

Aesthetic Harmony and Aesthetic Agonism

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ABSTRACT

The cosmopolitan harmony view of aesthetics holds that an ideal aesthetic world is one where different aesthetic cultures all respect each other and everyone understands how even aesthetic practices that they personally dislike remain valuable for others. Against this view, aesthetic agonism maintains that an ideal world can include deep conflict in which some people regard others' aesthetic practices or judgments as completely lacking in value even if they are willing to tolerate one another. I argue for aesthetic agonism by showing that the aesthetic conflicts that the cosmopolitan harmony view excludes form an important part of our aesthetic lives. I go on to contend that aesthetic injustice arises not from disagreement or conflict but rather from the failure of democracy that results when our political and economic environment enables some people but not others to participate in shaping our shared aesthetic culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

Should we hope to live in a harmonious aesthetic community that is free from deep and intractable conflict over what is aesthetically valuable? Hume and Kant are often taken to think so, with Hume maintaining that an ideal aesthetic world would be one in which everyone shared the same aesthetic judgments as "true judges" (Hume 1993, 147) and Kant holding that everyone in such a world would agree about pure aesthetic judgments that make a "rightful claim" to universal validity (Kant 2000, 5: 213). But some philosophers have found an aesthetic ideal of harmonious aesthetic unanimity unappealing on the grounds that such an ideal would stifle aesthetic diversity. Alexander Nehamas, for instance, fears that "a world where everyone likes, or loves, the same things, where every disagreement about beauty can be resolved ... would be a desolate, desperate world" (2007, 83).

Recently, philosophers have attempted to hold on to an ideal of aesthetically harmonious community while making room for the significant aesthetic diversity that Hume and Kant arguably exclude. Dominic McIver Lopes, for instance, stridently rejects the unanimity required by Hume and Kant (Lopes 2018, 222). He contends, however, that an ideal aesthetic world would still be harmonious in the sense that it would not feature "incompatibility conflict," meaning that no aesthetic culture would have values that rule out respect for the values of another aesthetic culture (Lopes 2024, 51–52). On the *cosmopolitan harmony view*, humanity's ideal aesthetic life would embody a certain kind of perpetual peace without requiring consensus about aesthetic values. Such an aesthetic world would include plenty of aesthetic disagreement, but it would be a world in which everyone respected and understood the value of everyone

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else's aesthetic projects. In the harmonious, multicultural aesthetic world envisioned by this view, aesthetics would provide a sheltered space in which each of us could pursue our individual and group aesthetic projects, not only without harming others but without even saying anything against the value of others' projects.

Despite this view's appeal, I doubt that it fully satisfies the concerns that Nehamas raises about aesthetic ideals of unanimity. Against the cosmopolitan harmony view, the view I will call *aesthetic agonism* maintains that an aesthetic perpetual peace—even one that involved significant multicultural diversity—would represent the loss of art as a valuable space of non-violent conflict and dissent. Aesthetic agonism envisions an aesthetic life that might be so intensely meaningful for us that we might sometimes find ourselves deeply committed to aesthetic values and practices that prevent us from regarding those of others as worthwhile.

In this article, I critically assess Lopes's argument for the cosmopolitan harmony view and advance an argument for the competing vision of aesthetic agonism.¹ Lopes's argument is not confined to aesthetic theory but instead aims to show that an interest in aesthetic harmony is required by an adequate political theory of justice. Lopes claims that to understand widespread phenomena in which aesthetic expression is “weaponized” to exacerbate and reinforce social injustice—including large-scale social arrangements that license racist and sexist beauty ideals, facilitate cultural appropriation, or fail to support the aesthetic development of disabled people—we must posit that everyone has an interest in aesthetics being a “conflict-free zone” (Lopes 2024, 66).

Against this view, I contend that this sort of injustice can be adequately explained without appealing to an interest in aesthetic harmony. I claim that a more general (i.e., not specifically aesthetic) theory of justice can explain the cases of “weaponized” aesthetics that trouble Lopes. I go on to argue that the cosmopolitan harmony view cannot readily make sense of the phenomenon of an avant-garde that rejects an existing aesthetic culture as fundamentally corrupted. To address this sort of phenomenon, the cosmopolitan harmony view must either deny that apparently intractable aesthetic feuds truly involve incompatibility conflict, which would require rejecting many avant-garde artists' self-understanding of their aesthetic commitments, or regard these avant-garde movements as aesthetically defective, which would exclude an important and valuable sort of art from a well-ordered aesthetic community.

My argument for aesthetic agonism does not decisively establish its superiority to the cosmopolitan harmony view, for the attractions of a world of multicultural aesthetic harmony could outweigh the costs of excluding antagonistic avant-garde art. But my argument shows that the cosmopolitan harmony view cannot easily avoid the tendency of consensus-based visions to flatten aesthetic life.

