The Tragedy of History: Peter Watkins’s La Commune

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In 1999, exiled British film director Peter Watkins completed La Commune, a 5 hour 45 minute epic reconstruction of the 1871 Paris Commune. In its mixture of steely radicalism and artistic experimentalism, La Commune is arguably the most important European film since the days of the great modernist cinematic provocateurs such as Eisenstein and Vertov. But undoubtedly the single most important figure from that era which informs the film is Bertolt Brecht, who made his only real Brechtian film, Kuhle Wampe, in 1931 with Slatan Dudow. The invocation of such distant modernists seems startling when even a Marxist critic like Fredric Jameson once declared that the kinds of cultural practices advocated by Brecht and Walter Benjamin, are no longer relevant to ‘the specific conditions of our time’.1 With La Commune, Watkins says that his aim was to show ‘that there are other ways to recount historical and current events, to relate to space and time, to show the connection between past and present and to give a voice to the public’. And while, as we shall see, Watkins has in mind here dominant and standardised film and television practices whose principles remain largely, if problematically, mimetic, those ‘other ways’ also challenge the theoretical paradigm of postmodernism. In order to fully understand La Commune we will need to locate it within a number of contexts: the immediate historical context of French politics and cinema from the mid-1990s; the history of the Paris Commune itself; Watkins’s pedagogy and – in the spirit of internationalism shown by the Commune itself – the theories and practices of Third Cinema.

FRENCH POLITICS AND CINEMA IN THE 1990S

The French political scene shifted decisively in 1995. This shift in turn opened up a space for left cultural politics and challenged the dominant critical paradigm through which French cinema has been discussed:

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that of postmodernism. Since 1983, when Francois Mitterand dropped one-nation Keynesian policies after an assault on the French currency by the money markets, neo-liberalism has increasingly shaped the agenda for French political life, albeit less decisively than in the UK. However, in 1995, prime minister Alain Juppé’s plan to slash social entitlement and welfare budgets provoked large-scale militant public sector worker strikes which ended Juppé’s career and eviscerated the Chirac presidency. At the Gare du Nord station, graffiti on the walls declared: ‘No, the Commune is not dead!’ Numerous banners evoked May ’68 and the Surrealist/Situationist politics (‘Through Strikes You Can Dream’) of an active, spontaneous agent for social change.

In 1997, the Socialist Party, in coalition with the Greens and the Communist Party, returned to power on a left platform for progressive social change. The political right has, six years later, yet to recover from this popular revolt. In March 2001, the left won control of Paris for the first time since the 1871 Commune when a Socialist Mayor, Bertrand Delanoë, was elected. This change in the political colouration of the elected state functionaries was symptomatic of a deeper, more profound intellectual and cultural sea change. Viviane Forrester’s attack on neo-liberal policies in The Economic Horror became a bestseller in France, as did Pierre Bourdieu’s The Weight of the World, which charted the experiences of people living at the sharp end of an unequal and divided society. Bourdieu has indeed become highly prominent in his interventions, which seek to overturn the ‘inculcation’ of the neo-liberal agenda which large numbers of the intelligentsia have internalised and accepted as inevitable.

Significantly, Bourdieu situates the struggles in France as part of a Europe-wide ‘rotating struggle’ which has awoken to the dangers that neo-liberalism poses, continent wide, to the social gains that have been won in the past. Bourdieu identifies the postmodern ‘condemnation of the great explanatory narratives or the nihilist denunciations of science’ as a key reason for the rise and celebration of the ‘uncommitted intellectual’. He has attacked the ‘passive complicity’ of intellectuals, especially those in the media, when confronted by the neo-liberal ideology. Their receptivity to it has helped shape the ‘horizon of expectations’ which has made the neo-liberal doctrine, at least hitherto, so unquestioned and widely circulated. Combating the legitimacy of neo-liberalism is the key role of the committed intellectual. Bourdieu identifies that their central contribution is to engage in symbolic and cultural struggles. Cultural workers in the cinema are part of that process and it is clear in a number of films that have come out since the mid-1990s that they have been connecting their artistic work with the broader social movements of the times and intervening in the consciousness struggle. In retrospect, La Haine (Martin Kassovitz, 1994) was clearly anticipating the new mood of political combative and it has been followed by such films as Ridicule (Patrice Leconte, 1996), Marius and Jeannette (Robert Guédiguian, 1997), It All Starts Today (Bertrand Tavernier, 1998) The Widow of Saint-Pierre (Patrice Leconte, 1999) and Human Resources (Laurent Cantet, 1999) all of which place the almost forgotten question of class relations and conflict back on the cinematic agenda.

