

*‘If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.*

*‘... We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process ...’*

Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*

INVERSIONS, ECHOES, phantoms, reflections: fragments of several old dreams of turning the world upside down were arranged in Michael Wilkinson’s “Lions After Slumber”. The space was dominated by an inversion of an inversion: an enormous black-and-white print of the photograph of Piccadilly Circus which had been hung—upside down—in Malcolm McLaren’s shop Seditious. A stretched linen included the famous photograph of the Paris Communards standing over the toppled Vendôme Column—but the image was turned on its side, so that it looked as if the restored emperor was once again lording it over the Communards, who now resemble dead bodies. The 90-degree rotation of the image transforms the photograph into a grim retrospective prophecy: power will soon stand on its feet again, and the Communards will be dead.

The show’s title was itself an echo of an echo. It was a reference to Scritti Politti’s 1982 track ‘Lions After Slumber’, which borrowed from Shelley’s 1819 poem ‘The Masque Of Anarchy’. Shelley imagined a passive resistance rising ‘like Lions after slumber/In unvanquishable number’ to avenge the dead of the Peterloo massacre. According to Slavoj Žižek, the point made by ‘The Masque Of Anarchy’—‘arguably the greatest political poem in English’—is that ‘our Justice is the travesty of Justice, the spectacle of Law and order is an obscene carnival’. Žižek connects the overturning of this obscene travesty with Mao’s cultural revolution. He quotes a section from Jonathan Spence’s *Mao*. ‘In the European Middle Ages,’ Spence wrote, ‘it was customary for great households to choose a “Lord of Misrule.” The person chosen was expected to preside over the revels that briefly reversed or parodied the



Scritti Politti, 4 A-Sides, 1979



Scritti Politti, *Cupid & Psyche* 85, 1985

one of the threads in Marcus's book and you start to (un)ravel something of the same web of connections and correspondences that were refracted in "Lions After Slumber"'s broken mirrors. The Paris Commune. The Pistols. The Situationists. Millenarian revolts. May '68. The Red Army Faction ... Anticipations and reverberations ... Yet if the vortex at the heart of *Lipstick Traces* was '76-78, then "Lions After Slumber"'s focus was on '78-85, the moment of post-punk.

The spectre of post-punk haunted the decade that just ended: first as simulacra, then as revenant. The simulacra were the new rock groups who, thirty-odd years after the fact, aped, all too accurately, the post-punk style—the former avant-garde returning as cabaret, betrayal disguised as fidelity. For post-punk was fired by the same drive as the cultural revolution—indeed, it was perhaps the final moment of the cultural revolution understood in that broad sense of a demand for perpetual reinvention. What was to be affirmed in punk was not any kind of fetishised form, but the impulse to overturn, and keep overturning. This was a permanent scorched earth policy that would see the whole world in flames rather than constitute an ordered territory. There were two risks here: burn-out, the premature exhausting of the process in a speed-crash; or else unwitting return: by the cunning of restoration, the very drive to reject the avant-garde's orthodoxies might end up curving back towards the familiar and the established.

Scritti Politti avoided the first tendency by falling prey to a version of the second. 'Lions After Slumber', like the LP from which it came, *Songs To Remember*, was a kind of airlock



Paris, May 1968



Seditionaries, c. 1977

conventional social and economic hierarchies ... It was Mao's terrible accomplishment to ... prolong the limited concept of misrule into a long-drawn-out adventure in upheaval. To Mao, the former lords and masters should never be allowed to return; he felt they were not his betters, and that society was liberated by their removal. He also thought the customary order of things should never be restored.' Žižek comments: 'Is, however, such a 'terrible accomplishment' not the elementary gesture of every true revolutionary? Why revolution at all, if we do not think that 'the customary order of things should never be restored?' What Mao does is to deprive the transgression of its ritualized, ludic character by way of taking it seriously: revolution is not just a temporary safety valve, a carnivalesque explosion destined to be followed by a sobering morning after.'

The cultural revolution demanded a world turned upside down, but this inverted world could not be stabilized into a new Order any more than it could be returned to its original orientation. The demand was for an endless series of explosions, with no sobering morning after.

Pre-echoes and echoes ... Mao's cultural revolution was part of a wider 1960s moment: a rejection of the state and party form, a howl against hierarchy that counted the Paris Commune amongst its inspirations. '[A]s masters of their own history,' wrote Greil Marcus in *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, 'the communards abolished ordinary time. The Lord of Misrule, joke king of the ancient overnight saturnalia, executed the day after, had somehow seized history and declared that misrule would last forever.' Pull

chamber between the avant-scrabble of Scritti's early work and the shiny strip malls of a new mainstream. Like much of post-punk, Scritti's early records were the sound of a group learning (to play together) and unlearning (the rules of rock) at one and the same time. The title of their anti-hit 'Skank Bloc Bologna' was a name for the terrain opened up by the cultural revolution: Jamaican dub, Italian autonomism, workers' collectives, somehow belonging to the same space.

Time moved very quickly then. It's no exaggeration to say that more happened in the four years between 1978 and 1982 than happened in the thirty years of rock since. Rock was emptied out, transformed from a set of certainties into a site of potentialities. This was not 'music', not 'art', or at least it wasn't what those things had become under consumer-spectacular culture. It was a portal, or a series of portals; the words and the images formed a montage of references, lines that could be pursued, connections that could be made, labyrinths in which you could lose yourself, or unmake yourself...

"Lions After Slumber" asks the question: have these connections gone dead? Are these formerly charged objects now inert? Or do they await only someone—you, or rather us—to transform the museum pieces into weapons? (And: is any kind of *us* now thinkable?)

Scritti in '82 were on the way into a new mainstream. This was not a mainstream to which they were passively submitting, but a new saccharine-superficial Fairlight-sequenced pop which they played a central role in designing. Was this, in the end, to be the final fate of the cultural revolution—a revitalization of capitalism? Post-structuralism as one more cool cosmetic surface effect; post-punk as a training ground for entrepreneurs? A seamless system of control, with no outside? Was that old dream of politicizing aesthetics to be forgotten, or to be recalled only with a shiver of embarrassment?

One of the items in "Lions After Slumber" was an audio tape, removed from its casing and hung from the ceiling. An object that has multiple resonances—most obviously, it suggests the shredding of analogue recording and playback technology, replaced by digital in the years since Scritti's 'Lions After Slumber'. Wilkinson also had another association in mind: the Taliban practice of unspooling pop music tapes and hanging them from trees. Fundamentalist fanaticism is posited as the only alternative to the restoration—but the real function of the Taliban for the world turned the right way up again is to serve as a warning about the dangers of excessive commitment. (From the point of view of the restoration, all—political—commitment is excessive, pathological.) In the *End of History* DVD, the Taliban's role is to be the pantomime villains with very real blood: this is what happens if you believe too much.

Elsewhere in "Lions After Slumber", the image of man watching police beating rioters in May 1968 is etched into a mirror. We do not know if the man was a spectator or a participant. Our own faces, looking glass-reversed, merge with his.



Fisher, Mark: 'Lions After Slumber', in *Lions After Slumber*, published by The Modern Institute, 2010