

A. V. Lunacharsky

MARXISM and ART

According to Marxism as a theory of the development of human society, art is a definite superstructure upon the mutual relations between men engaged in productive processes, relations which are themselves determined by the forms of labor prevailing in a given period. Art appears as a superstructure on this economic foundation in two ways: first, as part of industry itself, and secondly as an ideology.

Art has played an important role in the life of humanity, from the most primitive times until the present as a specific tendency in the whole of human production. Perhaps nothing can be found among the products of human labor where every detail—such as color, form etc. is dictated exclusively by utilitarian motives. If we take any object, be it a book or a building, a cup or a lamp-post, and consider its basic outlines, it will be seen that these outlines cannot be explained merely on the grounds of usefulness. Harmonious proportions without doubt evoke pleasure in the spectator, regardless of utility. This is the simplest aspect of the question; but even on a more complicated scale, it is impossible to find any human product which does not bear some trace of the desire to beautify—to polish, glaze and color objects of use. It is clear that man has a powerful tendency to combine in the products he creates not only purely utilitarian aspects but also aesthetic ones. In the long run this tendency is connected with our senses. We know that there are pleasant and unpleasant sounds and colors. Man always attempts to make his productions pleasant; attractive, interesting.

Naturally, aesthetic taste varies from people to people, from period to period. One of the most interesting tasks would be to investigate the roots of all the different styles in art. Why for example, Chinese art, which evokes such pleasure, is so different from Greek art. It would be interesting to analyze the evolution of French furniture, to discover why the pomp of the Louis XIV style develops into the cold severity of the Louis XVI style; then the graceful austerity of the revolutionary style; then into the harmonious discipline of the imposing Empire style. Only Marxism can discover the true causes of the endless variety of style in art. But for this purpose Marxism must investigate not only the social order of a given period and the traditions of preceding periods; but also the prevailing technical equipment.

Art, however, is not only an aspect of work; it is an ideology. From the Marxian viewpoint, an ideology is a systematic reflection of all life as it appears to human consciousness, which fills the entire conscious life of mankind. Human consciousness takes form in individual, momentary, isolated thoughts; but when these ideas and feelings begin to crystallize they become ideologies.

Various sociological schools which existed before Marxism or alongside of it taught that the organization of thought and feeling is an independent process, and even that this idealistic process is the very essence of human life; they believed that human society first organizes its thought and feeling through its great specialists, the thinkers and artists, and then proceeds to organize its environment according to the theories evolved by these intellectual specialists. Marxism, however, has shown that the opposite is true. Ideologies grow out of realities and bear the earmarks of this reality. Every ideology receives its material from reality; the actual forms of reality control the ideas and intuitions of the thinker, who cannot ever free himself from definite social interests. The thinker is always tendentious; that is, he always seeks to organize his material toward a definite end.

More than that: Marxism points out that society is divided into antagonistic social classes which struggle against each other. In this sense, classes are groups of people, participating in the process of production, who occupy different positions in production and different attitudes toward production; and therefore have quite different interests; such as, for example, the landowners, the bourgeoisie, the peasantry, the proletariat.

When a Marxist speaks of the class character of ideas, he is not content with merely saying that every system of ideas belongs to this or that basic class, to the ruling class, or to the class struggling for power, or to the class under domination. Marxian analysis goes further: it seeks to determine the relations between various legal theories, philosophic systems, religious teachings and schools of art and the various groups within the basic classes, or

even intermediary classes in society. Often a given society is extremely complicated. It is a crime against true Marxism to take ideological phenomena and explain them by the interests of only one of the important classes. The history of ideas is entirely rooted in the history of society, and as the evolution of human society is varied and complex, ideologies are equally varied and complex. Furthermore, while Marxism denies that ideologies play the dominant role in the evolution of society, it does not deny the importance of ideologies. When social classes create their legal systems, their religions, their philosophy, their morals, their art, they are not wasting energy. This is no mere reflection of reality in various mirrors. These reflections themselves become social forces: they become banners and slogans around which the social class gathers, with the aid of which it fights its enemies and recruits among them its agents and vassals.

Art plays a prominent role among the ideologies. To a certain degree it is the organizer of social thought. In itself it is a special medium for apprehending reality. Science, which seeks to be accurate and objective, helps us to apprehend reality in another way. But scientific knowledge is abstract; it says nothing to human emotion. In order to understand any aspect of reality thoroughly it is not enough to have merely an intellectual concept of it; it is also necessary to have an emotional attitude toward it. This attitude finds expression in ethics and aesthetics. It is possible, for instance, to know something about the Russian peasants from statistical reports; but it is quite another matter to become acquainted with the Russian peasants through the works of a novelist like Uspensky.

However, we know that statistical reports may be distorted, either deliberately or unconsciously; similarly, the artistic reflection of life may also be deliberately or unconsciously distorted by class interest. But it is precisely this factor which makes art so powerful. It is not merely an instrument for apprehending reality; it is also a weapon for propagating definite viewpoints, a definite approach to reality. In so far as art organizes thoughts, it organizes them together with feelings. Sometimes art organizes only the feelings. Music for example, and architecture, (considered as art and not as engineering) are incapable of expressing thought. It takes a great deal of trouble to translate their language into the words which express our concepts; and the result is crude. Nevertheless, the effect of music and architecture are colossal.

