

SMPLECTY

Ecological Civilisation and the Will to Art



SAMUEL ALEXANDER

Essays on the Aesthetics of Existence

Preface: The Apocalyptic Sublime

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* This is a provisional Table of Contents. The essays are being published individually as they are completed, meaning that this project is a work-in-progress which may evolve.

‘The bleaker and emptier life becomes under capitalism,
the more intense is the yearning after beauty.’

– ***Georg Lukács***

Preface
The Apocalyptic Sublime

Samuel Alexander

There once lived a philosopher of the future called Zarathustra, who, increasingly aware of his unsettled spirit, left his home by the lakeside and went to live alone in the mountains. For ten years he meditated on his troubled condition and wearied not thereof. But eventually he felt something change in his heart, as if he were a bee that had gathered too much honey – his cup was about to overflow. So, one morning as the sun rose, Zarathustra announced before the great star that he would descend from the mountain, as the sun does at nightfall, and bring light to the underworld. Thus began Zarathustra's descent. On his way down the mountain he happened to cross paths with a saint who had left his hermitage to gather roots in the forest. In the morning mist the aged man was singing and chanting in glorification of God. Could it be possible, Zarathustra spoke in his heart, that this saint had not yet heard that *God is dead*?

Friedrich Nietzsche's parable is well known.¹ Suppose, however, that this philosopher of the future were alive today, cast into the apocalyptic environment of industrial civilisation in the twenty-first century. What life might he lead? He would soon realise that, despite the deepest desire for spiritual retreat, he could no longer exit society to live alone in the mountains, for all the available land had been enclosed and privatised. Instead, he would have to sell his labour simply in order to live within global capitalist society. By accident of fate, he might find himself trying to meet key performance indicators in a corporate university, enduring his unsettled spirit in the polluted and crowded atmosphere of some urban landscape.

Nevertheless, if this philosopher were sufficiently firm of mind – if he were a yea-sayer that affirmed his fate – he could undertake his inner work even in the inhospitable conditions of industrial modernity, living humbly within the wasteland of acquisitive society and yet above it. One day a clown in the ivory tower might summarily cast Zarathustra out of the educational-industrial complex, imposing upon him the precarious freedom to meditate on the human condition without the distractions of academic life. Blessed be the clown, declared Zarathustra, and he continued to love his fate. But what now for this free spirit?

Retiring to his small garden in the suburbs, we can imagine Zarathustra leaping into the depths of his being and writing a book, drafting and redrafting it in a timeless state of poetic frenzy. Eventually, after an indeterminate duration, he would rise with the dawn and realise that his meditations were complete, at which point he would immediately share his learnings with the world, startling the Owl of Minerva as he left.

Zarathustra would be shocked but not surprised by the darkness that lay waiting for him as he reemerged into the world. In the marketplace people were gathered to be entertained by a tightrope walker, but lo and behold the entertainer failed to make the perilous crossing, falling to his death on the busy tarseal below. The people cheered and called out for more entertainment. Could it be possible, Zarathustra wondered, that these people had not yet heard that *capitalism is dying and Earth is being killed*? Verily, he muttered to himself as he

looked around the marketplace, this civilisation is still moving, but it is the movement of a falling corpse, the hair and fingernails of which will continue to grow long after death.



If God is dead, capitalism is dying, and Earth itself is being killed: how now shall we live? This is the confronting question that consumed me over the last year as I worked on this collection of essays, and I'm happy to admit that I wrote them primarily for myself – not so much as a scholarly exercise but rather as an existential need. It is an anxiety of mine that I never really know my position on an issue until I have attempted to distil my vague musings into words. As my project got underway, this anxiety became unbearably acute regarding a particular matter that I needed to clarify and to which the following pages are dedicated, namely, whether existence can be affirmed while living in a dying civilisation, on a dying planet, situated in what seems to be a godless and absurd universe. If one were to find a way, despite all this, to say 'yes' to life – and for now this remains an open question – in what form or by what process could such an affirmation authentically emerge? What might such an affirmation look like? Perhaps more importantly, what might it feel like? Conversely, perhaps the only reasonable response to an existence such as ours might be a disciplined renunciation of a world that ought not to exist. These are some of the lingering existential uncertainties that have fuelled my inquiries.

