

Why Culture Wars Matter

Then & Now

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4BZ81zas0o>

I get emotional at films an embarrassing amount. Why? It's bizarre if you think about it. These are imaginary people that I don't know on a screen dealing with issues that I often have no experience of. Why are we moved by them? Even if you don't get emotional, you'd probably agree that there is emotion that connects you to the story – even if it's simple pleasure.

I think understanding why this is can go some way in helping us understand what's at stake in a so-called culture war. Because, what's often forgotten is that *culture, politics, and our own psychological lives* are inseparably intertwined.

How does culture connect to politics?

There have always been cultural wars – battles over values, beliefs, systems of thought – fights over national consciousness itself.

Culture wars differ from political ones in that they go beyond simple political debates about economics, laws, taxes, and so on. They're about how we relate to one another on a more fundamental level.

The current conservative complaint is now well known – major institutions have been captured by leftist cultural warriors. Hollywood, TV, mainstream news, newspapers and universities are all dominated by a woke politically correct mindset.

Andrew Breitbart was right when he said that politics is downstream from culture. That our values are laid bare in stories, songs, art, even games and sport, before things get political.

In other words, we focus too much on *realpolitik* – on the drama of political life, on elections, on the minutiae of the decisions that politicians make.

But to understand politics we must understand the culture or cultures that underpin it.

The way we divide up politics and culture can be seen, in part, as a product of the Enlightenment division of the world into two: a rationalist world and an emotional one.

On the one hand, we have a rationalised modern state and the bureaucratic management of things like business, politics, war, universities, and our own lives. We apply rules, assign roles to each other in the office, live by schedules, have treatises between countries, have court processes, school exams, recognised qualifications, rules for elections, standardised measurements and regulations and so on.

This is the inheritance of Enlightenment rationalism. It's the way we *do* modern life. The way we *do* business and politics. But in contrast to this but just as important, we have a Romantic tradition.

This tradition acknowledges that reason and rationalism are not all that matters. We have emotions, passions, beliefs, personal relationships, national identities, cultural myths, art, film, poetry, and music.

These two realms are often kept apart. We have the image of the white-coated rational scientist or the corporate businessman, involved in experiments, data and

calculation. Then we have the artistic genius – the passionate songwriter, the national poet, the autre filmmaker, the insightful novelist.

But no matter how much they're kept apart, in reality they always collide.

The 'rational' politician relies on poetic rhetoric in impassioned speeches. Scientists are often passionate and emotional about their pursuits. Artists have to rely on the bureaucracies of universities when they're training.

And as much as we try to rationalise the political process – when it comes down to it, when we look for the ultimate justification for our values – we get into a murkier area: one where national identity, passions, our cultural stories on TV shows, and data, tax benefits, regulations all collide – we make political decisions based not on one or the other but on an a strange mix of both. It's a reminder: politics and the arts are not separate.

I think one of the best thinkers to use to understand this dichotomy is a giant of the arts who is somewhat underappreciated in the popular imagination of the Anglosphere – the German writer Friedrich Schiller.

He was at the centre of maybe the most important and consequential culture war in history – the Enlightenment one that culminated in the French Revolution. This culture war absolutely changed the world and is at the heart of how we think today.

In the decades before the French revolution exploded, there were wide-ranging debates about what art meant, the nature of religious feeling, the place of the theatre, and, most centrally, an outpouring of novels that grabbed the hearts and minds of readers all across Europe – Voltaire's *Candide*, Rousseau's *Julie*, Goethe's *Werther*, these were stories at the core of a culture war – a battle of the values that defined European life.

For Schiller, these works of art were obviously political – so he asked himself a powerful question: how is art related to freedom?

The French Revolution began in 1789, but before the revolution, throughout the 1780s, Schiller had written several popular plays that were conspicuously revolutionary in character.

He used stories to discuss themes of liberty and equality while denouncing the regimes of oppression across Europe. Their theme: revolt against established order.

