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DOI:

[10.1080/14767430.2020.1771014](https://doi.org/10.1080/14767430.2020.1771014)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

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Citation for published version (APA):

Wilson, N. (2020). Aesthetics in a persecutory time: Introducing Aesthetic Critical Realism. *Journal of Critical Realism*, 19(4), 398-414. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767430.2020.1771014>

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Aesthetics in a persecutory time: Introducing Aesthetic Critical Realism

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Abstract

We are living through a time when simplistic notions of good/bad, right/wrong, and us/them, have come to dominate our encounters with each-other and our planet. Against this 'persecutory' backdrop, this paper considers the promise of a more relational and mutually supportive way of living. Introducing Aesthetic Critical Realism (ACR), I present a laminated explanation of 'aesthetics in a persecutory time'. This is founded on our capacity for *aesthetic experience* (the emergent experience of being-in-relation with the natural necessity of the world); doing *art* (giving shareable form to our aesthetic experiences); and caring for *culture* (as our system(s) of value recognition). Far from being of interest only to artists and the arts, 'aesthetic reason' bridges theoretical (scientific/philosophical), practical (political/ethical) and productive (creative/artisanal) knowledge. In living 'artfully' we both 'give and get recognition', and this is a requirement for human flourishing.

Keywords

aesthetics; Aesthetic Critical Realism; experience; aesthetic experience; art; value; culture; aesthetic reason; artful living

Introduction

Let me begin by repeating two well-known features of critical realism. First, the core objective of the human species – its moral truth, is a sustainable, diversified global society in which the free flourishing of each is a condition of the free flourishing of all. Second, to understand and then change the world requires the pursuit of ontology – an attempt to understand and say something about ‘the things themselves’. This paper is written in the spirit of the former, and the practice of the latter. The ostensible ‘thing’ that I wish to understand and say something about is *aesthetics*. As we shall see, this entails focusing on a yet more foundational phenomenon – *human experience*, which, thus far, has been subject to (at best) something of a strained relationship with critical realism.

As Alan Norrie outlined in his 2019 IACR Conference keynote address ‘we live...in a psychological time that can be said to be persecutory, i.e., a time in which fear and anger, together with simplistic ideas of good and bad, self and other, seek to rule.’ Norrie went on to suggest (after Benjamin 2018) that this is a time which splits people into ‘doers’ and those ‘done to’. Extending this theme, I suggest that our polarized society does indeed appear to be characterized globally, nationally, and locally by winners and losers, haves and have nots, the powerful and the powerless, climate activists and deniers, leavers and remainers, and so on. Both in our politics and our relations with the natural world we have become morbidly *dis*-connected. This dis-connection lies at the heart of many contemporary world problems – from climate emergency, poverty and exclusion, continued infant mortality, inequality and terrorism, to populism, political corruption, economic and scientific triumphalism and the pathology of value. In reference to the financial crisis of September 2008, for example, Bhaskar referred to ‘a triple disembedding: of money from the real economy; of the real economy from society; and of society from its spiritual infrastructure’ (Bhaskar with Hartwig 2010, 196). He added that this has occurred ‘in the context of the manifestation of symptoms of growing alienation and stress at all four planes of social being’ (Ibid.) But, the obvious question arises – *why* is this the case?

Whilst recognizing the foolishness of attempting to diagnose so many complex and highly path dependent problems with a single answer, I do, however, want to pull together some disparate (albeit connected) strands in this paper. For there *is* a common thread to be followed. In critical realist terms we can trace this back to ‘actualism’ – the commonest form of realism within empiricist cultures.¹ Actualism involves the reduction of the necessary and the possible to the actual. The actualist relies on what is evident, and what is actually apparent, rather than what is possible or necessary for the phenomenon being ‘explained’ to exist. Within critical realism, much of the focus of attention in respect of actualism has been how it tends towards a reliance on (often implicit) causal laws, which are based on the constant conjunction of events. However, beyond this critique of Humean empiricism, actualism confuses and/or overlooks our (emergent) knowledge of ‘natural necessity’ (the way the world is) with/or substituted by our knowledge of events, concepts and signs – or in other words, what is ‘actually apparent to us’. Such actualism underpins both our behaviours and our explanations. In what amounts to a systematic mistreatment (what the dictionary defines as ‘persecution’), our ‘natural necessity’² as human beings to experience being-in-relation with other(s), with ourselves, and with the world – our ‘betweenness’ – is overlooked.

We are always *between* being and becoming. Life for each one of us is what happens between our birth and our death. William Desmond describes life’s ‘adventure’ as our ‘wak[ing] to the mystery of being, impelled towards an end, we know not, from a beginning we comprehend not, in a milieu whose lords we are not.’ (Desmond 1995, 6.)³ Our experiences of the

‘present’ embrace (more or less consciously) the ‘past’ and the ‘future’. To state this parochially, you are currently somewhere *between* the beginning and the end of this article.⁴ Furthermore, life takes place somewhere between our unfolding sense of self and other. This is not merely existential; none of us would be here at all had it not been for the solidarity, love and care of others. Returning to the theme of actualism - crucially, there is the very betweenness of our relationship with a world that we can only ever have fallible knowledge of. I call this betweenness (which is a facet of the natural necessity of what it is to be human) ‘the space that separates’.

