The Arts and Entertainment

SOVIET AESTHETIC

"I KNOW your Socialist Realist novels," sighed the Moscow television comedian. "On the first page there is a description of a turbine. On the second page a description of a hydraulic drill. On the third page a description of a dynamo. On the hundred and fortieth you come to the words I LOVE—followed by MY MACHINE."

The Soviet attitude to the arts is not static. Recently there has been much discussion and criticism. But before I describe this new development, it is necessary to understand the basis of their approach, which does not change. First and foremost, every work of art is a moral problem. We tend to see the constant argument about realism and formalism as a question of the relative importance of content and form. They see it as a question of whether a work is moral or amoral—which, to them, is immoral. They are not concerned with a work of art as an object in itself, but with its effect. Its qualities are not absolute but functional. This is what Stalin meant when he said that writers were "the engineers of the soul."

"What you are really saying is that the Russians consider all art as propaganda?"

Yes, so long as one remembers that propaganda has now come to mean any insistent interpretation of life made according to values with which one happens to disagree. And also as long as one takes into account that the tradition which they claim, is not only one of political lampoonists, but of, for instance, Goya, Shakespeare, Balzac, and, most particularly, of all their own great eighteenth- and nineteenth-century artists. The principal and obvious result of the Soviet emphasis on the *use* of art is that it is really taken seriously. The training of art students and architects is far longer, more comprehensive and rigorous than ours. A student of 17 spends 30 working hours on a portrait drawing. As a result of such discipline he is twice as competent as I am—who teach in an art school.

"But what about the artists who don't conform, who don't want to follow the party line?"

A good deal of wishful thinking really lies behind this question. It is usually asked, with far too dramatic a picture in mind. Rather as if one heard of a house built 400 feet above the sea, and immediately assumed that it was perched on a crag, instead of being one building in a town nestling in the dip of a hill. First, because there is far more variety in what is produced—both in terms of local tradition and individual personality—than is generally imagined. I met two Fauve painters who were doing very well. Secondly, because the main Russian tradition of painting and literature (Pushkin, Tolstoi, Surikov, etc.) has always emphasised social conscience. Thirdly, because the revolution occurred thirty-six years ago. Contemporary Soviet art can only be seen in relation to the whole established Soviet way of life. It is no good thinking of the artist in Russia as a tragic *victim*; if one is set on pitying him, one must say that he is a tragic *product*, that he has been conditioned to know no better. But he won't thank you for that. What you call independence he will call irresponsibility.

The first Socialist Realist paintings were produced immediately after the Revolution by a group of painters working in Leningrad. The most outstanding of these was Brodski. Their subjects were portraits or scenes from the Revolutionary struggle. Lenin arriving from Finland at Petersburg railway station and addressing the workers from the famous armoured car, for instance. Their style was austere: somewhat in the tradition of Courbet—although in fact they owed far more to their own nineteenth-century realists who were painting social themes as early as the 1860s. Many of Brodski's canvases are large and contain hundreds of figures. In reproduction they look a little like over-exposed photographs. But in fact they have zest, dignity, clarity and a sense of structure that are truly remarkable: the rough equivalent in painting to Eisenstein's films—the same intensity of focus.

About ten or fifteen years later the character of Soviet painting began to change. It became far less austere, more colourful and far more academic—roughly what most people in the West now think of as typical "Victorian" Soviet art. There were landscapes, genre subjects, historical scenes, portraits of workers, pictures of factories, Stalin, collective farms, new towns, Stakhanovites—but the vast majority were photographic and trite. Yet, for all its banality, this art was a serious attempt to solve a problem. The Revolution was over. Socialism was being built. For the first time ever large-scale popular taste became a positive factor to be considered by painters. Somehow art should celebrate the people's achievements. The mistake they made was to assume that people only wanted and needed reassurance, that they must be constantly patted on the back. They forgot the true optimism of Gorki's remark that "Life will always be bad enough for the desire for something better not to be extinguished in man," and substituted instead a trivial optimism. This led to a naturalistic art lacking either tension or conflict. Since everything was—or was going to be—all right with the world, there was no need for the artist to *select* experience. They were rightly proud of what they had achieved, but they wrongly considered that therefore all that was necessary was to hold up a mirror to their achievements. Or to put it another way, art drew so close to life that it had neither space nor time to resolve itself. It could stimulate but could not satisfy. Satisfaction only came from life itself.

Then, a few years ago, there ensued a great debate about these questions. Artists and critics began to realise that it was not enough simply to record any scene and to hope that it reflected the progress of life at large; but rather that the artist must choose the typical, release and demonstrate the hidden potentialities of what he painted. This implied that there was struggle and conflict—otherwise such potentialities would be obvious. In psychological terms it meant seeing action in relation to motive; in purely visual terms it meant seeing superficial appearance in relation to underlying structure.

Now the results of this reassessment are becoming evident. The dreary academic painters still remain. The national Russian emphasis on anecdote is still strong. One expects to see an encyclopædia as well as a palette in a painter's studio. (Incidentally, it is for this reason that there are few mural paintings. They realise that to make a synthesis between the broadly decorative and the precisely literary is still at the moment beyond their powers.) But at the same time the character of the work of students and young painters is new, strikingly different. In subject matter it is less directly didactic; in formal investigation far more searching. It is no longer sufficient to capture a "frozen" snap-shot image of an arm; its structure has got to be established. Then its capability of alternative movement can be fully realised and so (in human terms) the decision behind the movement taken into account. If one paints a smile one must also imply that the human face is capable of weeping.

I would sum up in this way. The majority of Russian painting is bad—the new developments are still embryonic. The majority of Western Art is equally bad, but for the opposite reasons. In one case it is a question of art being too superficially literal; in the other of it being too profoundly remote. They have made art cheap. We have made it a luxury. Were I a critic in Moscow I would attack the old sentimental academic there, just as I attack the new heartless academic of formalisation and abstraction here. (Having read some of their criticism, I also think that I should be published.) But—and this is the crux of the matter—I believe that they are creating the foundations of a true tradition, whereas we, for the most part, are destroying the tradition we inherited. A true tradition can only be built on the general awareness that art should be an inspiration to life—not a consolation.

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