

SMPLECTY

Ecological Civilisation and the Will to Art



SAMUEL ALEXANDER

Essays on the Aesthetics of Existence

Banish the Poets! The Power and Politics of Aesthetic Education

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'The development of man's capacity for feeling is... the more urgent need of our age.'

– ***Friedrich Schiller***

Banish the Poets! On the Power and Politics of Aesthetic Education

Samuel Alexander

One of the most famous and controversial elements in Plato's *Republic* concerns his policy proposal to banish the poets from his ideal city-state.¹ It was not a blanket dismissal, however. He didn't banish *all* poets, just those whom he considered the wrong kind of poet. Admittedly, this included the greatest names in Greek literature, such as Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes. In Plato's view, these poets told lies about the gods, sometimes depicted villains that were happy and virtuous people in misery, and they would seduce audiences and actors through imitation or 'mimesis' to embody improper characters. These features and more besides were criticised on the grounds that they might have a lasting negative effect on the state of one's soul. Plato argued that what we imitate or are exposed to, we become, without necessarily being aware that we are being changed. Poetic mimesis, even when we recognise it as such, might interfere insidiously with the proper functioning of the rational mind (the epistemological critique) and one's emotional balance (the moral critique). So even philosophers and virtuous people were at risk of intellectual deception and ethical corruption through exposure to degenerate forms of poetry. Accordingly, such undesirable poets should be banished from the city-state and their works should not be available to young ears, or indeed culture at large, owing to their corrupting influence on the soul.²

On the other hand, Plato maintained that the *right* type of poets – those who tell edifying stories that celebrate virtues like temperance, courage, and sobriety – were critical to establishing a good, well-ordered society. They were a necessary means of promoting proper values, communicating rational beliefs persuasively, and encouraging sound dispositions, all of which were necessary for the achievement of political harmony and social prosperity. Plato recognised the great power, not just of poetry, but of the arts more generally. These aesthetic modes of communication and expression were prominent means of cultural transmission – a means of shaping social norms and traditions. So the role of art in culture, then as now, should be taken very seriously for what it is: education.

Whether or not some poets are banished from society might seem to be of trifling significance for the contemporary reader, given that not many people seem to read poetry today. The stereotype of the poet as the misanthropic, self-indulgent bohemian, or nature-loving romantic, might even tempt the modern reader to sympathise with Plato's decree – good riddance! But in the Athens of ancient Greece, poetry did not lie at the margins of culture but at its centre, with an influence more akin to mass media in the twenty-first century in terms of cultural influence and impact. When we appreciate this point, the political regulation of poetry acquires a contemporary relevance and poses problems that still demand attention. Plato recognised how poetry, music, and the arts more broadly shaped culture. Being no democrat, he did not hesitate to advocate for the use of state power to regulate artistic creation and performance according to his vision of the common good.

Most people of liberal sensibility are likely to object to Plato's authoritarian solution to the problem of how to create a good culture and an ideal Republic. We would defend the liberty of artists to create as they wish, as a corollary of the inalienable right of free expression. Even if we felt confident in our own aesthetic judgement of what was socially beneficial, we would be unlikely to feel comfortable imposing our views on everyone else. Individual choice and taste in aesthetic matters are to be valued, and the avant-garde should have the freedom to advance in its own unforeseeable ways, as the call of genius (or madness) dictates. Allowing the state to decide what art is permitted seems like a terrible idea, socially, politically, and aesthetically.

At its extreme, Plato's reasoning could even produce dictators like Stalin, who also recognised the power of the arts, calling writers and poets 'engineers of the human soul'.³ This insight into art's power motivated Stalin and his secret police to round up those artists whom the Communist Party did not like and either execute them or send them off to the gulags for a most unpoetic life of hard labour. The very threat of execution would also have created a 'chilling effect' on the creation of new art, becoming a self-regulating policy to some extent. In one of the more disturbing lines ever expressed by a human being, Stalin is reported to have said: 'Ideas are more powerful than guns. We would not let our enemies have guns, why should we let them have ideas?'⁴ And thus, the arts, always brimming with new ideas and perspectives, were purged of so-called dissidents. Anyone who thinks that art lacks political or social effects needs to explain why authoritarian governments have always seen art as dangerous and in need of severe – albeit selective – repression.

Leaving aside Stalin's murderous tendencies, I surmise that most people living in liberal democratic societies today would shudder at the idea of any government department being judge and censor of cultural production; of state officials being tasked with determining what art is edifying and permissible and what art must be prohibited. Nevertheless, if we recognise the cultural significance of the arts – if Athenian poetry is transposed into a cultural force as significant as mass media – we ought to be concerned by the same issues that disturbed Plato. Specifically, that bad culture can corrupt, just as good culture can edify and nourish. Even if we would deny governments the role of being arbiters of aesthetic value, that does not relieve us of the responsibility of considering what forces shape culture and whether there are things we can do to improve our world by shaping a better culture. This might include the role of art and aesthetic practices in that process.⁵

