Bohemianism and Cyberspace: Why the Internet Had to Happen

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Abstract
Change can be evolutionary or revolutionary, and new economic and social orders form following major political upheavals. A pattern has developed for young people to rebel against order and, by doing so, to bring about chaos. One of the aftershocks of the worldwide political revolutions of the late eighteenth century was the gradual evolution of a new cultural identity, bohemianism, which began in the 1830s. Bohemianism gave a name to the philosophy of "doing your own thing." Prior to this time, the term "bohemian" was often a synonym for a vagabond or a gypsy, a reference to the Romany Gypsy tribe that originated in the kingdom of Bohemia. The great wars of the early and mid-twentieth century engendered new waves of bohemianism. Living life unconventionally was the basis for each of these movements, but their public faces took disparate forms such as the Lost Generation and the German Wandervogel in the 1920/30s, America's societal dropouts, the Beats, society's child, the Hippie, and most recently, the Punks and the Goths.

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Bohemianism and Cyberspace: Why the Internet Had to Happen

KAREN LAWSON

Change can be evolutionary or revolutionary, and new economic and social orders form following major political upheavals. A pattern has developed for young people to rebel against order and, by doing so, to bring about chaos. One of the aftershocks of the worldwide political revolutions of the late eighteenth century was the gradual evolution of a new cultural identity, bohemianism, which began in the 1830s. Bohemianism gave a name to the philosophy of “doing your own thing.” Prior to this time, the term “bohemian” was often a synonym for a vagabond or a gypsy, a reference to the Romany Gypsy tribe that originated in the kingdom of Bohemia. The great wars of the early and mid-twentieth century engendered new waves of bohemianism. Living life unconventionally was the basis for each of these movements, but their public faces took disparate forms such as the Lost Generation and the German Wandervogel in the 1920/30s, America’s societal dropouts, the Beats, society’s child, the Hippie, and most recently, the Punks and the Goths.

While Bohemia is no longer a kingdom, this paper explores the idea that bohemianism has found its latest incarnation in cyberspace, a new upheaval that has pervaded and destabilized contemporary culture. The artistic manifestation most frequently thought of as representative of bohemianism is Puccini’s opera La Bohème. The cyberspace expression of the bohemian movement, however, is best represented by Bizet’s opera Carmen. Whereas Carmen sings about the gypsy life as “the whole wide world at your domain” or “the world at your feet,” online, armchair bohemians are summoned by the siren call of “the world at your fingertips.”

People living an unconventional life in a colony with others have existed throughout history. Bohemianism, as an informal culture, emerged in Paris in the 1830s as a rebellion against the staid life of the...
bourgeoisie. Following the French Revolution of 1789, a large middle-class, or bourgeoisie, began to establish itself within French society. 

Emboureger is the French verb that means to gentrify or to “make middle-class.” This group of people occupied a position between the upper and lower classes and was composed primarily of business and professional people and bureaucrats. Their way of life was marked by concerns for material interests and respectability. Bohemians were no longer members of a particular race; a bohemian was an artisan, usually gifted in literary or creative arts, preferably impoverished. They were highly influenced by Romanticism, a nineteenth-century movement that rejected conventional artistic strictness and placed an emphasis on imagination, the emotions, and personal experience in art and literature. The bohemian community provided a place and an identity for those who did not fit in elsewhere, and its “pleasures extended to all men and women of courage” (Gould 130). Like the waves of bohemians that would follow them generations later, “Bohemians were singled out for… their artistic pretenses, their bizarre clothes, and their exotic tastes in food and interior decoration” (Gluck 366). Although Prosper Mérimée’s Carmen was written in 1845-1847, Henri Murger’s Scènes de la Vie de Bohème (published in 1849) publicized the bohemian lifestyle for the general public. Whereas Mérimée recounted a tale of gypsies, seduction, and murder, Murger emphasized the artistic lifestyle of the bohemian and tried to distance them from identification with gypsies per se. Both became the basis for operas: Bizet’s Carmen and Puccini’s La Bohème respectively.

