

## A Class Struggle in Umberto's Boccioni's Painting- *Street Noises Invade the House (1911)*

**Tek Bahadur Chhetry**

Assistant Professor of English

Pokhara University

[tek.englecpu@gmail.com](mailto:tek.englecpu@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

*The modern art of the early twentieth century is the reaction to Realism, and impressionists were the first who broke away from so called rule bound represented bourgeoisie. That is to say that they are the harbingers of the twentieth century art. As Europe was shifting swiftly with the new things being built, the impressionists were changing the whole concept in the art with an attempt to avoid myths and history in painting and developed a new perspective to look at the painting and do it as it is for anyone. This avant-garde art has brought about symbolism, cubism, fauvism and futurism. It has also put the dimension of art and painting in a new mode of representation. Futurism embraces the chaos of the advances in technology with the features like dynamism, speed, energy, vitality and change as an inspiring way to reject the tradition and face the future. Against this backdrop, this paper examines how futurism, an artistic mode of representation has situated the context of art into a social change in Umberto Boccioni's painting- *Street Noises Invade the House (1911)* vis-a-vis the Marxist approach of class struggle. In addition, the paper also analyzes the formal elements- color, structure, balance and harmony employed in the art by the artist that constitute the composite whole.*

**Keywords:** impressionists, dynamism, futurism, formal elements, class struggle

### 1. Formal Analysis

The painter has depicted the chaos in the street created by the various workmen- bricklayers, carpenters and plumbers- and the workforce. Change is the central part of painting, realized by the noises, which not only penetrate the walls and flats on the right but also draws the attention of the three ladies on the balconies. Noise is pervasive. The force of the noise is elevated to indicate the gigantic excavation that is going to surface in the near future. There are three ladies

who are observing the motion taking place on the street. A gigantic lady can be seen from the back bending to look down the work on to her left from the balcony. She looks luxuriant by her dress and physique. The piercing noise is echoing in her ear to the left. Interestingly, there is no women's participation in work.

The colors used by the artist are yellow, golden yellow, fading blue, brown and black which reveal the intention of the change. The yellowish gold color shines from the foundation of the new building and the fading blue suggests some kind of threat toward the peace that sustained for long. The golden yellow at the back of the giant lady is pulling her down. Negligible green with narrow horizon suggests the ecological imbalance between the nature and nurture. The civilization is foregrounded, devoid of any background of the nature. Hence energy is more oriented towards urbanization.

Very like cubist, this painting buys into geometrical shapes in its architectural structure. The scaffoldings suggest the possibility of erection of new buildings. This is in the vertical shape. Similarly, the squares of the windows and the triangle shapes in architecture at the top in a regular form harbor some balance and order. All the same, the erratic form of the buildings in their shape and size invites some danger in the future. The combination of different shapes bring structure that balances the painting.

The men at work are quite indifferent and at work progressively. As a matter of fact, the result is the erection of the buildings. Some are really completed and others, in progress. There is the completed building straight ahead. This seems to give the viewers impression about the building of authority that employs people to work. The houses bend, tremble, stagger and stand up anew in the square on the right in an erratic form. Though there isn't heavy machinery, we can witness the tools- shovels and ladders, and materials of construction - bricks and sand piles. This evokes the sense in the viewers that great change is taking place. There are two horses clearly visible in the painting and both are galloping. They indicate the strength that the grandeur of work in given space and time in a harmony; a sense of achievement to be accomplished at a particular point of time.

## **2. Class Struggle: A Marxist Approach**

The painting by Umberto Boccioni can be interpreted as the class struggle- the conflict between the haves and the have-nots. In the painting there is a clear indication of the two groups-the working class and the upper class; the former represents the people who are working on the street whereas the latter represents the three ladies who surprisingly gaze upon the dynamic vigor of social change happening with piercing noises. Karl Marx in his famous book, "The Communist Manifesto" argues that a class is formed when its members achieve class consciousness and solidarity. This largely happens when the members of a class become aware of their exploitation and the conflict with another class.

For Marx, consciousness is determined by means of production, modes of production and production relation which all together form the base structure or the material reality. And it is this material reality that defines one's superstructure. By superstructure, we understand the ideologies that dominate a particular era, all that "men say, imagine, conceive," including such things as "politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc." (Marx and Engels, German Ideology 47). On the contrary for Hegel, as cited by Navickas in 1976, it is consciousness which determines the material reality. His consciousness of objects necessarily implies some awareness of self, as a subject, which is separate from the perceived object. In other words, one becomes aware of oneself by seeing oneself through the eyes of other. The major difference between the two lies in the utilization of property. For Marx the haves in the society make use of property to subjugate and oppress the poor. However, Hegel views wealth as the means to ends; that means each person should possess property in order to fulfill his or her needs.

