

Wreckage in May

The Paris Commune, March 18 - May 28, was an anarchist-socialist government implemented by the working class inhabitants of the city that is widely regarded as the first organised assumption of power by the working class during the Industrial Revolution. The ruling elite, already on unsteady ground, saw the Commune as a further savage attack on what they perceived as national ideals. The response was ruthless and brutal. The Thiers government crushed the Commune and executed, imprisoned or exiled anyone even suspected of involvement or support.

The Impressionist movement emerged in Paris during the 1870's - beginning with the first Impressionist exhibition in 1874 - and has gone on to become synonymous with the avant-garde modernism that was to emerge in Paris in the late 19th and early 20th Century. The paintings typically depict the city of Paris and its inhabitants engaged in leisure activities around an ever increasingly modern urban landscape.

Many of the locations from the paintings of the Impressionists had, only a few years previous in 1871, been the location of fierce fighting and mass executions during the brief life of the Paris Commune. By depicting the same locations - in the immediate aftermath of the massacres - as areas of leisure for the bourgeoisie, whether intentionally or otherwise, the Impressionists helped to reclaim the city centre for the bourgeoisie and eradicate the legacy of the Commune from the city.

Gustave Courbet, a precursor to, and great influence upon, the Impressionists had been greatly moved by the initiative of the Commune and became an avid member, even fighting on the barricades in its defence. It was in his active role as a commune member that he proposed that the Vendôme Column, located within the area occupied by the Commune, be dismantled as a symbol of Bonapartist imperialism, and reconstructed in Les Invalides - the museum of national and military monuments.

He argued:

"In as much as the Vendôme Column is a monument devoid of all artistic value, tending to perpetuate by its expression the ideas of war and conquest of the past imperial dynasty, which are reproved by a republican nation's sentiment, citizen Courbet expresses the wish that the National Defense government will authorise him to disassemble this column."

After posing for photographs in front of the monument, the Commune voted to destroy it on May 12 and did so four days later. These photos were later used to identify communards who were subsequently executed.

The Thiers government were bitter about the destruction of their symbol and quickly rebuilt it after suppressing the

Commune. Courbet was deemed personally responsible, due to his coming up with the idea, and he was imprisoned for 6 months and fined. Afterwards he was exiled from Paris but ordered to pay for the total costs of rebuilding the monument in monthly installments for the next 33 years. He died, aged 58, a week before the first installment was due.

In contrast, few of the artists that would go on to form the Impressionists - despite their admiration for him - joined Courbet in the Commune. Manet, for instance, despite having made three versions of the Execution of the Emperor Maximilian that concerned French interventionism in Mexico, stayed away from Paris during the Commune; leaving for Oloron-Sainte-Marie in January 1871, and not returning until around June 7th. The semaine sanglante (bloody week) ended on May 28th.

The Paris Commune left another problem for the French elite. Throughout its existence, women had been central in the founding and running of the Commune. More problematic still, they had been vociferous and brave in its defence. Many of these women were paraded through the streets of Paris with their bare breasts revealed to demonstrate to the populace that there were indeed 'wild' female active members of the Commune.

In the wake of the Commune the caricature of the pétroleuse began to be circulated. They were depicted as raving, alcoholic, wild women intent, with petrol bomb in hand, on destructing the architectural splendor of the city of culture. At the time of the construction of the Third Republic, the famous statue of Joan of Arc was erected on the Place de Pyramids (1874). This, the iconic depiction of the sacrificial female, was closer to the image the Third Republic had of its female citizens than the anarchistic pétroleuse. This image was exported overseas also. A cover of the The Graphic, a weekly London pictorial newspaper, dated Saturday June 19th, 1871, depicts the execution of a pétroleuse on its front cover.

The re-establishment of a passive bourgeois society seemed to suggest that Paris, and by extension France, was on its way back to normality. Although this complacent normality would be challenged from within again when the grandchildren of the Impressionists came of age in 1968. It is in this context, and with regard to that outlined above, that I am interested in producing a film work that considers the Paris Commune, its brief existence and suppression, and the impact this had on Parisien/French society. Additionally, I am interested in using it to explore the long standing conflict between how the inhabitants of a society feel their cities should be utilized, and how governments have throughout the intervening 150 years consistently used violence to suppress social autonomy, and often used culture as a means of giving their actions, and by extension, their society, a sense of calm and normality.

This is well illustrated in the recent events in Taksim Square in Istanbul. A passive, collective movement barricades itself in the city centre after the authorities have attempted to use force to remove them. The government, under the pretense of negotiation, lulls the protestors into a sense of security and then uses further violence to 'restore' normality. The Taksim riots began over a public desire to keep an urban park ahead of government plans to introduce a large-scale shopping mall.

I happened to be in Taksim at the time and was struck by the 'communard' spirit amongst protestors. After the police had first been repelled from the area, a bookshop broadcast *The Internationale*, in French, from a balcony, to the overwhelming popularity of the dense crowds on Istiklal, the street leading to Taksim. I have film of the event that I took at the time, and I'm interested in potentially working this into a narrative that ruminates on the Commune, the Impressionists and their work, the depiction of women as passive/aggressive members of a bourgeois society, and contextualizing this in a contemporary framework.

Wreckage in May re-introduces the character of the agent, previously encountered in *We Are Not Like Them* and *The Most Cruel of All Goddesses*, this time as he follows a woman around a number of locations in the city of Paris. The woman appears to be involved in researching the history of the impressionists, but as the agent gathers more information on the woman he begins to suspect her of covert leftist political activity. Eventually breaking in to her apartment, he uncovers political material that suggests a leftist political interest of the part of the woman.

Returning to the gallery to examine the paintings in the belief that they contain some hidden clue to the intentions of the woman, the agent is interrupted by an off screen presence, who shoots him. The film ends with the agent bleeding to death on the floor of the gallery beneath a painting by Gustav Coubet.

Wreckage in May, like *The Most Cruel of All Goddesses*, takes the ghosts of history, and introduces them into a narrative as active 'agents' that profoundly impact contemporary events. Though nominally using historical political events as their subject, I see these films being entirely grounded in the political present, and consider them as oblique commentaries on the causes, effects, and ongoing ramifications of the current, highly unstable, political climate in 2015. In many ways, the roots of the appalling, and unfortunate events that recently occurred in Paris, can be traced back to the outlook of the Theirs government that dismantled the Commune in 1871.