

# Artist, Critic and Teacher

*Paddy Whannel*

THE one-day forum, the Artist, the Critic and the Teacher, sponsored by the Joint Council for Education through Art, took the form of four statements.

Art: Battleground or Playground, by Lindsay Anderson

Theatre: The Approach to Reality, by Kenneth Tynan

The Myth of the Artist, by John Berger  
Education: Agent of Change or Impotent Onlooker, by Brian Groombridge.

Anderson's statement was illustrated by his film *O Dreamland* and by a reading by Christopher Logue of his own poem *To My Fellow Artists*. Tynan's plea for a responsible theatre was supported by a live per-

formance by the actors group, The London Studio. This was a semi-improvised version of the Maupassant story *Day in the Country*. Berger's analysis of how the artist is presented to the public was accompanied by extracts from Huston's *Moulin Rouge* and Emmer's *Drama of Christ*. When Brian Groombridge sought to bring the other statements into an educational focus, he backed up his comments with a showing of *Momma Don't Allow*.

The day ended with all the participants appearing on a panel to answer questions under the chairmanship of Karel Reisz.

It was an educational conference. Great trouble was taken to ensure that as many

as possible of those attending were educationists. Most of them were, although some refugees from the Court and the N.F.T. probably sneaked in.

The purpose of the occasion was to attempt a break-through of some cultural barriers particularly as these relate to the teacher.

By and large the kind of education the teacher receives in school and training college posits an established body of cultural products to which there are certain definable attitudes.

But he emerges from college to learn that Jackson Pollock "affirms the flat space of his canvas by slapping it with his paint-

covered hands" and that Austin Cooper claims about his paintings: "I do all sorts of things to them—put them in the rain, throw beer on them, and sometimes piss on them." On the other hand, if he just skims through his *Daily Mail*, he could easily mistake the reproduction of the Lady Dalkeith portrait for an advertisement for a new kind of soap.

His pupils, however, will belong to a different world. The world of Tommy Steele and Elvis Presley. In the playground they will be singing the latest jungles from "commercial."

And not unrelated to all this is the question of status. He can read in the correspondence columns of the *Telegraph*: "It is now time our teachers were told that their job is not a profession, and that their attempt to gang up with doctors, lawyers and others is an impertinence."

This is the situation in which the teacher finds himself. Under pressure to produce technologists, doubtful of his status, faced on the one hand by an art world that seems unrelated to all he has been taught to understand by culture and on the other by the nightmare of Sabrina, Gilbert Harding, Murraymints and monsters from outer space, it is little wonder that he often escapes into the routine of the classroom to emerge as the fuddy-duddy—the counterpart stereotype to the other myth of the artist as outsider.

If, however, he does not escape. If he takes up the battle on all fronts, what help does he get?

Sir Eric James, the high master of Manchester Grammar, has said: "A television set will enter Manchester Grammar over my dead body."

But if the teacher seeks more serious guidance and turns to Mr. Driberg's television column in the *New Statesman*, he can read:

"I must say that the effect was startlingly realistic and also sometimes deafening. When an express train rushed through the room the floor did—literally I swear—tremble, and, since we are seven miles from a station, the cook nearly dropped the "quiche Lorraine" she was making in the kitchen."

He may switch on Monitor and hear Mr. Huw Weldon introduce a talk on Leger with the announcement, "most of us had never heard of Leger."

The authorities and the critics are failing when the need for critical guidance is crucial.

The first need is for responsibility in writing. This means an end to both the sophisticated, amusing and criminally irrelevant writing in many of the highbrow reviews and the sure-fire smart-alec tedium of popular journalism. (There are ways of presenting serious views in a popular way as was recently demonstrated by a *News Chronicle* article on publicity by Leslie Mallory.) There is a need to relate works of art to our lives in an illuminating and significant way. At the one-day forum there were displays of photographs and newspaper cuttings. Like the dramatic and film illustrations these were supposed to create a network of references connecting the battered face of Basilio, the smooth faces of the boardroom, the working model of the execution of the Rosenbergs in *Dreamland*, the *Bridge on the River Kwai* and the uninhibited gaiety of *Momma Don't Allow*.

