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The Artist versus Commodity Culture: Wyndham Lewis and the Dilemmas of Bourgeois-Bohemianism

Modernist culture is often associated with an exalted view of the artist as the aloof aesthete “paring his fingernails” while the contemptible philistine engages in the pursuit of material goods. The focus of this paper is the career of a modernist whose aloofness was notorious but who, nevertheless, sought to undermine the notion of art as something antithetical to marketplace values. Apart from marketing his own artistic ventures, he captured in his work the ambivalent position of the artist faced with the realities of capitalist economy. He also ridiculed the intellectual pose of many of his contemporaries, supposedly opposed to commodity culture but failing to practice what they preached. Where other modernists saw opposition, Lewis spotted complementarity, or at least, ambiguity. The term “bourgeois-bohemianism,” which he coined to describe a mixture of subversive pretence and middle-class calculativeness, conflated two attitudes which had traditionally been perceived as mutually exclusive.

The meaning of the word “artist” seems to trouble Lewis. It is a persistent theme in his creations, however if any definitions are provided, they are given in the negative. As Alan Munton (1998: 17) observes, “Lewis’s fictions delineate the social circumstances that support the bad artist and the bad idea.” The subject of pseudo-art is treated extensively in *Tarr* and *The Apes of God*, and keeps recurring in other texts, both fictional and critical ones. Unlike many canonical modernist works which celebrate the artist hero, Lewis’s writings seem to place emphasis on the decline of forceful individuality and its failure to shape the life around it. There is not much hope for the artist’s resistance to the trends of modern society: mediocrity triumphs over a superior mind, if such a thing as a superior mind exists at all.

Lewis’s pessimistic reflection upon the artist’s status in the modern world originally stemmed from his experience of living in Montparnasse in the first decade of the twentieth century. There, in the bohemian quarter of Paris, he met an array of artists and intellectuals, some genuine but also many sham ones

– people he would call “art parasites” and intellectual frauds. Often short of money, he also developed an acute awareness of the forces which weigh upon the artist in a free market economy. We find those aspects of Lewis’s Parisian adventure transposed in the novel *Tarr*, whose initial title was *Bourgeois-Bohemians*, later dismissed by the author as perhaps too straightforward.

In *Tarr*, Lewis subjects the myth of artistic Bohemia to critique by ruthlessly unmasking cultural affectation and intellectual fakery. What interests Lewis is the collapse of the binary opposition between the bohemian and the philistine: he shows how the boundaries between the two become blurred, and links this phenomenon to the advent of commodity culture. The portrayal of bourgeois-bohemianism in *Tarr* is set against the background of the aggressively expanding metropolis, where people and places are swept by “the victorious flood of commerce” (Lewis 1996: 97) and where superior and elitist qualities give way to mass appetites and unrestrained acquisitiveness. There is a memorable passage in the novel describing the Restaurant Lejeune which used to be “a clean, tranquil little creamery” but became transformed by the forces of the market into a “a broiling, luridly lighted, roaring den, inhabited by a rushing and howling band of slatternly savages” (Lewis 1996: 97). The artistic circles of Paris undergo a similar transformation, as if the giant organism of the city conditioned the lives of its inhabitants. In such an oppressive and competitive environment, artists and intellectuals find themselves torn by conflicting desires: on the one hand, they would like to cling to their non-conformist ideal, and, on the other, they develop materialistic yearnings. Plagued by the same maladies as the entire consumer society, they find it difficult to resist the compelling power of the good (that is, material) life. What they aspire to is the status of the new idle class – imagining themselves as the aristocracy of spirit, they nevertheless willingly partake of the pleasures of consumerism.

Although *Tarr*’s bohemians look back with nostalgia on their mid-nineteenth-century predecessors, described in Henry Murger’s *Vie de Bohème* – a book that each of them considers a necessary read – they can place themselves within this tradition on a very superficial level, for example by wearing bohemian outfits. Their counter-culture posturing is reduced to collecting artistic trinkets and attitudinising; it has nothing to do with the ideal of bohemia as depicted by Murger, that is, a community of free souls beyond the pale of respectable society. *Tarr*’s characters are too shrewd to truly rebel against bourgeois, philistine mentality, because this would be tantamount to voluntary poverty. They lack the courage which Clement Greenberg (1993: 541) mentions in his famous essay on avant-garde and kitsch, where he writes that “emigration

from bourgeois society to bohemia meant also an emigration from the markets of capitalism, upon which artists and writers had been thrown by the falling away of aristocratic patronage.”

