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The ghost of Vkhutemas

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The following essay was written for a conference in Moscow earlier this year to celebrate the centenary of the foundation of Vkhutemas, the Higher Artistic and Technical Studios. The author dedicated it to the memory of his friend the architect Yuri Pavlovich Volchok (28 February 1943–6 July 2020), Professor at The Moscow Institute of Architecture, and former head of the Scientific Institute for the Theory and History of Soviet Architecture.

As a counterpoint, the Editors of the Journal of Architecture *asked for a response from three students of architecture: Lilian Pala (graduate of ETH Zurich and final year student at the Architectural Association); Claire Johnson (graduate of Edinburgh School of Architecture and about to start her MArch at Manchester); and Małgorzata (Gosia) Stanisławek (graduate of the AA). We prompted them with some questions to start an online, asynchronous conversation, which was then edited and is printed below the original essay.*

We live in an era when the notion of objective historical truth is under renewed attack. Old fashioned wisdoms are upended, fiction murders fact, and the past is recast, not just as a contested terrain, but in some cases as myth. In such a scenario, anniversaries become highly problematic. What for some is a cause for celebration, for others is a moment of bitter regret. Whole histories can be invented and likewise denied. What then are we to make of the 100th anniversary of Vkhutemas?

In an essay written in 1970 to the editorial staff of Novy Mir — a Russian language literary magazine established in 1925 — Mikhail Bakhtin commented that 'literature is an inseparable part of culture and it cannot be understood outside the total context of the entire culture of a given epoch'.[1] The same can be said for architecture, which similarly, can only be fully understood within the complex historical relations out of which it emerges. This should not be controversial in itself, and one might argue is self evident. But the consequences of such a position throws up what for some is an uncomfortable historical truth: that the history of Vkhutemas, and more generally the Russian avant-garde, is inseparable from the political aspirations of the 1917 revolution. For the first time in history the opportunity presented itself in real time, to imagine what a post-capitalist city might be like.

Radical ideas for linear cities, green cities, prototypical workers' clubs, communes, and the socialisation of land were all circulating in the political and architectural imagination prior to the revolution. It is also the case, as Catherine Cooke reminded us, that Vkhutemas was a broad church in which Neo-Classicists, Rationalists, and Constructivists all competed for students. In many ways, it was the embodiment of Lunacharsky's 1918 dream of 'free art studios' based on 'maximum creative freedom'.[2]

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But what made Vkhutemas so different from other schools in Europe was the way in which so many staff and students embraced the new challenges and social tasks thrown up by the revolution. These were articulated most clearly in the manifestos and teaching programmes of the Constructivists, but also in the voices of luminaries like El Lissitksy who memorably declared that 'it is to the social revolution, rather than to the technological revolution, that the basic elements of Russian architecture are tied'.[3]

This was inspirational stuff for disillusioned students of architecture like myself in the 1970s, and as I reread the essays and archives collected by Catherine Cooke and Khan Magomedov, I still feel a tingle up my spine.[4] Faced with contemporary cities scarred by environmental destruction and profound socio-spatial inequality, The Organisation of Contemporary Architects (OSA)'s Editorial in 1927 on how the abolition of the private ownership of land had opened up hitherto unimaginable opportunities for the new planning of cities, seems like a fairy tale. As for Aleksei Gan's demand for the complete democratisation of planning and the development of new forms of artistic labour that would transform the revolutionary festival into a mass urban action, well, frankly, it is a cry from another universe.[5]

To dismiss such ideas as utopian fantasy, as is frequently done, is to see utopias solely in the sense of 'ready-made blueprints' for ideal societies and cities. In contrast, Ernst Bloch encouraged us to conceive of utopia, not as a thing, but as a *process of thinking*, of creating 'wish landscapes', and of speculating on a world that transcends the limitations and contradictions of the one we are in. It might well be, as Engels quipped, that the more that 'perfect systems of order', like Fourier's Phalansterie, were worked out in detail, the more they drifted off into pure fantasy, but we should not lose sight of their value as provocations that interrogate how we might live.[6] Bloch referred to this function of utopia as 'the unimpaired reason of a militant optimism'.[7]