The next need, especially for educationists, is to sort out our values in relation to popular culture and the mass media. We cannot make judgments if we condemn the popular simply because it is popular. Too frequently those who are most vocal in the condemnation of jazz are those, as someone put it, who could not tell King Oliver from King Saud.

## The response

These at any rate were the kind of issues raised. What was the response?

The theatre was full and by all accounts the audience found the occasion exciting. True, there were critics. Some people did not feel the dramatic presentation to be relevant. It may have been that the form of the presentation, using techniques of mime and expressionism, obscured the fact that it drew its substance from observation. Realism can take many forms of which naturalism is only one. There were other criticisms but I think it would be fair to say that the reaction of the training college student who sent in eight pages of excited and constructive comment was representative.

The reactions of the educational press were more instructive.

The *Times Educational Supplement* presented a sober account of the meeting, concentrating, as was natural, on Brian Groombridge's statement on education and popular culture.

On its front page, however, it made this comment under the heading "Ennobling Savages":

"There is an unparalleled opportunity to achieve the first democratic culture in history," said Mr. Brian Groombridge at a meeting of the Joint Council for Education through Art. Somehow one doubts this—especially when he went on to say 'we must beware of imposing aristocratic or middle-class standards on working-class children.' One might have thought, if we wanted a culture at all, that this was the only thing we could do. The idea that the modern masses possess a culture worth anything, or are likely to create one, is delusory. The really popular is the almost worthless—this applies to newspapers, music, art and most activities except football, horse-racing and other forms of sport. The trouble about a democratic age, which this undoubtedly is, is that it generates a strong prejudice against imposing anything on people. It is held to be not the right way to treat a noble savage. But, of course, the imposing goes on all the time. The educational system, the churches, the B.B.C. still, all in their several ways attempt to raise the masses to the level of the cultivated middle class."

This of course is not quite so silly as it may at first appear. The comment went on:

"At the side of this platonic endeavour, largely cancelling it out, runs the other form of imposition which apparently aims at making the masses more like their present selves than ever; this is the realm of the cheese-cake weekly, the corny film, and low television. All culture in these days is imposed from the top. The interesting point is whether the imposition should be by policy or left, as it mainly is now, to the play of the market."

There is some hope in the qualifications "corny" and "low." Also, while it is important to urge educationists to take up a less bigoted and more constructive attitude to the mass media, it would be foolish to ignore the corrupting character of much that is offered. Here the *T.E.S.* makes a real point. The stuff that is presented to people by "free enterprise" in the cinema, in the press, and on television, is as much an imposition as that which is imposed by the B.B.C. The interesting point indeed is whether we can leave this to the "free play of the market." One wonders if the author of the words realized the implications of this. The other comments make one doubt if he did.

The phrase "making the masses more like their present selves" presents a too unobvious picture of the relationship between the public and the image of the public presented in press, film and TV. There is a striking passage in *O Dreamland* where the camera stalks a line of coaches parked in a waste ground while the voice of Frankie Laine calls on us to believe that for every drop of rain that falls a flower grows. It is easy to condemn this sort of sugary pseudo-religion but one must ask why it is popular and surely part of the reason is that the response is rooted in a genuine aspiration for the poetic. The popular arts reflect accepted values but the mirror is a harshly distorting one and the image reflected back, which in turn moulds behaviour, bears only a very oblique relationship to people's "real selves."

The history of jazz, for example, presents a recurring pattern of genuine folk creation being vulgarized by commercial exploitation.

"The educational system, the churches, the B.B.C. still, all in their several ways attempt to raise the masses to the level of the cultivated middle class."

