

# LETTERS

## TO THE EDITORS:

Professor Egbert seems to me entirely correct in pointing to the oversimplification by American analysts of the ideological aspects of artistic activity in the Communist countries [Donald D. Egbert, "Politics and the Arts in Communist Bulgaria," *Slavic Review*, XXVI, No. 2 (June 1967), 204–16]. I'm afraid that cold war zeal has led many critics, especially in art and architecture, to confuse the problem of state censorship with another question of quite a different order—that of "modern" vs. "traditional" modes of expression in the art forms themselves. This confusion leads our own avant-garde establishment to equate escape from Communist censorship as leading inevitably to the adoption of its own regnant modes of expression—Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns in painting, Cage and Cunningham in music and the dance, Johansen and Rudolph in architecture.

This seems to me a caricature of the actual situation. It may appear to these establishment circles—artists, critics, museum curators, etc.—that their taste is absolute and infallible for modern life everywhere, representing the only true path for future artistic development. But one does not have to move very far from their orbits to discover how limited is this conviction. One need not go to Ethiopia or Mexico or the USSR. Right here at home, Americans display—in their preferences in houses, music, art, and decoration—a taste for the anecdotal, the "realistic," the traditional, or the pietistic which is very close to current Russian taste. Only the iconography is slightly modified—station wagons, cookouts, and resort clothes instead of happy workers, big harvests, and booming production lines.

As one who has visited a number of Communist countries, it seems to me an error to assume a priori that the regimes there have imposed upon their peoples standards of taste or modes of expression which are totally foreign or antipathetic to them. Quite the contrary: anyone who has spent an afternoon in the Tret'iakov Gallery of Russian art in Moscow cannot not be struck by the fundamental continuity between nineteenth-century tsarist and twentieth-century Soviet painting. There is the same emphasis upon genre and anecdote, the same historicity, the same insistence upon ideality and symmetry. All of it, moreover, will seem startlingly familiar to the American. John Rogers in 1867 and Norman Rockwell now would both be perfectly at home in those galleries. (I am aware, of course, that the short-lived artistic radicalism of the 1920s is not adequately represented there. But Lissitzky and Gabo appear, even today, like real "foreign bodies" in that enormous corpus of oleaginous painting. One wonders how much headway Constructivism would have made, even if Stalin had not extinguished it.)

Much the same paradox obtains, or so it seems to me, in architecture. For decades now it has been *de rigueur* in our own circles to ridicule the Stalin Style as quintessential evidence of the general Communist error. For myself, trained in the Bauhaus epoch, it has always seemed a vulgar and bathetic idiom; and its forcible imposition upon Eastern Europe did great harm, both functionally and formally, to the development of architecture in those countries. But there is nothing specially Communist, not even anything specially Russian, in the Stalin Style. Moscow Uni-

versity and the Berlin Karl-Marx Allee are nothing more than tardy and inept mimicries of American skyscrapers like the New York Municipal Building or the Pure Oil and Wrigley Towers in Chicago. Nor is this idiom actually an exotic Russian importation into the satellite capitals. The whole of downtown Budapest, much of central Prague, and such remaining fragments of prewar Warsaw as the Telephone Building—all of these show us that Renaissance-Beaux Arts eclecticism got there long before the Russians.

Communist architects have now been permitted to discard this whole creaking apparatus, which is a mercy. But it by no means follows that the only proper use for this new freedom is a slavish adoption of current American conventions. Moscow architects are doing just this, in the new curtain-walled skyscrapers along Kalinin Prospekt, and they will live to rue the day they adopted this particular American error. Indeed, according to Ada Louise Huxtable, writing in *The New York Times*, the first summer has proved how ill adapted they are functionally to the Moscow summers. (Wait until the Moscow winter closes in!)

A "third world" may not be possible in foreign policy. But if Claes Oldenburg's empty grave behind the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in which nothing was ceremoniously interred by the artist, or Cage's four minutes of silence, or the apartment which Rudolph has designed for himself—if these represent the only alternatives which we can offer to socialist realism and the Stalin Style, then a third (or fourth or fifth) way out for art seems mandatory. It is fatuous to pretend that only Communist architects are in trouble: the architects of the whole world are in trouble and, fundamentally, it's the same trouble everywhere!

October 30, 1967

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TO THE EDITORS:

I enjoyed reading Marc Raeff's interesting and informative survey, "Filling the Gap between Radishchev and the Decembrists" (*Slavic Review*, September 1967), but I wonder why he has omitted mention of several Soviet works on literary criticism and journalism which would have been relevant to his topic. I have in mind such books as V. G. Berezina, A. G. Dement'ev, et al., *Istoriia russkoi zhurnalistiki XVIII-XIX vv.* (Moscow, 1963); V. G. Berezina, *Ruskaia zhurnalistika pervoi chetverti XIX veka* (Leningrad, 1965); and N. I. Mordovchenko, *Ruskaia kritika pervoi chetverti XIX veka* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1959). Mordovchenko's book—originally written as a doctoral dissertation in 1948 and not published until after its author's death in 1951, obviously for ideological reasons—is particularly important for a study of the Decembrists' predecessors. He maintains, among other interesting thoughts, that in their aesthetic views the Decembrists were more influenced by the Shishkovites than by their more progressive predecessors—a thought that supports Professor Raeff's own idea of the lack of a rectilinear descendancy from Radishchev to the Decembrists.

October 13, 1967

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TO THE EDITORS:

Professor Martin Horwitz of Cornell University has kindly called my attention to the following two facts in connection with statements I had made in my recent article