On the Aestheticisation of 'Technofossils'

• Chris Wingfield

01 *Refuse collector in Soweto, Johannesburg, South Africa, 2019.*

Since early in the millennium, geologists have grappled with how best to describe a world in which human actions have outstripped rivers, the ocean and volcanoes as the principal agents in the global movement and formation of soils. Just as earlier geological epochs have been associated with distinctive fossil types, it has been suggested that human-made things – and perhaps plastic in particular – may become the 'technofossils' by which Anthropocene deposits will be recognised.[1]

The discussion is largely a technical one between geologists, but when human-made artefacts become objects of study, an inevitable overlap emerges with the concerns of archaeologists, anthropologists, but also artists. A recent contribution by the historian of science, Andrea Westerman,[2] has pushed back against the work of artists in this area.

Westerman argues that much recent work infuses the concept of the 'technofossil' with beauty and imagination, connecting it to more optimistic art produced during the second half of the twentieth century that celebrated the novel features of plastic. A young Dustin Hoffman as *The Graduate* was, after all, told in the 1967 film of that name that 'there's a great future in plastics'.

Once again, it seems, plastics enable us to imagine a future – though now it is one in which they have become a marker of our future past. Westerman recognises that such artworks function as 'aesthetically configured scaling devices', which make it possible to imagine deep time and deep futures, but argues that this approach brings with it 'distractions and topical omissions'.

Instead, Westerman suggests we should turn a blind eye to the aesthetic allure of plastic 'and instead pay attention to the circumstances of its chemical fabrication',

highlighting both the environmental and health hazards that arise, as well as the related exploitation of migrant labour. Plastic, as she points out, is largely made from petrochemicals that result from fossilised remains, and form part of a global complex of extractive industries that are deeply implicated within the discipline of geology itself.

Westerman makes the case for environmental sustainability and socioeconomic justice as two faces of the same coin. This is important and valuable, but I can't help wondering if it is really necessary to disregard the aesthetic dimensions of plastic in order to appreciate these points. History is an important method for highlighting and understanding the complex connections between environmental and social concerns, but might artists, archaeologists and anthropologists not also have valuable contributions to make?

Relations of production

In many ways, Westerman's argument, by emphasising relations of production over the final product, echoes a long tradition in European social thought. This is most obviously associated with the insights of Karl Marx, whose concern with the operation of capitalism arose from the social transformations experienced in Europe during the establishment of mechanised factory production during the industrial nineteenth century.[3]

Marx's theory of commodity fetishism suggested that investing value in commodities in and of themselves obscured the relationships of production (and exploitation) between humans that enabled their manufacture. He emphasised the value generated through the labour of the human worker – from whom such products are →

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ultimately alienated by capitalist wage labour regimes. But does the aestheticisation of technofossils necessarily obscure relations of production in the same way as the production of commodities?

In various ways, artists ensure that the marks of their labour remain visible rather than being effaced, since this is how their contribution to an artwork, particularly when made from found materials, becomes visible. Far from alienating their production, the labels we display alongside artworks in galleries, unlike price tags in shops, recognise and celebrate the role of humans in the fashioning process.

While the labour theory of value is framed in terms of abstracted human relations, world-systems theorists like Immanuel Wallerstein[4] attempted, during the later twentieth century, to articulate the ways in which capitalist production had reshaped the world historically around a geographical core. Here, raw materials sourced from a periphery had been converted into high-value consumer goods that could be re-exported following these transformations.

This geographical division of labour between the core and the periphery maps roughly onto a division of the world that is more commonly expressed today in terms of the Global North and the Global South.

Manufacturing processes pioneered in Europe during the nineteenth century have increasingly been relocated from the Global North to the Global South, which has provided not only raw materials but also now the cheap labour to transform these.

From production to deposition
While this focus on the shifting relationships involved in production is revealing, it risks ignoring what happens at the other end of a commodity or artefact's biography – its deposition. In parallel to the work of Karl Marx, the discipline of archaeology, building on roots in geology, developed distinctive ways of engaging with deposited evidence of the human past in its pre-fossilised form.

It was necessary for archaeologists to conceptualise not only the production of artefacts but also their deposition, since it was from within composite deposits – archaeological equivalents of geological strata – that artefacts were excavated. The 'technofossil' concept was prefigured by the nineteenth century notion of 'the artefact', and many of the insights of recent Anthropocene geologists were, in fact, already apparent to archaeological pioneers such as Augustus Pitt Rivers and John Lubbock.

Museums established during the second half of

02 *Fabrice Monteiro, The Prophecy, Untitled No. 12 Ngaï, 2017. Photograph.*

03 *Polluted river in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, South Africa, 2019.*

the nineteenth century, such as the Pitt Rivers Museum, developed technologies of display that involved typology, series and seriation that, in Westerman's terms, underpinned museums as 'aesthetically configured scaling devices', allowing the deep time of human history to be made visible.