The political and cultural shift also demands a break with the dominant intellectual paradigm of postmodernism, which has been used to discuss French cinema ever since *Diva* (Jean-Jacques Beineix, 1981). If the dominant tone for French cinema during the 1980s and early 1990s was an obsession with the image for and of itself, the altered political landscape suggests that critics need to at least entertain the possibility of films engaging critically in a reality beyond their own signifying practices. Film critics now need a different political


narrative, but having been nurtured on postmodernism for more than a decade, and taught that this was no mere historically determined and fairly brief conjuncture, but an epochal change which had decisively superseded both the emancipatory ambitions of modernity and the aesthetic strategies of modernism, the weaning period may be unnecessarily protracted. It is in this political and cultural context, then, in which we have to situate and understand the significance of Watkins’s film, which, in a Benjaminian constellation, returns to and redeems the Paris Commune.

1871: THE PARIS COMMUNE

The Paris insurrection came out of the deprivations caused by the Franco-Prussian war, the product of an all too familiar combination of geo-political rivalry and the personal ambitions of Bismarck and Napoleon III. Paris had been under siege for 135 days, during which time the working class were enrolled into the National Guard to defend the capital. However, driven by ‘gnawing hunger and freezing cold’ they transformed the National Guard into their own democratic military organ. When the National Guard refused to hand over its canons to the government (they had been paid for by public subscription), France effectively entered that classic revolutionary stage of dual power. On the one side, now based in nearby Versailles, there was the National Assembly, ‘the representative’ Marx wrote, ‘of everything dead in France, propped up to the semblance of life by nothing but the swords of the generals’ and led by that ‘monstrous gnome’ Adolphe Thiers. On the other, there was Paris where elections saw workers (for the first time in world history) and workers’ representatives elected. In the name of a ‘Universal Republic’ and in a blow against national chauvinism, foreign radicals such as the Hungarian Leo Frankel were also elected, while the National Guard was led by radical Polish generals, part of the revolutionary diaspora from earlier failed revolutions.

The Communards were desperately hungry for social justice and saw their struggle as the culmination of the generations before them who had been sacrificed on the altar of private property and ‘progress’. For the first time, labour could develop bottom-up experiments in direct, participative democracy. Public officials were to be elected (including magistrates and judges), revocable at short terms and paid only the average working wage. For the first time a state was actually implementing policies for the working people: pensions for war widows (married or not), a maximum ten-hour working day, no night work for bakers; these measures, the like of which were later to be won in the next century, but are today under attack from the neo-liberal offensive, brought howls of rage from the property-owning classes. La Commune explores the intense debates around the Commune’s separation of Church and state, particularly in the area of education. It also explores how the distinct emancipatory claims of women coalesced into the Women’s Union, which was organised by Elizabeth Dmitrieff, a friend of Marx. La Commune does not shy away from their struggle against the sexism of male Communards schooled in

Proudhon’s socialism, which was shot through with explicit statements on the inferiority of women.\textsuperscript{12} The nature and characteristics of the Commune, its content – collectivism, mass participation, transformation, tensions, contradictions and self-criticism – represent a kind of Marxian sublime,\textsuperscript{13} which raises profound questions as to how this ‘content’ can find – in audio-visual language – an appropriate means of representation. As we shall see, this requires a critique and refunctioning of dominant audio-visual forms.

Although the memory of the Paris Commune is still kept alive today in leftist popular culture, the Paris Commune occupies a marginal place in official French culture and is skated over in the education system. And for good reason: while the 1789 French Revolution is celebrated as the birth of modern France, or its excesses castigated by conservative critics, the Paris Commune cannot be recuperated within any bourgeois historiography. Its brief two-month life was a testimony to working-class radicalism and aspirations of autonomy. The death of the Commune, an ‘ineffable infamy’ (Marx, 1970, p 99), was as bloody as the French Revolution’s Red Terror. But while the latter has attracted much attention as a test case for the costs of radical social change,\textsuperscript{14} the Commune has attracted less attention as a case study on the limits of democracy under capital. Inspired by the ideals of the Commune, men, women and children defended the barricades against impossible odds. Over 30,000 Communards were slaughtered as troops liberated the capital for capital. A hundred years before the Chilean military crushed Salvador Allende’s democratically elected


Popular Unity government in the 1973 *coup d'état*, the suppression of popular power was being carried out right in the heart of Europe.

