

The future lasts a long time: Lucio Fanti's Soviet symphony, 1969-1977.

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All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned.....

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 1848

Fanti would say: the URSS is a necessary detour for me to speak of us, of myself

Louis Althusser, March, 1977.

Contemporary art history in Russia seems curiously introspective; while developing theoretical paradigms with which to review the Stalinist, post-Stalinist and contemporary eras, and alert to the best post-Soviet scholarship from America, the complex histories of Western European communism and its impact on art and thought have sunk into deep oblivion. The paintings of Lucio Fanti, exhibited in France, Germany and Italy in the 1970s, are extraordinary in their premonition of post-Soviet painting's deployment of irony and kitsch - and in their collapse of the heroic epic of the USSR into a timeless and melancholic dreamworld. Produced as early as 1969, the works traverse the period shaken by the revelations of Solzhenitzyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, while philosopher Louis Althusser's preface to Fanti's elegaic series for Mayakovsky in 1977, precedes by a few months his declaration of the 'crisis of Marxism'.

France was deeply traumatised by the spectre of its socialist-realist heritage in painting and sculpture, a heritage suppressed even in its own theoretical discussions of socialist realism in the 1970s, with the names of André Fougeron and Boris Taslitzky - well known to Russian art historians - always anathematized. The Narrative Figuration painters of the 1970s were involved, of course in critical contexts far removed from that of their 1950s counterparts. Besides the philosophers actively engaged in writing about their work - Jean-Francois Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Althusser himself, the artists participated in a vital dialogue with film production at the time - the works of a Jean-Luc Godard or Chris Marker. This relationship is now used to reposition and depoliticise this highly political painting - as the Centre Pompidou exhibition *Nouvelle Vague* (painting, video and film) designed for young audiences in Beijing and Shanghai demonstrated in 2005. The current exhibition at the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Orléans, *Figuration Narrative dans les Collections Publiques, 1964-1977*, readdresses the importance of this movement, showing what young French curators bought for the State prior to the opening of the Centre Pompidou in Paris. It also offers a rare chance to see Fanti's work.

Lucio Fanti grew up in the ambiance of his father, Giorgio Fanti, Italian Communist intellectual and correspondent for the *Paese della Sera* newspaper, a job which took him from Rome to the USSR, as well as London and Paris. Giorgio Fanti would become a close friend of Althusser - along with other prestigious intellectuals of the Communist 'family' who would eventually write on Lucio Fanti's work, such as Jorge Semprun and Italo Calvino. Fanti's tutelary figure as a painter was the Spanish anti-fascist artist-in-exile, Edouardo Arroyo, who lived in Montparnasse's La Ruche, the 'beehive' of artists once frequented by Alexander Exter, Chagall, Soutine and Léger - where Fanti lives today.

At the age of fourteen Fanti was sent on an exchange programme with a group of boys to a Soviet pioneer camp in Artek. On his return, his father was moved abruptly to London: the young Lucio, speaking neither English nor French, was dispatched to London's Lycée Française. It was in London that the satirical and critical works of artists such as Hogarth and George Grosz would first make an impact on Fanti who began drawing at this time. In 1960 Arroyo's first London exhibition, reviewed by Giorgio Fanti, strengthened links which would

develop when Lucio became an art student in Paris; he gravitated around the militant painters who had seized and reformed the Salon de la Jeune Peinture in the later 1960s, in particular Gilles Aillaud, a former philosophy student and disciple of Althusser, Arroyo himself and the Italian Antonio Recalcati. In 1965, these three artists had created a scandal with their eight-canvas figurative sequence *Live and Let Die, or the Tragic End of Marcel Duchamp*; showing the *doyen* of 'ready-made' contemporary art arrested, assassinated, and carried off in a coffin draped with the American flag (a reference to Duchamp's acquisition of American nationality in the context of the Vietnam war).⁶³ Europe was pitched here against an already 'American' Duchamp; figurative painting against 'ready-mades'; political realism against Duchamp's entirely apolitical life; moreover critical theory, discussions and group practice ('Althusserian' procedures) against the minimal interventions of Duchamp, the artist-genius of the late 20th century.

