

## The Contemporary Reading of Schiller and Aestheticization as a New Enlightenment



### Literature

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### Abstract

In his book *Aestheticization as a Second Enlightenment* (2012) the literary and cultural theorist Jürgen Peper understands culture as a “designed and experienced idea of the truth” rather than the progress of civilization. According to Peper, Aestheticization is “the epistemological-critical questioning of the classical ideas of truth” that during the 19th and 20th century led to the new Enlightenment. Examining the key issue of the 18th century, the question of freedom, Friedrich Schiller considers both aspects of the problem of Aestheticization – the sentimental artist with his epistemological-critical stance and the consumer of art that could be educated only within the aesthetic activity. The core of Schiller's theory is that only the emancipation of the human spirit can lead man to his moral perfection and a harmonious society. Schiller's elitist anticipation of the development of European history and society reverberates in Peper's theory, confirmed through the empirical analysis of literary and philosophical works as well as works of art from 19th and 20th century. Peper demonstrates how aestheticization, as a process of individualizing particularization, contributed significantly to the history of the development of the individual and thus the history of democratization.”

Although aestheticization is commonly understood as palliation, in the wider sense it connotes the shaping of an object according to the aesthetic laws or putting an object into an aesthetic context, so that it can be perceived as beautiful, sublime or ugly. For a work of art, the aesthetic context is a matter-of-factness, but aestheticized could also be the ideas, objects, events and beliefs whose context is not originally aesthetic. The idea of aestheticization takes its place in the literary and cultural theory during the 20th century within the discussion about aesthetic and non-aesthetic and within an attempt to define the role of aesthetic in the field of knowledge, politics and religion.

In the Epilogue of his famous essay from 1935 *The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (*Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*), Walter Benjamin defines the aestheticization of political life as “a situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic”, referring to the political manifestation of fascism that bases its production on an effect, by means of public speeches, marches, sporting events and Sunday film journals. It is about ritual forms of presentation that are in service of suggestive and ideological influence.

According to Benjamin's Marxist thesis, fascism undertakes the aestheticization of politics, whose central component is the cult of leader, using the media – photography and film that will culminate in war: “War and war only can set a goal for mass movements on the largest scale while respecting the traditional property system” (Benjamin, 1935). As a central example, Benjamin quotes the words of Marinetti's *Manifesto on the Ethiopian colonial war* (1935) that proclaims the aesthetic beauty of the war. Benjamin disposes the euphoric call “The war is beautiful!” as a social misuse of art and beauty understood in futuristic manner. Fascism does not use technical development and art for the welfare of the masses, but rather for the aestheticization of war. According to Benjamin, it is not necessarily negative that the technical reproduction of the work of art reduces sensual enjoyment in art, since that is what enables the masses to consume art like never before, excluding at the same time the asocial component of the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art* and enabling progress. However, the uniqueness of the work of art – its aura – is replaced in political monopoly with the cult rituals. Benjamin confronts the Fascist aestheticization of politics with the concept of politicizing art – creating art that could be didacticized and instrumentalized for the cause of the progressive development of society.

The model for any future criticism of mass culture has already been provided by Nietzsche in his book *The Case of Wagner* (*Der Fall Wagner*, 1888) and after Benjamin, a similar model was revived in Heidegger's claim that aestheticization inevitably leads to the end of the big art as well as in Adorno's criticism of the cultural industry, which contributes to the institutionalization of art and its use for the political causes.

The aporia of modern culture, according to Adorno, is in its attempt to reconcile the autonomy of the work of art as a free aesthetic creation with its autonomy as goods on the market (Eagleton, 1994). Culture is in fact a collection of goods in a system of production and trade and contains truth and ideology at the same time, but after the experience of the world wars and totalitarian systems, truth is not beautiful. Beauty in art is not acceptable from the political-moral aspect, she lies about the world that is anything else but beautiful. In that spirit is Adorno's famous 1949 dictum that it is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz (1977). Art can be authentic only if it opposes its previous practice to befuddle the truth proclaiming world for beautiful and if it stops being an accomplice of the power structures, mediating the feeling of the powerlessness to the receiver through the concept of sublime art. Art should be the last defense against the world, the revolution based on utopian but necessary melancholic hope for improvement of present social relations. Art guarantees human dignity because it reflects the world and existence as a whole. Individualization is, consequently, the exclusive function of art and it has no communicative or political function as suggested by Benjamin. According to Adorno, art is the mirror of the world on the one hand and utopia on the other. Art suggests that the reality exists only in an "aesthetical appearance" as the curative presentation of truth. Art sets the demand of the perception of truth on our cognitive faculties. The aesthetic is the paradigm of thinking because art can show all that which philosophy cannot articulate – according to Adorno, it can express the inexpressible (Eagleton, 1994). Adorno's late concept of art as an "assumption of truth", respectively as a truth itself, is based on the dialectic of fragmentation: art defragments the image of the world in order to assemble it again as a whole.

