

Monograph Series

**DEGROWTH AS AN
'AESTHETICS OF EXISTENCE'**

DR SAMUEL ALEXANDER



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE



MELBOURNE SUSTAINABLE
SOCIETY INSTITUTE



Degrowth as an ‘Aesthetics of Existence’

October 2017

About MSSJ Papers: MSSJ strives to inform and stimulate public conversation about key sustainability questions facing our society. Each paper encapsulates the insights of a thinker or practitioner in sustainability. Although material is often closely informed by peer-reviewed academic research, the papers themselves are presented in a clear, discursive style that appeals to a broad readership. The views and opinions contained within MSSJ publications are solely those of the author/s and do not reflect those held by MSSJ, the University of Melbourne or any other relevant party. While MSSJ endeavours to provide reliable analysis and believes the material it presents is accurate, it will not be liable for any claim by any party acting on the information in this paper. © Copyright protects this material.

Author: Dr Samuel Alexander is a Research Fellow with the Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute and a lecturer with the Office for Environmental Programs, University of Melbourne. His books include: *Sufficiency Economy: Enough, for Everyone, Forever* (2015); *Prosperous Descent: Crisis as Opportunity in an Age of Limits* (2015); *Simple Living in History: Pioneers of the Deep Future* (2014); *Entropia: Life beyond Industrial Civilisation* (2013) and *Voluntary Simplicity: The Poetic Alternative to Consumer Culture* (2009).

Acknowledgements: The author would like to thank Josh Floyd, Jonathan Rutherford, Mark Burch, and an anonymous referee for very helpful feedback on this essay which prompted various important revisions.

Cover image credit: Melissa Davis © 2017

Citing this report: Please cite this paper as Alexander, S 2017, *Degrowth as an ‘Aesthetics of Existence’*, MSSJ Monograph Series, Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute, The University of Melbourne.

See other issues papers: www.sustainable.unimelb.edu.au/publications

ISBN: 978 0 7340 4953 7

Many of the great cultural shifts that prepare the way for political change are largely aesthetic.
– J.G. Ballard

Introduction

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 reach seven and a half billion people, trending toward eleven billion by the end of the century (Gerland et al 2014). 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 (Steffan et al 2015). 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, raising 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’ (Blomqvist et al 2015), all the while the face of Gaia is vanishing as Empire marches resolutely on.

Lifting the poorest billions out of destitution 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 developed world. Unspeakable or even unthinkable in mainstream economic and political discourse, a compelling case can be made that responding to this context of ecological overshoot will need to entail *planned economic contraction* of the energy and resource demands of the most developed regions of the world, as well as a reconceptualisation of sustainable development in the Global South, beyond the conventional path of industrialisation. This ‘limits to growth’ position signifies an extremely complex, challenging, but arguably necessary paradigm shift in the dominant conception of human progress, one that is being explored boldly today within the nascent ‘degrowth’ movement (Latouche 2009, Kallis 2011).

Although the degrowth movement is diverse and defies singular definition, in general terms it seeks to initiate a transition beyond the existing order of globalised growth capitalism and in its place build 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 (Alexander 2015a). Counter-intuitively, perhaps, the movement also contends that a degrowth transition of planned economic contraction can actually maintain or even 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 from advocates of degrowth 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.

In recent decades the ‘limits to growth’ position has received a great deal of attention, mostly from economic and ecological perspectives (Meadows et al 2004, Daly 1996, Jackson 2009, Turner 2012). More recently, the degrowth movement has begun contributing an important range of new political and sociological analyses (see generally, D’Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis 2015), offering deeper insight into the alternative paradigm, evaluating transition strategies, policies, and obstacles, while also continuing to update and

refine the ecological critique of growth economics (eg Kallis 2017a) in response to those who continue to fetishise growth. The purpose of this scoping paper, however, is neither to review these existing literatures nor offer another ecological critique of growth, but to extend and deepen the understanding of degrowth by examining the concept and the movement from a perspective that has yet to receive any sustained attention—namely, aesthetics. More about raising questions than offering answers, my aim is to open up the dialogue not close it down, which is to acknowledge that large theoretical territories are traversed without being able to map them all in the detail they deserve. Consider this, then, an invitation to discuss.

Overview and Justification

Defined further below, aesthetics can be understood as a domain of inquiry that examines not merely the meaning and function of art and the role of the artist in society, but broader considerations about taste, judgment, perception, imagination, and sensibility. In what follows I highlight and examine the aesthetic dimensions of degrowth, in the hope that this reveals new and worthwhile insights about the meaning and potential of this emerging sustainability movement. Might the degrowth imperative demand not just a radical political and economic engagement with the structures and goals of our growth-orientated civilisation, but also an engagement and transformation of our aesthetic sensibilities, capacities, and practices? And what is the relationship between the aesthetic dimensions of degrowth and the various ecological, economic, political, and cultural dimensions? These questions motivated and shaped the forthcoming analysis.

Admittedly, readers would be right to approach this aesthetic inquiry with a degree of scepticism. After all, in a world where ecocide, financial crisis, war, and creeping fascism loom ominously on the horizon like dark clouds gathering for a perfect storm—a situation that demands a radical political engagement in order to dissipate and transcend the various tragedies already taking form—a turn to aesthetics certainly needs justification. How could one look to poetry, literature, music or the imagination in a world immiserated by violence, oppression, and unspeakable suffering? As critical theorist Herbert Marcuse (1978, p.1) noted as he began his own meditation on aesthetics: ‘It would be senseless to deny the element of despair inherent in this concern: the retreat into a world of fiction where existing conditions are changed only in the realm of the imagination.’ At first instance, aesthetic considerations do seem like a petty indulgence or trivial distraction, reserved for the comfortable few who do not have to worry about the problems of the real world. Art, one might contend, is not a serious subject for the activist or theorist of political economy.

The following analysis deconstructs this dismissal of aesthetics by examining the distinction between art and political economy, in order to show that there is in fact an inherent aesthetic dimension to politics as well as a political or even revolutionary potential inherent to certain forms of art or aesthetic practice. In doing so the analysis is shaped by the emerging ‘aesthetic turn’ in politics (Ranciere 2006, Bleiker 2009, Kompridis 2014) and by various political interpretations of art and aesthetics (Edelman 1995), mixing and developing these substantive bodies of thought in the hope that this alchemy produces a deeper understanding of the blurry nexus that conjoins (as it attempts to separate) art and politics.

To be clear, the premise of this essay is not that we *should* or *should not* infuse politics or economics with aesthetic considerations, but rather, as Jacques Ranciere (2006, p.58) states, that ‘politics is aesthetic in principle’—an insight that extends to political economy more broadly in ways that will be explained. Moreover, it will be argued that only by acknowledging, appreciating and operating within the aesthetic dimension can there be any hope for deep revision in the established politico-economic order in the direction and form of degrowth. After all, it is one thing to establish firm scientific, ethical, and philosophical foundations for de-

growth, but if there is no *felt need* in society for such a transition then this can be understood in part as an aesthetic obstacle that demands an aesthetic intervention or series of interventions. A major prerequisite to deep societal transformation, as Marcuse (1978, pp. 3-4) implored, is ‘the fact the need for radical change must be rooted in the subjectivity of individuals themselves, in their intelligence and their passions, their drives, and their goals.’ Accordingly, the degrowth movement’s neglect of the aesthetic realm arguably constitutes a failure that is hurting the movement for change.

