

Art for the Ages or Temper of the Times?

***The Two Worlds of American Art: The Private and the Popular*, by Barry Ulanov (Macmillan. 528 pp. \$7.50), applying a single critical measure to our music, movies, painting, architecture, sculpture, theater, literature, and dance, finds little that is exemplary of genius, much that is vulgar. Arthur Darack is book and art editor of the Cincinnati Enquirer and teacher of esthetics and musicology at the University of Cincinnati.**

By ARTHUR DARACK

BARRY ULANOV, who is a professor of English literature at Barnard College, has set his hand to rounding up the whole constellation of American art—its recency, vulgarity, genius. If he finds more that is recent and vulgar than what is exemplary of genius, few will quibble with his scale of weights and measures. Ulanov has assembled here an encyclopedic survey course in the popular and fine arts; however, because the latter, older term has an honorific connotation, he substitutes “private” for “fine.” The term “popular” enjoys more neutrality, he supposes.

In his recital of music Ulanov includes classical, popular, and jazz. He sails through the art galleries, taking in photography without raising an eyebrow over its status. He has a chapter on architecture. Poetry, the short story, and novel win a larger share of his attention, his affection and, I think, his perceptiveness. Ulanov finds some popular, as well as private, art in literature but obviously the popular arts are television, radio, the movies, and the commercial theater. Though he begins with the bland assumption that for critical purposes popular and private arts are to be considered as one head, to be chopped off with a single critical tool, it turns out that reason and evidence get the better of him, and he finds little to say on behalf of radio and TV in the U.S., compared with what goes on in Europe, particularly in Poland. He also deplores most of what Hollywood produces, noting especially its failure to appreciate and exploit the creative developments that have taken place out there—Chaplin, W. C. Fields, even, one infers, the Scott Fitzgerald episode.

If you commence a critical excursion by saying that you intend to treat two subjects as one, though ordinarily they are kept apart, like the tiger and zebra at the zoo, and wind up speaking eloquently on behalf of the zebra for its good behavior, superior neck thrust, etc., while denouncing the tiger for its stealth, ferocity (or whatever), you have not quite taken the tour you announced. Ulanov ultimately is guilty of this perhaps trivial deception. (An esthetician like R. G. Collingwood might say he has destroyed the basis for any distinction in the arts; but that is a zebra of another stripe.) For all his intention, Ulanov cannot convince himself that radio and television, as they presently are inflicted upon us, operate from the same value schedule and formal pose that he finds in the literary arts, in music (classical and jazz, less often popular), painting and sculpture, and in some branches of the theater. It is not surprising that he arrives at this position; it would have been surprising had he not. Why then, did he announce another program?

Ulanov cuts through much critical provincialism, dogma, and cant to take a firm but viable stand on issues that more specialized observers often fight wildly about. He wants it to appear that the

same vocabulary may be applicable to aspects of Duke Ellington and Beethoven, without reflecting the poverty of language or criticism. (They may have more in common than criticism usually supposes.) In a word, the arts in America exhibit a pluralism that includes what is best about democracy and what is worst. It is our problem to make the best of both worlds, popular and private.