Before proceeding, it is important to note several distinctions between the cosmopolitan harmony view and other cognate views. First, the cosmopolitan harmony view holds that an ideal aesthetic community would be free from aesthetic incompatibility conflict but not that there would be consensus about aesthetic values in such a community. In this way, the cosmopolitan harmony view is distinct from Humean and Kantian views. Second, the cosmopolitan harmony view specifically concerns *aesthetic* harmony. Many cosmopolitans hope for a world in which everyone not only tolerates but respects everyone else's values in all spheres, not just the aesthetic. One need not be persuaded by this sort of comprehensive cosmopolitanism to go in for the cosmopolitan harmony view, for even if there are some areas of life, like politics or religion, where deep conflict is inevitable or even desirable, aesthetics might provide a special domain for us to develop unique individual values without disrespecting the values of others. Third, the cosmopolitan harmony view holds that the entire human aesthetic world would, ideally, be harmonious. This contrasts with views like Nick Riggle's communitarian theory of aesthetic value, which celebrates “being in aesthetic community” as “[t]he highest good of aesthetic life” (Riggle *forthcoming*, 16) but which is not committed to aesthetic community being realized at a global scale. Riggle's communitarian good could be realized in a community whose values are incompatible with those of other communities, while the ideal of cosmopolitan aesthetic harmony is one of conflict-free relations among *all* human aesthetic communities, whenever they encounter one another. With these distinctions in mind, for economy of expression I hereafter refer to the cosmopolitan harmony view as simply the “harmony view.”²

II. THE HARMONY VIEW

The harmony view holds that in an ideal aesthetic world different aesthetic cultures would all respect one another, and everyone would understand how even aesthetic practices that they personally dislike remain valuable for others, rather than denying that others' aesthetic values are genuine values. Lopes's version of the view holds that everyone has an interest in aesthetics being a "conflict-free zone" (Lopes 2024, 65–66). This interest is undermined by contact between aesthetic cultures that involves "incompatibility conflict"—when the values of the cultures that come into contact rule one another out. Lopes's view allows that different aesthetic cultures might compete for limited resources: for instance, you might want to sculpt a hedgehog while I want to sculpt a fox, but there is limited marble to go around. But competition for resources need not involve more fundamental conflict in the way that "[t]he honour code of the medieval samurai is incompatible with the ideal of non-violence" where "the content of one is logically inconsistent with the content of the other" (Lopes 2024, 51). In contrast to cultures like *bushidō* and *satyagraha* that give rise to an incompatibility conflict when they encounter each other, well-constituted aesthetic cultures are "plural" because "they have aesthetic value profiles that are (1) different, (2) valid, (3) incommensurable, (4) compatible, and (5) mutually comprehensible to some degree" (52). This characterization of aesthetic cultures leads Lopes to hypothesize that "since they are plural and welcome respect, aesthetic cultures are not natural sites of incompatibility conflict. *They are naturally conflict-free zones*"; thus, "incompatibility conflict is a degenerate condition for contact between aesthetic cultures" (65, emphasis added).

Because Lopes's argument for this claim is complex, critically assessing the argument requires understanding several background pieces of Lopes's theory of aesthetic value and normativity. According to Lopes's network theory of aesthetic value, aesthetic normativity arises from our participation in aesthetic practices (Lopes 2018, 119). "[T]he reason-giving power of aesthetic values is internal to practices. The vividness of a gesture is very strong reason for Copeland [a ballet dancer] to dance it and for her audience to appreciate it, but it is no reason at all for Rele [a Kathakali dancer] to dance it and little reason for Kathakali audiences to pay it much attention." (Lopes 2024, 50). Outsiders to a practice can grasp that it would have some appeal if they got into it, but this does not give Rele a reason to dance the vivid gesture that Copeland dances (Lopes 2018, 202). If, and only if, you are "into" an aesthetic practice, do you have reason to act "in accordance with the practice's aesthetic value profile" (Lopes 2024, 47). Following the aesthetic practice allows you to *achieve*—that is, "to act successfully and as a result of competence" (47)—and our achievements are enhanced because each of us can specialize in our own localized aesthetic niches (50). While each of us specializes within certain cultures and activities, these combine to make up a global network. Our localized niches "jointly cover the whole aesthetic universe," ranging from making and appreciating fine art to pop art to "hoodies from the Gap" to "perennial borders" to "The Keg Steakhouse" (50). In contrast to the views of Hume and Kant, Lopes's picture is one on which my aesthetic reasons and values are not the same as yours although we are both joined together in an overarching global network made up of all our cultures and practices.

Building on this network theory, Lopes claims that we all have interconnected justice-relevant interests in the "value diversity" of aesthetic cultures, in the "social autonomy" of aesthetic cultures, and in aesthetics remaining a space free from incompatibility conflict (4, 65–66). We have an interest in value diversity—meaning an interest in the existence of aesthetic cultures with "different, valid, incommensurable, compatible, and to some degree mutually comprehensible" values (66)—because cultural diversity is either itself a final good or because it allows us to explore a broader range of perspectives on what might make our lives good (68). We have an interest in the social autonomy of aesthetic cultures—meaning an interest in each aesthetic culture having decisions about its aesthetic values and practices in its own hands (69–70)—because this sort of social autonomy allows people and cultures to be true to themselves (70). And we have an interest in aesthetic harmony—meaning our interest in aesthetic cultures not coming into incompatibility conflict when they make contact—because aesthetic cultures "welcome respect" of one another (65).

Respecting an aesthetic culture does not require engaging with its values in the way I engage with the values of my own culture, nor does it require fully comprehending its values. But respect for the values of foreign aesthetic cultures requires more than registering in some abstract sense that they are

values (52). To respect a value, I must hold attitudes toward it “that are consistent with its value” and I must “understand it as a value” (52–53, emphasis added). Thus, “Copeland respects Kathakali values only if she sees how they engage Rele much as she is engaged by ballet values” (53) and accepts that these values provide Rele with genuine reasons to act and create Kathakali dance. The absence of this sort of respect indicates an incompatibility conflict between aesthetic cultures.

