Notes on Hauser *Social History of Art, Vol. IV* (Original date of publication 1951)

Cameron Weber, May 2009

In these notes I summarize and critique Jonathon Harris' introductions to both Hauser's four volume series as well as Harris's specific introduction to Hauser's last volume, which covers from 1830 onward. I outline both the Marxian analysis used by Hauser, as well as the breakdown of this analytical technique in the subject volume, given what is seen by Harris as the non-applicability of the Marxist method to modern capitalism. Finally, I use examples from Hauser's text to illustrate Hauser's method and its usefulness as a means of art criticism.

From General Introduction to series by J. Harris from 1989 Routledge edition

Hauser's series lacks a thesis/overview of aims and methods and is generally imprecise in use of terms such as 'style' and 'art'. Reflexivity (the admission of personal influences into social analysis, which is counter to Hauser's voice of authority) however only came into being in academic theory since the 1960s and reflexivity per Harris represents an advance in cultural and art history, which was until then 'complacent'.

Hauser per Harris however is an advance on prior works of art history as he attempts a correlation between 'claimed' stylistic features and changes and parallel socio-economic developments. "He wishes to see – and attempts to show, that 'development' and 'progress' in art is related, necessarily- though abstrusely-to a corresponding dynamism, a 'historical logic', active in the organization of human societies since the Stone Age" (xvii). The relationship between style and socio-economic change 'supplants' the more tradition art-historical method of visual analysis of the works themselves, and is oftentimes thus frustrated due to a high level of abstraction. It should also be noted that Harris believes that 'culture' is represented by Hauser as "an essentially restrictive, limiting containing context against which art must fight for innovation" (xxix, from the Intro to *Vol. IV*).

Claims such that the work of David correlates to the social order of the French revolution under Napoleon, or that the space-time of film represents the experimental early 20th century, cannot be proved or disproved. These claims "become a bit like artworks themselves, which we can admire or not, depending on taste" (xx).

Hauser's dialectical method has been overcome by the New Art History (losing grand narratives and accepted principles but / and bringing in popular culture, race, sexuality, women and ethniticity). This lack of 'meta-narrative' in the New Art History has meant a 'balkanization' of the art-history discipline but has also reintroduced social activism into contemporary art, something which Hauser lamented the lack of in "modern" art.

Harris states the following about the paragraph below from *Vol. I,* page 21, "Hauser's own 'equivocation' here – what does he really mean by 'immanent' or 'autonomous'? – exmplifies the nature of his text as a whole, which does not present a single of unified argument, nor a stable set of concepts and ideas, nor a homogenous sense of value or purpose.

> The greater the age of an art, of a style, or a genre, the longer are the periods of time during which the development proceeds according to immanent, autonmous laws of its own, unaffected by disturbances from oustide, and the longer these more or less autonomous episodes are, the more difficult is it sociologically to interpret the individual elements of the form-complex in question.

Here I would like to say that I agree with Hauser, and not Harris, to a certain degree. If we look at the works during classical period under the Greek and Roman empires, we do find a homogenaity in the work, a form-complex which is indeed purposefully free of the artist's individual personality. If we then compare this to the art created in the United States during the Great Depression, we find that, like classical art (I am thinking here of the sculptures) there is an immiediately identifiable style, which in the latter case is full of personality while at the same time maintaining a recognizable style. The Greek and Roman empires of course lasted hundreds of years more or less "unaffected by disturbances from outside" while the Great Depression was a momentary blip relatively, yet indeed was an 'autonomous episode'.

That being said Hauser's general theory here excerpted is indeed so vague as could be applicable to almost any situation. The same can be said of Hegel's dialectical method, which too is completely vague, but too can be useful in understanding historical movement. Hauser is, it can be noted, not explaining historical

movement but parallel movements (socio-economic development and artistic 'style') within time.