In the late '60s, the idea of aestheticization still appears within the political context in the work of French philosopher Guy Debord, who speaks about aestheticization of goods. He condemns the western society as "the society of the spectacle" which is also the title of his book from 1967 (*La société du Spectacle*). Similar to Adorno, Debord criticizes the conformism and passiveness of the contemporary spectator and sees the perspective only in conscious art created for an individual and not for the mass, considering the fact that the intellectual development is always an individual one. Debord transfers the Eleventh thesis of Karl Marx – that the world does not need interpretation, but instead change – into the field of arts: the common artist loses the reality by aestheticizing it and "the psychogeograph", the real artist, sees the art as the precondition for emancipatory transformation. Works of art of any kind can help to annul the logic of spectacle so that art becomes the catalyst of the revolution in life habits. Debord's unexpected conclusion reverberates with the past concept of the golden age and an aesthetic education of man for the realization of his best ability.

Following Adorno, Jean-François Lyotard rehabilitates sublime as an aesthetic category without which is not possible to define the axioms of modern art that strives to presents the fact that the unrepresentable exists. The avant-garde art wants "to make visible that there is something which can be conceived and which can neither be seen nor made visible" in a way that implies Kant's philosophy of sublime (Lyotard, 1993). The sublime art aims to help man to become aware of his emptiness, powerlessness and transitoriness, taking away from him "the comfort of good forms" (Pries, 1989). The sublime art demands the receiver to be "present" and "vivid" in order to rise above the nihilistic emptiness. Sublime experience has nothing to do with metaphysic any more. It is, according to Lyotard, perceiving of its own perception, a feeling that occurs when the sense falls out in the conscious process of perception. What was earlier ritually provoked by asceticism can now be provoked by the intensive stimulation of thinking and perception. In both cases though, it results in leaving the canon and creating space for the new perception and new aesthetic and cognitive experience.

In the postmodern art, the fluid metaphysic–idealistic feature is subordinated to the aesthetic perception and the ideological aspect of the work of art is suspended. Lyotard is one of the representatives of the postmodern opinion that strives to find the way out from the crisis of determinism.

Other voices of postmodernism, including Habermas, Bubner, Schulze and Luc Ferry also tried to define the predominant features of aesthetic that warned of crisis of normativity in the field of politics, cognition and religion. To the aesthetic – that is not necessarily beautiful or artistic any more – is mostly attributed the critical role: to criticize the epistemological endeavor after truth, political legitimacy and religious orientation towards transcendence. However, in the last two decades, the branches of philosophy, theology, literary and cultural theory are claiming that aesthetic is the constitutive element of political, epistemological and religious practice.

Many cultural theorists today attribute a significant portion of the success and functioning of those fields to the aesthetic, or in other words, claiming aesthetic to be the key term for the necessary revision of knowledge, politics and religion. That is where Christoph Menke sees a significant chance: “is it not the aestheticization of politics, knowledge and religion as the erosion of their normativity, the only possibility of their renewal?” (2010). Although the new understanding of immanence of aesthetic in those fields is not determined enough and there are still a lot of arguments for the critic of aestheticization, the relevance of its consideration to the present becomes conspicuous. Aesthetic is comprehensibly understood as an ambivalent phenomenon that comprises the heterogeneous factors and has different significance in society – from its influence on the development of order to the elements of order that ‘become’ aesthetic.

In his book *Aestheticization as a Second Enlightenment (Ästhetisierung als Zweite Aufklärung, 2012)* the literary and cultural theorist Jürgen Peper openly admits the epistemological-critical potential to the aesthetic phenomenon and the cultural theory is derived from the literary-aesthetic postulates. He does not understand culture as the progress of civilization, but as a ‘designed and experienced idea of truth’ within society – the same goes for postmodernism as well as for the middle ages. According to Peper the aestheticization is ‘the epistemological-critical questioning of the classical ideas of truth’ that during the 19th and 20th Century led to a new Enlightenment. It seems that art is not inspired by the technical inventions, but rather the other way round: the art is what predicts the future (2012).