As an alternative to Plato's aesthetic authoritarianism, is our only option the policy of letting the 'free market' determine the shape of our cultures? Hopefully not. Reflecting on the vapidness of reality TV, social media, and pop music today – what the Frankfurt school would have called products of the 'culture industry'⁶ – we might have concerns about where market capitalism has taken contemporary culture and what it is doing to us as citizens. One might suggest that the good poets have already been banished from contemporary society, albeit through the insidious workings of the market rather than by the dictates of the state. The bad poets – those soul-numbing 'artists' who merely distract or entertain us with formulaic gruel – have come to dominate cultural life. After all, turn on the television, scroll through social media, and read the news: where is the good art to be found? The art that energises and inspires? The art that makes existing injustices intolerable and the path to a more humane world clear and inviting? Too often the primary evidence is absence. We suffer, as I have suggested, from an aesthetic

deficit disorder. People everywhere seem hungry for soul-nourishing art and self-determined creative activity, but we find ourselves living in conditions of aesthetic and spiritual famine. Perhaps, as Dostoyevsky once declared, we have arrived at a time when only 'beauty can save the world.'⁷

This brief engagement with Plato's view on the arts was intended to re-introduce the theme of aesthetic education in society, which is the focus of this essay.⁸ In what follows I will consider three obstacles to societal transformation that are inhibiting the transition to a just and sustainable society, in response to which I highlight, in each case, the critical role of aesthetic education. First, I will offer a broad critique of the existing educational paradigm under capitalism, which I call 'education for economic growth' or 'economic for profit', following philosopher Martha Nussbaum.⁹ This paradigm is designed to maximise profits and economic growth and its social function is to shape citizens into obedient worker-consumers. An alternative education is needed. Building upon my previous analysis of Friedrich Schiller's aesthetic theory, I will propose that the *process* of bringing about an alternative education serendipitously overlaps directly with the *goals* of such education. That is, aesthetic education, engagement, and value are both the means and the ends of this strategy of emancipation and cultural enrichment.

Second, I will consider the so-called 'information deficit model' of change, which assumes human beings are fundamentally rational, evidence-based thinkers. On that basis, the theory maintains that the primary means of societal progress is more evidence and better arguments.¹⁰ I believe that this is at best a partial and often misleading theory of change that marginalises the role of the arts and aesthetic education in social and political transformation. We human beings are as much influenced by our hearts as by our heads, as even the arch-rationalist Plato recognised. This suggests that the arts and aesthetic interventions in culture are highly significant shapers of the world, for better or for worse. Perhaps it is not better evidence that we are lacking today, but better art. Perhaps what is needed, more than anything, is a new aesthetic education, one that emerges from the grassroots and thereby avoids the dictates of state and market. Indeed, I have come to believe that aesthetic education is the most promising means of expanding the social imagination. Accordingly, it is an essential ingredient to cultural change – more powerful, perhaps, than the rational provision of better evidence and stronger arguments.

The third issue to consider, closely related to the first two, concerns what could be diagnosed as an imaginative sterility in contemporary culture, one that seems to have left so many citizens unable to envision forms of life beyond consumer capitalism. Political and cultural theorist Mark Fisher called this enclosing of the imagination 'capitalism realism',¹¹ often defined as the view that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. This is both a condition of imaginative sterility and an affective enclosure related to our felt needs. After all, the world does not seem to be on the cusp of a revolution whereby humanity claims its dignity as a free and self-determining species. Social movements for resistance and renewal exist, but they seem highly marginal and underdeveloped, perhaps because different, better, more liberated worlds can barely be imagined.

The same forces that have shaped our needs, desires, sensibilities, and rationalities, have shaped – that is, enclosed – our imaginations. The result is a growing and intensifying homogenisation of consciousness and again, the prescription to be explored in this essay will be a renewed aesthetic education. The purpose of this education would be to break through the crust of conventional thinking about possible futures and shatter the ruts in which we find ourselves, opening the horizons of possibility and allowing us to create something new. But in order to create something new, first we need the aesthetic capacities to *imagine* it in our minds and *feel* it in our hearts. Only later do we need to *reason* and *act* our way to its fruition.

Education for profit

I begin by framing the problems under discussion in terms of education. This will also clarify the role an alternative mode of education must play in any resolution of these problems. Today it seems we have been educated into a species that is most accurately described as *homo economicus*. Given that economic growth is the most important benchmark for measuring societal progress under the global capitalist order, it follows that the purpose of education should be to create obedient, docile worker-consumers who are most likely to contribute to that ultimate value. Critical thinking or imagination might be relevant to the economic elites in positions of authority, where the skills and capacities for independent thought can maximise profit through astute innovation of processes, products, and marketing. But for most workers, the primary expectation is simply to obey and efficiently undertake their tasks in the factory, office, or farm, without question. In these typical circumstances, it is best that the imagination is numbed in order to facilitate the efficient achievement of menial but profit-maximising tasks. Curiosity, creativity, and the love of wisdom are not often seen as ‘profitable’ and, as such, should not be encouraged, and indeed, should be actively suppressed. One simply ought to do what one is told.