My contention in this paper is that what I am arguing for in respect of our experience of natural necessity is central to the realm of aesthetics. Of course, this is not how aesthetics has been generally understood. We haven't been able to ‘see’ aesthetics this way precisely because of the prevailing tendency towards actualism. Indeed, this tendency is reinforced and at its strongest in relation to what we think aesthetics refers to – what we see, hear, taste, touch and so on, i.e. our sensory perceptions of the world. (If actualism is alive and well we are surely going to find it here.) But this is a truth in practice combined with a falsity in theory – a TINA.⁵ Moreover, it is a TINA that spawns further TINAs: for example, that aesthetics is constituted (solely) by the ideological practice of understanding and saying something about art and artworks; or that art is simply the term we give for (producing) artworks. Instead, I will argue that aesthetics and art refer precisely to our experiences of natural necessity, including of our betweenness (of being-in-relation) and our sharing and valuing of these experiences with each other.

Critical realism prides itself on its maximal inclusivity. As highlighted in the Introduction to the 2019 IACR conference ‘it pursues an emancipatory and progressive agenda, [engaging] with ontological questions and claims to truth, while acknowledging the fallibility of knowledge.’⁶ Bearing this in mind, the promise of a critical realist-informed depth ontology of aesthetics comes as a welcome proposition. Unfortunately, critical realism has been slow to make good on its potential in this respect. Critical realist scholars have largely chosen to stick clear of aesthetics (with one or two notable exceptions – which I refer to below). That is, at least, until *The Space that Separates: A Realist Theory of Art* (Wilson 2020), which tackles the subject head-on, introducing Aesthetic Critical Realism (ACR). The purpose of this paper is to introduce the key headline points of ACR as they are directed towards the emancipatory goal of coming to know our relational selves better. This takes the form of a laminated explanation.⁷ Necessarily, this involves summarizing a wide range of ideas that are discussed in much more detail elsewhere; however, in so doing, I present (in outline), the case for ‘aesthetic reason’ and ‘living artfully’ – thereby offering an ‘emancipatory and progressive’ way out of our persecutory times (*if, that is, we choose to embrace it*).

Aesthetics

It is time we got completely rid of that expression which, ever since Kant, is ever and always to be read in the writings of amateurs of philosophy, even though its absurdity has often been recognized...Aesthetics has become a veritable *qualitas occulta* – hidden behind this incomprehensible word there are many nonsensical assertions and vicious circles in arguments that should have been exposed long ago.⁸

Writing in 2009, Jacques Rancière observes that ‘aesthetics has a bad reputation’ (p.1). He adds that ‘aesthetics is charged with being the captious discourse by which philosophy, or a certain type of philosophy, hijacks the meaning of art-works and judgements of taste for its own benefit.’ (Ibid.) Given my particular focus on our persecutory times, it is tempting to put a *contemporary* spin on this critique. In point of fact, and as illustrated in the indented

quotation above from August Schlegel (who you might be surprised to know was writing in the first decade of the 19th century), finding aesthetics ‘problematic’ is anything but new.

Credited with introducing the modern-day understanding of the term, the German eighteenth-century philosopher Alexander Baumgarten defined aesthetics as ‘the science of how things are cognized by means of the senses’ (Baumgarten 1735; see also Baumgarten 1750). Whilst the word ‘aesthetics’ had previously carried with it some connotation of ‘sensation’, Baumgarten’s philosophy gave it to mean taste or ‘sense’ of beauty. Today, aesthetics is generally recognized as a particular branch of philosophy devoted to the conceptual and theoretical study of art and aesthetic experience. This encompasses three over-arching philosophical interests:⁹

- i. The *practice of art*, the activities of making and appreciating it, alongside the manifest objects that are considered works of art.
- ii. The aesthetic *properties*, features or qualities of things (including artworks).¹⁰
- iii. A certain kind of aesthetic *attitude, perception* or *experience*.

The history of debate within (and about) aesthetics is extensive. All three of the areas just listed throw up a range of issues and problems that have been widely discussed and are hotly contested. Even before we enter into any level of specificity, there is the problem, as Terry Eagleton observes, that ‘aesthetics is always a contradictory, self un-doing sort of project, which in promoting the theoretical value of its object risks emptying it of exactly that specificity or ineffability which was thought to rank among its most precious features. The very language which elevates art offers perpetually to undermine it...’ (Eagleton 1990, 2-3.) In respect of my particular focus on ‘experience’ it is necessary to foreground the Kantian approach, ‘marked by the disinterested and sympathetic attention and contemplation of any object of awareness whatsoever for its own sake’ (Carroll 1999, 170). Here, Noel Carroll asserts that the ‘essentialist’ aim of discovering some ‘common thread’ running through ‘aesthetic experiences’ is a failure and cannot be sustained. The view that ‘aesthetic experience is necessarily a matter of experience valued for its own sake...seems wildly implausible’ (Carroll 2000, 204). Against this perspective it is worth noting that the ‘purposiveness without a purpose’¹¹ of Kant’s ‘disinterested’ contemplation has, nonetheless, proved stubbornly beguiling, fueling arguments about art’s autonomy – as captured in the well-known phrase ‘art for art’s sake’.