After fleshing out the concept of aesthetics in the next section, the essay presents a brief but broad-ranging critique of the dominant consumerist and industrial aesthetics of advanced capitalism, in order to provide a background against which to contrast, in due course, an alternative aesthetics of degrowth. Critically examining aspects of the contemporary aesthetics of advanced capitalism will also function to show why the aesthetic dimension is not somehow separate or isolated from matters of political economy but inextricably intertwined with them in ways that are important but not always obvious. The discussion attempts to emphasise the aesthetic challenges and opportunities presented by degrowth, as well as highlight the fact that the movement must not just engage the head but also the heart; which is to say, to be effective the degrowth movement must seek to change not only the way we think about the world but also the way we feel, perceive, judge, create, and in the end, exist in the world. I argue that art—as well as broader aesthetic interventions in culture and politics—may well need to play a defining role prefiguring or provoking such affective changes in how we experience the world, thereby influencing how we act in it. Drawing on the aesthetic and cultural theories of Herbert Marcuse and extending the later work of Michel Foucault, this essay will introduce and ultimately defend the notion of degrowth as an ‘aesthetics of existence.’

The Aesthetic Dimension

Narrowly defined, aesthetics refers to the philosophy of art, a domain of inquiry that seeks to understand the nature and meaning of art as well as how (or whether) judgements of beauty can be established or defended beyond appeals to subjective experience alone. However, aesthetics can also be understood to encompass a broader range of concerns and perspectives, examining aesthetic concepts like taste, form, creativity, perception, feeling, and sensibility to shed light on lived experience beyond the specific domain of ‘art objects’. While questions of art and the role of the artist in society will be taken up in the final sections of this essay, my analysis will be informed on the whole by this broader conception of aesthetics. The purpose of this section is to unpack the meaning of the aesthetic dimension of experience in a little more detail, acknowledging from the outset that the discussion must be selective and very incomplete.

To begin at the most abstract level, the human condition has an inherently aesthetic dimension, insofar as lived experience is always shaped and mediated by language (Rorty 1989). That is, our linguistic concepts give order and form to our experience of the world and even to our conceptions of self. This can be understood aesthetically in the sense that human beings have had to *create* those linguistic concepts and frameworks, and infuse them with meaning, for neither the concepts nor their meanings were given to us in advance. The concepts and their meanings could have been otherwise, have been otherwise, and in fact are always and everywhere changing due to the inherent semantic instability of language and the ever-changing contexts of human life within which language is used (Fish 1989).

Furthermore, there is no way for us to step outside our linguistic constitutions and somehow perceive the world in an unmediated, pre-linguistic form; no way for us to shed the conceptual schemes through which we experience the world and see the world *as it really is*. Instead, reality is experienced through the lens of

language, and the key point is that human beings *created* that lens. This is essentially all that is meant when philosophers talk of the linguistic or social ‘construction of reality’ (Berger and Luckman 1966), even if explanations are usually dressed up in impenetrable, post-structuralist jargon.

There are various levels to this creative process of constructing reality through our linguistic practices. As children we are educated into a ‘language game’ that we did not ourselves create—first upon someone’s knee, then through lessons ratified by wider society—but it is not as if this is a purely passive process. Humans both shape and are shaped by language, and this dialectical relationship is an ongoing process of co-creation and co-production. By inventing new concepts or vocabularies in response to a changing world, or creatively redefining the meanings given to existing concepts or vocabularies, human beings can literally reshape not just their *experience* of reality, but more fundamentally, *the reality* they experience, expanding the horizons of what can be thought, said, seen, and even felt.

This capacity to shape and reshape reality with the tool of language can be understood most clearly perhaps through the narratives we tell ourselves and each other about the world and our place in it. The universe, our histories, our relationships, and our lived experience all defy full and complete accounting by virtue of their infinite complexity. There is no way to tell The Whole Story, so to speak, for there is always more that could be said; other perspectives not yet considered; new events and situations that call into question previous interpretations or categorisations of the world, etc. Accordingly, when we find ourselves trying to make sense of the world, we are inevitably faced with the creative challenge of selecting which aspects of life to focus on and how to interpret or describe those limited aspects. In thus describing the world or our experience, we are effectively giving a narrative account of our lives—we are giving form to content—and in this sense we find ourselves in a position not dissimilar to the author tasked with telling a story (Nehamas 1985).

If the meaning of life does not announce itself to us or lie ‘out there’ in external metaphysical reality waiting to be discovered, it follows that we must instead create as an aesthetic project the meaning of our own lives, as well as collectively shape as an aesthetic project the societies in which we live, just as that society inevitably shapes us. As Jean-Paul Sartre (1964, p. 101) once noted: ‘You can always make something out of what you’ve been made into.’ The intention here is not to sound grandiose but simply to highlight the inherent aesthetic or creative dimension at the core of human existence—a point to which we will return.

Aesthetics also inquires less abstractly into our *sensuous* experience of the world. The traditional focus of analysis has been the experience of beauty: what is it about a particular painting, story, sonata, poem or vista that stirs our souls and causes us to feel such uplifting yet mysterious emotions? Is beauty a property of some objects and not others, capable of objective recognition by the discerning observer? Or is the experience of beauty a function of subjective tastes which we have been taught and internalised in culturally dependent ways? These are genuine aesthetic inquiries, but as noted above, the aesthetic domain need not be limited to the study or analysis of art, beauty, and taste. More generally, our sensuous or aesthetic experience of the world also encompasses our passions, joys, hopes, sorrows, and fears, as well as our capacities for a range and depth of impressions, moods, feelings, and emotions. Additionally, aesthetic *practice* can be understood variously as forms and modes of creative activity, including artistic production, but extending more generally to the application of creativity and imagination to the broader realm of life, as we endeavour to give form and order to the world and our experience of it.

Having sketched this thin definitional boundary around the domain of aesthetics, I will now explore, specifically, the aesthetic dimensions of life within the consumer cultures of advanced, industrial nations. I will touch on the foundational ‘story of progress’ which lies at the heart of industrial development;

review typical aesthetic features of postmodern urban life, with its ubiquitous advertising and consumerist messaging; highlight the dominant cultural modes of self-creation through consumption; outline the way all this impacts affectively or sensuously on our bodies and psyches; and finally, I will address the question of ‘taste’ which drives and entrenches the industrial-consumerist aesthetic and explain how this aesthetic underpins the political economies of growth capitalism. Albeit fleeting, this brief critical review will provide the necessary background against which to contrast, in later sections, the possibility and nature of an aesthetics of degrowth, while also exposing the blurry boundary between aesthetics and political economy.

The Old Story: A Critique of Industrial-Consumerist Aesthetics

Every individual and every society is an enactment of a story people tell themselves about the nature and purpose of their existence and of the world they live in (Berry 1999, Quinn 2017). Whether we conceive of ourselves as children of God, speaking apes, revolutionaries, artists, parents, bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, or consumers—perhaps all of these things or none of them—in the end we all give a narrative structure to our lives, or at least adopt the default narrative 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.

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 (Sachs 1992). The very vocabulary of ‘development’ implies that some societies have reached maturity—the rich, developed nations of advanced capitalism—while the rest of the world is lacking the same degree of civilisation and therefore is in need of 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. 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.

Although this mode of industrial development 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. As noted in the introduction, environmental scientists have been demonstrating that the global growth economy is destroying the ecological foundations of life, while 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 poverty (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). 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 (Monbiot 2012), failing to recognise that growth may now be causing the very problems it claims it can solve.

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, etc—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 (for some reviews, see Lane 2000, Kasser 2002, Offer 2006, Frank 2009). Our civilisation’s defining goal appears to be misconceived. There seems to be an emptiness to affluence (McCormack 2001, Hamilton and Denniss 2005) 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.

