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Revolution and Aesthetics

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One of the revolutionary movements with the highest profile today operates not so much on a political level, as has been common in the past, as on a planetary one. "Extinction Rebellion," as this environmental protest group calls itself, has a uniquely striking and consistently applied aesthetic, from the simple hourglass logo to the blood-red robes of the Red Brigade, whose image has inescapable revolutionary and dramatic associations. Leading figures of the movement have recognized the centrality of aesthetic branding to their current and future success, and the artistic and cultural importance of these symbols has already been acknowledged by the Victoria and Albert Museum's acquisition of key items of the group's visual identity.[1]

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However, this connection between rebellion and art is nothing new. The very concept of revolution seems fundamentally twinned to an aesthetic ideology of heroism and protest, analogous to an artistic role of remodelling and creation but on a larger, societal scale. The ethical arguments of revolutionary groups throughout history have often been surprisingly simple; could this be because their aesthetic conception fills in the gaps and underpins their cause at a deeper and more instinctive level? Perhaps the emotional sensibility and aesthetic concept of a revolutionary movement is fundamental and drives intellectual rationalization. And this, in turn, could explain the extreme artistic censorship many young, post-revolutionary societies impose, as to undermine the revolution's aesthetic principles is to undermine the basic ideological foundations of the state. If to depart from the ideologically approved forms of socialist realism was considered a threat to the USSR, it is

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because to do so was to depart from the intellectual orthodoxy and doctrines that were the basis of state power.

It is interesting to note that Leon Trotsky, when in exile in Mexico, collaborated with André Breton to write a manifesto, *Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art* (1938), as much artistic as political.[2] In this work they describe art and revolution as inextricably linked—“true art is unable *not* to be revolutionary”—and undertake a piercing aesthetic critique of Stalinist Russia. Trotsky clearly knew that the most effective way to undermine an oppressive régime was to attack its artistic ideology.

The inverse of this relationship is also true. While revolution seeks to give itself an artistic grounding, art has often sought to give itself a revolutionary edge. The very form of the manifesto, much beloved by artists, is essentially a political and revolutionary form, modelled on *The Communist Manifesto* of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Perhaps this is art seeking an ethical foundation, just as revolution could be seen to have an aesthetic foundation.

Reading the Extinction Rebellion’s “Declaration of Rebellion,” it is easy to see it as an antithetical cousin to the Futurist manifesto (that pioneer of artistic manifestos): peaceful and conservationist, rather than aggressive and destructive, but united by a shared aesthetic language of revolution.[3]

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Nicholas Romanos, age 16, is a student at The Perse School, Cambridge, UK, studying Classics and languages, who finds himself drawn to philosophy, and particularly aesthetics.

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Endnotes

[1] <https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/design-and-society/extinction-rebellion-objects-acquired-for-our-collections>. Accessed 22nd October 2019.

[2] Believed to have been written by Trotsky and Breton, although signed by Breton and Diego Rivera:
https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/works/rivera/manif esto.htm. Accessed 22nd October 2019.

[3] <https://rebellion.earth/declaration/>. Accessed 22nd October 2019.

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