

SMPLECTY

Ecological Civilisation and the Will to Art



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Essays on the Aesthetics of Existence

Industrial Aesthetics: A Critique of Taste

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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.

‘Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.’

– **William Wordsworth**

Industrial Aesthetics: A Critique of Taste

Samuel Alexander

Every individual and every society are enactments of stories we tell ourselves about the nature and purpose of our existence and of the world we live in.¹ We might conceive of ourselves as children of God or speaking apes; dead matter or enchanted spirits; revolutionaries or conservatives; entrepreneurs or bureaucrats, producers or consumers – perhaps all of these things or none of them. But in the end, all of us give a narrative structure to our lives, or at least we adopt the default narratives of the dominant culture, usually unconsciously. The myths and stories we tell ourselves situate us in space and time, shape our perceptions of the present and guide us as we move into the future, influencing our interpretations of what is possible, proper, and important. As those individual narratives are woven together, the social fabric of a civilisation takes form.

One important function of story and myth is how they can shape what a person or culture finds beautiful or ugly. That is, social narratives influence our tastes. Moreover, our tastes influence what we desire, and our desires obviously shape how we act, both personally and politically. These sensuous dispositions are often taught to us through aesthetic education, including the ways in which a society ‘distributes’ opportunities for different forms of sense experience. On that basis, I propose that humanity will need a new aesthetic education, and a new ‘distribution of the sensible,’² if we are to move beyond the industrial societies of late capitalism and toward an ecological civilisation that is constituted by radically different conceptions of beauty.

The myth of progress

Put simply, the grand narrative of industrial civilisation is a story of progress within which societies advance by way of continuous economic growth, rising affluence, and technological innovation. The very vocabulary of ‘development’ implies that some societies have reached maturity – the rich nations of advanced capitalism. The further implication is that the rest of the world is lacking the same degree of civilisation, and therefore needs more growth, more industrialisation, and more capitalism in order to civilise, just as healthy children must grow to maturity in order to fulfil their potential. This is a coherent metaphor until one realises that a child that never stops growing has a fatal disease. So convinced are the developed nations of their linear story of progress that over the last three centuries they have been imposing this narrative on the rest of the world, seeking to establish a ‘fully developed’ world, created in their own image of growth without limit.

Can humanity survive this growth model of progress? Although industrial development across the globe has brought with it many benefits, the dominant story of progress is not without its anomalies – anomalies so deep, one might argue, that today they are threatening the coherency of the paradigm itself. For many decades, environmental scientists have been demonstrating that the global growth economy is destroying the ecological foundations of life. From a social justice perspective, the critique has been that the system has produced socially corrosive inequalities of wealth and left billions in conditions of humiliating poverty, despite

unprecedented capacity to eliminate hunger. These realities are often ignored or marginalised, but even when they are acknowledged, the dominant political and economic response is simply to reassert 'sustained growth' as the only solution. Very few people seem to recognise that growth may now be causing the very problems that it is supposed to be solving. As novelist and essayist Edward Abbey once wrote: growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of a cancer cell.

What is most troubling of all, perhaps, is that even those individuals who have achieved the so-called 'consumerist ideal' – the house, the car, the gadgets, the clothes, the travel, and so forth – all too often find themselves discontented despite their material abundance. In recent decades this finding has been established consistently and independently by a litany of sociological and psychological studies.³ Industrial civilisation's defining goal appears to be misconceived. There seems to be an emptiness to affluence that is never acknowledged in glossy advertisements, let alone discussed in schools or around the dinner table. It is perhaps the dominant culture's final, unspeakable taboo. Few people dare to ask themselves, 'How much is enough?' Fewer still dare to meditate on the real question: 'Enough for *what*?'