Needless to say, within mainstream discourse these criticisms are rarely considered fundamental flaws in the basic story of industrial development, but instead are treated as matters of detail in need of refinement, a little tweaking around the edges, nothing 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, often shaping the consciousness of even those it oppresses, marginalises, and alienates (Sachs 1992).

Moving from the civilisational level to that of individual subjectivity, the narrative of industrial development is merely regurgitated in a personalised form. 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 (Hamilton 2010a). Anthropologists and sociologists have done considerable work studying and analysing the ways in which people communicate through their consumption; how they convey social messages—tell stories—about who they are through the symbolic content of commodities (Schor 1998, Miller 2010). It would seem that 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 Descartes’ famous dictum in consumerist-existential terms: ‘I shop, therefore I am.’

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 their deepest insecurities or emotional needs (Anon 2017). 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, and social admiration. 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 (see Bauer et al 2012).

The consumerist-industrial aesthetic is compromised further (or compromises *us* further) as people in highly developed societies today find themselves evermore disconnected from nature. This is not to defend or idealise some mythical pre-industrial ‘wild’ but only to acknowledge that ‘nature deficit disorder’ is a real condition, threatening to become an epidemic, albeit largely undiagnosed (Louv 2011). Other cultural theorists investigate a strange existential condition they label ‘affluenza’—a spiritual malaise of sorts that afflicts even those who have achieved the consumerist ideal (Hamilton and Denniss 2005). The causes 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 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 impose themselves upon one’s attention; only

to be so tired upon the return home that there is no life-energy to do anything but sit in front of the television or computer, in 'nice clothes', eating a microwave meal and sedating oneself with alcohol or drugs in order to fight off the ennui. I am being polemical here, of course, and painting with too broad a brush, but the picture is accurate enough as far as it goes. 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 when Theodore Roszak (1972, p. xxviii) looked into the eyes of modern consumers he saw only faces 'twisted with despair'?

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, disaffection, 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 (Jackson 2009), ensuring that the vicious circle of consumption continues. The spiritual malaise only deepens (Myers 2001), for as the Parisian graffiti of 1968 stated: 'those who lack imagination cannot imagine what is lacking'.

To better understand the industrial-consumerist aesthetic and its implications on consumption practices, we could turn to the question of 'taste'. In the 20th century, French intellectual Pierre Bourdieu, in his seminal text, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984), 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, given that practices of 'conspicuous consumption' that deliberately show off certain levels of wealth to emphasise high status have been discussed at least since Thorstein Veblen's work in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (2009 [1899]). Bourdieu (1984, p. 358) argued that the acceptance of dominant forms of taste is a form of 'symbolic violence', because individuals in lower classes do not always have the economic or cultural means of accessing 'highbrow' cultures of consumption and are thus dominated by taste, forever trying to conform to the reigning aesthetic for fear of being socially ostracised by appearing crude, vulgar or tasteless.

Anthropologist, Mary Douglas, offers 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' (Douglas 2006 [1976], p. 243). 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, such that even the notion of poverty can be understood as something that is culturally specific and not merely a biophysical universal. 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 actually desire a certain level or manner of consumption but because they naturally desire social legitimation and acceptance, know-

ing that there are cultural expectations in this regard. Transcending consumerism therefore means 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’. Someone once gave Dennis Diderot (the French enlightenment thinker) a beautiful, new scarlet robe, and without thinking he discarded his old one. 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. Juliet Schor (1998, p. 145) 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.

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. Few people, it seems, have a taste for sufficiency. It should be noted, 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’ (Diderot 1769). Diderot had been master of his old robe but became slave of the new one. ‘Opulence has its obstacles,’ he concluded (Diderot 1969), a lesson we might have much to learn from today.

In this section I have attempted to provide some insight into various aesthetic dimensions of consumption practices in advanced industrial societies. The purpose has been to show 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; the ways we shape our identities and communicate through consumption; the disaffection and alienation that evidently is widely experienced in consumer societies, even by those who have achieved the consumerist ideal; and the way dominant conceptions of taste and social legitimation with regard to material living standards entrench materialistic conceptions of the good life.

With the basic foundations laid, I will now outline Michel Foucault’s notion of an ‘aesthetics of existence’ and then explore its relevance to consumerism, industrialisation, and the degrowth alternative. The thesis of this paper is that a transformation in our aesthetic relationships to the world and indeed to ourselves will need to precede any deep revision in the politico-economic order of growth capitalism in the direction of degrowth. In making this argument I begin by examining the aesthetic dimensions of human subjectivity and then offer some political and macroeconomic reflections.

Degrowth as an ‘Aesthetics of Existence’

Throughout the Western philosophic tradition it has been argued, or simply assumed, that beneath the various historical manifestations of human subjectivity there lies an ahistorical or transcendental ‘subject’ or ‘nature’ that all human beings share. The notion of a universal form of the subject is epitomised in the work of Immanuel Kant, who argued that human beings are endowed in common with rational faculties and that by correctly employing those faculties we can determine, on rational grounds, the universal moral rules that ought to govern human life. Michel Foucault (2000) rejected this universal notion of the ‘subject’ and the idea of a universalisable moral code that flowed from it. Just as Friedrich Nietzsche had announced the ‘Death of God’ to signify the loss of faith in a transcendental basis for morality, Foucault (2002, p. 422) famously anticipated the ‘Death of Man’ to signify the loss of faith in a basis for morality that was somehow grounded in a universal ‘human nature’.

If there is no universal form of *the subject* but rather only historically specific forms of *subjectivity*, what are the implications of this on how we understand the human situation? It is in response to this type of question or self-questioning that Foucault began developing his notion of ethics as ‘an aesthetics of existence’. Rather than try to determine the moral code that universally deserves human obedience, Foucault’s approach essentially was instead to ask: ‘What sort of person should I become?’ ‘From the idea that the self is not given to us,’ Foucault pronounced, ‘I think that there is only one consequence, we have to create ourselves as a work of art’ (Foucault 2000, p. 262).

This aesthetic metaphor strikes many people as strange, for we are not generally accustomed to talking about life as a work of art. We might want to say, for example, that life is one thing, art is another, and that these distinct categories should not be conflated. But the distinction between art and life was precisely what Foucault was trying to question. In fact, it can be argued that Foucault was not actually using art as a metaphor here at all. That is, he was not proposing that we are related to our own lives *like* the way the artist is related to his or her raw materials; instead, he was proposing that we are related to our lives *as* artists, whose raw material is life itself. As he once lamented in an interview (Foucault 2000, p. 261):

[I]n our society art has become something which is related to objects, and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialised or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?

Foucault’s reasoning here is unusually straightforward: if the nature of the self is not given to us in advance—that is, if there is no ‘true self’ to which we should be trying to interpret correctly or discover—then it follows, by default, that we must *create* ourselves. We are not, however, given a blank canvas to work with, so to speak; which is to say, we do not get to create ourselves from scratch, since our identities are by and large a *product* of linguistic, social and institutional forces beyond our control or choosing. Nobody, for example, gets to choose the categories which structure their perception or interpretation of the world; rather, as noted above, we are all educated into—or subjected to—a form of life as we grow up, and through that process we find ourselves embedded within elaborate structures of power/ knowledge that both enable and constrict our thoughts and actions (Foucault 1977). This education and those power/knowledge structures shape who we are as individuals and they define the nature of our subjectivity.