But perhaps that is what is wrong with them. We must get past the customary nod in the direction of how much the B.B.C. has done for music and ask if this approach can ever lead anywhere. It is easy to hold up middle class virtues to sophisticated ridicule, but to talk of raising the standards of taste of the masses implies that there are standards whereas in the new realm of the mass media there are none. We have to create them. Even in the more traditional arts we must question the validity of standards. Whose standards? The standards of Monitor where Leger is an unknown? The standards of Bond Street where he is a commodity? The standards of the Academy where he is a monster?

## Books show "class"

The organ of the Middle Class, the *Daily Telegraph*, recently carried an advertisement for the Reprint Society:

WHAT CLASS OF HOME DO YOU WANT YOURS TO BE?

Say what you like, there's nothing on TV to compare with the pleasure of a good book. But have you thought what social standing it gives you and your family—having good books about the place? They put you a whole class up—in the eyes of your neighbours and business friends. You're "well-read"—the sort of family that's a cut above the rest."

What surprises about this is the confident belief that such a crude appeal will be successful. Yet a few hours listening to the conversation of "educated" men in the average golf club leads one to suspect that the confidence is not misplaced.

Reviewing Kenneth Allop's book *The Angry Decade*, Richard Hoggart remarked: "We hear little about those—I am afraid they may compose the largest single group—who rebel or affirm or wait on nothing, who go through the stages of educational and social change to become graduates but, outside their subjects of academic study, are as much the consumers of the more trivial mass-entertainments as if they had never been 'educated'."

To say that "the idea that the modern masses possess a culture worth anything, or are likely to create one, is delusory" is to take an all too restricted and literary view of culture, and to ignore altogether the rich pattern of life described by Hoggart in the first section of *The Uses of Literacy* and the significance of working-class institutions (Raymond Williams, *U.L.R.* No. 2). And this is no mere theoretical argument. It has important implication for classroom practice. The danger of treating the arts in education as "subjects" divorced from life is obvious, but the "raising standards of taste" school of thought has led to another and ultimately more pernicious practice, that of "getting at the pupils through their interests." This "weaning attitude," as Brian Groombridge called it, inhibits any real encouragement of critical discrimination where such discrimination is most needed. It is the attitude behind the characteristic view of many teachers who only recognize the existence of the cinema when it is being used as a medium for the work of a more acceptable art form. Dragging children along to see *Henry V* or *Great Expectations* does not in the least help them to form critical judgments about films. If anything they regard such things as an unwarranted intrusion of their private pleasure.

## Anger and the Arts

The journal *Education* was less careful than the *T.E.S.* in separating reporting and comment.

Its piece was headed "Anger and the Arts." After describing Lindsay Anderson as "setting the appropriate note of Angry Young Man-ism" they spoke about a "galaxy of opponents of the Establishment" and announced that Christopher Logue's poem *To My Fellow Artists* was meant to chastise all the other angry young men. Brian Groombridge's views were characterized as his "hobby-horse." The piece ended with a more sober reference to John Berger's statement:

"It was Mr. John Berger, the art critic, who most of all, perhaps, caught the imagination of his audience (who must have included a large proportion of art teachers). His theme was the myth of the artist's life, which it was now fashionable to elevate to a greater importance than his works—he instanced the Hollywood films on Van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec, both of which were highly misleading. The result was that artists came to be regarded as necessarily queer and neurotic, and the wrong kind of people were attracted to the arts; normal folk were put off."

What was striking about this report was how effectively the first part of it illustrated the very attitude that John Berger had analyzed. Here was a submission in an educational journal to the popular image of the intellectual as a wild undisciplined outsider. The cult of personality gloss suggested by the phrase "galaxy of opponents" was given overtones of conspiracy by a reference to "the ostensible object of the exercise." A letter to the journal pointing this out received this comment:

"It is remarkable how angry a letter-writer can become, when denying that he is an angry young man. Mr. Paddy Whannel's letter on page 664 shows that a note in last week's *Education* touched someone on the raw at the one-day conference on the Critic, the Artist and the Teacher. It is hard to know why there should be so bitter a reaction, unless like pacifists who overturn loudspeaker vans, critics invariably resent criticism.