Means of production such as land, labor and capital, the modes of production- labor instruments and raw materials, and production relations- the human capital with diverse professions and the relation between the rich and the poor are clearly illustrated in the painting. In fact, these were all controlled by the upper class only to derive a passive income from their operation by making the poor work. However, in the painting, the working class has their energies as labor, proclaiming their land, their own capital and the tools like shovel and ladder, used for the production only be used and operated by themselves only. The production force such as bricks and sands and production relation that human skills from different occupations such as masons, carpenters and plumbers clearly form a social structure for the base structure. The ladder symbolizes the desire of the working class to move upward mobility. The artist portrays the completed building which is "the House" that stands for Municipality, a power center. It can be taken as the superstructure that controls the laws and politics.

The slanting of the enormous body of the lady and the fading blue color clearly indicate the inevitable fall of her class. Interestingly, the majority of the work is happening to the left and the lady also view to the left. This suggests the leftists are in the movement. The men, at work who belong to the working class, contributing for the vertical construction of modern structure draws the attention of the bourgeois who were left in awe. Brown and Harris (2014) in the book-*The Human Capacity for Transformational Change: Harnessing the Collective Mind* argues, "Transformational change is always stochastic: it is the outcome of established systems having been disturbed by an unpredictable change." The noises that penetrated the high class structures and people symbolize the dynamic change taking place, which is the spectacular, making the women confused at the balcony.

The fading blue also symbolizes the experience of melancholy of the haves in sharp contrast with golden yellow that symbolizes the vitality of social transformation of the have-nots in the near future. Similarly, the galloping of the two horses on the left and the right stand for strength

and motion of the working class. The motion, the energy and dynamism in the work within the frame of limited time and space, in the painting, is shown only to spotlight the struggle which is inexorable in the social pattern. Associating life with Boccioni's painting as cited by Pioch (1995), he says, "All life and the noises of the street rush in at the same time as the movement and the reality of the objects." Noise becomes something seen, something literally invasive or intruding on one's solitude.

### **3. Historical Overview of Modern Art**

In the history of art, impressionists are the harbingers of modernism. Impressionism is a departure from Romanticism and Realism. It advocates on how we see the art and when we see it while analyzing the painting for the simple reason that perception keeps changing, and so does the mood psychologically. Impressionism is a style of painting that began in France around 1870, that uses spots of color to show the effects of different kinds of light, and that attempts to capture the feeling of a scene rather than specific details. Realists dictated only the grandeur of the past, mythological figures, rhyme meter and other established values. It only showed the atrocities, bloodshed and devastation. Realism in its essence missed the distortion of time. Earlier Realism was limited to capture the real feelings and emotions, the sorrows and sufferings and even paranoia. Thus realism was more sophisticated in nature. The most powerful institution, Salon had its legacy on Realism to have its elitist hero in the nineteenth century. However, the impressionists were not satisfied with the style which was limited in calculations such as rhymes and meters. In France Manet and Courbet revolted against the realism despite being realists. In realistic painting everything is recognizable. Horkheimer and Adorno (1982) say, in their book- *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that the promises of civilization have turned into barbarism. "What we had set out to do," the authors write in the Preface, "was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism." Hence, Realism is the only demonstration which has nothing to do with the depiction and therefore goes beyond positivism. The modern painters are more interested in incongruous, irrational, dream, irony and even nihilism. They are the disillusionment of life.

Symbolism emphasizes that the art should reflect on emotion or idea rather than represent the natural world. In painting symbolism represents a synthesis of form and feeling, of reality and the artist's inner subjectivity. Realism in the arts has reiterated on the accurate, detailed, unembellished depiction of nature or of contemporary life. Realism rejected imaginative idealization in favor of a close observation of outward appearances. They have stuck with one sign but Symbolism has freed the sign and opened many ways for interpretation. Europe was then flooded with experimentation and gave proliferation to the art and paintings. In his book "The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature," Richard Ellman (1965) puts one of his theses as Symbolism is the return of Romanticism.

The neo impressionist movement took the colors and themes of impressionism but rejected the impressionists' ephemeral treatment of their subjects. They focused on the theory of color and vision breaking things down to a more fundamental and basic level. These are those who inspired the optical theory, painted using tiny adjacent dabs of primary color to create the effect of light.

The modern art such as post-impressionists, neo-impressionists, fauvist, cubists, futurists and other abstract painters used the fluctuating colors of the nature. Post-impressionists emphasized on the urban entertainment as frozen life.

