

Three-Pennies: Bohemian Culture of Tom Waits and Nan Goldin



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Tom is standing on the piano with a megaphone that reaches across the room toward a lone microphone screaming about hot dog sandwiches, sexual discomfort, and Pontiac apple pie. In the next room, a stack of dingy Polaroids scattered in small piles secretly reveals a portrait not usually seen by the outside world and whose sitter would as easily give the finger to that world than care about what it thought. In these two rooms, a counter-culture continues to push through the smoky haze of cigarettes and stale coffee. It is an ideal that has evaluated the masses, a check and balance on current moments. The importance of bohemian culture is that it continues to live, to breath, and to re-evaluate the principles of the time. Tom Waits' music and Nan Goldin's photographs deconstruct current cultural norms by either approaching the world through subtle shifts of musical bars made from home grown instruments or by slapping the face of considered pictorial composition and content. Both Waits and Goldin live in the world of bohemian ideals that continue to reshape what it means to be an artist, an intellectual, a peasant against the elite, and someone who lives for passion.

The bohemian movement of 19th century Paris revitalized in full force three main principles that allowed its members to challenge the notions of cultural norms. Painters, writers, musicians, etc. convened together in dingy Parisian cafes to talk about the current state of affairs and injustices in politics, society, and thought. These three principles served as a code to follow and even justified the detachment from society that characterized the bohemian movement. At its core, the bohemian movement was guided by rejection of private property and materialism, rejection of values by living in a carefree state, and rejection of wealth by living for art. (Hopf) The importance of

bohemian counter-culture throughout the established societies of Paris, Germany, England, and the United States is a complex idea. The counter-cultures in each nation differed, but each shared a rejection of established cultural norms.

German writer Bertolt Brecht and composer Kurt Weill wrote a bohemian play in 1928 that spoke about a counter-culture that rebelled against bourgeois ideal. The focus of *The Three Penny Opera* is working-class characters that navigate common relationships and ordeals. Brecht's inspiration for the *Three Penny Opera* was yet another opera written in 1728 by John Gay, that, while created prior to the 19th century bohemian movement, included themes that would become central to the bohemian ideal. Like Brecht's opera, Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* used Italian operatic format to satire the political and social situations in London and across Great Britain. Here Gay appropriated high art opera, including compositions by Handel, but then incorporated popular tunes and common instruments, as well as folk characters.

American bohemian artists of the 1980's and 1990's, Tom Waits and Nan Goldin, incorporate into their art counter-culture and bohemian themes that, in many ways, resemble those found in both *The Beggar's Opera* and *The Three-Penny Opera*. In fact, Nan Goldin intentionally and directly referenced Brecht's *Three Penny Opera* in a series of photographs entitled *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1979-1986), as the title of the series was taken from a song in Brecht's opera. Additionally, Waits often uses themes and devices deriving from commonality, which was an essential characteristic of Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*. Satire, common instruments and popular tunes are all used by Waits to develop a multi-layered performance, which presents bohemian counter-culture as high art.

Throughout the history of counter-culture, a simple observance of the three principles remains essential to the encoding of what bohemian culture is and what its participants abide by. As society progresses, with complexities where multiple groups take on similar codes, more developed classification is needed. Even in the bohemian movement in Paris during the mid-nineteenth century, the pseudo-bohemian “Dandy” developed characteristics that challenged the bohemian principals by “emulating the aristocracy rather than living in poverty.” (Hopf) As cultures develop multiple class structures, the complexity of bohemian culture must continue to develop and revitalize itself. Here, the three principles project various degrees of stimuli, which can then be used to evaluate not only the individual but also the work. Not only do we see these three principals as part of the bohemian culture in Tom Waits’ and Nan Goldin’s work but also we see that they and their work incorporates bohemian, counter-culture themes in terms of aesthetics, tone and narrative.