Nevertheless, Foucault argued we can also act upon ourselves, act upon our socially constructed subjectivities, through processes that he variously called ‘self-fashioning’, ‘care of the self’, ‘techniques of the self’,

or ‘arts of the self’. Foucault (1990, p. 37) defined these Greek ‘arts of existence’ as: ‘those intentional and voluntary actions by which men [sic] not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria’. Through these processes, in which the self engages the self, human beings have the potential to transform their subjectivities in much the same way a sculptor transforms a given lump of clay. The subject, Foucault (2000, p. 290) insisted, ‘is not a substance... [i]t is a form’, and what form that subject takes is up to us as individual agents, at least in part. This is the creative challenge—one might say the aesthetic challenge—with which we are all burdened. We must, as Foucault (2000, p. 262) proposed, ‘create ourselves as a work of art’.

To be clear, Foucault’s argument was not that we should try to make ourselves as beautiful as possible. Instead, *creativity* rather than *beauty* was the primary aesthetic value that defined his aesthetics of existence. He was not calling on us to be ‘dandies’ in the tradition of Oscar Wilde or Charles Baudelaire; rather, he was calling on us to avoid being merely products of our socialisation and to instead exercise our imaginations in response to the question: ‘what sort of person should I become?’

How, then, is this related to the present focus on degrowth? In a previous essay I explored in detail the notion of voluntary simplicity (or simple living) as an aesthetics of existence (see Alexander 2015b). I argued that because we are 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, thereby marginalising 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 we will all have internalised these cultural narratives to some extent, often unconsciously, I argued 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.

The self-creation of these new forms of subjectivity is a necessary first step in any transition to degrowth society, for the simple reason that until there is a culture that embraces voluntary simplicity, the social underpinnings for degrowth will be absent (Alexander 2013). In other words, a politics or macroeconomics of degrowth will not be desired within consumerist cultures that seek and expect ever-rising material living standards, and politicians will never campaign for degrowth if it is clear there is no social support for it. So 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 question, ‘how much is enough?’, and trying to reshape our relationships to material culture in line with the aesthetic values of balance and harmony.

Nevertheless, a re-fashioning of the self in line with voluntary simplicity will not be enough on its own to produce a degrowth society, 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 (Sanne 2002). For these reasons voluntary simplicity as an aesthetics of existence is a necessary though not sufficient response to existing crises. It lacks a systemic perspective, which is why I have been drawn to expand the analysis in terms of ‘degrowth as an aesthetics of existence.’ This is intended to highlight the fact that current crises are ultimately systemic crises that require a systemic response—not merely a cultural response—even if that systemic or political response begins with the aesthetic self-transformation of our given subjectivities; begins, as J.K Gibson-Graham (2006) would put it, with a ‘politics of the subject’.

A systemic analysis obviously requires a political and macroeconomic statement exploring new structures and systems suitable for a degrowth society. I have attempted such a statement elsewhere (Alexander 2016), which I will not attempt to summarise here. Instead, I want to explore the aesthetic foundations of a politics or economics of degrowth, by extending Foucault's aesthetics of existence beyond the domain of the subject and propose a more holistic or systemic approach, based on Marcuse's work, that conceives of society, not merely the self, 'as a work of art' (Marcuse 2007, Ch. 4).

5.1 *Society as a work of art*

What might it mean to speak of society as a work of art? Is it merely a degeneration into breezy, New Age theoretical nonsense? I ask the reader to resist such an interpretation and dare to take this perspective seriously. To begin with, a case has already been made that human experience in and of the world is socially constructed, mediated by linguistic categories and practices, the shaping and reshaping of which is an ongoing creative process. Cultures are, and have always been, founded upon stories, myths, and narratives that are always evolving, defining the contours of civilisation. We are both creatures and creators of this aesthetic process—both product and producer—and the present point is that when asking political and economic questions about how best to structure our societies, we inevitably offer answers shaped by the underlying stories of self and society. In short, I would argue that *politics and economics are tools in the service of story*. Crafting these stories is an aesthetic process of giving form to the content of our lives and societies, akin to a collaborative work of art.

It follows that a politics or macroeconomics of degrowth will depend upon an underlying and prior aesthetic revolution in our cultural stories of self and society. We need new visions of progress and prosperity. This suggests that before there can be systemic transformation in the existing societal structures there must be an imaginative redefinition of the meanings of many of our key concepts, categories, values, goals, and visions. After all, notions like freedom, justice, happiness, wealth, and progress will need to be transformed if degrowth is to make sense. I believe this is not so much a philosophical or scientific task about finding the 'essence' or 'truth' of such concepts and the relationships between them; it is better understood as a literary or aesthetic challenge, in the sense that the creative redescription of concepts and relationships need to be shown to make more sense within a New Story than within the Old Story.

In the Old Story, for example, a person might think they are free and happy because they have managed to acquire the largest house in the street; the thoughts, feelings, actions, and institutions of society all support this interpretation. In developing and prefiguring a New Story, however, another person might realise they are free and happy because they *don't need* a large house to live a full and meaningful life. Freedom and happiness mean very different things depending on the underlying stories of self and society, and if politics is partly about securing and maximising freedom, and economics is partly about advancing happiness, then obviously a restructuring of society will depend on a prior reimagining of how we understand fundamental terms like freedom and happiness. As more people develop new ways of seeing and understanding things, they begin to reimagine their lives, make different decisions, develop new hopes and dreams, engage people in new ways, and sooner or later the old ways die out; new thoughts, feelings, and actions begin to call into question the coherence of the Old Story, and pressure begins to mount on the laws and institutions of society. Overtime, either incrementally or in bursts of discontinuity and rupture, society is remade according to the new vision or visions, limited only by the collective imagination in context.

Even when we accept that there are physical limits to growth, this need not limit our lives, just as the limited number of keys on a piano has never limited the pianist. There will never come a time when all the beautiful

sonatas have been written. Similarly, there are an infinite number of meaningful and fulfilling forms of life consistent with living a life of material sufficiency, which is to say, a life based on a certain material *content* can take any number of *forms*. To deny this, I would suggest, betrays a failure of imagination, even if the practice of material sufficiency in a growth-orientated society is deeply challenging: an ongoing creative process not a destination. Degrowth as an aesthetics of existence is about, first, imagining the various forms such a society of material sufficiency may take, and secondly, working toward creating such a society—individually, socially, economically and politically—in order for the entire community of life to flourish within sustainable bounds. This raises questions not merely about what to do in order to create a degrowth society that is shaped by such aesthetic values as balance and harmony, but also questions about how our aesthetic experience of the world may change during the transition to such a society. For better or for worse, aesthetic matters are fundamental both to society and the individual.

There is much more to say about the notion of a conceiving of society as a work of art, both in defence and in response to potential criticisms.¹ Nevertheless, I would now like to bring the analysis down to Earth, so to speak, and explore in very practical terms—both individually and at a societal level—what an aesthetics of degrowth might look like or feel like in the real world, and how it might contrast with the dominant industrial-consumerist aesthetics already reviewed.

The New Story: Toward an Aesthetics of Degrowth

In exploring an aesthetics of degrowth, we could begin with clothing, it being the domain of life where we express our personal aesthetics or ‘style’ most noticeably and immediately. The primary purpose of clothing is to keep us warm and its secondary function, at least in modern times, is to cover nakedness. That being said, those functions have been marginalised in consumer societies today, where clothing’s purpose has evolved to be primarily about expressing one’s identity or social status (Mackinney-Valentin 2017). There are powerful cultural expectations about looking a certain way depending on context, and since fashion changes so quickly, there is social pressure to constantly upgrade and expand one’s stock of clothing. These aesthetic expectations drive consumerism and the growth economy at the expense of a healthy environment and create cultures overly focused on cosmetic concerns.