Alongside more mainstream ‘analytical’ and ‘continental’ approaches to aesthetics is the school of thought which goes by the label of ‘aesthetic realism’. Aesthetic realists maintain that ‘aesthetic experience is experience that is endowed with *aesthetic representational content*.’ (Zangwill 2003, 64, original italics.) As Nick Zangwill argues ‘our aesthetic experience represents aesthetic states of affairs, situations, or facts. This, in turn, means that in aesthetic experience the world is represented as possessing genuine aesthetic properties’. (Ibid.) As should be evident here, we need to take great care not to conflate one ‘realist’ approach with another. Whilst it is certainly the case that critical realism encourages us to take seriously the ‘real’ properties of the world, this appeal to ‘genuine aesthetic properties’ nonetheless betrays actualist tendencies (whilst also leaving in doubt what such ‘aesthetic’ properties are), and lends itself more to naïve empirical realism than critical realism.

Critical realism and aesthetics

Without transcendental realism and critical naturalism, aesthetics is bound to reproduce its own kind of persecutory theory-making, systematically mistreating the nature of experience (and any ‘special’ category that might be considered ‘aesthetic’). Critical realism allows us to move beyond the false distinction between naïve empirical realist and essentialist arguments, which so characterize this branch of philosophical study. As such, it also affords the

opportunity of overturning what Rancière (2009) describes as the ‘confusion’ of aesthetic theory, and what I take to be his false diagnosis that ‘that there is no such thing as art in general.’ (p. 6)

I have purposefully chosen to begin this section on critical realism with a positive assertion – one that the rest of the paper is intended to justify. However, I must also preface what is to follow with a rather more critical position in regard to critical realism’s (mis)treatment of aesthetics. Given critical realism’s interdisciplinary ‘embrace’ (see Bhaskar with Hartwig 2010), it is surprising that critical realists have consistently overlooked such central features of human living as aesthetics, art, and culture. Reflecting on the fact that I attended my first critical realism (IACR) conference back in 2004, and in the 16 years since I have (putting this mildly) consistently been in the minority when it comes to offering papers that have any overt interest in art and culture, let alone aesthetics¹², I can be forgiven, perhaps, for asking whether this absence constitutes something like a systematic mistreatment?

As I have acknowledged, I certainly do not claim to be the *only* one to have an interest in, or written about, aesthetics from a critical realist perspective.¹³ Back in 1998, Gary MacLennan concluded his article ‘Towards an Ontological Aesthetics’ with the view that ‘the development of aesthetic theory within DCR [Dialectical Critical Realism] is vital in the matter of the struggle over which paradigm is set to replace postmodernism. The latter largely marked out cultural studies as its territory and has to be challenged there.’ (p.11) 22 years on, this ‘struggle’ remains a ‘vital’ one (N.B. postmodernism may have had its day, but I don’t think we know what ‘paradigm’ has replaced it). Writing in 2006 in this journal, Ian Verstegen prophesied that ‘the future of critical realist aesthetics promises to be exciting as its frameworks demolish long established divisions between analytic and continental philosophy.’ (p. 323) To the extent that I believe my own attempts to develop ACR offer, if not a ‘demolition’, then at least a bridging of the divide, I am bound to agree. However, for this to achieve any real purchase, the project of a critical realist aesthetics (or as I refer to it – aesthetic critical realism) needs to first gain legitimacy within its own circles.

For his part, Roy Bhaskar’s only explicit commentary on aesthetics appeared in his 1994 publication *Plato etc.* Bhaskar distinguished between (a) ideologies of the aesthetic; (b) aesthetic experience; (c) the theory of art; and (d) art-criticism. (p.155.) He wrote very briefly on (a) and (b), suggesting that within aesthetic experience there is ‘a genuine aspiration to concrete utopianism, neo-Blochian hope and prefigurationality.’ (Ibid.) There is also an assertion that ‘a world without aesthetic experience is inconceivable, be this the joys of a walk in the countryside or of a swim in the sea or the delight of a poetic turn of phrase or the recurrence of a motif in a Beethoven symphony.’ (Ibid.) But his main focus is limited to a brief discussion of ‘ideologies of the aesthetic’. He observed ‘...it is here, in the realm of the aesthetic, that masters grant slaves dummy resolutions of the insoluble aporiai that philosophical ideologies generate on the four planes of social being.’ (Ibid.) This position echoes concerns of Theodor Adorno (1973b; 1997), and Terry Eagleton (1990), whose work is explicitly referenced.

I was lucky enough to share my fledgling ideas of ACR with Roy Bhaskar on several occasions; he was always supportive. A question I would have liked to explore further, however, is - why does the ‘realm of the aesthetic’ get such little attention within his project (including PMR)? One defence offered to me by critical realist colleagues (but not Bhaskar himself) is that critical realism is a philosophy of (*social*) science. It is also pointed out that Bhaskar’s PMR provides extensive elaboration of some aspects human experience (which is true). However, these arguments are not sufficient. I believe critical realism has had

something of a 'blind spot' with regard to aesthetics. We can point to three main factors, which go some way in accounting for this.