Women may have been welcome in the new Bohemia, but the stakes for them were high. Men did not view them as their cultural equals; in this they were much like their estranged bourgeois brothers. Sexual freedom for male bohemians could be risky, but the stigmas of loss of propriety, unwed motherhood, and sexual disease overwhelmed most women. Women who did try to live the bohemian lifestyle most likely found the traditional bohemian careers of art and writing closed to them. The two kinds of women most closely associated with bohemian life, called grisettes and the lorettes, defined themselves in relation to the men in their lives. The grisettes, French working-class women, typically wore gray (gris) gowns made of woolen cloth and found work as seamstresses or cleaners. Lorettes, named after the prostitutes who worked the area around the church of Notre Dame des Lorettes in the ninth
arrondissement of Paris, relied on their bohemian lovers for support. The bourgeoisie saw little difference between the grisettes and lorettes. Ideally, a woman acted as a muse for her romantic, idealistic, bohemian artist.

While a person could presumably have a bohemian outlook on life and live anywhere, a citizen of France had to travel to Paris to live in the bohemian community. This move to the city is important because to be a true bohemian, one must live in an alternative space. The bourgeois citizen flourished in small towns and stable neighborhoods. The early bohemian community defied social conventions but did not feel compelled to convert others, or society, to its way of living. Ryerson interprets one of Murger's observations about bohemian life in this way:

Bohemia is supposed to function as a sort of training ground for the bourgeois world, a kind of preparation for reassimilation. Like the rebellious child who ultimately grows up to live his parents' life, bohemia locates itself at the point where the bourgeois ideal meets the bourgeois reality, where the promise of self-development and freedom meets the exigencies of day-to-day life. As a form of literal and figurative escape, bohemia tests the limits of that ideal, before allowing its denizens to return to the comforts of home with a few great stories to tell. (par 17)

Corroboration for this viewpoint can be found in Georges Jeanneret's fictionalized memoir of his life, Georges Grisel peintre-Neuchâtel-O sa vie et son œuvre. Jeanneret was an engraver, enameller, and the father of the artist Le Corbusier (Charles-Edouard Jeanneret). According to Seigel, Jeanneret "saw Bohemia as a space in which to live out his rebellion at a time when he was psychologically unable to meet the demands of membership in society" (270). Bohemianism also offered a way to channel discontent into an alternative lifestyle that otherwise might have—and ultimately did for many of its members—found expression in politics.

In 1848 a series of revolutions swept through France, Italy, Germany, and central Europe. The Revolutions of 1848 were political and economic revolts that took place in Europe because of recessions and abuses of political power. The Revolutions changed the governments of the countries involved, but the changes were short-lived. Either the old governments regained control or the new governments turned out to be more repressive than their predecessors. Many bohemians became politicized by the Revolutions and their aftermaths. Others sacrificed a life purely devoted to their art in favor of becoming successful profession-
als or entrepreneurs. Some became flâneurs, favorably known as “men about town,” or disparagingly as “dandies,” and thought less about art than about appearances. Cafe society became more of a cabaret society; by 1870 much of the original bohemian atmosphere had dissipated. Many of the eccentricities of the bohemian lifestyle had been adopted as fashionable by the wealthy, and much of what had been seductive about that lifestyle had become part of mainstream culture.

The next cycle of collective bohemianism took place after the bloodbath of World War I. Known as the “Lost Generation,” disillusioned Americans from all parts of the country converged in Paris, finding it necessary to cross the ocean to feel that they were truly bohemians. Gertrude Stein used the phrase “Lost Generation” to describe the disillusioned young survivors of World War I who ended up in France not seeking a purpose, but enjoying its relatively low cost of living. Many talented writers of the 1920s were disgusted with the hypocrisy and materialism of contemporary American society, and they expressed their concern in their works. The era was remarkably literary, producing writers such as Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner. Women had progressed to mentor instead of muse status by this time; Stein and Sylvia Beach are two of the most famous senior writers of the era. It is surprising that, after making such a determined pilgrimage, the Americans seemed uninterested in actually entering French culture, choosing to limit their Bohemia, the Left Bank of Paris, to fellow expatriates.

