

# **Digital media, Popular culture and Arts education: The idea of arts education in a society of mass consumption**

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## **1. The Fundamental Problem**

Today we are living in a society of mass consumption, in which people desire and enjoy the consumption of various goods every day. These goods change with the latest modes of fashion and technological innovation almost every moment.

Information on these matters is transmitted at high speed all over the world through digital media. They send visual, concrete images of goods, including their fashionable usage and environment. Therefore people's desires are powerfully stimulated by them. In this society, a huge variety of merchandise and diverse information about them determine the lifestyle of the masses and their cultural life.

And this society caused the so-called Lehman Brothers Shock of 2008 and brought worldwide financial panic. Because of it, many financial institutions in the USA were publicly censured, and criticized severely for their greed.

However, the root of the problem consists in the egotism of so-called “good citizens”, for they entrust such financial institutions with the works of making money so that they may consume various goods. For instance, many pension funds are deposited in such institutions.

Thus, our modern society is one in which a competitive attitude and meritocracy control everything. One must always financially or commercially make more money than others. This competitive and aggressive situation is overwhelming us. In consequence, it brings about a serious antagonism between « freedom and equality » which are ideas of modern times.

What can we do for such an alienated society ? That is our fundamental problem.

## **2. “Modern idea—unfinished project”**

Now we turn to the concept of “modern idea—unfinished project”. The social philosopher J. Habermas (1929—) points out the contemporary importance of the theory of aesthetic education by Friedrich von Schiller (1759 — 1805), the famous German poet and aesthete of the latter half of the 18th century. His theory of aesthetic education was an answer, a counter to a deeply moving political event, the French Revolution of 1789.

After Schiller heard of the inhuman excesses of this revolution, in which the freedom-idea of the Enlightenment was perverted in the murderous frenzy of fanatical idealists and orgiastic masses, he worked out a design for communicative taste-pedagogy, i.e., a theory of the aesthetic education of man. He thought that, with the help of it, the altruistic, sociable aspects of man could be cultivated, his contact with others could be aestheticized and then

the bourgeoisie would be able to make democratic organizations.

Joseph Beuys (1921 – 1986), a 20<sup>th</sup> century German artist, had sympathy for this vision of Schiller's and could understand it deeply, Beuys regarded Schiller as a pioneer of this conception. Let us note at this opportunity, that Beuys said "Goethe and Schiller belong to the group of progressive artists who saw our problems of the future. They are not only contemporary with us, but also go much further into the future. They are therefore, yes, our comrades in arms."<sup>1</sup>

Habermas states in his book "*The Philosophical Discourse of the Modern Times (Moderne) : 12 Lectures*"(1985) that Schiller regards art "as «a form of communication» which intervenes in intersubjective relations of man. [...] Schiller grasps art as the communicative reason that shall be realized in «the aesthetic State» of the future." / "If art is to fulfil the historical task which is to establish harmonious relationships in these broken modern times (Moderne), it is not enough that art only win the hearts of individuals. It must transform the forms of life that individuals share. Therefore Schiller sets his hopes on the communicative power of art which finds common interest and causes solidarity, i.e., on the public character of art." For "Schiller criticizes bourgeois society for «its system of egotism»."<sup>2</sup>

Actually, Schiller states in his book "*On the Aesthetic Education of Man : In a Series of letters*"(1795) : "In the very bosom of the most exquisitely developed social life egotism has founded its system, and without ever acquiring therefrom a heart that is truly sociable, we suffer all the contagions and afflictions of society."<sup>3</sup> (from the fifth letter)

That is, Schiller had seen the nature of our present society 200 years ago, i.e., at the beginning of modern times. And his theory of aesthetic education of man was a

philosophical plan to gradually reform our modern society through education of this kind.

Therefore in Schiller's Theory, we can find a method by which little by little we are able to solve our fundamental problem.

