

# Notes on Naive Art, Critique and Nationalism

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Naive art is a prototype of Romantic anti-capitalism, contemporary postcapitalism and the politics of the aesthetic withdrawal from politics. It is also at the root of the convergence of art and the nation state, nationalism and national identity. I am not only suggesting that the limitations of Romantic anti-capitalism are rooted in a peculiarly subjective and cultural idea of politics that grew up around Rousseau and Goethe at the end of the eighteenth century. I also want to raise the following question. Is the chief legacy of the eighteenth century affirmation of naive art not the uncertainty of whether radical art is secretly conservative and whether conservative art is secretly radical?

First formulated by Friedrich Schiller in 1795 in his essay 'On Naive and Sentimental Poetry', naive art has not enjoyed the intellectual reception of Schiller's momentous 'On the Aesthetic Education of Man', which was published just before it. Aesthetic Philosophy has acknowledged the great contribution of the 'Aesthetic Education' letters in establishing the value of play and the aesthetic for freedom conceived of through the formation of a new subjectivity.

Lukàcs pointed out that Schiller was the first to politicise aesthetics as inherent to the critique of existing society by 'extending the aesthetic principle far beyond the confines of aesthetics, by seeing it as the key to the solution of the question of the meaning of man's existence in society'. Rancière says Schiller's aesthetic letters 'constitute a sort of new region of being - the region of free play and appearance - that makes it possible to conceive of the equality whose direct materialization ... was shown to be impossible by the French Revolution'.

The essay on naive and sentimental poetry, however, is the origin of the compare and contrast methodology so prominent in art criticism and art history subsequently. Also, it was here that Schiller outlined his theory of genius, which has since been preserved in theories of the artist and aesthetic freedom. It is in this essay, too, that Schiller anticipates the modern conception of childhood. Naive art and the naive genius, Schiller said, are childlike. Although the modern concept of childhood would not take on its full political character until it was crystallised around the campaign against child labour, Schiller insists here that childhood is precious and that its purity and simplicity ought to be valued and preserved.

The theory of naive art is a response to anxieties about technological change, environmental harm, cultural decline and moral uncertainty. At the outset of industrial modernity, Schiller outlines an agenda that in many respects remains current today, albeit interlaced with casual tropes of racial, gender and class bias that precede the full development of their emancipatory movements. Faced with the "evils of civilisation", Schiller counsels his reader "to remain pure yourself in the midst of these impurities, free amidst this slavery, constant with yourself amidst these capricious changes, a faithful observer of the law amidst this

anarchy". To do this he distinguished between two types of moral conduct and "two orders of poets who correspond to them".

Schiller contrasts naive and sentimental art primarily to compare and contrast his own poetry with that of the mature Goethe's neoclassicism. In one sense, Goethe is the exemplar of naive art because he turns to antique precedent, which is the paradigm of naive art. However, rather than pitching sentimental art as superior to naive art, Schiller sets up the opposition between the two in a sequence of arguments that point towards what we might call a deconstructive treatment. Naive art is the natural expression that sentimental art expresses as a longing for something lost. At the same time, sentimental art is the highest form of naive art.

Sentimentality is originally presented in the essay from the perspective of the naive artist and is therefore regarded as an affectation or a manufactured feeling (Schiller sneers at "this taste of sentimentality so widely diffused in our day"). In an essay that ostensibly affirms sentimental poetry in contrast with naive poetry, naivety (or simplicity or innocence), is nonetheless presented as the antidote to the plague of factories and commerce that Schiller was quick to acknowledge as a threat to the natural world, culture and human nature. It is this that he has in mind when he speaks of "escaping from factitious situations and relations" - that is to say, of opposing and negating the artificial world emerging from the rise of manufacturing - through a return to nature.

This dialectical intertwinement of naive art and sentimental art is expressed most graphically when he presses this distinction into the contours of the established debates on the relative merits of the antique and the modern. Schiller recasts the quarrel of the ancients and moderns by converting the choice between binary opposites into a dynamic dialectical relationship. "The thing that touches us in the ancient poets is nature", he says, whereas "modern poets touch us through the medium of ideas". The merit of the former is that it has a finite object that is grasped completely while the merit of the latter is that its object, being an idea, is infinite. Ancient statues, like ancient poetry, derive their perfection, in Schiller's terms, from being the natural product of artists living close to nature. "These objects which captivate us", he said, "are what we were, what we must be again some day". Greek antiquity stands for nature and Romanticism represents the return to nature as an ideal.

But what is nature for Schiller? Plants, minerals, rural districts, the open sky and the countryside are natural but so are children and the monuments of early ages. Nature overlaps with social and cultural phenomena, here, because, for Schiller, it is an abstract idea that signifies "existence itself according to its proper and immutable laws". It is not nature as perceived by agricultural workers or scientists that captures Schiller's meaning. He gives emphasis, instead, to "our fancies for flowers and for animals, our preference for gardens laid out in a natural style, our love of walks, of the country and those who live there, of a great number of objects proceeding from a remote antiquity, etc".

For Schiller and the Sturm und Drang, framing nature through subjective experiences (preferences, feelings, taste, etc), is already revolutionary because, in Roy Pascal's words, they called for "a new type of political thinking, which judged society against the measure of personal life and inner need". Schiller's argument, which guides the individual through the unfamiliar moral terrain of modernity through a reflection on the intersection of poetry, feeling and nature, resonates with the micropolitics of contemporary anti-capitalism because his advice covers primarily subjective and cultural effects of the emergent modern industrial condition. At the historical moment of the extermination of naiveté, Schiller confronts the factory system and commercial production by advocating a specific form of subjective resistance shaped by the longing for the naive and the naive as ideal, the return to nature and all that that entails.