Despite the personal motivations for working on this project, it would please me if there were at least a few fragments of these essays that might be of use to others, so I cast them out into the darkness of cyberspace and drop the manuscript down the well of industrial civilisation. I'm now left waiting, listening for any echo as it hits the bottom. My hope is that the themes may reverberate in the soul of some readers, as they have done in mine, in strange, unsettling, but uplifting harmony. The only advice I offer the reader (echoing Henry Thoreau) is that this book, like all books, should be read as deliberately as it was written, for the themes and theses will be easier to digest if they are chewed over slowly.



In this preface I will explain why I came to write these essays. My purpose is to state some of the background assumptions, defended in my other publications,² that I don't intend to explain or justify in any detail herein – the present work is quite long enough. Fortunately, I feel many of these critical perspectives on contemporary society already reside in the collective unconscious, so most people should accept and understand them intuitively. Every day I see these unsettling realities rising more clearly to the surface of consciousness, like oil in water, ever harder to repress, even if most people have not yet admitted as much to themselves.

We are, it seems, cursed to live in 'interesting' times. For almost two decades I have been studying and writing about industrial civilisation, focussing on the interwoven problems of growth economics, societal complexity, fossil energy dependence, ecosystemic decline, consumerism, and capitalism. During this time a reality has dawned on me that I now believe is inescapable: this civilisation has no future. There are contradictions built into the very

nature of the global capitalist system that admit no resolution. Let me briefly restate this critique.

Most starkly, industrial civilisation is fatally dependent on a finite and depleting stock of fossil energy – coal, oil, and gas. It becomes clearer by the day that post-carbon technologies (whether renewables or nuclear) will be unable stop humanity from blowing the ‘carbon budget’ for a safe climate. That is, it is already too late for ‘green tech’ to save us from destabilising climatic systems, with existing atmospheric concentrations of carbon having already locked us into a dangerous amount of global heating and extreme weather.³ Furthermore, as fossil energy supplies eventually peak and decline in coming years, the global economy will be unable to maintain, let alone expand, current energy surpluses, especially in the affluent societies that currently enjoy unprecedented and unsustainable energy abundance. While transitioning to a renewable energy system of moderated production and consumption is both desirable and ultimately necessary – particularly when distributive equity is taken into account – almost nowhere do we hear about the necessity of *planned energy descent*. Instead, the dominant, celebratory message in public discourse is always and everywhere the techno-optimistic fantasy that we will simply ‘green’ the supply of energy and all socio-ecological contradictions will be resolved. Little do people seem to appreciate that global capitalism would remain grossly unjust and unsustainable, even if it managed to run entirely on solar and wind energy. Energy is indeed the lifeblood of civilisation, but our problems are even more fundamental.

More broadly, the structural demand for infinite economic growth on a finite biosphere is ecocidal, a tragedy unfolding in real time, exacerbated by the wealth-concentrating tendencies of capitalist economies. If once our species lived on a planet relatively empty of human beings, today we live on a planet that is evidently full to overflowing. The human population has grown exponentially to exceed eight billion people, trending towards eleven billion by the end of the century. As this expanding population continues to seek ever-rising material living standards by way of sustained economic growth, the global economy is being driven into gross ecological overshoot, dangerously crossing or threatening to cross a range of planetary boundaries with dire consequences that are already unfolding. Indeed, the metaphor of ‘Earth as a Petri dish’ has become worryingly apt, given that the dominant colony seems to be consuming all the available resources and is at risk of poisoning itself from its own wastes. This raises questions about whether humanity can muster the intelligence to avoid the fate of common bacteria. Techno-optimists and free marketeers promise ecological salvation via continuous ‘green growth’, all the while the face of Gaia is vanishing as Empire marches resolutely on.

To add cruel fuel to the fire, the so-called peak of industrial civilisation – consumerist culture – is failing to satisfy the human craving for meaning, and yet the collective response seems to be to dig deeper into the pit in search of something that has not yet been provided. As poet Bertolt Brecht noted with piercing insight, ‘What were bad harvests / To the need that ravages us in the midst of plenty?’⁴ Too much is never enough. Few consider the option of climbing out of this pit, or avoiding it altogether, through the escape routes of mindful sufficiency and the economics of ‘enough’. Admittedly, that’s no easy feat in a web of complexity that is conspiring against us, entangling us against our will – by design. Even the affluent societies find themselves in a pit, ensnared in a web. For whom, then, do we destroy the planet?