First, in that the philosophy of critical realism has its origins in the critique of naïve empirical realism, 'experience' has itself been marginalized as an object of study. The need for depth ontology, which Bhaskar so brilliantly diagnoses, must be applied to experience *too*, but this has not (hitherto) been the case (N.B. this is by no means to imply that there haven't been many important critical realist insights *relating to* human experience (just to cherry-pick a few topics – reflexivity and the internal conversation, spirituality, health and wellbeing, epistemology and realism, being 'human'¹⁴), but these haven't focused on the phenomenon (phenomenology) of experience itself.) Second, resulting from this absence of a depth ontology of experience, and as evidenced in the short excerpt (and its absences) from *Plato etc.*, aesthetics has been falsely reduced to the ideological. My point here is not to refute the undoubted significance of Adorno's, Eagleton's or, indeed, Bhaskar's few remarks concerning the 'ideologies of the aesthetic', but rather to emphasize how these are only part of a much bigger story. This is a story I unfold in the pages that follow. Third, and as indicated by the comments of some colleagues, there is a belief amongst critical realists (and many others) that art and aesthetics are not immediately relevant to what makes science (or indeed, philosophy) *possible*. Regarding the Philosophy of Meta-Reality (PMR), there *are* rich insights to be taken from this latter phase of critical realism. However, for the reasons outlined above, it is also my view that Bhaskar's PMR 'leapfrogs' the embodied practices and concerns of ACR, and this has been detrimental to how aspects of PMR have been received. Interestingly in this respect, the somewhat hostile reception given to PMR and its 'so-called spiritual turn' by some commentators, echoes Adorno's critique of Heidegger's philosophy and what he termed its 'diminished theological resonance' (Adorno 1973a, 2, in Wilson 2020, 159).

Introducing Aesthetic Critical Realism (ACR)

So, why the need for Aesthetic Critical Realism (ACR)? To re-cap: the philosophy of critical realism is centred round its liberating depth ontology. Until now, however, this has not been applied directly to human experience, and as a result, 'the aesthetic has remained (implicitly) theorized at the flat level of ideology alone.' (Wilson 2020, 205) Aesthetic Critical Realism addresses the immanent epistemological concerns that lie behind our understanding of aesthetics and art. I consider the central contribution of ACR as 're-direct[ing] attention towards experience (and its emergent form – aesthetic experience), with all the conceptual tools of critical realism and its depth ontology at our disposal.' (Ibid.)

What follows is a laminated explanation of 'aesthetics in a persecutory time'. The explanation comprises five sections that cast the conceptual spotlight, in turn, on: i) human *experience* – as a form of knowledge; ii) the emergent form of human experience we call *aesthetic experience*, which is our experience of being-in-relation; iii) our giving shareable form to this experience of relationality in and through *art*; iv) a dispositional account of *value* (and valuing), which provides the conceptual link between 'aesthetic experience' and 'ideologies of the aesthetic'; and finally v) *culture*, understood as our system(s) of value recognition, of which 'the arts' is but one (albeit particular) system.

Experience

'Experience is perhaps the most miraculous phenomenon we know of; but it is also the easiest to overlook.' (Wilson 2020, 48.) In the Introduction to this paper I began to lay out my position regarding human experience, and in particular, what it means to experience the

natural necessity of the world, including our own ‘betweenness’. In the preceding section I ventured the argument that critical realism’s particular take on experience has, in some respects, contributed to its being marginalized as an object of study in its own right. As this quote from Bhaskar’s *A Realist Theory of Science* demonstrates – critical realism is, after all, born out of a critique of trusting *too much* to experience:

The crux of my objection to the doctrine of empirical realism should now be clear. By constituting an ontology based on the category of experience as expressed in the concept of the empirical world and mediated by the ideas of the actuality of the causal laws and the ubiquity of constant conjunctions, three domains of reality are collapsed into one. (Bhaskar 1975, 56-57.)

It would be misleading to imply that critical realism has overlooked experience altogether. Bhaskar himself is critical of the ‘natural attitude’ of people to apply ‘common sense’ realism – and to treat experience as simply directly apprehending the world through our senses (see Bhaskar 2007, 192; Bhaskar 2016, 6-7). The project of Aesthetic Critical Realism (ACR) is, nonetheless, a response to what I consider a theory-practice inconsistency, namely the need to develop a critical realist account of just what experience *is* – such that *its* depth ontology is accounted for. What type of ‘work’ is experience? How might we account for the full range of our experiences in critical realist terms? Commencing with discussion of the ‘problem of perception’ and a review of relevant literatures (notably those from the phenomenological tradition), I define experience as ‘the human capacity for cognitive conscious and nonconscious, i.e., thought and unthought, knowledge, gained through interaction with our environment’ (Wilson 2020, 61).

Experience is a form of knowledge. This knowledge is gained through interaction with our environment. It is dependent upon, but not reducible to our internal ruminations, reflections and conversations (see Archer 2000; 2003; 2007; 2012), as well as the properties and powers of the things we encounter, and our proximal sensory relations with these things. Crucially this knowledge does not just take the form of thoughts, ideas or conscious knowledge, but rather it embraces ‘unthought knows’ (Bollas 2018) – a complex mixture of affective, somatic, and felt experience.

Aesthetic Experience

‘A primary task for any theory of aesthetic experience is to be able to account for what makes it different from experience more generally, or in other words, what makes it “special”’ (Wilson 2020, 69; see Dissanayake (1992) for discussion of the ‘special’ nature of aesthetic experience.) My claim in this respect is that aesthetic experience is *not* an absolute, but rather a relative phenomenon. In short, *aesthetic experience* is a label we can give to a particular type of experience – namely, our knowledge of *being-in-relation* with the *natural necessity* of the world (the way the world is). This form of experience is emergent – meaning that the potential for *aesthetic* experience is contained (in principle at least) within *any* experience – including the one you are having right now, as you read this sentence. As John Dewey ([1934] 2009) asserts, aesthetic experiences are continuous with everyday life. Far from being something reserved only for art galleries and concert halls, aesthetic experience occurs right across the spectrum of our everyday (and not so everyday) encounters. Furthermore, aesthetic experiences aren’t just ‘nice to have’ or ‘entertaining’ – though often they are both of these (and my theoretical approach does not trivialize entertainment by any means). Referring to Bhaskar’s observation concerning ‘concrete utopianism, neo-Blochian hope and prefigurationality’, we should in this respect be careful not to limit our analysis of ‘aesthetic experiences’ to those of apparent ‘joy’ and ‘delight’, however important these indeed are.

