

*Reflections on César Graña and Matei Călinescu and their references to the paradoxes in the relationship between artists and the bourgeoisie with particular emphasis on the July Monarchy of the French Revolution.*

The literary view of bourgeois society frequently gives rise to many paradoxical implications for the artist and his role within society. What is perhaps most apparent about these concepts is the persistent obsession with classist hierarchy. Not only does the artist seem to abhor the existence of the bourgeoisie, but he feels gravitated to a life away from it, rejecting its values and traditions in favor of a purer life. However, it seems that the more the artist strives to escape it, the more it engrosses him. I comment on these paradoxes with a view to César Graña's *Bohemia versus Bourgeois*.

The artist has always seemed to transcend normal life. The transcendence of the artist in post-Revolutionary France is noteworthy because previously, the artist had always been a patronee of the aristocracy, commissioned to produce works on their behalf or for the Church. However, after the demise of the aristocracy and the triumph of the bourgeoisie, the artist seems to opt to become part of a superior literati class that in effect replaces the former aristocracy. However, this class distinction could be seen as a fallacy due to the very fact that this new class would be made up almost exclusively of bourgeois mutineers.

The artist, then, despite his refusal to bend the knee to the new bourgeois order, cannot help but be overcome by its pervasiveness. The literary mind of the Orleanist period was, as Graña mentions, struggling with this very notion: “between intellectual ardour and intellectual helplessness”<sup>1</sup>. It is clear that the literary movements of the time both embraced and lamented the epochal changes that had been brought about by the ascension of the Third Estate. The new order had liberated artists from the domineering aristocracy, though in doing so, it had destroyed the protection that this regime had granted to the artist. Secondly, new ideas, such as, the freedom of self-expression had helped remove many of the constraints on art and the absence of a superintendent meant that art became answerable to nobody. Arguably, the artist became unleashed on society.

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<sup>1</sup> César Graña, *Bohemian versus Bourgeois: French Society and the French Man of Letters in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Basic Books, Inc., 1964), p. 18.

However, it was not without tribulation. The artist consciously resisted emergent bourgeois ideologies, such as those from Francois Guizot, who maintained that the political value of a man may be assessed by his dedication to useful tasks that benefit the economy<sup>2</sup>. The bourgeoisie, having emancipated the artist, also desired for him to serve a purpose. To defy this, the artist produced works that purposely confounded the bourgeoisie.

Moreover, the lack of a distinct audience meant that artists began to become egotistical. Artists made themselves the audience, and subsequently, the artwork itself. In many ways, the disappearance of a distinct audience for the artist, brought about an existential crisis for art. If there was no audience, no purpose, no patron, what even was art?

The autonomy of art was in crisis. The evaporation of the artist's protection under the patronage of the aristocrat left it vulnerable to the insidiousness of the bourgeoisie and their obeisance to capitalism. The artist was left with two choices: embrace the changes which he could use to make a living or even a fortune; disassociate himself completely from the society that attempted to pervert him, incidentally finding sustenance *par hazard*. De Vigny, as noted by Graña, alludes to this dilemma: the bourgeoisie had brought about intellectual autonomy for the artist, but on the other hand, they had made economic dependency unavoidable<sup>3</sup>.

The abandonment of aristocratic obsequiousness meant that originality became not only a possibility but essentially "the sole point and foundation of literary criterion"<sup>4</sup>. However, this could be said to be contradictory to the artist's desire to resist the bourgeois' emphasis on utilitarian ideals. For if the sole point of a work is to be original in some way, then surely this constitutes an underlying purpose for its creation and therefore, can be said to *utilize*

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<sup>2</sup> Graña, pp. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Graña, pp. 41.

<sup>4</sup> Graña, pp. 41.

creativity as a means to stand out as original, thus giving the work a utilitarian ideal. Hence it can eventually be accepted by the public.

Furthermore, if originality is essential to art, then all artist must strive to be original or risk being categorized as regressive or kitsch. This accentuates the paradox because if artists must be original in order to be described as true artists, then surely, this constitutes artists striving for the same thing and therefore, inherently being unoriginal.

Additionally, the idea that a particular artwork has already been produced and therefore cannot be reproduced (as it would, by definition, be a copy) only enhances the idea that whoever is the first to create a particular artwork nullifies its creation for other artists. In this way, it turns art into a first-past-the-post competition with the prize of originality for the winner where, yet again, it can be seen to have been obedient to a bourgeois ideology.

The point may be extrapolated even at the thought-process level. For if the artist's desire is to express an original thought (or the absence thereof) through the medium of art, then this incurs the underlying assumption that its expression (or lack thereof) has never before been considered by another human, though once expressed, instantaneously loses this quality. In this sense, either the artist is a genius or kitsch.

D'Alembert remarked, as noted by Graña, that there are three things that separate men: money, virtue, and intelligence. Intelligence, however, he said was the only one that could be regarded as legitimate<sup>5</sup> and that it was the source of esteem<sup>6</sup>. The literary mind at this time, longed for a hierarchical world based around the veneration of intelligence, spiritual poise, the aesthetic and moral superiority<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Graña, pp. 51.

<sup>6</sup> Graña, pp. 51.

<sup>7</sup> Graña, pp. 69.

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Effectively, the implications for the artist and his role within society was that of a genius who unleashes “an all-powerful, radical, and unequaled event, a gift of nature which must be allowed to take its course no matter how disruptive to common perceptions”<sup>8</sup> in the name of intelligence.

In essence, the role of the artist must then be said to have no defined role but that of a genius. The artist inhabits a separate sphere, free from, or at the very least conscious of, the pollutants of bourgeois society. This means that the artist must reject society, yet also use society in order to navigate away from it. This demonstrates the artist's existence as both separate and symbiotic with the bourgeoisie. Therefore, it can be said that the role of the artist has been both destroyed and brought about through the dominance of the bourgeoisie. The true artist is one who recognizes this antagonistic and symbiotic relationship.

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<sup>8</sup> Graña, pp. 52.

César Graña, *Bohemian versus Bourgeois: French Society and the French Man of Letters in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Basic Books, Inc., 1964)