Anticipating Greenberg's findings, Lewis captures the moment when the inhabitants of the artistic underworld gradually discover the “umbilical cord of gold” (Greenberg 1993: 542) with which they are connected to those they despise – the bourgeoisie. Sometimes this cord of gold is literal, as many of *Tarr's* bohemians hail from bourgeois background and their “artistic” lifestyle is made possible thanks to allowances they receive from family homes. Lewis (1996: 117), describes them as “disciplined in their idleness,” because the degree of their non-conformism is regulated by the ebbs and flows of funds sent in by their parents. The less fortunate aspirants to Parnassus who have no stable source of income must turn their art and ideology into a marketable commodity. What they sell to bourgeoisie is either their work, geared to the lowest common denominator of mass taste, or even just the “avant-garde” ideology. Thus, for example, a protagonist called Ernst Volker paints portraits of the middle class ladies, while the two scroungers Kreisler and Soltyk get money from people who are flattered to spend time in the presence of “artists.” A mere impression of activity is sufficient to gain respect and recognition, as is the case with the painter Lowdnes, who “has enough money to be a Cubist” (Lewis 1996: 45) but does not produce much, only constantly pretends to be interrupted at work by unexpected visitors.

Once bohemianism is turned into a commodity, the role of its material manifestations increases. Hence the importance of artistic objects, outfits, props and trinkets, so well recognized by the artistically dressed Hobson or by the two polite society ladies, Bertha and Fräulein Lipmann, whose apartments are decorated so as to display the desirable “art-touch”:

[Hobson] was very athletic, and his dark and cavernous features had been constructed by Nature as a lurking place for villainies and passions. But he slouched and ambled along, neglecting his muscles. [...] The Art-touch was very observable. Hobson's Harris tweeds were shabby. A hat suggesting that his ancestors had been Plainsmen or some rough sunny folk, shaded unnecessarily his countenance, already far from open. (Lewis 1996: 22)

[Fraulein Lipmann's] room, dress and manner, were a sort of chart to the way to admire [her]; the different points in her soul one was to gush about, the different hints that one was to let fall about her “rather” tragic life-story, the particular way

one was to regard her playing of the piano. You felt that there was not a candlestick, or antimacassar in the room but had its lesson for you. (Lewis 1996: 131)

All such gadgets and accoutrements add a material, tangible dimension to bohemian ideology. Abstractions are reduced to objects which can be accumulated, bought and sold. In this way, form begins to outweigh content, and bohemianism degenerates into kitsch, becoming a matter of style without substance.

The most perceptive of the bunch of bourgeois-bohemians, Tarr, realizes this when he visits the flat of his art-student fiancée, Bertha. Upon entering the room, he is confronted by an abundance of phony, pseudo-artistic objects:

Tarr was in the studio or salon. It was a complete Bourgeois-Bohemian interior. Green silk cloth and cushions of various vegetable and mineral shades covered everything, in mildewy blight. The cold, repulsive shades of Islands of the Dead, gigantic cypresses, grottoes of teutonic nymphs, had invaded this dwelling. Purple metal and leather steadily dispensed with expensive objects. There was the plaster-cast of Beethoven (some people who have frequented artistic circles get to dislike this face extremely), brass jars from Normandy, a photograph of Mona Lisa (Tarr hated the Mona Lisa). (Lewis 1996: 52)

The trinkets in Bertha's room represent the artificially synthesised mass culture that has been produced by industrialization. They are "works of art in the age of mechanical reproduction," cast in plaster, reduced to kitsch and made accessible to a mass audience. Tarr, the self-styled modernist *Übermensch*, reacts to them with horror, but at the same time acknowledges the pervasiveness and appeal of "the little," always threatening to contaminate "the large":

She had loved him with all this. She had loved him with the plaster cast of Beethoven, attacked him with the Klingers, ambushed him from the Breton jars, in a funny, superficial, absorbing way. [. . .] The appeal of the *little* again. If he could only escape from *scale*. The price of preoccupation with the large was this perpetual danger from the *little*. (Lewis 1996: 73)

Among the many bourgeois-bohemian protagonists, Tarr seems to be the closest to the ideal of the artist (in one of the letters Lewis (1963: 79) admits to making him a mouthpiece for his ideology). Very tellingly, however, even Tarr allows "the little" to overwhelm him completely: at the end of the novel he turns out to be every bit as idle and pretentious as the others, having wasted his creative talents on seducing *femmes fatales* and polite society ladies. The fact that Lewis does not "save" him from the general *malaise* of inauthenticity means that he probably cannot see any possibilities of redemption, or of autonomous

life, for an artist in a bourgeois environment. The forces which are remaking society at large are beyond the individual's control – one must ultimately yield to their powerful pull.

While *Tarr* offers an early perspective on the transformation of bohemianism into its opposite, *The Apes of God*, written in 1930, anatomizes the condition of the arts in postwar Europe. The setting has changed from Paris to London, where, in the recognizable milieu of Chelsea and Bloomsbury, Lewis detects the familiar symptoms of the modern cultural *malaise*. A trend that he finds particularly alarming is not so much the bohemian inclination towards bourgeois values, which has by then become the norm, but rather the infiltration of artistic circles by the bourgeoisie. As Lewis's introduction to the novel makes clear, the eponymous Apes – the monied amateurs usurping the name of artists and mimicking bohemian lifestyles – maintain a stranglehold on artistic creation, thus threatening the traditional distinction between the producers and consumers of art:

