In defence of the Enlightenment

Chapter in Jeremy Myerson, ed, *Design renaissance: selected papers from the International Design Congress*, Glasgow, Scotland 1993

Three of the major breakthroughs of the Renaissance and of the Enlightenment – rationalism, humanism and universalism – are under threat from dark and pessimistic forces in society today. To develop progressive products and lifestyles of the future, these forces must be resisted

We could talk about the technologies of the future – about micro-mechanics, biometrics, mobile telephony. We could discuss multi-media and how old people are going to cope. We could investigate developments in high definition TV or computer-supported collaborative work. We could expose the bogus green claims of manufacturers, or analyse the crisis of the premium brand. All these issues are important, but I want to go straight to the core theme of the conference. I want to defend the Renaissance, as well as the Enlightenment, because we live in a time when many people want to overturn the gains those two eras bought us.

The Renaissance of the 16th century was a period of republican city states and of increasing criticism of the church. There was a great amount of admiration and respect for nature; but at the same time, there was a growing respect not just for landscape or animals, but for human beings.

One of the great insights of the Renaissance was made by the British poet, Sir Philip Sidney, in his *Defence of Poetry.* In that work, he said: 'Nature never set forth the Earth in so much tapestry as diverse poets have done; neither with so pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too-much-loved Earth more lovely. Her world is brazen; the poets only deliver a golden'. (1)

Nature's world is brazen, but the creativity and thought and action and planning of poets, of human beings, is what distinguishes us from nature. A bee may work in a hive, an otter may build a dam, but they don't design things in the kind of conscious, articulated way that mankind does.

This leads to my first premise. A fundamental rethinking for design may be necessary, in that products related to work will be more important than products related to consumption. It is in that sense that we can say that the act of creativity, of work, is what is human about us. The act of consumption, by contrast, is something that we share with animals. Animals eat, animals excrete,

but we're above that. We're creative, we are designers and we make progress in design. And that fundamental distinction between work and consumption will become more apparent to us as we all find work a more grueling business in the 1990s. It also leads me to the Enlightenment.

Three Enlightenment breakthroughs

What were the gains of the Enlightenment? First, there was rationalism – the idea that there was a reason for things. Second, there was humanism, summed up by Pope in his *Essay on Man:* 'Know then thyself, presume not God to scan / The proper study of Mankind is Man'. (2) Finally, the Enlightenment taught us universalism – for example, the doctrine that all people were in some way equal.

It was Adam Smith, a Scot, who most clearly represented the Enlightenment in Britain. Smith applied rational theory to the actions and the work of human beings, and, in his celebrated analysis of the 17 operations that went on to make a pin, developed the idea of a division of labour. (3) Smith also developed the ideas of value and of price in products.

Why was all this important? Because when we come to 1798, little more than 20 years after Smith published his *magnum opus,* an English parson by the name of the Reverend Thomas Robert Malthus made a retrograde step, against the spirit of the Enlightenment. (4) What Malthus concentrated on was consumption. He said that there were too many mouths to feed, given the natural resources available on the land. He wasn't interested in the quality of human beings and the special quality their work has of making things with a market value and a price.

Malthus suggested that there were too many dissolute working class people consuming and also breeding too much. For him, the only proper kind of consumption was the consumption of the aristocracy and of the church – in the person of the Reverend Thomas Robert Malthus and people like him. The whole emphasis of Malthus was on the burdensome *quantity* of the poor.

Beyond the 1980s

The Renaissance and the Enlightenment were actually rather relevant to the period which has recently ended – the 1980s. What Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher said, and I'm afraid some people still say it, is that one human being's experience can never be commensurate with another's. As Margaret Thatcher put it, 'There is no such thing as society. There are only individuals and their families'.

Like Malthus, this represented a step backwards from the Enlightenment. But after an era of unbridled individualism, today less is once again more in design. Instead, therefore, of market segmentation, it is a moment now for changed priorities. Our three Enlightenment breakthroughs now need defending as principles. That way, we can go forward in the aggressive and politicised manner that Stefano Marzano recommends to us, earlier in this book. Let me explore those principles in a little more depth.