A particular feature of my claim for aesthetic experience is that it involves our knowledge of the ‘natural necessity’ of the world. This includes phenomena that we cannot directly observe through our physiological capacity for sensory perception.¹⁵ It is for this reason that I have already drawn particular attention to our ‘unthought knowns’ being a crucial component of experience. Critical realists will be familiar with the claim that, *inter alia*, the world comprises structures, mechanisms, relations, powers, possibilities, potentials, forces, values, energies and relations. This is, quite simply, the way the world is. But none of these are directly perceivable. You cannot see, hear, taste, or touch the relationship you have with your partner, mother, son, or friend; or the potential in a creative idea; or the forces that hold things together, or tear them apart. But this does *not* mean you have no knowledge of these things. Indeed, very often, we feel them intensely. It is precisely our capacity for aesthetic experience (as I define it) that means we can, and do, have knowledge, albeit fallible, of the natural necessity of the world. As I argue in the Introduction, this includes our own natural necessity in the form of our experience of betweenness.

I have not yet engaged directly with the subject of beauty, despite this being central to Baumgarten and later Kant’s aesthetics. ACR takes beauty to be ‘the intensely-experienced energisation of behavior by, or the direction of behavior “toward” *the space that separates*...i.e., as a positive stimulus (a form of approach motivation).’ (Wilson 2020, 184.). Putting this more simply, beauty is an intense experience of connection. What this emphasizes is not that beauty is an objective quality of things (as some critical realist readers might expect), but rather that beauty is a relational property of our experience of a world that is capable of being experienced *as* beautiful. As we shall see shortly, a similar line of argument, which owes much to Andrew Collier’s (1999) ethical naturalism, underpins the approach I take to explain ‘value’.

Art

Thus far, the argument presented focuses on our individual capacities as human beings to experience the world – including its (and our) natural necessity. But, of course, we do not live as isolated individuals. We both need conducive conditions for emergent experience(s) of being-in-relation to unfold, and to share these with others. This brings us to *art* - because it is art – the skilled practice of giving shareable form to our aesthetic experience – that mediates between our individual atomistic aesthetic experiences and our social surroundings. Such skilled practice can, and does, take many forms. This includes those identified and legitimized within particular ‘art-forms’ – music, dance, painting, performance, sculpture, poetry, film, and so on. But it also includes the myriad of ways in which we interact verbally, physically, emotionally, affectively with each-other and with the world. It is in this respect that our being ‘artful’ is not just of interest to ‘the arts’ but entirely relevant and central to our theoretical projects (science and philosophy), our practical projects (politics and ethics), and indeed our productive projects (craft and artisanship).

It should now be clear how I respond to the TINA that art is taken to be synonymous with artworks produced by artists in the arts. My central argument is that it is in doing art that we give shareable form to our experiences of being-in-relation with the natural necessity of the world. In critical realist terms, this refers to the causally generative domain of the ‘real’ that extends beyond our direct observation, and comprises relations, structures, mechanisms, possibilities, powers, processes, systems, forces, values, energies, ways of being. Though art is often portrayed as something ‘nice to have’ for those with the time and money to engage with it, my theorization challenges this head-on (whilst *still* acknowledging the systemic inequalities that deny many the opportunity). For coming to terms with our natural necessity – our betweenness (what I have termed ‘the space that separates’) is, in fact, one of our

deepest needs. It is precisely our capacity for art that best enables us to meet this need. In art, we open ourselves to the world's openness, whether experienced as wholeness, emergence, excess or lack; this is creativity and deep connection.

The value of art *far exceeds* interest in artworks, artists or the arts. In stating this, I don't wish in any way to belittle or overlook the importance of creating artworks, the work of artists or, indeed, the significance of the arts. Contrary to the views of Carroll and Rancière, as noted earlier, I think we *can* 'discover' a 'common thread' that explains artworks in terms of their being 'aesthetically real' objects. These are artefactually real or conceptually mediated material entities, which in the course of being experienced give rise to an emergent experience of being-in-relation with the natural necessity of the world (see Wilson 2020, Chapter 4). Furthermore, as a 'recognizer' of an artwork (the aesthetically real object) we come to recognize *ourselves* as recognizers, and are, in the process, recognized. As a broad literature on recognition discusses,¹⁶ such 'recognition is a pre-condition of identity formation, self-realization, good life and freedom' (Wilson 2020, 201).

Needless to say, being able to understand and say something more specific about particular paintings, sculptures, musical compositions, dances, novels, performances etc. is very important, but necessarily requires additional *domain-level* knowledge and understanding (N.B. it is entirely consistent with what is presented here that such work can, and should be undertaken within this aesthetic critical realist theorization, but this is not my chosen focus of study, nor do I possess the domain-level knowledge to undertake this). At the broader level, however, *all* artworks, regardless of medium or form, are 'tools' enabling aesthetic experience – and in turn influencing what 'counts' as art. In this respect, of course, whether or not they are recognized as (valuable) 'artworks' (and who by) is another very important question – one that brings us to the issue of value(s) and valuing.

