

In Defense of Universal Art

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“The personal is political,” a belief raised from writer and poet Adrienne Rich that resounds loudly into modern art culture today. Art has long been known to affect the emotions and kindle the mind towards an awareness of oneself and their place in society. If the artist is to be a force for good, then the artist should represent the cultures of those silenced in the world and be a voice for the voiceless. It is hard to deny that the effect of art stretches into the realm of morality, and perhaps artists have a moral obligation to elicit change through their work. Despite these good intentions, I remain skeptical of this approach to art. Good art should elicit change due to its inherent appeal to the human soul, regardless if its intention is to be political. Of course it is political. Art makes one think about the world differently which will inevitably affect every other aspect of life, including politics. Yet policymaking is not the sole function of art. Art affects the deepest parts of our humanity and allows us to view the world in different ways previously hidden to us. Art makes us realize that there is something more to our lives than merely surviving. It connects us to something larger than ourselves which unites humanity.

Perhaps we should start with the definition of the cultural “universals” proposed by the Romantics in the 1800s, or “the old white guys” in the western tradition. After the deindividuation caused by the industrial revolution, Romanticists longed for something meaningful beyond the machine, a desire to be reunited with nature. Their ideals were finding meaning through transcendental experiences, the pursuit of beauty and inspiration, self-discovery, and the struggle of realizing the difference between our perception of the world and reality as it really is. These ideas are themes humanity has been wrestling with for millennia, and I think it is fair to say these ideas are present in most (if not every) culture in the world. Most

importantly, these ideas have stood the test of time as we still struggle with them today. Yet, we seemed to have abandoned them not because they are wrong, but because they were exemplified by white males.

It is clear that women and non-European people everywhere were underrepresented in every area of society as it was during this time, but art especially was reserved for social classes privileged enough to have extra time to reflect on their innermost being. Fortunately, there has been significant - though far from perfect - improvement on this front, and art from many more perspectives is becoming more accessible around the globe. This fact should be promising more unity for citizens everywhere. After all, what time in history could view art from around the world within seconds? Yet, in today's art culture, we approach art with the purpose of proposing social and political change, and this seems to be segregating cultures more than unifying them. Art society today is becoming a kind of culture war where there is no room for discussion or disagreement without fear of being criticized for holding a differing view. Rather than learning from others through reflection upon their art, artists are talking at the public and forcing their political agendas at the eyes of their spectators.

As writer and philosopher Cornel West has said, these very same artists promoting social change are still at the mercy of the institutions who fund them (West, 2). The majority of these artists are privileged and likely have not experienced any real adversity. So, are they merely mirroring the real struggles of the people around them and being pressured to create political art for fear of ostracization by their peers and institutions? It will be hard to find an artist who will admit this, but one has to wonder if most of these artists are in privileged positions and continue living their affluent lifestyles by profiting off the populous' craving to feel like they are making a difference.

The problem with the culture industry has long been the struggle of the artist giving people what they want. To remain influential, the artist foregoes inner reflection and looks toward public recognition. This only perpetuates the same beliefs and corrupt systems without putting into place a mechanism that encourages thinking about the reason these systems and beliefs exist in the first place. The effect of art will be more powerful if the artist is engaging in this kind of reflection about the world themselves. According to Novalis, the society itself is a person, and a mini society lives in each individual (Novalis, 314). When the artist expresses the inward feelings of him or herself, the result will be an experience likely felt by all humanity, because more often than not, we all experience the same kind of isolated struggles. The artist can reveal and create unity for everyone by helping people realize they are not alone, trapped inside their minds.

Many artists forsake inner reflection and believe the best method to get the public to understand people who are different than themselves is by exposing their different worlds and illuminating the differences across cultures. What if the artist looked inward to themselves and discovered commonalities across all cultures? If we tried to unite people in the common struggle of life before introducing their differences, we might find more willingness to create political change. The audience will feel compelled to help when they understand that the people struggling in the world are just like them. If “the way to the head is through the heart,” and we feel connected to people through art, we are equipped with new ways to see the world that go beyond our theoretical conceptions of cultures and this lets us into the openness of the human heart that sees people as fellow humans, not as “others.” This is where the universality of art excels by illuminating our similarities more than our differences.

Similarly, Friedrich Schiller believes art is a moral agent in its power to improve character by responding to feelings, not reason (Schiller, 289). Most people today still believe in art's ability to moralize audiences by appealing to their emotions through exposing different perspectives and injustices in the world. However, the difference between Schiller and the modern art critic is in the wording. Schiller chooses to write "character," or the disposition that influences everything in the life of that person. In the culture of a lot of politics today, the only thing a politician needs is for someone to change their mind about a few specific issues so voters cast their votes in the politician's desired direction. Yet, art is not about changing one opinion or belief, it should influence the foundation of one's entire belief system and the moral character that makes someone who they are. When internal change alters the character of a person, external change will radiate everywhere else in the person's opinions and actions in society. Art should attempt to strike the deeper parts of the human psyche with no specific goal, rather, it should aim to develop and refine character. Change from the inside out will be lasting because the person knows their reasons for their opinions; they are not empty words that blow in the air, controlled by whoever is creating the wind. Through art, we are given the opportunity to observe our own character and morals, and we can reflect on our beliefs as well as our inner struggles that are experienced universally.