"In fact, there was a great deal which our correspondent left unsaid. He did not for example speculate—as well he might have done—on the sartorial splendour of the scene. There must be some reason why bridge-building between the artists and the teachers requires eccentric clothes and a ban on shaving."

The reference to Aldermaston, quite gratuitously dragged in, is of course again an illustration of how people should know better than to swallow what they read in the press. Leaving aside, however, all question of accuracy, what is disturbing about this is the attitude of mind it reveals? But to be fair a real point is again being made with this comment:

"The mistake seems to have been in supposing that when Mr. Berger spoke about the need to kill the myth of the artist, his words applied only to those outside the arts."

If artists are regarded as outsiders it is in part because they have cultivated outsiderism. If teachers do not all see art as relevant, then it may be because a lot of art is not relevant. If the Society for Education through Art has made only moderate headway, part of the reason might be found in the pretentiousness of many of the articles in its journal *Athene*.

Correspondingly, while teachers as a whole are not as lively and imaginatively aware as they ought to be, neither are other groups.

Speaking about false critical approaches, Lindsay Anderson threw in film appreciation as an example. This is the sort of unqualified remark that can irritate practising teachers. True, there is a kind of film appreciation (and this applies to any other kind of appreciation) that seeks to analyze technique and style in a wholly arbitrary and arid way divorced from content and meaning, but the need for an adjustment in the content of education to allow for

some consideration being given to the development of critical discrimination in relation to film and television is still vital. With very little help, some teachers have been working out the methods of this for several years. The *Sight and Sound* article and the lesson in the Secondary Modern school are at different levels but the need to reveal the relevance of the subject matter is common to both. The essential problems are fundamentally the same.

The critic writing in *Sight and Sound* should be able to see the connection between what he is doing and the problems of the teacher. Unfortunately there is often a condescension in the attitude of the intellectual to teachers which is in the end just as much a sign of immaturity as the giggling of a small group at U.L.R. meetings when the Labour Party is mentioned.

## Educational journals

The best teachers must somehow come out and force responsibility in the critics. There is one meeting ground that has hardly been tried—the educational journals. It is true that at first sight these do not appear too promising. They are usually old-fashioned in typography and layout and generally depressingly dull in appearance. Secondly they are mainly concerned with the structure of education or methods of teaching and only rarely is any thought given to a possible reshaping of the curriculum (this is also a flaw in Labour Party thinking). Thirdly their conception of Education is a severely limited one. It is a commonplace that a teacher must know more than he teaches, and yet how few educational journals provide him with the kind of high level article he requires. There is a need not only for substantial and serious articles within particular fields of study, but for a continuous critical commentary on the contemporary scene. Teachers should be able to read in their journals reviews of *Look Back in Anger*, *The Seventh Seal* and *The Catcher in the Rye*. At the moment this work is only being tackled intermittently and even then the scale of values is too often false. For example, the only recent occasion that Visual Education stepped outside the bounds of film as a visual aid was to review the new Cinerama programme.

On the other hand, how many critics even read these journals let alone think of them as suitable vehicles for their views? And not to be unfair it should be pointed out that the *T.E.S.* does carry regular film criticism, and that while it can describe the popular as almost worthless, it has also carried photographs of young people at a jazz club which would have done credit to Free Cinema. *Education* has as its principal columnist one of the most vigorous controversialists writing today. The recent attacks by the educational press on Government policy have been models of informed argument.

Because education is a serious and practical business, the educational journals could provide the critic with a forum free both from the false sophistication of the weekly reviews and from the pressures of the "keep it crisp" and "be bright" school of popular journalism.

On the other hand, because of the present cultural situation, education needs the services of the serious critic. Somehow there must come an acknowledgment that the Artist, the Critic and the Teacher are allies in the same struggle.

