

THE EMBALMING OF LENIN'S BODY: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF A CUMBERSOME CORPSE

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to discuss the ways in which the embalming of Lenin has fostered an experience of the sacred. This investigation serves a dual purpose: first, it aims to elucidate how the scientific management of Lenin's body could signify the "sacrality" embedded within the political ideology of the party itself, namely Leninism; second, it seeks to clarify the mechanisms that regulate visibility relations among social actors, which may be interpreted as *figurativizations* of more abstract organization associated with the dissemination of knowledge among individuals (Landowski 1989, p. 115, it. transl.). In addition, this paper introduces a theoretical framework largely based on René Girard's reflection on the *scapegoat* (Girard 1972) in order to demonstrate the relevance of this case to the study of secular models of *martyrdom*. The case of Lenin's body fosters a model of martyrdom that characterizes the Soviet "pantheon of heroes", primarily because of its emphasis on penitential practices, which constitute the background for self-knowledge in Western Christianity.

Questa indagine persegue una duplice finalità: in primo luogo, intende chiarire come la preservazione del corpo imbalsamato di Lenin possa significare la "sacralità" insita nell'ideologia politica del leninismo; in secondo luogo, mira a definire i meccanismi che regolano le relazioni di visibilità tra gli attori sociali, interpretabili come "figurativizzazioni" di una più astratta organizzazione epistemica, volta ad articolare la diffusione del sapere e l'accessibilità allo stesso (Landowski 1989, p. 115, trad. it.). Infine, il presente lavoro introduce un quadro teorico ampiamente ispirato alle riflessioni di René Girard sul capro espiatorio (Girard 1972), al fine di dimostrare la rilevanza di questo caso nello studio dei modelli di martirio secolare. Il corpo imbalsamato di Lenin promuove un modello di martirio che caratterizza il "pantheon degli eroi" sovietici, soprattutto per l'accento posto sulle pratiche penitenziali, caratteristica determinante per la conoscenza del sé nel cristianesimo occidentale

KEYWORDS: Lenin, Sacredness, Embalming, Body, Russia

PAROLE CHIAVE: Lenin, Sacro, Imbalsamazione, Mummia secolare, Russia, Semiotica

I. Introduction

The appeals made by Nadezda Krupskaja⁽¹⁾, Lenin's widow, as published in the *Pravda* on January 29, 1924, did not yield the anticipated results. In the wake of the Bolshevik leader's passing, discussions commenced regarding the preservation of his body, a matter that quickly escalated into a state issue. However, it is clear from discussions between the party leaders and medical doctors in the weeks following Lenin's death (21-01-1924) that the decision to preserve his body forever was not planned beforehand, but emerged gradually and somewhat unexpectedly. This fact was reflected in the remarkable cacophony of opinions voiced by the party leadership⁽²⁾. However, in late March 1924, it was decided to subject Lenin's body to an experimental embalming procedure proposed by Professor of Medicine Vladimir Vorobiev and the biochemist Boris Zbarsky, who developed a dynamic method of preservation that required regular *re-embalming*, submerging the body in baths with special chemical solutions, substituting its original organic materials with artificial ones, and regularly re-sculpting its shapes and surfaces. This proposal garnered support even among the most skeptical, based on the premise that preserving the body intact would assist the populace in the prolonged process of mourning. Clearly, the most advantageous approach, in order to ensure for the Soviet Union and its symbol that political immortality "which is the objective of every ritual strategy in an era of secularization"⁽³⁾.

(1) The authenticity of Lenin's testament is contested. (See for example, Canfora 2025).

(2) The only option dismissed was cremation, which Stalin supported, despite reservations expressed by other comrades. Indeed, cremation could serve as a potent weapon against both the Church and religion; however, adopting this practice would necessitate forgoing processions, eulogies, and salutations as ritualistic forms. Initially, there was consideration given to the option of freezing the body, as it was already exhibiting early signs of decomposition. Therefore, after establishing the inadequacy of this technique through meticulous freezing tests, the government ultimately approved a new proposal.

(3) On the relationship between sovereignty and the ritualistic dimension of sacred, see Yelle 2018.

A special commission was periodically studying Lenin's body in a naked state, examining spots on his surface. Scientists have long focused on maintaining the "authenticity" of the body, replacing biological matter with artificial materials to keep it flexible and lifelike, while allowing for the gradual degradation of the original biological matter. Their focus, however, has not been on retaining the biological flesh *per se*, but rather on preserving its physical form: his *anatomicheski obraz*. This concept encompasses various attributes including appearance, shape, weight, and coloration, as well as dynamic characteristics such as overall suppleness, skin elasticity, joint flexibility, and internal muscle tension (Yurchack 2015, pp.116–118). By the sixth month post-mortem, the embalming of Lenin could be considered complete: in the early days of August 1924, the body was presented for public viewing, (Hutchinson and Zibarskij 1997, pp.15–28) rendered eternal and imperishable akin to relics associated with saints (cf. Tumarkin 1983, pp. 4–6).