With a painting of Vietnamese peasants in a rice field, Lucio Fanti contributed to his first exhibition, the 'Red room for Vietnam', conceived for the Salon de la Jeune Peinture of 1968, postponed to 1969 because of the May student revolution; an apotheosis of political figurative painting, it involved artists such as Henri Cueco. (His Delacroix-inspired *The barricade, Vietnam, 1968*, was exhibited in 'Paris, Capital of the Arts, 1900-1968', London and Bilbao, 2002). The Salon of 1969 was particularly aggressive: 'Police and Culture' contained many group works, including the *Datcha* by Aillaud, Francis Biras, Fabio Rieti – and Lucio Fanti. Parodying an academic history painting in oils, it bore an ornately-presented inscription at the base of its frame: *Louis Althusser, hesitating to enter Claude-Lévi-Strauss's datcha 'Triste Miels', where Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes are together, just when the radio announces that the workers and students have decided, joyously, to abandon their past...: a satirical statement targeting the hermeticism of the Parisian structuralists.*

That summer, however, when Fanti joined Arroyo in the Italian resort of Positano on the Amalfi coast, his first extraordinary works were created: *Nephews of the Revolution* and *Statue* which figured in the militant exhibition *par excellence* held to celebrate Lenin's centenary in 1970, *Kunst und Politik* held in Karlsruhe, Wuppertal and Frankfurt. Their strangeness, however, distinguishes them from the range of styles celebrated by these 'children of Marx and Coca-Cola'. Just like his fellow members of the so-called Narrative Figuration group, Fanti used photographic documents; but while a Bernard Rancillac or Gérard Fromanger would take contemporary advertising or photographs of Parisian street scenes respectively, projecting images onto canvas with an epidiascope or simple slide projector prior to painting them, Fanti squared up – like an Italian master. Moreover his images were not of France or Italy but stemmed from the sepia mythologies of the Soviet Union: Fanti's fairy tales He has shown me his sourcebooks – often gifts from Soviet officials to his father. In *The History Lesson* Fanti depicted himself as a young child, eyes unhealthily red-rimmed, transfixed by the stories and images in a huge album devoted to Lenin's life and exploits: Lenin at the Finland station, Lenin with Nadejda Kroupskaia.... A book on the Ukraine, published in 1955, served for the Positano paintings – and later works such as *Soviet Garden*, 1972, with its grand Lenin sculpture. The natural beauties, city sites, civic monuments, photographed here deployed genres inherited from the city panorama and ethnographic studies of mid-nineteenth-century Russia, coming together with the more recent viewpoints and smiling faces of Soviet propaganda. Turning the pages, amidst these picture-book images we come across a militant parade of bemedalled officials, so close to the 'uncles and aunts' who march in the sky over *Nephews of the Revolution*. Two generations removed from the revolutionaries, these sepia ghosts parade through the brave new world of a distant past. Weightless, the metaphoric lack of gravity extends now, alas, to their ideals and beliefs, all ruined. Yet paradoxically, the painting is not only a Proustian remembrance of things past

when all was bright, energetic, forward-looking - but Fanti's first work of melancholy and mourning.

The image of Merkhurov's huge Lenin statue in the Ukraine state museum almost crushing the young school teacher and her pinafores students, also appears in the 1955 album, captioned 'You could not go through these museum rooms without a deep impression of the image of the great proletarian leader...' *Statue*, translates this photograph - already rich with unconscious bathos - into a disturbing mirage of a dystopic sublime. In the *Kunst und Politik* catalogue Fanti chose a quotation from Lenin's *Revolution and the State* (1917) to replace any biographical statement: '*The oppressing classes have constantly rewarded great revolutionaries during their lifetime with continual persecution. After their deaths, they are canonised, turned into harmless deities, aureoled in glory...The bourgeoisie and working class opportunists collude together in this appeasement of Marxism which represses the revolutionary dimensions, the revolutionary soul of the doctrine.....*' In the *Statue* painting, Lenin is dead, arrested in marble, impotent amidst his female entourage... he suffers the same fate - 'museumification' - as the seascape on the wall. The claustrophobia of the original photograph where Merkhurov's statue is constrained by its corner setting and the closely-cropped schoolgirls which surround it, gives way to a conversely agoraphobic space of nightmare- the 'museum without walls' of classic Communism. Yet the red sky streaked with purple - a double of the seascape and doubtless a quotation from a Soviet master - spreads like blood across the scene, surrounding Lenin with an aureole which both signals the living presence of the spectral *revenant* and heralds a terrifying actuality, 1970 saw the forming of Italy's Red Brigades, committed, like the Maoists in France to the principles of revolutionary violence; these paintings were shown again in Rome in Fanti's first solo show in 1972 at the Galleria 'Il Fante di Spade' - the Ace of Spades - in this political context, with the full panoply of the Italian Communist elite at the *vernissage*. Fanti's audacity was avowed; moreover the show would be restaged with similar punch, accompanied by important critical texts in Paris's Musée de la Ville de Paris in 1973. By this time, works such as *Soviet Bathers*, 1971, were pitched against American hyperrealism which had arrived in Europe in force at the Kassel Documenta of 1972; the European riposte, including French Narrative Figuration and Italian *neorealismo* and *nuovo racconto* was immediate. The hyperrealists' sharp-focus present contrasted, however, with Fanti's time-warped universe: here an idyllic sunset bathing scene becomes sick: photograph-based greenish girl bathers clash with the lurid colours of both sky and river: the Moscow sky-scraper pierces the water with a shadow reflection which deems the anonymous bodies irrevocably bound to ideology.