From Intro to Vol. IV by J. Harris from 1989 Routledge edition

On Hauser's Method

Harris' general proposition here is that Hauser's Marxist 'objective' method (historical materialism) breaks down when it comes to the Generation of 1830 and onward, especially the "modernity of life after 1870" (xxvii). Harris believes Hauser moves to 'subjective' analysis during this final volume because the dynamic changes in modern life are too close to Hauer's own time. "This [shift toward subjectivism] is partly because contemporary culture and society seem somehow, sometimes, 'out of history' – too transient and shifting for Hauser to put into perspective" (xxvii).[1] Harris quotes Hauser writing that the speeded-up life of modernity, transforms people's "whole attitude to life and it is above all this new feeling of speed and change that finds expression in impressionism" (from *Vol. IV*, 158).

Harris makes the additional point that Hauser's analysis has not been political Marxism, e.g. that of 'left wing' politics, but that the analysis has been "restricted to art's description and analysis, seen therein as a complex correlate of social organization and change" (xxviii). Harris makes the further point that perhaps that it is the art under view itself (criticism imitating life) which can account for the shift in Hauser's method. " It may be the that the subjectivism endemic within modern consciousness, in the aesthetes ["hedonistic sensualism" in Hauser's words] of the late nineteenth century, in Henri Bergson's philosophy, in Marcel Proust's novels, begins – for a variety of complex reasons – to influence or infiltrate Hauser's own analysis" (xxvii). "His recognition of the relativism of perspectives and interests has begun to undermine the theoretical certainty that Marxists have usually claimed – the belief that their assumptions and research protocols were unassailably 'scientific' and 'objective'" (xxxii).

[1] It can be noted too that this was a critique of the German Historical School in economics, where its main protoganist, Gustave Schmoller, writing in the 1870s, was seen to introduce his normative values (using the state to build a strong German nation) into his otherwise 'value-free' historical analysis.

This subjectivism then, combined with the non-political basis of Hauser's Marxist analysis, makes the value of art a matter of (personal) taste, "His judgments on the value of 'great art' are, he admits, unrelated to sociological factors and are therefore, like religious faith, ineffable (see, for example, *Vol. II*, 45 and 149). [2],[3]

As far as the dialectical method in Marxist analysis applied to the year 1830 and beyond (e.g., the 'capitalist' stage of human development), Harris gives the example of Hauser's emphasis on "aesthetic achievement" as being symptomatic of a reactive opposition against commodification and destruction of values under capitalism (see page xxviii).[4] It is this aestheticism (as juxtaposed with realism) then which comes to the fore in 'great' art under capitalism.

The main dialectical method used by Hauser (and here I am paraphrasing Harris and bringing in some of my own readings of Hauser) seems to be the interplay between realism in art and art for art's sake. Is the artist part of society or apart from society, and then again which parts of 'society' are juxtaposed with the artist; as an apologist for the rich and/or existing regime, for or against the academy, for or against the masses, and as part of (or indifferent to) popular culture?

Furthermore how does art get its value, as something which stands alone or something which is reflective of society itself? [And Hauser at times clearly says that art must be engaged in society to be "great" art, see quote below]. It is this interplay and tension which is used to describe the parallel movements of art and the socio-economy. Neither Harris, nor Hauser thus far in my readings, appear to resolve this dialectic with a synthesis unless it is indeed the subjectivism under which, Harris believes, negates Hauser's Marxian analytical method, however successfully applied in previous volumes, until 'capitalism' in *Vol. IV*.

This dialectical method of analysis does work in my opinion as it is able to provide a model to show motion between what I shall call "art movements" (Hauser's "style") and society. For example dialectics can be used to analyze, When does art support a state regime or when does it represent the masses (or now the

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[2] "It's O.K. if some — make that most — artists are forgotten. Precious few are good enough to be remembered forever. But it is exciting when a neglected talent is recovered from the dustbin of history," Ken Johnson, October 31, 2008, *Washington Post*, "A Forgotten Baroque Painter, Shown Free of Rembrandt's Shadow".

[3] Harris says this theory of the ineffable value of art can be juxtaposed with that of Clive Bell's' "aesthetic hypothesis" in *Art* (London 1931).

[4] Hayek might reply that it is not "capitalism" which has destroyed values but rather the removal of individual responsibility under "welfare-state capitalism" since the end of World War Two.

bourgeoisie), versus, When does art stand apart or criticize society or some of its elements? It is this continual movement which seems irresolvable, e.g., without an endgame, though we do see Hauser's normative preference for reality-based art.