Rationalism must be the foundation of the design of the world of products and lifestyles of tomorrow. Rationalism also means that we must have a critical attitude to today's fashionable theories. Take, for example, Chaos Theory – the idea that you can't explain anything because life is so chaotic. As Spielberg's movie *Jurassic Park* repeats it, a butterfly need only flap its wings in South America and something happens as a consequence in Glasgow. In this perspective, the natural must take primacy over the social, and we will never be able to understand the world.

This kind of anti-rational theory is growing in influence. After all, the media have recently rediscovered our old friend, Evil. Now as it happens, one of the doctrines of the Enlightenment was that evil didn't really exist. Yet there are many people today who will brand races and individuals as thoroughly evil without trying to explain them by any rational means.

Against all this, I want to propose *la douche froide de Descartes* – the cold shower of Cartesian logic. And I want to say this because in the past few years pessimism about the future, and in particular pessimism about technology, has grown quite fast. We read sinister novels like William Gibson's *Neuromancer.* My kids are dying to see the murderous nature of *Robocop.* We read magazines like *Mean Sega Machines,* which says that it wants to prepare us for 'the final fight'. It is looking gloomy out there – yet in fact there is no need to be gloomy at all.

It is not that technology doesn't create problems; of course it does. But if we believe in the primacy of humanity and mankind, then we believe that we have the capacity still to solve those problems. I now want to indicate just two technologies that pose some of these questions very poignantly.

New materials and transport

Ezio Manzini has managed to bring to us much of the magic, the possibilities and the potential of materials. (5) Today, we should celebrate refractory ceramics, lights made of leather and zips, lights which can crawl up poles of conductive Velcro. This is the kind of progress that we need in the 1990s, a

progress which is unashamedly in favour of a considered and rational approach to technology, one which looks forward to room-temperature super conductors and even now can make Badedas bottle-tops in a pleasurably exotic kind of plastic.

Plastics can reduce weight in cars and aeroplanes. They bring ecological problems, but they also save fuel. We have to be steadfast in our appreciation that technology is not a villain – it is just what we make it.

The high speed train and the electric car illustrate similar principles. From Amtrak in America to the *Shinkansen* in Japan, the high speed train raises some charged issues. In about 20 years time, if British Rail will allow me, I will be able to get on at Waterloo and travel to Paris in an hour or two. But if Paris becomes a suburb of London, the effect will be that people are going to be crammed together more. Not only will the high speed train appear to turn Europe into one large city, it will in the process appear to increase population density. Do we then want the high speed train or don't we?

I submit that we do want it. I submit that there's nothing wrong with more people being put together. By the same token, I think we have to come out in favour of the electric car. The infrastructural problems with electric cars are enormous. Everybody knows that to make batteries and to charge them from power stations generates a lot of pollution. But at least an electric car will not put fumes in your face. Are we in favour of that? Yes. Do we think technology can solve today's very grave green problems? I think we have to say yes.

Humanism, ethics and the Third World

How do we achieve what Doris Lessing has described – and Michael Wolff has echoed – as the 'substance of "we" feeling'? If you read Paul Kennedy's new book *Preparing for the Twentieth Century*, you will find that the big problem facing the world is our old Malthusian friend, overpopulation – not in Britain, as Malthus had it, but overpopulation in the Third World. (6) This dogma is the contemporary shape of anti-humanism.

The old divisions are still there, but they take a new form. Indeed the Malthusian argument has now got a green twist. It is said that because there are too many people in the Third World, they will add to the Greenhouse effect. Too many breeders, too many breathers: so just go home and get some contraception, otherwise you're screwing up my personal atmosphere.

One can laugh, but there is a need to mount a very strong counter-argument. In our profession, if ethics are important, we have to make the point that the

problem is not over-population in the Third World. The problem is under-design. The reason that the world lacks water is not because there isn't enough water on the planet – two thirds of the planet's surface is covered by water – but that we don't have the irrigation systems; we're not prepared to make that a priority. We are not prepared to put human beings at the centre of things.