This is how I have always thought of projects like Ivan Leonidov's *Palace of Librarianship*, Krutikov's flying city, Mikhail Okhitovich's egalitarian network diagrams, and indeed Tatlin's tower: not as schemes to be implemented in a literal sense, but as works in progress, invitations to debate, to think, and, yes, to dream about what tomorrow might bring. It strikes me that we need this sort of dreaming more than ever. As Karl Mannheim remarked, if we were to relinquish utopias, 'man would lose his will to shape history, and therewith his ability to understand it'.[8]

For me, this is one of the most important legacies of Vkhutemas and the avant-garde. With its ethos of creative freedom and open debate, it reminds us of other possible horizons, both in terms of education and of practical alternatives to the dystopian reality of the capitalist city. Its premature dissolution in 1930 also leaves us to wonder what might have been if it hadn't fallen victim, like so much else, to the counter-revolution. In the Empire city of an Absolutist State there could be no talk of disurbanist theories of decentralised settlements, paintings of black squares, or novels featuring devils and talking cats.[9] The avant-garde was exiled, and architecture, like painting and literature, retreated into the reactionary cultural orthodoxy of what became

known as Socialist Realism.[10] Far from ‘withering away’, as both Engels and Lenin had dreamt, the State was rebuilt at a monumental level with a city to match. New grandiose boulevards and triumphalist buildings reinforced Moscow’s old neo-classical plan, and at its epi-centre were laid the foundations for what would have been one of the most extraordinary architectural manifestations of state power ever seen: Boris Iofan’s *Palace of the Soviets.*[11]

But ideas cannot be murdered. Vkhutemas survived and lives on in the imagination. In this it is akin to a restless ghost that reverberates through time, a generous spirit that continues to reveal its secrets to every new generation that has the desire to ask, ‘what if’? Like Marx’s ‘Spectre’ with which he opens the Communist Manifesto, or indeed the ghost of Hamlet’s father, Vkhutemas is a ‘revenant’ that reappears, time and time again, to demand some form of resolution, however impossible that may be.[12]

I have always thought that one of the most important functions of any educational institution is to push students to explore the furthest boundaries of knowledge, to encourage them to transgress accepted norms, to learn, and then to break the rules. In the memoirs of their student days at Vkhutemas, Kirill Afanasev and Lidiia Komorova spoke passionately about the highly fertile creative environment and atmosphere of ‘unlimited inventiveness’ and how they were given the freedom to select their own professors and course of study.[13]

I have now largely retired from teaching in an architecture school, partly because I feel the freedom to explore, to invent, and to pursue knowledge for knowledge’s sake is slowly being dismantled. The marketisation and commodification of higher education has a tendency to reduce knowledge to easily digestible bite-size chunks of information that can be readily bought and sold. Taken to its logical extreme, such forces threaten the whole idea of an open school of architecture as an experimental laboratory. Bit by bit, the curriculum becomes infected with a vulgar utilitarianism that sees value only in terms of quantifiable targets and money. In the realms of the truly pessimistic imagination, this sorry state of affairs is just one more sign of the victory of instrumental reason and the reduction of thought to ‘mere tautology’.[14]

I sincerely hope that I am proved mistaken.

To combat such gloom, and to reassure myself that another world is possible, I like to indulge in time-travel to those moments in history when a window opens onto the *iskra* of something else.[15] Which is how I found myself drinking in an underground Moscow bar with the author Yevgeny Zamyatin. I told him of my travels across Europe, of how I flew through the explosive geometry of Melnikov’s workers’ clubs, stumbled through the first iterations of Kurt Schwitters’s Merzbau, and knelt before the wizardry of Naum Gabo’s kinetic spatial constructions. At length we discussed the merits of collage, Lenin’s reservations about Dada, and how the principle of space–time displacement was the only legitimate foundation for art. Which is all very well, he pointed out, but what the authorities really wanted was an art of certainty without the burden of doubt or abstraction. This is why his satirical novel about a city composed of numbers and a machine that unbends the wild curve of the universe has

been banned.[16] 'You know,' he said, 'some day, an exact formula for the law of revolution will be established. And in this formula, nations, classes, stars — and books — will be expressed as numerical quantities'.[17] With this alarming thought in mind I caught the tram to the vast Khodinka field in the north west of the city to witness Alexander Vesnin and Liubov Popova build their colossal air-born installation in which the capitalist city does battle with the victorious communist city of the future. Fast forward fifty years: it's Paris, 1968, and scrawled on a bridge is the immortal slogan 'Soyez realistes, demandez I'impossible'. I have always thought that these words would make a good title for an architecture school and a fitting epitaph for Vkhutemas.

