

AESTHETICS and Modernity

from Schiller
to the Frankfurt School

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Introduction

The anniversaries of Friedrich Schiller's birth and death, in 2009 and 2005 respectively, have been a welcome occasion for renewed interest in his ideas and their legacy. This recent work has assessed Schiller's writings alongside those of his contemporaries: his debt to or divergence from Kant's writings about art and his relation to idealist thinking more generally. This scholarship has also asked after the continued relevance of his ideas for a contemporary readership. The importance of his legacy as a playwright, poet and theorist of the role of art and the aesthetic in modern civilization is undisputed, but it has been asked whether his dated style and the political naivety inherent in the claim that beauty is the road to moral freedom renders his ideas themselves outdated. Conversely, it has been suggested, the subtle anthropology that accounts for man's hybrid nature – our passions and principles – and his account of man's relationship to alterity has more enduring relevance.

These discussions are valid and valuable, but the concern of this collection of essays, and the conference at which they were first presented, is rather different. It is not primarily a volume about Friedrich Schiller, but rather locates his work – and in the main his theoretical writings rather than his literary work – at the start of a 200-year German tradition in intellectual history, and specifically in socio-cultural theory. The over-arching theme of these chapters, as the book's title suggests, is the contribution to theorizing modernity that is made by the German tradition of thinking about the 'aesthetic' dimension. Schiller's importance for this tradition often goes unrecognized, particularly in the anglophone world. As such it is hoped that this volume will bring this connection to greater prominence, in particular for those who do not read German. The cornerstone of the ideas may be German and aesthetic, but the resonance of the ideas

is multidisciplinary and international, as is reflected in the range of chapters included in the volume. These treat issues in visual culture and music, as well as literature and drama. They make the connection from Schiller's ideas not just to Walter Benjamin or Theodor Adorno, but to Charles Taylor and Clement Greenberg. And as a whole they approach the issues raised by Schiller's theoretical reflections not from any predominantly *philosophical* point of view, but by placing them in the broad political and socio-historical context of modernity.

A central strand that runs through a majority of the chapters in the volume is Schiller's sensitivity towards the boundaries and tensions between man's divergent capacities and the points at which they intersect – what James Parsons in his chapter calls the *Indifferenzpunkt*. On the one hand, for instance, several of the essays concentrate on the aesthetic dimension as an aspect of humankind's make-up that stands in contrast to our rational, reflective and conceptual faculties. So Michael Bell, in his discussion of the emergence of the aesthetic as a category in the eighteenth century, traces the treatment of the 'sentimental' as an emotional or affective principle – intuited, not rationalized. This is seen to be an important component of, for instance, a human moral sense, and cannot be reduced to just 'feeling'. Norman Kasper discusses the treatment of the 'naïve' in writings about aesthetics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, following Schiller's distinction between the naïve and sentimental, as an experience that is in some way purely sensory or 'material', preceding conceptual reflection. Programmes of 'naïve' aesthetics set out by John Ruskin and others aim to 'purify visibility', by privileging presence and materiality. Insofar as they seek – albeit paradoxically – to restore lost innocence, they have an in-built moral character. By contrast, Randall K. van Schepen reads the – presumably intrinsically 'sentimental' – formalism that makes up the other pole in Schiller's essay as the source of an artwork's non-representational, and therefore non-instrumental and ultimately political force.

An analogous attempt at restoring a lost link to a non-rational dimension is apparent in Nicholas Saul's reading of the 1891 novel by Saul Bölsche, *The Noon-Day Goddess*, against the grain of its usual 'naturalist' and even Darwinist interpretation. Saul foregrounds the novel's thematics of spiritualism as an instance of the dethroning of the dominant scientific view,

as well as the supposedly sovereign ego. The material or sensory quality of the artwork has more pointed ethical force in Eric S. Nelson's reading of Theodor Adorno's poetics, in which Adorno's focus on the non-human is seen to be at odds with, for instance, Jürgen Habermas' intersubjective 'truth-claims'.

Alternatively, the aesthetic is read as being central to certain allegedly distinguishing human capacities, such as meaning or freedom, with significance that is equally 'moral'. The epistemological value of the aesthetic is what Martin Swales is driving at when he elevates art and the aesthetic to the 'central philosophical activity bar none'. In the wake of the demise of religious belief, the aesthetic has become the activity that the human longing for meaning attaches to. Central to his discussion of the value of the aesthetic is the epistemological category of *anagnorisis*, or privileged recognition, even in the grip of tragic suffering. This epistemological significance of the aesthetic dimension or experience is central to a number of the essays. Sebastian Hüscher characterizes Kierkegaard's conceptualization of the aesthetic as a 'category of existence', which in spite of his criticisms of early German Romanticism, derives from Friedrich Schlegel. Kierkegaard sees the Romantic 'poetization' of reality as an – albeit seductive – abandoning or betrayal of reality. Hüscher compares romantic irony, which de-realizes world and self and leaves us free to (re)create the self, from Socratic irony. The latter is defined as a capacity for 'negativity' that is essential to subjectivity, and which crucially retains a binding external dimension. The former is pure freedom. In this theoretical context Hüscher presents Gerhard Schulze's more recent diagnosis of the 'aestheticization' of everyday life, a phenomenology that sees the aesthetic as 'essence of modernity', and which Schulze diagnoses as a source of the 'erosion of the meaningfulness' in modern life. The contrast with the aesthetic as a source of meaning is apparent. In similar terms, Bram Mertens reads Walter Benjamin's *Kunstkritik* essay as Benjamin's attempt to lay out his embryonic thoughts on the 'aesthetic' nature of knowledge, experience and perception. Benjamin's epistemology shares the early German Romantics' scepticism about Fichte's immediate intuition of the self, and echoes their respect for the object, characterizing experience as a 'coincidence of subject and object', and seeking to describe 'the integrated and continuous multiplicity of knowledge'.