On top of all this, the threat of nuclear Armageddon remains ever present – the terrifying capacity to destroy ourselves through the ‘sophistication’ of our weaponry. Such a technological catastrophe could fast-track humanity’s demise at any moment, a risk heightened by growing geopolitical tensions over access to the declining stocks of natural resources. I write these words in early 2023, when the global superpowers are rattling their nuclear sabres more loudly than they have for decades. The Doomsday Clock has never been closer to midnight.

These menacing contradictions are intensifying year by year, and I fear that at some point they will lead to the collapse of civilisation as we know it. No one can know for certain whether this great rupture will happen swiftly or unfold agonisingly over multiple decades, and there are many descent pathways that lie before us. But my confident hypothesis – both frightful and hopeful – is that by the end of this century, industrial civilisation will be an *historical phenomenon*. In fact, this process of inevitable descent is already well under way, as evidenced by the range of environmental, social, and political crises competing for our attention today. We need not examine those matters in any detail here, for they are too numerous, and are known well enough – even as we might look away.

The end of *this* civilisation, however, does not imply the end of civilisation, *as such*. Whether some phoenix might one day emerge from the ashes of the Empire is a speculative inquiry to which this collection of essays dedicates some attention. But every day it becomes harder to imagine that there is some door hidden in the wall through which we might escape the Four Horsemen. This imaginative sterility however suggests that any escape will require an imaginative intervention, not merely a technocratic solution. As the Parisian graffiti of 1968 declared: ‘those who lack imagination cannot imagine what is lacking’.



What might seem surprising about this grim diagnosis is that there is absolutely no shortage of evidence to support it.⁵ In fact, it was supportable several decades ago – and nothing has changed, except the mounting of further evidence on the deepening of the human-ecological predicament. Most of my scholarly work has involved reviewing and synthesising that evidence, attempting to draw out its implications, and exploring responses and strategies for transformation. What needs to happen seems clear enough. Lifting the poorest billions out of destitution is obviously a moral imperative, but doing so is likely to place further burdens on an already overburdened ecosystem. This confluence of ecological and social justice imperatives calls radically into question the legitimacy of further economic expansion in the already high-impact, consumerist societies of the so-called developed world. It follows that any resolution to the crisis of ecological overshoot will need to entail ‘degrowth’ – that is, *planned economic contraction* of the energy and resource demands of the most developed regions of the world. It will also require a reconceptualisation of sustainable development in the Global South, beyond the conventional path of carbon-based industrial growth. This ‘limits to growth’ position signifies a necessary paradigm shift in the dominant conception of human progress, one that is being explored boldly today within movements associated with degrowth, permaculture, post-development, voluntary simplicity, appropriate technology, and economic re-localisation.

I have summarised the critical perspective – but what about the positive, regenerative alternative? Although the range of post-growth and post-capitalist movements are diverse and defy singular definition, in general terms the alternative paradigm is as clear as the problems. What is needed is a transition beyond the existing order of growthism, building in its place a constellation of highly localised economies of sufficiency, based on renewable energy, appropriate technology, egalitarianism, participatory democracy, and non-affluent but sufficient material cultures of voluntary simplicity. Counter-intuitively, perhaps, advocates for this type of Great Transition also maintain that moving beyond growth economics will increase quality of life, by reshaping cultures and societal structures to promote non-materialistic forms of meaning and wellbeing beyond consumerist conceptions of ‘the good life’. Sometimes dismissed as utopian or naïve, the obvious rejoinder is that nothing could be more fantastical than the current economic model that assumes the viability of limitless growth on a finite planet. In any case, in an era when it is commonly remarked that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, perhaps utopianism is not an indictment but a defence of radical movements today. This is the paradigm shift I have been working on since my doctoral thesis on degrowth (2006-2010), and it is heartening to see these movements expanding and gaining momentum, albeit slowly and despite remaining on the margins of public discourse.

Nevertheless, over time I began to wonder whether I was approaching the transitional question in the wrong way. The scientific evidence for deep change is compelling, supported by basic moral principles of fairness, justice, and sustainability. Yet, these forces of evidence and theory aren’t having much practical, real-world impact. As I began contemplating the reasons for this civilisational inertia, I realised that I had been proceeding as if the primary problem was an information deficit, assuming that existing crises were mainly a result of *intellectual* or *scientific* failings of our species. I had assumed with typical academic bias that when more evidence and better theories were available, we would see the error of our ways and steer the ship of civilisation away from the cliff’s edge.