In this respect, Christianity fundamentally established two divergent perspectives regarding posthumous bodies: one perceiving accelerated decomposition as miraculous, while viewing unaltered or slowly decomposing bodies as manifestations of sanctity. Hence arose the choice of a transparent sarcophagus, a legacy from Christian tradition but also reflective of contemporary tendencies; consider skyscrapers made from glass and notions that such material could ensure high hygiene standards.

2. Contrasting regimes of visibility: initial remarks

"If we can preserve the body and observe it[...] why not do so, as it is so dear to us? If science can indeed preserve his body for many years, why shouldn't we?"

Thus asserted Felix Dzerzhinsky, the chairman of the Commission during one of the debates concerning the legitimacy of body preservation (cf. Ingerflom and Kondratieva 1993, op.cit. in Mengozzi 2021, p. 33). This issue holds particular significance, as the exposure of the body

and its preserved physiognomy served as a bulwark against instability: the focus on the face, also corroborated by funeral eulogies, became a fundamental instrument in safeguarding the Party and ensuring trust in Marxist doctrine (*ibidem*). However, while Soviet science asserted its claim over a body emancipated from temporal constraints, Party leaders were preoccupied with inaugurating the mausoleum and legitimizing a form of worship purged of any religiosity⁽⁴⁾. The sacred space, the Mausoleum⁽⁵⁾, along with its viewing chamber for exposure, parades, and funeral eulogies, constitutes essential components in constructing Lenin's cult, epitomized by his embalming initiative and his designation as an eternal body⁽⁶⁾.

However, in contrast to other instances⁽⁷⁾, the preservation of Lenin's body maintains a dynamic form that encompasses not only its external appearance but also transcends it. Observers at the mausoleum witness

(4) Lenin's status as a political symbol was firmly established within the core of the regime, with the authorities exercising rigorous oversight over the presentation of his image. The Committee for the Immortalization of Lenin's Memory was tasked with regulating the dissemination of all media works, while the Lenin Institute, officially founded in 1923 and inaugurated in 1924, was designated to collect and preserve his writings.

(5) Moreover, the choice of location for the exhibition was clearly motivated by the historical significance and high symbolism of Red Square — a site that has been witness to pivotal historical and political events. As Federica Rossi has highlighted, Lenin's mausoleum represents a novel architectural typology for Russia — serving both as a memorial building and a public space, encompassing both a mortuary chamber and a podium for political speeches (cf. Rossi 2018, p. 56).

(6) The deceased leader's body emerged as a central element of the nascent cult surrounding his persona. However, the veneration of his memory was not solely a top-down imposition. The desire to honor his legacy stemmed from a profound expression of grief following his death, as well as the strategic maneuvers of the political elite (as discussed further below). The initiatives undertaken by ordinary individuals — such as a teacher inspiring her students to compose poems in tribute to Lenin, a manufacturer enhancing product appeal through the incorporation of Lenin's likeness, an artist striving for recognition through works depicting Lenin, party members invoking his name and memory, and the proliferation of personal names directly associated with Lenin — collectively contributed to the emergence and evolution of the Lenin cult. Prior to its formal standardization in 1926, these grassroots contributions played a significant role in shaping the cult beyond the purview of centralized authority.

(7) In this context, the concept of bodily preservation diverges significantly from that observed in other instances of preservation, whether they be natural, such as bodies encased in permafrost, ice, salt, or sandy soil, or artificial methods involving mummification, cryogenics, or plastination. In these alternative scenarios, the corporeal form undergoes various transformations: mummified remains desiccate, harden, alter in pigmentation, and often become unrecognizable; similarly, frozen and plastinated bodies may retain their superficial appearance yet forfeit flexibility and elasticity (Shin and Bianucci 2021).

Lenin encased within a glass sarcophagus, dressed in a dark suit with only his head and hands visible. They remain oblivious to the fact that the body's joints retain their flexibility, that the internal pressure of its skin is meticulously maintained, and that its imperceptible surfaces are continuously sculpted with precision. Even in contemporary times, Lenin's torso and neck exhibit rotational capabilities, while the skin appears firm and elastic, and the hair on his head remains affixed to the scalp⁽⁸⁾. However, the process of preserving the body was conducted under a veil of strict secrecy, concealed from public view and accessible only to the abstract gaze of the political regime, but never explicitly examined by this regime either. From the perspective of the State's political apparatus, Lenin's body was perceived as malleable and perpetually in flux; conversely, to the ordinary visitors of the mausoleum, it appeared immutable and preserved once and for all (Yurchack 2015, p. 147).

As will be discussed, the presence of these two distinct regimes of visibility does not indicate mere oversight or accidental omission; rather, it reflects a structural tendency inherent in Soviet political culture: the deliberate curation of ideological discourse. From this perspective, the constant preservation and manipulation of Lenin's body can be seen as a semi-symbolic parallel to the selective and constant overproduction of *Leninism(s)* by successive party leaders. However, rather than reflecting a singular, unified effort, both processes represent ongoing negotiations shaped by shifting ideological imperatives; a dynamic influenced less by unified manipulation and more by competing ideological demands.