Notes and references

1. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* ed. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. by Vern McGee (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010), p. 3.
2. 'Socialist society can give the life of the artist an endlessly richer content than the society in which he has lived till now […] [m]aximum freedom […] resulting from the transition in world history. And briefs set not by the merchant classes but by the people, with it creative freedom, and a free structure for all establishments. These are the principles which can uniquely answer the great perspectives now opening up to art.' Catherine Cooke, *Russian Avant-Garde: Theories of Art, Architecture and the City* (London: Academy, 1995), p. 160.
3. El Lissitksy, *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution* (London: Lund Humphries, 1970), p. 27.
4. I was privileged to have known Catherine well. I first met her in the mid 1980s after I had been to Moscow for the first time with an architectural map guide and list of key buildings that she had published with *AD* magazine. At the time, she was the only person that I was aware of in Britain who was seriously interested in the history of Russian architecture and in particular that of the avant-garde. For a while she was my mentor. She invited me to lecture at the Architectural Association in London and in Cambridge, where I met the surviving members of Tecton, the firm set up by Berthold Lubetkin whom I interviewed just before he died. Her archival work over the years was nothing short of extraordinary and her last major publication on the avant-garde gave a real flavour of just how thorough her work was as a historian. She was and remains unique and I will always remember her fondly as a larger than life figure, generous with her time and ideas, who dressed in the garb of a Russian peasant but spoke like the Queen of England.
5. Catherine Cooke, 'Avant Garde or Tradition? The Revolutionary Street Festivals', in *Russian Avant-Garde,* pp. 23–24.
6. 'Society presented nothing but wrongs; to remove these was the task of reason. It was necessary, then, to discover a new and more perfect system of social order and to impose this upon society by propaganda, and, where ever it was possible, by the example of model experiments. These new social systems were foredoomed as utopian; the more completely they were worked out in detail, the more they could not avoid drifting off into pure fantasies.' Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Duhring* (Moscow: Progress, 1978), p. 311.
7. Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*: *Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), p. 107.
8. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Kegan Paul, 1936), p. 236.

9. The attack on the avant-garde and experimental forms of cultural production was all encompassing and was paralleled in Germany by the closure of the Bauhaus in 1933. Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *Master and Margarita* was banned and Malevic was temporarily imprisoned, prevented from teaching, and died prematurely in 1935. Two years later at the height of the repressions, the radical Bolshevik sociologist and 'disurbanist' Mikhail Okhitovich was arrested and disappeared forever into the gulag.
10. For a more in-depth discussion of Soviet architecture in the 1930s, see Jonathan Charley, 'The Dialectic of the Built Environment: the making of an imperial city', *Journal of Architecture*, 1.1 (1996), 19–38.
11. The result of an international competition, it was to have been built on the site of the demolished and recently rebuilt Cathedral of Christ the Saviour.
12. It comes as somewhat of a surprise to many people to discover that not only was Marx a scholar of literature who peppered his work with literary motifs, but he employed a thoroughly Shakespearean cast of apparitions, spirits, ghosts, and simulacra with which he set out to reveal, dismantle, and transform the world. Famously the Manifesto begins with the immortal 'A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of Communism', a spectre that in the next stanza he likens to a nursery tale. In the first volume of *Capital*, a whole section is devoted to the 'Fetishism of Commodities – The secret thereof' and the fantastical transformation of social relations between humans into relations between things. And so it continues right up to the last pages of Volume III, where we are invited to enter 'an enchanted, topsy-turvy world, in which Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre do their ghost walking as social characters and at the same time merely as things'. See Karl Marx, *Capital,* 3 vols (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1984), III, p. 830. Derrida commented that 'Marx does not like ghosts any more than his adversaries do. He does not want to believe in them. But he thinks of nothing else. He believes rather in what is supposed to distinguish them from actual reality, living effectivity'. See Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, (Routledge: London, 1994), p. 47.
13. Cooke, *Russian Avant-Garde*, pp. 174–75.
14. Adorno and Horkheimer were the undoubted masters of the pessimistic intellect. Take for example the following: 'Mathematical Formalism, however, whose medium is number, the most abstract form of the immediate, instead holds thinking firmly to mere immediacy. Factuality wins the day; cognition is restricted to it repetition; and thought becomes mere tautology'. See Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of The Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 22.
15. 'Iskra' literally translates as a 'spark', or 'flash'. When combined with the word *nadezhdi*, hope, it becomes 'glimmer of hope'. *Iskra* was also the name given to the pivotally important newspaper published by Russian socialist émigrés at the turn of the twentieth century.
16. An engineer and former Bolshevik, his seminal novel *We*, a biting satire on the trajectory of the revolution was the template for both Huxley and Orwell. It was smuggled out of Russia and published in the west. He died in exile in Paris in 1937.
17. Yevgeny Zamyatin, 'Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters', in *A Soviet Heretic: Essays by Yevgeny Zamyatin*, ed. and trans. by Mirra Ginsburg (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 108.