> The purpose of the work of art constantly wavers between these two points of view, between an immanent being detached from all reality beyond the work itself [art for art's sake], and a function determined by life, society and practical necessity. From the standpoint of the direct aesthetic experience, autonomy and self-sufficiency appear to be the essence of the work of art, for only by cutting itself off from reality, only by forming a total, self-contained cosmos, is it able to produce a perfect illusion. But this illusion is in no way the whole content of art and often has no share in the effect it produces. The greatest works of art forego the deceptive illusionism of a self-contained aesthetic world and point beyond themselves. They stand in an immediate relationship to the great problems of their age and are always searching for an answer to the questions" How can a purpose be gained from human life? And: How can we participate in this purpose? (Quoted in Harris Intro, page xxix, from *Vol. IV*, 20).

Again we find this unresolved dialectic as described by Harris, "'Art for art's sake' – the autonomy of the aesthetic, something which he has constantly defended and even claimed was present in ancient art – represents 'the most involved problem in the whole field of aesthetics. Nothing expresses so accurately the dualistic, spiritually divided nature of the artistic outlook. Is art its own end or only the means to an end?" (xxx). (We shall find later that Hauser supports the necessity of art's engagement with the social problems of its creator's day in the case of Flaubert, perhaps, though, this is only representative of the last vestiges of pre-capitalism). Harris believes that the artworks chosen for display by Hauser in his texts represent a 'conservative' canon (a dismissal of radical breaks in 'style') in the earlier volumes but then represent the 'avant-garde' in the later volumes. "Hauser appears to think that the works of these canonical avant-garde writers and artists are not just 'great', but are also important 'typifications' of attitudes and values somehow present in the broader culture and society. The problem is that this can not be confidently demonstrated" (xxxii).

Value and Political Economy

Harris gets into a discussion of value. Works of art for art's sake (e.g., art "often produced by artists and writers in near-complete social isolation, in exile, or in the bohemian garret", xxxii) are not the result of a market demand. Art for art's sake is neither produced on commission nor for speculation for a potential sale, nor, it should be added, for peer- or social-recognition and in fact to be misunderstood is increasingly a goal itself for artists. "No public at all may have been envisaged – or even wanted – by their creators, such was their contempt for the bourgeoisie" (xxxiii). Harris writes that Hauser believes that 'styles' in art beginning with the Renaissance "had been intended for an identifiable, collective public, whose worldview or ideology was somehow 'realized' and 'reflected' within the art their social interests required to be produced….The relationship of producer and consumer goes through a series of extremely important transformations over the following centuries, but also, in one sense, comes to an end entirely because of the avant-garde's [artists with aesthetic as opposed to realist intent] rejection of their bourgeois origins" (xxxiii).

Harris believes that Hauser in the end is a romantic as Hauser shares both Freud's and Picasso's 'sense of discomfort' and "the same feeling of estrangement and loneliness as the romanticism and aestheticism of the age, the same anxiety, the same loss of confidence in the meaning of culture, the same concern at being surrounded by unknown, unfathomable and indefinable dangers…" (xxxiii, from *Vol. IV*, 208). This is witnessed in Hauser's take on the audience for film, "The only link between these people is that they all stream into a the cinemas and stream out of them again as amorphously as they are pumped in; they remain a heterogeneous, inarticulate, shapeless mass with the only common feature of belonging to no uniform class or culture" (xxxviii, from *Vol. IV*, 236). Hauser too sees art, or in this case 'modern art', as losing its function in society,

> Modern art became homeless and began to lose all practical function….The dual role of literature as an art and an entertainment at the same time, and the satisfaction of the requirements of different levels of culture by the same works, now comes to an end….Only a quite small stratum of intellectuals appreciates such works adequately and therefore even this literature may be classified as 'studio art' (xxxix, from *Vol. IV*, 65-6.).

Harris believes that Hauser would have a different take on the social history of art if he were to have written after 1975. Harris believes that the term "modern" might be reserved for the period between 1880 and 1960, after which we find ourselves in the period of "contemporary" art given this later period's "social and political re-engagement of significant numbers of artists" (xli).[5] "On the other hand, given Hauser's general conservatism regarding aesthetic values and selection, it is perhaps more likely that he would have dismissed all the 'isms' of 1970s art as ephemeral and opportunistic: well-meaning propaganda, at best, but certainly not art" (xli).