The archaeology of Pitt Rivers and Lubbock worked out both parallels and distinctions in the periodisation of the deep past across the globe, since European frameworks such as the three-age system (Stone, Bronze, Iron) had to be adapted to make sense of the archaeological deposits in different global locations (there is no Bronze age in sub-Saharan Africa, and neither Bronze nor Iron ages in Australia).

When we consider the deposition of contemporary technofossils, however, we discover not radically different worlds, but rather a coeval and connected circular economy. Raw materials extracted and then manufactured into commodities in the Global North, consumed in the Global South, and then frequently re-exported back to the Global South for deposition (with certain high-value materials removed for remanufacturing).

The shape of the contemporary world system has transformed since its origins in the late fifteenth century, so that the North Atlantic heartlands, from

where global circulations of financial capital are directed, have increasingly become the main stage for the performance of acts of consumption, from where the social and environmental relations of extraction, production, but also deposition, have become increasingly invisible.

The colonial city and the postcolonial world system
As a theorist of colonialism, Frantz Fanon recognised that the division of space, or perhaps more accurately its enclosure, was central to the establishment of colonial relations – a world that has, in his words, been 'cut in two'. Fanon describes two opposed zones:

> The settler's town is a strongly built town, all stone and steel. It is a brightly-lit town; the streets are covered with asphalt, and the garbage-cans swallow all the leavings, unseens, unknown and hardly thought about...
>
> The town belonging to the colonised people... is a place of ill fame... It is a world without spaciousness; men live on top of the other... The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire...[5]

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> "The trick and the challenge, whether for goods or people, is to become desirable enough to be granted safe passage."

Driving across South Africa's Northern Cape, a landscape that is scarred by multiple large-scale mines, in the course of writing this essay, I couldn't help recalling Fanon's words as I passed the former apartheid township of Galeshewe on the way to Kimberley. Drifts of plastic rubbish lined the road, while smouldering piles of waste were picked over by residents searching for items of value.

Since the end of apartheid in 1994, however, some of the spatial divisions separating the 'settler's town' from the 'town of the colonised' have gradually broken down, a visible feature of which is the encroachment of litter, as well as sanitary waste. As South Africa battles to maintain its electricity supply, Fanon's brightly-lit town is now regularly shrouded in darkness.

We might understand the postcolonial world system as one in which Fanon's colonial division of space has been globalised into a distinction between the North and the South. It is easy to see parallels between South Africa's pass laws, which restricted access to the settler's town, and the contemporary enforcing of immigration policies – both across the US/Mexico and Europe's Mediterranean border zones.

But this replacement of a local spatial frame by

a global one would, on its own, fail to recognise divisions of space that increasingly operate within the Global North itself. Recent unrest in France has highlighted the living conditions of many immigrants from the Global South, as well as their descendants, within the peripheral zones of French cities.

Sparked by the violent policing of these communities, whose frequent ID checks parallel the enforcement of South Africa's apartheid pass laws, rendering certain types of people illegal in certain types of spaces – such outpourings of frustration and anger remind us that the European post-metropolis has assumed many of the characteristics of the colonies established by Europe in other parts of the world in previous centuries.

Indeed, Jean and John Comaroff[6] have suggested that it is Theory from the South that might enable us to understand the global conditions in which we find ourselves, since, as the subtitle of their book suggests, *Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa*. Building on their work, Achille Mbembe[7] has suggested that we might understand decolonisation as a form of disenclosure – the breaking down of the walls and fences that have enclosed worlds, and we can recognise this process in

04 *Aerial view of township and wealthy suburb in South Africa, 2022.*

the way Galeshewe has gradually spilled over into Kimberley.

However, it seems important to recognise parallel and ongoing processes of enclosure – Bruno Latour[8] suggested that the proliferation of hybrids was often accompanied by a parallel project of purification. Contemporary pockets of privilege and wealth, whether in London, Lagos or Johannesburg, are being enclosed by ever higher walls, fences and an increasingly militarised security regime.

John Lanchester's 2019 novel, *The Wall*, imagined a dystopian future for Britain in which global migration and sea-level rise had together resulted in an island surrounded by a high wall that had to be constantly patrolled by platoons of young people against incursions from the lawless world beyond.[9]

Just as Donald's Trump's Mexican border wall imagined a national border as the location that space could be definitively divided, the spectacle of really big walls draws attention away from the many smaller walls that divide our world into proliferating pockets of space. The ruined remains of Norwich's city wall remind us of the former medieval world, in which urban space was enclosed and protected from the threatening expanse

of countryside that lay literally beyond the pale. In our own times, a rash of privately owned shopping malls has created similar semi-permeable bubbles of consumption, patrolled by CCTV and security guards, ever ready to exclude the undesirable.