Having been struck too often by the ineffectiveness of evidence and argument, I now see that humanity’s primary obstacle is not an intellectual or evidential one but an *aesthetic* one, related to our sensibilities, felt needs, communication strategies, and imaginative capacities. I will suggest, consequently, that this obstacle also demands an engagement in aesthetic terms – an approach that will obviously require some explaining and defending. Defined further in the introduction, my use of the term ‘aesthetic’ will appeal both to the modern usage, pertaining to the philosophies of art, beauty, and taste, as well as to the earlier meaning, pertaining to the realm of sensuous experience. Inspired by and engaging with thinkers such as Fredrich Schiller, William Morris, Fredrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, and Jane Bennett, I will be proposing that through art and the aesthetic dimensions of life we can move most coherently toward an ecological civilisation in which freedom, flourishing, and justice are open and unfolding realities.

Herein lies one of the points of departure in the following essays. Humanity’s fatal problem is not that we do not *know* we have to change in fundamental ways (although some still deny this); nor is there any shortage of assertions about *how* to change (although there are many false paths). My preliminary proposition – a premise of the project – is that to date very few

people have acquired a *taste* for the profound changes that are needed. This is partly because so few have developed the imaginative or aesthetic capacities to *envision* those changes, and fewer still have shown the disposition to *desire* them. Taste, vision, imagination, desire – these can be understood as aesthetic categories, and this collection of essays emerged from the hypothesis that those categories would reward aesthetic analysis. For in an age increasingly called the Anthropocene – the age of ecological overshoot driven by human activity – what is needed more than anything is planned contraction of energy and resource demands by overgrown and overconsuming regions of the world. As I have suggested, the evidential case for embracing ‘degrowth’ is compelling.⁶ But *there is no taste for degrowth*, which can be understood as an aesthetic obstacle requiring an aesthetic intervention.

Strangely, this approach implies that if my arguments are ultimately accepted, readers will eventually find themselves needing to throw away the ladder after having climbed up it, given that I am presenting a rational case for an aesthetic response. In other words, reasoning can only take us so far, or rather, it may be that the intellectual shifts that are required may need to be *preceded* by an aesthetic engagement and transformation in the emotional and sensuous capacities of our species. This realisation points to the need for a new politics of art. To paraphrase poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge: we must create the taste by which we will be judged.

Accordingly, my starting point is this: that we know in our heads that there must be more humane, meaningful, and sustainable ways to live, but we do not yet *feel* this in our hearts. For if we did – if a new aesthetic sensibility had already arisen – the emotional energy would be at hand to bring new worlds into existence through creative and sustained collective action. The aesthetic revolution would have already done its work. And yet we wait, as if paralysed before the looming apocalypse. I believe this is due to an aesthetic deficit – a shortage of beauty, meaning, creativity, and pleasure in our lives. But I will argue that this deficit is within our creative hands and minds to resolve.



It is good to remember that the term ‘apocalypse’ has a dual meaning, not simply referring to the ‘end of the world’ but also signifying a ‘great unveiling or disclosure’ of knowledge. I confess that I have had fleeting experiences of the sublime when contemplating the apocalyptic unveiling that awaits our species. In the eighteenth century, the pioneering philosopher of the sublime, Edmund Burke, described this notion as the strongest emotion the mind is capable of feeling: ‘Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime.’⁷

And yet, Burke explained that the sublime is not exclusively an unpleasant emotion, for the fear and danger we feel can, in certain circumstances, also confer a certain delight. As we observe an ominous storm approaching, watch fierce waves crashing violently against the rocks, or stand upon a majestic mountain ridge and look down upon the vast ravines below, we can be cast into an unsettling state of awe and self-conscious insignificance, at once frightening and pleasurable, restoring a certain perspective to our lives. What is more, Burke suggested that feelings of the sublime can overwhelm our faculties of reason: ‘The passion

caused by the great and the sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is the state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror.⁸

Of course, the delight induced by experiences of the sublime are only possible because of the safe distance one remains from the immense and threatening forces under consideration. I acknowledge the privilege of this distance, for it is obvious that the apocalypse has already arrived for billions of human beings on Earth today, not to mention the broader community of life whose habitats are under ruthless and relentless attack. Thus, I must also acknowledge the perversity of any feelings of awe in relation to a falling civilisation that might end up destroying us all.