My hypothesis asserts that although embalming renders the body perpetually visible, it simultaneously serves as a tool primarily aimed at safeguarding the integrity of the state through mechanisms of erasure. This process ultimately hinges on which "version" of Leninism is being endorsed or repudiated. Consequently, the body may function as a "shield" or "screen", potentially concealing selected aspects of the collective body. I believe that an analysis of these empirically observable

(8) The current operations of this research institute, akin to those in previous eras, are obscured by a euphemistically cumbersome designation: "Center for Scientific Research and Teaching Methods in Biochemical Technologies" (Yurchack 2015, p. 117).

figurative manifestations might reveal the fundamental units of meaning that comprise the diverse political identities at play. In this article, it will be illustrated that the modulation of *bodily visibility* can illuminate aspects that transcend corporeality, establishing a dialectic of appearance in which various political actors navigate a tension between “showing” and “hiding.” This dialectic relies on a certain degree of *dissimulation*: although Lenin appears to be the primary beneficiary of this collective “sacralization,” the actual distribution of its benefits among party leaders suggests that the true locus of communication lies elsewhere. This dissimulation mirrors what Robert Yelle describes in sacrifice and magical practices, where the action appears to be aimed at one recipient (e.g., the deity or the public), but the true recipient and the actual distribution of benefits are obscured. The hidden nature of these practices reinforces the political regime’s control, much like how certain sacrifices in magical practices serve not just the deities, but also the practitioners or institutions involved in these rituals; a rhetorical device that has a different effect than what it appears to be aimed at (Yelle 2012, pp. 2–4). As such, my inquiry into the concept of this “precarious visibility” (Asselin, Lamoureux and Ross 2008) will shed a light on the secular reliquary, not only in its discursive capacity but also as a critical factor that can either elucidate or obscure the political medium of the party.

3. The leader’s two bodies

At this critical juncture, a comprehensive understanding of the expanded role of this political entity necessitates a retrospective examination of the final years preceding Lenin’s demise, during which the schism between Lenin and his “cult” began to emerge. In the spring of 1923, Lenin’s health experienced a significant decline following a third stroke in March; concurrently, political rivalries among party leaders intensified, leading Lenin to perceive himself as effectively “erased” from active political engagement during this period. Although the public was kept apprised of his health status through curated reports in Soviet newspapers, these updates ceased in the months leading up to his death,

thereby fostering the illusion that Lenin remained politically engaged (Yurchack 2015)⁽⁹⁾. However, as Lenin was isolated from politics, the Politburo began actively constructing his myth. Between 1922 and his death in January 1924, many of the iconic images and institutions that shaped the Lenin cult were established. Although his previous statements were compiled and lauded, the authentic Lenin was intentionally omitted from this meticulously constructed portrayal. Concurrently, his physical remains underwent a gradual process of *thematic re-categorization* accruing new layers of significance contingent upon the political contexts into which they were subsequently integrated.

As Landowski (1989, p. 115) elucidates, the mechanisms governing visibility relations among social actors can indeed be perceived as figurativizations of more abstract organizations related to the circulation of knowledge among individuals. In such a light, the regimes of visibility in each era, which encompass the relationships between *what can be said* and *seen*, might dictate the nodes of power dissemination. It must be also emphasized, that to the public gaze, Lenin's death was presented as a sudden and unforeseen action: which corresponds to an "explosive" moment in the emotional state of the Subject; however, it resulted from a meticulously prepared agenda over an extended period. The *punctual aspectuality* in this cases induces a peculiar rhetorical strategy, suggesting an external force acting upon the Subjects that has propelled them beyond their own will — thereby somewhat stripping them of

(9) In late December 1922 and early January 1923, as he sensed the impending conclusion of his life, Lenin composed the "Letter to the Congress", directed towards the delegates of the Thirteenth Congress of the Russian Communist Party, scheduled for convening in late spring 1924. These documents held considerable sensitivity, wherein Lenin provided a critical evaluation of the political ideologies and moral characteristics of several prominent party leaders: Leon Trotsky, Grigory Zinoviev, Nikolai Bukharin, Lev Kamenev, and Georgy Piatakov. Lenin articulated concerns regarding Stalin's authoritarian tendencies, intolerance towards dissenting opinions, and discourteous behavior in private interactions — all attributes that rendered him unsuitable for leadership within the party. Lenin issued explicit directives concerning these documents to his secretary, L.A. Fotieva, as well as to his wife. Unbeknownst to Lenin, Fotieva was acting as an informant for the delegates at the Thirteenth Party Congress; however, the letter was subsequently suppressed by Stalin and excluded from the final published transcript of the congress released a few months later. Beginning in the early 1930s, when Stalin consolidated his position as the singular leader of the party, this letter was officially denounced as a forgery created by adversaries seeking to destabilize party unity. Possession of a copy became equated with participation in anti-party activities — a designation that could lead to a death sentence during the height of Stalinist purges (see Yurchack 2015).

full agency regarding their actions. Herein, Subjects are no longer self-Destining but represent themselves as “acted upon,” a passive subject dominated by an indeterminate uncontrollable external instance for which they bear no responsibility.