In a degrowth society, the social importance of high fashion could be drastically reduced or disappear, as people might come to see that clothing is really just a superficial shell—saying little or nothing about the depth of a person’s character—and that always looking ‘brand new’ in an age of ecological overshoot is neither necessary nor cool. Of course, human beings have always expressed themselves through what they wear, so we should expect that style would not so much disappear as evolve in a degrowth society. But this style would reflect the ethics of sufficiency and frugality that would shape material culture in all domains of life (Thoreau 1983). People would probably have limited changes of clothing, buy second hand whenever possible, mend the clothing they have, exchange items, perhaps even make their own, and wear their items in creative arrangements until they are worn out. This would require many people to rethink their ‘image’ in light of the new aesthetic, including their ‘self-image’, in ways that might require a deliberate reshaping of the self by the self.

Clothing would be functional first and foremost, comfortable and well-worn, so there would be no worry about lying down on the grass if the mood called for it, opening up new opportunities for a sensuous reconnection with nature (Reich 1970). Neckties, high heels, and ostentatious displays of jewellery could slowly disappear as relicts of a bygone era. A time would come, no doubt, when people wearing ‘high fashion’ would be the ones perceived as lacking style and taste, and conversely, that the creative and eccentric clothing-makers

and stylists would be the ones admired, esteemed, and sought after—at which time it would be clear that a new, creative, post-fashion, and highly localised aesthetics of degrowth had emerged.

A similar aesthetic evolution might come to shape both our homes and how we furnish them. In contrast to the McMansions prevalent especially in the United States and Australia, housing in a degrowth society would come to reflect the ‘small is beautiful’ aesthetic (Schumacher 1973). A small house minimises the materials and time needed for building, as well as shrinking the spatial footprint, thereby minimising pressure on urban sprawl. Most importantly, perhaps, a small house reduces the energy needed to heat and cool it, especially if well designed in terms of materials, orientation, window placement, and insulation. Less space inside also incentivises frugality and minimalism, as there would be little room for material clutter. There could be a widespread cultural embrace of William Morris’s dictum: ‘Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.’

Often furniture might be homemade (perhaps even the house itself); spaces would be dedicated to home production (eg arts and crafts) rather than merely consumption; renovations would rarely if ever be merely cosmetic; and the piano rather than the television might become the heart of the lounge. It should be clear, then, that nothing here suggests that homes in a degrowth society would be ugly, only that the sense of beauty and style would be very different, again reflecting a humble ethics of creative sufficiency rather than the slick uniformity of modernist chic. Scarcity begets creativity.

Continuing with basic material aspects of life, we could turn to food. One of the more perverse aspects of the industrial-consumerist aesthetic with respect to food is the bizarre expectation today for visually perfect, unblemished fruit and vegetables in supermarkets. Not only does this result in vast amounts of perfectly good food being thrown away or left to rot on account of it being aesthetically unacceptable to the contemporary consumer—highlighting the moral implications of aesthetics—but also the aesthetic demands for exterior perfection tend to impact negatively on the food’s taste (see generally, Stuart 2009).

In a degrowth society, it would be considered utterly tasteless to throw away good food if even a single person went hungry, and cosmetic blemishes would not be considered flaws but merely the inevitable result of natural, organic production. Similarly, it would be considered bad taste to eat meat from factory farms and in general meat consumption would be greatly reduced or eliminated due to environmental, especially climate, impacts (see Tanke 2007) and the heightened sensibility with respect to animal welfare. Thus the picture of an ordinary meal could begin to look very different from the highly processed, meat-heavy diets prevalent in the West and increasingly elsewhere, resulting in a new engagement with cooking styles, tastes, and recipes. Given that diets would probably be healthier on account of these changes, the very aesthetic of the human shape would likely transform in a degrowth society, with a reversal of the obesity epidemic. In terms of home production of food, the tidy but unproductive lawns and nature strips common today would be dug up and planted with fruit trees and vegetable gardens, transforming the ‘look’ of the suburbs and reminding people of the changing seasons. The productive permaculture garden or food forest might become new status symbols in the degrowth society (Holmgren 2002).

This reference to status symbols provides a segue into a consideration of the aesthetics of transport and travel. In consumer societies today, the automobile sits alongside clothing and housing as an object of consumption that is often designed and desired in order to convey wealth, success, and status. But in a degrowth society, the Lamborghini or Porsche would be considered a bit tacky, extremely wasteful, destructive, and contrived—certainly not something considered beautiful or to be envied or admired. There would be far more interesting and important things to focus on, for as Henry David Thoreau (1983, p. 568) would say: ‘Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only.’

A degrowth society would likely be a highly localised society, in which people's main forms of transport would be cycling or walking (Honnery and Moriarty 2008). Aside from the environmental benefits, this would be a positive aesthetic innovation because it would increase the human connection with nature, keep us fit, and expose us to the elements in ways that would enrich our sensuous experience of the world. 'Nature deficit disorder' would disappear (Louv 2011). With good wet weather gear and adequate lights, even cycling home at night in the rain would not concern members of a degrowth society, who would instead look forward to the soft exhilaration of an evening ride, as cyclists today already know. Rather than go on holiday in homogenous luxury resorts overseas, the practitioner of voluntary simplicity in a degrowth society would sooner take the family camping in the local national forest or beachside village, again transforming our aesthetic or sensuous experience of the world in ways that could enhance our lives, provided we had developed a 'taste' for simplicity, nature, and the outdoors. This could open the door to what is today called 'alternative hedonism' (Soper 2008) or 'frugal hedonism' (Raser-Rowland and Grubb 2017)—that is, simpler ways of living that explore the various potentials of living 'more with less'.

It should be clear that this type of aesthetic revisioning could be extended to all domains of life, large and small. At the ecosystemic level, by creating a post-carbon way of life, members of a degrowth society might avoid experiencing in their day to day existence the worst climate impacts; the wind farm would be perceived as a vista of supreme beauty, enriching the landscape, not something aesthetically objectionable; at the household level, the impression of a 'good sized' family might tend toward one child; in matters of detail, not flushing urine in order to save water might raise aesthetic objections from within the consumer mindset but become the 'new normal' in a degrowth society; similarly, using a composting loo to create 'humanure' (Jenkins 2005) might offend the squeamish bourgeois sensibility and yet defecating in drinking quality water might offend an alternative degrowth sensibility.

Furthermore, a degrowth society would likely produce vastly different urban and suburban landscapes, where advertising and cars were increasingly absent, de-polluting the visual, aural, and mental environments, allowing people to have thoughts of their own, liberated from the industrial-consumerist aesthetic. Even the arts themselves would doubtless evolve, with the corporate production of formulaic pop music, vapid television, and meaningless 'spectacles' of performance art (Debord 2000) losing hold on society and creating cultural space for a rebirth of authentic, local art, uninfluenced by the promise or seduction of the globalised market economy.