Bohemia, just after World War One, was so full of *déclassés*, driving a pen or dipping a brush – Apes of God – that confusion ensued. Confusion was the result when it came to the *jeunesse dorée* taking up oil painting, their gold in future ceasing to be spent upon pictures (not their own) and in all spheres the passive rôle of the patron coming to an end. People no longer bought books, they wrote them. One began to recognize the people from the stalls and boxes acting on the stage; if a man had an expensive house he became an interior decorator, and so on and so forth. (Lewis 1955: 3)

The Apes of God depicts a society in which, in the words of one of the novel's protagonists, "Everyone able to afford to do so has become a 'bohemian'" (Lewis 1955: 119). Bohemianism as a lifestyle requires means, for it has been reduced to a new form of idleness. Its attractiveness lies not in the urge to create, but in the temptation to indulge in wastefulness while enjoying the status of intellectual elite. Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*, a classic turn-of-the-twentieth-century analysis of consumer culture, provides an explanation for this state of affairs. To be an idler is a mark of superiority, for it sets the individual apart from persons forced to work for a living. The ruling canon of leisure-class life is "conspicuous consumption" and, resulting from it, "conspicuous waste." Under the conspicuous waste coda, the more useless an activity, service, or article, the greater the consumer's prestige. Counted among the occupations which do not carry the stigma of productive industry, bohemianism becomes a pastime of the leisure class. It is ennobling, for it seems to

be connected with abstract values, and at the same time expedient, for one's adherence to these values cannot be easily verified.

The lack of verification is what distresses Lewis most, as it makes possible the propagation of sham artistry. The "Encyclical" part of *The Apes of God* contains a warning against "all these masses of Gossip-mad, vulgar, pseudo-artist, *good-timers*" who "are as vulgar as any of their *nouveau riche* first cousins" but "more damaging for the very reason that they are identified, in the mind of the public, with art and with intelligence" (Lewis 1955: 121). Because the well-off bourgeois-bohemians do not really need to sell their work to survive as "artists," it is enough for them to occasionally come up with some trivial, amateurish imitation of serious art, which they can then popularize by making hype. In this way, the channel of communication between artist and public is blocked by false messages, and that which is of genuine value is obliterated in the deluge of mediocrity.

Consequently, in order to mark his presence, the real artist is forced to compete for attention. In keeping with the trends of the modern market, he has to deploy the tactics known from the advertising industry and seek out audiences for his work. So, while the bourgeois-bohemian can enjoy the life of an aloof idler, the truly creative person must invest his precious time in activities necessary to his economic survival. Lewis finds this situation humiliating; still, he sees no other possibility but to adapt to the rule of the day:

The trouble is this: It does not matter what objective Nature supplies. The inventive artist is his own purveyor. But the society of which he forms a part, can, by its backwardness, indolence, or obtuseness, cause him a series of inconveniences; and above all, can, at certain times and under certain conditions, affect his pocket adversely and cause him to waste an absurd amount of time. When no longer able to produce his best work, it would not be a waste of time for a painter or for a writer to lecture, for example, on the subject of his craft. The propaganda, explanatory pamphlets, and the rest in which we, in this country, have to indulge, is so much time out of active life which would normally be spent as every artist wishes to spend his time, in work, in a state of complete oblivion as regards any possible public that his work may ever have. Yet were one's ideas on painting not formulated, and given out in the shape of a lecture, a pamphlet, or a critical essay, an impossible condition would result for an artist desirous of experimenting. (Lewis 1991: 160)

These words are full of intellectual pretension, but they reveal an awareness of the changing times. Much as the real artist may be distressed by commodity culture, he has to go along with it to a certain extent. Lewis understood this,

indulging willy-nilly in self-promotional campaigns: his numerous journals, autobiographies and treatises, the Enemy pose, the catchy titles for his texts all betray his knack for hype-making. Even if his marketing efforts were largely frustrated (he died far from prosperous), the ambivalence of his position must have given him mental dyspepsia. The concerns of his artist protagonists – Tarr, Kreisler, Zagreus, Dan Boleyn and others – seem to be also his concerns. Tortured by the questions he was trying to ask, as well as by the answers he came up with, he produced works which record the struggle for the impossible, the attempt to secure the sacred status for art in an increasingly commodified society.

One way to read Lewis is to treat his creations as an expression of the elitist longing for the time before democracy made things possible for everyone. Intrinsically political in his sensibilities, he feared

the William Morris, tolstoyan, or other utopist dream of a millennium in which no one would have to work too much; and in which, above all, everyone would “have the scope to develop his personality,” everybody be a “genius” of some sort; in which everyone would be an “artist” of some sort – singing, painting, composing or writing, as the case might be, and in which a light-hearted “communism” should reign in the midst of an idyllic plenty. (Lewis 1963: 124)

Such views may appear outrageous, but that should not prevent us from appreciating the accuracy of much that Lewis foresaw, especially when we consider the levelling dynamics of mass culture. Bearing in mind the fact that Lewis wrote from the perspective of modernism, “that uncanny moment when for the last time High Art still mattered enough to hate” (Kamiya 2001: 1), one has to give recognition to the more influential aspects of his legacy: existential anguish about the void that opens up before modern man, and the genuine concern about the direction our culture is taking.

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