With this description of our interests in value diversity, social autonomy, and aesthetic harmony in place, Lopes goes on to argue that we really have these interests by showing that the existence of these interests is necessary to explain a widespread phenomenon in which aesthetic expression is “weaponized” to exacerbate social injustice, where social injustices are injustices arising from social hierarchies where subordinated groups suffer interlocking and compounding harms (8–10). Weaponized aesthetics can take many different forms, but prominent instances of it include cultural appropriation, stereotyping, uses of blackface, and racist and sexist beauty practices. According to Lopes, part of what is unjust about the large-scale social arrangements that underlie these phenomena is that they subvert the interest that we all have in preserving aesthetics as a “conflict-free zone” (66).

Lopes claims that his case for the harmony view will succeed if positing an interest in aesthetic harmony satisfactorily explains paradigmatic cases of weaponized aesthetics (162). One of the central cases on which he relies is that of Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist of Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye* (Morrison 1970). Pecola is an eleven-year-old black girl growing up in poverty in Ohio in the 1940s. Over and over, Pecola is regarded as ugly by the people she encounters as she is growing up, ranging from family members and acquaintances to a white shopkeeper. As a result, she wants to escape her black body, longing for blue eyes. For Lopes,

[B]odily beauty ideals harm Pecola in her capacities for evaluating bodily beauty—black bodily beauty in particular.... [S]he has internalized a gendered and racialized ideal of bodily beauty that rules out the possibility of beautiful black bodies.... [This ideal] deprives us of an opportunity to multiply cultures of bodily beauty that can shelter and invite ... respect for multiple valid, incommensurable, logically compatible, and sometimes mutually incomprehensible ideals of bodily beauty. (Lopes 2024, 118–119)

Lopes argues that the harmony view best explains the injustice in *The Bluest Eye* because part of the injury that Pecola suffers is her loss of a capacity to perform certain “acts motivated by attributions of aesthetic values” (4–5). The impact of weaponized aesthetic practices and values on Pecola is a specifically *aesthetic* injustice because she is harmed in her capacity as an aesthetic agent when she is prevented from inhabiting an aesthetic world free of incompatibility conflict. Lopes concludes that because instances of weaponized aesthetics like the case of Pecola could not be adequately understood if we did not have an interest in aesthetics remaining a conflict-free zone, the harmony view “earns its keep” (20).

If aesthetic cultures are naturally conflict-free zones, then the domain of aesthetics provides a space in which each of us can pursue aesthetic practices that we care about as individuals while feeling ourselves to be part of a larger aesthetic world that complements our individual niche. As Lopes puts it, “[t]hat the aesthetic field is not by nature a conflict zone is something to treasure. Contact with aesthetic others can model how to welcome difference through mutual understanding and without feeling vulnerable to a loss of meaning” (162). Each of us is, in a way, doing the same aesthetic thing, although we each do it by specializing in our own unique, individual way. If this view of aesthetic culture is right, there is an overarching, global aesthetic culture in which we all partake, and we may each have reason to feel a tinge of joy, if only a small one, at every realization of an aesthetic possibility.

III. AESTHETIC AGONISM

What place is there, on this view, for deep and intractable aesthetic disagreement—for the aesthetic feuds that often seem to propel aesthetic innovation? Lopes might be right that it takes a “real sourpuss” to “see absolutely none of the appeal of video games” (2018, 202). But there are indeed plenty of aesthetic sourpusses in the world—and not only that, beyond the sourpusses, there are plenty of people who are committed to aesthetic values that are incompatible with other aesthetic values. Beefs between musicians, including about aesthetic matters, are commonplace. Avant-garde artistic movements have

often seen themselves as fundamentally opposed to the values of the aesthetic cultures and practices against which they react. And many of us have encountered other people whose personal style we simply cannot stand.

Aesthetic agonism holds that, at least sometimes, we have an interest in aesthetic cultures giving rise to incompatibility conflicts when they come into contact, meaning that, at least sometimes, we do not have an interest in aesthetic harmony.³ In this section, I advance an argument for aesthetic agonism. Because the harmony view and aesthetic agonism are incompatible, the first part of the argument for aesthetic agonism aims to weaken the case for harmony by showing that the harms of weaponized aesthetics can be explained without appeal to an interest in aesthetic harmony. The second part of the argument makes a positive case for the value of aesthetic incompatibility conflict by showing that aesthetically meaningful feuds cannot be explained without positing that some people sometimes have a real interest in aesthetic conflict.

III.A. The Negative Argument

The first task of the negative argument for aesthetic agonism is to deny that the harmony view's explanation of cases of weaponized aesthetics is meaningfully better than explanations offered by theories that do not posit an interest in aesthetic harmony. Consider again the case of Pecola. While a proponent of aesthetic agonism need not be a Rawlsian, imagine one who is. Looking at Pecola, the Rawlsian might say that we can see that there is an injustice in this case because the fair equality of opportunity requirement of Rawls's second principle of justice is not satisfied ("Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are ... attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity" (Rawls 1971, 83)). Given the strong empirical case for a connection between beauty and status (Hamermesh 2011; Lopes 2024, 111), the social inequalities that surround Pecola deny her the same chance to occupy positions of power and influence that other people in her society (including boys, white kids, and wealthier children) have. Pecola is harmed by widely held beauty standards that help to limit her access to social positions based on factors other than her talent and ability and her willingness to use them (cf. Rawls 1971, 73).

Another tack that the proponent of aesthetic agonism can take is to substantively contest the aesthetic values at play in Pecola's inability to value black and brown bodies. A proponent of aesthetic agonism might argue along the following lines (again, this is only one option for the proponent of aesthetic agonism): Pecola should not regard blueness as the correct ideal of beauty for human eyes, because brown, black, green, and gray eyes are just as beautiful. On this account, the aesthetic problem with Pecola's situation is that Pecola has been trapped in a set of substantively false aesthetic beliefs about bodily beauty.