Futurism refers to the early twentieth century artistic movement centered in Italy that emphasized the dynamism, speed, energy, and power of the machine and the vitality, change, and restlessness of modern life. The characteristics of futurism are a focus on the technical progress of the modern machine age, dynamism, speed, energy, vitality and change. Futurism has the associative links with Constructivism in Russia. Futurism also buys into the idea of neo-impressionism and cubism to create composition to express the idea of dynamism, energy and movement. Despite the futurist movement, the world has encountered with the two great wars. Art then turned into more abstract after 1950s. Adorno who favored abstract paintings and expressionist art stated that the madness of the world can be showcased by the madness in painting.

#### **4. Conclusion**

From the aesthetic dimension of art, Umberto Boccioni's *Street Noises Invade the House* maintains harmony, balance and order to evoke the special emotions and a sense of pleasure in the minds of the readers. In this sense, this piece of work is art as form, and art as representation of social patterns how they change when there is a departure from one pattern of working class to the rise of the upper class. Bocconi's futurism tenderly presents how the have-nots are striving and thriving to undergo social transformation by the strong sense of vigor and hope. Futurism, in painting, doesn't predict what happens in the future but describes about happening. The moving images are the center of Boccioni's paintings. Unlike cubism that is static, futurism is dynamic. Futurism geometrizes movements while cubism, the shapes. The blend of both has heightened the impression of the art.

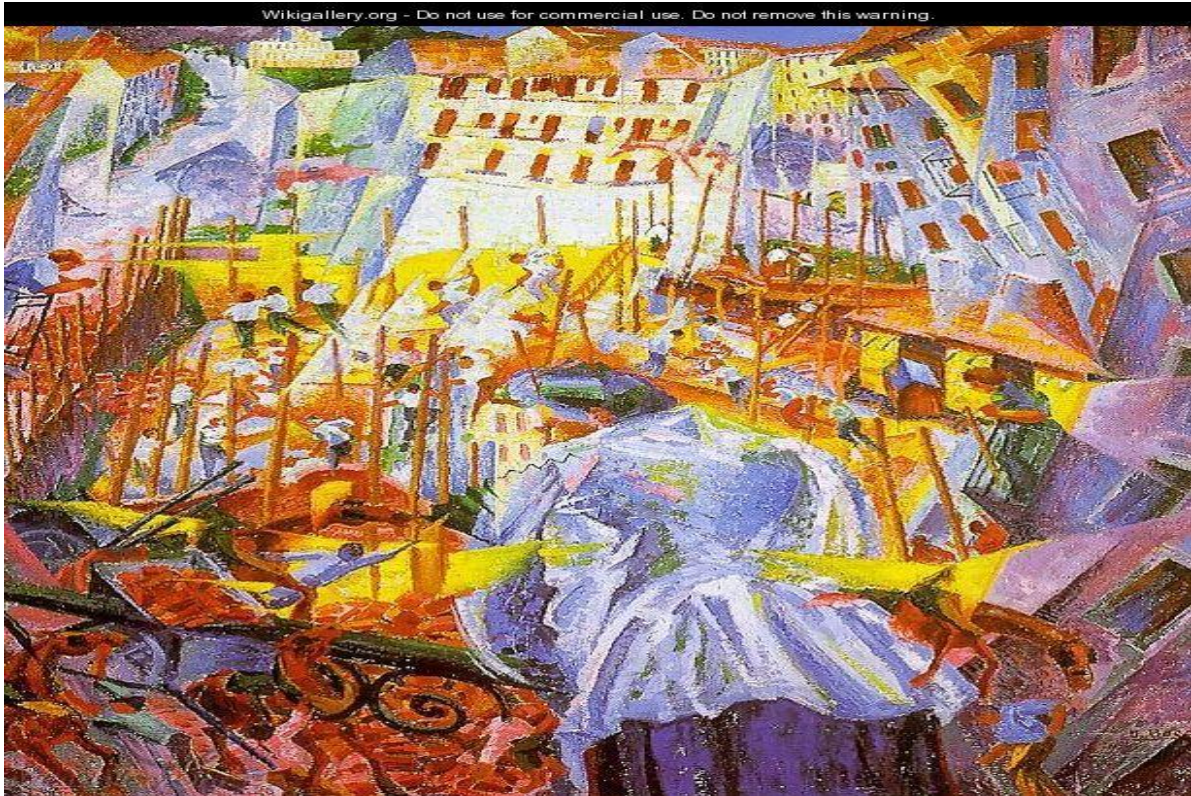
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Appendix: I



*Fig: Street Noises Invade the House (1911)*

Source: <https://www.google.com/search?q=street+noises+invade+the+house+image>