At this point, if we think about the process of embalming as *bodily intrusion* that violates Lenin’s personal human body, we can go back to Renè Girard (1972) who theorizes that that sacredness is not an attribute of the object; rather, as clearly demonstrated by the central phenomenon of the *scapegoat*, the sacred operates as both an effect and cause of constant *control* exercised as a safeguard against “violence”: controlling cultural reproduction while providing motivation for such control which remains always precarious, thus necessitating continuous re-exercise. In this outlook, in order to avoid possible conflicts resulting from the perpetual successions of Lenin, it became necessary to introduce a *deviation* (a disengagement or *débrayage*) within cultural reproduction processes to halt this effect, that continually arise within a culture⁽¹⁰⁾. The selection of the personal body of Lenin underlines an interesting application of Girard’s theory, because by halting decay through embalming and exposing his body in a highly symbolic space, Lenin’s corporeal nature is transformed into something “sacred”: from an aspectual perspective, Lenin’s death is characterized as an event marked by precision where emphasis is placed on its *terminal phase* (death as new life); indeed it is precisely through *managing* this terminal phase that Lenin’s life inaugurates an *eternal duration*: socialism on an everlasting global scale. In this process, the corporeal dimension is subject to a fundamental ambivalence: on one hand, the rejection of internal organs denies the reasons for the private body and, in a certain sense, its very nature, depriving it of essential elements; on the other hand, embalming becomes a tool for elevation, as denying the body elevates it, reconciling it with that higher realm of ideology. Henceforth Lenin will become an *abstract collective* (the transformation thus occurs in terms of thematization) entity symbolizing an ideology with eternity as its horizon. In this scenario, death,

(10) It requires establishing value through mutual agreement and objectification within a specific program — a certain redefinition involving particular subjects and objects: “sacred” subjects and objects (and rituals). Furthermore, this “certainty” must be reiterated and constantly re-enunciated in response to ongoing voids of meaning.

a punctual episode triumphantly overcome, becomes emblematic of a widespread conviction: communism shall prevail over time and thereby over death itself⁽¹¹⁾. Crucially, as Marina Cattaruzza emphasizes, “Totalitarian regimes might be interpreted as attempts to hypostatize temporality which would present itself as closed — and thus non-historical — even if not necessarily cyclical” (Cattaruzza 2008, pp. 5–22; op.cit. in Mengozzi 2021, p. 54; my translation). The individuality distinct from the masses is thus isolated in a singular exceptionalism: the body of the state (the collective totality) rendered eternal through the *violation of the personal body of its founder*. Through this process, his preserved body not only symbolized the triumph of socialism over mortality but also created a physical, ever-present reminder of the “correct line” of Leninism, ensuring that the Party remained aligned with its foundational truths. What distinguishes Lenin’s sacralized political body is that it represented not only his personal legacy but also the institutional immortality of the Party itself.

Ken Jowitt (1992, pp. 1–6) outlined that the Leninist system combined two seemingly contradictory principles: the traditional idea of individual heroism and the modern bureaucratic principle of organizational impersonalism. In this framework, sovereign power was not vested in a charismatic leader, as in absolutist regimes, nor in an anonymous bureaucracy, as in modern democracies. Instead, it resided in the body of the Party itself. Leninism, the doctrine invoked by all Soviet leaders to justify their authority, relied on the ongoing preservation and reconfiguration of Lenin’s body as a metaphor for the Party’s eternal, impersonal truth. Stalin, despite his overwhelming power, did not

(11) Girard contends that human beings possess an inherent need to emulate the lifestyles of their peers through the mechanism of imitation. Utilizing Greimasian terminology, no value is ascribed unless one actant is aligned with the values of another actant; in this dynamic, the first actant assumes the role of “subject”, while the latter adopts the position of “destinant”. However, Girard complicates these roles by introducing the concept of *mimetic desire*, which allows for their reversibility. The implications of this assertion are paradoxical: as subjects strive to conform to others in order to forge their identities, they simultaneously forfeit their individuality. The objects perceived as valuable derive their worth solely from third-party actants, which not only undermine the agendas of subjects but also serve to validate them. If these dynamics remain unregulated, they risk culminating in self-destruction, a phenomenon Girard characterizes as “violence.” Thus, it becomes imperative to implement a deviation — specifically, a disengagement or *débrayage* — within cultural reproduction processes to mitigate this detrimental effect.

embody sovereign authority; he presented himself as its faithful interpreter, channeling the truth of Leninism. When his interpretation was questioned after his death, the Party distanced itself from Stalin and survived his personal downfall by reaffirming the “true” Leninism. This ritualized transformation ensured that Lenin’s legacy and the Party’s authority remained intertwined, reinforcing the Soviet system’s capacity for self-renewal, even in the face of leadership changes or ideological crises. Every Soviet leader, from Stalin to Mikhail Gorbachev, produced his own version of Leninism. This was possible because each version, regardless of its contemporary meaning, held the position of unquestionable, foundational truth within the Soviet political system. This truth was articulated outside and beyond the Soviet system, and no Soviet leader, not even Stalin at the height of his power, could occupy this position — only the constructed corpse of Leninism could.