In the aftermath of 1968 the increase in revolutionary terrorism recapitulated an Oedipally-staged conflict of generations. Jean-François Lyotard's *désirrévolution* was echoed by Althusser's work **on psychoanalysis** as well as politics, and the desire of a generation enriched by Reich, Marcus and Lacan to reclaim Eros for civilisation, to attack phallogocratic regimes of power. In short to play Hamlet to the petty Polonius-type leaders who ruled as substitutes for the great dead Father. *Lenin under glass*, recreates the imaginary museum in all its claustrophobia, where now the leader is decapitated, castrated; freedom for Fanti is always repressed by the sky, the space beyond rules, beyond society; but with *Lenin's armchair at Smolny*, 1975, the space of the Father returns. It is a *reprise* of Isaak Brodski's famous painting of 1930, itself already a posthumous, photographed-based representation, *unheimlich* with the significant emptiness of the white chair (Stalin?) confronting the great leader engrossed in his treatises. In Fanti's painting, the spectral presence-in-absence of the Father is made more uncanny as the 'museum without walls' with its black and white socialist-realist reproductions and municipal palm-pots falls away into an idyllic seascape at sunset; the dissolving railway track leading away from the foreground is also ominous (the

trope of Auschwitz doubling for the Solzhenitzyn's Gulag?). Moving apparently from culture to nature, *Electrification plus the sentiment of nature* combines the romantic landscapes so beloved by Fanti – sourced in Caspar David Friedrich or, for example, the luminous moonscapes of an Arkhip Kouindji from the State Russian Museum, St Petersburg - with Lenin's famous dictum, 'the Soviets plus electrification' symbolised by the pylon. (The pylon persists, inverted, reflected in Fanti's landscapes of the flooded Camargue region in works of 2002-3). The piercing light shining here through the pine-trees cannot be natural, but supernatural surely, a God-presence, revelation: to name the Leader would be sacriligious. Fanti's citational techniques evoke our empathic responses to nature and sublimity – while allowing the artist a definite *plaisir de peindre*, the sensual pleasures of painting in an outmoded genre. Yet meaning is always already undercut by a melancholy both personal and political. This is the new 'left melancholy' of the 1970s, a *reprise* of Walter Benjamin's term of the 1930s. It pervades the output of other Narrative Figuration painters such as Jacques Monory, but never with the acuity, the sense of personal investment, disappointment and black, Hamlet-like irony focused on the notion of political promise that we find in Lucio Fanti. The presence of the horizon in so many paintings relates to this concept of promise; the reflection of images in water, a painterly cliché from the Dutch landscape painters to the impressionists onwards, creates images whose inversion becomes the sign of their dysfunction, their emptiness of meaning (see Fanti's *Nymphéas* series of the early 1980s, with inverted pylons and Lenins – his homage to Monet).

The post-Solzhenitzyn period was deeply inglorious for the French Communist Party – which Louis Althusser, like Pablo Picasso, chose never to leave. Increasingly Althusser would demarcate his distance from the apparatchicks of the Party and its ideological orthodoxies by using the past as a critical probe. In spring 1976, he prefaced his disciple, Dominique Lecourt's retrospective analysis of the Lyssenko affair - a scandal at the height of French Stalinism which implicated the national scientific establishment. Althusser's preface *Histoire terminée, histoire interminable*, deliberately evokes Freud's 'psychoanalysis terminable and interminable'. He deliberately used the occasion to recall facts which *crevent les yeux et la mémoire* -literally put out the eyes and memory. The shameful Lyssenko story 'doesn't exist' he claims, because it is buried in the silence of Soviet archives - but also in the silence of French communists who are 'impotent, as marxists, to account for their own history, especially when it's a failure'. The Soviet leadership refused and still refuses, he said, to offer a marxist analysis of the the 'gigantic error, buried, after its millions of victims, in the silence of the State.' On December 16th, 1976, Althusser violently attacked the decision taken at the 22nd congress of the French Communist Party when, with elections in mind and a new slogan 'the union of the people of France' it renounced the principle of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Althusser's responded to this self-declared historic event, reminding the party that their use of examples of 'dictatorship', Hitler, Mussolini, Pinochet, had deliberately avoided 'Stalin', 'not just the individual Stalin as such, but the structure and the confusion of the Soviet Party and state; the line, 'theory' and practices imposed by Stalin for forty years, not just in the USSR but on Communist Parties the world over... the trials, the confessions, the massacres and the camps.