Substantively contesting Pecola's aesthetic values might appear to involve a commitment to aesthetic realism that itself rules out aesthetic agonism by demanding assent to an objective and universal aesthetic ideal of bodily beauty. However, the substantive contestation of Pecola's aesthetic values need not involve a commitment to aesthetic harmony. For instance, it is open to the proponent of aesthetic agonism to adopt a realist meta-normative stance that rules out a range of aesthetic values as ineligible for anyone without demanding assent to any single specific aesthetic value profile. In contrast to the aesthetic harmony view, this approach allows for a great deal of aesthetic incompatibility conflict while ruling out the possibility that the blueness of eyes is a fitting standard for bodily beauty. As I will argue in Section IV below, Lopes's view also excludes many aesthetic ideals from a well-ordered aesthetic community; thus, in substantively contesting Pecola's aesthetic commitments, the proponent of aesthetic agonism need not be committed to a realism any stronger than that evinced by Lopes.⁴

Although some proponents of aesthetic agonism will be drawn to this aesthetic realist approach, many others will find it unappealing. But the proponent of aesthetic agonism need not adopt it; instead, they can emphasize that their diagnosis of Pecola's case involves claiming that the bluest eye norm is an incorrect norm for *Pecola*, where this claim takes the form of advice "restricted to considerations on which" Pecola "could act or base a practical orientation to [her] social world" (Diehl 2021, 687). One way of spelling out this approach would draw on Rahel Jaeggi's account of immanent critique to show that regarding blueness as an ideal of beauty for human eyes makes Pecola's life "uninhabitable" (2018, 128–129) by making it impossible for Pecola to realize other ideals and desires to which she is committed, like her desire to be loved by someone (Morrison 1970, 32) or her incipient valuing of the

natural beauty of dandelions (50). This approach to substantively contesting Pecola's aesthetic commitments need not involve any commitment to realism about objective aesthetic value.⁵

The two prongs of this negative argument support one another. The claim that Pecola suffers from a social injustice explains how she is harmed in a way that the white shopkeeper, who might also hold substantively false views about bodily beauty, is not. The negative argument for aesthetic agonism gives up on the idea that Pecola suffers from a distinctively *aesthetic injustice*, although, as I will discuss in Section IV, it can acknowledge that the social injustice and aesthetic wrongs of Pecola's case are deeply intertwined. The aesthetic agonist explanation of the injustice suffered by Pecola has not invoked any interest in aesthetics remaining a conflict-free zone: Pecola has interests in seeing her body as beautiful and in not being the target of racist and sexist discrimination, but not a general interest in aesthetics remaining free from conflict.

III.B. The Positive Argument

The positive argument for aesthetic agonism roughly parallels Lopes's argument for the harmony view: aesthetic agonism earns its keep if it correctly describes a real phenomenon; aesthetic feuds are a valuable feature of aesthetic life that cannot be adequately understood if there is a universal interest in aesthetic harmony; therefore, aesthetic agonism earns its keep. There is, however, a notable dissimilarity in the argument for aesthetic agonism and Lopes's argument in that aesthetic agonism makes a much narrower claim than the harmony view. Aesthetic agonism claims only that *some* of us *sometimes* have an interest in the existence of *some* aesthetic incompatibility conflict: incompatibility conflict does not, by itself, make contact between aesthetic cultures "degenerate." This view is compatible with most or almost all aesthetic cultures harmonizing with one another.

Consider three cases of aesthetic feuds that demonstrate that incompatibility conflict is a significant and intuitively valuable feature of aesthetic life. The first case is Lorraine O'Grady's 1980s performances as Mlle Bourgeoise Noire. On June 5, 1980, O'Grady "invaded" Just Above Midtown (JAM), a black-owned art gallery in Tribeca. Appearing uninvited as Mlle Bourgeoise Noire 1955, O'Grady wore a gown and cape made of 180 pairs of white gloves and carried a cat-o-nine-tails studded with white chrysanthemums (O'Grady 2019, 8). Mlle Bourgeoise Noire paced around the gallery, beating herself with the "whip-that-made-plantations-move" (Williams 2021, 63) before laying down her cat-o-nine-tails and shouting:

That's ENOUGH!
 No more boot-licking...
 No more ass kissing...
 No more buttering-up...
 No more pos...turing
 Of super-ass...imilates...
 BLACK ART MUST TAKE MORE RISKS.
 (O'Grady 2019, 10, adapted from a poem by Léon-Gontran Damas)

O'Grady's guerrilla intervention appears to give rise to incompatibility conflict between the aesthetic values to which she is attached and the aesthetic values pursued by assimilationist black artists who, in O'Grady's view, were compromising their identities and aesthetic visions to appeal to white audiences and art world institutions. O'Grady's demand was not for *more* art, or more diverse aesthetic profiles, but for an "invasion" in which black artists would create different, more confrontational art (O'Grady 2019, 210). The aesthetic value of O'Grady's performance cannot be understood if we take aesthetics to be a domain that is naturally free from incompatibility conflict, for, much as the values of the medieval samurai are incompatible with pacifist values, the values of O'Grady's practice are incompatible with those of her targets who adopted a less confrontational stance toward the white art world.