Remarkably, in the aftermath of his death, the ideological field was characterized by a proliferation of competing interpretations of Lenin’s thought, each attempting to ground its authority in a privileged access to the “true” Lenin, while simultaneously discrediting others as heretical or “deviationist.” What emerged was less a concealment of Lenin’s positions than a discursive overproduction of Leninisms, each selectively emphasizing different aspects of his writings to justify shifting political goals. Crucially, this process cannot be understood without acknowledging Lenin’s own profoundly pragmatic orientation. His political thought was neither fully systematic nor internally consistent; rather, it often exhibited an instrumental flexibility in which theoretical proclamations were subordinated to contingent strategic necessities. The well-documented tension between the libertarian rhetoric of *The State and Revolution* (1918) and the centralizing, bureaucratic practices that shaped the actual Soviet state, an inconsistency noted by Simone Weil in *Écrits historiques et politiques* (1960), exemplifies this contradiction. Lenin’s political discourse operated simultaneously on two registers: the static, doctrinal register of ideological legitimation, which sought to stabilize meaning through reference to economic “laws” and historical inevitability, and a mobile, adaptive register of tactical improvisation.

This interplay between doctrinal stabilization and strategic flexibility can be helpfully framed through Eric Landowski’s semiotic typology

of interactional regimes (Landowski and Petitimbert 2023), particularly the opposition between *manipulation* and *adjustment*, which offer a critical analytical tool for examining the dialectical interplay between discursive coherence and political improvisation inherent both in Lenin's praxis and its subsequent appropriation within Soviet ideological discourse. Landowski delineates two fundamentally distinct modes of semio-narrative engagement: manipulation and adjustment. The manipulation regime is characterized by strategic intentionality, wherein the addresser endeavors to direct the addressee's conduct according to a predetermined narrative schema, employing modal competencies such as *vouloir-faire* (willingness to act) and *pouvoir-faire* (capacity to act) to achieve specific outcomes. This mode presupposes a hierarchical organization of meaning production, whereby persuasive discourse functions instrumentally to orient subjects towards established objectives. Conversely, the adjustment regime operates without fixed goals or codified scripts; it relies instead on aesthetic competence and relational co-presence, with subjects attuning reciprocally through mutual responsiveness and contextual sensitivity; a process Landowski terms "mutual realization" which unfolds within lived experience rather than through premeditated discourse (*ibidem*).

These two regimes, of rhetorical control and of improvisational governance, coexisted within Lenin's own political practice, and were later reproduced by party elites as both a political necessity and a legitimizing mechanism. Rather than imagining a singular, authentic Leninian essence that was later corrupted, it is more accurate to see Lenin himself as navigating (and often amplifying) the tensions between theoretical rigidity and political plasticity, a duality that his successors merely inherited and re-inscribed through their own interpretive interventions. This semiotic dynamic finds a striking parallel in the treatment of Lenin's physical body after his death. The painstaking effort to preserve and periodically retouch his corpse in the Mausoleum, keeping it lifelike, supple, and perpetually "present", can be seen as a symbolic extension of the same logic that governed the treatment of his texts. Just as his theoretical legacy was subjected to endless reinterpretation, reframing, and strategic citation, oscillating between dogmatic manipulation and opportunistic adjustment,

so too was his embalmed body manipulated and adjusted to resist decay while remaining ideologically usable. In both cases, the goal was not preservation in the strict sense, but a kind of suspended animation: a Lenin who never fully dies, because he must always remain available for ideological projection. The corpse becomes a shield of the discourse: plastic, curated, and situated between manipulation (its artificial maintenance) and adjustment (its periodic refitting in response to physical and political decay). This dual process reveals the deep interconnection between corporeal materiality and ideological signification in Soviet politics, where even death was no closure, but a new modality of control. Applied to the posthumous construction of Lenin's corporeal presence and intellectual legacy, this semiotic model reveals the structural ambivalence characteristic of Soviet ideological production. Accordingly, the proliferation posthumously of competing "Leninisms" does not merely indicate internal ideological fragmentation; instead, it signifies a deeper semiotic instability within the Soviet political imaginary caught between manipulation-oriented doctrinal closure and pragmatically adaptive adjustment regimes. These coexisting modalities thereby reveal not a unified Leninist orthodoxy but rather an inherent structural ambivalence embedded within Soviet political culture.

4. Lenin has died, but Leninism lives!

Broadly speaking, one might assert, echoing Leone's examination of reliquaries (cf. Leone 2014), that the dialectical relationship between encompassing entities (the glass case, the mausoleum, the body) and encompassed entities (Lenin as individual body-soul) merely replicates (at the level of manifestation) the interplay between *system virtuality* and *process realization* (the promises of communism versus their actual phenomenal realization). In this regard, Leone posits that "covering devices" function as forms of *débrayage* (embalming or displaying the body within a mausoleum), while all unveiling mechanisms represent forms of *embrayage* (with transparency allowing public visibility). The former conceals what exists yet remains unseen (Lenin is deceased),