For Peper to aestheticize means to set – an object, a representation or the world – free from its extensive bonds that functionalize it, so it can be observed ‘phenomenologically’ – as a value on its own. To aestheticize does not necessary mean to palliate, it is the matter of taste, are we going to recognize the aestheticized object as ugly, beautiful or sublime. The aestheticization wakes the aesthetical potential of an object, which can be free of any value judgment. Aestheticization means – in a Kantian sense – to release an object from its purpose, from any function and schematized sense, what brings to its self-realization, individualization – emancipation from any sense or presupposed purpose.<sup>4</sup>

Emancipation always means refusing to obey, breaking the context of meaning. In the field of literature, Kafka provides the best example for the loss of meaning and the reduction to absurdity. Emancipation is always

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<sup>4</sup> This is to remind one of Kant as well as on his successor: „The beautiful is that which, apart from a concept, pleases universally.” (Kant, 1790). Or: „The beautiful is that which, apart from a concept, is cognized as object of a necessary delight” (Kant, 1790). Beauty is absolute and not usable. When we recognize a flower or a bird as beautiful, we take pleasure in them because we judge them as beautiful, rather than judging them beautiful because we find them pleasurable. Beautiful objects are “purposive without purpose”. The aesthetic principle of purpose affects us, but the purpose is not in the flower or in the bird, the harmony is in us. The principle of purpose is the name for the pleasure that we feel. It is not the pleasure because our needs are pleased; it is the pleasure from the feeling of form. Kant defines it as a “free pleasure” or “uninterested pleasure” that does not need interpretation and occurs as a harmonizing activity when the pattern of the associative fields of an object matches with our sentimentality, with our expected presentation. Since the connection between an object and the aesthetic pleasure is not the personal benefit, it does not go only for an individual, but rather universally. The aesthetic judgment is uninterested and that is why it has a universal validity. Kant defines beautiful through four moments: beautiful is an object of a necessary delight apart from any interest and concept, it pleases universally without any purpose, it is the form of finality apart from the representation of an end and the form of order apart from the law.

bidirectional – it means the gain and the loss at the same time for the object that is emancipated. Within the process of anesthetization the traditional meaning is being lost, but the object benefits from the strength for self-realization and from widening the horizon of cognition. Self-realization arises from the previous negation, decontextualization, which aims to suspend the schematized sense.

Aestheticization emancipates in a way that enables us to see the object of aestheticization in its own context, autonomous, without any purpose. That is why the aestheticization is ambivalent as any other form of emancipation. As an example for emancipation, Peper (2012) gives the Bible story about Adam and Eve, a case that can be seen negatively as a fall into sin or positively as a rise into maturity – *felix culpa*. Suspended context is still an interpretative one – and interpretation is always understood as giving a new sense – and thus also the morally oriented context, which is inevitable for the practical action. The stance of aestheticization is, in other words, the theoretic stance that can, and does not need to, practically influence the life stances and habits, although it cannot replace them. The newly gained conscious fits into a new practical life context that is also morally polarized.

The questioning of the interpretative contexts with the aims of creative aestheticization challenges the traditional culture to place its interpretative – the affirmative or even patronizing – contexts at the disposal of an instrument of the sense (reason). It can, and does not necessarily need to, put the new light (enlightenment!) on the culture that is called into question during the democratic civilization of human rights and positive law.

According to Peper, the development takes place in our conscious and can exclusively be an individual one. In that sense, it implies as necessary the practical action, behavior and habits of an individual, as well as his morality. An incentive to such a development comes from an aesthetic field. The construe of sense precedes any cognition. The process that brings about a change of opinion, claimed already by Nietzsche, must begin with the creation of fiction:

*Before there is "thought" there must have been 'fiction'.*  
*Bevor gedacht wird, muss schon gedichtet worden sein (1922).*

We find the same assumptions for the development of an individual consciousness and aesthetic as its instrument – also based on Kant's conclusions, more specifically on his Copernican paradigm shift from an object to subject – in the theoretical work of Friedrich Schiller. Examining the key issue of the 18th century, the question of freedom, in his influential theoretical essays *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry (Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung, 1795)* and *Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man (Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen, 1795)*, Schiller especially considers the problem of aestheticization. He focuses on the sentimental artist with his epistemological-critical stance on the one hand and on the other, on the art receiver that could be educated only within the aesthetic activity. The core of Schiller's theory is that only the emancipation of the human spirit can lead man to his moral perfection and a harmonious society. The instrument of this emancipation is an aesthetic object.