Value(s) and valuing

In his 2006 article in this journal, Ian Verstegen argues that 'ultimately, we cannot do without the category of value. Conceived as a relation it loses much of its objectionability.' (p. 343) He goes on to add that 'while many notions of value have been put to authoritarian uses, the intuitionistic, naturalistic and cognitive nature of value can be normative and a guide to understanding debates in aesthetics.' (Ibid.) I very much agree. Taking my lead from Andrew Collier's (1999) ethical naturalism, and Andrew Sayer's (2011) definition of values as "'sedimented" valuations that become attitudes or dispositions, which we come to regard as justified.' (p.25.) I theorize value(s) in terms of forces or potentials that motivate us to move. In keeping with all living things, we move towards or away from stimuli in what scientists call 'approach or avoid motivation'.¹⁷ Values are the forces we experience which motivate us to move (though, of course, this is not some kind of reflex or hydraulic effect). We 'are moved' at an emotional level, if not physically. If we value something highly, we'll tend to move towards (sometimes away from) it. This includes ideas – such as this one. If we don't value it at all it will not register affectively, and there will be no 'movement', no emotional pull, and hence no 'energizing' of behaviour.

But, of course, values are not determined atomistically by individuals alone. What you, me, and others (especially those in positions of power and authority) think, experience, and share with each other, has a bearing on which values 'count'. In this regard, we have here reached that level in this unfolding laminated explanation where the 'ideology of the aesthetic' takes centre stage, but *without* being conflated into aesthetic experience. To explain this further we can draw on two prominent critical realist concepts. The first is the 'dispositional' nature of value and valuing. Here 'disposition' 'highlights the logical, epistemological and ontological

priority of the possible and implicit over the actual and the explicit' (Hartwig 2007, 147). The second is its being understood as an ongoing 'morphogenetic' process (Archer 1995). This takes seriously the pre-existing natural necessity of the world – the existence of forces and energies etc., but then works through how our experience(s) of these powers constitutes a dispositional account of unexercised / exercised / and actualized value and values respectively. There are four stages to this model:

- i. The independent existence of forces and powers in nature, i.e., natural necessity; [power(s)]
- ii. Human beings' aesthetic experience of these powers, i.e., emergent experience of being-in-relation with these real phenomena as 'value(s)', but no action (movement) taken; [unexercised value(s)]
- iii. Individual action (movement) taken as a result of (ii), embracing now a level of *individual* (self-)recognition; [exercised value(s)]
- iv. *Collective* recognition of 'value' (as valuable) on the basis of (i)–(iv); [actualized value(s)]. N.B. this recognition forms the first conditioning phase for any future morphogenetic cycle.

Where this model now directs us towards is to our collective recognition of value (to include recognition of individual artworks and the arts), and so to culture.

Culture

Writing in 2000, Ludwig Grünberg noted that 'two centuries have passed since, in a book that was a trailbreaker for the modern concept of culture, Johann Gottfried Herder complained about nothing being vaguer than the term, "culture."' (Grünberg 2000, 55.) For the theorist, novelist and critic, Raymond Williams, 'culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language' (Williams [1976] 1983, 87). For her part, Margaret Archer describes culture as being 'inordinately vague'. (Archer [1988] 1996, 1). On the one hand, it is a 'superordinate power in society'; on the other, it is reduced to 'a mere epiphenomenon'. (Ibid.) Blaming this state of affairs on the all-pervasive 'myth of cultural integration' (Ibid., 2.), Archer analyses culture as a cycle of interaction between what she terms the *Cultural System (CS)* and *Socio-Cultural Interaction (S-C)*.¹⁸ The Cultural System 'is constituted by the corpus of existing *intelligibilia* – by all things capable of being grasped, deciphered, understood or known by someone' (Archer 1988, 104). These intelligibilia are concrete things – books, films, documents, musical scores, and the like – from which we can extract cultural meaning. Taking issue with ideas as 'objective knowledge', and appealing instead to the normative pressures exerted by groups of people on one another, Dave Elder-Vass calls these 'norm circles'.¹⁹ I want to suggest, however, that rather than accounting for the 'objective moment' of culture in terms of 'ideas' (which, incidentally, leaves one to question the 'cultural' status of our (aesthetic) experiences as I have defined them in earlier sections of this paper), we should rather be focusing on something else: *value*. It is 'human, creative, value-laden activity' after all, which 'is the vehicle without which the human being would not be able to endow existence with a specifically human meaningfulness.' (Grünberg 2000, 61 my italics.)

Understood this way, culture maps readily on to the final stage of the dispositional model of value(s) and valuing that I introduce above, i.e., the 'collective recognition of value' (where *exercised values* are transformed into *actualized values*). This makes explicit the movement between individual and structural levels – the very focus that 'static' (see Jackson 2009) conceptions of culture as 'way of life' or as 'art(s)' have tended to obscure. This is a movement that is present in Archer's morphogenetic model of culture too (between the

Cultural System and Socio-Cultural Interaction), but there the theoretical fulcrum forms around ideas rather than value(s).

What I am arguing is that we can, and should, re-define culture as our collective system(s) of value recognition. More formally:

Culture, as our system(s) of value recognition, is constituted by, emergent from, but irreducible to clusters of culture (oriented) axiological phenomena that are consciously and/or unconsciously reproduced or transformed through people's (creative) practice.

