a young black woman in profile. She, of course, wears no helmet and we see an expression of determination and defiance on her face. She is holding up her right arm, stretched at full length, with clenched fist, so that it appears almost to touch the helmet of one of the policemen she is confronting. The oblique line of the stretched arm occupies the very centre of the picture and therefore attracts our attention and gives the picture its meaning: resistance is the order of the day, the struggle must go on, and the picture conveys a strong “invisory force”, a term which I

introduced in imitation of Austin's illocutionary force<sup>2</sup> - it seeks to capture the fact that the picture interpellates its viewer at a specific place: we are made to empathise with the young woman, all too human, unarmed and apparently alone (the other demonstrators are out of shot) and sympathise with her gesture of defiance.

The composition of the photograph is worthy of the best Italian *Annunciations*. The characters are seen in profile, according to what Louis Marin calls the utterance axis of the picture – it goes along the surface of the picture, from left to right, and distributes the positions of the actors: not the announcing angel and the modest but welcoming Virgin, but a row of armed and threatening robots and a defiant young woman.<sup>3</sup> Louis Marin adds that there is another axis, the axis of enunciation, perpendicular to the surface of the picture, which goes from the point of distance, where the viewer must stand in order to look at the picture, to the vanishing point, in the depth of the picture, which organises the perspective. In this photograph, we are indeed placed at the distance point, in the position of the faithful looking at an *Annunciation*, and this point of distance is a point of empathy: we are both *out* of the picture, in the position of the voyeur, as we look on a confrontation which may well erupt into violence, and emotionally *in* the picture, sharing the point of view of the human character (as opposed to the police robots). What we are looking at is an inverted *Annunciation*. The silent and multiple Angel is the bearer of bad news, the news of repression and oppression. The equally silent Virgin (the silence of the confrontation is almost palpable – this is not a scene of interlocution, as the *Annunciation* was) is not in one of the five conventional postures of the announced Virgin, according to Michael Baxandall: *conturbatio* (disquiet), *cogitatio* (reflection), *interrogatio* (inquiry), *humiliatio* (submission) or *meritatio* (merit).<sup>4</sup> Defiance is not the characteristic of the speaker of the conventional words, “*Ecce ancilla domini*”. Not that the young woman's gesture is devoid of eloquence – translated into words, it might not be printable.

The second picture was taken in similar circumstances, during a demonstration in Louisiana. Taken by Jonathan Bachman, it captures the arrest of a young woman, a nurse by the name of Ieshia Evans, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The photograph is taken from a greater distance than the first, so that we see the whole of the actors, on a wide expanse of tarmac. Again, the left side of the photograph is occupied by a rank of

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2 J.J. Lecercle, 1992.

3 Quoted in D. Arasse, 1999, p. 29.

4 M. Baxandall, 1972, p. 51.

policemen, with not only helmets and visors but heavy boots, enormous backpacks and body armour which take away any appearance of humanity and make them look like alien monsters. The right side of the photograph is empty except for a young black woman who stands erect, as immobile as a statue. She is wearing a long flowing dress, not unlike the Botticelli Venus – the *Guardian* newspaper published the photograph with the caption, *A Boticelli nymph attacked by Star War baddies*.<sup>5</sup> She looks straight in front of her and in her left hand she holds what is probably a smartphone but gives the impression of being a chalice – indeed her posture can only be described as sacramental. There is no active defiance in her, only what could be interpreted as serenity or indifference.

We can already note a number similarities and differences between the two photographs. In both cases there is a series of contrasts between the woman and the police: female vs. male; black vs. white; one vs. many; unarmed vs. heavily armed; frail vs. solid to the point of being threatening. But there are also differences: in the first photograph, the police are passive, the woman active, with her extended arm and clenched fist; in the second the woman is immobile – it is the police that are active. And this is where the second photograph is extraordinary, why, in the words of *The Guardian*, it has become “an instant classic”. Between the young woman and the static row of policemen we see two of those robotic policemen, caught in full movement. They are obviously rushing towards her to make an arrest. But because they are in a phase of deceleration, their bodies are not thrust forwards but backwards. And since this is a photograph, what the French language calls an *instantané*, their movement is arrested so that the viewer cannot tell whether they are rushing forward to arrest her (which is of course what really happened) or being forcefully projected backwards by the force that emanates from the revealed deity – the attempted arrest becomes an epiphany, a modern equivalent of the incident on the road to Damascus. The viewer is made to hesitate between the all too probable reading (they are going to arrest her – in a second or so she will be yet another black victim of white police brutality) and the impossible but highly desirable reading (the force of the revelation of the holy is such that the rushing robots retreat in dismay). What the photograph expresses is the possibility that in the midst of oppression justice may prevail. For there is yet another difference with the first photograph: although the first photograph is a colour photograph, it is dark, the dominant colours are the black of the face of the young woman and the white of the reflected light of the policemen’s visors. In the second photograph, the police half, the left side of the photograph, is