At the same time within Germany, a bohemian-like folk culture, the Wandervogel, emerged. These young people were ramblers with a passion for German folk music and contempt for bourgeois urban materialism. Eventually this movement became politicized, and many members chose to join German Third Reich youth groups. The Wandervogel and the Lost Generation bohemian movements both dissolved in the turmoil of the Spanish Civil War and the rise of Fascism in pre-World War II Germany.

Since the ends of World War II and the Korean War, two major and two minor sequential bohemian movements emerged, predominantly although not exclusively, in the United States. The first of these movements, the Beats, flourished in the 1950s. These artists and writers, at odds with the growing bourgeoisie of white suburban America and its narrow view of life, expressed their rebellion through poetry, folk mu-
sic, and literature. Their name came from the slang of jazz musicians; to be “beat” meant to be down and out, or poor and exhausted. They began to be called Beatniks after the 1957 launch of the Russian satellite Sputnik. Their movement began in Greenwich Village, New York, with the friendship of Allen Ginsburg, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, and Neal Cassady. They emphasized alcohol, drugs, sex, jazz, Buddhism, and a restless vagabond life. While they did rebel against the mores of established society, they existed outside it without trying to change it. Coffeehouses replaced the cafes of prior generations of bohemians, and their language was patterned after Black hipsters, with whom they identified. They frequently wore black, and as a result Norman Mailer referred to them as “white Negroes.” In the late fifties and early sixties, the cultural conditions that had given birth to this cycle of bohemianism were changing. The contrast that had existed between the bohemia of the Beats and the American middle class gradually began to fade and suburban conformity began to be replaced with a more open and unconventional lifestyle. The stage, however, was being set for the cycle to repeat itself.

Stemming from the antisocial attitudes of the Beat generation, a “countercultural” bohemia formed in the 1960s. Activists, dissatisfied with many social and political situations in American society, began to act in opposition to government policies concerning civil rights and the war in Southeast Asia. Hippies or Flower Children, proponents of peace, joy, and love, formed a colorful subset of the anti-war movement. Their eclectic and colorful clothing (that for a time included a Gypsy “look” among young women) and mysticism and consciousness expanding via meditation or mind-altering drugs became the 1960s symbols of bohemianism. San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury area replaced Greenwich Village as the center of counterculture. The Hippies had a name for those they stood against: the Establishment. Their strong feelings about peace and the importance of sexual freedom in their lifestyle eventually led to the end of their bohemia. The impact of the sexual revolution “seemingly permeated the consciousness of an entire generation in the 1960s” (Nathe 393), and sexual freedom served as a catalyst for the feminist and gay liberation movements. The escalating war in Vietnam caused increasingly violent protests against it. Many Hippies and mainstream Americans became radicalized.

It was probably hard to be a Beatnik in Boone, Iowa or a Hippie in
Hannibal, Missouri. Droves of young and sometimes not so young people traveled to New York City or San Francisco to be a part of the heart of these cultures. The ties with the original nomadic Gypsies were evident in Kerouac’s classic novel *On the Road*, hitchhiking to concerts, the Merry Pranksters’ bus trip, and pilgrimages to India for enlightenment.

The counterculture of the 1960s gave voice to a movement that was unable to find an acceptable place in the established political system. Following the student massacres at Jackson State and Kent State, the resignation of President Richard Nixon, and the end of the Vietnam War, many members of this cycle of bohemianism made peace with society and entered mainstream culture. Timothy Leary is more specific:

But by the end of the decade it became apparent that utopia wasn’t going to happen that easily, for three obvious reasons: there were powerful forces dead-set against any change in American culture, there were no practical blueprints or role model for harnessing a vague philosophy of individualism into a functioning social order, [and] basically, we were not quite ready; the Spockies 3 were still kids outnumbered demographically and unprepared psychologically to create the postindustrial phase of human culture. (59)

Two other recent counterculture waves are noteworthy: the Punks (1980s) and the Goths (1990s). Both groups were exemplified by their extreme clothing styles, appearances, and music. An important difference for these groups from other bohemians is that their cultures were marked by a turn inward rather than to another physical place. They did not form large physical communities, and their culture itself was dark and noisy. For young people who had only known peace and prosperity, this was a form of escape from the mundane and predictable.