whereas the latter reveals what was previously obscured but now manifests (Lenin lives). Within this framework, if embalming signifies that textual articulation transitioning from truth (what is and appears) to secrecy (what exists but does not appear), then exposing the body within a transparent case serves as that textual articulation moving from secrecy (what exists but does not appear) to truth (what is and appears): *Lenin lives!* A subsequent essential consideration concerns how to further articulate the dialectic between the transparency of encompassing entities and the perceptibility of encompassed entities according to applicable plastic categories. In this context, an increase in perceptibility regarding the encompassed entity (Lenin as both body and spirit) prompts a more or less progressive reconfiguration: as transparency heightens for the encompassing entity (the glass case being transparent), so too does it elevate for the encompassed entity. Nevertheless, “overall unveiling” remains largely imaginary since it relies on observers tasked with completing qualities inherent within the case: although visible to sight, access to touch or dialogue remains obstructed. The body exists in suspension; therefore, it falls upon observers to imbue this “body’s shell” with ideological essence. This abstract narrative mechanism elucidates why visitors frequently expressed an inclination to transition from imperceptibility associated with life (the immobile suspended body perceived merely as a container for something unexperientable) toward its antithesis: soul. Consequently, there arises a pragmatic effect derived from this narrative dialectic between encompassing and encompassed elements: “to recognize imperceptibility alongside desire for perception will lead either to elimination or at least attenuation of encompassing entities” (Leone 2014, pp. 609–617). Thus, the relationship between embalmed bodies and immortality presents *dual veridictive implications*: on one hand, an embalmed body affirms authenticity concerning represented events (Lenin lives); on another hand, both case and mausoleum act as authenticating sources for this sacred body. Indeed, visitors could partake in that same here-and-now experience with Lenin’s remains; thereby establishing direct connections with him and his corporeal essence, while reactivating a form of enunciational solidarity among Party members (the enunciator) and observer-visitors at his tomb.

As Leone emphasizes, one could argue that it is the reliquary that confer upon the body its status as such, essentially “indicating” it sacrally. While such an assertion holds validity when viewed through an ethical lens grounded in structural semiotics, understanding it from an emic viewpoint reveals that it is not the reliquary which creates the relic; rather, it is the relic creates its own reliquary. Indeed, for the believer though the reliquary is not important in itself but serves merely as an indicative sign of the sacred; in the sense that the adoration reflects reverence towards the entirety from which this relic is but a fragment (*ibidem*).

As previously outlined, the embalming and exhibition of Lenin echoed the models established by Orthodox tradition. However, while the rationale behind this analogy may seem evident; namely, to facilitate the public’s adoption and adherence to the dogmas of religious communism, the ritual itself took on a more ambiguous character. Initially, the embalmed body was treated as though it were a living being, only to later undergo a solemn “sacralization”, pointing to a macabre and grotesque ritual. Had the hypothesis concerning the Orthodox origins of this image ceremony been accepted, Jowitt’s assertion would have been rendered untenable, or at the very least, would have required a more nuanced revision. Nevertheless, there exists an alternative, and more clandestine, explanation: that a purely “laic” *consecratio* offered no foundation for associating the leader’s effigy with what is perhaps the most defining characteristic of sovereignty: *its perpetuity*. From a semiotic standpoint, this mechanism establishes a basis for the “contest over meaning” prevalent at the political level, marked by discursive games enacted by various participants (Schmitt 1932). This implies that the essence of the political domain necessitates a specific dynamic of identity construction characterized by the emergence of gaps and associated practices. I contend that an examination of certain expressions found within late imperial and early Soviet constitutions can illuminate this transcendent dynamic, illustrating how the sacralization of power was not only feasible but also profoundly intertwined with the ritualistic dimension associated with a religious gap.

5. Insights into a “supreme idea” through late Imperial and early Soviet constitutions

As Jacob Sadowski outlines, the phrase “to do something not out of fear but for conscience” (“ne za strakh, a za sovest”) (Fyodorov 2008, p. 665; op. cit. in Sadowski 2022, p. 2058) serves as an idiomatic expression within the Russian language that encapsulates the fundamental principle of acting with moral responsibility and conscientiousness. The connotations associated with this expression align seamlessly with the delineation of an individual’s obligation to the monarch, thereby transcending the limitations imposed by secular law. The characterization of the tsar as a “sovereign and unlimited Monarch” or as the “possessor of the Supreme Sovereign Power” (Sadowski 2022, p. 2058) inherently implies an expectation that his commands be executed with sincere intent, necessitating no further explanation (Uspenskij and Zhivov 2012). Indeed, the invocation of God situates the Russian power structure within a cosmological framework, thereby legitimizing its legal architecture through religious underpinnings. This formulation exemplifies the extensively documented occurrence surrounding the sacralization of authority figures, while simultaneously reflecting adherence to the historio-sophical doctrine of the “Moscow–Third Rome” (Lotman and Uspenskij 1984). Consequently, within legal texts that outline governance structures in the Russian Empire, references to God function not only as instruments for religious legitimization of sovereign authority but also symbolize an overarching “supreme idea” deeply embedded in conceptualizations of state power prevalent in Russian culture. Building upon Sadowski’s insights, we argue that the concept of God functions as an apophatic “rhetorical” echo within the first Soviet constitution, symbolizing supreme ideas that are integral to political authority. These ideas contribute to the sacralization of the collective body and establish the locus of sovereignty as external to the body of the system itself (Lenin). In fact, this rhetorical echo extends beyond the divine; it encompasses all worldview and mythological frameworks embedded within Russian constitutional constructs, which, whether implicitly or explicitly, allude to any form of transcendent ideal.