Nan Goldin, Greer and Robert on the bed, NYC 1982

The rejection of location, home, rent, private property, and materialism led the bohemian into places not many common citizens would ever think of going. In these run-down apartments, lofts, alley’s, bars, cafés, and so on, the bohemian was isolated from society, so that he or she could make art and commune with friends in peace. The

bohemian seeks a living “aesthetic,” which allows one to forge a relationship with what is considered the lowest and crudest. This awareness of aesthetics is found in Nan Goldin’s 45-minute slideshow *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, wherein she projects a succession of hundreds of slides. Goldin’s photographs reveal the counter-culture of a rejected part of society. By inserting herself into this counter-culture, she is able to pull the viewer into a world of bathrooms, bedrooms, and backstage strip joints, In these dingy scenes, we see characters for both who they are and who they wish to be. The viewer thus acts as intruder and participant in the scenarios; the viewer has nowhere to go, so he or she must sit and join in on the moment. “Between nakedness and frailty: people called Guido and Clemens and Valerie and Cookie, naked, kissing, fucking, asleep in bed; bruised, hospitalized, dying, dead.” (Darwent) What is most interesting in Goldin’s work is that the environment is a stage to the photograph. The photograph remains a snapshot of a moment that we are asked to build the story around:

The pictures are as frail, as edible, as the people in them, the aids patients, the shadows, the snowflakes, Nan Goldin. And you know that she’s edited herself out, too, which may be as frightening as editing herself in. She is Barthe’s photographic killer, but she is also his victim, murdering herself as she goes. (Darwent)

The rejection of location as an aesthetic characteristic is key to Tom Wait’s musical compositions. In his three disc recording: *Orphans- Brawlers, Bawlers, and Bastards*, Waits sinks the listener into a grimly lit and haunting environment of robust frustration. The listener of his musical angst finds that they are engrossed in the moment and can’t get out, as if they were locked in the room under the stairs. Once the listener finds that they are welcome to join in, they are confronted by threat and safety at the same time. Waits creates a visual stage for his music, which is characterized by complete self-release, since we must give into the story-maker. To listen to his music is to find that

there is no obstacle in the way of being launched into a compulsive and exclusive gritty conversation.



Tom Waits

The second principal and probably the most important to the Parisian bohemians, rejection of values, morals, consequences, gave Nan Goldin the pots and pans to cook her photographs into a stew. Tone plays an important role in Goldin's series of work *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. Here Goldin uses tone to justify the scenarios that occur in her photographs. The photographs are documents of a culture dealing with a heavy awareness to AIDS, drug use, and prostitution. The viewer is asked, upon arrival into the photograph, to readjust his or her own point of view and to look at the photographed participants as morally just. The tread marks on the arm of one individual suggests drug use to the viewer, but what moral consequences does the viewer find in the images? Are we to help or are we to stare? These are questions that Goldin wants the viewer to ask. We, as moral individuals, are compromised. In *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, Goldin uses the images to construct "the struggle between autonomy and dependency." (Weinberg 9) Goldin wants the viewer to evaluate his or her moral standpoint. It is the same dilemma she is faced with as she chooses to photograph this counter-culture. As she

has noted, “I have a strong desire to be independent, but at the same time a craving for the intensity that comes from interdependency.” (Weinberg 9)

The tone of Tom Waits’ work comes in the form of what instruments and vocal variations he chooses to exploit. Waits has no problem with using sounds as a means to communicate and will exploit the common instrument by physically deconstructing the piano, the megaphone, the concertina, and whatever other instrument he might come across to create a sound that one musical critic describes as, “caveman style.” (Fraiman)

In many of his songs, the listener is challenged to leave behind the notion that music is made from a specific group of instruments and established principles of voice, that are informed by musical tradition. Waits interrupts the listener’s awareness to where they stand with a relentless barrage of noise constructs that seem to have no precedent. In fact, trying to nail down the instrument as an object is an experiment of fruitless definition. We miss the point of the noise if we take time to classify it. Furthermore, Waits hails from a time when American bohemian beatniks stood up in front of small crowds and attempted to disenfranchise themselves by not allowing the listener or the viewer the privilege of knowing automatically.