Response to 'The Ghost of Vkhutemas'

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JoA: There is a strong sense of poignancy in Charley's 'Ghost of Vkhutemas' piece. Vkhutemas was a revolution lost; at the most we have now only restless ghosts, spirited spectres, and demanding revenants to continue the dream of impossibilities. How optimistic or pessimistic are you feeling about your education now and its relevance and potential for the future?

Lilian Pala (LP): I believe that we are experiencing the end of an economic and cultural cycle. Architecture as a cultural, societal, and financial phenomenon is subject to such cycles, but despite being inherently projective, it always lags behind. The convergence of the current global crises with the end of the architecture of spectacle[1] precipitates the rift between what architecture consists of and what it is supposed to deliver. At times, systemic issues such as the environment or racism are addressed but they seem to overtake the practice of architecture and architectural education. If I were more optimistic, I could read this rift as a new starting point — especially for my architectural education — and see myself formulating new demands for architecture. Yet, I feel lost amid the demands of 'spectacular' architecture and the new, but vague, demands of a more 'conscious' architecture.

Claire Johnson (CJ): Overall, I'm optimistic, but with two more years of study ahead of me, and coming from the world of commercial practice, the pessimist in me has grown. The relevance of the architect, let alone my own education, seems to be in question. If we are, as Lilian suggests, at the apparent end of an 'economic and cultural cycle' then we might again be at a juncture where a window can be 'opened onto the iskra of something else'. Perhaps what is needed to spark the inventiveness seen in the Vkhutemas is the sense of urgency and direction that arises on the back of revolutionary sociopolitical thought. I agree that 'Soyez realistes, demandez l'impossible' would make a good title for an architecture school but would add that in addition to demanding the impossible, the architect needs to suggest new ways in which it could be achieved.

Małgorzata Stanisławek (Gosia, MS): Vkhutemas was a product of its time, like my education has been a product of mine. What has been most relevant about my time at the AA has been the training to interrogate the social and other systemic structures that can often be so frustratingly deterministic in where one might end up, and learning how to find the tools to challenge them in theory and practice. Rather than deciding whether one is pessimistic or optimistic, it is more important to decide whether one has the courage to

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take responsibility for one's ideas and test them out. The ability to have courage will determine various future potentialities.

JoA: Do you share the view that the opposing forces of an experimental lab of 'maximum creative freedom' and instrumentalised targets of curriculum, qualification, and marketable skills cannot be reconciled in contemporary schools of architecture?

CJ: From its establishment, the Vkhutemas offered free education to candidates from all backgrounds, regardless of their academic standing. Sadly, the UK's institutions offer no such allowances; our architectural profession continues to show depressingly poor statistics in relation to diversity and inclusion. It does not offer a true reflection of society and this cannot help with what I think should be an important part of a school's mission: to foster broad, challenging, and potentially innovative thinking and ideas.

MS: There is a difference between schooling and education. A school should provide education for all but currently schools of architecture are not universally accessible to those who wish to pursue architectural learning. A new format for architectural education urgently needs to be developed.

LP: Disagreeing with the premise of the question, I would like to raise a doubt about the instrumentalisation and marketisation of skills. Skills are the foundation for creativity. For example, knowing how to calculate the cost of a building is not only a marketable skill, but also a possibility to inform one's project.

A balance between practical knowledge and knowledge for its own sake has to be achieved. An excess of the former could lead to a corporate culture, creating an uncritical pipeline from academia directly into practice; an excess of the latter could lead to self-indulgence. Preparing for and negotiating the architect's changing role between self-fulfilment and service provider, a school should therefore not only offer a solid education in terms of histories, art and design, construction, and technical knowledge, but also allow the students then to work against all of it in their projects, similar to Charley's understanding that 'one of the most important functions of any educational institution, is […] to learn, and then to break the rules'.