**WATKINS, PEDAGOGY AND THE CULTURE INDUSTRIES**

It is perhaps unsurprising then that Watkins’s film has been marginalised within France. It was funded by 13 Production and the Documentary Unit at ARTE, the well-regarded French television broadcaster. Initially ARTE responded favourably to the completed film, promising, Watkins says, ‘to bring the film to as large an audience as possible’. However, ARTE became increasingly indifferent and critical of the film and despite public declarations of support ARTE began pressuring Watkins in private to radically re-edit. When Watkins refused, chief executives at ARTE declared that the film was not ‘Prime Time’ viewing. Rather than serialise it over two or three parts and make the film a major cultural event (and restore some public purpose and pride to an increasingly commercialised medium) ARTE buried it in a one-off broadcast in the early hours of the morning. The film was subsequently screened at the Musée d’Orsay in Paris in conjunction with an exposition on the Commune. The film opened at the Orsay on 22 March 2000, running initially over several weekdays. It then ran regularly every Sunday (the cinema holds up 250 seats) until early June. Thus the growing legitimacy of the audio-visual within the traditional space of the art gallery and the museum has provided, in this instance at least, an alternative site of exhibition when the usual means of audio-visual dissemination (television, cinemas) prove too conservative to handle material that is aesthetically and politically challenging.

Watkins has been here before. In 1966, the BBC, under instructions from the Home Office, prevented his film *The War Game* from being broadcast on television. Watkins’s film was a meticulously researched drama documentary into the devastating impact that a nuclear strike would have on the UK. Despite the emergence of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, successive governments were determined to stifle any public debate on the subject. The BBC tried to avoid accusations of censorship by farming the film out for a desultory distribution by the British Film Institute.\(^{15}\) Watkins resigned from the BBC and without copyright permission toured around the world with the film, exhibiting it in schools and colleges.\(^{16}\) His unbending integrity earned him the eternal hostility of the BBC and made him virtually unemployable within the UK’s film and television industry. He left Britain at the end of the 1960s for Scandinavia and has subsequently settled in Lithuania.

All films can be regarded as forms of ‘public pedagogies’, argues Henry Giroux. They link public and private discourses and put into ‘play particular ideologies and values that resonate with broader public conversations regarding how a society views itself and the world of power, events and politics’.\(^{17}\) Film and television are crucial mediators and definers of that public conversation. Watkins’s film practice constitutes an attempt at progressive audio-visual pedagogy, researching into and trying to bring into the public field, histories,
information and debates that have been marginalised or forgotten. In films such as *Culloden* (1964), *The War Game*, and *La Commune*, Watkins is drawn to moments of social crisis – the best time for learning – in which the apparent homogeneity of the nation splits apart and its conflicting social interests stand revealed.

Watkins is also a media educator in a more conventional sense. There is, Watkins argues, a crisis within the mass audiovisual media (MAVM); he is highly critical of the centralised control that media owners, managers and commissioning editors have accumulated. This ‘small elite of power-brokers’ operates within hierarchical, undemocratic and unaccountable structures which severely attenuate ‘the potential for the media to become a truly democratic means of communication and interaction’. ¹⁸ The lack of transparency in the decision making that lies behind film and television production and the lack of broader public debate concerning the role and goals of the MAVM are the inevitable outcomes of these structures. Watkins is also highly critical of the very language of film and television, what he calls the Monoform. This language form was institutionalised by Hollywood and subsequently adopted, despite generic variations, by television. Today:

…it is the densely packed and rapidly edited barrage of images and sounds, the ‘seamless’ yet fragmented modular structure ... it includes dense layers of music, speech and sound effects, abrupt sound cuts for shock effect, endless scenes saturated in music, repetitive and rhythmic dialogue patterns, constantly moving, tilting, jiggling, circling camera, etc. ¹⁹

The Monoform allows minimal space for the implications and ramifications of the story to be explored and it works ruthlessly to close down the opportunities for the audience to participate in a dialogue with the text and to reflect on the implications of the story in relation to the wider public conversation. This homogenous, abstract template manifests itself in television news by assimilating vastly different events. The same ‘grid-lock’ covers both ‘a tragic airplane crash and someone who has painted their cucumbers pink’. Thus with *La Commune* Watkins sought to break from the ‘suffocatingly tight structure and endless tricks to grab the audience’ that characterise most film and television. The formal strategies of the film were designed ‘to find some kind of collective process with which to overcome the hierarchy of the media towards the public’. ²⁰ This was why Watkins resisted re-editing the film along the lines which ARTE were insisting. In private ARTE criticised the film along the lines which ARTE were insisting. In private ARTE criticised some of the non-professional cast for being ‘weak’ and they criticised the film for not having a ‘tight’ structure. As Watkins notes, ‘it became clear that ARTE’s demands to change the film were being couched in the exact language of the Monoform’. ²¹

