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The End of Something

1. Definition

As I type this essay the number one song according to MTV® and Billboard magazine is “[Kiss Kiss](#)” by rapper artist Chris Brown. The video of this song uses only people of what would be politically correct described as “African American.” These people are evidently wearing clothing that as symbols (Barthes 1976) pertain to high school white class boys. The video lyrics perpetuate many stereotypes of socially constructed images (Foucault), as we perceived them today so do the imagery chosen for the video. Several songs follow this “number one” hit from the same genre with a few notches occupied by Latino singers. The way we describe contemporary artists is no much different from the concept of bohemian established during the early decades of the XX century yet it is radically altered to conform a new set of social rules and expectations. This essay will attempt to show how the concept of bohemian has evolved in the last decade pushed by the forces of the market and the *establishment* to create a mimicry of it thus far validating Foucault’s theory about power and control to conclude with a new subculture of “bohemians” that David Crooks names as “bobos,” which adapts to current markets, economy, and values.

The term “bohemian” has evolved over the years. Bohemia was the name of a region of central Europe occupying the western two thirds of the Czech lands today known as Czech Republic. Bohemia was famous because of its openness and acceptance of other people and beliefs and it was a famous place among nomads crossing it during the migration period by Germanic and Slavic tribes, a “tambo” (quichuan term used to define a place to rest during a long trip.) The term then derived and became a way to define gypsies, the nomad European culture who ha

Its early stages the term meant “gipsy” used in two senses namely denotative and pejorative. The original term morphed to Garachi, Gitanos, Kalderash, Romnichal, and Sinti to accommodate to languages in the various regions where it was used to refer to travelers without structure, informal people.

It wasn’t until the late XIX century when the term “bohemian” became charged with the meaning that we use today as a response to the social effects resulting from the social consequences of mass production that came as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Bohemian was used as a synonym of artist, although it was not used to name any artist but the Artist who had elevated his status to that of a genius

responding to his nature call of a higher understanding of society while the same society begun requiring conforming artist to mass produce objects of art as saleable goods. The bohemian was then defined as the struggling artist who lived in the poor neighborhoods as a way to reject the establishment, the government, the status quo; becoming that way a “true artist.

“Bohemia became a subculture because its writers, painters, musicians, and composers, performers, journalists, and intellectuals congregated in bohemian cafés.” (Wilson 1999) It is important to notice that the title of “bohemian” was appointed to people who embraced the act of creation and/or making in their lives. It was a positive proactive term. It meant that you were a person who used intelligence against the establishment.

Living in poverty was a very important component to be perceived as a bohemian. It was self-perceived as fighting the forces of mass consumption and anti-bourgeois which lead to every kind of excess in alcohol, drug, erotic deviance, political extremism, blasphemy, or madness. In terms of gender, the bohemian title was attributed to men and women in different ways. Bohemian men were active makers and creators of cultural products whereas bohemian women were attachment to men as in prostitutes, dancers, Muses.

The golden era of bohemia according to many authors happened between 1890 and 1920 since those years offered quite a few new concepts and theories emerging as responses to the Industrial Revolution and the foundational changes in terms of communication, social relationships, urban development. These fundamental changes in society would produce a shift in meaning for the term bohemian to adapt to new emerging media namely television, film, and eventually, later on computers and mediated communication. However, certain characteristics of the past definition of bohemian have stayed and transcended to adapt to the new definition to provide a new foundation for contemporary performing, fine, and media artists. As I will explain later on based on the analysis of two art pieces as examples the term bohemian offers a new definition to it which contrasts drastically to its original meaning, sadly enough to comply with the market place and to become a vital source concept of what is defined today as “branding.”