Of course, growth-obsessed cultures do not *only* desire growth, but it is the nature of the capitalist paradigm to treat growth as something of a ‘false target’ to aim for. That is, it is assumed that if a society aims for growth, the other things that are desired – health, security, education, and so forth – will be most effectively advanced. Within the capitalist growth paradigm, what is of paramount importance is to educate people so they can ‘get jobs’ and contribute to profit-maximisation as workers and consumers. This ‘jobs and growth’ mantra is so powerful and deeply entrenched that in capitalist societies today, politicians can sometimes see an advantage in denigrating the humanities allegedly on the grounds that they aren’t needed for economic growth. The humanities might be desirable perhaps, but something of a luxury, even superfluous, in these tough economic times.¹²

The risk of course – with effects we are already seeing – is that ‘education for economic growth’ or ‘education for profit’¹³ will produce generations of worker-consumers that are quite useful productive machines but not always very good at being free and community-orientated citizens; not well-versed in the art of critical thinking, or being imaginative, open-minded, compassionate, or sensitive to the sufferings of others or planet. This is not so much a moral critique as an economic one, given that people, when beaten into the shape of *homo economicus*, are usually just trying to survive in a hostile economic environment, and are not *inherently* greedy, selfish, or subservient.

Nevertheless, such an education can give rise to citizenries composed of people who engage or rather manipulate each other in terms of economic self-interest in the marketplace. Adopting a business model approach to social engagement, fellow citizens are treated as a means to an end, rather than an end in themselves. These market actors will know nothing or too little of what it is like to interact with people in due recognition of their mysterious complexity, depth, and beauty. Instead, subjects of capitalism are educated to deal with others in terms of advancing their own exchange value in the market.

But surely something noble or essential in the human spirit is lost when we are reduced to antagonistic atoms in a totalising marketplace. As philosopher and social reformer Rabindranath Tagore wrote: ‘while making use of [material possessions], man has to be careful to protect himself from [their] tyranny. If he is weak enough to grow smaller to fit himself to his covering, then it becomes a process of gradual suicide by shrinkage of the soul.’¹⁴ In other words, education purely for profit is a grossly impoverished conception of education, a subterranean assault upon the integrity of any citizenry, and it is not clear whether democratic society can survive such an assault.

The external forces of this assault arise from the cultural, economic, and political contexts of our lives, which provide inhospitable soil for self-creation, rendering us cogs in a machine, managed by the exigencies of instrumental reason. But even within spheres of potential agency and freedom, there are internal forces within us, whereby people often *choose* to live in bad faith and in fear of freedom. Such inauthentic living strategies deflate creative resistance and turn us into conforming, subservient beings that go with the flow of the status quo, created but not creative. Modernity has given with one hand and taken back with the other. Yes, many of the citizens in the affluent regions of the world find themselves with unprecedented wealth and technological capacity. Nevertheless, so many are also disenchanted with life, disconnected from people, nature, and indeed themselves. Our natures are out of balance.

Martha Nussbaum calls this the ‘silent crisis’¹⁵. It is silent because it is hard to hear the crisis coming, even though its effects are everywhere. An economic or political crisis is generally obvious. Politicians and corporate leaders can leap into coordinated action to try to resolve it. But an educational crisis can be – and is – in many ways invisible, silent, operating more like a cancer than an earthquake. The point of this critique of education for profit is not to disparage the often critical, necessary, and important education for things like engineering, computing, maths, science, and so forth. There are obviously material foundations that must be established for any good society to emerge and sustain itself. But a far broader education, beyond the realm of economic contribution, is needed not just for good citizenship but for the fostering of meaningful lives. Indeed, educators for profit might even fear (not merely tolerate) education for genuine citizenship, since the latter might lead to the realisation that profit is not the ultimate value it is currently held out to be. An education for citizenship, which I’ll soon argue needs to include a robust aesthetic education, is likely to be dangerous to the established order, and this is why, no doubt, it is currently repressed.

Maverick priest and political radical, Ivan Illich, wrote extensively on such issues in the 1970s, making a case for the ‘deschooling’ of society.¹⁶ He argued that the industrialisation of centralised, compulsory schooling had resulted in mere anti-intellectual learning for

certificates, fostering ignorance with little true education. He saw a 'hidden curriculum' in Westernised education that served to indoctrinate the youth into accepting industrial society without question, churning out obedient consumers with little capacity for critical thinking. His proposal was to develop alternative modes of education that would assist in the unlearning of capitalist culture.

Despite the existence of a critical counterculture, education for profit remains the dominant model and this has aesthetic effects. Earlier, I recounted the story about the world-famous violinist who unassumingly performed on his three-and-a-half-million-dollar violin in a Washington train station. What was striking was how few people stopped to listen or admire the aesthetic spectacle, at most a few young children (from whom we might have something to learn). The disturbing lesson is that the world might be full of more beauty than we know, which we just miss while rushing through our lives, conditioned to focus our attention on other things. What were people rushing by to do? Get home to watch television? Even if people were rushing to get to work in order to pay the rent, we should condemn an economic structure that has left us too busy to absorb such beauty, especially when it is freely on offer. But this indictment is also grounds for hope. If the world is more beautiful than we appreciate, perhaps there are ways of restructuring our consciousness to be more receptive to these aesthetic rewards, and even to become creators of aesthetic value ourselves.