All this, of course, returns us to the question of 'story'—and its importance, both in terms of self and society. Mending one's clothes or growing one's own food within the Old Story might be considered by many to be a shameful requirement, symbolising an unsuccessful life of poverty. But within the New Stories being told by degrowth and related movements, such practices would be seen and experienced as a fulfilling exercise of creativity; an example of sensible frugality; and a small but meaningful act of ecological care that draws social admiration, and so forth. Each element in life looks very different depending on the underlying narrative that gives those elements context, and so Story can be understood as the meta-aesthetic issue that shapes the 'taste' we have for various aesthetic forms, values, and practices. A degrowth society therefore requires a story of self that transcends the consumerist story of self—requires a new aesthetics of existence, as I have argued, from which a 'taste' for degrowth aesthetics would emerge. Of course, the challenge here, to paraphrase the poet Samuel Coleridge, is to *create the taste by which we will be judged*.

How to do that is a question that leads nicely into our final subject of inquiry.

The Role of Art and the Artist on the Degrowth Pathway

In these closing substantive sections I wish to reflect more directly, albeit briefly, on the role of art and the artist in the context of a degrowth movement. As noted from the outset, such an inquiry should be treated with some caution, for there is a risk that art merely signifies a pessimistic or even irresponsible retreat into the realm of the imagination at a time when the world needs committed and direct political and economic engagement, not merely beautiful pictures or creative stories. While a legitimate concern, I will maintain that art and aesthetic inventions in culture more broadly, far from merely representing an escape from the real world, may be, in fact, necessary to provoke and drive the required societal transformations that the degrowth movement envisages. Here the work of Herbert Marcuse remains as relevant as ever, who held that ‘art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world’ (Marcuse 1978, p. 32).

The foundational point—a negative one—lies in the realm of consciousness: 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 capitalism. This is the reality of the situation and there is little use in denying it. The Marxian idea that the working classes would develop a revolutionary consciousness has not transpired and does not seem to be threatening to emerge. Indeed, within mainstream culture there does not seem to be any *felt need* to act for deep and urgent change, and without that cultural sensibility it is not clear how deep and deliberate change could ever eventuate. A radicalised consciousness seems to be a precondition for a successful degrowth movement, thus its absence should be a subject of critical concern.

I will offer two primary reasons (somewhat overlapping) for the broad cultural acceptance of the established reality of consumer capitalism. The first is related to the limits of human rationality; the second relates to the counter-revolutionary allure of affluence, which I argue limits the human imagination. Both of these issues reward an analysis through the lens of aesthetics and point to essential aesthetic responses.

7.1 *The limits of rationality and the aesthetic implications*

What is the nature of the human being? How do we make our decisions? The Enlightenment conception 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 is slowly lifting humankind out of the domain of historical ignorance and primitiveness, and by applying the scientific method we will continue to develop a broader range of knowledge and technologies with which we 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, etc). To take the ecological crisis as a case in point: arguably there was evidence enough in the 1970s or earlier to justify a fundamental transformation of our destructive modes of economic activity. If not historically, then certainly today. Climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss, pollution, topsoil erosion, etc, etc—at what point will there be ‘enough’ evidence to provoke change? I contend that perhaps it isn’t ‘better evidence’ that is lacking.

Granted, there are vested interests at play which influence how democracies respond to the issues they face (Tham 2010), but the fact is that culture broadly *knows* about the 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 domain either, even though marginalised counter-cultures 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?² It is important that evidence-based thinkers answer this question based on the evidence (see Haidt 2000, Thibodeau and Boroditsky 2011).

If humanity's social and environmental problems were just a result of an '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.

I hasten to add that this is not in the slightest to denigrate the necessary and important work of environmental and social scientists. It is only to suggest that relying on 'the evidence' alone to do the hard work of societal transformation is naïve. 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 (see Thibodeau and Boroditsky 2011), and it could be that the environmental movement, and the degrowth movement in particular, has trusted too much in the provision of the evidence, neglecting the critical task of presenting the evidence in socially digestible forms. This is an aesthetic challenge because it highlights the importance of giving *form* to *content*. It follows, I contend, that the degrowth movement should be exploring ways of being more creative and engaging in its presentation of its own scientific and ethical foundations, in order to do those foundations justice. After all, it is not enough to be correct in one's diagnoses and prescriptions; one must also find a way to expand the audience beyond those already converted, and that points to a communications challenge.

On a related note, I would argue that the degrowth movement should be trying harder to appeal not merely to the head, but also—or especially—to the heart. Put otherwise, a persuasive case for degrowth must be made not just *intellectually* or *rationally* but also *affectively* or *emotionally* (Haidt 2000, Amin and Thrift 2013). No doubt there will be and are people who, when exposed to new evidence, reconsider their current thinking and adjust their worldview and actions to better reflect the facts. This is the rationalistic ideal and probably the self-image we all hold 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 (eg the growth paradigm), people can 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 (see, eg Hulme 2009, Hamilton 2010b).

It is in these non-rational contexts where the artist arguably 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, feelings, hopes, and drives. As Marcuse (1978, p. 10) pointed out long ago, art can communicate truths 'not communicable in any other language.'

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, for the purpose of exposing the violence often hidden in our habits of thought and practice, and opening our minds to alternative ways of living and being. David Cox (2010) defines the practice of culture jamming as ‘a vibrant counter-attack on the empire of signs’, and this counter-attack need not just be the production of images, but can include other acts or activity that function to disrupt people’s ordinary experience and open new doorways of perception and understanding. Some refer to this as ‘activism’ (see Jordan 2017).

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. This is the closest thing we have ever seen to a global uprising, but note that *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’ (Debord 2000) on its own terms, and met with some success.³ Culture-jamming is an oppositional aesthetic practice, I contend, that has yet to fulfil its potential.

The neo-pragmatist philosopher, Richard Rorty (1989), has made a compelling case that art—the novel, in particular—is a far more effective means of provoking an expanded moral or ethical sensibility and reshaping social relations in the world than logic, science, or books of moral philosophy. Indeed, Rorty argues that paradigm shifts in human culture, science, and political economy rarely occur because a society has been rationally convinced, based on the evidence, of a new framework of understanding; instead, such revolutions are usually a result of creative interventions in the dominant story whereby many significant aspects of the old mode of understanding have been *redescribed* in new ways. When a new generation grows up adopting and normalising these redescrptions, we find that the world has changed. This is perhaps why Percy Bysshe Shelley (1890, p. 2) was prepared to declare that ‘poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world’, suggesting that aesthetic revolutions often precede revolutions in political economy, sometimes in subtle ways. Perhaps the ultimate lesson for the degrowth movement, then, is this: when all appeals to reason have failed, tell a new story (Burch 2016).

7.2. The counter-revolutionary allure of affluence and the aesthetic implications

The reflections in the previous sub-section offered one take on why there is no broad cultural consciousness that seeks to transcend consumer capitalism. The argument was that the evidence in support has not been communicated sufficiently well and that the movements for change, including degrowth, have focussed too much on an intellectual mode of persuasion, at the expense of emotional or affective modes of persuasion, which are arguably more effective in shaping or reshaping consciousness. It could even be the case that the very terminology of ‘degrowth’ is too confronting—is socially indigestible—in a civilisation where ‘growth’ is the defining metaphor of success. That is, degrowth invokes what it seeks to overcome, and therefore arguably reinforces the dominant metaphor. On the other hand, perhaps attacking the metaphorical foundations of civilisation is the only coherent means of achieving the types of changes required. I will not try to resolve that debate here, but note that it is far from being a merely cosmetic concern (see Kallis 2017b, Thibodeau and Boroditsky 2011).

In this closing sub-section I will briefly expand and extend this analysis by arguing that the promise (and to some extent the reality) of rising affluence in developed nations has functioned, in recent decades, to dissipate

any large-scale social discontent or threat of social upheaval. The Grand Narrative of progress via economic growth has been widely internalised in consumer cultures, such that 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 and affluence, rarely if ever beyond it. People may shake their heads in concern when they hear of the latest warnings of climate scientists, or shake their heads in outrage when they hear that the richest eight 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.

