

The Stylish Design of Globalisation

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Abstract

This paper examines the way the very design of everyday products manifests the fluid imagination of globalisation as described by Hardt and Negri. This vision, hailed by the boosters of ‘free markets’, is of a smooth planet of de-territorialised flows, where exchange is unhindered by regulation. Through a critical aesthetic methodology, I will be arguing that there is more than just metaphorical equivalence between the smoothness of lifestyle commodities and the smoothness of larger globalisation, and that this can expose the contradictions between the alluring uncoded flows of commodity consumption and the reality of flows, often still very coded, of commodity production.

Introduction

This paper examines the way the very design of everyday products manifests, and indeed realises, the imagination of the architects and benefactors of globalisation. But how can we learn anything about the huge, macro-economic forces of globalisation through an analysis of the frivolous minutiae of lifestyle products like shoes, computers, mobile phones and stereos? To make the link even more fraught, it is not even the products *per se* that will be analysed for their larger significance, but their design and, indeed, those aspects of design that are designated as merely ‘aesthetic’. What possible purpose could there be in such an analysis, as political-economics is the study of that which has an unambiguous utility? To start with, it is in the very taken-for-granted ubiquity of the so-called ‘stylish’ design of the commodities of globalisation that we can learn a little about the taken-for-granted ubiquity of the very notion of ‘globalisation’. Both terms have an air of neutrality about them that needs to be excavated. Such an excavation can also uncover a more intimate relationship between the two concepts. I hope that, by examining patterns in the aesthetics of what we call ‘stylish’, we can learn about certain patterns in globalisation, and how they are reproduced. In short, I will be arguing that there is more than just metaphorical equivalence between the smoothness of stylish commodities and the ‘smoothness’ of globalisation political economics.

Am I ‘stylish’ now?

When extended beyond a more limited understanding of ‘expression’, the term ‘style’, and particularly in the adjectival form ‘stylish’, basically refers to being fashionable. But unlike this latter term, ‘stylish’ has far less of the pejorative connotations of abject frivolous conformism: being a ‘fashion victim’. To quote from an exchange in a short story:

“And what is stylish?”

“Avant garde. A la mode. Trendy, slick, hip, contemporary, fashionable but not conformist. Not too conformist.” (Jaramillo, 2001)

Fashionable, sure, but without making it too obvious, without showing the rivets of culture industry prerogatives. In other words, being stylish must look effortless and more a whim of individual choice, which just happens to be right and good,¹ even though the concept of ‘stylish’ is as changeable and culturally loaded as anything to do with ‘fashion’.

The second point to note about ‘stylish’ is that it was traditionally a description of a person. Even when in reference to someone’s cultural product, like a stylish piece of writing, the praise belonged to the author, not the product *per se*. A century ago the notion of a stylish stove made about as much sense as a talkative stove. Thus the contemporary inundation of advertising copy with terms like ‘stylish design’ is a fairly recent phenomenon, the ubiquitous and taken-for-granted status of which deliberately underplays or denies any underlying cultural tectonics.

Before I examine these tectonics, let’s actually look at what ‘stylish design’ refers to in contemporary advertising.



(Dodane, 1999)

As we can see the shape, lighting and explicit captioning emphasises sleek curves and rounded smoothness. Why is such a design so affirmatively designated as stylish? Previously,

lifestyle products were not so coy about their functionality: if a monitor had to be box-shaped to accommodate its use, then it was box-shaped. If such rough shapes and lines were not explicitly designated as stylish, then it did not really matter as it was people who were 'stylish' and, in this case, people were usually explicitly placed with products rather than products being sold alone. This is not to say that such block-like designs were not considered fashionable in terms of being 'modern'. Indeed, it is worth comparing the contemporary attitude towards smooth design to that of nineteenth century design reformers like A. W. Pugin and John Ruskin who despised the soft, rounded lines of domestic interiors. These reformers contrasted the 'bloated' excess and decadent femininity of corpulent sofas, upholstered furniture and heavy draperies hiding the sharp edges of furniture to clear, distinct, masculine lines and edges (Sparke, 1995, pp. 62-68). Penny Sparke (p. 69) notes that, though this design reform movement never achieved total hegemony in the Victorian era,² it did become the influence for the predominant Modernist furniture design of the early twentieth century, with its emphasis on utilitarian minimalism. The designation of this move to assert the look and feel of technological manufacture as 'modern' was easy to justify. So how is it that the design now called 'stylish' is seemingly a return to the Victorian aesthetic of smoothness? To answer that question we need to look at another move towards smoothness.

