

# Art

MONTHLY

## Re-Imagining October

Calvert22 London 2 October to 6 December

'Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns,' wrote Walter Benjamin, 'threatens to disappear irremediably.' 'Re-Imagining October' examines the junction between the USSR's history and the contemporary reality of Russian moving-image practices. At first it feels like a straightforward thematic survey, but rather than grounding their exhibition in a piece representative of the displayed ensemble, co-curators Mark Nash and Isaac Julien instead took as their starting point the works of two outsiders who once quickly passed through Russia: Derek Jarman and Abderrahmane Sissako. As foreigners temporarily involved in an alien situation, these filmmakers' positions mirror somewhat the curators' own. Nash and Julien's gazes, their biases (well-known research interests) and limitations (given cultural perspectives) are not only acknowledged but proffered. 'Re-Imagining October' could have been a rather rigid academic exercise, but it turns out to be a potent claim for the subjective within the scholarly, and a suggestively individual take on a still under-represented art scene.

Sissako's *Octobre*, 1993, narrates the doomed love story

Derek Jarman  
*Imagining October* 1984



between a Russian woman, Irina, and an African man, Idrissa. She's pregnant and considers abortion; he doesn't know about it and is miffed by her sudden coolness. The film unravels languidly, echoing the characters' interior ruminations. Sissako, who grew up in Mali, studied in Moscow at the Federal State Film Institute (VGIK) in the 1980s. The filmmaker's fictionalised autobiography encapsulates a feeling experienced by any exile, what he describes as 'a sense of rejection ... beyond racism'. The film is a portrayal of solitude and displacement, a poignant staging of the impossibility of ever truly fitting in.

In 1984, Jarman was invited to Moscow to present his cinematic adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and, while there, he shot everything he came across on Super 8, in his customary manner. These blurry images of the city's landmarks, bathed, accidentally or not, in reddish light, became the first part of *Imagining October*, 1984. There is as much awe as there is anger in these shots – a set of conflicting moods highlighted by the grand orchestral soundtrack. But anger finally takes over in a text-based sequence equating the Soviet Union with Thatcherite Britain. 'Market Forces, MORI Polls, Audience Rating' / 'Best Way to Crush Effective Expression of Independent Conscience' appear in neat white lettering on a dark background. 'This is shit, but we think you'll like it.'

Jarman's impassioned tone is very much in line with his outspoken political commitments and his fight for gay rights in the Tory Britain of the 1980s. In his catalogue essay, Nash reminds us that homosexuality was recriminalised in the Soviet Union in 1933, a state-endorsed homophobia, he writes, 'paralleling the growing discrimination in the UK which in 1988 led to the enactment of Section 28 of the Local Government Act that prohibited local authorities "promoting homosexuality"'. In *Imagining October*'s last sequence, Jarman responds to this overarching repression with a blissfully homoerotic Last Supper. Throughout this last scene, two cuddling epebes pose for a painter. The result is progressively revealed: a monument to queer heroism, Socialist Realist-style.

*Octobre* and *Imagining October*'s references to the Soviet Revolution – the seminal moment that defined Russia as experienced by both filmmakers – is also an obvious homage to Sergei Eisenstein. Russia was the cradle of modernist experimental filmmaking and cinema still occupies an exalted position in its culture. 'Remember that of all the arts,' said Vladimir Putin recently, quoting Lenin, 'for us the most important is the cinema.' The rest of the show is dedicated to this historical and artistic legacy.

In most films, the political apparatus of marches, flags and statuary is used as a synecdoche to signify the regime. In *The Parade*, 2006, Ksenia Peretrukhina sets up an absurd procession (oddly reminiscent of the recent People's Republic of China's 60th anniversary ceremonies). A woman, digitally multiplied into a battalion of similar figures, mechanically marches, rides a bike and models folk costumes from various corners of the USSR. Moscow's Red Square is eerily empty: except for a few old ladies, there is no audience. What was once grandiose, a celebration of the country's excellence and diversity, is turned into a poetical parody, a caricature somewhat disturbingly tender for the era it playfully mocks.

There is a similar melancholy in Factory of Found Clothes' black and white film *Scarlet Sails*, 2007. Young women in a sewing workshop labour over a long, unidentified piece of fabric. Their task is soon interrupted by a group of older women singing a popular song. All hell breaks loose as the newcomers grab the cloth. The final shot shows them ceremoniously carrying it around a seaside pier, the textile now crimson, personifying both a dead utopia and the blood poured in its name. Victor Alimpiev's take on the red flag equally reflects Communism's historical failure. In *To Trample Down an Arable Land*, 2009, dancers, arranged as in a glorious historical painting, carry flagpoles bearing faded, dirty pink banners. The slow choreography ends with the performers blocked by a wall, their effort towards an unattainable ideal perpetually defeated.

Shot with a hand-held camera, Kristina Norman's *Documentation of artist's action on 9 May 2009 in the previous location of the Bronze Soldier monument in the centre of Tallinn*, 2009 (from *After-War*, 2009), shown earlier this year in the Venice Biennale, has a real reportage feel. The film shows the artist placing a papier maché effigy of a Russian soldier in the spot where, for years, a similar bronze had stood before being relocated to the city's outskirts as part of a de-russification programme. The artist's simple gesture immediately triggers strong emotional responses from the Russian-speaking community, with people bringing flowers and posing in front of the sculpture. The police quickly intervene, removing the statue and the artist. Norman's use of a remnant of the past underlines very current tensions within Estonia. She takes stock of the social consequences of the Soviet Union's dismantlement, and of the long way there is still to go before reconciliation can be expected.

Of the 15 films and videos on display, seven are more than 20 minutes long. Such a selection can only raise the thorny issue of the propriety of film display in a gallery context. What kind of experience are the viewers supposed to have? Are they meant to stay for hours desperately trying to see everything (as I did)? Or is it enough to dip in and out? Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark*, 2002, is looped on one of the gallery's main walls. This film is a tour de force, a single 96-minute take in which the French Marquis de Custine wanders throughout the Hermitage, discussing with an invisible narrator (Sokurov) 300 years of Russian history. At Calvert22, there are no subtitles, reducing the film frustratingly to moving wallpaper. Yet *Russian Ark*'s role in the exhibition is crucial: it introduces the idea of Russia before the Bolshevik revolution, putting all the other pieces in historical perspective. It is bold curatorial choices like this, as well as the expert use of film display devices, that add such nuance to Nash and Julien's discourse. ■