Before we rush to castigate the Third World for having too many people and too many ethnic hatreds, and before we also rush to 'respect' its 'culture', its charming raffia work and all that, I say, unpopularly, that we should think twice. I say that we have to use the most advanced technology and design to cure these problems, which are not to do with the backwardness and stupidity of the Third World, but to do with social conditions, to do with human beings.

The problems can be solved, because all the degradation that characterises Third World cities is man-made. These cities weren't naturally vile; we made them, so we have to unmake them. We can unmake them with German solar power or with American blood-testing systems. This is the way to the 'all-win' global economic strategies that Erskine Childers so persuasively calls for in section 1 of this book.

A universalist synthesis

The third principle of the Enlightenment was universalism. The point I want to make here is how much we need to draw from people whose experience is very different to ours, and how everyone can benefit from that experience. We really do have to take a lesson from the East. In this regard, please note that shoes from Taiwan are being designed not just with springs, but with air conditioning in them.

We have so much to learn from the Taiwanese and from the Chinese. Even NASA, in its plan for a $12bn space station, will have to shack up with Russia's MIR. In Japan, too, they have given the world ski-lifts complete with hot-tubs and *sake* to drink. I'm not sure that this is necessarily the solution to all our problems, but it certainly belies many of our stereotypes of the Japanese.

What we mean by universalism is upholding the best design achievements, not of our own nation, but of every other nation around the world: upholding them, mastering them, synthesising them into products for all countries and all walks of life.

The issue is not about being politically correct and saying 'I respect your culture'. It is about universal access to design. It is thus about democratic rights – a concept that was pioneered by the Enlightenment, but which today is often

under threat. We have to resist that threat if we're to live up to our responsibilities as designers.

In this context, we need to speak out in favour of what IT people call adaptive interfaces: interfaces that recognise who you are, learn about you, and adjust themselves to match. Above all, we need to advocate adaptive interfaces that understand the power and the subtlety of human speech. Voice-operated software is the last great frontier if we're to make access and democracy part of our design movement.

I love pen computers. But in the Third World, 90 per cent of the population cannot write. Even in America, about half the population is supposed to be functionally illiterate. Voice recognition can solve these problems. Many other problems could be solved by machine translation, on which the Japanese are working. These things have to be technological, social, economic, financial and design priorities of the future.

Please note that the universalism advocated here does not deny the specificity of particular individuals or locations. On the contrary: it is only by understanding what is common to all people, countries or cities that the idiosyncrasies of each can be set in sharp relief. Core designs can be modified to accommodate these idiosyncrasies but the problem is first to arrive at those core designs.

Universalism in practice: the idea of modes

How can we apply all this in practice? Conventional marketing theory wants to divide us all into As and Bs and C Is and C2s. If it is really sophisticated, it will go on about lifestyles. Briefly, here is a method by which you can make your products more accessible to people, more humanistic and more universal.

Every day, you and I go through phases of feeling like an A (upper middle class), a B (middle class) a D (unskilled) and an E (unemployed). When we're running for a plane we feel over 80, even if we're 40. So we can see that conventional market segmentation has its merits, but that very often, in our attitudes and behaviour, we elude its categories.

If, by contrast, we focus on what we at the Henley Centre call 'modes', that can be much more productive. A mode usually appears around an occasion of use. When you go to an airport, you can be in panic mode. You can be in 'first time at Heathrow' mode. What we need to understand is the number of all these different modes, the nature of them, the relative priority of them, and so on. Then we can prepare the products and systems and graphic interfaces to match.

The myth of over-consumption: weak penetration of technology in the home

Percentage of UK owning

	1992	*2001/2*	*2010*
CD player	35.9	80	83
PC	23.8	49	77
Answering machine	11.9		
Word processor	8.4	-	-
Camcorder	8.1		
Satellite TV	7.8	43	88
Mobile phone	4.9	64	80
Landline phone		94	87
Cable TV	3.3	(included in satellite stats)	
Fax machine	1.8	-	-
Microwave oven		86	92
Dishwasher		27	40
Tumble dryer		54	57

Source: The Henley Centre Planning for Social Change 1992, updated (7)

Keynes and consumption

To emerge from a period of crisis and move toward the kind of rational, humanistic, universal and comprehensive perspective that is needed, we need a new theory of design and of society. We will get that theory, but it will not be the old theory of John Maynard Keynes.