The point I would like to make is that this inability to think beyond growth and consumerism is a troubling failure of imagination, and arguably one of the greatest obstacles in the way of transformative change in the direction of degrowth. 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.

Again, this is why art has a revolutionary or transformative potential and always threatens to perform a political function, albeit usually indirectly (Edelman 1995). I would argue that one of the most important roles of the artist in society is not merely to make beautiful objects, images, stories, or songs, but to expand conditions of possibility by breaking through the petrified social reality and unshackling the human imagination. Far from representing an escape from reality, art and the artist can in fact expose the falseness and contingency of the established order, leaving the truth of alternative realities more accessible and perceivable. In the words of Marcuse (1978, pp. 6-7):

the world formed by art is recognized as a reality which is suppressed and distorted in the given reality. This experience culminates in extreme situations (of love and death, guilt and failure, but also joy, happiness, and fulfilment) which explore the given reality in the name of a truth normally denied or even unheard. The inner logic of the work of art terminates in the emergence of another reason, another sensibility, which defy the rationality and sensibility incorporated in the dominant social institutions.

With specific reference to degrowth, it would seem that the artist must help people see or feel more clearly, not merely the violence too often hidden in our cultural practices and economic and political institutions, but perhaps, most importantly, show that there are forms of flourishing and liberation that lie beyond consumer culture; forms of flourishing founded not upon affluence, growth, competition, and technology, but upon the visions and values of sufficiency, moderation, permaculture, community, cooperation, and self-governance. In short, an art for degrowth, first and foremost, must expand the collective imagination. The words of Gary Snyder speak to this approach with eloquent insight: ‘it would be best to consider this an ongoing “revolution by consciousness” which will be won not by guns but by seizing the key images, myths, archetypes, eschatologies, and ecstasies so that life won’t seem worth living unless one is on the transforming energy’s side’ (Snyder 1970, np).

Such aesthetic interventions in the name or spirit of degrowth are beginning to emerge here and there (Jordan 2017), but we are still waiting for the groundswell of creative activity that makes degrowth irresistible. We are still waiting for a new ‘aesthetic education’ (Schiller 2004) that teaches us how to live in balance and harmony with nature; a new aesthetic education that re-enchants our lives in ways that make the status quo utterly unacceptable and the joys of defiant activism seem impossible to pass up (Bennett 2001). But now, at least, the challenge has been laid down – both to artists, in particular, and to artists-of-life more broadly.

If it turns out, however, that neither art nor science can provoke the transformations needed to avoid the looming apocalypse, then the role of the artist will only magnify further, as creative imaginations are tasked with interpreting and understanding civilisational descent in terms that give meaning to the inevitability of suffering; give sense to the pain we will feel (perhaps are already feeling) as global capitalism dies its inevitable death. At that stage, the therapeutic or even spiritual role of art will take precedence over its political function, a transition anticipated already by the Dark Mountain (2017) movement. The very 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. It will be the artist, not the scientist, I contend, who will contribute most to the human understanding of such a disclosure when, or if, it arrives. Rather than wallow helplessly as civilisation descends into barbarism, let us hope that our artists, novelists, poets, and filmmakers, are up to the task of weaving narratives of human and ecological suffering into a meaningful web of solidarity and compassion—and thereby, perhaps, give birth to a new golden age of Grecian tragedy that offers both an education and cleansing of the emotions and passions in these turbulent times (Aristotle 1997).

Perhaps that is the new dawn that lies beyond this dark hour.

¹ See, eg, Walter Benjamin’s (2010 [1935]) concern about fascism being an aestheticisation of politics, which properly acknowledges that aesthetics is a two-edged sword, which can be used for good or evil, depending on the values and visions that drive its political and economic applications.

² Disconcertingly, this critique seems to entail a meta-critique of itself: doesn’t presenting a critique of the rationalistic conception of societal change, by relying on critique, still privilege a rationalistic conception of societal change?

³ Although failing in its greatest ambitions, I believe that, among other things, Occupy made it permissible again to talk about inequality in US politics, creating political space for the likes of Bernie Sanders who was very close to being the Democratic candidate and some argue would have been a stronger opposition to Donald Trump.

References

- Alexander, S 2013, 'Voluntary simplicity and the social reconstruction of law: Degrowth from the grassroots up', *Environmental Values*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 287-308.
- Alexander, S 2015a, *Sufficiency economy: Enough, for everyone, forever*, Melbourne, Simplicity Institute.
- Alexander, S 2015b, *Prosperous descent: Crisis as opportunity in an age of limits*, Melbourne, Simplicity Institute.
- Alexander, S 2016, 'Policies for a post-growth economy', MSSSI Issues Paper, No. 6, 2016.
- Amin, A and Thrift, N 2013, *Arts of the political: New openings for the left*, Durham, Duke University Press.
- Anon, 2017, *Advertising shits in your head*, London, Dog Section Press.
- Aristotle 1997, *Poetics*, New York, Dover.
- Bauer, M Wilkie, J, and Kim, J 2012, 'Cuing consumerism: Situational materialism undermines personal and social well-being', *Psychological Science*, vol. 23, no. 5, pp. 517-23.
- Benjamin, W 2010 [1935], *The work of art in an age of mechanical reproduction*, New York, Prism Key Press.
- Bennett, J 2011, *The re-enchantment of modern life: Attachments, crossings, and ethics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Berger, P and Luckman, T 1966, *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*, Garden City, NY, Doubleday.
- Berry, T 1999, *The great work: Our way into the future*, New York: Bell Tower.
- Bleiker, R 2009, *Aesthetics and world politics*, London, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Blomqvist, L, Nordhaus, T, Shellenberger, 2015, *Nature unbound: Decoupling for conservation*, Oakland, Breakthrough Institute.
- Bourdieu, P 1984, *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*, London, Routledge.
- Burch, M 2016, *Euterra rising: The last utopia*, Winnipeg, Mark Burch.
- Cox, D 2010, *Sign wars: The culture jammers strike back*, Melbourne, University of Melbourne Custom Book Centre.
- D'Alisa, G, Demaria, F, and Kallis, G 2014, *Degrowth: A vocabulary for a new era*, London, Routledge.
- Daly, H 1996, *Beyond growth: The economics of sustainable development*, Boston, Beacon Press.
- Dark Mountain 2017, 'The Dark Mountain Project', available at: <http://dark-mountain.net/> (accessed 20 May 2017).
- Debord, G 2000, *Society of the spectacle*. Detroit: Black and Red.
- Diderot, D 1769, 'Regrets in parting with my old dressing gown' available at: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/diderot/1769/regrets.htm> (accessed 20 May 2017).
- Douglas, M 2006 [1976], 'Relative poverty – relative communication', in T. Jackson (ed.). 2006, *The Earthscan Reader in sustainable consumption*, London, Earthscan.
- Edelman, M 1995, *From art to politics: How artistic creations shape political consciousness*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

