



Alienation: A Canvas Portrayal in Van Gogh

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ABSTRACT: Alienation, in my understanding from Marx's works, reflects the appropriation of the active labor of one for the profit of the passive other in ways that severs the worker from his ways of being and acting in more ways than one. Taking Marx's concept of alienation as the foundation, my aim herein is to seek for its presence in the brushstrokes of Van Gogh. I bring in the 'Peasant shoe' and 'Worn Out' paintings for the dramatic portrayal of the strangled lifeworlds of the peasants in an age of commercial farming and industrialization. As a ray of hope, the painting 'Starry Nights' reflects, I argue, a reclaiming of alienated nature by the species-being as a source of survival. I conclude with the thought of how the canvas attempts to question the helm of the system of which it is a part in more ways than one.

KEYWORDS: Alienation, Art, Capitalism, Labor, Material, Nature

I. INTRODUCTION

The 19th century, an era of the classics, an era of capitalism in its heyday. The Industrial Revolution had made its entry and was in a rapid roll across the European nations and was spreading beyond its boundaries. While slavery in its raw form came to be abolished, it took a new veiled shape, marking its presence up until the present times. In the dynamics of its presence, I aim to focus on the works of the time which recognized that veiled structure of strangled livelihood. In this essay, I aim to bring in two classics of the 19th century whose names are engraved in our minds and whose works speak for themselves; Karl Marx and Vincent Van Gogh. Both commendable artists, in their own ways, created ripples around the globe with their influential works and those ripples seem to continue in an unending pattern. I bring in both these 19th century giants of their own fields to reflect upon the concept of 'alienation', introduced by one and that which seems to pervade in the works of the other.

IMPRINT OF ITS TIME

As rightly said, and I agree, art and literature carry the mark of the time of its creation. With the rise of capitalism in the 19th century, Marx (1818-1883), along with Engels, worked on various works of political philosophy and social sciences. In his work, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844", he introduces the concept of 'estranged labor', termed as 'alienation' in the English translation of his work (Marx, 1844). He focuses on the lived conditions and surviving experiences of human beings in capitalism. In an attempt to recognize the origin of private property, instead of taking it as fact of nature, the chapter on 'Estranged Labor' recognizes the causal link between the labor put into the creation of what is appropriated as private property and taken away from the laborer as something that was never his own (Marx, 1844). The worker gives into this appropriation as a way of life and does not have the consciousness to question the same. The Shakespearean trope in Marx's writings point to the literary genius in him. He created an art of the written text in his time that carries the essence of the surrounding circumstances and veiled realities.

During quite the same time, a misunderstood genius, Vincent Van Gogh was creating art that was to reign the world of post-impressionist painting with no end limit to its significant influence. Born in the Netherlands, bordering Germany on one side, in 1853, his lifetime aligns with the phase when Marx was publishing his works along with Engels on Communism. Van Gogh also spent two years of his life in Paris, the thriving center of modern art, out of necessity. His life story remains a tragic reality of an artist whose true worth was realized posthumously. However, the art that he created reflected the harshness of the times in shades of graphite and vivid colors on canvas.

Reflecting the context of their art, either in literary form or in the form of paintings, the origin of their works seems to lie in the concept embodied in the material. This argument on the origin, I draw from Heidegger's work, "The Origin of the Work of



Art" (Heidegger, 2002). He focuses on art as the 'clearing of the self-concealing hidden given form' (Heidegger, 2002, 1). He reflects on the roots of art and how it impacts the nature of the same. The artwork is characterized by the conceptual framework of the symbol of work, as defined by Heidegger. The thing that we can see and feel in the sensuous form is the substructure into which the concept is built. The paintings by Van Gogh hold within them multiplicities of entwined meanings that aligns with the lived experiences and realities of the time. I bring in the parallel presence of two significant names in history that resonate clearly in the present times to focus on the reflection of the ideas of one, in the works of the other in an unmediated, spontaneous sort of manner. Both were injecting content into their sensuous work in terms of the prevailing circumstances, hence the alignment of the images in their words and strokes of paint.

The conditions of life in the contextual space of Van Gogh seem to be the triggers or inspiration for such meaningful artworks. Having been born in the Netherlands, the socio-economic transformations in the nation during the time of his life in the homeland seem to have been expressed through the use of the brush. Dutch agriculture was in its traditional state before 1880, post which gradual commercialization of the same was evident. Market gardening emerged and was concentrated near the cities of the land around the same time. Until the 18th century, self-sufficient family farms were the main structure behind agricultural development in these areas (Haifa Feng, 1998). With the Industrial Revolution, abolition of the feudal system came in seemingly for the good, but replaced it with the greater veiled monstrosity of capitalism. The Dutch industrial revolution started in the first half of the 19th century, which aligns with the lifespan of Van Gogh. Industrial development provided new avenues for expansion and opportunities in agriculture with increased demand and improved infrastructure. With this seemingly progressive change in society, one era of exploitation was replaced by another.