The second case is Friedrich Hundertwasser's diatribe against straight lines in architecture in his "Mouldiness Manifesto: Against Rationalism in Architecture":

Today we live in a chaos of straight lines, in a jungle of straight lines. If you do not believe this, take the trouble to count the straight lines which surround you. Then you will understand, for you will never finish counting. On one razor blade I counted 546 straight lines... . Not all that long ago, possession of the straight line was a privilege of royalty, the wealthy, and the clever. Today every idiot

carries millions of straight lines around in his pants pockets... . Any modern architecture in which the straight line or the geometric circle have been employed for only a second—and were it only in spirit—must be rejected... . The straight line is godless and immoral. (Hundertwasser 1968, 94–100)

While O’Grady’s invasion was closely linked to concerns about social injustice—the racism and sexism prevalent in the art world—Hundertwasser’s feud with straight-line architects does not seem directly connected to concerns about social injustice. Yet, like O’Grady’s contact with assimilationist artists, Hundertwasser’s contact with straight-line architecture also gives rise to incompatibility conflict. His attitude toward straight lines is evidently incompatible with the values represented by, say, mid-century architectural modernism. Hundertwasser does not demand that an approach to architecture like that of the International Style be supplemented with a different, more organic architecture, but instead demands the complete abandonment of straight lines. Again, the aesthetic value of Hundertwasser’s architectural project cannot be grasped if we adopt the harmony view, for an incompatibility conflict with rectangular architecture is central to Hundertwasser’s radical style.

The cases of O’Grady and Hundertwasser might be understood as, partly, conflicts over resources, in which O’Grady and Hundertwasser are strategically making a case for their aesthetic visions in an outrageous style as part of an attempt to secure greater resources for their preferred approaches to performance and visual art and architecture. The opportunity to exhibit in fine art spaces in New York City is scarce, and it is expensive to construct buildings.

However, this reading cannot fully account for the vehemence of O’Grady’s and Hundertwasser’s views. Both artists want not just to create a new form of art but to overturn an old one. Moreover, a third aesthetic feud—Dogme 95’s attempt to strip filmmaking of the “impurities” imposed by big-budget productions and the studio system—provides an even clearer example of an aesthetic incompatibility conflict that involves more than resource competition. Dogme 95’s manifesto makes the movement’s conflictual stance clear:

DOGME 95 has the expressed goal of countering “certain tendencies” in the cinema today... . The new wave proved to be a ripple that washed ashore and turned to muck... . The anti-bourgeois cinema itself became bourgeois, because the foundations upon which its theories were based was the bourgeois perception of art. *The auteur concept was bourgeois romanticism from the very start and thereby ... false!* ... Today a technological storm is raging.... For the first time, anyone can make movies. But the more accessible the medium becomes, the more important the avant-garde. *It is no accident that the phrase “avant-garde” has military connotations.* Discipline is the answer ... we must put our films into uniform, because the individual film will be decadent by definition! (Dogme 95 2000, 226, emphasis added)

When Dogme 95 encounters “bourgeois” cinema, an incompatibility conflict arises. Dogme 95 rejects this form of cinema as “decadent by definition.” And this does not seem to be a displaced conflict about resources: the starting point for Dogme 95’s manifesto is that the costs of entry to filmmaking are radically lower in 1995 than they used to be: today “anyone can make movies.” The values of Dogme 95 speak directly against the values of the Hollywood blockbuster and individualist auteur cinema.

Aesthetic agonism claims that aesthetic incompatibility conflict in cases such as O’Grady’s contact with assimilationist black artists, Hundertwasser’s contact with International Style architects, and Dogme 95’s contact with Hollywood blockbusters and neo-New Wave auteur cinema is a significant and valuable aesthetic phenomenon. The cases of O’Grady, Hundertwasser, and Dogme 95 support the view that aesthetic culture, like the cultures manifested in *bushidō* and *satyagraha*, is often quite properly a zone of substantive contestation and even antagonism. Because it can accommodate the intuitive value of deep and sharp aesthetic conflict in aesthetic feuds, aesthetic agonism earns its keep as a theory.

Proponents of the harmony view might raise several objections to the positive case for aesthetic agonism. First, they might object that many aesthetic feuds can be redescribed in a way that allows the combatants to respect one another’s values, even if they are not themselves engaged by them. For instance, the harmony view might claim that, notwithstanding his provocative language, Hundertwasser has at least some respect for International Style. However, this objection misunderstands the depth of Hundertwasser’s commitment; Hundertwasser’s views about straight lines are every bit as incompatible

with the practices of International Style as the medieval samurai's views about violence are incompatible with the Quaker's values (Lopes 2024, 60). An interpretation of Hundertwasser that defanged his passionate antagonism toward rectangles would be a misreading. Hundertwasser can acknowledge that the values of the International Style are psychologically motivating for its participants, but in claiming that straight lines are "godless and immoral" he denies that these values provide genuine reasons for aesthetic actions and that they are worthy of respect.

Second, the harmony view might object that the conflicts in which O'Grady, Hundertwasser, and Dogme 95 were involved were conflicts *internal* to aesthetic cultures, where an avant-garde seeks to transform a culture of which it is part, rather than conflicts between cultures. O'Grady, for instance, was part of the black avant-garde art scene in New York City, and, although she appeared "uninvited" at JAM as Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, she already had a relationship with the gallery and other artists who exhibited there before her performance (O'Grady 2019, 80). This objection fails because the interest posited by the harmony view is undermined by all aesthetic incompatibility conflicts, whether internal to aesthetic cultures or between them. The harmony view must take such a stance on pain of losing its ability to provide a satisfying account of the case of Pecola as a uniquely aesthetic injustice, since Pecola shares some aesthetic cultures with her oppressors. The white shopkeeper who is disgusted by Pecola, for instance, is, like Pecola, part of a culture of evaluating and appreciating bodily beauty, even if there are other cultures that he does not share with Pecola (Morrison 1970, 48). The harmony view regards the encounter between narrow standards of bodily beauty and more diverse standards as degenerate whether it occurs inside of a culture or between cultures. Against this view, aesthetic agonism claims that aesthetic incompatibility conflict is at least sometimes *not* degenerate, where the occasions on which it is not degenerate might involve conflict internal to aesthetic cultures or contact between cultures.