The introductory section of *The Constitution of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic* (1918) includes the Declaration of Rights for Toiling and Exploited People adopted by the Third All-Russian Congress of Soviets. The discrete points within this internal structure established foundational articles constituting not merely legislative poetics but performative acts. For example, Article One proclaims that “Russia is declared a Republic of Soviets representing Workers’, Soldiers’, and Peasants’ Deputies. All authority at both central and local levels shall reside within these soviets.” In Article Seven, which functions concurrently as both declaration and political directive, it asserts:

The Third All-Russian Congress of Soviets [...] maintains that during this critical phase of proletarian struggle against its oppressors, there exists no rightful place for exploiters within any governmental institution. Authority must be wholly and exclusively allocated to the working masses and their duly authorized representatives — the soviets representing workers’, soldiers’, and peasants’ deputies (Sadowski 2022, pp. 2062–2963).

The semantics inherent in these sentences prompt reflections not only on how orders are executed or the attitudes toward their execution, but also on the interpretations of their rhetorical dimension. This dimension is embedded in the orders themselves — an essence that becomes apparent not merely through content, but through its form, which is imbued with repeated references to the proletariat, now assuming the role of the sovereign, god-like authority. This echoes the rhetorical “power” of an enchanted structure. Similarly, what precisely constitutes the body of the state encompasses two distinct dimensions: mortal and immortal, personal and sacred, enchanted and scientific. The first dimension, a quasi-biological mortal body, transcended the individual biology of each party member and leader, achieving a state of perpetual renewal with each successive incarnation throughout Soviet history. In contrast, the second dimension, the immortal body, represents the external foundational truth inherent to Leninism. Ineed, as Yurchak emphasizes, the material presence of Lenin enshrined

within his mausoleum exemplifies one aspect of this duality concerning party sovereignty (Yurchak 2015).

In sum, although Leninism maintained its status as an unquestionable external truth, its practical implications evolved over various historical epochs: from Stalin's Short Course to Gorbachev's attempts to reestablish an "unknown Lenin", among others. This duality involved not only ongoing manipulation and reinterpretation of Lenin's writings and biographical details but also a continuous reshaping and reconstruction of his physical embodiment.

Such a persistent emphasis on the authenticity of the face, corroborated by restrictive regulations concerning paper reproductions and the photographers permitted at ceremonies, contributes over time to the sedimentation within the collective imagination of a cognitive type (Eco 1997) as an integral component of the cultural and historical memory of the nation. In this context, the visual memory of the leader, cultivated through meticulous embalming, frames, posters, and official images disseminated by propaganda, has served as a foundation for intriguing re-semanticizations manifested in translations, reconfigurations, and trans-medial migrations that span from artistic domains to consumer contexts. A face gradually transforms into a *cognitive type*, (TC) perpetually reproduced, referenced, and emulated; it becomes subject to parodies and syncretic forms of hybridization that are occasionally deemed blasphemous.

6. A model of martyrdom

Another critical element to consider in the present analysis is the international community, which assumes the role of sympathetic observer and engaged participant in collective mourning. For instance, Antonio Gramsci published an extensive article succinctly titled "Leader" in issue number one of the new series of "L'Ordine Nuovo" (March 1924), presenting a brief treatise on leadership, predicated on the premise that every state operates as a dictatorship led by a figurehead alongside a select few. Notably, upon receiving news of Lenin's death while in Vienna, Gramsci conveyed his initial reflections in a letter addressed to his wife Julka, in January 1924:

It will never be possible to prevent great masses from synthesizing Revolution into certain names that seem to embody all aspirations and pain felt by oppressed working-class masses [...] An incident occurred in an Italian village: three days after Lenin's death, an agricultural laborer who was communist died [...] he chose to be buried dressed in red with 'Long Live Lenin' inscribed on his chest. Lenin had passed away and wished for such burial. Within significant portions of poorer and more backward populations, these names take on almost religious mythic status. This is a force that must not be destroyed" (cf. Gramsci 1924; cited in Santucci 1992, p. 204; my translation)⁽¹²⁾.