2. Analysis

Giacomo Puccini’s wrote *La Bohème* as a four act opera based on a libretto by Luici Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa. They based their work on *La vie de Bohème* by Henri Murger who was a French poet

and novelist who lived in Paris until his death in 1861. Murger published *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* as a description of his own life story in poverty and struggle to survive as an artist. He was member and co-founder of a group of friends who called themselves: “The water drinkers” as a wit observation of not having enough money to drink wine. (The Nuttall Encyclopædia 2007.) The version used for this essay is Baz Luhrmann’s opera version as recorded and presented in DVD® format. Baz Luhrmann is an Australian film director, screenwriter and producer who have been nominated for several worldwide recognitions such as the Oscar and the Globe Awards.

In 1988 Billy Aronson had the idea of re-reading and re-writing *La Bohème* as a musical based on Puccini’s *La Bohème* with a contemporary twist and adjustment to New York’s reality on the eighties and early nineties where AIDS became a very important social change and subject of debate and constant thinking in every field of communication and particularly important to the Bohemian life style.

As part of my research to write this paper and taking advantage of the fact that I hadn’t watched either piece I decided to watch both of them at the same time. Using two laptop computers I ran both movies at once so I could compare approaches, colors, compositions, length and all sorts of details that may flee the brain otherwise.

Additionally, the findings of this experience will serve as foundation to compare the concept of Bohemian used in the 1990s to the one used in contemporary terms as it has been reformed by the powers of the market and corporations.

From scene number one the two movies are visually and conceptually different. Puccini’s *La Bohème* (From now on PLB) opens with a scene depicting one male character and the text “Le Amour” whereas Aronson’s *The Rent* (from now on ATR) has all the characters (male and female) singing a introductory theme that speaks of perception of time, stress, distress, and how value is attributed to various life subjects that will be treated throughout the movie. The two approached present two different emotional modes to their audiences. As the movies move linearly through the narrative they share common scenes. The burning of art in exchange of heat represents the detachment of bohemians to the created pieces to symbolize their transgression to traditional conceptions of art (specially classic) to enhance their fight against the establishment. Bohèmians are, after all, non classical artists who live a very Zen approach to live in the here and in the now opposed to more traditional classical artist who own their studios and afford their models and paintings or paper to create art.

Both movies move into a depiction of the struggling artists who cannot afford to pay the rent and how they have to find ways around by fooling the landlord into feeling part of their circle of friends. At this early stage differences begin to appear as ATR introduces more characters and contemporary topics such as AIDS and homosexuality. As said earlier ATR presents a larger number of characters that attempt to represent the cliques of those times: The black minority, the Latino, the Gentleman’s club dancer, the new media artist, the lesbian couple, the artist student, the singer all of them going through the same struggling and supporting one another by sharing whatever loot they manage to put hands on. PLB

provides a very different experience given the use of Opera as medium (even though the delivery of the movie is by visual digital means we still perceive Opera as the medium, not video) and Italian with (or without) subtitles for the delivery of the storytelling. That simple difference in terms of perception creates a whole new experience based on McLuhan's "the medium is the message" theory.

The use of different languages and storytelling techniques add to the contrast and ultimately the final message of the piece. There is a particular scene where the two main characters (even though in ATR they are not necessarily the main characters) are alone in the room. The lights are gone and romance is in the air. While PLB constructs a more romantic and somehow more puritan view of the Bohemian, ATR does the same but introducing the subject of sex and drugs as the additional lexia incorporated to this scene providing a more complex meaning to it. Is he falling in love with her (Mimi) or remembering her previous girlfriend who died as the result of an addiction?

ATR is evidently quite more elaborated as it successfully attempts to introduce complex social topics along the story lines. There is a love story between two men with aids, a black, who is a dropout (but really expelled) of M.I.T. and works as a university professor and a young Latino who works as a street artist and a travesty. While a fourth reread of the movie with the filmmaker comments on, the director makes a remarkable comment: The travesty character is so "beautiful" as a fake woman that male viewers are confronted with an unexpected dilemma: why am I feeling attracted to this person even though I know the character is really male? I found that very interesting to prove how society is constructed rather than assimilated. The pace of both movies is also distinctively important as they adjust to our current perception of time. ATR has no scenes per se but rather is perceived as a continuum narrative. Both narratives introduce the conflict between the bohemians and the establishment by juxtaposing the characters to what would be considered tradition or the expected discourse of a society. They achieve this purpose by introducing scenarios and additional characters dressed up as businessmen and for the case of ATR the police.