The harmony view can still claim that its ability to explain cases of weaponized aesthetics is more important than aesthetic agonism's ability to explain aesthetic incompatibility conflict. Thus, completing the positive case for aesthetic agonism requires filling out the intuition that aesthetic conflict can be valuable. There are several possible explanations.

First, aesthetic agonism can propose that aesthetic disagreement provides a mechanism for the cathartic discharge of agonistic energy, redirecting conflict away from domains of life in which conflict is more likely to give rise to violence, such as politics. The aesthetic domain may provide a safe space where we can go all in for our preferred view of what is valuable without rupturing our relationship with others in the way that we might in other domains of life.⁶ Thus, one might accept aesthetic agonism even while embracing cosmopolitan views about other domains of life, thinking that a just world would be one in which everyone completely respected everyone else's moral, political, and religious values, but where we could still have real, intractable conflicts with one another when it comes to art, music, and style. Of course, whether art actually serves a cathartic function is contested, and even if it does, whether this is valuable is debatable.⁷

But other values are also advanced by aesthetic conflict. Aesthetic agonism can argue that we could not have the depth of feeling that we should hope to find in aesthetics if it did not, at least sometimes, involve extremely intractable and intense conflict like that between the honor code of the medieval samurai and *satyagraha*. There are two reasons that our aesthetic lives would be impoverished in the absence of such incompatibility conflict. One is that we might think that artists like O'Grady and Hundertwasser are at least sometimes right, as a substantive matter. Whether or not O'Grady was right about the undesirability of assimilationist black art or Hundertwasser was right about the immorality of squares, there are *some* aesthetic cultures and practices that need to be rejected and overthrown. Another reason is that we might hold a meta-aesthetic view that an aesthetic world populated by cultures that come into incompatibility conflict with one another should be preferred to a world in which aesthetic cultures all respect one another's values. We shut ourselves off from important forms of aesthetic culture that involve impassioned, exclusive commitment if we accept the harmony view. As I will further argue in Section IV, excluding a wide range of aesthetic commitments that are as absolute as those of O'Grady, Hundertwasser, and Dogme 95 from a well-constituted aesthetic culture cuts off access to a wide swath of important aesthetic values and practices. This meta-aesthetic argument for disharmony can still allow that incompatible aesthetic cultures can tolerate one another, perhaps out of a political *modus vivendi*. But a world without *any* aesthetic sourpusses, aesthetic agonism claims, is one in which the life-rending potential of art has been neutralized.

IV. THE POLITICS OF HARMONY

It might appear that there is some sense in which, in their aesthetic absolutism, artists like O’Grady, Hundertwasser, and Dogme 95 are themselves proponents of harmony: Dogme 95, for instance, seems to be demanding that *everyone* put their films “into uniform.” But notice, first, that much of what these avant-garde artists celebrate is the wildness and newness of aesthetic innovation: part of Dogme 95’s ideal is the “countering” of entrenched practices of moviemaking, whatever they are. Second and more importantly, like the harmony view, aesthetic agonism is a view about how to envision our shared aesthetic world: should we aspire to live in a world without aesthetic incompatibility conflict? Should states and non-state institutions work to exclude disharmonious aesthetic ideals from our social life? Aesthetic agonism answers these questions in the negative.

In contrast, much as Rawls’s political liberalism excludes unreasonable comprehensive doctrines (Rawls 1996, 58–66) whose inclusion in the justification of political arrangements would not be “consistent with the political values of democracy” (Kelly and McPherson 2001, 39), the harmony view excludes aesthetic cultures whose commitments are inconsistent with the fundamental interest in aesthetics remaining a conflict-free zone. Cultures whose values rule out respect for the values of any other aesthetic cultures that are part of the global network must be excluded as degenerate (Lopes 2024, 162).⁸ The harmony view thus rules out many aesthetic cultures with value profiles that are incompatible with the value commitments of other aesthetic cultures—including the bathwater of racist beauty cultures that refuse to perceive black and brown bodies as beautiful but also the baby of architectural cultures that prize organic forms so much that they refuse to respect rectangles.

The prize that the harmony view holds out is membership in a cosmopolitan network that encompasses not all but many aesthetic cultures: a network formed by people whose participation in local aesthetic arenas leads them to respect any other aesthetic practices that fall within this cosmopolitan space. This picture partitions the aesthetic world into, on the one hand, the cosmopolitan network with all its member cultures, and, on the other hand, the various aesthetic cultures whose values conflict with cosmopolitanism and who might respect the values of *certain* other aesthetic cultures but not *all* foreign cultures. If we join the cosmopolitan network, “[w]e can discover our place in the world as one among many places that together make up a world in which we are all at home” (Lopes 2024, 163).