- Fish, S 1989, *Doing what comes naturally: Change, rhetoric, and the practice of theory in literary and legal studies*, Durham, Duke University Press.
- Foucault, M 2002, *The order of things*, London, Routledge.
- Foucault, M 1977, *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews & other writings 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon, New York, Pantheon.
- Foucault, M 1990, *Michel Foucault: Politics, philosophy, culture: Interviews and other writings 1977-1984*, Edited by L. Kritzman, New York, Routledge.
- Foucault, M 2000, *Ethics: Essential works Vol. I*, edited by Paul Rabinow, London, Penguin.
- Frank, R 2009, *Luxury fever: Why money fails to satisfy in an era of excess*, New York, The Free Press.
- Gerland, P et al 2014, 'World Population Stabilization Unlikely This Century' *Science* 18 September 2014: DOI: 10.1126/science.1257469.
- Gibson-Graham J.K 2006, *A post-capitalist politics*, London, University of Minnesota Press.
- Haidt, J 2000, 'The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgement' *Psychological Review*, vol. 108, pp. 814-34.
- Hamilton, C 2010a, 'Consumerism, self-creation and prospects for a new ecological consciousness', *Journal of Cleaner Production*, vol. 18, pp. 571-575.
- Hamilton, C 2010b, *Requiem for a species: why we resist the truth about climate change*, London, Earthscan.
- Hamilton, C and Denniss, R 2005, *Affluenza: When too much is never enough*, Crows Nest, NSW, Allen & Unwin.
- Holmgren, D 2002, *Permaculture: Principles and pathways beyond sustainability*, Hepburn Springs, Holmgren Design Services.
- Honnery, D and Moriarty, P 2008, 'Low-mobility: The future of transport', *Futures* vol. 40, pp. 865-872.
- Hulme, M 2008, *Why we disagree about climate change: Understanding controversy, inaction, and opportunity*, New York, Cambridge.
- Jackson, T 2009, *Prosperity without growth: Economics for a finite planet*, London, Earthscan.
- Jenkins, J 2005 (3rd edition), *The humanure handbook: A guide to composting human manure*, White River Junction, VT, Chelsea Green Publishing.
- Jordan, J 2016, 'Injecting imagination into degrowth' in *Degrowth in movements*, available at: <https://www.degrowth.de/en/dim/degrowth-in-movements/artivism/> (accessed 20 May 2017).
- Kallis, G 2011, 'In defence of degrowth', *Ecological Economics* vol. 70, pp. 873-80.
- Kallis, G 2017a, 'Radical dematerialization and degrowth', *Trans. of the Royal Society A* 375:20160383.
- Kallis, G 2017b, 'You're wrong Kate: Degrowth is a compelling word' *Oxfam blogs*, available at: <http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/youre-wrong-kate-degrowth-is-a-compelling-word/> (accessed 20 May 2017).
- Kasser, T 2002, *The high price of materialism*, Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press.
- Kompridis, N 2014, *The aesthetic turn in political thought*, London, Bloomsbury.
- Lane, R 2000, *The loss of happiness in market democracies*, New Haven, Yale University Press.
- Latouche, S 2009, *Farewell to growth*, Cambridge, UK, Polity Press.

- Louv, R 2011, *The nature principle: Human restoration and the end of nature-deficit disorder*, New York, Algonquin Books.
- Mackinney-Valentin, M 2017, *Fashioning identity: Status ambivalence in contemporary fashion*, London, Bloomsbury Academic.
- Marcuse, H 1978, *The aesthetic dimension: Toward a critique of Marxist aesthetics*, Boston, Beacon Press.
- Marcuse, H 2007, 'Society as a Work of Art' in Kellner, D (ed) *Art and liberation: Collected essays of Herbert Marcuse (Volume Four)*, London, Routledge.
- McCormack, G 2001, Revised edn. *The emptiness of Japanese affluence*. New York, Armonk, M.E. Sharpe.
- Meadows, D, Randers, J, and Meadows, D 2004, *Limits to growth: The 30-year update*. White River Junction, Vt, Chelsea Green Publishing.
- Miller, D 2010, *Stuff*, Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Monbiot, G 2012, 'How "sustainability" became "sustained growth"' available at: <http://www.monbiot.com/2012/06/22/how-sustainability-became-sustained-growth/> (accessed 20 May 2017).
- Myers, D 2000, *The American paradox: Spiritual hunger in an age of plenty*, New Haven, Yale University Press.
- Nehamas, A 1985, *Nietzsche: Life as literature*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- Offer, A 2006, *The challenge of affluence: Self-control and well-being in the United States and Britain since 1950*, Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press.
- Quinn, D 2017, *Ishamel: A novel*, New York, Bantam.
- Ranciere, J 2004, *The politics of aesthetics*, London, Continuum.
- Ranciere, J 2006, *Dis-agreement*, London, University of Minnesota Press.
- Raser-Rowland, A and Grubb, A 2017, *The art of frugal hedonism*, Hepburn Springs, Melliadora Press.
- Reich, C.A 1970, *The greening of America*, New York, Random House.
- Rorty, R 1989, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, New York, Cambridge University Press.
- Roszak, T 1972, *Where the Wasteland Ends: Politics and Transcendence in Postindustrial Society*, New York, Doubleday Press.
- Sachs, W (ed) 1992, *The development dictionary: A guide to knowledge as power*, New York, St Martin's Press.
- Sanne, C 2002, 'Willing consumers – Or locked in? Policies for a sustainable consumption'. *Ecological Economics*, vol. 42, pp. 273-287.
- Sartre, J.P. 1964, *Situations*, Paris, Gallimard.
- Schiller, F 2004, *On the aesthetic education of man*, New York, Dover.
- Schor, J 1998, *The overspent American: Upscaling, downshifting, and the new consumer*, New York, Basic Books.
- Schumacher, E 1973, *Small is beautiful: Economics as if people mattered*, London, Blond and Briggs.
- Shelley, P.B 1890, *A defense of poetry*, Boston, Ginn and Co.
- Stuart, T 2009, *Waste: Uncovering the global food scandal*. New York, W. W. Norton and Co.

- Snyder, G 1970, 'Four Changes' *Modern American Poetry* available at: http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/snyder/snyderessays.htm (accessed 20 May 2017).
- Soper, K 2008, 'Alternative hedonism, cultural theory and the role of aesthetic revisioning' *Cultural Studies*, vol. 22, no. 5, pp. 567-587.
- Steffan, W et al 2015, 'Planetary Boundaries: Guiding Human Development on a Changing Planet', *Science*, 347(6223) DOI: 10.1126/science.1259855.
- Tanke, J 2007, 'The care of the self and environmental politics: Towards a Foucaultian account of dietary practice', *Ethics and the Environment*, vol.12, no.1, pp. 79-96.
- Tham, J-C 2010, *Money and politics: The democracy we can't afford*, Sydney, University of New South Wales Press.
- Thibodeau, P and Boroditsky L 2011, 'Metaphors we think with: The role of metaphor in reasoning', *PLOS ONE* 6(2), e16782.
- Thoreau, H 1983, *The Portable Thoreau* (ed. by Carl Bode), Penguin, London.
- Turner, G 2012, 'On the cusp of collapse? Updated comparison of *The limits to growth* with historical data', *Gaia*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 116-124.
- Veblen, T 2009[1899], *Theory of the leisure class*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Pickett, K and Wilkinson, R 2009, *The spirit level: Why greater equality makes societies stronger*, London, Penguin.



MELBOURNE SUSTAINABLE
SOCIETY INSTITUTE

www.sustainable.unimelb.edu.au

Melbourne School of Design (Blg 133)
Masson Road
The University of Melbourne
Parkville VIC 3010, Australia

About MSSI:

The Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute (MSSI) aims to facilitate and enable research linkages, projects and conversations leading to increased understanding of sustainability and resilience trends, challenges and solutions. The MSSI approach includes a particular emphasis on the contribution of the social sciences and humanities to understanding and addressing sustainability and resilience challenges.