Vkhutemas applied the same strategy: every student had to visit the same basic course. Against this background, they then developed their projects in the different studios, which in turn had their own set of rules to work against.

CJ: The enormous developments which arose in the Vkhutemas were arguably a result of the continuous methodical feedback between the educational process, research, and testing which existed under the school's curriculum. The balance a school maintains between 'maximum creative freedom' and 'instrumentalised targets' is important to the quality of education it offers and the wider role of

higher education within society itself. It is the 'degree-machine' notion of contemporary higher education — 'tick-box' grading, evidence-based criteria mapping, and the emphasis on the production of 'oven-ready' professionals — that Charley laments.

JoA: Charley argues for the role of 'utopia' — between ideal blueprints, radical thinking processes, mass urban actions, and dreams of impossibilities — as one of the most important legacies of Vkhutemas. If one can step out of the dialectics of 'utopia' as opposed to 'dystopia', what does 'utopia' mean to you in relation to what is expected of students in their schools, and what is expected of schools in society at large?

MS: Based on my experience at the AA, the concept of utopia echoes through much of the students' work. The realm of possibility — of what might be — expands with each project. The power of utopia lies in examining questions raised by students' projects, the degree to which present conditions allow for the realisation these projects and what they might set in motion. I wonder whether it is in our unlimited imaginations' confrontation with the 'real world' that the realisation of dreams is tempered, or whether the 'real world' is limited only by the boundaries of where our imagination might take us. As Bloch noted, 'utopia arises out of the sea of the possible' and 'the content of the utopian changes according to the social situation'.[2]

LP: It is the understanding of the projective in architecture in terms of something entirely new, 'authentic', or 'original' that I often encounter in schools, and that I find fundamentally problematic. Architecture is not about a 'new' world, but about a 'better' one. This is tied to practical aspiration, and ultimately to the possible. I am not against the projective in architecture — that would make no sense — but would like to emphasise the meaning of utopia as a kind of courage to change the present towards a future, rather than to 'invent' a future, which is often how it is understood in schools.

MS: The notion of 'cruel optimism'[3] may be relevant to my feeling of entrapment between optimism and pessimism, and perhaps relevant to the role that schools play in fostering utopian ideation. Margherita Huntley argues that schools are places that encourage students to come up with ideas and ways of thinking that are impossible to practice once we have finished our courses, or at best are so discriminatory that only the privileged few are able to pursue ideal conditions for producing such ideas. Ultimately it is the nature of reality that 'both arrests and denies us our pleasure'.[4] The school is perhaps expected to produce shiny new architects to enter the world, trained to provide a service, but it is in the nature of chasing utopias that 'there is a great deal that is not fulfilled and made banal through the fulfilment'.[5]

CJ: Perhaps a more tempered definition of 'utopia' has been expected of students in my own experience of architectural education. Tutors have encouraged

us to deliver a social mission through our projects but that we explore this mission through projects that were very grounded in reality and through others which were entirely fantastic and more akin to the utopian thesis projects at the Vkhutemas. I think that both types of projects are important and entirely relevant within architectural education.

JoA: What is the value of learning about Vkhutemas now? Do you think this is a project of revealing and altering certain objective historical truths which, as Charley remarks, have been debated throughout the twentieth century? Or if the revision of history is the duty of every new generation, then how would you critique 'learning from Vkhutemas' now in relation to your beliefs as a student in contemporary society?

LP: To look at histories always has value, and those of the Vkhutemas show the potential and power of ideology and collaboration. The fact that almost none of the projects imagined were built yet had such an impact on architecture either politically or formally, speaks for itself. Learning from what was is not a project of altering histories. On the contrary, to concern oneself with the Vkhutemas (now), is at most to reinterpret the histories told about this incredible time.

MS: Helen Carr wrote that in writing *A History of Soviet Russia*, her great-grandfather, the historian E.H. Carr, 'was initially optimistic; "it is possible to maintain that objective truth exists", yet by 1950 he concluded: "objectivity does not exist"'.[6]

Learning from history in general, and from Vkhutemas specifically, is necessary for students of architecture to understand our education in the present. E.H. Carr separated facts into facts of the past and facts of the present. Facts of the past are undeniable but rudimentary — Vkhutemas was founded in 1920 in Moscow. Facts of the present, on the other hand are, as Helen Carr paraphrased her great-grandfather, 'something a historian has chosen to be a fact […] "history means interpretation"'.[7] So I would say that a 'reinterpretation' of history is inevitable, rather than a 'revision'.