In addition to an analysis of value, Harris also touches on briefly the political economy of art as found in Hauser. "He dismisses Soviet sponsored culture in this manner. Not primarily because its production may be enforced or directed (he believes that great art has certainly been created under totalitarian regimes in the past), but because the art being sponsored is simple aesthetically bad – socialist realism is an anachronism (literally: 'much behind the times today)" (xlii). The "certainty of the aesthetic achievements of art for art's sake, he says, 'makes it impossible for the architects of communist cultural policy to do justice to the artistic developments of the last hundred years and it is the denial of this development which makes their views on art seems so old-fashioned'" (xlii).[6]

It is not clear, fully, what is meant here unless we are to believe that, perhaps, the subjectivism brought about by modernity (an increasing complex and speeding-up world) then prevents the creation of a 'great' (both aesthetically pleasing and socially-engaged) art which is sanctioned by the state. Or, are we led to believe that the good art produced under previous periods of totalitarianism were produced *despite* or *counter-to* the prevailing regimes?[7] Perhaps also, given the unresolved tensions throughout history between aestheticism and realism, any 'theory' of art history cannot answer this question, except using situationally-dependent case studies.

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[5] Whether or not the "contemporary art" gallery scenes and museums devoted to this art do indeed engage with the masses or again just the cognoscenti is of course perhaps a matter of opinion.

[6] Art for art's sake is "unamenable to sociological analysis" (xxxviii).

[7] Here we can point to the work of Shostakovich, who encoded anti-Stalinist themes in his state-sanctioned symphonies or the anti-Soviet satirical novels of Bulgakov as perhaps examples of 'great' works produced under the totalitarian Soviet Union.

From Harris we learn that in *Vol. IV* Hauser begins to question the validity of any theoretical system which pretends to be relevant outside of the time and place of its conception (of its "conditions of emergence"), and, this includes Marxism, an analytical system which emerged, and therefore perhaps is only relevant to, the 'capitalist' stage of human development. "Hauser astonishly redescribes Marxism itself as no more than a version of capitalist ideology. Historical materialism, he says, 'with its technique of exposure was itself a product of that bourgeois-capitalistic outlook on life the background of which Marxism wanted to expose. Before economics had achieved its primacy in the life of Western man, such a theory would have been unthinkable'" (xxxi, from *Vol. IV*, 207).

Harris writes further about Hauser on 'great' art. "Hauser's assumption is, or was (like Ruskin's), that great art civilized, though he observes that it had been civilizing fewer and fewer since the 'high' Renaissance Art's 'ability to civilize, however, is why he hopes, at the culmination of his account, that a training of the masses' capacity for aesthetic experience will be possible, a development which might lead to an amelioration of the state of Western society. The most contemporary art he discusses – Dada and Surrealism – can not be part of such training, as their products are 'insipid and monotonous'….questioning not only 'the value of art but of the whole human situation'" (xlii, from *Vol. IV*, 220). Yet, Harris believes that Pollock and the other American abstract expressionists would fulfill Hauser's requirements for great art (xxxviii).[8]

Finally on education, the masses can be "trained to use their 'capacity for aesthetic judgment', which is the only means to slacken the 'cultural monopoly' enjoyed by a 'small minority' in the West (xxxviii, from *Vol. IV*., 246).[9]

[8] Is this perhaps because abstract expression can be seen as clearly art for art's sake whereas Dadaism or Surrealism may blur the line between realism and art for art's sake?

[9] Harris' take on Hauser deeming abstract expressionism as 'great' art, yet surrealism and Dadaism as "insipid and monotonous" highlights a problem in the formulation of any education programs surrounding 'taste-making' in the arts, the problem of 'merit goods'. A 'merit good' in political economy is when an expert is given the authority to determine tastes, which then leads to the government enforcing these tastes upon the masses, e.g., enforces people to consume these goods beyond which they would consume voluntarily with their own resources. The problem then becomes the same one Harris finds in Hauser's application of historical materialism to modernity. When it is subjectivity which brings value, how can "expert" tastes be more valuable that the art consumption chosen subjectively and voluntarily by the consumer of art herself?