One of the plays – *The Robbers* – is the story of the son of an aristocrat who leads a band of 'moral' thieves who have codes of ethics and virtue. Their loyalty to one another is contrasted with the immorality and egotism of those they steal from. A minister who sells offices to the highest bidder, for example. But more than a simple Robin Hood, the central character is also a revolutionary.

But Schiller was sceptical about outright revolution. He believed in what the German's called *Bildung* – a sort of moral education that improved everyone's character.

And when the French Revolution turned to widespread bloodshed he, like many, lamented over what had happened. How could the Enlightenment's culture war plea for a new moral order with freedom and equality at its core turn into such a horrifying bloodthirsty moment?

He said it was a ‘moment of prodigal opportunity’, met with ‘a generation unprepared to receive it’.

Instead of a new ethical kingdom of heaven on earth, violent and selfish impulses and passions were unleashed.

So many of the period thought the same. William Wordsworth, the wider Romantics, and Kant and Hegel, all looked at the revolution with complicated feelings.

And in 1795, Schiller wrote an essay that would change the trajectory of Enlightenment thought, inspire the Romantic revolution, and still explains much of why culture wars still happen today.

In *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Schiller argues that art and beauty are fundamental to the politics of freedom. He argues that people talk about philosophy and law and politics, but forget art’s role in our political lives. He claims that it ‘is through beauty that one progresses towards freedom’.

Look at the revolution, he says – politics and philosophy have failed. We must turn, instead, to culture. But how can culture address the issues we face?

One problem, as he saw it, was that modern society was separating us from each other into different roles while also separating us from ourselves by dividing us up into different parts. Reason and art were becoming divided in the same way division of labour separated us all into different jobs with no connection to each other – in the same way we still separate that rational scientist and creative artists.

Previous civilizations, he thought, like the Greeks had had a more balanced approach – their culture tried to cultivate a balanced individual.

He claims that in beauty, the separation between emotion and reason, sympathy and logic, science and art can be reunited. He says ‘it is by way of beauty that one approaches liberty’.

So what does it mean to judge something as beautiful? It was a problem that had perplexed philosophers for millennia.

For Schiller – and he followed Immanuel Kant here – our appreciation of beauty can be explained by the way sense and form come together.

Senses involve the diversity of sensations, feelings, emotions, and different qualia in the world. Form involves structure, plan, reason, and logic.

When we appreciate beauty – whether in a sunset, a story, song, painting, poetry, dance – Schiller said, we *play* between these two different drives: sense and form.

Schiller describes it as ‘living form’. It’s life and form at the same time.

In music, we take distinct noises and put them in a pleasant order, in dance we take the possibilities of the human body and apply form and music, and we do the same in sport – which is often described in aesthetic terms – a beautiful goal, for example. And in a story or a poem, we take the contingencies of someone’s life and usually impose a structure of some kind onto it, a moral order, a lesson, a goal, a point of some kind.

Schiller said, ‘the play of art encourages us to play with all our faculties-intellect, feeling, imagination, memory, and anticipation. This free play frees us from the narrowness caused by specialization’.

He said that this playful blend of sense of form *lifts up* – in German *aufheben*. But the German means to lift up and change, but also to preserve the diverse elements at the same time.

This makes complete sense if you think of a great film, for example. He's saying that modern life is disjointed, but in something like a good story, music, acting, with a plot that shows us life in a completely different country, for example, we're quite literally lifted up by the coming together of sense and form – it's why we can describe art as inspiring.

The German philosopher Hegel, who was friends with Schiller, would be inspired by this.

But how is this related to politics? To understand this, we have to think about a link between passion and politics. At the time – and maybe less so today – many believed that we had a kind of moral sense, and there was a great wave of what was known as sentimentalism – a great outpouring of emotion and passion – all across Europe. Rousseau, for example, influentially argued that people should *feel* more.