If you read the preface to the German edition of Keynes's *The General Theory of Money, Interest and Employment, you* will find a very interesting remark. There, in 1936, Keynes had the nerve to make the point that his theory was more applicable to totalitarian societies than to democratic ones. So state intervention, the policy of Keynes, doesn't look like a very attractive solution to our problems. We know that monetarism and Post-Modernism, the ideas of the 1980s, are not a solution, but nor are state intervention and Modernism. That is why we need a new theory.

The final thing to remember about Keynes is that his focus, like Malthus, was all on how to increase consumption to combat lack of effective demand. Now, of course, we find our modem-day Keynesians inverting his doctrine, and in a green manner, saying that we all need to cut consumption.

This in itself is very ironic. Precisely at a time when you and me *are* cutting consumption – that's what we're forced to do in a recession – our green friends tell us to make still more cuts. You can't get a glass of water in California without them asking you whether you really need it. Thus California's water shortage is turned from a social problem to do with dams and pipe design to a natural, individual and moral one. In the same way, we're all now supposed to feel guilty when we get in a car. So let's be careful before we rush into Keynes and consumption as the basis of our new theory.

Guarding against nostalgia and false universalism

Through the better design of work, we can achieve that difficult and untrendy thing, progress. By the same token, we need to guard against nostalgic retro-design. Do we really want a design culture which is like the rock music charts right now, where nearly everything comes from 30 years ago?

Let me urge you, too, to guard against *false* universalism. The universalism of Vodafone, whose graphics say, in Russian Constructivist style, that everybody must have a mobile phone, but which also insists that everybody must wave a Union Jack about it at the same time. The universalism of Rupert Murdoch who is so politically correct nowadays that he insists that you and me, in an ecstatic state of empowerment, determine the future of electronic media, not media barons like him. And let's also watch out for the bogus universalism of the United Nations, whose little plastic spacemen came out of my Sugar Puffs packets in the 1960s, but who, in their blue helmets, look pretty much like spacemen to people in Somalia right now.

The stakes today are very high in design. The forces which want to send us back to times before the Renaissance and the Enlightenment are growing. We can go back or we can go forward. I suggest we go forward. I suggest that we become representatives and partisans of the future. To professionalise ourselves, to read widely, to understand and really uphold the examples of other countries, is tough for us to do – but that is the only way out of the present impasse.

During the Renaissance, the philosopher Francis Bacon wrote an essay called *of Superstition.* (8) I believe that something it said really applies to our Malthusian friends, and to all the dark, irrational theories I have mentioned. Bacon wrote that the causes of superstition had a lot to do with what he called 'barbarous times, especially joined with calamities and disasters'.

Let’s stand out against the forces of superstition in the 1990s.

References

1. Quoted in David Norbrook, 'Introduction', in D Norbrook and HR Woudhuysen, *The Penguin Book of Renaissance Verse 1509-1659* (Penguin, 1992)

2. Pope, *Essay on Man*, Epistle 11

3. Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* 1776 (Pelican, 1970)

4. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principles of Population as it Affects the Future Improvement of Society*, 1798

5. Manzini, *The Material of Invention*, 1986 (The Design Council, 1989), and *Artefatti: verso una nuova ecologia dell'ambiente artificiale*, Edizioni DA, 1990

6. Kennedy, *Preparing for the Twentieth Century* (Harper Collins, 1993)

7. Office for National Statistics, 'Ownership of consumer durables increases into 2010', 29 November 2011, www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/family-spending/family-spending/family-spending-2011-edition/sum-consumer-durables-nugget.html

8. Bacon, *Essays Civil and Moral*, 1625 (Cassell, 1889)