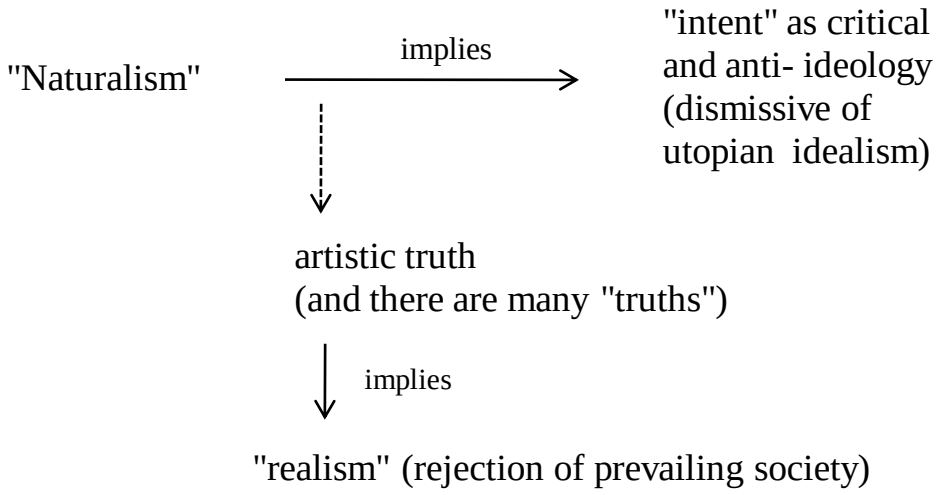
It seems that Harris shares Hauser irresolution on the value of art for art's sake versus that of a socially-engaged art, again only resolving itself in the subjectivity of modernism. "Though Hauser himself has defended the autonomy of great art and aesthetic criteria many times, the modern social and political implications of this belief are clearly troubling. Aestheticism, he says, 'reaches the pinnacle of its development' in the age of impressionism, …'. It becomes, in its autonomy, its lack of consideration for everything outside its sphere, a pattern for life, the life of the dilettante, who now begins to displace the intellectual heroes of the past…'" (xli, from *Vol. IV*, 170). Is modernity a period without ideals, without a common culture, a period of "hedonistic sensualism" where art is nothing but escapism? Or, more positively, is now then a common culture one which is uniquely subjective?

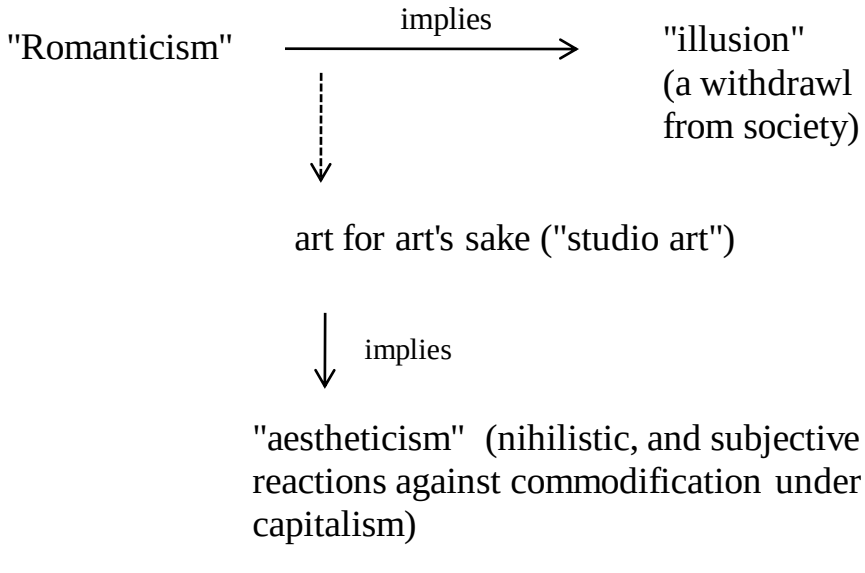
Some applications from "Second Empire", *Vol. IV*, (pp. 58-99).

