

Bored by stridency and thumping, in fact, some listeners to popular music are now timidly beginning to point out the virtues of 1930s dance bands and their wispy crooners. But when such music's revived, it usually comes with heavy camp winks and irony, pastiching the doo-wacka-doo and vo-de-o-do elements, just to make it clear to everyone that this is a lark.

MUCH THE SAME tactic is used in the strip cartoons. Their draughtsmen often seem to be playing games with the audience, exaggerating the dramatic perspective, the bulging biceps, the glaring eye. And in the movies the games are more explicit. In-jokes, quotations, flippant allusions to other films, extravagant villainy, and the ironical use of melodramatic cliché: all served to appease the adult viewer's self-criticism. They put him in the position, ostensibly absurd, of condescending to himself—or at least to his lower instincts. Enjoying the simple thrills and wish-fulfilment, he can at the same time congratulate himself on not being taken in. It sounds a contradictory stance: but all art depends on similar tensions between objective reality (sitting in a chair studying print, gazing at a screen, or watching actors) and the illusion that each activity seeks to create. Nor is there anything particularly eccentric in the contrast between

enjoyment and self-reproach. It was George Santayana, after all, who wrote in *Platonism and the Spiritual Life* of “the delicious irony of despising the passions one is forced to share”.

One further question nevertheless eludes an answer. Why is it that fantasies of the *Batman* type still seem to require apology? Folk tales and fairy stories—usually sealed with critical approval—involve most of the excesses, and little of the conscious irony, to be found in comic-book stories. You may argue that they have the worn polish of generations of sincere and simple story-tellers, while *Batman* is the collective product of sophisticated cynics out to make a buck. Perhaps so: but why then is *Batman* so popular? Can showmen really fool most of the people most of the time?

I personally doubt it. I suspect that the explanation lies not in *Batman* itself, and not even in the hype, but in the dearth of better competition. Too many artists, even in the cinema, seem to neglect the simple rules of narrative: begin with a “hook”, establish characters in conflict, create suspense, spring surprises, reach a plausible resolution. Did I say “simple”? Forgive me. But when so few works respect such basic requirements, those that even begin to do so stand out. We're back, in fact, at optical illusions. *Batman*? Or a gaping void?

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An Evening for John Constable

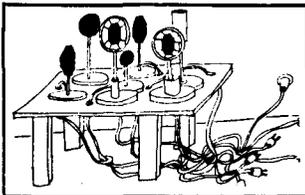
You, sky watcher,
 knew well how every day
 and every moment of the day
 are fresh and unrepeatable.
 Take this evening
 in the last of August,
 after a heavy shower.
 A ship has anchored
 off a rainbow
 and high above the wind,
 tufts of cirrus
 rest quietly
 in a field of mazarine.
 The sun sinks.
 Gulls yaw.
 Across a pit of fire
 swifts swerve south,
 without a sound.
 Far to the east
 the afterlight honeys
 a coast of clouds that calmly rise
 to meet the whitening moon.
 Under the wind's heel
 the sea heaves high
 in bottled fury;
 grins like a shark along the shingle,
 sloshes over.
 Now it is almost dark.
 Look up, John, at the first ladder
 of bright stars.

Bryn Gunnell

NOTES & TOPICS

The Paradox of Truth-Telling

East & West between Propaganda & Reality—By GEORGE URBAN



GLASNOST is having some intriguing side-effects. The first casualty was Soviet propaganda, the second the Soviet and East European peoples' image of the Western world.

I shed no tears for the first, I shed half a tear for the second.

By the time Mikhail Gorbachov launched his reform programme, Communist information policy had lost all credibility. Official utterances were so poorly regarded that it had become conventional wisdom for the reverse of whatever was stated to be believed as the most likely truth; and it came to be said of the truly incorrigible Warsaw liar that "even the opposite of what he claims cannot be trusted". But mendacity so transparently deployed had its uses; it offered a grotesque but serviceable key to government thinking and to the outside world. *Glasnost* has now begun to undermine all that; the full truth is still not on offer, but the lie-detector, too, has come under suspicion.

In Poland, Hungary, and the trail-blazing Baltic Republics of the Soviet Union, truth-mongering has brought relief but also bewilderment. The man on the Budapest omnibus finds it perplexing that images of a crime-ridden New York City, a slummy Glasgow or a racist France can no longer be ascribed to Communist propaganda alone; authentic evidence that these exist now reaches him from American, British and French sources unhindered by interference. "If", he wonders, "the Communists have been telling us some of the truth about New York and Glasgow, might they not have been telling us some of the truth about other things, too? If government duplicity can no longer be relied on, how do we find our bearings in the bewildering world of 'neither-truth-nor-open-mendacity'?"

These are difficult questions both for public opinion in the Communist countries and for the Western communicator. Under Stalin and Brezhnev, the image of a rich, equitable and "cultured" West became a psychological counter weight to repression and poverty. "Over there", it was said, stands the Celestial City to which those sentenced to live under socialist squalor can aspire and from which they can draw

hope. "Over there" were the legatees of dormant traditions and the guarantors of return to a dignified national existence.

But this reassuring although warped vision of the world outside the socialist universe cannot be attributed entirely to a sorely tried public's reaction to Communist mendacity. There is another factor, just as important.

Before *glasnost* arrived on the scene, most of the reliable information the East European and Soviet citizen could glean about the rest of the world (and frequently about his own country) reached him through the airwaves of Western broadcasting stations such as the Voice of America, the BBC, Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, *Deutsche Welle*, and others. These were, for the most part, institutions founded and supervised by men and women of the cultural élite and replenished with successors of similar learning and sensibility. Many became writers and politicians of distinction, and came to occupy leading positions in national governments and international organisations. They were, in other words, rather unrepresentative of the state of American, British or French civilisation as we encounter it in our daily lives, but were immensely effective—and perhaps for that reason—as international broadcasters. For the appeal of "high culture" in Eastern Europe has always reached beyond the cultured classes. Even under "the dictatorship of the proletariat", assimilation of the higher reaches of culture has been a mark of *bon ton* and a prerequisite of acceptance as a serious member of the national community.

IT WAS NOT that our Western cultural élites conspired to monopolise the antennae of their respective countries on behalf of cultural values which they could no longer adequately assert in their own domestic environment. It was, rather, that international broadcasting was an inherently élitist activity. Foreign broadcasters had to be linguists familiar with the history and thinking of the countries they addressed. That alone would have made them untypical. But they were also heirs to the ethos and scholarship of the founders and high priests of committed radio such as John