ALIENATION ON CANVAS

In the beginning of the essay, I stated my aim to reflect upon the concept of 'alienation' through the works of Vincent Van Gogh. For the purpose of the same, I bring in the 'Peasant shoe' (Gogh, 1886) (Gogh, 1888) series and 'Worn Out' (Gogh, 1882) paintings. These paintings, I argue, as also many of his contemporaries and analysts do, have been symbolic of the hard yet picturesque life of the 'laborer'. The dramatic portrayal of the strangled lifeworlds of the peasants in an age of commercial farming and industrialization becomes an apt foundation to reflect upon the appropriation of the active labor of one for the profit of the passive other. I aim to bring in the painting of the 'Starry Nights' towards the end to reflect a reclaiming of alienated nature by the species being. The understanding of nature in the true sense of the term, as a source of survival.

Van Gogh's 'Peasant Shoes', painted in the 1880s, is a painting of a pair of shoes which Van Gogh came across in a Paris flea market and took them back to his studio according to art historians. As against this view of the painting being of Van Gogh's own pair of shoes, Heidegger talks of it as portraying a peasant woman's shoes. Heidegger saw the painting on exhibition in Amsterdam in 1930 and later described it in such vivid expressions of written text that called for philosophical attention to the work of art. The depth of meaning was reflected in Heidegger's analysis of the shoes as holding within it the abyss of the worker's life in the dark peeping through the torn holes of the shoe. In the muddled strokes of oil on paper, the mismatched scribbles on the surface were recorded evidence of the struggles of the peasant's daily mundaneness. The sweat, the soil of their work, the active sensuousness of work that Marx talks about was inherent in that portrayal of the peasant's shoes. Below I quote a segment from Heidegger's analysis,

"In the shoes vibrate the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death." (Horton et al., 2009)



Fig. 1¹



Fig. 2²

The emphasis on fallow desolation in the above quote draws my attention to the worn-out leather shoes as an embodiment of the lived experience of alienation. The literal meanings of the terms 'fallow', 'desolation' are enough to pinch the soul with the deep implications of the same towards the empty, barren, dismal conditions of being. The phrase 'uncomplaining anxiety' aligns with Marx's calling out of the peasants as alienating themselves from their own labor. The unquestioned acceptance of the exploitative system leads to its portrayal as something 'natural'. Heidegger says about the 'natural' as being merely the familiarity of a long-established habit that has forgotten the unfamiliarity from which it arose, which once struck man as strange and caused him to wonder (Heidegger, 2002). When any circumstance in time is tagged with the characteristic of being 'natural' instead of being historical, the process of change instilled in it fades away. It solidifies in the cycle of time as a rigid state of being. His alignment of the experience to the surrounding menace of death holds a dramatic emphasis on the haunting pervasiveness of capitalism in the lifeworlds of the species being.

In the sensuous presence of work in the shoes, work in the true sense of the term remains confined to it. The worker is alienated from work as such and it becomes a daily struggle to survive. The shoes provide them the material means to engage in further alienated labor. The fact that the shoe itself is a product of someone's labor gets veiled in this alienating process that goes around in circles. The materiality remains, in torn bits, while the sensuous living being gets cut through the torn edges. What remains is the shoes as a material entity, while the worker is alienated from the understanding of how

the shoe came into being. The production process becomes something alien to the worker who toils around for the success of the same.

Next I bring in the painting titled 'Worn Out' (1882) by Van Gogh for an impactful peek into the psycho-physical impact of the system on a Dutch farmer peasant, as I would like to interpret it.



Fig 3³

¹ (Gogh, 1886)

² (Gogh, 1888)

³ (Gogh, 1882)



Drawn with pencil on paper, the light strokes of graphite juxtaposed with the bold edges of the chair and the farmer's pants points to the material emphasis over the living human in the times of capitalism. The low bent posture points to the treatment of laborers as tools of the process of production which is damaged over the period of excessive use. The wretched, yet restful position with his head resting atop his folded wrists gives out the dynamic of the worker bending down before the appropriators as something of his master, of a natural line of being and existing. The moment of relief, with a sigh of fatigue, after a laborious day's work on the farmlands of the capitalists points to what Marx says alienation of labor. What 'labor', in the natural sense of the term, should bring about was a sigh of content relief that makes the person involved in the work feel sufficient and able. What capitalism does is that natural labor of enabling is alienated and replaced with a labor of alienation. This latter form disables the workers and pushes them into the system as entwined with the lifeless machines, making work a living hell for each.

The style of these drawings falls under realism, since each subject is depicted in a natural, realistic form without addition of whimsical elements to distract the eye or deter the imagination away from the blunt force of real life. As the farmer toiled the extremes of all seasons to the benefit of the passive capitalist; the grim of the mundane takes over the fresh life of the laborer.

In the process of production, in the involvement with activities of alienation, the worker is cut off from the production process itself, from the product of production, from one's own self and from the entire species being. The torn and ragged shoes of the peasant-worker are also a product of some worker's labor who is cut off from the product. The shoe becomes a commodity in the line of production, which the laborer comes to own as a tool facilitating further alienation. The distressed laborer, in the few scanty hours away from the deviated understanding of 'work', finds momentary solace in that lonesome chair of someone's labor. The shoe, in isolation, appears as something external to the labor of its maker. The single, dilapidated object in a rough, dark abyss reflects the condition of the human species being in the system of capitalism. The human is engulfed in the process of production like a cog in the machine, as a machine-in-itself.