Can we overcome our current condition as *homo economicus* – obedient, self-interested producers and consumers – and become something new? Or rather, looking back through history, can we reclaim our creative and sensuous natures and potentials as *homo aestheticus*? Perhaps it is less about looking backwards than it is about looking forward. If we come to realise that our aesthetic natures have yet to be fulfilled, we can look forward to, and fight for, a *homo aestheticus* 'to come'. Culture has certainly created deep ruts whereby we are seduced into conforming and obeying. It is so easy to go with the flow. But, as outlined in the earlier essay on Schiller, we need to find ways to disrupt our 'normal' or 'conventional' senses of self and claim our freedoms, both individually and politically. We need change, but how might change come about?

The 'information deficit' theory of change

Currently there is little evidence within advanced, industrialised nations that people within the dominant culture think or feel that there is any need to transcend consumer culture or the capitalist forms of political economy that drive and are driven by it. The highly developed state of global capitalism in the twenty-first century corresponds to a very low revolutionary potential.¹⁷ This is the given reality and there is little use in denying it; little use in fabricating a false hope merely to ease our sense of foreboding and dread. The Marxian idea that the working classes would develop a revolutionary consciousness as the contradictions of capitalism intensified has not transpired in the advanced capitalist nations, and does not seem to be threatening to emerge. While capitalism is evidently in the process of catabolic collapse, the resistance to this unfolding reality has yet to emerge, at least beyond the margins.

At the same time, as capitalism continues to develop its means of exploitation, pushing into every new frontier, what becomes clear is that the true benefits of this mode of production are

being distributed to fewer and fewer people, even if material rewards are growing for some sectors of the global population. What this suggests is that the class of people who have a *genuine material interest* in system change is growing. This demographic extends well beyond the confines of the traditional proletariat and expands into ever larger portions of consumer society – as well, of course, into the populations exploited by consumer society. So a mass base for transformative change certainly exists and is growing – both globally and specifically in the ‘affluent West’. Yet the *revolutionary consciousness* seems to be weak or even absent. Indeed, the classes capable of societal transformation are so integrated into consumer society that it would be fair to say that there is not merely a lack of revolutionary consciousness, but an even more stabilising anti-revolutionary or counter-revolutionary sensibility.¹⁸

To state this problem in aesthetic terms: within mainstream culture there does not seem to be any *felt need* to act for deep and urgent change, and without that sensibility it is not clear how deep and deliberate change could ever eventuate. A radicalised consciousness seems to be a precondition for a voluntary transformation of the social order, thus its absence should be a subject of critical concern. One way to assess this problem of inaction in the face of civilisational deterioration is to consider the process of human decision making. Why don’t people mobilise en masse to stop the brutal degradation of Earth and the immiseration of humankind? How do we make our life decisions? Let us consider these questions.

The Enlightenment conception of human decision-making is, notoriously, a highly rationalistic one, assuming that our species shares a common nature by virtue of our rational faculties. The essential idea is that scientific progress and technological advancement are slowly lifting human beings out of the domains of historical ignorance, primitiveness, and superstition, and by applying the scientific method we will continue this linear progression. We will develop an ever-broader range of knowledge and technologies which can better control and predict the workings of nature, thereby advancing human ends more effectively. The faith is that human beings are, by nature, rational – or capable of rational deliberation and reflection – and that increasingly we will shape how we act in the world according to the best scientific evidence we have at our disposal.

I am hardly the first to contend that human beings are far less rationalistic than this picture assumes (see the works of Nietzsche, Freud, Derrida, and so forth). To take the ecological crisis as a case in point: arguably there was enough evidence in the 1970s or earlier to justify a fundamental transformation of our destructive modes of economic activity.¹⁹ If not historically, then certainly today. Climate breakdown, deforestation, biodiversity loss, the extinction of species, pollution, topsoil erosion, etc – at what point, one might ask, will there be ‘enough’ evidence to provoke change? The premise of this essay is that perhaps it isn’t ‘better evidence’ that is lacking. There is not an information deficit but an aesthetic deficit – a lack of art, imagination, creativity, and nourishing sensuous experience. We suffer a confusion of desire so deep that it cannot be resolved rationally but must be confronted, first and foremost, at the mythopoetic level. This is less about our minds being in need of refinement and enrichment than our emotions and sensibilities. We might *know* what needs to change, but for change to actually transpire people en masse need to *feel* the demand for freedom and justice in their bodies. We need to develop the aesthetic sensibility to react physically to injustice in the same way we react to a foul and intolerable stench.

Granted, there are numerous vested interests at play which influence how citizenries respond to the issues they face (e.g., mass media and the megacorporation prefer a passive, obedient population). But the fact is that cultures around the world broadly *know* about the dire ecological crises that are unfolding. Yet, people continue to vote for politicians that are essentially maintaining not subverting business-as-usual. Little change seems to be coming from the personal or household domains either, even though marginalised countercultures are everywhere bubbling under the surface. Who, then, seriously thinks that yet another scientific report on the declining state of the environment is going to be the catalyst for transformative change? It is important that evidence-based thinkers answer this question based on the evidence.