Globalisation, now with a smooth, stylish design!

As with 'stylish', the term 'globalisation' has an affirmative, or at the very least neutral, quality about it. How can you be against spherical shapes or, if we take a less-literal connotation, the coming together of the world? Small wonder there is so much ambiguity over whether globalisation is good or bad, or even what it actually amounts to. It is, like 'stylish', pretty much taken as a given (at least in the mainstream media), a near-natural process without socio-political machination. Of course, this has not been without contest, but even within the so-called 'anti-globalisation' movement there are considerable differences between those who see the enemy as 'globalisation' itself, and thus leave themselves open to charges of attacking internationalism in all its forms (the free-movement of refugees as well as capital), and those who see the real enemy as capitalism in general, and any number of variations in between (Hardt, 2002). Such a disparity is as much a function of the deliberately amorphous banality of the term 'globalisation'. In the nineteenth century the same process of global trade expansion, with concomitant cultural and political 'exchanges', was quite ubiquitously called 'colonisation',³ the imperial instigators having little need to dissemble as to the power relations in such a process, given that it was notions of racial superiority that explicitly justified it (Said, 1993, p. 8). In our supposedly 'post-colonial' world, it is hardly surprising that 'globalisation' is the preferred term amongst trade elites who have an interest in down-playing any notion of power politics in favour of a conceptualisation that infantilises world trade, the same way a punch to the head would be if you called it a 'meeting of bodies'.⁴ Yet, like 'stylish', 'globalisation' is just as culturally loaded as 'fashion', and it is indeed at the level of style and design that this can become apparent.

John Agnew (1998, p. 4) has called the way global space is layered to form political-economic 'reality' the 'geopolitical imagination', in other words, the way we 'see the world'. There is no doubt that the motif of this imagination is still very much that of clearly demarcated sovereign nation-states as it emerged in fifteenth century Europe.

The onset of the capitalist world economy and the growth of the European territorial state gave rise to a novel set of understandings about the partitioning of terrestrial space. The 'layering' of global space from the world scale downwards created a hierarchy of geographical scales through which political-economic reality was seen; in order of importance, the four were the global (the scale of the world as a whole), the international

(the scale of the relation between states), the domestic/national (the scale of individual states) and the regional (the scale of the parts of the state). (Agnew, 1998, p. 3)

Such a rigid, static cosmology has been shifting since the post-war realignment of the global economy. This new geopolitical trope can be seen in the daily business of transnational companies with their decentralised (though still hierarchical) ‘headquarters’, which “can be any concentration of capital and authority on the occasion” (Watkins, 1998, p. 78). Watkins goes so far as to claim that this new order of capitalist organisation - transnational capitalism - does not produce any ‘resources’, as understood in common-sense terms:

Transnational capital is a second-order operation, a process of symbolic conversion of resources, and it is a highly mobile operation because its political pathways must always lead to where economic resources *already* exist. That’s where you’ll find transnational capital’s symbolic conversion at work. (Watkins, 1998, p. 87)

In making this claim Watkins does note that there are still ‘multinational’ corporations which maintain links to industrial capitalism in terms of searching for raw materials and cheap labour. But transnational corporations are in search of cheap capital which frees up the organisation structure of the corporation, not bound to particular locations like multinationals are (p. 87). Such ‘decentralisation’ is also manifest in GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), numerous multilateral and bilateral trade agreements, such as NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), and the European Union, which has already removed one of the tenets of the nation-state: the national currency.⁵ No doubt the demand of global capital for fluid borders is often contradicted by the continued predominance of the nation-state mentality, especially in the War on Terror, where governmental re-territorialisation has meant increased state power and border security. However, it is worth noting that at the same time the Australian government was passing tougher laws for asylum seekers, it was streamlining entry conditions for APEC business people. Nor has all the rhetoric about sovereignty in anyway undermined the passage of the free trade agreement with the U.S., making our borders more porous for American capital and commodities. In other words, human beings with little value to capital, such as refugees, are actually becoming more constricted and contained (the apotheosis being the near-total stasis of refugee detention), but globalisation as a peripatetic flow, unhindered by the static inertia of state regulation, is becoming a reality for capital.

Thus I would contend that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s notion that the geopolitical imagination has changed under globalisation towards a ‘smooth world’ “of uncoded and deterritorialized flows” (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 333) is still valid. Using the concept of ‘Empire’ to describe this new geopolitical imagination, Hardt and Negri claim:

In contrast to imperialism, Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a *decentered* and *deterritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. (p. xii)

Hardt and Negri themselves admit that this smooth world is really “a world defined by new complex regimes of differentiation and homogenization, deterritorialization and reterritorialization” (p. xiii).