Needless to say, within mainstream discourse these criticisms are rarely considered fundamental flaws in the basic story of industrial development. Instead, they are treated as matters of detail in need of refinement, a little tweaking around the edges – nothing that technology, market mechanisms, and more economic growth cannot manage or resolve. So dominant and uncompromising is this narrative that its contingency and historicity are easily missed, as if there were no other stories to tell, no other paths of progress. This 'myth of progress' has reified into an ideology, sometimes even shaping the consciousness of those it oppresses, marginalises, and alienates.⁴

Moving from the civilisational level to that of individual subjectivity, the narrative of industrial development is merely regurgitated in a personalised form. In the stories we tell ourselves, we create ourselves, and our world. The dominant 'story of self' in consumer cultures today is one that treats material advancement as the clearest indicator of social success and the best means of acquiring self-esteem, social status, happiness, and respect. Anthropologists and sociologists have done considerable work studying and analysing the ways in which people communicate through their consumption; how they convey social messages and tell stories about who they are through the symbolic content of commodities.⁵ Commodities are purchased not just for their functionality or use-value but also or primarily for what they signify about the people who possess them. By accumulating a certain body of commodities, individuals in consumer societies thereby shape their identities through consumption, defining themselves not by what they do but by what they own. This provides a basis to update Rene Descartes' famous dictum in consumerist-existential terms: 'I shop, therefore I am.'

The industrial aesthetics of consumption

While this process of self-creation through the symbolic content of consumption can be considered an aesthetic process, it should be acknowledged that individuals do not simply shape, but are also shaped by, the dominant consumerist aesthetic to which they are exposed. Members of advanced capitalist societies (and increasingly all people around the globe) are

bombarded, literally thousands of times every day, with advertisements, images, and other more subtle cultural and institutional messages insisting that ‘more is better’. These cultural messages are devised by sophisticated marketers, highly skilled at manipulating people by preying on our deepest insecurities or emotional needs. It is no exaggeration to state that the implicit (sometimes explicit) message in every advertisement is: ‘Your life is unsatisfactory as it is, but with this commodity you can attain happiness, beauty, meaning, love, respect, etc.’ The rich and famous are glorified and celebrated at every turn, serving only to entrench the assumption that money means fame, success, happiness, and social admiration. A cult of youthfulness distorts cultural conceptions of beauty, just as last season’s fashion can be discarded by those who have been socially engineered to perceive it as ‘of bad taste’. There is barely a social space or even a private space today where one can find sanctuary from the onslaught of the consumerist aesthetic. We internalise the world ‘out there’ even as we produce and reproduce it. What we are exposed to, and what we give our attention to, we become.

The consumerist-industrial aesthetic is compromised further (or compromises us further) as people in highly developed societies today find themselves ever more disconnected from nature. This is not to defend or idealise some mythical pre-industrial ‘wild’ but only to acknowledge that ‘nature deficit disorder’⁶ is a real condition, threatening to become an epidemic, albeit largely undiagnosed. The nature deficit can be understood as part of the broader aesthetic deficit disorder I have been diagnosing throughout these essays. As creatures of Earth who spent our entire evolutionary history living outdoors, in the most intimate connection with the ecosystems upon which we rely, it should come as no surprise that we suffer existentially as we find ourselves disconnected from this rich source of material and spiritual nourishment. Biophysically we are essentially the same creature who lived in caves tens of thousands of years ago. Culturally, our highly artificial and technologised existence today could hardly be further from the conditions of our evolutionary upbringing. This dislocation should be expected to have, and is having, negative health and psycho-spiritual effects.

In the same vein, cultural theorists have diagnosed and investigated a strange existential condition they label ‘affluenza’⁷ – a spiritual malaise that seems to afflict many people in consumerist societies. Both the causes and symptoms are numerous and varied. In urban and suburban contexts, the natural environment has been progressively covered with concrete or tarseal. Skies are scarred with wires, power lines, and the contrails of aircraft. Lives are lived mostly indoors under artificial lights, in front of computers or machines, disconnected from the changing seasons. The music of birdsong is becoming rarer as urban trees are cleared for apartments or a new freeway, while warnings of a ‘silent spring’ continue to be ignored. The long, typically monotonous working day often begins and ends with a slow commute to or from work, in loud, heavy traffic, past the ubiquitous advertising billboards which demand attention. Returning home one can be so tired that there is no life-energy to do anything but sit in front of the television or computer, in nice clothes, eating highly processed takeaway food and relying on the sedations of alcohol or drugs to fight off the ennui. This is a polemical statement, of course, painting with too broad a brush. But the picture is accurate enough. Consumer culture seems to have failed to fulfil its promise of a meaningful and satisfying life, even as it destroys the planet. Is it any wonder that cultural analyst Theodore Roszak looked into the eyes of modern consumers and saw only faces ‘twisted with despair’?⁸