Schiller's *Letters* are the first programmatic text of modern aesthetical critique. With the background of the French Revolution – the barbaric nature of which diminished the German contemplative spirit – Schiller outlines the utopia, by which he recognizes beauty and art as having the actual revolutionary role. *Letters* are the turning document of Weimar Classicism, where Schiller connects his abstract aesthetic qualifications with a current historical question of freedom.

According to Schiller, the path to the political solution leads through the aesthetic solution: it is through beauty that we arrive at the moral freedom and through the moral freedom – at the practical freedom. The state based on physical necessity, power and authority should be converted into the state based on morals. Moreover,

the moral man cannot be made by force, because the physical man cannot accept the moral abstraction forcibly. The man should be persuaded of moral reasons, without being physically destroyed. Therefore, mankind needs education that leads to the emancipation of the intellectual strength of man and that education can only be an aesthetic one, by means of sensuous-concrete. To bring the man up to be good by the means of beauty, putting into action his cognitive and creative power, to refine his moral existence – that is the point of Schiller's theory, significantly complicated because of Kant's terminology, and that is the task and the purpose of all poetic writing, belles-lettres and the entirety of fine arts.

In contrast to Kant, Schiller also knows the concept of 'moral beauty'. Moral beauty comes into effect when the man's moral obligation becomes his nature so that his kindness is not the product of his practical reason, but it is the matter of fact and realizes by his free will. Schiller uses Wieland's syntagm 'beautiful soul' for the man who acts morally by his nature as well as by his free will. Beauty in the appearance has its place in the beautiful soul. Not only reason and senses harmonize in it, but also goodwill and duty. Aesthetic is then the intermediate area between those poles, a compromise between them. Only when all of those fields harmonize is man open for his best possibility, without fear to get lost in any of those tendencies. The aesthetic initiates and enables the human play instinct and art mediates the ideas and the distance to the real world. The highest form of humanity can be discovered in the sphere of play, where the aesthetic and ethical culminate. An artist is a man who plays, *homo ludens*, and a free man at the same time; he is the model of future humanity, the realization of human totality. Within the play instinct, the idea of beauty meets humanity.

The main objective of Schiller's utopia is above all the "aesthetization of life relationships", but also, as Habermas notices, "the revolutionary turn of the agreeable relationships" (1985), or in other words, democratization. Following Kant's *Critique of Judgment (Kritik der Urteilskraft, 1790)*, Schiller is interested in aesthetic as the form of message, but he also does not overlook the moral, practical aspect of aesthetic as a „feeling for the community“. The discussion about the aesthetic judgment, which has already been on the table since Hume and Baumgarten, concerns, namely, the certain form of intersubjectivity, communication and collectivism. That is what Schiller, also following Kant, understands under the idea of play. *Letters* are the result of Schiller's endeavor to explain that man's play instinct – his born need to make an order out of chaos – which has the practical, moral nature, is possible to harmonize with the opposing, but in the same way human, instinct for a sensuous existence in the world. Only through play can we overcome the sensuous instinct, without destroying it, claims Schiller, only while playing can we stay free (Schiller, 2002). According to Schiller, only within play is it possible to achieve the anthropological ideal of the complete man – human totality. Man is 'only completely a man when he plays' (2002). Play takes place in between the compulsion and accident, but it is neither accidental, nor necessary, it is the matter of the man's choice and not the matter of compulsion. The third, very important factor is that during play, the spectators are learning, accepting play as the reality, because the seriousness of reality can be faced without tears, fear or mockery, only within play. That is how the receivers are being educated within play.

In the last two moments, the thesis on the role of the aesthetic in cognitive comes to the forefront. Within an aesthetic context, man experiments and exercises freely with that which he can later apply without fear in other, moral-practical or political contexts. Within play, man formulates unclear presentations, which he shuns from within the practical contexts, having fear from its consequences. He learns, best within play, how to take responsibility for his own beliefs and fight for them, even if he knows that they cannot be justified one-sidedly, in a fundamentalistic manner. Schiller's first moment, which concerns play and the complete man, emphasizes the individual, creative and aesthetic. Progress is possible only through the separate, creative development of the individual into a moral, free person by his own choice. The moral form is the abstract form of our mind, but within play, it can be realized as a sensuous-concrete form – either as a nice gesture or as a work of art. Schiller's sentimental man, as well as his sentimental artist, is the modern man, who possesses a

consciousness that killed the naivety in his relation to others and to nature and disabled the mimetic method of artistic creation. The sentimental man tries, at the same time, to put his world in order, which he as a conscious being, sees as chaotic, intransparent and obscure, without losing any of its aspects – and that is possible only within play. In other words, only within the process of aesthetization, the sentimental artist creates the necessary distance from an incomprehensible reality and its traditional, predetermined contexts. Only within aesthetic activity does man put into action his cognitive potential and critical stance and creates the new forms of thinking and new cultural patterns. This Schillerian process of transformation of consciousness, apart from any religious implications, can be seen in Dostoyevsky, the best of Schiller's students, in the example of the individual fate of his character, Mitya Karamazov, who is not an artist, but in his own way – the 'artist of life'.