One way to discover our universal commonalities is by objectifying art and removing the artist from their creations. The result, suggested by Schopenhauer, is the loss of the individuality of the artist, and the unification with something that goes beyond one's singular perception (Schopenhauer, 335-339). I certainly do not think this is the only way to discover unity with others. The subjective experience of the artist connected with their art can also invoke common emotions and experiences. Nevertheless, I do think there is value in separating one's ideas from

their identity and realizing that the ideas themselves will long outlive the individuals who embody them.

To express timeless ideas, the Romantics believe you need a timeless artist. This is exemplified in the role of the genius; the artist who escapes the most blatant reminder of our humanity - time. By intense concentration on the ideas under their phenomenal essences, the ideas of objects can be realized and communicated outside the phenomenal realm through the expression of art, which carries more meaning than the material of which it is made due to the meaning the artist casts upon it (Heidegger, 387). When this occurs, the ideas themselves become timeless because they are not reliant on the structures of human time and physical space to be comprehended. The individuals who enter this timeless realm are called the geniuses and are often associated with God or a higher power giving them insight that cannot be explained. The problem is not with the concept of the genius, but with the recognition of the genius. There are types of people all over the world who can (and do) tap into this space and create works of art through contemplation and reflection. These artists may not be associated with the idea of genius if they are not European, but similar concepts of gods invoking insight apply to many other cultures. The genius, in my understanding, is simply a person who has a desire to discover truths or insights that are common to all humanity. They are not creating for egotistical reasons, but to find a universal truth.

Sometimes searching for a universal truth requires creating art for oneself. Before you can discover the world, one must discover themselves because “the person is a society in miniature” (Novalis, 314). Even though the artist is creating to find truth and unity for all, the act of creating art certainly benefits the artist. It is Schiller’s concept of the play impulse that puts the artist in a state that we typically call the flow state today. In this condition, the artist forgets

time and loses themselves in the realm of possibilities. The artist feels connected to something larger than themselves while simultaneously feeling small in respect to the universe as a whole. This state elevates the contributions of the artist because they are in a different state of mind that invites a kind of effortlessness that flows naturally from the artist to their work. The play impulse is instigated by deliberate focus on their work resulting in a period of time where they are cut off from the rest of the world and enter into the realm of ideas. When the artist is in this state, the art that follows is usually objective because the artist has abandoned his individuality. What is needed today is objective art from a variety of sources. If there is no attempt at discovering universal truths from people all around the world, we will fail to discover what is truly universal, and we will be prevented from benefiting from the knowledge of the universal human condition.

I believe everyone has a capacity to get into this creative space if they so desire, and anyone from any realm can be artists. One reason why the Romantic movement is alluring is because it gives the individual the power to create change, rather than observing the pile of rubble that is life and being left with no direction on how to proceed forward. The Romantic philosophers inspire people to engage in art and go beyond mere survival. Art is to give humanity a means to rise above to the noumenon, where the mind is liberated, and our essence is more than our physicality. Novalis encourages the individual to be the author of their lives and live their lives like a novel. "Everything must become food," (Novalis, 315) and we are to collect the seeds of our experiences and plant them to create something meaningful out of our lives.

Lower classes who do not have the "privilege to contemplate" can still choose what information they consume, even if it is as simple as reading a work of literature that makes them think instead of watching television created for the masses. While it certainly is a privilege to learn and create, it is one that almost everyone has access to, and the privilege only becomes

more powerful the more one engages with art and it starts to influence one's decisions and penetrate into the rest of their lives. Why are we trying to appeal to the wealthy public to create change within the struggling classes instead of including the struggling classes in art directly? Political art only continues to keep people down indirectly by regurgitating the message that lower classes are not privileged enough to create art and enjoy it. The goal is to inspire inner reflection about the world as it is perceived by the individual, and to unite the perceptions and create deeper meaning. If we viewed art like the Romantics, we would be giving people from diverse groups the tools to create art that benefits everyone. If universal truths are universal, more people from differing social classes will have access to them. We might begin to rid art society of its secluded elite and invite lower classes in. Lower classes may feel obliged to create art because their reflections about their own experiences are validated by their being universal. If artists in privileged positions try to emulate the struggles of people not involved in the art world, that is, without individual reflection that arises from the artist herself, the audience will not have something new to contemplate. Rather, they see the work of art as an imitation of how the artist sees the world. Imitation is nothing but a deception of honesty and reality. If we adopted the notion of universal art, we could encourage the inner reflection from people across all different walks of life to produce art that leads to contemplation about the nature of the soul. The art would derive different perceptions of the world, but ultimately, I think art is the medium in which we realize everyone wants and strives for the same things, and when it comes to what is important in life, we are more alike than different.

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