Althusserr's anger, his own mourning for an ideal, encountered Fanti's very specifically in April 1977, when he prefaced the painters show at the Galerie Krief-Raymond. The works marked a significant development. Gone was the picture-postcard evocation of a thaw-period Soviet Union, proud of its achievements and its father-figures. From the passions of a 1960s *Dr Zhivago*, the imagined territory shifts to more desolate wastes in this era of a post-Gulag imagination; Fanti offered a meditation upon Mayakovsky, retrospection, suicide. Mayakovksy's 'twenty years of work' had been celebrated over the winter 1975-6 as one of

the most richly-documented exhibitions in Paris's Centre National d'Art Contemporain. Now Fanti showed *Useless Poems I, II and III*, two taking the title 'As a telegram steals my strophe', the third 'The sea is not always calm in the Crimea'; and a series of five works 'Young man in a state of nostalgia, I- V', quoting 'the boat of poetry has smashed against the everyday'. With a certain *pudeur*, Fanti changed 'love' to 'poetry' as he quoted, Mayakovsky's final adieu, his suicide note which repeated an unfinished fragment of verse. The rowing boat would become the very symbol of Fanti's creativity, his studio in a sea of unrest – always charged, as in the *Boat of Poetry*, 1981, with the sound and savour of the USSR.

Althusser visited Fanti's studio to discuss his preface: he was fascinated above all by the proposition that one could *paint ideology*: *A good Hegelian would say 'Fanti paints the conscience of the Soviet Union. A marxist would say 'Fanti paints the official Soviet ideology of the URSS : the type of identity the Soviet Union needs to give itself to ensure the official unity of its 'citizens' and its 'peoples'. Fanti paints 'official Soviet photographs composed by photographers attentive to their ideological duties... the ideology "exists" in these images, in the treatment of the "subject" the symbolism of the figures, the framing, the type of landscape, the statues, the statues, the statues that people the gardens, in the statues and the pictures that inhabit their dwellings.*

Althusser's reaction is complex: 'an image charged with ideology never presents itself to be seen as ideology in image'... At the moment when Duchamp's *infra-mince* filtered through the Pompidou centre – for Fanti's exhibition coincided with their opening Duchamp retrospective - Althusser speaks of the 'miniscule interior distance' which throws the image off balance, identifies it for what it is, denounces it... *'In the silence of his various procedures, Fanti practices this implacable décalage: either the insistence on the uncanny in the ordinary, colour as violence or mourning, the strangeness of certain papers whisked by the wind across an immense plain crouching under a tempestuous sky, or men who read in the snow while pages escape from their books, or even absence, witness these gigantic electrifying pylons of a Communism without Soviets!*

Alert to the 'look' of the paintings, Althusser was alert, himself, to their irresistible sadness their mourning, the poignancy of Mayakovsky's fiery exhortations, speaking as from the dead: 'Lenin, Mayakovsky: their statues ... are like phantoms, surging with a surprising lightness through the winter sky, abandoned in the mourning branches of naked trees. Words of a dead man, dead, always alive in what he denounced....'

In November, 1977, Althusser travelled once more to Italy where his speech 'At last the crisis of Marxism' was given in a context that his editors have failed to note: *Cultural Dissent* - the huge meeting in Venice, following on from the Biennale of 1976 - of intellectuals from the USSR, from Eastern and Western Europe, with a major visual arts exhibition: *New Soviet Art: a non-official perspective*. Here for the first time in the West the works of Eric Boulatov, such as *Horizon*, 1971 proclaimed the existence of a 'post-Soviet' figuration that had been anticipated by Fanti as early as 1969. (The circulation of European narrative figuration and images of American Hypperealism in Moscow raises wider questions here). Althusser's speech in this context preceded his devastating public attack on the French Communist Party in April 1978. His own 'death as a philosophical subject' would be announced by his colleague in the wake of his murder of his wife in 1981 and the excoriating biography written in the melancholy years of his own silence: *The future lasts a long time*, which was posthumously published in French in 1992.

Fanti's paintings have never seemed more actual, anticipating now much contemporary Soviet art – even works in video, such as the Blue Soup group's DVD *Way out*, 2005, where the evocation of Lenin's armchair in Smolny and the play of spectral absence and presence through light effects is again the subject. The future lasts a long time.

Lucio Fanti's theatre decors became celebrated from 1973 onwards. He continues to paint and to work for the stage, recently Luc Bondy's Le Viol, Paris and Vienna, 2005-6.

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