

# What's Left? A Century in Revolution

## Tyneside Cinema

29 September – 8 October 2017

Tyneside Cinema and Durham University present *What's Left? A Century in Revolution*.

Marking the centenary of the 1917 October Revolution in Russia, this special programme of screenings and events examines the paradoxes of revolutionary cycles across the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, emphasising the global reach of these events. While rooted in history, the programme focuses on the significance of 'revolution' today. Examining events that cut across Russia and the former Soviet space, Latin America, China, the Middle East and North Africa, our exploration of cinematic engagements with revolutionary movements foregrounds the inextricable link between moving image and social action.

At the centre of the series is a new art film by the Russian artist collective Chto Delat? (What Is to Be Done?). Titled *The New Deadline #17 Summer School of Orientation in Zapatism*, the film performs an imaginary transposition of the Zapatista movement from Mexico to Putin's Russia. In their 2005 manifesto, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation introduced the idea of the 'Zapatista Embassy', urging followers to travel across Mexico and the rest of the world to deliver the Zapatista message. In preparing their work, the Chto Delat? collective met up with members of the Zapatista movement to discuss their revolutionary strategy. In their film, they imagine the 'Zapatista Embassy' appearing in Russia today, exactly one hundred years after the October Revolution. After its world premiere in Newcastle, this work will tour to the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) in Mexico City.

Our programme of film screenings opens with *October* (1928), Sergei Eisenstein and Grigori Aleksandrov's sweeping silent classic produced for the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution. Introduced by Dušan Radunović of Durham University's School of Modern Languages and Cultures, the film will be accompanied by a live piano score by John Snijders, Reader in Performance at Durham University's Music Department.

Going beyond commemoration, the programme seeks a non-nostalgic, critical approach to the meanings of 'revolution', starting with the example of Cuba. The programme features one of the classics of modernist cinema, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968), offering the UK premiere of the recently remastered version of the film. This audacious, sensual reflection on the early days of Cuba under Castro is juxtaposed with the 2015 documentary *Esto es le que hay* by Léa Rinaldi – a portrait of Los Aldeanos, contemporary Cuba's hip-hop sensation, whose music is inseparable from social and political engagement. This group serve as an example of a new generation of Cuban cultural and social actors who are reshaping the present-future dimensions of the Cuban revolution in global perspective.

Revolutions change the course of history, but they ultimately acquire meaning in and through the lives of ordinary people. Focusing on the legacies of the Chinese Communist Revolution, the programme examines the intimate interlocking of personal and historical time through two documentaries by Chinese authors based in Europe. *Once Upon a Time Proletarian* (2009), by novelist and film-maker Xiaolu Guo, profiles thirteen representatives of China's contemporary 'proletariat' as they try to make sense of their lives in a rapidly changing social, political and economic landscape. In *My Father's Choice* (2017), Yan Ting Yuen tells a very personal story of her father, who fled from the cultural revolution to eventually settle in the Netherlands, yet whose life, and that of his family, remains inextricably tied to the historical transformations of revolutionary China between the 1950s and the present.

In contrast to both Cuba and China, whose regimes, forged in Communist revolutions, persist to this day, Eastern Europe experienced, between 1989 and 1991, a revolutionary overturn of Communism itself. Our programme features Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică's *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992), which focuses on the five days in December 1989 that brought down the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu. At this point television became a key instrument of revolution, and the television studio a site in which history was made. Yet the immediacy and visual potency of television does not mean that the revolutionary downfall of Communism in the countries of the Eastern bloc, including the USSR itself, was necessarily rooted in democratic 'transparency'. A quarter of a century on, in *The Event* (2015), documentary film-maker Sergei Loznitsa is still trying to piece together what lay behind the supposed 'birth of democracy' in Russia in 1991. And, as becomes clear in the example of *Pussy vs. Putin* (2013), Russia remains fertile ground for the return of revolutionary activism, developing a new performative aesthetic of political radicalism, in which gender is deployed as one of its key weapons. At the same time, as we see in Dmitry Venkov's *Krisis* (2016) – a theatrical re-enactment of a Facebook discussion between Russian and Ukrainian artists after the tear-down of the Lenin statue in Kiev during the Euromaidan protests of 2013-14 – the revolutionary symbols of the Soviet era are still alive in the post-Soviet world.

Yet the most visible and prolifically documented revolutions of the present moment are, no-doubt, the mass uprisings which spread across the Arab world in 2011 and whose aftermaths still haunt the region in the shape of a series of ferocious civil wars, with Syria at the forefront. One of the distinctive features of the so-called 'Arab Spring' has been the transformative role that new technologies and social media have played not only in shaping the dynamics of these revolutionary events, but also in transforming 'revolution' into a radically new kind of visual experience. As our programme shows, the technologies of the new millennium have impacted in radical ways on how recent filmmakers are cinematically shaping these political events.

Peter Snowdon's *The Uprising* is composed entirely of videos made by the residents of Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Syria and Yemen, creating an imaginary pan-Arab uprising. *Silvered Water* (2014), a collaboration between exiled Syrian filmmaker Ossama Mohammed and young Kurdish activist Wiam Simav Bedirxan, distils footage from thousands of authentic videos to create a harrowing on-the-ground documentary chronicle of the ordeal undergone by ordinary Syrians in the ongoing civil war. Joe Piscatella's *#chicagogirl: The Social Network Takes on a Dictator* (2013) foregrounds the social-media-based transnationalism of revolutionary activism on the example of the role played in the

Syrian revolution by the young Syrian-American woman Ala'a Basatneh. The difficult predicament of women on the frontlines of revolution in the Arab world is the theme of Gini Reticker's *The Trials of Spring* (2015), a documentary account of a young woman from rural Egypt in search of freedom and social justice in a country torn by power struggles.

Our programme ends with the screening of Chris Marker's remarkable two-part documentary *A Grain Without a Cat* (1977). Marker's film displays an array of archival historical footage ingeniously edited to retrace the issues, events and debates that had provoked the upsurge of worldwide political activity in the late 1960s and early 1970s: the rise of right-wing oppression and the crisis of the traditional left as 'one event is swept away by another [...] and it all finally descends into collective oblivion'.

*What's Left? A Century in Revolution* is curated by Úna Henry on behalf of Tyneside Cinema and the team of scholars from Durham University, led by Dušan Radunović, including Andy Byford, Anoush Ehteshami, Abir Hamdar, Francisco-Hernández Adrián and Qing Cao. The programme is produced in association with the Cross-Language Dynamics, Open World Research Initiative (OWRI), programme of research (<https://www.dur.ac.uk/owri/>). The screenings are accompanied by director Q&As, panel discussions with guest speakers, and commentaries by members of the curatorial team.

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