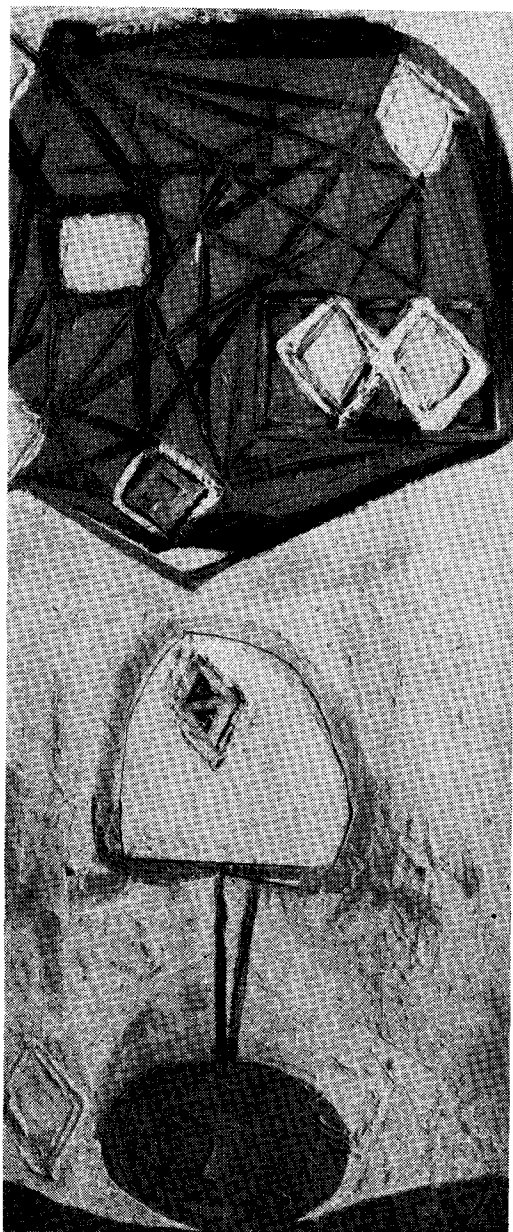
SPECIFICALLY, composers like Ruggles, Varèse, Sessions, Carter, and Babbitt reflect the temper and noises of the times, times that are unreasonable or uncomprehending; an earlier critic called them “out of joint.” In this case, the popular has inundated the private. Popular music, which Ulanov interprets mostly as musical comedy (no Beatles fan, he), falls on more receptive tastes, but tastes that have failed. They are not necessarily debased, merely uninformed or unformed.

In painting he considers design to be crucial with us. The bias towards design stems from Cubism, Surrealism, even Abstract Expressionism. But sometimes Ulanov uses the term “design” as we might use it to designate lines and blocks in Optical Art; at other times he uses it to mean what we customarily



—Culver.

Greta Garbo with Sig Rumann, Felix Bressart, and Alex Grenach in *Ninotchka*.



—Collection, Whitney Museum of American Art, N.Y.
"The Red Skirt," by Robert Motherwell.



—Boosey & Hawkes.

Composer Aaron Copland.



Dancer and Choreographer Agnes de Mille.



—NBC.

Still from the Western *Branded*, with Chuck Connors as star.

The arts in America, whether popular (the movies, radio, television, and commercial theater) or private (occasional samples of painting, music, literature, and the dance) "exhibit a pluralism that includes what is best about democracy and what is worst. It is our problem to make the best of both worlds, popular and private."

refer to as style—the characteristic disposition of the lines and blocks in the context of an artist's production.

In the novel he considers James and Faulkner to be our twin giants; if credited, his estimation of Scott Fitzgerald and Hemingway will depress the current market. Ulanov's discussion of them—value judgment aside—has, in view of the ground he covers, the expected brevity, but an insight that is unexpected.

The whole book is a supermarket of ideas and attitudes, assessments and descriptions of American arts, including the latest best-selling novels and plays. Thus, the author castigates Edward Albee bitterly for *Tiny Alice*, which he considers a "diseased" attack on religion (this in a footnote), but praises him enormously (in the body of the text) for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Ulanov is oddly at war with Tennessee Williams, "because of his obsession with the association of death and sexuality." Yet much of the world's madness over the past twenty-five years stems precisely from this association and its subsequent enactment. Nor has it ended. I should think this entitles Williams to an exactly opposite rating in Ulanov's scale—not for promoting madness, but for revealing it.