### **3. Aesthetic State: a third joyous kingdom of play and of semblance**

Schiller states again in the same book : "In the midst of the fearful kingdom of forces, and in the midst of the sacred kingdom of laws, the aesthetic impulse to form is at work, unnoticed, on the building of a third joyous kingdom of play and of semblance, in which man is relieved of the shackles of circumstance, and released from all that might be called constraint, alike in the physical and in the moral sphere." <sup>4</sup> (from the twenty-seventh letter)

According to Schiller, "man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays." <sup>5</sup> "The object of the play-drive" is "living form," namely "what [...] we called beauty." <sup>6</sup> (from the fifteenth letter)

And this "living form" means "form" in "the aesthetic impulse to form", and "semblance" means, strictly speaking, the "aesthetic semblance", which we can have through our free imagination<sup>7</sup>. Therefore "play" also means, strictly speaking, the "aesthetic play", which typically comes into existence in our artistic activity.

Schiller continues in the same place.

"[...] in those circles where conduct is governed by beauty, in the aesthetic State, none may appear to the other except as form, or confront him except as an object of free play. To bestow freedom by means of freedom is the fundamental law of this kingdom." <sup>8</sup>

And “the aesthetic State alone can make it (society) real, because it consummates the will of the whole through the nature of the individual. Though it may be his needs which drive man into society, and reason which implants within him the principles of social behaviour, beauty alone can confer upon him a social character. Taste alone brings harmony into society, because it fosters harmony in the individual.”<sup>9</sup>

(Of course, the “taste” quoted here means not the ability to feel different flavours in our mouth, but the ability to judge what is attractive or suitable, especially in things related to art, style, beauty, etc., in short, aesthetic taste.)

“No privilege, no autocracy of any kind, is tolerated where taste rules, and the realm of aesthetic semblance extends its sway.” Here “A-social appetite must renounce its self-seeking, and the Agreeable, whose normal function is to seduce the senses, must cast toils of Grace over the mind as well.”<sup>10</sup>

“Here, therefore, in the realm of Aesthetic Semblance, we find that ideal of equality fulfilled which the Enthusiast would fain see realized in substance.”<sup>11</sup>

In the same letter, we can find the basic views of Schiller which are expressed very concisely below. They form the core of his aesthetics.

“[...] only aesthetic mode of communication unites society, because it relates to that which is common to all.”<sup>12</sup>

“Beauty alone do we enjoy at once as individual and as genus, i.e., as representatives of the human genus.”<sup>13</sup>

Therefore “beauty resolves the conflict” of man, “or at least aims at resolving it [...]”<sup>14</sup>

Just for this reason, we can resolve the competitive and aggressive situation in our own day through activities which are concerned with beauty and the arts. These activities will be done in various aesthetic circles, in which that serious antagonism between «freedom

and equality » will disappear.

Now, let' us once more inquire! What is art in Schiller's theory? He answers : "Art is a daughter of Freedom". For art "takes her orders from the necessity inherent in mind, not from the exigencies of matter."<sup>15</sup>

And Schiller describes the emergence of art concretely in his long poem "The Artists"<sup>16</sup> (1789) . We can find there the origin of art about which he thought.

The fairest flowers that deck'd the Earth,  
    Into a nosegay with wise choice combin'd, —  
Thus the first Art from Nature had its birth ;  
    Into a garland then were nosegays twin'd,  
And from the works that mortal hands had made,  
A second, nobler Art was now display'd.

Here is "the aesthetic impulse to form" and a certain beginning of "the building of a third joyous kingdom of play and of semblance". The experience of beauty here "relates" without doubt "to that which is common to all", as Schiller said. "Beauty alone do we enjoy at once as individual and as genus, i.e., as representatives of the human genus." Therefore "beauty resolves the conflict" of man, namely, "Beauty alone makes the whole world happy, and each and every being forgets its limitations while under its spell."<sup>17</sup>

#### **4. Aesthetic Education as Political Education**

According to Schiller, we can resolve the competitive and aggressive situation in our own day through aesthetic activities in our own various circles, in which that serious antagonism

between «freedom and equality» will disappear. This situation is not only aesthetic, but also political. Out of this situation first, we are able to begin to make a democratic self-organization of our society.

