

Readers respond to *The Aesthetic Component of Socialism*

Our Readers
1 April 1998

Dear David Walsh,

In a general sense, I agree with what you say. But I had some problems with it. No, let me put it this way: I agreed with everything you said, but I had a problem with what you didn't say.

The center of the essay concerns itself with your exchange with Mr. Brad Evans. You use this exchange as a vehicle for exploring the questions of Marxism and art. In his second letter, you quote Mr. Evans as saying: "On 'artistic form,' you have stated that this has 'an independent and objectively significant power, an ability to enrich spiritual experience and refine feeling'. If Marx heard these words of 'spiritual experience' he'd be laughing in your face!"

"What kind of 'spiritual experience' is going to change the material (political and economic) state of this world? Material forces can alter material states, leave the spiritual experiences of the New Age."

This questions gets right to heart of the matter, and you correctly position yourself to confront it directly—and then fail to do so. Certainly you flank the question, march around it, and even lay siege to it, but you never directly engage it (sorry, I've been reading Clausewitz).

Let me explain what I mean: when, in *Literature And Revolution*, Trotsky addresses Man's spiritual side, I feel I know what he means. Note the word "feel." I cannot *express* what he means, I only have a sort of intuition. "A sort of intuition" is not science! Mr. Evans makes a very direct challenge: What does a materialist mean when he refers to Man's spiritual life? How dare a materialist even use such a phrase?

"Spirit" is an interesting word. It has, indeed, been taken over by the New Age movement, and one is tempted to surrender the word to them, and try to get by saying something else. To your credit, you wish to

reclaim this perfectly good and useful word that means—what?

The Oxford English dictionary devotes five closely written pages to the word—a good indication that we're talking about something a little hard to pin down. It begins with "the animating or vital principle in man (and animals); that which gives life to the physical organism..." In other words, it begins with the purely mystical. Further down we find: "In contexts relating to temporary separation of the immaterial from the material part of man's being, or to perception of a purely intellectual character..." Here we have, perhaps, dualism, but still there begins to be something that I think is getting closer to what you (and Trotsky) are talking about.

I don't know. I don't have the answer; that's the problem. In your discussion of the theory of "Proletarian Culture" you speak around and about the issue, but still left me, as I was before, with the nebulous feeling that I understand, rather than with true understanding. I don't expect the sort of precise definition a debater would want—we're not dealing with mathematics, and narrow definitions that exclude all the connotations of a word distort more than they reveal; but you had the opportunity here to drive toward understanding a very difficult and important concept and I think you ought to have taken it.

What is the purpose of art? The question is almost nonsensical; art has many purposes. For one thing, just by existing, good art makes our lives richer—life is more fun when you can laugh at a comedian or have a vicarious adventure at a movie or lose yourself in a good piece of music, or enjoy a fine meal (is gourmet cooking art? I think so). But that is hardly all there is to it. One passage you quote from *Literature And Revolution* (it tickles me, by the way, how many

passages you quote that I have marked in my copy) hits it hard: “What the worker will take away from Shakespeare, Goethe, Pushkin, or Dostoyevsky, will be a more complex idea of human personality, of its passions and feelings, a deeper and profounder understanding of its psychic forces and the role of subconscious, etc...” That is another “purpose.” Inspiring passion is still another: while you were entirely correct in telling me, some time ago, that one doesn’t read a novel to learn history, and accurate history does not make up for artistic failure, nevertheless if a novel awakens an interest in history in a reader, that is all to the good.

Yet another, and in my opinion very important, aspect of art, is that it inspires the viewer to strive. The greatest art does this merely by existing: I listen to Beethoven, or I look at a painting by Van Gogh, and I feel a kind of awe at what human beings are capable of. Hearing a concert of the Grateful Dead (when they had a good night, at any rate), or seeing a sculpture of Rodin would fill me with a desire to go and *create* something—to make something from nothing.

Literature can have this effect in more direct ways—the tragedies of Shakespeare (Macbeth may be the best example), make one feel that, even if one is doomed to lose, it is always worthwhile to struggle, to fight, to throw everything you have into the effort. Everyone quotes, “Lay on, Macduff,” but it is the line before it that brings a lump to my throat.

This effort, this drive, requires intelligence, dedication, and enthusiasm: it requires spirit. Here we get into another definition of that word, which is related to the one that troubles me, but isn’t the same.

SB

31 March 1998

Dear David Walsh:

Your attempt to come to grips with what the Marxist approach to art should be has crystallized for me what I have felt for years and years. It is, if I can sum it up, that the liberation of humanity is bound to the mastery of its culture in toto, from the earliest beginnings to now. How horrified I was years ago, during my youth (and this certainly pushed me away from Stalinism more than most else at the time), when Maoists and self-described radicals, at their most self-serving, would declare that all past culture would have to be destroyed in order for mankind to progress. Mozart—out!

Beethoven—out! Shakespeare—out! They were nothing but bourgeois decadents! But now I understand better, after reading your lecture, that in order to go forward culturally, we must understand all that has gone before, not because it is a nice subjective wish, but because within all present the past is sublated, included, and to destroy the past—its scientific and artistic accomplishments in even in the most oppressive class societies—is to leave us blind, one-sided.

For years I tried to write a “Marxist” analysis of art, particularly theater and film, which are my fields, but I kept coming against, as it were, the “sins” of our past: the one-sidedness, semi prolet-cult approach. I remember these feelings coming up quite strongly when, to my horror, I saw that you had written a review of *Crash*, which I immediately proceeded to brand as “bourgeois decadence.” Can you believe it? I now laugh at those in the bourgeois press who write about this “Marxist” work (even that iceberg of mediocrity, *Titanic*, has been labeled as being Marxist—just because it shows different classes on a ship!) or that. But what the hell is a Marxist work of art? I keep telling my friends that there is no such animal. But of course, what they mean is the Stalinist conception of art as “social realism,” which now, for the first time (after reading your article), I understand how it came to form one of the ideological lynchpins of the Stalinist bureaucracy!

I will try to contribute to artistic matters more frequently; it will take a lot of effort, but it’ll be the only way I can despoil myself of that “one-sidedness” you talk about. I am excited about the party’s new attempt to come to grips with this all-important issue.

I thank you from the bottom of my heart for all your efforts in bringing this understanding to the socialist movement and the SEP.

Most comradely,

RR

30 March 1998



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