Contrary to popular belief – culture is not so much about our shared *values* themselves (e.g., the way we do things round here), but rather, our shared *system(s) of value recognition*. This, in turn, brings us to 'the arts' – with their particular value-related (axiological) institutions and structures. For the arts are, indeed, one such 'system of value recognition', in which those involved (we call them 'artists') co-create (with audiences) aesthetically real objects (i.e., objects which enable aesthetic experience), and these are called 'artworks'. As important as they are, the arts constitute just *one* of our systems of value recognition. There are many others, operating within and across different temporal and spatial parameters (N.B. though we separate them analytically they are, in reality, inseparable). These include education, religion, politics and the institutions of state; but by far and away the most dominant and pervasive system of recognizing value (in Western contemporary society at least) is the market-driven economy. So pervasive is it, indeed, that the very word 'value' has become all but synonymous with economic or financial worth. As cultural policymakers, practitioners and theorists have all encountered, accounting for the value of art quickly calls the economic into play. But what ACR offers is an alternative reading, and furthermore, one that can shed much needed light on the 'intrinsic' value of art – a process that takes place within and beyond 'the arts'. Furthermore, in bringing 'value' firmly into the foreground, this re-definition of culture also calls us to re-consider the choices and decisions, and indeed decision-making processes, that determine just what types of system(s) of value recognition we want to value. Putting this another way it encourages us to *care* about (and for) culture.²⁰

Conclusions

I began this paper by evoking critical realism's emancipatory 'spirit' and highlighting its particular 'practical' contribution in terms of re-focusing attention towards ontology. So long as aesthetics remains a descriptor associated loosely with our senses, art, culture, and the arts, and with some notion of the beautiful, it will indeed continue to be, as Jacques Rancière fears, both confusing and 'confused'. It will also surely continue to be seen as largely irrelevant to the 'serious' issues we face in the world (and the 'scientific' approaches that our conferences and journals recognize as being of value). If, on the other hand, the depth ontology of aesthetic critical realism is applied in the manner I have outlined in these pages, we may come to know 'the realm of the aesthetic' for what it is.

My contention is that the account of ACR presented here offers a timely and much-needed response to the 'persecutory' nature of our times. Understood against the *longue durée* of the 'philosophical discourse of modernity' (see Hartwig 2011), we may also wish to characterize this persecutory nature of the 'self-defining subject' (p.486) as both hailing from, and standing for, Bourgeois triumphalism, endism and market fundamentalism. What is then at stake is not just the value we ascribe to those practices we consider to be 'aesthetic' or 'artful'; rather, our capacity to value *anything* has been shown to be dependent upon (though

not reducible to) our i) aesthetic experiences – emergent experiences of being-in-relation with the natural necessity of the world; ii) art – understood in terms of our giving shareable form to these experiences through the creation of aesthetically real objects (including, but not limited to, artworks), and iii) culture – reproducing and transforming those axiological structures, institutions and ideologies that constitute our system(s) of value recognition.

In drawing particular attention to *our* natural necessity as human beings which we can and (under certain conditions) do experience in terms of betweenness and relationality, I suggest that there is real potential to overcome ‘simplistic ideas of good and bad, self and other’ and the ‘fear and anger’ which accompany them. We can move beyond this persecutory mindset. However, I have no illusions concerning the enormity of the task required to achieve this. There will be no overnight ‘aesthetic revolution’. Making the argument is, of course, a necessary and important ‘first step’ (and this paper contributes towards this). But the key test is whether the argument will be heard and valued. Will it be recognized as valuable? Will readers be moved at all to change their practices on account of what they read? (Such questions are, no doubt, the very ones that those working on climate emergency and political activism, in all its forms, are asking themselves too).

Thus far, ACR has been presented through a book within the Routledge Studies in Critical Realism Series, a keynote talk at the 2019 IACR conference, and now, the pages of this journal. This is a good start. But to have any real purchase in society ACR will have to reach much more widely than that. Notwithstanding the theoretical merits of what I have proposed (and this is, of course, a big proviso), the next step is centrally contingent upon what I have outlined here as *aesthetic reason* – a form of reason (knowledge) that bridges the theoretical (scientific and philosophical), the practical (political and ethical) and the productive (creative and artisanal).²¹ In short, what will be required is nothing short of ‘artful’. For, contrary to the ‘truth in practice’ of C.P. Snow’s famous Rede lecture on ‘the two cultures’ (given 60 years ago), that which has been bracketed under the terms ‘aesthetic’ and ‘art’ *is* also of relevance to science (and philosophy), as much as it is to politics and ethics and, of course, ‘the arts’.

Mindful that Gary MacLennan’s first steps ‘towards an ontological aesthetics’ were taken some 22 years ago, it looks like should there be any kind of aesthetic revolution, this will be a slow and ‘long’ one. In 1961, Raymond Williams outlined what he saw as ‘the long revolution’ in terms of ‘the struggle for democracy, the development of industry, the extension of communications, and ... deep social and personal changes’ (Williams 1961, xii). It is fascinating to read Carl Auerbach’s contribution to this special issue, which notes that ‘democracy, particularly deliberative democracy, is desirable because it requires and facilitates the development of citizens with the relational capacity of mutuality.’ (Auerbach 2020, TBC.). Such a view concerning our relations with each-other is entirely consistent with ACR. Turning to our relations with the natural world, sadly as I write this, parts of the country are being devastated by record levels of flooding. My talk at the 2019 IACR conference took place against a backdrop of catastrophic bush fires in Australia. Global warming is happening right now. To the extent that the first moral step of ‘caring about’ (Tronto 2013) others and the other – whether as citizens or as climate emergency activists – is to ‘notice’ our mutuality or, as Jessica Benjamin refers to it, our ‘thirdness’²² (to experience being-in-relation with the world), we really can’t wait too ‘long’.