The prize offered by aesthetic agonism is different. It tells us that aesthetic life involves making commitments that rule out other commitments. In *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, Simone de Beauvoir tells the story of a young student “who wanted first to make the world of the athlete hers, then that of the gambler, the flirt, the adventurer, the politician, one after another. She tried her hand in each of these domains, without understanding that she remained a student hungry for experience.... For this piece of universe to belong to me, however, I must truly cultivate it” (de Beauvoir 2004, 94–95). Beauvoir does not claim that the student should not continue varying her life, as she has been doing, nor does she deny that there might be something very attractive about the student’s pursuit of diverse experiences. But she insists that the student has not really had the experience of being a gambler or a politician without pursuing either of these endeavors in a way that excludes the others. A similar observation holds for aesthetic experiences. We cannot really have the experience, or the value, of radical avant-gardism if we all prescind from views and practices that are incompatible with others. While there might be something attractive about joining the harmonious cosmopolitan network, we should not mistake doing so for having access to all aesthetic values.

While partitioning the aesthetic world, the harmony view has attempted to skirt the aesthetic demarcation question—the question of what, if anything, separates the domain of aesthetics from other domains of value and activity. Lopes, for instance, assumes that “aesthetic values do demarcate from other values” roughly along the lines of our folk concepts of aesthetic value (Lopes 2024, 37) without giving an account of why we should make such a demarcation or how we might select those folk concepts that qualify as part of the aesthetic. However, I doubt that the debate between the harmony view and aesthetic agonism can be resolved without turning to this question.

The harmony view might answer the demarcation question by adopting a constitutivist view, according to which the aesthetic simply *is* the domain of life in which conflict is degenerate. The constitutivist harmony view might then hold that the aesthetic domain is simply defined as the domain in which we can choose what to value among a rich variety of things in a way that is not rationally or socially

compelled.⁹ O'Grady, Dogme 95, and Hundertwasser would presumably all deny that their interventions concern "discretionary" rather than "compulsory" valuing, which would result in their practices not being classified as "aesthetic" and reclassified as something else (politics, perhaps) on this view. Thus, going down the constitutivist path would require a highly revisionist picture of what activities qualify as aesthetic that would give up relying on folk concepts to answer the aesthetic demarcation question. Moreover, taking the constitutivist approach would require the harmony view to surrender its aspiration to provide a politically potent rejoinder to aesthetic cultures like racist beauty standards, since the constitutivist view simply denies that antagonistic cultures are part of the aesthetic domain rather than showing them to be degenerate in an ethically or politically significant sense.

While it might be logically possible for the proponent of aesthetic agonism to agree with Lopes's premise that aesthetic values are demarcated from other values, aesthetic agonism is more comfortably aligned with an approach that draws a less stark divide between the aesthetic and other domains of value. Notably, all the cases that I have offered of aesthetic incompatibility conflict are cases of avant-garde artists who saw their interventions as both aesthetic and political. O'Grady, for instance, sought to develop anti-hierarchical artistic practices that would displace the art she criticized, while the creators of Dogme 95 were members of the Communist Party in their youth who saw Dogme 95 as "a political movement" (Kelly 2000, 85–89). Even Hundertwasser, whose concerns are less straightforwardly political, saw his resistance to the straight line in architecture as bound up with a broader ethical ideal of a life in which "[e]veryone should be able to build ... the four walls in which he lives" (Hundertwasser 1968, 94). These antagonistic avant-gardes all understood aesthetic questions as having moral and political urgency, denying the possibility of fully separating aesthetics from politics.

It might have seemed to be a weakness of aesthetic agonism that it denies that wrongs like those suffered by Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* are distinctively *aesthetic* injustices. However, adopting a view of the aesthetic and the political as continuous with one another provides aesthetic agonism with an avenue for better explaining this sort of injustice. There are a variety of ways that the proponent of aesthetic agonism might do so, but one avenue would be to adopt a political ideal like that of "cultural democracy," which sees democracy as calling for all members of a community to serve as "equal and exclusive authors of and co-contributors to their communal lives" (Gingerich 2024, 1150). Such an ideal demands that all members of a community have equal opportunities not just to participate in formal political institutions and decision-making processes but also to help shape all parts of their shared social lives, including their cultural and aesthetic lives (Balkin 2004, 35). Achieving this ideal of democracy in aesthetic domains requires that members of a community have widespread opportunities to influence one another. For this to happen, people must directly and spontaneously attend to a wide variety of artistic and other cultural materials in a way that is open to the possibility that their existing values and beliefs might be changed by these encounters (Gingerich 2022, 262). Because much of our shared cultural life cannot be captured in explicit, discursive thought, sharing authorship over all parts of our communal lives requires that this sort of change must be possible not just through rational, discursive arguments but also through the transformation of one another's inchoate aesthetic desires and preferences (Gingerich 2024, 1158). This cultural view of democracy does not sharply demarcate the aesthetic from the political but sees both as deeply intertwined aspects of a democratic society (Gingerich 2022, 250–251).

Cultural democracy is a demanding ideal of democracy that not all readers will find attractive. But, regardless of whether one is attracted to this ideal, it demonstrates how aesthetic agonism can more fully account for the case of aesthetic injustice without adopting the ideal of aesthetic harmony. Cultural democracy does not require that members of a democratic community *respect* one another's aesthetic value profiles, but it does require that their existing values and preferences can be transformed through their encounters with others. This view can support a claim that institutions are unjust not when they allow disharmony to creep into aesthetic life but when they undermine possibilities of equal mutual aesthetic influence and transformation. It holds that someone suffers an injustice not because their putative interest in aesthetics remaining a conflict-free zone is frustrated, but because they have been denied a role in shaping the aesthetic world in which they live.