If we view the heuristic below we can find the opposing "social outlooks" (p. 62) used by Hauser to describe an artist's relationship with his or her world. Naturalism represents an artist's 'style' which is engaged with, and critical of, the existing social order, and represents an intent by the artist to capture the "truth". This outlook is juxtaposed with Romanticism, a "style" of art purposeful in creating illusion, a withdrawing of the artist from society. In other words we find realism versus aestheticism, or an intent of "truth" versus an intent of "art for art's sake". Using the cases of the painter Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) and the novelist Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) in Hauser we can view his method as applied.[10]

[10] It should be noted too that the social meanings of the terms "romanticism" and "naturalism" as used by Hauser are also in flux over time. "Romanticism still contained a popular element appealing to the broader masses of society, whereas naturalism, at least in its most important productions, has nothing to attract the general public [is he referring here to the bourgeoisie, the proletariat, or both?]. The death of Balzac [1850] marks the end of the romantic age [yet art for art's sake continues on in opposition to realism into the modern age]; Victor Hugo is still at the height of his artistic development, but as a literary movement romanticism has ceased to play any part in cultural life" (*Vol. IV*, 66).

Opposing "Social Outlooks" in Hauser's Method





Courbet is seen as the progenitor of realism in art (which, as we shall see, parallels Balzac's development of realism in literature) and his followers are seen as seekers of truth and revolution. The artist is now purposefully engaged with societal change after the failures of the 1848 revolutions. This naturalism is then 'rejected' by the ruling classes.

> Naturalism begins as a movement of the artistic proletariat; its first master is Courbet, a man of the people, and an artist lacking all bourgeois respectability. After the old boheme had broken-up and its members had become the favorites of the romanticizing bourgeoisie or the occupants of good bourgeois positions themselves, a new circle formed around Courbet….[who] owes his position as a leader chiefly to human, not to artistic qualities, above all to his descent, to the fact that he describes the life of the common people and appeals to the people or, at any rate, to the broader strata of the public, that he leads the uncertain and unrestrained life of the artistic proletariat, despises the bourgeois and bourgeois ideals, and is convinced democrat, a revolutionary and the victim of persecution and contempt. [11]

After the exhibition of *Burial at Ornans* (1850), "'From now on the critics must decide for or against *realism*.' The great word has now been spoken". Courbet's 'realist' circle is seen as political and "their self-assurance comes from the conviction that they are the pioneers of truth and the forerunners of the future." "In the eyes of Proudhon and Courbet, naturalism and political rebellion are different expressions of the same attitude, and they see no essential difference between social and artistic truth".

In a letter from 1851 Courbet writes, "I am not only a socialist, but also a democrat and a republican, in a word, a partisan of revolution and, above all, a realist, that is, the sincere friend of the real truth." Of course this outlook is rejected by the power-structure, "By rejecting naturalism the ruling classes, therefore, only give expression to their instinct of self-preservation: their perfectly correct feeling that every art that describes life without bias [e.g., an art that is not an apology for the bourgeois] and without restraint is in itself a revolutionary act." And finally, "…the resistance to naturalism is a confession of faith in the prevailing order and that by rejecting naturalism, one is also rejecting the materialism and democracy of the age."

[11] All quotes on Courbet from Hauser, *Vol. IV*, pp. 61-63.

In the case of Courbet we see a "value-free" use of the dialectic in analyzing how an art's 'style' (an art "movement") reflects the opposing socio-economic forces in post-revolutionary France. However in the case of Flaubert we also see the dialectic used to describe the internal search for a method by the writer, one who is conservative (not revolutionary) yet one who, as he becomes disenchanted with the increasing totalitarianism of the Second Empire, transitions in method from a romantic writer to a naturalistic writer. We note here too that Hauser finds naturalism the appropriate artistic 'style' in post-revolutionary France, and, yet, do we not find that art for art's sake (a subjective reality free of idealism), according to Harris as described above, is the appropriate 'style' for the modern age?

> The artistically most valuable literary products are hardly any longer suitable for light reading and have no attraction at all for the general reading public, unless they draw public attention to themselves for some reason and become successful by creating a scandal, like Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, for example. Only a quite small stratum of intellectuals appreciates such works adequately and therefore even this literature may be classified as 'studio art', like the whole school of progressive painting: it is intended for specialists, for artists and connoisseurs…..[they] regard success itself as a sign of artistic inferiority and consider being misunderstood by their contemporaries a precondition of immortality (*Vol. IV*, 66).