Although transnational corporations and global networks of production have undermined the powers of nation-states, state functions and constitutional elements have effectively been displaced to other levels and domains. (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 307)

Aesthetic ways of thinking

But that there is an emerging vision of unstriated, fluid flows of goods, information and political authority (rendered in the rhetoric of less government ‘interference’ in the market) there can be little doubt. That this smooth world of globalisation coincides with a commodity aesthetic of smoothness could be seen as just that: a coincidence. But if we were to indulge the notion of a slightly deeper relationship between macro political-economics and petty product ornamentation, we would not be in totally uncharted waters. In fact, according to Weimar German cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer (1995), the design of baubles and mass-produced trinkets can tell us infinitely more about the nature of social power than conventional political analysis:

The position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from that epoch’s judgments about itself. (p. 75)

There is thus a balance between a ‘materialist phenomenology of daily life’ - an insistence on treating so-called ephemeral minutiae as important in themselves - and a relationship to larger historical processes (Levin, 1995, p. 28). Because the form of mass-produced products are both disregarded as trivial and yet treated as enigmatically inscrutable (how to ‘read’ an ornament that has no obvious ‘text’?) they are very much like dreams for Kracauer. Both are mundanely ubiquitous, and yet both lurk beneath the grasp of consciousness, influencing our desires below the radar of the Ego. Such forms thus need to be interpreted like dreams to unpack what Kracauer called the ‘fundamental substance’ of the state of things (Kracauer, 1995, p. 75). Nor are these commodities frozen artefacts that arise like boils after the event. Kracauer (p. 76) writes of an aesthetic relationship that includes the objectification of other people like the performative conformity of stadium crowds and dancing girls (everyone moving in synchronicity to the same beat). Here the linearity of Taylorist production⁶ is reproduced and actively embodied; it is not just an ‘idea’ that persuades people by moving from head to head, but a performative action that influences our very movement.

Though Taylorism still exists in both our assembly-lines and bodies, the secret dream language of commodities is increasingly less and less the linearity of Kracauer’s time, and more and more the sleek fluidity of post-industrialism. Taking Kracauer’s commodity dream analysis, the shoulder-shrugging neutrality of stylish design and the Smooth World of globalisation can be seen as an infinitely more loaded relationship mediated by a ubiquitous, yet low-level, aesthetic ideology which aligns our sensuality to the contemporary demands of the globalised productive apparatus. However, before we gallop off towards such bold declarations, let’s unpack how the aesthetic could have such an effect.

Contrary to the claims of our still-dominant Platonic heritage, we are fundamentally aesthetic creatures. That is, there is a fluid continuum between our analytical and sensual faculties, something acknowledged by pre-Socratic materialists who used *aisthesis* (the etymological antecedent of *aesthetics*) as the concept to describe this continuum, but denied by Platonic idealists who designated *aisthesis* as impoverished sense-perception. Thus the pre-Socratic Heraclitus looked to the flux of sensory experience to understand knowledge, though this did not lead to an undifferentiated epistemology as he believed elementary *aisthesis*, ‘thoughtless perception’, was an ineffective means to understanding. Yet real knowledge was not found in abstract reason, but rather in ‘bright perception’. Without conflating knowledge with sensation, Heraclitus’ conception of *nous* was still more related to *aisthesis* than to *logos* (Verelst and Coecke, 1999). However, most of our Western philosophical heritage comes not from such

pre-Socratics, but from fourth century BCE dualists like Socrates and Plato, both of whom yearned for stability and permanence in politics - they were enemies of democracy and apologists for aristocratic oligarchy (Ste. Croix, 1981, pp. 293-95) - as well as in epistemology. This desire for stability made *aisthesis* a denigrated concept in Platonic epistemology, where knowledge was the exercise of analytical reason to render eternal Forms, and the sensory only eliciting apprehension of illusory appearance (Hamlyn, 1987, p. 52). All *aisthesis* could render was the inferior shadow world of appearance.