While what happens in the world often appears to be a convoluted flow of events, beneath this perceived chaos a pattern exists. Over time all systems, organic and man-made, continually create new organizations and patterns out of chaos. Chaos theory, or the ability to find order in disorder, offers one explanation for the cyclical nature of bohemianism. Hayles conjectures that: “disorder has become a focal point for contemporary theories because it offers the possibility of escaping from what are increasingly perceived as coercive structures of order” (265). Bohemianism is an alternative way of living that challenges traditional order. The chaos generated by wars and the socio-political changes that resulted from them were catalysts for prior waves of bohemianism. The chaos caused by the absence of global warfare and
the resultant social, political, economic, and technological changes induced the latest cycle of bohemianism, which arose at the end of the twentieth century.

By the end of the twentieth century, the world’s perception of America had changed, as had the way Americans behaved in their world. Americans in general were traveling in record numbers to other parts of the world for business and pleasure. The problem of “Ugly Americans,” travelers who visited other countries without attempting to learn its language or customs, remained. Globalization, at this time, was really Americanization. Many other countries in the world were slowly being “Americanized,” to the chagrin or pleasure of their inhabitants. Americans increasingly realized that their way of life was not always the goal of other populations and was often at deadly odds with some cultures. Travel was never without perils, but terrorist attacks, distant wars, and disease were making travelers anxious. Perhaps the most significant change was the increasing danger in America’s own cities, streets, and even the traditionally safe haven of a family’s neighborhood.

Young people in this type of culture have very little chance of escaping their parents’ constant contact. Before birth, pictures are taken of them with ultrasound, they are video-recorded at birth, camcorded at every opportunity, given cell phones so that they can keep in touch from the dance or from the ball game; and they often carry electronic devices so that they can correspond by electronic mail or instant messaging from nearly anywhere in the world. There is no place to go: Paris, New York, San Francisco, and Taos are still places where the arts thrive, but chances are that Mom and Dad have already been there; or if Junior went to live there, they would soon be on a plane to visit. The electronic umbilical stretches across the world. Schools and other organizations have zero tolerance policies for alcohol, drug, and weapon use. Sex is no longer a mystery owing to the increasingly graphic nature of television and movies and can be deadly with the pervasiveness of the global AIDS epidemic. The same growth in telecommunications technology that bound young people to their physical communities, however, also offered them a novel way of escape: the Internet.

As the Cold War escalated, and particularly in response to the Russian launch of Sputnik in 1957, the United States government created ARPA (Advanced Research Projects Agency) to step up its presence in the “space race.” Several years later, ARPA began to focus on computer
networking and communication. By the early 1960s, the first computer network, ARPANET, had been created. Originally intended as a communications network for military command and control, by 1969 it had evolved into a system that would allow researchers across the country to share super-computers. The system focused on military and research uses, but the Internet had been born. It was composed of three distinct features: electronic mail (the exchange of computer-stored messages by telecommunication), file transfer protocol (the exchange of files between computers), and telnet (the ability to access one computer from another). The first international network links were established in the early 1970s. The general public remained only vaguely aware of the growing use of networked computers for daily life until the early 1980s.

The World Wide Web (WWW), a component of the Internet that came into existence in 1991, is designed to allow easier navigation of the network through the use of graphical user interfaces and hypertext links between different addresses. The WWW allows for the formation of virtual communities that share common interests and ideas. Technologically, something virtual is a simulation of the real thing. Simulation technology allows a person to cross boundaries and experience something without needing its physical presence. Virtual communities provide a framework for WWW users to exchange ideas and information, form relationships, and interact. Traditionally, communities or countries have physical boundaries imposed by geography or politics. Benedict Anderson also remarks on this aspect of national culture: “In an anthropological spirit, then, I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community.... It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (15). Individuals may very well feel more connected to their virtual community than their geographical or political community, just as past bohemians felt more a part of a community based on like-minded interests than the place where they were born.