Many of the great bestselling love stories of the period were written within a political frame, for a reason that's kind of lost to us, but that we can empathise with, nonetheless. Rousseau's *Julie*, Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, and Schiller's *Intrigue and Love* are all about love being obstructed by the politics of the time. Love lost in an ancient regime of privilege, people ordered into unhappy marriages, relationships between the classes prevented, between servant and lord impossible.

Rousseau's and Schiller's works were Europe-wide bestsellers. Some reported being so taken by them that they'd faint or weep for days.

It's easy to see why Rousseau thought that love could be the basis of a universal politics, because it transcended those artificially imposed and oppressive differences.

Love and beauty being so intimately connected, the question must be raised: is there something universalistic in these feelings? Something that speaks to our equality? Our natural liberty even? Schiller thought so.

Beauty is timeless – we keep thousand year old statues, the best stories are told over generations, the best art is hung in galleries for centuries.

If beauty is universal then there's something in it that can unite.

Schiller believed that Kant was right when he said we have a moral law within us. That law is a simple taste for the universal. That morality has its basis in thinking reasonably about whether our beliefs, actions and our relationships with others were conformable to a universal moral code. Whether, if everyone acted in that way, we could all live harmoniously in what Kant called a 'Kingdom of Ends'.

Form, structure – in music, art, stories, and in morality – is unity, harmony, perfection.

Kant's ethics – living in harmony with one another – was a type of *form* that we apply to our human lives in the same way that we apply form to sound in music or to acrylic in painting.

We all work together to impose rational harmony onto the world – that’s what makes us human.

Schiller talks passionately about how the simple play of beauty can lead to duty and destiny. He said, ‘sensual pleasures we enjoy merely as individuals... the pleasures of knowledge we enjoy only as a group... the beautiful alone we enjoy both as individual and as group’.

Schiller’s essay has been extraordinarily influential, and has been analysed and cited and poured over ever since. It is full of holes and problems and in many ways raises more questions than answers, but I think it speaks to something we do seem to have an intuition for – a connection between the beautiful and the good.

It adds to a chorus of ideas that were growing in popularity at the time. That art isn’t mimesis – it isn’t simply copying of the world – but that through art, through expression, we mould, shift and create the world – and hopefully, Schiller would say, that’s a moral harmonious and good world.

Schiller said to the artist to raise people, ‘wherever you meet them, surround them with noble and great forms and symbols, until illusion conquers reality and art conquers nature’.

I think Schiller is addressing this almost mysterious question of how we relate to the other that we don’t always know. In modern life we’re meant to be a collective while not really knowing anyone past our immediate circle. For Schiller, we don’t just relate to them politically – subject to the same laws, say – but that we relate to each other culturally, through television shows, music, and film – as, in Benedict Anderson’s phrase, an imagined community.

And I think he’s right, and that culture wars – especially ones about the arts – matter because they’re about that powerful relationship between beauty and politics – they’re about liberty.

Artists of all types are engaged in the practice of creating these new moral horizons. Writing not long after Schiller, the Romantic poet Percy Shelley called poets the ‘unacknowledged legislators of the world’.

Wordsworth and Coleridge went on to write simple romantic morality poems in their lyrical ballads in an attempt to connect with ordinary people – to lift up – *Aufheben* – their character.

Schiller said that, ‘the end of humanity is... to achieve harmony in knowing, doing, and enjoying’.

In his book on culture wars, Stephen Prothero has argued that although it seems like conservatives make a lot of noise during them, liberals have always won them, because, at their heart, they’re usually about toleration.

And if you think about some of the progressive culture war wins throughout history – women winning the vote, advances in civil rights, the sovereignty of the people over monarchs – there are clear and memorable works of artistic endeavour attached to them.

Prothero thinks that culture war advances throughout history have proven that the arc of history 'bends a little more toward inclusion and toleration'. Schiller would add that art is essential to that arc.

Sources

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