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<sup>5</sup> The Guardian, 2016, p.9.

seen on a background of a three storey building and white sky, whereas the right side, the young woman’s side, is seen on a background of a tender green lawn and greener trees: the opposition of Nature and Society is clear – society is violent and aggressive, nature is peaceful and serene.

The third photograph is a still from a Pepsi Cola TV ad. It shows a well-known model, Kendall Jenner, handing out a can of Pepsi to a young policeman who is part of the usual police rank. Except that this policeman, as handsome a young man as the model is a pretty young woman, who holds out his hand in order to receive the gift, has no baton, no body armour, and a baseball cap instead of a helmet, which enables us to see his face and gives him the same human appearance as the female demonstrator who, incidentally, is white like him.

The ad, which obviously plagiarised the second photograph, created a furore and was quickly withdrawn. But the failure is not only political (the press has noted that now, in real demonstrations, the protesters throw cans of Pepsi Cola at the police): the picture, an obvious example of recuperation and commodification, has lost all its invisionary force. There is no ambivalence, as there is no hint of possible police violence – the police might be spectators of what is hardly a demonstration. The focus is on the moment of exchange – the right hands of the young woman and of the policeman are almost touching, an emotional exchange, a free gift of Pepsi and good will that is a metaphor of the exchange (of commodities against money, of the worker’s labour power against a salary) on which the capitalist system is based. And it is no chance that the photograph plagiarised is the second and not the first: once rid of its ambivalence, which we shall soon call dialectical, the apparently religious picture is reduced to a moral platitude, all strife excluded, all struggle abandoned, in the universal reign of good will. Yet, in what the French language would call *un éloge du vice à la vertu*, the slightest feeling of unease creeps up, for even a neutered and aseptic picture of struggle remains, even if only as a remote possibility, a picture of struggle.

The question of course remains, what has all this to do with the haunting if the October revolution? My contention is that such haunting takes the twin forms of repetition and trace and that the three photographs inscribe both processes

### 3. Haunting by Repetition.

The first page of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* famously expounds a theory of historical repetition.<sup>6</sup> The theory has two sides: it concerns both the historical event itself, such as a political revolution, and the perception of its actors. Marx begins by revisiting Hegel and the idea that a historical event occurs twice, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce: the comparison between Napoleon the great and his puny nephew, *Napoléon le petit*, immediately comes to mind. Marx then proceeds to analyse the consciousness the participants of the event have of themselves and their historical role as a form of repetition: the historical event being radically new (this is the very definition of an "event"), it can only be described in an already known language, as the new language that will emerge from it is not yet available. Marx describes this necessary repetition as the weight of tradition – the tradition of the past generations that oppresses the mind of the living. The metaphors he uses are the metaphors of vestments and of language: Luther had to put on the mask of the apostle Paul in order to initiate his reformation; the French revolutionaries of 1789 draped themselves in the *togae* of the Roman republic. As a result of which, the revolution of 1848 could only be a parody of the great Revolution. Thus, he adds, the beginner in the learning of a new language always translates it into her native tongue, and she only captures the spirit of the new language when she manages to use it without such translation. In other words the old always haunts the new, both as an impulse towards dereliction, by going from tragedy to parody and farce, and by imposing the weight of its own language on attempts to formulate the novelty of the situation..

The first photograph is a fine example of this second form of haunting by repetition. It is immediately recognised not so much, as I have suggested, as an inverted *Annunciation* (for this involves a displacement of recognition and various cultural filters), but as a traditional icon of the resistance to oppression, that is as a series of historical allusions. The first and most obvious reference is to Black Power and the struggles of the seventies and eighties. This young woman is a worthy descendant of Angela Davis, and her gesture of defiance a repetition of the scandalous gesture of the two Black American athletes on their podium at the Munich Olympics. But the allusion goes further back, to the clenched fists and raised arms of communist protests the world over, in the wake of the Russian revolution. And indeed, the aesthetic posture of the photograph, with the oblique line of the raised arm that is the pulsating centre of the picture, is strongly reminiscent

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<sup>6</sup> K. Marx, 1964, p. 219-220.

of the aesthetic of Soviet revolutionary posters or *photomontages*. The photograph owes much of its invisionary force to this political and aesthetic haunting – and this is where the inverted *Annunciation* reappears, as the invisionary force of the picture is at least in part due to this blend of traditions (the cultural equivalent of the Freudian compromise formation), the revolutionary impulse being itself haunted by older religious impulses, salvation having come down into this world in the guise of emancipation..