Watkins’s critique of the Monoform is similar to the thrust of films studies in the 1970s, with its critique of the Institutional Mode of Representation ²² and the Classic Realist Text. ²³ Contemporary film studies has largely moved away from such concepts, sometimes to the detriment of its critical power, largely because they were seen as overly homogenising and prone to a certain formalism and elitism. The
alternative film practices which this avant-garde theory fostered, what Wollen called a ‘counter-cinema’, ran by and large into a cul-de-sac, often on the back of a highly one-sided reading of Brechtian strategies. The rejection of popular culture and the attempt to rework the language of the audio-visual media produced formalistic experiments for elite audiences hostile to the whole concept of pleasure and narrative. What is interesting is that Watkins does not follow this route in his film practice despite the similarities between Watkins’s theory of the Monoform and 1970s film theory. For Watkins has a commitment to democratic processes of production (and here his use of non-professional actors is crucial) and to the urgency of a broader and lucid public communication, which makes his film practice rather more like Third Cinema than the European avant-garde circa 1970s.

**THIRD CINEMA**

The term Third Cinema was coined in the late 1960s by the Argentinean filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in their theoretical reflections on their groundbreaking documentary *The Hour Of The Furnaces* (1968). The term referred to the new cinema emerging in Latin America and other parts of the world in response to the burgeoning anti-imperialist struggles. This cinema aimed to express the cultural hunger of the masses while avoiding the elitism of Second Cinema (Art cinema) and the standardised homogeneity of First Cinema (dominated worldwide by Hollywood). As this Third Cinema developed, it pioneered new democratic working practices. Jorge Sanjines for example explored ‘popular participation’ in the making of films about Bolivia’s peasant and Indian communities. Third Cinema filmmakers sought access to their audiences developing ‘parallel’ distribution circuits outside those dominated by national and international capital. Its practitioners critiqued dominant aesthetic norms as the aesthetic norms of the dominant culture industries and institutions. Julio García Espinosa famously called for an ‘imperfect cinema’, one which rejected the technical and artistic sophistication of the dominant models. Fernando Birri reminded filmmakers that they must work with their resource limitations, transforming them into ‘new expressive possibilities’. Third Cineastes developed de-individualised modes of dramaturgy which were able to represent the collective dynamics of social change and conflict in a way which First Cinema and Second Cinema had so conspicuously failed to do. This more collective fociation, which Rosen finds to be central to the work of Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembene, required reworking both documentary and fictional modes of representation. Documentary had to be sheared away from its pseudo-objectivity and dominance by expert witnesses and the monologic voice of God, a feat accomplished in Patricio Guzman’s *Battle of Chile* (1973–76), which charts the Chilean revolution and counter-revolution by immersing itself in the struggles of the masses rather than telling its story from the perspective of ‘important individuals’. Fiction had to be sheared away from its customary ‘hermetic structures that are...
born and die on screen" and opened up to history – made ‘porous’ to its social context, to borrow a concept from Walter Benjamin. *La Commune* touches base with many if not all these issues and debates. Although Third Cinema emerged, for historical reasons, in the Third World, it is defined primarily by its cultural politics and not its geographical location. Indeed, Third Cinema has important precursors in the European avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s. *La Commune*, then, is best seen as a rare example of Third Cinema in Europe.

**LA COMMUNE**

To make a film about a revolutionary struggle using the production practices of the ‘old’ society is a contradiction in terms. The production process for *La Commune*, which involved over 200 people, eschewed the standard divisions of labour and hierarchy. Watkins is interested in unlocking the creative expressiveness that our day-to-day working lives and our interaction with institutions, including those that control our leisure time, snuff out. It was the participation of the cast, many with no previous acting experience, which was responsible for the film’s organic growth, planned originally to be a mere two hours long.