Whatever the pace of change, we need to transform our cultures to those that support artful living. This, I argue, is a mode of living that is relational. It promises to overcome the persecutory opposition of doer and done to precisely by allowing us all to experience the natural necessity of being in-relation with (thereby recognizing) each other, our selves, and

the natural world. My sincere hope is that what I am arguing for under the heading of Aesthetic Critical Realism – with an emphasis on becoming more experienced at experiencing the world, living artfully and caring for culture, will complement the enormous potential of the philosophy of critical realism – in all its stages – to provide the foundation for doing this. There *is* an alternative. The question is – will we, and critical realists in particular, be sufficiently artful to bring it about?

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Notes

¹ As Hartwig notes (2007, 16) there are many varieties of actualism besides the dominant empiricist form (including Plato's *eidetic* actualism, Aristotle's *kinetic* actualism and forms of *conceptual* actualism).

² Natural necessity refers to the ways of being of the world, or more formally, the relationship between a thing's intrinsic structure and the way it behaves. Another term for 'the real' – it is that domain of the world that extends beyond (whilst embracing) our direct observations, and comprises relations, structures, mechanisms, powers, possibilities, forces, values, energy – ways of being.

³ Desmond refers to this betweenness as 'metaxological' after the Greek *metaxu*.

⁴ Bhaskar introduces the co-occurrence of the absence and presence of something in his *Dialectic* (1993). In his *Philosophy of MetaReality* he deepens this referring to 'where some other thing is enfolded or implicit within a being' (Bhaskar 2012 [2002], xlix.)

⁵ A TINA syndrome is a 'truth in practice combined or held in tension with a falsity in theory', which issues in emergent error and illusion (Bhaskar 2002, 84-5; quoted in Hartwig 2007, 465). The term is named ironically after British prime minister Margaret Thatcher's slogan, 'There Is No Alternative' (TINA) – to the free market.

⁶ <https://iacrsoton.wordpress.com/> [accessed 20th February, 2020.]

⁷ 'Laminated explanation' is a term introduced by Andrew Collier (1989, 98f) and subsequently taken up by Roy Bhaskar. 'The idea of a "lamination" is designed to underwrite the irreducibility of, and necessity for, the various levels used in an applied or concrete interdisciplinary investigation.' (Bhaskar 2016, 16.)

⁸ August von Schlegel, 1809-11, 182-3.

⁹ Levinson 2003, 3. Roger Scruton ([1974] 1998, 2) notes that 'philosophical aesthetics seems to divide into two parts: firstly, there is the study of aesthetic appreciation, the aesthetic attitude, taste, the aesthetic emotions, and so on. ... Secondly, philosophers attempt to analyse our judgements about the objects of aesthetic feeling and appreciation. We make value judgements about these objects and we describe them in various ways which seem to have a peculiar relation to their aesthetic significance.'

¹⁰ 'Some of the hallmarks of aesthetic property status include: having gestalt character; requiring taste for discernment; having an evaluative aspect; affording pleasure or displeasure in mere contemplation; being non-condition governed; being urgent on lower-level perceptual properties; requiring imagination for attribution; requiring metaphorical thought for attribution; being notably a focus of aesthetic experience; being notably present in works of art.' (Levinson 2003, 6.)

¹¹ *Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*, Kant ([1790] 1987, §10, 220/65).

¹² The 2019 IACR conference was no different – my two papers were the only ones amongst more than 80 in total.

¹³ Other critical realist contributions, not discussed here, include Cashell (2009; 2012; 2014); McDonald (2008); Nellhaus (2017); Norrie (2014); Pitt (2010); Verstegen (2013; 2016); Wilson (2007; 2014).

¹⁴ See Archer (2003; 2007; 2012) on reflexivity and the internal conversation; Hartwig and Morgan (2012) on spirituality; Bhaskar et al. (2018) on health and wellbeing; Norris (2002; 2005) on epistemology and realism; Archer (2000); Smith (2010; 2015) and Haley (2019) on being 'human'.

¹⁵ To be clear, *all* experience is dependent upon, though not reducible to, such perception.

¹⁶ For discussion of 'recognition', embracing the ideas of Hegel, Rousseau, Marx, Honneth, Fraser, Taylor and many more, see Schmidt am Busch and Zurn 2010.

¹⁷ Elliot's (2008) *Handbook of Approach and Avoidance Motivation* provides a very comprehensive overview and history of the concept.

¹⁸ Archer is explicit about the CS and the S-C being *empirically* encountered conjointly, whilst *ontologically* they constitute different strata.

¹⁹ See Elder-Vass 2008; 2010a; 2010b.

²⁰ I follow Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher's (1990) definition of caring as 'a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible.' (p. 40) According to this definition, I define creativity as a structured practice of care (see Wilson 2018).

²¹ In this respect, what I term 'aesthetic reason' is closely allied to what Jeremy Bendik-Keymer (2018) discusses in terms of 'relational reason'. He suggests that this is 'the latest to be discovered and still largely inarticulate, despite the constructions and findings of intersubjectivity, phenomenology, communicative action, feminist theory, environmental philosophy, and Africana, Chinese, Buddhist, and much Indigenous philosophy.' (p. 14)

²² Benjamin, 2018. Jessica Benjamin contrasts the doer/done-to position with the mutuality/thirdness position.