The photograph may be taken as typical of the haunting that affects the current struggle for emancipation. My two incontrovertible facts form not so much a paradox as a contradiction: the current struggle cannot repeat the stance of the October revolution, because of its abject failure, and yet it must, as the October revolution was the only moment in history when capitalism had to be aware of its own mortality. As Paul Valery famously said, *les civilisations savent qu'elles sont mortelles*. So do, or are bound to do, modes of production. To repeat *and* not to repeat, that is the question the haunting of the October revolution poses to the contemporary struggle for emancipation.

But capitalism, too, is haunted: my first incontrovertible fact will return, at the very time of its apparent triumph, like the Freudian repressed. This is apparent in the third photograph, and it takes the form of repetition as farce. The attempted plagiarism of the second photograph by the Pepsi ad is a blatant instance of recuperation. But I am not sure it is inspired by the facile pathos of ironic nostalgia, which prints Lenin's face on adolescent tee-shirts or dresses rock bands in the uniforms of the Red Army. There is an aspect of Freudian denial in the ad, the formula of which could be: not to repeat and yet to repeat, that is the question (we recognize the "and yet..." of Freudian denial: "I know full well that this is the case, and yet..."). What the ad is trying to achieve is not only the bowdlerization of the second photograph but the repression through denial of the first, along the usual correlation, a mixture of apparent similarity and essential difference. On the one hand, we have two young women facing the police. But, on the other hand, we have a series of contrasts: white vs. black; a single, human policeman vs. a rank of robots; a gesture of communication and potential friendship vs. a gesture of defiance and a total absence of communication. The third photograph is not so much a plagiarism of the second as the repression through denial of the first. And since this repression must be taken in the Freudian sense, the repressed struggle will insist, it will return to haunt the new picture and turn the whole exercise into a farce, as the farce always founders on the incontrovertible fact of the continuation of the struggle (hence those cans of Pepsi now thrown at the police). The historical

event occurs first as a tragedy; its repetition is a farce; but there is a third moment, the moment of the repetition through inversion of the repetition, where tragedy returns as renewed struggle. Napoleon the great was tragic, his nephew farcical, a farce that ended in the renewed tragedy of the Paris Commune. We find here our two hauntings: the farcical end of the October revolution haunts our struggle for emancipation – it also nourishes it, as its success (several decades is more than the merely transient) haunts capitalism at the moment of its (equally temporary) triumph.

#### 4. Haunting by Trace.

It is time to come back to the second photograph which is, after all, by far the most successful and also, whatever we may mean by the term, by far the best. My contention is that it inscribes the second type of haunting, the haunting by trace. The term – it is hardly a concept – has two origins. The first and most obvious is of course Bloch's *Spuren*.<sup>7</sup> In this book, the term, which is never precisely defined, has a ghostly quasi conceptual existence and must be grasped, in Wittgensteinian fashion, through its uses, through the language games, or rather stories and anecdotes, in which Bloch puts it to work – for instance in the anecdote of the pauper, the old woman who sits in the dark to save energy, and thus, even in her own private life, takes on the burden of economy (the ambiguity of the term is of the essence here) in order to make the life of her masters easier. The first section of Bloch's book ends on a sub-section entitled "Paying attention", where the term explicitly appears, and where the reader understands what a trace may consist in: we must, says Bloch, look at things "sideways", we must pay attention to "small events", use them as "traces or examples" – we must pay attention to the bizarre and the nugatory, and inscribe it in "fables", in the stories that we tell ourselves and by which we live. The anecdote of the old pauper is a perfect example of this. On the face of it, it is nothing, not even a story: an old woman sitting at home in the dark. But it is also the trace of a system of oppression and exploitation – in other words, it is haunted by the class struggle. In the same manner, our second photograph, unlike the first, does not directly tell a story of resistance and struggle. It is not, like the first photograph, a call to action. We know what is going to happen (the arrest of the young nurse by the rushing policemen – Dark Vader crushing the Botticelli nymph), but it hasn't occurred yet and a strange sense of serenity, which is also a sense of unreality, pervades the scene.