If humanity's social and environmental problems were just a result of 'information deficit' or 'knowledge deficit', then perhaps a purely rationalistic approach to societal change would be justifiable. That is, the primary task would be simply to conduct the scientific research and publish the findings, and trust that human beings, as rational agents, will read and understand the evidence, change how they live, and vote for an appropriate political and economic response. It could be argued that this has been the defining faith of the environmental movement to date, and perhaps points to its deepest failing.

This line of reasoning is not, in the slightest, to denigrate the necessary and important work of environmental and social scientists. We know that science has social impacts. Think, for example, of the significant decline of smoking in response to the overwhelming scientific evidence that it is carcinogenic. The point, however, is to suggest that relying on 'the evidence' alone to do the hard work of societal transformation is naive. Yes, it is critical to apply the scientific method rigorously to better understand the world; to pose and test hypotheses; to develop and apply appropriate technologies; to create cultures that think critically about the world; and to endeavour to be evidence-based decision makers at all levels of life. But it is just as important to recognise that it is not just *what* is communicated that matters, but also *how* it is communicated. It could be that the environmental movement (broadly speaking) has trusted too much in the provision of evidence, neglecting the critical task of presenting the evidence in socially digestible forms.

As Herbert Marcuse contended, the 'strong emphasis on the political potential of the arts which is a feature of this radicalism is first of all expressive of the need for an effective *communication* of the indictment of the established reality and of the goals of liberation.'²⁰ Put otherwise, radicals need to find forms of communication which break with the oppressive rule that the established language and images have over mind and body. Through diverse acts of creation, the counterculture must give rise to a new language and universe of images that point to new ways to live and paths for their realisation.

This is an aesthetic challenge because it highlights the importance of giving *form* to *content*. Social movements today (environmental and otherwise) should be exploring ways of being more creative and engaging in the presentation of their own scientific and ethical foundations, in order to do those foundations justice. After all, it is not enough merely to be correct in one's diagnoses and prescriptions; one must also find a way to expand the sympathetic audience beyond those people who are already converted, and that points to a communications

challenge. For better or for worse, emotive imagery and language might well be more persuasive than sober reasoning (a lesson the political Right has historically tended to exploit more effectively than the Left).

Another way to put this is that social movements should be trying harder to appeal not merely to the head, but also – or especially – to the heart. A persuasive case for societal change must not only be made *intellectually* or *rationally* but also *affectively* or *emotionally*. As Schiller argued: ‘the development of man’s capacity for feeling is... the more urgent need of our age.’²¹ It might be said that we are not short of good ideas, as such, but we have yet to make good ideas seem powerful. No doubt there will be and are people who, when exposed to new evidence, reconsider their current thinking and adjust their worldviews and actions to better reflect the facts. This is the rationalistic ideal and probably the self-image we all have of ourselves. But most people would also probably accept that in many cases human beings fail to live up to this self-image, especially in this age increasingly called ‘post-truth’. When confronted with evidence that challenges a cherished worldview (e.g., the growth paradigm), people can simply look away; assume the evidence is flawed; attack the authors rather than the evidence; blindly trust that markets or some new technology will solve the problem; go searching for evidence that validates (however dubiously) their current position or lifestyle; or undertake any number of other evasive strategies.

This speaks to the limitations of reason and rationality as transformative and progressive forces. After all, can we sit down and reason with corporations or governments who only know the rationality of capital expansion? As Marcuse wrote:

Can you reason with the Pentagon on any other thing than the relative effectiveness of killing machines – and their price? The Secretary of State can reason with the Secretary of the Treasury, and the latter with another Secretary and his advisors, and they all can reason with Members of the Board of the great corporations. This is incestuous reasoning; they are all in agreement about the basic issue: the strengthening of the established power structure. Reasoning ‘from without’ the power structure is naïve.²²

It is in these non-rational contexts where the artist becomes a necessary agent of change, having the potential to provoke social change via different mechanisms of persuasion, making emotional, psychological, or even spiritual impacts on an audience at those times when science, logic, and argument have failed. The artist can conjure up new modes of perception, providing a feast of sensuous experience that anticipates, often explosively, a different way of living and being in the world, reshaping in some mysterious way not just the thoughts of individuals, but also their needs, hopes, and drives. Indeed, Marcuse pointed out that art can communicate truths ‘not communicable in any other language.’²³

Beyond the work of art narrowly defined lies the potential of aesthetic interventions in culture and politics more broadly. The ‘culture jamming’ movement, for example, seeks to incite cultural and political change not through argument, evidence, and logic, but through provocative and jarring images that disrupt and unsettle our sense of normality. The purpose is to expose the violence often hidden in our habits of thought and practice, opening our minds to alternative ways of living and being. Cultural theorist David Cox defines the practice of culture jamming as ‘a vibrant counter-attack on the empire of signs’,²⁴ and this counter-attack

need not just be the production of images, but can include other acts or activities that function to disrupt people's ordinary experience and open new doorways of perception and understanding. Some refer to this as 'artivism'.²⁵

It is worth noting that the Canadian journal *Adbusters*, which is the global hub of the otherwise decentralised culture-jamming movement, was the institution that conceived of the Occupy Movement. In recent decades this is the closest thing we have ever seen to a global uprising, but *Adbusters* did not create the discontent at the heart of the Occupy Movement. It merely gave imaginative form to content – created an ingenious 'branding' of that discontent – in ways that were able to mobilise and organise it for political and economic purposes. It fought the 'Society of the Spectacle'²⁶ on its own terms, and met with some success. Perhaps culture jamming is an oppositional aesthetic practice that has yet to fulfil its potential. As a slogan of the 1968 uprising in France stated: bring imagination to power! That is what is needed, but it is difficult to achieve when the imagination itself is under attack – and losing.