For instance, to return to Pecola, in Morrison's depiction the "dart of affection" that Pecola feels for dandelions has no hope of impacting the aesthetic culture in which she is located (1970, 50); the grown-up world's disdain for dandelions feels, to Pecola, inalterable. The complex roles that Pecola's age, sex, race, and class play in shaping her aesthetic situation mark the depth of her unfreedom to

actively shape her cultural world. Defending the value of cultural democracy and fully developing an account of aesthetic injustice grounded in this ideal are beyond the scope of this paper, but the foregoing discussion shows how the proponent of aesthetic agonism can locate the source of aesthetic injustice not in aesthetic conflict but rather in political environments that enable some people but not others to participate in shaping their shared aesthetic culture.

V. CONCLUSION

I have not settled the debate between the harmony view and aesthetic agonism. I have shown that, in offering an argument for aesthetic harmony grounded in claims about political justice, proponents of the harmony view, perhaps surprisingly, end up excluding some of the most stridently political forms of art from their vision of an ideal aesthetic world. Lopes's rejection of Humean and Kantian universalism about aesthetic judgment also turns out to be universalist in its own way, as it endorses a picture of aesthetic life that demands that everyone adopt a nonconflictual, cosmopolitan ethos toward other aesthetic cultures on pain of perpetuating aesthetic injustice. However, it may not be possible to so easily avoid either politics or a form of universalism in our aesthetic theory. As many avant-gardes have recognized, how we make and appreciate art is bound up with how we organize our collective lives, and demanding new ways of seeing and creating is a way of demanding a new politics.¹⁰

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None declared.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Matthew Strohl also advances a vision of an aesthetic world where people have genuinely conflicting aesthetic judgments but "celebrate the diversity of aesthetic sensibilities in the world rather than demanding that everyone conform to our own" (Strohl 2022, 184). Strohl's advocacy of the cosmopolitan harmony view is less explicit and more qualified than Lopes's—allowing, for instance, that some aesthetic activities are utterly lacking in value (2022, 179), so I focus on Lopes's view.
- 2 The debate between the cosmopolitan harmony view and aesthetic agonism partially parallels the debate between Riggle (2021, forthcoming) and Hansen and Adams (2024) about whether aesthetic discourse aims to "converge" on a unique normative standard. Hansen and Adams think that good aesthetic conversations should involve a "hope of agreement" among their participants about their aesthetic judgments, which suggests some sympathy to the cosmopolitan harmony view. But they also allow that "there are acrimonious aesthetic arguments that are still worth having," including conversations in which participants do not evince respect for one another's aesthetic views (Hansen and Adams 2024, 757–58). Riggle's communitarian theory of aesthetic value emphasizes the value of a limited sort of intra-community harmony in conversations that generate a "kind of mutual support," but Riggle emphatically allows for the possibility of flourishing aesthetic conversation that involves "contempt, dismissal, hatred, and incredulity" (Riggle forthcoming, § 3). Because the debate between Riggle and Hansen and Adams primarily concerns the aims of aesthetic communication rather than the content of aesthetic values, which is my focus, I set it aside.
- 3 My account of aesthetic agonism has much in common with Chantal Mouffe's view of art as an "agonistic intervention" that "foments dissensus" and "makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate" (Mouffe 2008, 12).
- 4 Further meta-normative questions will ensue if the proponent of aesthetic agonism adopts this sort of aesthetic realism. Why would the normative space of aesthetic value have this shape, such that some value profiles are substantively wrong but no specific value profiles are right? Taking a Humean line, the realist proponent of aesthetic agonism might argue that pleasure is a constitutive aim of aesthetic activity and that some value profiles are incompatible with achieving this aim, but that there are multiple equilibria of value profiles that are compatible with it. Because this meta-normative dispute is not central to my defense of aesthetic agonism, and because I am more sympathetic to the less strongly realist approach that aesthetic agonism might take, I set aside the further development of this view.
- 5 Again, this approach to substantively contesting Pecola's aesthetic values will involve further metaethical debates. For discussion of the range of metaethical commitments that might undergird this type of immanent critique, see von Samson (forthcoming).
- 6 For a classic view of the ways in which tragedy could provide a mechanism for the cathartic discharge of emotions of fear and pity, see Bernays (1857). For a contemporary view of the distinctiveness of the aesthetic domain that could accommodate such a catharsis view, see Nguyen (2017, 2020).
- 7 Theodor Adorno, for instance, suggests that catharsis is an "ally of repression" because it provides a substitute for the real satisfaction of its audiences' interests and needs (Adorno 2002, 238).
- 8 Strictly speaking, Lopes holds that "incompatibility conflict is a degenerate condition for contact between aesthetic cultures" (Lopes 2024, 65), not that aesthetic cultures or their value profiles are themselves degenerate when they entail conflict with other aesthetic cultures. But for all or almost all existing aesthetic cultures, such contact is inevitable. Whichever aesthetic cultures have value profiles that are incompatible with those of other network members must therefore be excluded to avoid degeneracy.
- 9 In constructing such a view, the proponent of aesthetic harmony might draw on Nick Riggle's account of aesthetic community as supporting the exercise of "discretionary valuing" and "volitional openness" (Riggle 2024, 128). However, as explained above (note 2), Riggle does not himself hold this sort of harmony view.
- 10 I am grateful to Anne Eaton, Rachel Fraser, Joshua Landy, and an audience at the APA Pacific for their comments and questions. I am especially grateful to Dominic McIver Lopes for his insightful replies to this paper at an APA Pacific Book Symposium on *Aesthetic Injustice*. I am also indebted to Nick Riggle for correspondence about his theory of aesthetic communitarianism and to two anonymous referees for the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* whose comments greatly improved this paper. Funding: This project has received funding from a Rutgers Global Grant and from UK Research and Innovation under the Horizon Europe Guarantee for a grant selected for funding by the European Research Council [grant number EP/Z003296/1].

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