The film itself is a complex mosaic of strategies. The camera moves through the swirling action of the 11th arrondissement using long sequence shots (up to ten minutes without a cut) and a wide-angle lens, both of which allow the film to chart the social dynamics of the revolutionary crowd (rather than individual heroes). It is the crowd’s hopes, fears, anger, celebrations, debates, differences, conflicts and fluctuations between all of these states that this determinedly collective fociation explores. In order to explore the social role of the media, the film deploys the anachronistic conceit of having the events covered by television. Watkins first used this strategy in *Culloden*, which had an English television crew cover with a critical eye (rather optimistically) the final subjugation of Scotland by England in 1746. In *La Commune* there are two television organisations. On the one side there is Versailles TV, studio bound with its middle-class experts and fatuous theme tune, and on the other side there is Commune TV, excited and involved in the events, trying to let the people who have been silenced and marginalised for so long get access to the airwaves. Where Versailles TV never lets the events raise any questions as to its own modus operandi, its ‘grid-lock’ modes of representation, we see Commune TV journalists debating with print journalists as to whether they should have more critical analysis of the events as opposed to simply letting the people speak.

The anachronistic device of using television not only allows *La Commune* to raise contemporary questions concerning the role of the mass media, but also plays a key role in structuring the film around its collective protagonist. It is largely television’s coverage of the events that links the scenes rather than the causal agency of individuals. Thus for example we may move from a scene in the streets of the 11th arrondissement being covered by Commune TV to the interior of a bourgeois household in Paris watching the events as they are covered by Commune or Versailles TV. The collective historical action is often

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interrupted by Commune TV journalists seeking interviews with the participants of history, but occasionally the interviews themselves are interrupted by the onward flow of historical action. Thus Marie-Louise Thibaudier’s interview near the beginning of the film is broken off when Versailles army troops try and take the Montmartre canon away. Marie joins the women in a spontaneous defence of the canon that involves fraternisation with the troops who turn against their commanding officers.

Although we are occasionally introduced to major historical figures, such as General Dombrowski, again usually through Commune TV, La Commune’s mise-en-scène is dominated by ordinary people, its perspective very much ‘history from below’. The narrative is organised around the multi-dimensional process of the Commune’s history which is then illustrated and played out in scenes that are often unconnected or only incidentally connected in terms of individual causality, but are strongly connected in terms of the historical theme being explored. So for example the effects, at both a policy and personal level, which the stranglehold of Versailles has on Paris are explored in numerous ways. We see the crowd in the 11th arrondissement rough up a journalist from the paper Père Duchêne as they become increasingly wary of spies and saboteurs. There follows a bad-tempered argument with Théron the jeweller who has refused to join the National Guard. We then cut to the municipal offices of the 11th arrondissement. Commune TV
takes us through the offices where we see the growing number of arrests, the collection of information about citizens and the embryonic growth of a surveillance and police apparatus. This dimension of the Commune is then contrasted with its progressive social policies. Here the film picks up the case of Agnès Noiret, whose husband is fighting for the Commune. On several occasions she is interviewed by Commune TV. She is worried that she has not heard from her husband and reliable information from the authorities as to his whereabouts and condition is difficult to obtain. On Commune TV meanwhile, a policy announcement is made concerning the provision for war widows and their children. An intertitle then tells us that two days after the next scene Agnès will find her husband dead and as a result will qualify for a pension. A little later, we return to and pick up the theme of growing authoritarian tendencies when the Commune announces measures against ‘police arbitrariness’ as it struggles to balance the conflicting needs of defending the Commune and protecting the rights of individual citizens. Thus the film avoids the ‘suffocating structure’ of the Monoform. It does not so much ‘develop actions as … represent conditions’ as Benjamin put it in relation to Brecht’s epic theatre.\textsuperscript{34} \textit{La Commune} has the loose discursive constitution of epic theatre, which Brecht described as developing in ‘curves’ and ‘jumps’, with ‘each scene for itself’.\textsuperscript{35}

The events in Paris are cross-cut with Versailles to contrast perspectives and social interests. Thus celebrations in Paris after the election of the Commune are cross-cut with military chiefs in Versailles training their provincial recruits to crush the Parisian ‘rabble’. Or we see Algerians debate with Parisians the effects of French colonialism in their country. Their tales of oppression are cross-cut with Thiers planning with his military chiefs the shelling of Paris. Thus the film asks the viewer to draw the connection between external colonialism and internal class oppression. Such spatial connections and juxtapositions are matched by temporal ones. The film makes extensive use of intertitles. These titles fill in the larger historical context and narrate the events of 1871. But they also juxtapose the Commune with contemporary issues. Thus for example, the scene where Algerians discuss French colonialism is followed by an intertitle which tells the viewer how, on 18 March 1996, 350 ‘illegal aliens’ occupied Church premises in Paris. The religious authorities asked the Home Office to eject them. Men, women and children were evicted with violent force by the police. Or again, during a meeting of the Women’s Union in which the women discuss their working and domestic conditions and their hopes for change, a title informs the audience that today 60% of women work in just six professions, while 80% of domestic work is done by women in contemporary France. The film’s openness to racial and gender struggles, as well as class conflict, is among its strongest features.