The third bohemian principal, rejection of wealth by living for art, is what establishes narrative. In both Waits’ and Goldin’s work, the narrative remains quite simply in the participation. Goldin uses the narrative of an individual’s life to challenge the viewer to create a narrative. In a set situation of dingy apartments, subversive counter-culture extravagance informs the narrative that grips us with both hands. We are to question our own moral judgments. The narrative, which derives from the rejection of standing in order to live for the art, allows the viewer the chance to make his or her way

into the photograph in order to enter on our own accord. Goldin directs us to use caution, but, in the end, allows us in so that we might be able to feel morally included. Her work suggests a “moral agenda.” As noted by Darwent, “Just as the excesses of medieval humanism meant that women could become saints by licking pus from lepers’ wounds, so Goldin seems, at first glance, to be on a mission to beatify the damned, herself included.” (Darwent)

Waits rejection of wealth for art as a narrative comes to us in the form of grittiness, which we find when listening to his voice and his instruments. His wealth is the voice through which his songs are manifested and the possibility of the found object. At the same time, Waits intentionally tries to destroy those precious commodities to advance more and more into a pressing guttural account on music as an art form in current society, “Every instrument Waits played looked like it’s been salvaged, but that is only a representation of how his arts gets made.” (Gladstone)

Not only does Waits encourage the listener to give up location, he asks us to follow him to a new place with a new set of rules. We are instructed to create a narrative with him. As Waits suggests in an account on making the music in a studio:

I don’t mean to say that it’s like somebody dying, I’m just using that. But that’s how it feels sometimes, that it’s as expedition and we fail. Other times we really soar...it can’t happen every time and if it did you’d probably [stop doing it]... The democratic approach to sound expedition is always a mystery where you’re going to wind up. (Montandon 175)

Suggesting that the bohemian counter-culture resides solely in the tradition of the Parisian bohemian principles is not only not allowing the counter-culture to change as society grows, but also does not give the current freedom for the bohemian to explore. This is not to say that the bohemian has lost a connection with the original code for that would be a fallacy, but one must allow the bohemian code the freedom to re-evaluate

itself as the artists, writer, intellectuals, etc continue to do. New bohemians like Tom Waits and Nan Goldin need as much room to innovate and experiment as they can get. Both artists challenge the cultural norm in regards to a rejection of what is considered normal, but both also are trying to change the landscape of that norm in order to challenge and respect the definition of what it means to be bohemian.

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Misc. Research

Nan Goldin

Mathew Mars Gallery

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Tom Waits

Tom Waits Press Conference

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Tom Waits & Iggy Pop - Coffee and Cigarettes (Movie Clip)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K6Mw6b1T50U&feature=related>

Tom waits- Chocolate Jesus (Sings through a megaphone)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1wfamPW3Eaw>

God's away on business

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExyRMqX8eOA>

Tom Waits - going out west

<http://www.kewego.fr/video/iLyROoaftzXV.html>

Tom Waits - I Don't Want To Grow Up

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Tom Waits - Romeo is Bleeding

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Tom waits interview & rain dogs live 1986

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fKSIDg_cn8I&feature=related

Tom waits interview & rain dogs live 1986 part 2

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xVZtjKixS8g&feature=related>

Gavin Bryars - Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet (Tom Waits and the Tramp/Gavin Bryars' actual recording of a tramp near Victoria Station singing this "mantra", followed after few years by remix with Tom Waits)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=byAGDVu4sC4>

Tom Waits - Christmas card From a Hooker in Minneapolis

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=12qBoy2rhVw>

Tom Waits - I Wish I Was In New Orleans

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qai3SfvSBgU&feature=related>

Tom Waits - Jersey Girl

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5DPRmcq6cw&feature=related>

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Tom Waits - Cold Cold Ground – 1987

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iwyHFyKQ8XE&feature=related>

Tom Waits - It's All Right With Me (Red Hot + Blue)

Tom Waits - Walking Spanish Down The Hall

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-O87GJjrv0&feature=related>

Walking Spanish (noise Cover)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0w8XjLMdh4&feature=related>

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