The concerns we may currently have as students with the content, culture, politics, and organisation of schools of architecture are ones that we share with the students of Vkhutemas despite our differing context a hundred years later. Their ideas around freedom to select a course of study or whether a school should be state-sponsored and free to attend continue to reverberate in conversations today.

CJ: Charley's essay is both poignant and somewhat nostalgic; it is pessimistic. As a student I am perhaps more predisposed to optimism than a person reaching the end of their career. I question the pessimism implicit in the portrayal of Vkhutemas as a 'revenant that reappears, time and time again, to demand some form of resolution' and am unsure as to what should be resolved.

Vkhutemas students looked to explore a new future. Their experiments and projects were open-ended, not closed, resolved outputs. Every time this 'revenant' reappears it will do so in a new context, have a different relevance, and will be interpreted differently. Not so much a 'restless ghost' as an 'opportunist', waiting for a time which embodies a revolutionary spirit akin to that which birthed it.

MS: It is ironic that Charley's piece starts with the claim that 'objective historical truth is under renewed attack' but ends with some fictional anecdotes with himself as protagonist nostalgically portraying some of those events: nostalgia and utopia are often placed in opposition, the former being considered regressive, the latter progressive. Maybe due to his disappointment with the reality of today's architecture schools, Charley fictionalises history as a time and space he would much rather be a part of.

CJ: With regards to the closing paragraphs, I know from conversations with tutors that the freedom to invent and explore knowledge for knowledge's sake is declining within schools of architecture and is a sentiment shared by others. These conversations are evidence of the continuing relevance of Vkhutemas. If we can learn anything from the legacy of Vkhutemas, it is that intellectual inquiry and experimentation are necessary to move beyond assertions of what things are and what they should be, so as to see them for what they can be. Utopian and experimental projects are useful as a means to break away from our own cycle of thinking in order to consider alternative solutions (both through examination of the aims of the avant-garde experiments and the methods), as well as to recognise the underlying mechanisms that subvert a system's own logic.

JoA: Can you see potential to enact the utopian thinking from your school projects, or do you believe it can only remain an idea today? And why do you think that even the existential threat of the climate crisis is not sufficient to spark some kind of revolution?

CJ: This is where the 'post-truth society' comes in — a lack of trust in experts and nationalist leanings (climate change requires a united global response). Tackling climate change also threatens to entirely undermine the current capitalist systems. We are in an increasingly divided society with enormous inequality. A terrifyingly large amount of money and resources is now in the hands of very few people. Real change thus seems unachievable without those few, who benefit the most from existing systems, exerting their power to make change happen. The manipulation of people through the use of digital media and data harvesting only furthers this.

MS: I'm very cautious about complete revolution and decrying capitalism without first trying to reform it. I think some of my caution stems from listening to my family's stories about communist Poland and experiencing

post-communist recovery and prosperity. Industry before the fall of communism was drastically more environmentally unfriendly than after 1989, for example. Perhaps in order for a 'real revolution' against capitalism to occur, it needs to be at some kind of 'mature' stage, where the 'ghosts of socialism' are not nightmares that people still alive today lived through. In 1980s Poland, capitalism *was* the utopia, and in some ways, maybe still is.

I don't think we can be complacent in the face of the climate catastrophe, challenges to democracy around the world, post-truth, government corruption, poverty, racial and gender inequality, etc. Change is urgent and necessary. Yet what does 'real revolution' mean? Revolution can be violent or non-violent; it is different to evolution, resistance, or rebellion. Utopian thinking in projects allows one to step outside what is and imagine what might be. Whether it takes the form of revolution or an evolution of existing systems to something entirely new is less relevant than the willingness to change. We have to first imagine a different world before we can create it, and this is a conscious effort of utopian thinking.

Notes and references

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2. Ernst Bloch, 'Something's Missing: A Discussion Between Ernst Block and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing', in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 1–17 (pp. 3–4).
3. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 2.
4. Mark Cousins, 'The Ugly (Part 1)', *AA Files*, 28 (1994), 61–64 (p. 64).
5. Bloch, 'Something's Missing', p. 2.
6. Helen Carr, 'History According to EH Carr', 8 May 2019, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2019/05/eh-carr-what-is-history-truth-subjectivity-facts> [accessed 19 August 2020]
7. Ibid.