But it is for this very reason that prospects of the apocalypse can evoke strangely seductive feelings of uncomfortable pleasure. Such a rupture promises a path of transformative change that has proven unachievable through the mechanisms of activism, politics, or conventional education. Contemplation of such change provides a further source of the sublime in what Burke calls ‘infinity’, where the eye is not able to ‘perceive the bounds’⁹ of something, or ‘see an object distinctly’,¹⁰ and this gives rise to a ‘terrible uncertainty of the things described.’¹¹ For Burke: ‘Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and the truest test of the sublime.’¹²

A recent realisation, however, has come to haunt me: I no longer experience the apocalyptic sublime. My only explanation for this is that I no longer feel I am at a safe distance. One cannot experience sublimity when submerged in great waves that are threatening at any moment to cast one violently into the rocks. And so, my state of perception has shifted, leaving me with a new sense of urgency, and, if I were to speculate, I sense this heightened urgency in other people too, even if we are unsure how to talk about our unsettled condition. I sometimes worry that the intensifying cultural tensions we see in the world today are an indirect and confused manifestation of these anxieties, of which we are still learning to manage and which no one fully understands. Great cultural shifts are often understood only in the rear-view mirror, by which time it is too late to adjust to the fact that the changes perceived were even closer to transpiring than what they appeared to be.

Traditional apocalyptic discourse has always involved the anticipation of some world-disclosing event – the apocalypse ‘to come’. I feel time is nigh to deconstruct this linear conception – or rather, the linear conception has deconstructed itself. In other words, we must no longer conceive of the apocalypse as some future event that may or may not arrive. Instead, it should be accepted that we are already living in the End Times – from a geological perspective, the Anthropocene is a blink of the eye. The great unveiling is already underway, even if we remain entrenched in conditions of disorder and disorientation. No longer can we merely ‘bear witness’. We are always and already involved in a perpetual state of crisis that is not *imminent* but *immanent*.

This is the soil in which this project was seeded, coming to fruition in the fading light of the apocalyptic sublime. As related above, the thesis I will be presenting is that only by passing through a new aesthetic condition, induced by aesthetic experience and creative activity, can

humanity hope to respond adequately or appropriately to our current predicament. That response is going to involve a shift away from ever-expanding materialistic goals and turning to the realm of the spirit to satisfy our hunger for infinity, a monumental task, of which the pioneering underlabourers have already begun. Having had my hopes for salvation exhausted elsewhere, I am now convinced that the aesthetic dimensions of life alone have the capacity to solve the most fundamental problems caused by growth-orientated, technological society, problems which are not themselves related to a lack of technology and which cannot be solved by more or better technology. Thus, in the face of extreme pessimism, which in the past has tempted me to despair, I can now offer readers an aesthetic justification for existence, which I believe is both coherent, compelling, even hopeful – despite everything.

As my friend Mark Burch says: ‘When all appeals to reason have failed, tell a new story.’¹³

¹ Fredrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

² My publications are listed, and mostly freely available, at my website: <https://samuelalexander.info/> (accessed 20 April 2023).

³ For example, see the reports by David Spratt and Ian Dunlop, published by the Breakthrough Institute, which review and analyse the latest climate science. Available at: <https://www.breakthroughonline.org.au/publications> (accessed 20 April 2023).

⁴ Bertolt Brecht, ‘On Judging’ in Bertolt Brecht, *Poems 1913-1956* (London: Methuen, 1987) p. 308.

⁵ See generally, William Ripple et al, ‘World’s Scientists’ Warning of a Climate Emergency’ (2021) *BioScience* 71(9): pp. 894-898; Thomas Wiedmann, Manfred Lenzen, Lorenz Keyber, and Julia Steinberger, ‘Scientist’ Warning on Affluence’ (2020) *Nature Communications* 11: 3107; Thomas Homer-Dixon et al, ‘Synchronous Failure: The Emerging Casual Architecture of Global Crisis’ (2015) *Ecology and Society* 20(3): 6. See also, note 6.

⁶ Useful literature reviews include, Martin Weiss and Claudio Cattaneo, ‘Degrowth – Taking Stock and Reviewing an Emerging Academic Paradigm’ (2017) *Ecological Economics* 137: pp. 220-230; Giorgos Kallis et al, ‘Research on Degrowth’ (2018) *Annual Review of Environmental and Resources* 43: 4.1-4.26. See also, note 2.

⁷ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 36.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 53

⁹ *Ibid*, p.67.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 58

¹¹ *Ibid*.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 67.

¹³ Mark Burch, *Euterra Rising: The Last Utopia* (Winnipeg: Mark Burch, 2016).