A failure of imagination

'Capitalist realism' is a term popularised by the cultural and political theorist Mark Fisher in a provocative and unsettling book by that name.²⁷ The term implies that, ever since the fall of Soviet Communism in 1989, capitalism has been the only game in town; the only *realistic* system of production and distribution to structure globalised human society. Everything else is sheer utopianism in the pejorative sense – naïve dreaming of what can never be.

Capitalist realism points to a failure of imagination, suggesting that it is now easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.²⁸ The diagnosis has almost become a cliché. As one looks around the world today, the case for capitalist realism is, admittedly, disturbingly persuasive – as Fisher himself was the first to admit, even as he resisted it. It can tempt one to despair, for it often seems that there is in fact no realistic alternative to what we know today. The material wealth that capitalism has created far exceeds what Marx would have considered necessary for the construction of a socialist society. But it is precisely the emergence of consumer society that now serves to support and sustain capitalist relations of production, discrediting, rightly or wrongly, the vision and desirability of socialism, even as the hedonic rewards of consumerism seem to be eternally deferred.

To say that capitalist realism is real is to acknowledge the *zeitgeist* of the twenty-first century, one shared not only by neoliberal conservatives but also by most on the green-left who, despite a 'progressive' self-image, remain insidiously entrenched in capitalism's growth paradigm. In Fisher's words, there is 'a widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it'.²⁹ He describes this consciousness as a 'pervasive atmosphere' that conditions 'not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action'.³⁰

But here is the disturbing paradox of capitalist realism: just as the dominant cultural imagination has contracted into a singularity of vision – there is no alternative to capitalism! The very system to which there is apparently no alternative shows itself to be in the process of

self-destructing, like a cancer cell growing itself to death, killing its host. At the hour when modern humanity has arrived at a self-aggrandising pinnacle of triumph – a global market economy promising riches for all – the skies have been darkened by the terrible spectres of ecological degradation and social decline and polarisation. The climate emergency is only one of these storm clouds, but this alone has the potential to radically disrupt civilisation as we know it. In other words, capitalist realism is unrealistic, non-viable, a dead end – literally. The system is full of internal contradictions that the system cannot resolve, most notably the myth that through market mechanisms we can purchase and consume our way to sustainability.

At the same time, vast oceans of debilitating poverty surround small oceans of unfathomable plenty, exposing the violent betrayal of the capitalist growth agenda, euphemistically (or just deceptively) known in public discourse as ‘sustainable development’. This is a race leading towards an abyss, both enabled and entrenched by a sterility of imagination called capitalist realism. Fortunately – if that is the right word – capitalist realism ‘can only be threatened if it is shown to be in some way inconsistent or untenable; if, that is to say, capitalism’s ostensible “realism” turns out to be nothing of the sort’.³¹

The grand narrative of progress via economic growth has been widely internalised in consumer cultures. The working class – once the locus of the revolutionary sentiment – has found little need or desire to replace the ‘economic base’ of capitalism, even if little wealth has been trickling down. Even when ecological and social justice concerns are given attention by politicians or mass media, the social imaginary is so limited that resolutions to such problems are conceived of within the paradigm of growth, technology, and affluence, rarely if ever beyond it. People may shake their heads in concern when they hear of the latest warnings from climate scientists, or shake their heads in outrage when they learn that a small handful of men now own more than the poorest half of humanity. But when reflecting on what an alternative mode of existence might look like, the dominant culture shrugs its shoulders, unable to imagine anything other than green consumerism in a technocratic world. This is obviously a non-confronting response to the crises we face because it does not question the growth paradigm, overpopulation, or consumerist conceptions of the good life.

It is all very well for scholars to present a range of devastating critiques of the existing order of neoliberal capitalism, but if people are unable to envision what a just, sustainable, and liberated world would actually look like, then the necessary task of mobilising communities for collective action will face insurmountable barriers. People will continue to seek meaning and advancement in the only ways the dominant culture permits: through consumption. Indeed, people may consume as means of objecting to the dehumanising ways they have been treated under capitalism, not realising they are in fact being counter-productive.