The concepts of bohemian life do change from one movie to the other specially in terms of becoming less gender biased. Mimi in the case of ATR is a dancer, an artist, a junkie whereas Mimi in PLB is a gentry woman rejecting her roots for considering them banal without value. She finds that value and that acceptance among the society rejects but rejecting them as well in the process. Maureen is an interesting character as she embodies the postmodern new media artist (Madonna style) who is not only beautiful and desirable with a body fit and sexy but also a talented creative artist who decided (by choice) to become a lesbian. However, her character might be perpetuating the social biased of the misleading free easy sex for all that homosexuality carries along. Her partner, Joanne is a successful lawyer from an aristocrat family who had embraced her non-traditional sexually accepted by her parents. Her character is very important to build up the final reflection of this essay.

In both stories the main characters are confronted with life decisions that will evolve into different separated realities. There is nonetheless, an important difference: For PLB the narrative pivots

on the relationship of two people, male and female, the artist and the bourgeois, whereas in ATR there are several stories being deconstructed and reconstructed as pieces of a final puzzle that will make this piece a whole. ATR introduces several relationships and show them as interconnected: A lesbian couple of a new media artist with a lawyer that also represents the legal status quo; a homosexual couple of an intellectual black young professional (juxtaposing the black race with intellectuality) with a young boy who represents at the same time the new generation of gypsies (illegal immigrants spread throughout the United States in search of a better future;); a third couple of the never successful musician artist, an Anglo-Saxon descendant who never had a chance to climb up the professional scale with a Latino strip dancer, drug addict and prostitute to conform to her dependency; Finally the film maker-artist who represents the bohemian geek who was dumped by a women by another woman to question the macho approach established and accepted by society and by doing so questioning the accepted vision of his looks as a geek to become an engineer. He represents the filmmaker wannabe who rejects Hollywood by embracing the independent filmmaking. There is a very interesting scene where Mark (the filmmaker) is confronted by a street bum (a black woman) as he tries to capture with his old crank-up camera how two policemen are mistreating this woman (notice the social commentary about the NYPD and the show COPS®) and he records the event with his camera. The woman stands up and says to Mark: “He is just trying to use me to kill his guilt. This place is full of artists, hey artists, you’ve got a dollar... didn’t think so” (The Rent 54’30’)

A very interesting aspect of both movies is how the narrative of the story forces both groups of bohemians slowly conform to the norm either by force of by age as they grow out of the Bohemian life style. Both music pieces end up b presenting the audience with the final message of camaraderie and human touch. Both movies are faced with dead as the climax scene and how they react to its presence and effects is what the viewer keeps in his head: Bohemians split and move up (?) to conform to the establishment, to adapt to the status quo.

3. The Final Transformation, or how this MUST be the end of something.

For this section of the essay I decided to incorporate a third element and for that purpose I will reclaim a concept introduced in the very first paragraph of this essay. The Opera was a medium suitable to tell stories and to use myth as a way to understand the mysteries of our daily lives (Joseph Campbell, 1988.) Later on cinema and movie making took stand on that stage and they informed us, the people, on topics and themes complex to decode without a certain level of external assistance. The latter one is the case of The Rent as a piece to communicate a reality as complex as: AIDS®, interracial®, and same sex relationships® in contemporary society. However, we are living new times sponsored by new media and its everlasting transformation. MTV® and the Internet are currently reshaping our understanding of myths. Here is where we find Kiss-Kiss and how the contents of that video, which is been watched by millions of

young minds in the making, are portraying the same set of values, attributions, and symbols that we assimilate as individuals and ultimately as a society.