In fields where living facts express themselves directly in ideas, it is easy to trace ideologies to the social groups which evolve them; but where it is a matter of organizing feelings, which is the essence of art, such a process becomes difficult. That is precisely why the history and theory of art have defended themselves so successfully hitherto against Marxism. But of late great progress has been made in this field. Several works by the German Marxist historian and art theoretician Hausenstein are forward steps in this direction. Hausenstein has been successful in developing the weakest sides of the Marxian theory of art.

These are principles of Marxism in so far as Marxism is a theory of human society and its evolution. But Marxism is more than such a theory; it is a definite program; it is itself the ideology of a definite class—the proletariat. Marxism is the only ideology which does no violence to reality. This is due to the fact that the proletariat is the class of the future; it is to the interest of the proletariat to base itself on that science which points out what actually exists and indicates the tendencies of the future. Similarly, the tendencies of the proletariat are good for the whole of humanity. The proletariat is the last oppressed class; in emancipating itself it emancipates all humanity from a social order based on classes. There has never been so far a more important or more liberating social change than that which the proletariat will bring about. It is for this reason that the aims of the proletariat are at the same time the aims of mankind.

The theoreticians of the proletariat must do more than point out with real objectivity how this or that aspect of art springs out of the social order; they have the right to adopt a critical attitude toward works of art, both past and present. The proletarian theoretician can designate those art works of the past which are clearly dominated by the monstrous spirit of exploitation; those works which express the passive sufferings of the masses or their slavish submission; or which are permeated with the spirit of compromise, evasion, surrender, and skepticism. The proletarian critic can spot those works of art which deliberately avoid all liv-



NOVEMBER, 1917

by William Siegel

ing content and resort to an empty play of intellect or vaporous dreams, in order to escape reality, to evade all responsibility for it. On the other hand, the proletarian critic can find certain valuable elements in old works of art, which, while often belonging to the ruling classes, are nevertheless full of the spirit of vast organizational plans, of man's faith in his own powers, of aspiration for knowledge and a just life; or works whose main tendency is that of revolt against evil, which proclaim the rights of the oppressed sections of mankind.

Endless are the voices, the complaints, the laughter, the songs which sound in the artistic works of the past; and if they were analyzed from beginning to end it would be possible to find a definite social value in each work. Some would turn out to be acceptable to the proletariat; they would have a friendly ring, like the voices of men who in one way or another were the prophets or precursors of the proletariat; other works would turn out to be doubtful in their tendency but interesting because they reveal unique social situations; still others would be found to be repulsive or inimical.

In addition to evaluating works of art according to their contents, the proletarian critic can also evaluate them on the basis of form. Marxism, for example, teaches us that those classes which are interested in expressing new ideas, in organizing great feelings will always create art works rich in content; on the other hand, decaying classes, which have no ideology, which have no hope of defending their rights, abandon themselves to purely formal art, which serves the purpose of making their life a little less monotonous and more acceptable. In the field of artistic form

it is possible to develop the most varied evils; it is possible to develop extreme aesthetic licentiousness; or colossal, stupid pomp; or the sensual refinement of a landowner.

There are epochs—as a rule those in which some social class is in full bloom—which are characterized by striking ideas and whose emotional content finds the proper formal expression. Then art is calm, precisely because of this harmony between content and form. The artist is sure that his work is significant, that it will be accepted by certain elements of his people. He is self-confident; he knows precisely how this or that content must be transmitted to the society of which he is a part. He is master of the requisite form. Under such circumstances, we have a classical period. But until the arrival of such an epoch there must be a period in which ideas and feelings are as yet unable to find their proper embodiment. Such a period usually coincides with the rise of a given class to power, and not with its highest point of power. During the period when the class is striving to find a political form for its class interests, its art is characterized by storm and stress, and its forms are restless. The artist of such a transition period strains his imagination to find the form which he is as yet unable to grasp. Even the ideas which do arise in his mind are not yet entirely clear to him. His feelings, however, are very turbulent; and thus there arises the romantic tendency in art. Finally, when a given class has passed its apex of power, when it is no longer useful to society; when new forces oppose it, it loses self-confidence. It has squandered all its ideas, and its feelings have become more and more inconsequential. Its former unity breaks up into individual atoms. This condition also finds its reflection in art. The soul of art (its ideas and feelings) begins to shrivel up

and is soon entirely lost; it retains merely a cold, formal knowledge which soon degenerates into academicism. But even this beautiful corpse does not long remain static. It soon begins to decay. The artists of such a class begin to neglect even form; they seek extravagance; or exaggerate one aspect of art to incongruous proportions. Art begins to rot.