In other words, we can have the will to spontaneous, free conduct in politics in such aesthetic circles. Here we experience the basis of a democratic system of government and recognize it intuitively.

Therefore aesthetic education is political education also. However it is not education in political knowledge, but education which one forms the nonpolitical basis for politics.

And this education is a roundabout way through which one leads to the democratization of society. Moreover, it is a thoroughly peaceful method by which one put democratic politics into practice while enjoying it and sympathizing with each other, i.e., without compulsion, therefore without the pain which goes with it. Two things which Schiller hated were compulsion and pain, and two things which he loved were peace and delight.

Now, our fundamental problem was to resolve the conflict of man in our day. For the solution, we can and should adopt the above-stated method, i.e., the aesthetic education of man. We can and should resolve this difficult problem not only by means of education in political knowledge or in morals, but also by means of aesthetic education which is embodied in various types of arts education in diverse schools or institutions.

In the mass consumption society, in which we are living, it is fundamentally important that we set our hopes on the public character of art. By means of it, we can have the spirit of solidarity and then can remove or at least weaken the system of egotism in our society. According to Habermas, “Schiller grasps art as the communicative reason that shall be realized in «the aesthetic State» of the future.” (see. Note No. 2.)

We should establish “the aesthetic State”, namely the harmonious society through our free imagination, i.e., by artistic activity. Of course, this is a pure idea. However an idea is always the greatest reality, because the idea is our signpost, toward which we advance.<sup>18</sup>

## Notes :

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- <sup>1</sup> Joseph Beuys/Michael Ende, *Kunst und Politik : ein Gespräch*, Freie Volkshochschule Argenteale e.V., Düsseldorf 1989, S.28.
  - <sup>2</sup> Jürgen Habermas; *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne : 12 Vorlesungen*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt a.M., 1985, SS.59-60.
  - <sup>3</sup> Edited & Translated by Elizabeth M Wilkinson & L.A. Willoughby, Friedrich von Schiller; *On the Aesthetic Education of Man : In a Series of letters*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1967, p.27.
  - <sup>4</sup> Ibid., P.215.
  - <sup>5</sup> Ibid., P.107.
  - <sup>6</sup> Ibid., P.101.
  - <sup>7</sup> Schiller describes imagination in the same book (twenty-seventh letter) as follows. From “fantasy play”, i.e. “From this play of freely associated ideas, which is still of a wholly material kind, and to be explained by purely natural laws, the imagination, in its attempt at a free form, finally makes the leap to aesthetic play. A leap it must be called, since a completely new power now goes into action ; for here for the first time, mind takes a hand as lawgiver in the operations of blind instinct, subjects the arbitrary activity of the imagination to its own immutable and eternal unity, introduces its own autonomy into the transient, and its own infinity into the life of senses.” (Ibid., p.209.) Therefore we should regard “imagination” in Schiller’s theory as “aesthetic imagination”.
  - <sup>8</sup> Friedrich von Schiller; *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, op.cit., p.215.
  - <sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.215.
  - <sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.217.
  - <sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.219.
  - <sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.215.
  - <sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.215.
  - <sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.213.
  - <sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.7.
  - <sup>16</sup> translated by Edgar A. Bowring; *The Poems of Schiller*, G. Bell, London 1916, pp.77–89.
  - <sup>17</sup> Friedrich von Schiller; *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, op.cit., p.217.
  - <sup>18</sup> I mention here that Mies van der Rohe (1886~1969, the third president of Bauhaus) said during a large Chicago luncheon in honor of Walter Gropius (1883~1969, the first president of Bauhaus) as given below.

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“I said before, it (the Bauhaus) was an Idea. The fact that it was an idea, I think, is the cause of this enormous influence the Bauhaus had on any progressive school around the globe. You cannot do that with organization, you cannot do that with propaganda. Only an idea spreads so far.” (Mies van der Rohe, Congratulations to Gropius on his 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday, May 18, 1953, in: Sigfried Giedion, *Walter Gropius, Work and Teamwork*, Reinhold Publishing Corporation, New York 1954, pp.17-18.)