Such a mentality persists in our own use of *aesthetics* to describe frivolous appearance as opposed to the true essence beneath. Yet the pre-Socratic version has never been totally lost, as evidenced by both Kant and Nietzsche, who saw knowledge as inherently aesthetic, given that it is fundamentally phenomenal (we only 'know' appearances, not the infinite 'noumenal'). Immanuel Kant's methodology of transcendental critique was posited as the means to escape the slippage between 'sensibility' (aesthetic, sensuous intuition) and 'understanding' by distinguishing *a priori modes* rather than *objects* of knowledge (Hamlyn, 1987, pp. 219-220). Thus, through a process of isolating out the incommensurable elements of the faculties, Kant believed he could stake out 'pure' types of knowledge. Yet despite the rigour with which Kant set the parameters for his critique, the corrosive effects of the aesthetic were impossible to fully resist.

By the time he wrote his later *Critique of Judgement*, Kant was acknowledging an epistemological concept, *sensus communis*, which would allow traffic between the aesthetic and reason. Nor was this interaction the clumsy dance of two rigid entities, *sensus communis* being defined as, "the effect arising from the free play of our cognitive powers" (Kant, 1987 [1790], p. 87). Later, Nietzsche extended this aesthetic understanding by stating, in the *Birth of Tragedy*, that

"only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* is existence and the world *justified*." Later he understood this increasingly as being a consequence of the constructed character of being, the world and reality. Thus, already in 1873 in 'On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense', he set out how all our notions of reality are underlain by 'freely inventive' human activity and hence by an '*aesthetic relation*'. (Welsch, 1997, p. 37; emphasis in original)

In other words, we can never have pure, unmediated, 'objective' knowledge of the world around us (how do we think outside of historically and culturally shifting language? What Archimedean point of Truth do we use?). Thus there is always a component of imaginative 'fabrication' in our thinking. Yet this 'fabrication' is not abstracted from experiential materiality the way we often conceive imagination to be, as the demolition of unmediated reason is also the demolition of unmediated imagination, imagination as abstracted from sensuality. This is why Nietzsche frames cognition as essentially aesthetic, combining as it does the sensual and the imaginative.

The smooth aesthetic from 'industrialism' to 'post-industrialism'

Thus the aesthetic of smoothness is more than a function of prosaic utility; it becomes, to use Raymond Williams' (1965 [1961] p. 64) term, a 'structure of feeling', a powerful mode of both affect and cognition. Given the rarity of smooth surfaces in nature - most surfaces exhibiting some form of roughness, striation and interruption due to the chaotic, unstable, dynamic forces of nature - the importance of smoothness as a marker of human cultural artifice vs. the rough hewn form of nature is important. But there is also a more subtle delineation here between the rounded organic form and the splintered edges of the inorganic. Smoothness as an aesthetic experience evokes ideological resonances with our sense of being human, both in terms of manufactured

culture, but also at the deeper organic level. It is thus not surprising that the significance of the smooth aesthetic has varied over time. The aforementioned soft, smooth furnishings of Victorian homes were stark markers of the feminine domestic sphere; their overly fabricated nature being contrasted, by male design reformers, with stark edges, lines and corners which bespoke an honest, masculine naturalness. Such historical aesthetic baggage persists, but the significance has taken on a different register.

Within the milieu of patriarchal Victorian industrialism smoothness certainly related to human manufacture, but it was the manufacture of soft, warm cushioning against cold, inorganic, rational nature. While reformers like Pugin and Ruskin were undoubtedly explicit critics of industrialism (Williams, 1963 [1958], pp. 37-152), their criticisms, ironically, often reflected some of the concerns of the industrial elite. Indeed, far from being dismissed out of hand, design reform was taken seriously enough to warrant a government report in 1836 as a possible solution to Britain's economic problems of the time (Sparke, 1995, p. 52). What resonated most with Victorian capitalism was the need to maintain clear, hierarchical demarcations between sites of production and consumption for maximum efficiency (keeping labour and leisure separate). Such divisions were embedded in the patriarchal nature of this capitalism, where the demarcation between production and consumption was clearly gendered: masculine productivism was very much the animus of Victorian primitive accumulation, while the decadence of feminine domestic consumption was often blamed, against all reasonable evidence, for economic slumps⁷ (Sparke, 1995, p. 52). The rigid, linear, rational nature of this industrialism⁸ was thus aesthetically embodied in the rejection of smooth, corpulent design. The depth of this aesthetic ideology is clearly evidenced by the fact that this rejection was made most vociferously by critics of industrialism itself.