Couched in these terms, Schulze's aestheticization of reality is not entirely unrelated to one of Schiller's persistent concerns, namely the nature of human freedom. Hüsich makes the point that this aestheticization is predicated on a reduced significance for the 'material' aspect of reality: put in Schulze's terminology, the society of experience (*Erlebnisgesellschaft*) displaces a society of survival (*Überlebensgesellschaft*). In a more positive appraisal of autonomy, Marie-Christin Wilm associates the concept of play in Schiller's *Aesthetic Letters* with the distancing at the heart of Kant's disinterested aesthetics. Play is seen as an 'interruption of immediate wants', for instance in which biology and psychology are held off. Wilm traces Schiller's legacy in Johann Huizinga's concept of *homo ludens*, in which play is not seen to serve some other instrumental function, but is seen as analogous to the aesthetic because of its captivating quality and the fact that it is an activity that establishes its own – 'formal' – limitations. A similar ironic distance is also crucial to the self-reflexivity of the aesthetic dimension in Maike Oergel's discussion of the dialectic as a new *Denkmodell* in Schiller and Friedrich Schlegel's thinking. The dialectic accommodates historical change, and historicity *per se*, in a 'safe' manner. Parsons likewise defines the 'aesthetic stage' as the ability to stand back and think, for instance of the infinite. Parson's discussion of Beethoven's use of Schiller's 'An die Freude' in his Ninth Symphony, however, turns on Schiller's predilection for the union of extremes, in this case the intersection of the earthy here and now and the boundless beyond.

And this association of the aesthetic with both the sensuous and the infinite reflects the sense, which comes through strongly in many of the contributions, that man in modernity is made up of different, and perhaps fundamentally incompatible, aspects: the sublime or infinite and the natural or mundane (Parsons); the word and the thing (Swales); the moral and the sensuous (Nelson), which of course tragedy is reckoned to combine in the cathartic experience, thus giving physical suffering metaphysical spiritual value (Swales).

In these terms, the value of the aesthetic is that it is the theoretical sign under which these spheres are seen to combine in significant ways. For Bell, the emphasis on distance has distorted our reception of Schiller's aesthetics, in which emotional engagement, and in particular the sentimental, is

an indispensable component of the moral attitude and art's moral force. Rather than the choice between feeling and principle, sentiment is precisely the felt principle.

The aesthetic also becomes a *project* that offers a kind of synthesis, a sort of reconciliation between these aspects. So in Schiller's own terms the success of any project of aesthetic education is reckoned to depend on the 'reconciliation of the purely human, or sensuous, and moral spheres'. (Parsons) One instance of this unification is the experience of joy, as Parsons reads Schiller's *Ode to Joy*, whose incorporation in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is taken to reflect the composer's similar aspiration to bring together the mundane and infinite, evident for instance in through five octaves and a change of key in his choral finale. In the same vein, Nelson reads a kind of reconciliation with nature or the non-human as the aim of Adorno's poetics, albeit with the caveat that this experience of nature can be coercive, and is in any case always 'indirect', mediated by the artwork or our faculties.

But a recurrent concern in many of the contributions is that any such reconciliation is not a simple, subsuming synthesis of one aspect by the other. Neither nature nor reason, Schiller tells us in the *Aesthetic Letters*, is to rule a person exclusively, but the two 'are meant to coexist, in perfect independence of each other, and yet in perfect concord.' Yet in Oergel's comparison it is Schlegel rather than Schiller who is alive to the radically open-ended nature of the historical dialectic. Whereas Schiller responds to the modern with a quest for lost completeness, Schlegel sees self-reflexive irony as allowing 'dichotomous elements' in human reality to be co-represented, though precisely 'not synthesized'.

This notion of co-representation introduces a thread in the volume that proposes the aesthetic as offering a kind of 'holist' grasp of man and his faculties, which seems to suggest a less heavy-handed approach to what Swales calls 'uncovering a logic of the imagination'. In Rob Leventhal's essay a similarly holist approach of 'co-representation' is central to the juridical – and aesthetic – concept of 'case', whose history he traces as a method of classifying individual anomalies from a variety of perspectives and in a variety of circumstances and conditions, as an aspect of Schiller's 'rehabilitation of individuality'. In similar terms Jerome Carroll traces the development of anthropology, a sibling discipline to aesthetics, from the