The point is that consumerism is not just a relationship to material culture. It can also be understood as a mode of existence, an aesthetic state of being-in-the-world, one that seems to be generally coloured with a mood of disenchantment, disconnection, and disillusionment. The real genius of consumerism, however, seems to be in how it seduces people into believing that, no matter how affluent they might become, the main things lacking from their lives are money and possessions. Thus the 'iron cage' of consumerism succeeds because it fails, ensuring that the vicious circle of consumption continues.⁹ The spiritual malaise only deepens, for as the Parisian graffiti of 1968 stated: 'those who lack imagination cannot imagine what is lacking'.

The aesthetic education of taste

To better understand the industrial-consumerist aesthetic and its implications on consumption practices, these issues could be explored through the lens of 'taste'. In the twentieth century, French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu, in his seminal text, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979),¹⁰ took aesthetics beyond philosophy and into sociology, by demonstrating empirically that taste is closely related to class. What forms of clothing, music, literature, interior décor, leisure, etc, a person or household consumes is obviously a matter of taste, but in his research Bourdieu discovered that children are taught their tastes from an early age, and what they are taught is shaped along class lines.

This aesthetic education becomes internalised, making taste seem natural or objective, yet this ends up serving an ideological function by entrenching certain cultures of consumption that demarcate class. At some intuitive level, it seems this has long been understood. At least since Thorstein Veblen's work in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), there has been discussion of practices of 'conspicuous consumption' that show off high levels of wealth for the purpose of socially emphasising high status.¹¹ Bourdieu argued that the acceptance of dominant forms of taste is a form of 'symbolic violence',¹² because individuals in lower classes do not always have the economic or cultural means of accessing 'highbrow' cultures of consumption. Thus they are dominated by taste, forever trying to conform to the reigning aesthetic for fear of being socially ostracised by appearing crude, vulgar, or tasteless. The essential message here remains valid even if the Marxist framing is dropped. Irrespective of the class implications, it seems clear that 'taste' is often a matter of aesthetic education, and accordingly deserves social and political analysis.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas offered further insight into how cultural tastes shape expectations about consumption, arguing that what is considered appropriate or necessary consumption is always culturally dependent. People do not merely consume to meet biophysical needs but also to meet social needs. In fact, Douglas argued that 'an individual's main object in consumption is to create the social universe and to find in it a creditable place'.¹³ This means that what are considered acceptable or appropriate practices of consumption in one society or social setting may be very different in an alternative social setting. The corollary is that even the notion of poverty can be understood as something that is culturally specific, not merely a universal biophysical threshold. A particular level of consumption that is considered wealthy or prestigious in one society might be so low in another society as to be shameful; a particular object that is admired as tasteful or refined in one culture might be

considered tasteless or uncouth in another. This can function to lock people into practices of consumption higher than they may feel necessary, not because they truly desire a certain level or manner of consumption but because they naturally desire social legitimation and acceptance, knowing that there are cultural expectations in this regard. Transcending consumerism therefore must include overcoming aesthetic obstacles regarding taste.

One particularly pernicious aesthetic phenomenon in relation to consumption is the apparent need for uniformity in consumption practices, a phenomenon known by consumer researchers today as ‘the Diderot effect’.¹⁴ Someone once gave Dennis Diderot (the French Enlightenment thinker) a beautiful, new scarlet robe, and without thinking he discarded his old one.¹⁵ But the next morning as he sat down to write he noticed that his old desk no longer did his robe justice. So he upgraded his desk. Then he realised that his chair, tapestries and bookshelves looked dated against his new acquisitions, and slowly his entire material surroundings were upgraded. Sociologist Juliet Schor describes this taste for uniformity in the following way:

The purchase of a new home is the impetus for replacing old furniture; a new jacket makes little sense without the right skirt to match; an upgrade in china can't really be enjoyed without a corresponding upgrade in glassware. This need for unity and conformity in our lifestyle choices is part of what keeps the consumer escalator moving ever upward. And ‘escalator’ is the operative metaphor: when the acquisition of each item on a wish list adds another item, and more, to our ‘must-have’ list, the pressure to upgrade our stock of stuff is relentlessly unidirectional, always ascending.¹⁶

This highlights the insidious effect that taste can have on our consumption practices, and how the growth economy more broadly is driven by (just as it produces) the seemingly insatiable desires of the modern consumer. Note, however, that Diderot eventually found himself sitting in the stylish formality of his new surroundings regretting the work of this ‘impervious scarlet robe [that] forced everything else to conform with its own elegant tone’.¹⁷ Diderot had been master of his old robe but became slave of the new one. ‘Opulence has its obstacles,’¹⁸ he concluded – a lesson we might have much to learn from today.

A politics of taste

The analysis above attempted to offer some insight into various aesthetic dimensions of life in advanced industrial societies. I have suggested that transcending consumerism and the growth economy will depend on first overcoming various aesthetic obstacles, practices, and tastes. These obstacles include the stories and myths we tell about ourselves and societies, and the ways we shape our identities and communicate through consumption. Other such obstacles include the disaffection and alienation that evidently is widely experienced in consumer societies, even by those who have achieved the consumerist ideal. In that light, I outlined some of the ways that dominant conceptions of taste and social legitimation, especially regarding material living standards, can entrench materialistic conceptions of the good life.

Given that humans are largely ‘socially constructed’ beings, it should come as no surprise that our modes of subjectivity in advanced, industrial societies have been shaped by the dominant social and institutional forces that celebrate consumerism as a way of life. This marginalises consumption as a subject of ethical concern. Far from challenging us to explore lifestyles of

reduced consumption in response to the ecological and social justice imperatives of our time, dominant forms of culture, economics, and politics call on us to consume as much as possible ‘for the good of the economy’. Given that these cultural narratives have been widely internalised, often unconsciously, it follows that ethical activity today may require us to engage the self by the self for the purpose of *refusing who we are* – insofar as we are uncritical consumers – and creating new, post-consumerist forms of subjectivity. Few people, it seems, have a taste for sufficiency, a taste for degrowth, which I maintain is a leading aesthetic obstacle in the way of any transition to a just and sustainable society. There is an elegance and beauty to the clothesline, the bicycle, and the water tank, that the clothes dryer, the automobile, and the desalination plant decidedly lack. When such an aesthetics of sufficiency is more widely embraced in a culture, it will be clear that we are on the path to an ecological civilisation.

In summary, the self-creation of new forms of subjectivity is a necessary first step in any transition to a new society. In previous essays, I argued (drawing on Friedrich Schiller) that art and aesthetics are promising means for disrupting our ‘normal sense of self’, inducing a sense of play that liberates us from habit and conformity and provides the conditions for giving birth to someone new.¹⁹ Until there is a culture that embraces voluntary simplicity, the social underpinnings for an ecological civilisation will be absent. After all, consumerist cultures that seek and expect ever-rising material living standards will not *desire* a politics or macroeconomics of degrowth, and politicians will never campaign for degrowth if it is clear there is no social mandate for it. Accordingly, the emergence of a culture of voluntary simplicity seems to be a prerequisite to any degrowth transition, and the first step in this cultural shift involves transforming our subjectivities beyond the consumerist default setting. Among other things, this will involve taking seriously the questions, ‘how much is enough?’ and ‘enough for what?’, and reshaping our relationships to material culture in line with the aesthetic values of balance and harmony. Through a new aesthetic education, we can resist capitalism and usher in an ecological civilisation by learning to find different things beautiful and different things ugly. Revolt is a matter of taste.

Nevertheless, a re-fashioning of the self in line with voluntary simplicity will not be enough on its own to produce an ecological civilisation, owing to the fact that consumption practices take place within structural constraints. Within consumer capitalism it can be very difficult, at times even impossible, to consume in ways that accord with one’s conception of justice and sustainability, because structural constraints can lock us into high consumption, high carbon modes of life. For these reasons a personal aesthetics of existence is a necessary though not sufficient response to existing crises. A systemic perspective is also required, which is why this analysis must be expanded further into social, economic, and political domains.²⁰ Current crises are ultimately systemic crises that require a systemic response – not merely a cultural response – even if that systemic response begins with the aesthetic self-transformation of our given subjectivities. To paraphrase Samuel Taylor Coleridge: *we must create the taste by which we will be judged*.