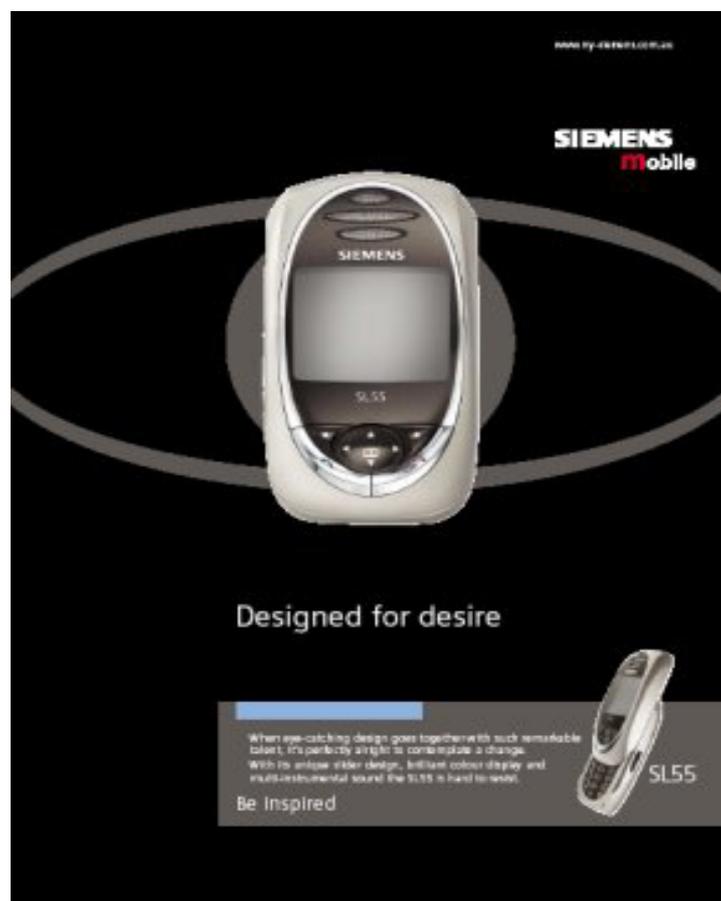
More than a century later the structural changes to world capitalism has meant the shedding and disavowal of many of these rigid striations. Instead of emphasising divisions of labour, it is much more fashionable to talk of inter-connectedness and flows. This is as much a response to the acknowledged faults of industrialism as it is to changes in the nature of exchange. The very real concerns people now have over pollution, alienation and the reduction of all life to the economic calculus cannot be totally swept aside, and they are thus reflected, if not actually dealt with, in the rhetorical contrast between a warm, organic 'post-industrialism' and a cold, rationalist 'industrialism'.⁹ At the same time, the importance of consumption to the well-being of profit margins has become paramount for an economic system, where the discipline of production has been well installed after years of strike-breaking, union-busting and the practical obliteration of alternative means of production (peasant communes, artisan shops and so on). The discipline of consumption has now become the new project of globalisation and, in this the, very design of commodities becomes an agent to both encourage consumption and to make this consumption feel part of a celebration of dynamic life rather than turgid account sheets.

The feminine qualities of warmth and empathy are now actively cultivated by product designers, where organic similitude to the human body is aimed for. Designers like Karim Rashid have spoken explicitly about a 'biomorphic' approach to design to approximate the product to an organic feel (Waters, 2003, p. 120). And lest you feel he is just some crank haute designer, he has designed CD players for Sony, as well as Prada bags, sofas and the top-selling 'Oh Chair' (Hall, 2001).



(Design Boom, 2002)

This biomorphism can be seen most clearly in the sexualisation of commodities. If more rudimentary advertising still needs to sexualise its products via obvious juxtapositions with scantily-clad women, it has been a noticeable recent trend to remove the mediating objectified human element and link the libidinal straight to the object through its own design.



(Adshel, no date)

Such lifestyle commodity porn is not merely glamorising the product with outlandish textual promises. The promise lies in the alluring rounded, smooth curves mimicking the sexualised human body. This intervention in the libidinal economy reproduces the performative embodiment noted by Kracauer, merging 'organic nature' into the inorganic abstraction of globalised commodity exchange, blurring the lines between the world of commodities and bodies.

But 'stylish' smoothness does not just simply mimic the sensual organic world; its aesthetic is also an invitation for the organic to join the high-speed world of commodity exchange. If the 'wind-tunnel-tested' sleekness of cars can be understood in terms of utility, how do we explain the same look for irons and computers?