Thinking and acting ‘beyond capitalism’ is not easy in a one-dimensional world that is increasingly homogenised, commodified, and standardised. Yet, breaking through the cracks of capitalism to *think* otherwise and *be* otherwise is more essential now than ever. In the words of poet and novelist Herman Hesse: ‘Nothing is harder, yet nothing is more necessary, than to speak of certain things whose existence is neither demonstrable nor probable. The very fact that serious and conscientious people treat them as existing things brings them a step closer to existence and to the possibility of being born.’³²

Aesthetic education: 'art therapy' on a mass scale

I have highlighted three obstacles in the path of progressive transformation of society, offering essentially the same solution to each of them: aesthetic education. The first obstacle was the problem of 'education for profit', through which human beings are increasingly shaped into obedient, docile workers whose creative capacities and potentials are suppressed in order to maximise economic growth. The second issue I considered was the information deficit model of change, a theory I criticised for holding the naively optimistic assumption that human beings usually make decisions based on the best evidence and strongest arguments. Third, I suggested that contemporary culture is in the grip of what Fisher called 'capitalist realism', referring to an enclosure of the imagination, whereby better futures beyond capitalism can barely be envisioned and thus not fought for.

In response to all these problems, I proposed that what is needed most fundamentally is a renewed aesthetic education. Today humanity suffers less from a lack of knowledge or technological capability than from a *confusion of desire*. Too often meaning and happiness is pursued through consumption, status, and power, and when that approach does not satisfy personal, social, and spiritual needs, the same approach is reapplied hoping for a different outcome. By reimagining the good life beyond consumer culture, an aesthetic education would rewire our tastes and desires and shift our modes of thinking by first shifting how we feel. In contrast to an education for profit, an aesthetic education would recognise the fundamental importance of supporting our creative and imaginative natures and capacities. It would immerse us more deeply in the arts, allowing us to revel in the sensuous and soulful pleasures of great art, and to absorb the infinite wisdom that lies scattered throughout art history.

But recall that I have defined art, inspired by William Morris, as the pleasurable and meaningful expression of creative labour. On that basis an aesthetic education would also train and empower us to be artists ourselves, in the broad sense, which includes being an artisan who makes useful and beautiful things. Thereby we would drive the Great Transition onwards, together, building the new world from within the shell of the old. As I will detail further in later essays, the more we infuse art into the everyday rituals and practices of our lives, the less inclined we will be to seek meaning in ecologically destructive and socially corrosive consumption. The more we let our senses be enchanted by nature's sublimity, the less inclined we will be to destroy the community of life or the magnificent life-support system called Earth.

In other words, I am proposing 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. As noted from the beginning, the two guiding premises that underlie these essays are first, that material sufficiency is all that is *needed* for human beings to live rich, meaningful, and artful lives; and second, that material sufficiency is all that is *possible*, over the long term, on a finite planet in an age of environmental limits. Through aesthetic education, we would not merely discover this to be true, we would feel it to be good, beautiful, and meaningful.

Thus I have been motivated in this project by the belief that an aesthetic education provides a key both to driving the transition and shaping the new society – an ecological civilisation of artisan-artists. Aesthetic education could drive the transition as more people exercised their imaginations to intervene in culture and politics to better expose the violence that often lies hidden in cultural values and dominant institutions. This creative unveiling of existing injustices would help demystify capitalism, exposing it as a choice not a natural or inevitable order. Upon that realisation, pathways beyond capitalism would become clearer to more people, providing social movements with the emotional and spiritual energy needed to fight what often seems to be a never-ending defeat.

Sometimes that energy can emerge from powerful art that wears its politics on its sleeve – a novel that indicts or a film that inspires. But our inner fire can also be stoked from the spine-tingling beauty of a sorrowful piano sonata or a poem about the smell of an old growth forest. As philosopher of enchantment, Jane Bennett, argues: ‘to some small but irreducible extent, one must be enamoured with existence and occasionally even enchanted in the face of it in order to be capable of donating some of one’s scarce mortal resources to the service of others.’³³ Therein lies some of the transgressive power of beauty – a category too often dismissed as being apolitical. Art can enchant in ways that provide the necessary propulsion to activity. After all, moral, ethical, and political reasoning *must* engage the heart to be effective, given that reason and rationality will fail to motivate or transform behaviour without an emotional engagement.³⁴ Eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume put it this way: ‘Reason is, and ought only to be, slave to the passions.’³⁵ This, in a sentence, speaks to the importance of educating the passions, and I am holding up the aesthetic as the best tool for that task. At the very least, aesthetic experience can induce a state of ‘play’ which allows us to break free from habitual modes of thought and reason differently.

Art can also inform the nature of the new society, not merely the transition thereto. I have used the term SMPLCTY to refer to an *orientating vision* of an ecological civilisation, one in which individuals and communities thrive in humble conditions of material sufficiency but cultural richness, meaningfully engaged in pleasurable and creative labour in collaboration with others. According to this vision, life itself would become an aesthetic project, a never-ending process of creative activity, sensuous experience, aesthetic engagement, and spiritual exploration. Such a society would be structured with the aim of sustainably providing opportunities for all people to find meaning and pleasure through creative labour and aesthetic experience. This signifies an anarcho-socialist form of life in which human beings minimise material and energetic demands for reasons of social and ecological justice, while creatively exploring the good life in non-materialistic sources of meaning and happiness, especially through art and aesthetic experience. This vision is supported by an interpretation of the universe as embodying a primordial energy called the Will to Art, which seeks to experience itself through the aesthetic flourishing that would be cultivated in such an ecological civilisation.