In the next essay I turn to consider the growth paradigm of consumer capitalism from an energetic perspective. The alternative model of degrowth or ‘voluntary simplification’ will also be examined, critically engaging the work of anthropologist and historian Joseph Tainter.²¹ As

to be expected by now, I will focus on this alternative paradigm through the lens of aesthetics, exploring to what extent art and aesthetics can help facilitate an overcoming of the dominant paradigm. The goal is to help open future pathways of prosperous descent, whereby many existing social, ecological, and political challenges can be resolved through planned contraction of energy and resources demands in the overdeveloped regions of the world. This will only be possible, however, after first developing a *taste* for the lifestyles of voluntary simplicity that degrowth implies.²²

I will argue that this living strategy remains valid even if it turns out that a degrowth economy is never created and the collapse of civilisation ends up dictating humanity's future. This is because resilience – the capacity to withstand societal shocks and crises – will be increased if a household or community is mentally and socially prepared for simpler lifestyles of radically reduced consumption, whether voluntarily chosen or externally imposed. As historian and futurist John Michael Greer quips: collapse now and avoid the rush!²³

¹ Daniel Quinn, *Ishmael: A Novel* (New York: Bantam, 2017); Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999).

² Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), p. 12. As discussed in previous essays, Rancière's notion of the 'distribution of the sensible' refers to the way in which political decisions, actions, and narratives determine what presents itself to sense experience. In other words, politics shapes what can be seen, felt, and spoken about – and by whom.

³ See generally, Robert Lane, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Tim Kasser, *The High Price of Materialism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004); Robert Frank, *Luxury Fever: Why Money Fails to Satisfy in an Era of Excess* (New York: The Free Press, 2009).

⁴ See generally, Wolfgang Sachs (ed) *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992).

⁵ See, e.g., Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting, and the New Consumer* (New York: Basic Books, 1998); Daniel Miller, *Stuff* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010).

⁶ Richard Louv, *The Nature Principle: Human Restoration and the End of Nature-Deficit Disorder* (New York: Algonquin, 2011).

⁷ Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss, *Affluenza: When Too Much is Never Enough* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2005).

⁸ Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends: Politics and Transcendence in Postindustrial Society* (New York: Doubleday Press, 1972), p. xxviii.

⁹ Tim Jackson, *Prosperity Without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (London: Earthscan, 2009), Ch 4.

¹⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984).

¹¹ Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009[1899]).

¹² Bourdieu, *Distinction*, note 9, p. 358.

¹³ Mary Douglas, 'Relative Poverty – Relative Communication' in Tim Jackson (ed) *The Earthscan Reader in Sustainable Consumption* (London: Earthscan, 2006), p. 243.

¹⁴ See Schor, *Overspent*, note 4, p. 145.

¹⁵ Denis Diderot, 'Regrets on Parting with my Old Dressing Gown', available at:

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/diderot/1769/regrets.htm> (accessed 10 March 2023).

¹⁶ Schor, *Overspent*, note 4, p. 145.

¹⁷ Diderot, 'Regrets', note 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ See Samuel Alexander, 'The Politics of Beauty: Schiller on Freedom and Aesthetic Education', in this collection of essays. The full set will be available here: <http://samuelalexander.info/s-m-p-l-c-t-y-ecological-civilisation-and-the-will-to-art/> (accessed 10 May 2023).

²⁰ The systemic nature of growthism and consumerism has been the focus of much of my academic work. Most of my writing is freely available here: www.samuelalexander.info (accessed 15 June 2023).

²¹ See especially, Joseph Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

²² Samuel Alexander, *Sufficiency Economy: Enough, for Everyone, Forever* (Melbourne: Simplicity Institute, 2015).

²³ John Michael Greer, 'Collapse Now and Avoid the Rush' *Resilience* (6 June 2012).