This is a rough outline of the main ideas of Marxism on the art of the past. It should be pointed out here that by a proper analysis we can obtain the most useful results from the most negative works of art; first, in so far as they are symptoms of certain social phenomena and increase our historical knowledge; secondly, in so far as they contain various positive aspects. It is possible to find a decadent work of art a marvellous combination of color, line or sound; it is possible to find in a degenerate work of art something which is very useful from the technical point of view. Similarly, in a monumental building permeated with the slave-holding spirit of some despot we may find magnificent proportions which are the product not only of despotism but also of the mightiest forms of mass-organization. The Marxist can thus learn something from every art work of the past and transmit that knowledge to others.

But Marxism is not merely a method of understanding the real roots of art; it is also a method of criticizing them and using them. Proper enjoyment of past art, its proper development is useful for contemporary art.

Marxism faces the task of developing a history of literature, a general theory of literature, and a theory of literary, artistic creation. We are only at the beginning of these tasks. Of course, the last of these tasks, that of literary artistic creation, already leads us from Marxism as a social theory to Marxism as a living social force. A Marxist, a representative of this force, can appear in literature either as critic or creator.

A Marxist critic must have a sufficient amount of theoretical experience; he must be able to approach every work of art objectively, without prejudice, discovering its social roots, explaining its place in society, its connection with the social forces of a given period, especially his own period. Criticism, as distinguished from literary history, must be understood to mean a living reaction to the art of our own epoch. If for a Marxist historian of literature it is permissible and even desirable to exhibit some passion in the final evaluation of a work of art or of its elements as useful or harmful for the communist cause, such a passionate evaluation, such a fighting approach, is simply a DUTY for a Marxist critic. The critic must be a Marxist theoretician in his strict scientific objectivity; at the same time he must be a fighter.

As a creative writer the Marxist is intimately acquainted with theoretical Marxist works. It is ridiculous to think that culture can harm a Marxist artist; that his talent will suffer if he seeks to clear up for himself questions of literary history or of literary technique. On the contrary, it can only help him. However science can be useful to a Marxist writer only when he is a real artist. No theoretical tricks and no theoretical equipment, however rich, can serve as a substitute for genuine talent.

What is the difference between a Marxist talent, a Communist talent in literature and other kinds of talents? A Marxist talent distinguishes itself by the fact that the acuteness of its reactions is specifically colored. Such a talent reacts with particular sensitivity to everything which has a direct connection with the great contemporary struggle; it will react sharply to everything directly or indirectly connected with the world's axis, the outstanding social phenomenon of our times, the struggle between labor and capital.

The internal recreation of this material proceeds in the Marxist writer under the main center of his thinking and feeling; a really great Marxist writer carries within himself an enormous arsenal of idealism, a colossal mass of bitterness and contempt for the evil sides of life, a tremendous amount of fighting spirit. He will seek clarity and monumentality of form. Such a writer will above all be interested in finding a wide democratic audience. Under such conditions, the monumental clarity with which he expresses his experiences will triumph over all other tendencies in art.

Translated by Joseph Freeman

I am happy to join in sending birthday greetings to the U.S.S.R., whose existence is the greatest triumph in all our human history.
FLOYD BELL.

Stefan Faber

G A S !

*It creeps over Shanghai,
It is stacked in Memel,
loaded in Hamburg,
produced in Leverkusen.
They try it out on rabbits and guinea pigs—
whether it cuts up the lungs quick enough.*

*It is traded on stock exchanges,
It is on demand by the Branch.
"Who has been buying it all up?
Straight-deal merchant seeks gas!
I've just got to supply.
—supply, supply, supply—
that gas!"*

*Gas was not invented for the small broker.
It's the great big goods and only for the great big dealers.
Who would enjoy its blessings
must have plenty in his waistcoat pocket,
must have governments in his waistcoat pocket,
must have railroads in his waistcoat pocket,
must have Geneva and Basle in his waistcoat pocket,
must have Socialist Parties in his waistcoat pocket,
must have trade unions in his waistcoat pocket,
must have judges and priests in his waistcoat pocket,
must have churches and guns in his waistcoat pocket . . .
Blue Cross and Yellow Cross,
Blue Cross and Yellow Cross—
who would enjoy their blessings
must have so many things in his waistcoat pocket.
In Leverkusen it is made for Shanghai.
In Memel it is stacked for Leningrad.
All that gas.*

*Gas
in Warsaw for Moscow.
In Tokio for Vladivostock.
In Bucharest for Klarkoo.
Gas
in Leuna—for Wedding.
In Ludwigshafen—for Neukoelln.*

*The gas is being made by workers.
By workers in Germany
against workers in Russia.
By workers in Germany
against workers in Germany.
By workers who hold silence
against workers who matter.
By hands in Leuna
against lungs in Berlin!
By hands in Leuna
against lungs in Leuna!
By your hands
against your lungs
this gas!?*

Translated from the German by Ian MacPherson

Greetings to the Soviet workers and farmers on the fifteenth anniversary of their revolution. Through fifteen years they have stood fast against a world of enemies,— abroad and at home. Through fifteen years they have planned and built the structure of a new social order. Through fifteen years of trail-blazing, they have put the workers of the world in their debt. Greetings to the Soviet workers and farmers on the fifteenth anniversary of their revolution.

SCOTT NEARING