Crossing walls and penetrating bubbles
All walls have apertures, since those who erect them have no more desire to be confined than those who are ostensibly excluded – the Ethelbert Gate in Norwich's Tombland once controlled access to a bubble around the cathedral close, since neither the Bishop nor the monks would have tolerated being entirely confined within an impermeable wall. As a technology, walls and their gates function as valves, channelling and directing the flow of desirables, while excluding undesirables.

The trick and the challenge, whether for goods or people, is to become desirable enough to be granted safe passage. This is far from lost on citizens of the Global South, who are required to comply with a gamut of eligibility checks in order to gain access to the North. Meanwhile Northerners frequently experience the privilege of visa-free travel when they wish to   →

05 *Romuald Hazoumè, Avatar, 2022. Found objects.*

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holiday abroad.

In the context of repatriation debates, Achille Mbembe has called for a regime of unrestricted mobility for artworks, so that works removed from colonised countries become free to travel and be seen by citizens of the post-colony, while retaining their visibility within the North, so that they are not so easily forgotten.

And many in the North, as the inheritors of the spoils of colonial violence, would like to see these uncomfortable reminders of our ongoing implication returned to their places of origin. Mbembe has invited us to consider the connections between this desire and our contemporary immigration regimes. Repatriation flights, after all, also eject undesirable humans, as the UK's Windrush scandal and government plans to build camps in Rwanda make clear.

Indeed, might we not regard the repatriation of colonial objects, migrant workers, as well as waste, as elements of a connected regime of consumption? As long as they remain desirable, they are provided with a pass into zones of privilege in the Global North, but having been consumed to the point where they become undesirable, they are ejected.

There is surely a parallel between the Windrush-era workers from the Caribbean, who came to Britain to labour for the postwar reconstruction of the country,

and the treasures taken from Africa during the colonial period to ornament and enhance our museums? While desirable they were celebrated, but having served their function – having been consumed – they have passed into a zone of undesirability and must be ejected.

In this they parallel the lifecycle of the global commodity – extracted as desirable, made more valuable by manufacturing processes, they can be ejected as waste following consumption. But are there conditions under which waste can become desirable once more, allowing it to return to the centre?

The aestheticisation of the technofossil

A popular English expression tells us that you can't polish a turd, and while this speaks to the material qualities of certain forms of human waste, it would seem that many other undesirable materials can in fact be rendered desirable through aestheticisation or polishing.

The labour of artists, like the labour involved in the commodity manufacturing process, is a way of adding value (and desirability) to materials. Combining different elements into new shapes has the potential to convert low-value waste into something for display. It is a way to take advantage of resources that are readily available and convert them into high-value goods – surely a kind of alchemy.

Like the attainment of educational qualification and skills, which turn undesirable illegal immigrants into high-value guest workers, aestheticisation is a process of adding value, and with it, desirability. While low in volume, it allows the re-export of at least some waste materials to the Global North, and may in the process also enhance the reputation of the artist themselves, so that they can also be granted the necessary visas to make similar journeys.

But is the 'aestheticisation of technofossils' simply an illustration of the labour theory of value, or alternatively a kind of magic trick that makes us believe that rubbish is in fact desirable? Perhaps, if considered only in terms of abstracted human relations. But much contemporary art operates in the sphere of the visible and the visual, making it possible for us to see things that would remain otherwise obscure.

On the one hand, some works enable time travel, enabling us to see what our contemporary times might look like from the far distant future. On the other, there are works that become portals which make the conditions of the Global South – Fanon's leavings, unseens, unknown and hardly thought about – visible within the liminal spaces of privilege constituted by art galleries in the Global North.

It is a kind of magic, or in Marx's terms fetishisation, but while the function of some spectacles is to distract, others can rather reveal reality to us in ways that we may experience as a revelation. Artworks, as objects of reflection and revelation that disrupt our habitual ways of thinking and acting, should, it seems, be regarded differently to those which encourage us in cycles of unthinking consumption.

Aestheticisation has the potential to result in work with far greater potential to influence and change the world than any piece of textual analysis, but this has the potential to be exploited both by those who seek to maintain an unsustainable status quo as well as those who recognise a need to change the world.

Our ability to imagine both the realities of a contemporary Anthropocene and all its environmental and social consequences, while retaining hope in the possibility of alternative futures, depends, I would like to suggest, on the success of processes of aestheticisation. Reimagining our commodities as future 'technofossils' helps to shift the ground, providing an alternative framing that retains a potential to open portals into other worlds.

But like science itself, we cannot allow ourselves to be content with the first results of this process. Every artwork, like every scientific paper, will contain omissions, and it is the work of others to critique, complement and enhance the visions we have been offered.

Aestheticisation, as a process that reframes the world, inviting us to look again, should arguably never cease. However, we must remain constantly alert to the very strong potential for artworks, as the products of this process, to become nothing more than commodities – available for conspicuous consumption as part of performances of virtue that may be staged within pockets of privilege.

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