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## A New Beautiful: Sontag, Schiller, and the Role They Can Play in Modern America

With every passing day, the United States seems to impossibly decline ever further into the plot of a George Orwell dystopia. Friedrich von Schiller, a philosopher writing during the Reign of Terror, seemed to think the solution to a society descending into chaos was in the Arts and Aesthetics (484). Though Schiller was dealing with a very different situation in the Reign of Terror than the situation today, there are myriad parallels that can be drawn between the two political climates. Schiller was writing at a time when morality and freedom seemed under threat, and the role that morals and democracy currently play in society seem to similarly be on the brink of collapse. Schiller's belief that art was the touchstone by which society could find its way back to goodness—because “it is only through Beauty that man makes his way to Freedom” (484)—was rooted in his understanding of the Beautiful. But what happens when the motivation behind the Beautiful, and thus its understanding, is turned into something volatile? The writings of Susan Sontag in *Fascinating Fascism* provide insight into the importance of context as it relates to art and aestheticism, as well as insights into a perilous age of which the ideas are again gaining traction. Through the writings of Friedrich von Schiller and Susan Sontag, and the issues they present surrounding the role the Beautiful plays in society, it is possible to construct a “New Beautiful” that keeps the freedom of Schiller's Beauty alive while preventing the fascist ideology of Sontag's from determining its definition.

The driving force behind *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* is Schiller's hypothesis that through a preoccupation with science, economics, and an attempt to control public thought, humans have lost what is the most integral part of being human: the ability to think without restriction and let those thoughts evolve and venture into unexplored territory (484). He suggests

that a revitalization of Art and the Beautiful—and the type of thinking it encourages—will thus bring about Freedom in his age of political peril. Schiller writes, “[f]or Art is a daughter of Freedom, and takes her orders from the necessity inherent in minds, not from the exigencies of matter” (483). What Schiller is condemning in this quote is the worldview that economic thinking has gained dominance over public thought. The world was slowly becoming more focused on utility and economic value, and less on free expression and the type of thinking that drove it. Schiller is then positing that to move away from this utility based society and back to one that is moral and free, Art (and thus Beauty) must again have an elevated importance.

The idea of beauty seems innocuous at first; what could be harmful about something that solely exists to please the senses? Susan Sontag addresses that question in *Fascinating Fascism*, and what she defines as Fascist Aesthetics. There is a point at which beauty, as defined by a hegemonic society, becomes a form of oppression. Susan Sontag describes Fascist beauty as follows: “Fascist art glorifies surrender, it exalts mindlessness, it glamorizes death” (9). The beauty of Fascism, then, in addition to having the ideal Aryan body, has its roots in making people obey. The Nazis took Schiller’s idea of elevating art and beauty in society, and manipulated it into something they could control. This seems quite opposite to Schiller’s goal of freedom. Schiller’s concern with freedom was obviously based in the very real goal of freeing the people of France from “the tyrannical yoke” of their oppressors, as he put it, during the Reign of Terror (483). The similarity of today’s political climate in the United States is hard to ignore—in France there was beheading in the streets, in America there are fatal shootings of unarmed civilians. There’s a distinct feeling of helplessness and loss of control, as a Nation that should represent progress and defines itself as “the leader of the free world” reverts to the hateful

rhetoric of Fascist Europe. It then becomes important to look at the ways in which beauty can be manipulated to fit a political agenda.

Beauty is still at the forefront of our society, though the word has come to take on different meanings in the centuries following the aesthetic movement. While Schiller spoke of Beauty as a means by which to overcome the central role that economics and utility play in society, in contemporary art and politics, the very idea of Beauty itself seems to have become commodified. Perhaps the key difference between the beauty of Schiller, Sontag, and today, is how it relates to the individual. Today, “beautiful” is most often used as a descriptor for the physical appearance of a person. It has become a defining characteristic that people strive to reach rather than something they seek to create from within. When beauty is associated with inherent physical characteristics that the individual cannot control, everyone who sits outside of this new ideal is made to feel fundamentally incapable of beauty. In modern America, an individual’s appearance can affect how they are treated, what they can accomplish because of that, and so on. In this way, personal beauty, in the minds of many, now equates worth. Thus, feeling incapable of beauty comes with the assumption that an individual is worthless; a harmful mindset to have. Harmful, that is, to the individual. It is beneficial to those who profit from the commodification of beauty, those who have the tools and platform to do so; the people who don’t meet society’s standards of beauty then feel compelled to purchase items to change that. Therein lies the commodification. That those in power directly and financially benefit from the belief of others that they cannot meet some arbitrary definition of “Beautiful” is then clearly a tool of oppression.

Is it then possible to marry Schiller’s idea of the Beautiful with this contemporary and capitalist world? The answer lies with Schiller and Sontag, who were both proponents of

allowing context to permeate art. Schiller advises living with one's century, but not becoming its "creature" (492). "Work for your contemporaries;" he writes, "but create what they need, not what they praise" (Schiller 492). Sontag similarly believes that the background of a generation, and the history of art, should be relevant to its viewing; "[t]aste is context. And the context has changed," she says (12). Sontag explains that for the Germans, "the appeal of Nazi art may have been that it was simple, figurative, emotional; not intellectual" (10). Maybe what's needed is a Beautiful that no longer equates to something visual. Maybe a visual and tactile Beautiful is too easy, and doesn't push the boundaries of art far enough. Perhaps a Beautiful that is in the mind, that praises ideas, that encourages intellectual and inquisitive thought, is what could bring America back from the brink. Perhaps it is time Americans surround themselves with "great and noble forms of genius," rather than seeking comfort in what they've always known (Schiller 493). Perhaps they should throw that idea on the proverbial wall, and see if it sticks; and see what a New Beautiful could do for the world.

## Works Cited

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