In contrast to the information deficit model of change, a focus on aesthetic education would also better appreciate that we are not as rationalistic as we might like to suppose. That is to say, an *effective* politics of change will need to be an *affective* politics. This is not to dismiss the importance of reason, logic, and evidence, but it does suggest that any appeal to those

rationalistic aspects of our nature might need to be preceded by an aesthetic approach that first appeals to the emotional and sensuous sides of our nature. As Schiller wrote, ‘the way to the head must lie through the heart,’³⁶ such that ‘the development of [humanity’s] capacity for feeling is... the more urgent need of our age.’³⁷ He was offering the profound and subtle insight that through beauty – through the works of poets, painters, musicians, and storytellers – we are best able to engage the intellect *having first affected the emotions*. In this way aesthetic education can be seen as the foundations for a theory of change.

Finally, I drew on Mark Fisher’s work to examine how social transformation is being suppressed by a contracting of the cultural and political imagination. On that basis I argued that a bold and creative aesthetic education might be required to expand the imagination to envision the pluriverse of post-capitalist futures waiting for us to realise through collective and creative action. The same aesthetic education would also immerse us in meaningful and pleasurable art, both as creators and spectators. This would expose us throughout the day to beauty that stimulates and consoles us, in ways that again provides emotional and spiritual energy for acts of resistance and renewal.

In short, I am proposing, as a political strategy, ‘art therapy’ on a mass scale. And if governments will not support such a strategy for fear of what an aesthetic education might produce, then it follows that that we must induce this aesthetic revolution ourselves, at the grassroots level. Under capitalism, the poets have been banished. We must welcome them back, and become poets ourselves, for they are needed more than ever. Indeed, if we define poetry as the expression of the imagination, then it is no overstatement to declare, with Percy Bysshe Shelley, that ‘poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.’³⁸

¹ Plato, *The Republic* (London: Penguin, 1955), especially Books II, III, and X.

² For a more detailed analysis of these themes, to which I am indebted, see MF Burnyeat, ‘Art and Mimesis in Plato’s “Republic”’ (1998) *London Review of Books* 20(10). Available at: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v20/n10/m.f.-burnyeat/art-and-mimesis-in-plato-s-republic> (accessed 2 February 2023).

³ See Liu Yunshan, ‘An Examination of the “Engineer of Human Souls” Metaphor’ in Liu Yunshan *Trends in Chinese Education* (London: Routledge, 2016).

⁴ Although this quote is often attributed to Stalin, I was unable to track down a source.

⁵ See e.g., Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016). See also, Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, revised ed.).

⁶ See generally, Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 2001).

⁷ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot* (New York: Bantam, 1981), p. 370.

⁸ For a leading text on aesthetic education, see Herbert Read, *Education Through Art* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1948).

⁹ Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*, note 5.

¹⁰ For a review and critical discussion of the literature, see Paul McDivitt, ‘The Information Deficit Model is Dead. Now What? Evaluating New Strategies for Communicating Anthropocentric Climate Change in the Context of Contemporary American Politics, Economy, and Culture’ (Thesis, Master of Arts, University of Colorado, 2011).

¹¹ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009).

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- ¹² See Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*, note 5.
- ¹³ *Ibid*, p. 10
- ¹⁴ Cited in Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*, note 5, p. 1.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 1.
- ¹⁶ Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (London: Marion Boyars, 1995).
- ¹⁷ See Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Routledge, 2002).
- ¹⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *Counter-Revolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).
- ¹⁹ See, e.g., Donella Meadows et al, *Limits to Growth* (New York: Singlet, 1972).
- ²⁰ Marcuse, *Counter-Revolution and Revolt*, note 18, p. 79.
- ²¹ Friedrich Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, in Friedrich Schiller, *Essays*, eds. Walter Hinderer and Daniel Dahlstrom (New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 107.
- ²² Marcuse, *Counter-Revolution and Revolt*, note 18, pp. 132-3.
- ²³ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (London: MacMillan Education, 1979), p 10.
- ²⁴ David Cox, *Sign Wars: The Culture Jammers Strike Back* (Melbourne: University of Melbourne Custom Book Centre, 2010).
- ²⁵ John Jordan, 'Artivism: Injecting Imagination into Degrowth' in *Degrowth in Movements*. Available at: <https://degrowth.info/blog/artivism-injecting-imagination-into-degrowth> (accessed 10 January 2023).
- ²⁶ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (London: Rebel Press, 2006).
- ²⁷ See Fisher, *Capitalism Realism*, note 11.
- ²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 1.
- ²⁹ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, note 11, p. 2.
- ³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 16.
- ³¹ *Ibid*.
- ³² Herman Hesse, *The Glass Bead Game* (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 14.
- ³³ Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). p. 4. I discuss Bennett further in a forthcoming essay in this collection.
- ³⁴ *Ibid*.
- ³⁵ David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature* (1739), Bk III, Part III, Sect. III.
- ³⁶ Friedrich Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, ed. Reginald Snell (New York: Dover, 2004), p. 50.
- ³⁷ See note 21.
- ³⁸ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defense of Poetry* (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1890) p. 2.