Marx points to the alienation of the species being from nature in the process of production in an

objectified sense. Nature, providing the material for production and subsistence, is embodied in the consciousness in the external material sense; i.e., it is understood only in its role as provider of material for production. The fact that the entire subsistence of human beings is dependent on the same natural world takes a backseat. In this sort of material consciousness, the species-being gets alienated from the basic means of life. He becomes dependent on the course of labor for survival, the 'work' replaces nature as a means to life. This I bring in to reflect upon the estrangement of the species being from the co-existential understanding of nature and the impact of the external understanding of the same on the workers.



Fig. 4⁴

In the acclaimed painting of Van Gogh titled "The Starry Nights" (Gogh, 1889), taking the liberty to make my own interpretations of the art, I find a reclaiming of the understanding of nature through art in the same. A work from 1889 remains a recurring name in every art lover's conversations; in every exhibition on abstractions; in every other discussion on post-impressionism and modern art and portrayals of nature. Vincent, in talking about his painting, stated, "I dare urge you to believe that in landscapes one will continue to mass things by means of a drawing style that seeks to express the entanglement of the masses" (Gogh, 1889). This statement in one of his letters from November 1889 which swayed me towards including this painting in my reflections on portrayals of alienation in his paintings. The phrase 'entanglement of the masses' opens up varied interpretations of which I would point to the entanglement of the species being with nature in the co-existential sense which was tainted by the capitalist objectification of the same.

⁴ (Gogh, 1889)



In stating that “*Hope is in the stars,*” he was quick to point out that “*earth is a planet too, and consequently a star, or celestial orb*” (McLean & van Gogh, n.d.). It seems like a hope to reconnect with nature in the sense of the pre-capitalist notions. Schapiro refers to the cypress in the painting as a “*vague symbol of a human striving*” (McLean & van Gogh, n.d.). What does he mean by the phrase on human striving? To understand this interpretation I bring in the supposed effort of Van Gogh through his work on the canvas, through the strokes of his brush, a striving effort to make sense of the distant, estranged nature outside of his window in his room of the asylum. “*Through the iron-barred window,*” Vincent wrote to his brother, Theo, around 23 May 1889, in talking about this painting, “*....I see the sun rise in all its glory*” (Gogh, 1889). A hope, a lingering possibility of reclaiming the pre-capitalist notions of nature, and not work, as the means to life.

Through all the varied interpretations of the paintings, sometimes shoes are just shoes, but the visitor of such an exhibition may realize that a pair of shoes can contain an entire universe of vivid layers of meanings. As Heidegger would argue, artworks need not always have a literal meaning of one single truth. It reveals the concealed nature of the earth into the world. In distinguishing the ‘*earth*’, the materiality of the art, he points to the concealed nature of the world of the peasant woman. Good artwork discloses the world’s concealments. It brings in various interpretations. It explains itself in various ways. Art doesn't have to portray the scientific idea of truth, but instead it opens up numerous possibilities.

These dynamics of thought inherent in the simple, yet intricate artworks of Van Gogh invite multiple subjective analysis of the same. Herein, I aligned his brushstrokes to the works of Karl Marx, in terms of alienation and its portrayal through art. The human tendency to end a piece of work with hope, the inheritance of the view that it is not an end, unless it is a happy ending led me to include the *Starry Nights* as a reclamation through art. However, the current appropriation of the same post-impressionist in the capitalist schemes of modern art exhibitions point to an irony. But it is not exactly something contrary because Van Gogh was also painting to sell his paintings in society, but due to the subtle, yet radical, strokes of his brush not being in line with the then societal conventions, his paintings did not sell during his lifetime. Art being a commodity of the elite in the world of capitalism, when the canvas attempts to question the helm of the same, it becomes blasphemous to the existing state of affairs.

II. CONCLUSION

Through the essay, I made an amateur attempt at juxtaposing the works of Karl Marx and Van Gogh, as the latter portraying the views of the former in a spontaneous, unmediated sort of way. Due to the circumstantial pervasiveness of capitalism during the times of their being and acting, their works carried a sense of unveiling the ‘*real*’ against the veiled images presented to the world by the ones in power. The impact of power politics in the lives of both the ‘*artists*’ was evident in their life stories, from being exiled, to being locked up in an asylum. The society was not ready for their ‘*radical*’ unveiling. In contemporary times, when alienation has seeped deeper into our consciousness, making it a natural state of being, the paintings of Van Gogh seem to remain significantly unabated. They are now appropriated as commodities in the line of capitalist production, as was the aim of the artist who wanted to earn through his art. But the analysts and art historians are increasingly identifying the ironical radicality in his brushstrokes. The way he portrays reality, while being a part of it. How he identifies the rooted alienation of the peasant-worker and presents it raw to the audience is commendable and needs further discussion and analysis. I end my essay here, with a hope of the starry nights being a source of solace for the worn out worker, where he can put off his torn shoes and admire the truly natural labor, the labor not of alienation, but of enabling contentment.

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