Equally important in Schiller's opposition to industrial modernity, however, is the capacious category of nature that characterises his theory of naive art. You will have noticed that Schiller's list of natural things glides effortlessly from flowers, animals and gardens to walks, the countryside, country folk and objects from antiquity. That is to say, his examples range from natural species to acts of cultivation, forms of social life and antiques. This is a political theory of nature - what Schiller calls "a moral sense" - that establishes alliances between a diverse range of examples of an ideal life that contrasts sharply with mechanised and monetised modernity. Indeed, he privileges culture over nature in his political theory of nature, asserting "culture, following the way of reason and of liberty, must bring us back to nature".

Given that nature is also exemplified for Schiller by the "manners of country people" and "primitive races", the politics of the Romantic rejection of industrialisation is marked by attitudes to class, race and gender characterised by a mixture of affection and aggression. Summarising all the human representatives of nature as "beings deprived of reason", these people are at once the epitome of humanity and cut off from being fully human. At the same time, modernity is a blockage on naiveté that nonetheless establishes the condition under which the naive can be fully thought. Schiller explains that "this interest in nature is based on an idea" and therefore "it can only manifest itself in a soul capable of ideas, that is, in a moral soul".

Schiller theorises the naive and the sentimental as a moral response to industrialisation in the era that simultaneously elevated landscape painting from its lowly place within the hierarchy of genres and introduced the popular practice of having pets. Pugs, birds and monkeys became members of the family as part of a broader tendency that, somewhat ironically, rejected the modern break with nature by assigning it a human character.

It is also the period in which, in the visual arts, the finished painting was eclipsed by the aesthetic value of the sketch. This valorisation of evidence of the thought process of the artist, which is still with us in a variety of forms, corresponds to Schiller's distinction between the natural and the manufactured. The polished product appeared both less natural and less human but also, significantly, more mechanical and more reliant on skill rather than talent or feeling.

Naiveté at the end of the eighteenth century, which for Schiller is exemplified in the genius, retains a trace of the *je ne sais quoi* in which the self was affirmed through the inexplicable acknowledgement of 'something' in the previous century. The genius for Schiller is inexplicable specifically insofar as it cannot be taught and has no social determination. The idea of naive art as childlike and natural therefore dovetails with the endorsement of the genius as an internally driven individual who 'does not proceed according to known principles, but rather to sudden ideas and feelings'.

The naive in art is the affirmation of nature in a social landscape threatened by industrialisation, the celebration of the childlike in a civil discourse bullied by calculation, and the modelling of experience on a classical Greek ideal of the fully rounded human individual in opposition to specialisation within the modern division of labour.

Naive art can be a stand-in for Greek art but when classicism becomes hegemonic in Italy, France, Germany and Britain, the naive is relocated in folk culture and primitivism. Primitivism, folk and the rural come to signify the kind of premodern harmony that the category of naive art was meant to affirm. These conceptions of unspoilt human community begin to merge with narratives of national identity. In fact, they were there from the start. The Romantic enthusiasm for Robert Burns, for instance, interpreted the significance of poetry written in the Scottish dialect as part of a nationalist project in which national bonds were secured through a shared language.

Stanley Mitchell puts it this way: "The Romanticism of Russia, Poland, Hungary, Germany, Italy was primarily concerned to assert the cultural dignity of each of these nations. It was a spiritual expression of national rebirth; it fought a dominating foreign culture: in political terms an aristocracy which spoke a foreign tongue and despised the culture of its own people. In general ideological terms the cry was against the rationalising universalism of French classicism. Romanticism fought for the particular, the nation." Here, then, we see the role of poetry and literature in the cementing of a national identity.

Art is one of the key elements of the "imagined communities" that sustain nationalism. Here, art has an ideological social function in the performative construction of national identity. Museums and libraries contribute to the construction of national identity. Art and literature in the school's curriculum is also bent to this end. That is to say, the specific "imagined community" of national identity is achieved by a centralised state education and, within this, the construction of a national cultural canon.

In the UK, for instance, when Secondary school education became compulsory in the early twentieth century and English literature rather than the Classics was taught to the entire British population, Shakespeare was inculcated as the greatest poet in history and a source of national pride. His plays were said to express universal values which both define our humanity and epitomise British culture. The use of Shakespeare in schools fosters the idea of a "people" which recognises itself

as having a common national identity. State education and universal literacy replace religion in the modern formation of social bonds based on common national values.

Hence, Thomas Carlyle, who is one of the key figures of the nineteenth century to formulate the idea of the nation, fashioned a striking contrast to determine the key to national identity. "Consider now, if they asked us, Will you give up your Indian Empire or your Shakspeare, you English; never have had any Indian Empire, or never have had any Shakspeare? Really it were a grave question. Official persons would answer doubtless in official language; but we, for our part too, should not we be forced to answer: Indian Empire, or no Indian Empire; we cannot do without Shakspeare! Indian Empire will go, at any rate, some day; but this Shakspeare does not go, he lasts forever with us; we cannot give up our Shakspeare!"

At the same time, landscape painting connotes nationalism only after common lands and traditional uses of the land by peasants and indigenous communities are violently suppressed during the "revolution of the rich against the poor" which determined to whom the land belonged and therefore what landscape, as an ideal depiction of the nation, signified. And yet, just as the land itself is enclosed and partitioned as the private property of capitalist land owners, landscape paintings present this land as "our land" thereby the imagined community of nationalism is, in this sense at least, restricted to a commonality that exists only in the imagination.

Citizen art is no improvement on Romantic and modern art in this respect except perhaps that it is more efficient in bonding the individual to the nation state by doing it directly rather than through the cultivation of aesthetic sensibility. Culture and art appear to be vital to the good life partly because the social organisation of economies based on nations placed culture at the heart of the project of social unity. If culture is the answer, what is the question?