Then as after *Madame Bovary* becomes "attacked" by the regime Flaubert 'converts' to naturalism.

> The fact that his political and artistic conversion takes place at the same time is extremely symptomatic of the intellectual situation; it proves that, in spite of its internal division into the two camps of the bohemians and the 'rentiers'[12], naturalism is rooted in liberalism. One cannot even maintain Flaubert, whose political views are thoroughly conservative, represents a reactionary, anti-social and anti-liberal point of view….Anti-government social criticism is common to all naturalistic literature…..In his letters, Flaubert complains repeatedly about the suppression of freedom and the hatred for the traditions of the great Revolution. He is undeniably an opponent of the universal franchise and the rule of the uneducated masses, but he is by no means an ally of the ruling bourgeoisie (*Vol. IV*, 68).

[12] It is not quite clear how the landed-class (David Ricardo's 'rentier' class in his 1817 *Principles*) can be considered "liberal" when it consistently used trade protectionism for agriculture products to put its interests above the (usually less wealthy) consumers of these products.

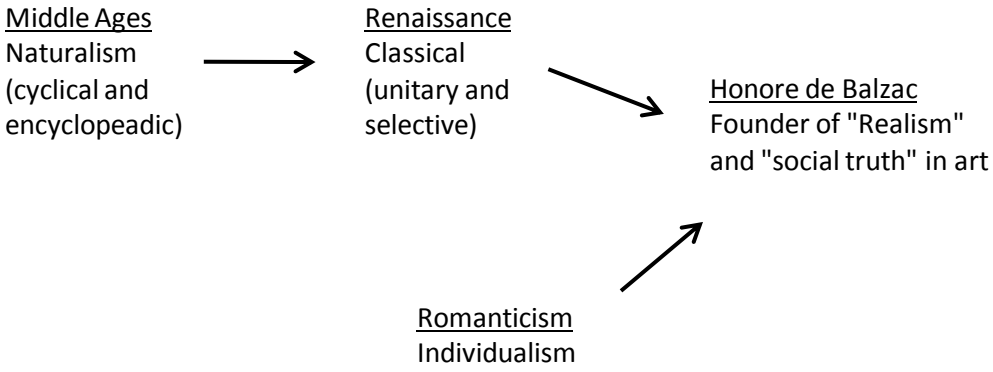
Flaubert's political conversion is aided through his artistic 'advances,' from romanticism to naturalism.

> Flaubert writes himself free from romanticism; he overcomes it by giving it literary shape, and by developing from its lover and victim into its analyst and critic. He confronts the world of romantic dreams with the reality of everyday life and becomes a naturalist, in order to expose the mendacity and unwholesomeness of these extravagant delusions….he remains the first naturalist writer. (*Vol. IV*, 70).

The Longview in Hauser

Finally, we should note that Hauser places Naturalism in its historical context. We learn that Balzac is the founder of Realism, which in turn is both a return to a naturalism of the Middle Ages and an absorption of Romanticism, itself a reaction against the post-Renaissance Age of Enlightenment and the rapid increase of wealth under early capital accumulation.

> Classical and classicist works of art are cut off from the outside world and stand beside each other in strict isolation within their own aesthetic sphere. Naturalism in all its forms, that is to say, all art that is obviously dependent on a real model, breaks through the immanence of this sphere, and all cyclic forms which embrace a variety of artistic representations abolish the autocracy of the individual work of art….When Balzac discovered his system and came on the idea of the *Comedie humaine* as a framework embracing the individual novels, he returned to some extent to this medieval method of composition and adopted a form for which the self-sufficiency and crystalline definiteness of the classical works of art had lost their meaning an value….The predominance of classicist art gradually comes to an end as the feeling of dependence on the material conditions of life grows. In this respect, too, the romantics are Balzac's direct predecessors. (*Vol. IV*, 51).


Middle Ages
Naturalism
(cyclical and
encyclopeadic)
Renaissance
Classical
(unitary and
selective)
Honore de Balzac
Founder of "Realism"
and "social truth" in art
Romanticism
Individualism