If we accept this hypothesis, it is crucial to note that they Lenin's body was also set within an educational and pedagogical frame: by showcasing Lenin, exemplifying perfect moral integrity and total devotion to the Cause, the Soviet ideology encouraged preferred representations for legitimization purposes regarding the worker's body, both as a reference to a common "creed" (the proletarian revolution) and as a memory of the sacrifices made by its founder and his total devotion to the collective cause. As such, in promoting a vision of a penitential society, it presented the cultural reference category of *smirenje* (representing humility and subjugation imbued with emotional connotation) whose religious origins were traceable to submission to God (Piretto 2004, p. 4). In exploring the role of productivity within Soviet ideology, Peter Kenetz highlights how the political education system, even during the civil war, placed a strong emphasis on productivity as a central value, corroborating that of sacrifice. As Kenetz emphasized:

Even during the civil war, the political education system stressed the importance of productivity. Not surprisingly, in the 1930s, productivity became the dominant theme of Soviet propaganda. [...] The regime selected a group of workers and helped them to vastly overfulfill their norms in order to hold them up as examples. The movement, named

(12) Non si potrà mai evitare che nelle grandi masse la Rivoluzione si sintetizzi in alcuni nomi, che sembrano esprimere tutte le aspirazioni e il sentimento dolorante delle masse operaie oppresse [...] In un villaggio italiano è successo questo fatto: tre giorni dopo la morte di Lenin è morto un salariato agricolo, comunista [...] egli si è fatto seppellire vestito di rosso, con sul petto scritto "Viva Lenin". Lenin era morto, e ha voluto essere seppellito così. Questi nomi, in una grande parte della massa più povera e arretrata, diventano quasi un mito religioso. È questa una forza che non bisogna distruggere." (cf. Gramsci 1924, op.cit. in Santucci 1992, p. 204).

after a miner, A. Stakhanov, brought considerable benefits: it took advantage of the genuine enthusiasm that may have existed among segments of the population for the socialist transformation of their land, and enabled the factories to demand more from the ordinary worker” (Kenez 2022, p. 657).

From this vantage point, a body called upon to bear witness to labor and exertion is more reflective of its subjugation to the collective than of its autonomy or individuality. This raises a critical issue regarding the public legitimization of bodily representation, which is intrinsically tied to the rejection of individual needs, an avenue through which the specter of individualism may have been concealed. The individual, thus, was stripped of personal time and subjected to the influence of a collective entity that embodied both religious and political-ideological characteristics, as well as prevailing mentalities and customs. Indeed, the bodies of individuals were inseparable from the divine body of the state. Through sudden “hierophanies”, such as purges, persecutions, and arrests, the state appeared to enforce strict compliance with the regulations that governed the correspondence between the “mundane” aspects of life and the transcendent dimensions of ideology. An example of this can be found in the repression tied to the forced collectivization of land-owning peasants (kulaks), which must be framed within a broader context of the suppression of individual needs. This repression eventually led to a crisis marked by a sharp rise in suicide rates. In response to this alarming phenomenon, the Party introduced a new dogma in 1925, officially prohibiting suicides, branding them as signs of spiritual weakness and a lack of faith in the collective cause (cf. Mengozzi 2021, pp. 60–61). In this context, Lenin’s embalmed body was imbued with specific guarantees of legitimacy by Soviet power, becoming a paradigmatic symbol of martyrdom — devoid of physical status or individual needs. Lenin himself had sanctioned this interpretation of his role as the protector of ideology, with subsequent attacks on his body underscoring its perception as a foundational pillar within the Party’s doctrinal structure. The first assault on his embalmed remains occurred on March 19, 1934, when Mitrofan Nikitin, a disillusioned farmer frustrated by corruption and material deprivation, attempted

to shoot Lenin's body before taking his own life shortly thereafter. In July 1960, another individual, Minibaev, broke through the protective glass surrounding Lenin's tomb, damaging his visage and necessitating extensive restoration. The most recent documented attack occurred on September 1, 1973, when an assailant detonated explosives near the sarcophagus, causing multiple injuries and two fatalities, though Lenin's body and sarcophagus remained intact. In post-Soviet Russia, only occasional incidents have attracted media attention; notably, in 2010, an individual approached the mausoleum's podium, demanding that Lenin's remains be buried and the mausoleum destroyed. More recently, in 2015, political activists poured holy water on the mausoleum, calling upon Lenin to "Rise and walk!"

7. Conclusions

As we have observed, the project of embalming Lenin gradually took shape within a complex political cosmology, one that remained largely obscured from the perspective of the various actors involved. This phenomenon, characterized by the intertwining of ritual and sovereignty, is not unique to the Soviet context but is reflective of broader models of sovereign power (Yelle 2012). The rituals that sustain the perpetuity of sovereignty vary across regimes and may appear irrational or even bizarre to external observers. In this context, the locus of sovereign power within the Leninist polity did not reside in the individual leader's embalmed corpse, but in the party itself, which was sacralized through intricate political mechanisms. This framework can be particularly relevant in shedding light on the enduring models of sovereignty present in Russian culture. These practices, though seemingly disconnected from overt religious or sacred rituals, subtly reinforce the sacralization of power and contribute to the perpetuation of certain models of sovereignty in ways that are not always transparent or easily understood. In discussing the complexities of sacred representations, Basso Fossali offers a crucial insight into the nature of sacred texts and their translations. As he has emphasized:

The sacred cannot merely articulate sacramental values but must exist on the level of enunciation as sacred; translations must not entirely diminish the original verb, lest their content — regardless of its determinacy or indeterminacy — lose its veritative significance (Basso Fossali 2008, p. 151; my translation).

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