It is this juxtaposition between the past and the present that becomes increasingly urgent as the Commune enters its final weeks (part two of the film). In Brechtian fashion, the actors step out of their roles, leveraging open the hermetic structures of the Aristotelian diegesis in order to explore the links between past and present. In stepping out of their roles, the actors foreground the pedagogic process which the


production of the film has opened up for them, thus providing a crucial stimulus for a similar process of self-reflection for the watching audience. This is achieved in a number of different ways. Sometimes the Commune TV journalists ask the actors to comment on the significance of the events they are in the middle of staging. For example and not without humorous effect, as the Communards rush to join the barricades, Commune TV asks whether they would join the barricades today. A second strategy is for collective discussions amongst the ‘characters’ within the diegesis to shade quite ‘naturally’ (although of course this is a de-naturalisation technique) into discussion of social and economic inequalities today. This breaking of the diegetic frame is sometimes reinforced visually by the camera pulling back to reveal previously off-screen actors ‘out of character’ listening to the debate or joining in. The past/present juxtapositions are also supported by intertitles. For example, a discussion within the diegesis concerning the setting up of cooperatives shades into a discussion about how, today, contemporary cooperatives operate within and adapt to the market, before then broadening out to a discussion of the power of international capital. An intertitle then informs us that in 1870, the wealthiest 20% of the world population had seven times the income of the poorest 20%. In 1997, this difference was 74 to 1.

Yet another strategy – and this occurs particularly towards the end of the film – is to follow the post-shooting debates which the actors had concerning their experience of making the film and the political reflections it has generated. We see of course different perspectives articulated by the actors, but some of those differences are broadly related to class positions. Thus many of the actors who played the Paris bourgeoisie were recruited from the middle class through adverts in the right-wing press. One bourgeois woman found the whole filmmaking experience too distressing and in line with the official public amnesia around the Commune, argues that it is time to forget about the past (while at the same time exonerating Thiers from responsibility for the la semaine sanglante or ‘bloody week’). Another middle-class participant is more reflective and recognises the need for a new social contract. The actors who played the Communards are generally more radical, although, of course, there are an array of perspectives and politics articulated.

La Commune can be located within the tragic mode, which is an important strand of Third Cinema. Films such as The Last Supper (1976) by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, which charts an 18th-century revolt by slaves on a Cuban/Spanish sugar plantation, or Ousmane Sembene’s story of an anti-colonial revolt by African/French subjects in Camp de Thiaroye (1987) are tragic because they are doomed to failure. However, they fail not because of individual flaws or the immutable quality of the status quo, but because these revolts are, historically speaking, too-early anticipations of later struggles which will succeed (in the case of anti-slavery/anti-colonial struggles), or at least stand a better chance of succeeding. Historically premature though, such insurrections are isolated and surrounded by hostile, vastly stronger opponents. They fail because the historically determined objective conditions for success are absent. Yet they nevertheless lay down a historical marker that the dominant social order is never permanent.

and act as an inspiration for subsequent generations if the memory of the revolt can be sustained by oral and technological means. For the individuals involved, such as the Communards, the price for putting down this historical marker is usually very high. Yet part of the tragedy consists in the historical and secular compulsion to undertake such dangerous and uncharted social transformations in order to sustain themselves at a material level and affirm themselves at a cultural level. It was Watkins’s hope that the form and process of *La Commune* would explore ‘the links between the forces which crushed the Commune and those which today still prevent social collectivism from flourishing on almost any spot on this planet’. In the Marxian historical narrative, the triumph of capital is also, potentially at least, its Achilles heel. As capital’s extension into uncharted territories reaches its absolute limits and as worldwide wage-labour becomes the dominant relation between classes, so capital’s intensive exploitation of these resources generates increasing opposition, which today is growing more conscious of its global links and solidarities. The question is whether we are still condemned by objective circumstances to play out the tragedy of history or whether we can bring the curtain down on the epoch of what Marx called pre-history.