

Art is now, Baby

A recent, cursory (but I hope efficient) perusal of the art scene in the city has inspired me to begin the year with a sweeping generalization. It is that art, to be significant, must be representative of the Omnipresent Here and How.

In other words, we want to know precisely where we are. Recent trends in art give validity to this concern. Pop art, for example, froze the great heaving mass of Madison Avenue into one horrifying moment of truth. The machinery of the Big Lie ground to a halt, and, in the process, revived the old Dadaist truism that common objects may and perhaps should be elevated to the station of art.

Out of the reductio ad absurdum application of the movement's principle, coupled with the age-old dictum of art as illusion, emerged Op art, which took its place as a viable, living form.

Kinetic and film art both depict life as a fleeting series of impressions. "Click! click!" goes the switch; "click! click!" goes the mind and, like wow, don't stop. Motion is life, rigidity a symptom of neurosis.

Last week I was on a board of judges asked to select a winner in a paint-the-fence contest. The decision was unanimous, and the triumphant quality was contemporaneity: the winning painting screamed NOW! No question about it, now" is the thing.

And what is now? Now is the age of the expanding consciousness. An age of colour, texture and sound, permeating and bombarding every facet of everyday life.

Look up! Look up! Says the holy man.

Look here! Look here!

Says the ad man.

Look in! Look in! Says Timothy Leary.

Look! Look! Says the artist.

And why not? "Seize thy chance for it will come to thee no more."

Where is that chance?

With you, baby.

—Isabelle Foord

Higgely-piggely fantasy trilogy

I see in the Saturday Evening Post of a few weeks ago that there has sprung up in the States a cult of Tolkien-lovers.

Among other manifestations of this group are badges reading "Frodo Lives" in both English and some quasi-Arabic script, and numerous posters offering courses in "Common Speech" and Elish.

The whole thing, in fact, is not only rampant and "in" (which is forgiveable), but tasteless (which is not).

The phenomenon is especially rankling in the context of the book upon which it is based: J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

The work is a trilogy, the parts of which are entitled *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King*, and is (why beat around the bush?) the most fascinating book I've ever read.

The setting for this 1,400-page fairy story in Middle Earth—a vaguely prehistoric, vaguely non-existent world with its own traditions, peoples and practices—and its characters are of several bizarre and unheard-of species.

The whole construct is a mythology in itself—complete and self-sufficient, and yet capable of expansion. Tolkien is himself a notable scholar of early Germanic cultures, and his debt to the myths of these people is obvious.

As a matter of fact, the hobbits, dwarves, elves and men of the book might conceivably have stepped from a new, altered, and vastly improved *Ring des Nibelungen*.

Here is an incredibly abridged plot summary.

In the Northwest portion of Middle Earth live the hobbits (short, agricultural, simple-pleasure-loving, folksy, unbearably sentimental, altogether rather Chestertonian).

Frodo, a hobbit and the hero of the story, comes into possession of the One Ring of Power by a process too complicated to retell, quite unaware of its terrible power.

When he eventually discovers its significance, he sets out on a journey of unbelievable difficulty in order to destroy the ring and thus render it useless to its original owner, the very convincingly evil Sauron.

The characters very nicely line themselves as friends and foes, with a few slightly dubious exceptions.

The plot culminates in the successful conclusion of the Quest, but a happy ending is always in doubt. And finally there is a beautifully ambiguous denouement.

Not really very subtle, eh? No, but the plot as plot is a thumping good one and, more important, provides an ideal vehicle for the societies Tolkien wishes to depict and the breathtakingly impressive atmosphere he creates.

And it is because the atmosphere is so impressive, is indeed the best thing in this or any other fantasy, that any plot summary must do violence to the true nature of the book.

Which bring me back to the Tolkien Societies. Anyone who has read *The Lord of the Rings* with even a modicum of sensitivity would go into a prolonged coma at the mere suggestion of a loud button reading "Frodo Lives," simply because it utterly falsifies the impression the book creates.

Admittedly, a good case can be made for considering Frodo a nit, but then what Frodo lacks the other characters more than make up for.

The "atmosphere" about which I protest so much is a product, basically, of two things. The first is what one might call Tolkien's sociological mythology—the sorts of societies he invents, and their histories and traditions.

The other is a feeling produced by the existence of the fantastic, nightmarish, and largely unseen Powers of Evil. The total effect is quite unforgettable.

It is said that there are some people who have read *The Lord of the Rings* and not liked it. If there are, they are surely unexampled nits. Besides, W. H. Auden really likes it.

—Bill Beard

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