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7 E. Bloch, 1968, p. 13-15.

Oppression will in all likelihood win the day, but justice may prevail, it is at least a potentiality.

However, the extraordinary character of the photograph does not primarily reside in its indirection – a trace it may be, but it is not yet clear of what it is the trace. It resides in its ambivalence, in the hesitation in the viewer's mind about what is actually happening, in the contradiction of evoked potentialities. In this, the photograph is a perfect example of what Benjamin calls the arrested dialectic of the image. For Benjamin, a dialectic image is first and foremost an ambiguous image, the ambiguity of which inscribes a contradiction. In the *instantané* of the image, the contradiction becomes explosive, it is ready to release its potential for emancipation. This is strikingly the case with our second photograph, the invisionary force of which is inscribed in the explosive contradiction of the serenity and apparent indifference of the revealed deity and the rushing forward and/or backwards of the merely human. And what is released is the Utopian potential that is at the heart of any struggle for emancipation. Against the all too probable violent and repressive outcome of what refuses to be a "story", the Utopian possibility of the defeat of the powerful, of the weak and the oppressed getting the upper hand is what makes the photograph so memorable. History, Benjamin used to say, is the history of the oppressed – but it is animated by the messianic hope of salvation.

This is where we encounter the second meaning of "trace". In a short paragraph of the *Passagenwerk*, Benjamin contrasts trace and aura.<sup>8</sup> Aura, as we know, is the appearance of distance within closeness. A trace is the inverse of an aura: it is the apparition of a form of closeness within (temporal) distance. A distant historical event informs our current struggle: it is still close to us, even if its direct impact has weakened – in other words its current presence, as a trace, is a form of haunting. What nourishes the Utopian impulse of our second photograph is our first incontrovertible fact: ever since the October revolution, capitalism has known that it might be defeated, in spite of its (potentially temporary) domination. And the arrested dialectic of the photograph inscribes the paradox of my two incontrovertible facts, and turns it into a contradiction. Capitalism has won the Cold War, and yet it is haunted by the possibility of its defeat; our struggle for emancipation knows that the domination of capitalism is total, and yet it also knows that it can be defeated. Such are the two hauntings of the October revolution.

#### 5. The hauntings of the October revolution.

It is time to note that the title of this paper is ambiguous. The

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8 W. Benjamin, 2000, p. 464.

genitive may be taken either as subjective (the October revolution haunts us) or as objective (the October revolution is itself haunted). My second photograph inscribes both types of haunting. The Utopian impulse that it embodies does not haunt capitalism only – it haunts the current struggle for emancipation, and it has always haunted the October revolution. It raises the question of power: how can struggles for emancipation effectively displace the power of the bourgeoisie without turning the new power into straightforward dictatorship (in the Bolshevik tradition, this is the vexed question of the dictatorship of the proletariat as the extreme form of democracy – we know what it turned out to be). The stark opposition, which the second photograph stages, between naked power and apparently powerless, but possibly all-powerful justice, translates this contradiction into religious or even magical terms. And the same contradiction already haunted the October revolution: was communism only a Utopian hope or an actually reachable goal, against the emergence of Party bureaucracy, which repeated the bourgeois structure of political power (this is known in the tradition as “Lenin’s last struggle” – the dying Lenin warning his comrades against the rise of Stalin)? Did the backward state of Russia allow a communist revolution, in spite of the underdevelopment of the productive forces, or could the working-class movement achieve a great leap forward and start constructing the society in the future (this is known in the tradition as the contrast between Lenin’s concept of the weakest link and the stagism of the Second International)? On the face of it, the second photograph seems to be light years away from this problematic: my contention is that it bears its trace, in the shape of the structure of feelings that, to speak like Raymond Williams, we have inherited from the October revolution.<sup>9</sup> The Utopian impulse, twice repressed, by the scientific tendency of the Marxist tradition and by the necessities of the real politics of the struggle for power at the time of the civil war, returns, in the second photograph as in the consciousness of those of us that are part of the current struggle for emancipation. Perhaps this is where the main interest of this double haunting lies: in the necessity to go back to the revolutionary tradition and reconsider it. Perhaps the true legacy of the October revolution was prophetically announced in the title of the celebrated article by the young Gramsci, “A revolution against *Das Kapital*”,<sup>10</sup> Lenin and the Bolsheviks not as the creators of a socialist state but as the untimely supporters of communism, of a Utopian possible turned into an incontrovertible fact.

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9 R.Williams, 1977.

10 A. Gramsci, 1974.

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