David Crook in his book “Bobos in Paradise” (Simon & Schuster March 2001) describes very ironically how our western societies (quickly followed by eastern ones) have transformed the concept of *Bohemian* today to adjust it and radically alter its definition both connotative and denotative. We can see this change incorporated in the two analyzed pieces. In the first one the concept of bohemian evolved from the struggling artist who fights against society in a silent way to the bohemian more incorporated into society as he or she provide a very important creative output to understand the process of creation and social construction. In about twenty years a new Bohemian has emerged, a Bohemian that has nothing or little to do with the creation of art but with a life style that has been embraced (or pushed?) by the market and described much earlier in the theory of conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899) widely elaborated by professor Noam Chomsky which states that humans have become creatures of spending. Brooks attempts an in depth description of our current state of mind as consuming capitalist who have embraced the positive aspects of the definition of bohemian with a capitalist twist to it. Brooks describes the new bohemians as a hybrid between past bohemians and bourgeois resulting in what he defines as “Bobos” (**boh**emians + **bour**geois.) A term that in Spanish, interestingly enough, means “dorkies,” or “slow-witted.” As a conclusion of this analysis and based on my reading of “Bobos in Paradise” I’ll attempt to describe a brief version of the opening scene common to both *La Bohème* and *The Rent* that were used during the analysis. This reinterpretation would be written to adjust to today’s new media as a live feed presentation in real time using Second Life® as the medium to publicly display them.

Opening scene: College students are sitting on a comfy three seat couch in front of a 42 inch HDTV®. Their ipods® are inside their pockets and white cables travel from their legs to their ears. The music is on but the volume is low so they can talk. Their laptops computers are on the kitchen table running screen savers. They have been there for three days, on all the time and connected to MSN® creating the illusion to their friends that they are online. As they watch MTV® they discuss about the possibility of coming up with a show to be broadcasted in youtube® as “episodes” of their current lives as college students. For fun, they burn credit card statements. They receive them yet their parents pay for them. The smoke detectors go off and one of them quickly grabs his HD triple CCD video camera to record the event. They laugh and split, it is gym time. The young woman of the group needs to train for a new 48-hour challenge through the mountains with no GPS. She tells the other guys about her concern is an evident search for help: Her hybrid car shows a blinking light every time she starts it. It reads: “Satellite locking Global positioning system not found” and she doesn’t have time to take it to the dealer. A new message vibrates in her cell phone. She touches the screen and finds out about her new exhibition in a recently opened new world that is selling pretty well. Although she doesn’t need the money she wants to join this gallery for CV purposes. They stand up and leave the room leaving it unlocked.

We are living in times where the concept of bohemian has evolved into what Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) called “The Economy of Symbolic Exchanges.” This theory states that all intellectual (bohemians included) compete in the market place with different forms for capital: academic, cultural, intellectual, political, symbolic, or linguistic. Intellectuals spend their career trying to convert their intellectual capital into different ways of capital to gain power in social life. Modern bohemians do not embrace the past definitions of the bohemian simply because they have been re-educated by physical power (Army and Police) inflicted virtually thanks to Mass Media and Propaganda. New bohemians cannot fight the establishment because the new means of artistic and creative production depend entirely of the market place. For instance, to be part of the creative and art industry you must own a computer and have access to the web which is pre-defined by a set of rules. It is easier to conform to the norm and create shallow content to fill the MTV® feed than to say something of importance that will make the bohemian vulnerable to the powers of control that may –today- identify you as the creator of a potential glitch into the system in a matter of seconds. There is no option of another “Weather Underground” anymore and all the creative inputs are there to entertainment purposes alone. Bohemians must obey as it is “not cool” to be against a welcoming and entertaining establishment that keep feeding its people with fear and fun. Picture Jim Morrison and The Doors® and how he embraced the full concept of Bohemian, think of rap artists Chris Brown and how he compares to the original concept. Even worse, think of U2® lead singer BONO® and what he stands for, a new definition of the Bohemian: A healthy person, self-conscious person who cares about he world, nature, and global warming; children in Africa and concerned about keeping up with latest technology launched by Apple® or Intel®: The Bohemian has become yet another commodity. Bohemian is a brand.

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