(Lawsons, no date)



(bMug, 2002)

Even the speed aesthetic of cars is well in excess of any real use-value, given strictly enforced speed limits. So why is ‘stylish’ so equated with the slick and fast?¹⁰ Daniel Harris (2000) notes a precedent in the ‘streamlining movement’ of the 1940s,

when our culture’s obsession with speed and new forms of transportation led industrial designers to create an aesthetic that suggested acceleration even among inanimate objects... even coffins were streamlined... (p. 143)

In our present turbo-capitalist age, our vectors have increased exponentially as has our celebration of speed, as more and more inert products look ready for the starting line at a formula one race. This design resonates with the frantic rhythm of transnational circulation (buy, throwaway, buy), and it even can be said to directly aid such a rhythm by promoting obsolescence; jettisoning the friction of ‘function’ in design to enable a higher turnover. The explosion of rounded, contoured finishes to any number of commodities from buildings to iMacs, from stereos to toys, is rarely a ‘performance’ issue *per se*. What such a revolution in design indicates is the liberation of commodity aesthetics from any direct link to the supposed function of the particular commodity. With the ‘signifier’ of form increasingly becoming detached from the ‘signified’ of function, the purpose and origin of these objects becomes increasingly clouded; the dissembling magic of commodity fetishism not only enables a higher turnover of products,

but it also disguises the mundane horror of commodity production. The rounded, smooth surfaces efface the joints and marks of production - production that is conditioned around rigid, linear, re-territorialising hierarchies, not fluid lines-of-flight. It is this heightening of the effects of commodity fetishism that makes the 'stylish' nature of the commodity aesthetic of smoothness so important, as it renders the complex power relations of transnational commodification practically invisible in the face of the Smooth World of globalisation.

This does not mean smooth commodity aesthetics is a façade *per se*; that if we break open the container we can get to the 'truth of the matter'. What it does mean is that our relationship with our designed world, with the objects that we interact with more than any other, cannot be divorced from the larger designs of globalisation. It is not as if the smoothness of biomorphic commodities does not relate to a 'real' smoothness in globalisation. It is worth noting that many designers of biomorphic products, like Marc Newson, who designed the 'Lockheed lounge' (Design Museum, 2003), actually live the jet-setting, fluid existence so trumpeted by globalisation boosters. What is important is that it is their imagination and those of their bosses that are being reproduced here in a powerful way, not those who work to mass-produce this vision. How we feel, sense and imagine the smoothness around us is as important as – indeed, it is an inescapable component of - how we 'understand' it. Thus those who control the 'means of imagination', both at the macro level of economic design and at the mundane level of product design, deeply influence our very understanding of this 'smooth world'.

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¹ 'Stylish' became a simile for 'good' around the late eighteenth century (Harper, 2000).

² For the reason that these reformers were all critics of industrialism in one form or another. The complex relationships between these reformers and the Victorian ruling class will be discussed below.

³ This is not to deny the differences between this phase of 'colonisation' of contemporary 'globalisation', though these are more quantitative than qualitative (Ellwood, 2001, pp. 12-23), thus the conceptual potency of 'neo-colonialism' to describe what is called 'globalisation'.

⁴ In case it needs to be stated, I am not claiming that globalisation is a one-way street of top-down oppression (not even nineteenth century colonisation was as simple as that). The important point is that it is underpinned by structural power relations, no matter how dynamic, and that there is an obvious desire for such relations to be effaced by those who benefit from it in a world where 'liberty' is, more and more, the oligarch's catch-cry.

⁵ General de Gaulle once claimed France only exists because of the state, the army and the franc (Agnew, 1998. p. 57).

⁶ Named after the early twentieth century management methodology of Frederick Taylor, where time-and-motion studies rigidly structured the production process (Boisvert, 1995, p. 72).

⁷ This has always been a shifting, ambiguous impulse, as capitalism relies on consumption to keep its inherent force of over-production from glutting markets. What it reflects are ongoing contradictions between the maintenance of patriarchy and the naked demands of capitalism for any labour, regardless of gender or willingness, and for any kind of consumption, as long as it passes through the market.

⁸ Which included the need for clear class divisions - a prejudice both Ruskin and Pugin certainly shared (Williams, 1963 [1958], pp. 151) - to maintain power systems for a bourgeois society still new and vulnerable to attack from feudal conservatives and socialists alike.

⁹ Think of how many ads pander to our desires for pastoral, communal authenticity in their emphasis on 'natural goodness', 'environmental friendliness' and personal, idiosyncratic taste.

¹⁰ To the point where the federal government recently felt compelled to impose advertising codes on excessive promotion of speed in car ads (Porter, 2002).