

Art as Promethean Fire: Does Beauty Liberate or Enchant?

→Final version due May 18th

As we learned from Herbert Marcuse, cultural artifacts (movies, television shows, commercials, and even novels) can indoctrinate us into thinking the status quo is “just the way things are.” They can numb us or keep us content, so we don’t rock the boat. Afterall, it is hard to stage a revolution, to protest, or to build a community of like-minded rebels when you spend all your spare time binging Netflix.

Art can, however, be motivating rather than dulling. It can provoke and disturb rather than numb. In her famous essay, “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” the poet Audre Lorde argues that art informs our perspectives and helps us imagine better futures. In the essay “Peril,” writer Toni Morrison claims that art can alert people to their oppression and transform sorrow into meaning. While these thinkers take slightly different angles, both suggest that art serves a political function, that it can change the way people view the world, and help them create a better future.

Plato, the ancient philosopher, agrees with Lorde and Morrison that art can serve political functions. However, unlike them, he doesn’t consider that a good thing. Plato believes art is dangerous for two reasons: first, artists imitate the appearance of things rather than grasping their true nature, making art a kind of illusion. Second, Plato worries that art inflames our emotions rather than our reason, destabilizing the soul and, by extension, society. For these reasons, Plato believes artists should be monitored and controlled by the state. Dictators throughout history have agreed with Plato, as evidenced by their attempts to ban certain art and artists.

An entirely different strand of thought, represented by the author Oscar Wilde, asserts that art shouldn’t serve a practical function at all, political or otherwise. Wilde believes that what makes art beautiful is the fact that it is useless. He believes that art that serves a political purpose is propaganda and shouldn’t even be considered art. Many artists and critics take this point of view, arguing that the moment art is expected to *do* something, we subtly reduce it to a tool. In doing so, we may actually undermine the freedom that makes great art possible.

Here is your assignment: Choose a quote representative of the above theories (*a quote from one of the writers*—not my summary!) and use it to view your artifact and your experience of that artifact. How does it encourage you to experience your artifact, and is that similar or different to how you experienced your artifact before you knew about the theory? Then, after using Marcuse or Wilde, or Lorde/Morrison to look at your artifact, look back at the theory. Is there anything that your artifact helps you see that the theory missed or couldn’t account for? Your goal is to persuade your classmates that your artifact either confirms, challenges, or complicates the theory you’ve chosen. Your final paper should be at least 750 words and should have your name in the upper lefthand corner. The final paper and bluebook containing the scaffolding assignments are due May 18th, the last day of class.