The Internet is both a media and a medium: an interactive, visual canvas for the new bohemian. Original music, art, literature, and theater are being created on the WWW in forms such as web dramas, MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) compositions, and on-line artworks. As there was always a drug of choice for past bohemians, the
media/medium of the Internet can also become an addiction. Relationships may form, but others may fail at their expense. There is an extended community in which to wander, but no real need to learn about other cultures. One can share files and recipes, but not eat together (unless video streaming or virtual dining are personally satisfying). The dangers of physical disease do not exist at this time, but sexuality can be preyed on and the media, the machine, is vulnerable to viruses and attack. When asked about his attraction to his computer and the Internet, a young friend explained: “You don’t have to share it like the beach.”

Not everyone who uses a computer, or sends e-mail messages, or with an Internet connection, or World Wide Web address, is a bohemian. Serious research, communication, and business, unimaginable even twenty years ago, takes place on-line. The question may not be whether all on-line users are bohemians, but whether a large group of them are not truer to gypsy roots than any past bohemian culture. A person, perhaps very bourgeois during one part of the day, can assume an alternate identity on-line, lurk and travel, playing a con game, creating or losing a fortune instead of telling one. It may be difficult to think of a person with a computer as impoverished, but not everyone with access to a computer and/or the Internet owns one. Parents may provide this access in much the same way as they may have purchased the ticket to Paris for the bohemian of an earlier generation. John, age fifteen, writes about his nightlife: “Become the demi-insomniac midnight king of your private suburban bohemia” (line 5). To blur the lines further, it is possible to go on-line to buy a bobbing-head Beatnik doll, or to log on to www.lostgeneration.com. There are Gypsy and Roma websites, as well as a “New Bohemian” website where one can buy a New Bohemian mug or tee shirt. Gluck, however, believes that Henri Murger’s view of such commercialism was a positive one: “unlike his romantic predecessor, the true bohemian was a successful professional and artistic entrepreneur who had learned to create publicity for his products and to negotiate the cultural marketplace of his own advantage” (352).

In 1989 the world watched the jubilant smashing of the Berlin Wall, the avatar of the Cold War and communism. Young people were highly visible during this literal and symbolic act of opening up to “Western” culture, which marked the symbolic raising and actual razing of the Iron Curtain throughout Europe. Much of the remaining Communist structure collapsed in a failed Soviet coup in 1991. These political and
social upheavals served as a starting point for a new phase of capitalism that converged with the availability of a plethora of available new technologies, which offered great opportunities for changes in social and commercial interactions. When the World Wide Web evolved, a new and radical form of “power to the people” came into existence. Beyond the driving force of economics, the desire for physical safety and the need for connection in an increasingly fragmented society is found by many in the global village. This conurbation allows bohemians worldwide to flourish, undetected by various governments, in a largely safe and unpoliced environment. They wander, gypsy-like, from place to place on the information highway.

What could the protagonists of a nineteenth-century novella and an opera, Carmen and Don Jose, have in common with the cybercitizens of today? It is a stretch of the imagination, but indulge in an informal fantasy that might be taking place on the stage that you see through the window of your Internet browser.

*Carmen* is, in the language of chaos theory, a “strange attractor.” She instigates a mysterious outside force that also initiates chaotic interactions. Don Jose is a fractal, his mind an irregular surface like that of a broken stone, who is shattered. The “Lorenz Attractor” shown above is commonly called the “butterfly attractor.” The butterfly effect illustrates a basic precept of chaos theory: that the flutter of a butterfly’s wings in China could eventually affect the weather in New York. Carmen is a butterfly, brightly colored and with wings, migratory, flying from one man to another. As butterflies are attracted to brightly colored flowers, she is particularly attracted to brightly colored men: the soldier, the toreador. Butterflies do not live long. Their most common enemies are predators. One way butterflies try to protect themselves from predation is through their bright coloration, which serves as a warning to potential predators that they might be poisonous. The epitome of free love, Carmen also loves to be free. Don Jose ignores all verbal and physical warning signals about Carmen’s nature, bringing about his own demise as well as Carmen’s.
While there are people who are thought of as social butterflies, chiefly concerned with the pursuit of pleasure, the butterfly is also a metaphor for the triumph of the spirit over the physical prison of the material world. Antonio Canova sculpted two mythological lovers in 1796. The piece, called "Cupid and Psyche Contemplating a Butterfly," shows Psyche, whose name is the Greek word for soul, gently cradling a butterfly in her hand while Cupid, a Roman god of love, holds the butterfly's wings shut with his fingertips. In an 1807 sculpture by Chaudet called "Cupid and the Butterfly," he is kneeling over a fallen butterfly, pulling at its wings. Love, even if ever so gently, attempts to keep the beloved from flight. An attractor will continue weaving back and forth between its two "butterfly" wings, its motion seemingly random, causing an oscillating object to move off course. Such is Carmen's affect on the men who enter her orbit, but particularly on the unstable Don Jose. When I look at the butterfly attractor, I see Gypsy eyes.