At the same time, the civil existence and the category of 'free time' also enables the receiver to gain access to play, so that he can come to the new knowledge and the new consciousness, also individually and through an aesthetical object, which is an object of play. It becomes the path towards emancipation, towards the new naivety – the ability to believe and create a new ideal – and towards a well-ordered life in society. The image of beauty, freedom in the appearance, is in the end the ideal humanity. Schiller's aesthetic state, based on the common play of free individuals is utopian or at least an elitist image of humankind. Schiller developed his theory of art with an objective to enable the Kantian idealistic aesthetic, under the appropriate political preconditions and within the practice of a good state, which is based on reason and on the aesthetic education of man for the moral confirmation of his best possibility. Schiller is one of the first theorists who recognized the modern processes of differentiation as a factor that disables an individual to be educated completely. To enable the completeness of an aesthetic education, sublime must be added to beautiful. That is why Schiller in his last published essay tries to define sublime as an aesthetic category, which leads to a new understanding of both of these categories.

Schiller's elitist anticipation of the development of European history and society reverberates in Peper's theory, confirmed by the empirical analysis of literary and philosophical works as well as works of art from the 19th and 20th century. In the works of Wordsworth, Poe, Mallarmé, Whitman, Wilde, Hemingway and the ideas of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Derrida, among others, Peper shows how art and philosophy, questioning the classical value system, anticipated the future development, always a step forward in front of their time.

Providing examples from 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, Peper illustrates how just the lost faith in the classical norms – taste, ideal beauty, beautiful soul – enabled Romanticism to look into the history and Realism to consider the social and psychological causality. Only after the realistic narrator was stripped of the auctorial forms of expressing judgment through the causal and final sentences, could he understand the true potential for expressing an inner experience that an impressionistic narrator has at his disposal. Further stratifying of the narrative structures opened the door for the innovations introduced by Proust, Joyce, Hemingway, Faulkner and which encouraged the new cognition later on themselves.

According to Peper, in his experimental form novel demonstrates the mutual relation of aesthetization and the loosening of semantic order. The obvious example for it is the stream of consciousness novel. Lyric, considerably flexible for the use of language, had more possibilities for an aesthetization of the medium of language at its disposal. There are countless examples. From argumentative lyrics of Baroque, including Shakespeare, over Romanticism, Symbolism, imagism to the *language poetry*, the history of lyrics gives many examples for more and more obvious self-realization of the poetic language.

Illustrating the similarities and differences, successive connections between ideas, structures and forms in the works of the main representatives of the literary and art epochs of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, Peper sketches the history of the process of aesthetization as a history of the new Enlightenment that subsequently opened new

horizons towards the building of the modern and postmodern culture. A good example of that is the concept of *self-culture*, which was developed by Goethe, influenced by Emerson. This concept would play the decisive role in the historic reconstruction of the understanding of transcendence: by Mallarmé in the understanding of art, by Nietzsche in the understanding of individualism, by Whitman – personalism is Whitman’s variation of the idea of self-culture.

Especially convincing is Peper’s chapter about the metaphor as a form of culture, where he shows how the process of aesthetization functions, using the phenomenon of changing the nature of the metaphor from Romanticism to Surrealism as well as the implications of the mutual relation of concretization, secularization and individualization for the receiver. In that model, Peper shows the development of the culture as a ‘consequent disintegration of the mental filter of meaning’ (2012).

Using the concrete examples of poetry, fiction and the theoretical thinking of the last two centuries, Peper actually shows how Schiller’s concept of play – harmonizing sensuous and normative within the field of art – really worked in practice, changing consciousness and patterns of behavior of an artist and his audience, and becoming with it the precondition of the new cultural and moral pattern. In that sense is also Peper’s conclusion: As a process of individualizing particularization and differentiation, which lead towards an individualization, through more and more obvious aesthetical consideration of an individual, concrete and sensuous, “aestheticization contributed significantly to the history of the development of the individual and thus the history of democratization” (2012). Having faith in the ability of man to fully realize his potential as well as in the realization of an elitist concept of individual education of man – that is the development that Schiller anticipated for European history and society.

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