The value of Ulanov's book is not damaged by it, but I think there are times when his method—the "popular"- "private" polarity—interferes with his examination of the evidence. For example, he does not quite know what to do with *West Side Story*. Popular? Private? He admits it has "no clear category" and that this may be its securest virtue. He should let well enough alone. He decides, however, that it is a middle-brow example of *kitsch*, just this side of Muzak. *West Side Story* does not, at this point, need either my defense or Ulanov's attack. Yet it seems clear enough that some features of both the score and libretto (or whatever you wish to call it) are "popular" and others "private," and all of it of a complexity that is provocative in a field ordinarily dominated by crude simplicity. If so, it is not *West Side Story* that needs to be recomposed, but Ulanov's categories, at least in this instance.

Otherwise, the book is impressive and engrossing, an example of a finely-tuned critical intelligence operating astutely and broadly.

The Business of Being Human

The Accidental Century, by Michael Harrington (Macmillan. 322 pp. \$5.95), examines and poses solutions for the problems raised by cybernation and by increasing corporate concentration and power. G. W. Linden is chairman of philosophy at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville.

By G. W. LINDEN

WE LIVE in a period of instant history when even facts are fantastic, when the only thing certain is change, for change has become inevitable through the bureaucracy of research. We live in a world dominated by corporate concentration whose increasing technological acceleration threatens to bury us in lopsided abundance. The danger of the future is not a dictatorship of the proletariat, but of programmers. Our existence has become subdivided; we are unable to create a sense of the whole. In our lived world, all ideologies—political, economic, ethical, religious, or philosophic—are problematic. We are even incapable of believing in disbelief. And the final irony is that Americans, the people with the greatest mobility, have no horizons to pursue. Even barring nuclear catastrophe, we, the people, may still be obsolete. These are the themes of Michael Harrington's new book.

In *The Other America* Harrington was concerned with the invisible poor. *The Accidental Century* is more basic; it is a search for the possibility of vision itself. According to Harrington, the older visionaries failed to fulfill unachievable ideals. Our situation is different: we are unable to visualize our achieved realities. Most of this book is descriptive of the texture of decay in the Western world, a world in which man cannot escape himself, since the spread of suburbia has obliterated the distinction between the city and nature. America is the paradigm; our excesses are most visible. Besides, we have never had difficulty exporting our errors. Harrington makes no attempt to be neutral, and quite rightly. If the present is too much to imagine, it is certainly too intense for objectivity. And thus this book is also prescriptive, for it argues passionately for the direction society ought to take.

When he calls our century "accidental," Harrington means that while the

"conscious revolutionists of the past proposed visions which outstripped reality, the unconscious revolutionists of the present create realities which outstrip their vision." This accidental revolution is "the sweeping and unprecedented technological transformation of the Western environment which has been, and is being, carried out in a casual way."

Economically, this means that capitalism is being destroyed by capitalists through the growth of corporate concentration, consumer creation, guaranteed profits, and administered prices. Precedent and power have given corporations the private right to determine public policy. The problem for business is the sacrifice of legitimacy for power; for the public, it is lack of access to the oligarchy of decision.

Mr. Harrington does not quarrel with the privacy of means, but he is disturbed by the privacy of goals. His prescription

is political: make the policies of corporations public, debatable, and subject to democratic control.

The revolution in technology is also creating a vast class of people no longer capable of participating in the work world. Politically, this means a schizoid society with a technological élite governing a subculture of unemployables. Morally, it means the death of the Protestant ethic: asceticism, thrift, and prudence are replaced by the patriotic duty to consume. This is the most poignant part of Harrington's book; it reveals his true quest: the spiritual meaning of cybernation.

But, Harrington protests, technocracy need not be our fate. With abundance possible, man is freed from the struggle for necessities, and is thus faced with choice. And Harrington insists that man must be responsible, must choose his future, not submit to it. The remedy? Abandon the patchwork methods of present governmental action and make a massive investment in people. Pay people to become educated, to work in service professions, and to teach the arts of leisure. Redefine work as a labor of love, a means of reaching reality and significance.

Throughout his book Harrington takes



H. Martin