If I were "carmen1845@lpastias.com," what would you know about me? Not my age or race or gender, not even whether I am male or female. If we engaged in an electronic conversation and I gave you a , what would you think? I could tell you anything, and you could choose to believe it or not. It is possible for us to thwart all sorts of rules and conventions. We have both become gypsies, our identities a matter of situation or opportunity. Carmen is a native-born gypsy, at home in a multilingual culture. Picture Carmen and Don Jose on a cyberspace stage: Carmen is the bohemian; Don Jose is the bourgeois. Don Jose has entered a foreign culture and makes no attempt to learn how the new culture operates. O'Donnell writes, as Don Jose might have if he were a scholar and not a murderer and bandit:

The esthetic of closure and fixity that we now cherish may very well turn out to be one taste among many, and the possibility now coming into view of a world in which useful and persuasive discourse never has to choose to freeze itself, but can continue to grow, amend itself, ramify, and become more subtle and more true in response to its readers' and to its author's continuing experience - that world may generate its own esthetic of openness and adaptability. As I wrote those words, some synapses begin to short out on me, for I know that the person I am today cannot grasp such liability - my words betray that, in that what I want to do is grasp and hold. But the world is a fluid place, and it does not always treat kindly those who would freeze it, or part of it, in place. (9-10)

In the vocabulary of the Internet world, particularly in chat rooms or newsgroups, there are categories of users known as "lurkers" and
"newbies." A lurker is someone who reads information from newsgroup postings or chat room messages, but does not post his own messages. A newbie is any new user of a technology; newbies are prone to a predictable series of errors often anticipated with amusement by the Internet savvy. Once a person becomes a regular user of the Internet, he is confronted with issues that he may or may not be aware of. Depending on where the traveler visits, his personal (and/or his computer’s) security may be in jeopardy as is, for many innocents, their sexuality. Once Don Jose willingly intrudes into Carmen’s life, he is faced with many of the perils of the cybercitizen of 150 years later. There is also a whole “new” problem in the realm of human relationships because of the Internet. Has anyone in your life told you that his or her relationship with you suffers because of the amount of the time you spend on the Internet? “Don’t be a gypsy, be mine,” donjose@khaos.com might say.

The use of tapage, or rhythmic controlled tapping, in Carmen, which Gould finds “clearly associated with the unruly behavior of bohemians, workers, and women” (129), is replicated by Internet users worldwide in the muted din of billions of keyboard and mouse clicks.

The Internet is a modern expression of bohemianism and Bizet’s Carmen provides the link between the Internet and the rich tradition of bohemianism. Puccini’s opera, La Bohème, based on Henri Murger’s Scènes de la Vie de Bohème, depicts life among the original bohemians, the poor artists living in Paris’s Latin Quarter. Starving, but cheerful, the poet Rodolfo shares a garret with the painter Marcello and two other friends. One Christmas Eve, the frail seamstress Mimi (a grisette) comes to Rodolfo’s door for help, and the two fall passionately in love, while Marcello carries on an affair with the flirtatious and appropriately named Musetta (a lorette). Rodolfo becomes impossibly jealous of Mimi, and the two regretfully part, until Musetta reveals that Mimi is dying of consumption. Rodolfo rushes to Mimi’s side, and the lovers reunite briefly, only to be separated forever by her death. Mimi, dying romantically of consumption in an unheated garret, was an icon for past bohemians, but she would seem to have little to do with the current wave of cyberbohemians. It is Bizet’s Carmen who should be their symbol. She can temporarily exist in the bourgeois cigarette factory or in Lilas Pastias’ tavern, but she is in her element in the wild with the smugglers. Passionate wanderer, beyond gender, seductive, life-changing: Carmen has many faces, as do many Internet users.
We have learned that no bohemian movement lasts for long. What will end bohemianism in cyberspace? Is the movement over already? One problematic area is the tremendous growth of on-line commercialism. Damien Cave quotes a Canadian Internet activist who calls himself (herself?) “Der Mouse.” He/she wrote the following in protest after ORBS (Open Relay Behavior Modification System), a blacklist of Internet “spam” sites, was shut down. Spam is unsolicited e-mail on the Internet. From the sender’s point of view, it is a form of bulk mail, often to a list culled from subscribers to a discussion group or obtained by companies that specialize in creating e-mail distribution lists. To the receiver, however, it usually seems like junk e-mail:

The Net I knew and loved is dead, killed by uncivilized greedy incompetents who came barging in, without caring that when you barge into a foreign culture it behooves you to learn how they do things. This would not have been a problem, except that they arrived in sufficient numbers to overload the mechanisms that normally would have either brought newcomers up to speed on the culture or rejected them; as a result they killed off the culture we had, the only culture I’ve ever seen work based on mutual friendship and helpfulness on a large scale. (2)

Other increasing concerns are privacy, hacking, and cyber terrorism. Cyberspace has been a place for many people to have a life separate from their day-to-day existence, but complex ethical issues concerning individuals’ property and privacy rights loom large on the moral landscape.

Hacking, or gaining access to a computer illegally, already exists on several levels. There are “white hat” hackers (the bizarre bohemian clothing appears again!), who are hired by companies to evaluate the security of their computer systems. “Gray hat” hackers, of dubious ethics, break into web sites for fun, often leaving embarrassing “I’ve been here” type messages to deface the site. “Black hat” hackers are malicious and set out to do serious damage to a website; they are criminals. Many people do not see a difference between the ethics of the “gray hats” and “black hats,” as proper citizens of Paris in the 1830s often would not distinguish between a grisette and a lorette.

Cyberterrorism is a premeditated, usually politically motivated attack against information, computer systems, or programs and data that violates the security of government or private agencies, or the on-line public at large. Hacking and cyberterrorism create a louder din in cyberspace than keyboard and mouse clicks; similarly Gould describes
a motif in the final scene of the opera Carmen: “one expression of ... tapage is murderous and disturbing, the other channeled into a popular pastime” (136). The current state of cyberspace is such that information is seriously at risk. It is also possible to stalk or terrorize through private or mass electronic mailings. The impact of cyber terrorism to the physical health of the world is, at present, indirect. Computers do not currently control sufficient physical processes to pose a significant risk of terrorism in the classic sense. As we build more and more technology into our civilization, we must ensure that there is sufficient human oversight and intervention to safeguard those whom technology serves.

Are we all bohemians now? Much of “westernized” culture has adapted so much from past bohemian movements by way of fashion, attitude, and the current milieu of cyberculture into our ways of life that there would appear to be more bohemians than bourgeoisie in the world. If that is true, then perhaps we must wait for the curtain to rise on the next mise-en scène including all its props, illuminations, and costumes. We know it will happen; we just must wait for the proper narrative to reveal itself.

Notes

1 Two of the different ways these words from Georges Bizet’s opera Carmen (Act II, Scene 16) have been translated.

2 WBGH 1992 television series The Machine That Changed the World, segment IV, is titled “The World at Your Fingertips.” Numerous on-line technology related companies also use this phrase as advertising.

3 A name for those in the age group whose parents had used Dr. Benjamin Spock’s Dr. Spock’s Baby and Child Care as a child-rearing manual in the mid 1950s-early 1960s.

4 An example of a web drama, “how chet baker lost his teeth” is available at: http://www.chetdrama.com

Information on art created on-line can be found in the New York Times article “Impressionists in Cyberspace, Digital but Diverse,” http://www.nytimes.com/2001/08/06/arts/design/06ARTS.html

“Original Music Compositions” by David Rubenstein can be heard at: http://users.erols.com/druben

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