

# Plastic

## The Slippery Slide to the Death of the Planet

John Zerzan

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Contemporary society has been engulfed and determined by the immateriality of cyberspace. A new remote-control e-reality lived online. It was preceded by another kind of immateriality, that of the move to the Age of Plastics.

Plastic is that rare substance that is not found in nature. In 1957, post-structuralist Roland Barthes called it “the stuff of alchemy” embodying “the very idea of its infinite transformation.”

Its origin, however, was a bit more prosaic. In 1863, owing to the high cost of ivory, a \$10,000 prize was offered for a cheaper substitute in the manufacture of billiard balls. John Wesley Hyatt won the prize with his invention of plastic, or celluloid, as it was originally called. A minor drawback was the occasional explosion of a billiard ball that had been struck too sharply. Celluloid was highly flammable.

Celluloid products were originally restricted to high-end, fancy items with an almost utopian association. Production of it commenced in 1872, but was replaced in 1907 by Bakelite, the first fully synthetic plastic. Bakelite, the model for future plastics, was harder than celluloid, non-flammable, and cheaper to produce. It used the mathematical symbol of infinity as its trademark, and became well-known as the casing of early radios.

Plastic products appeared and proliferated soon after, including cellophane, rayon, nylon, and newer classes of complex plastic polymers such as polyesters, vinyl, silicone, and others.

By the 1930s and 1940s, there was a widespread sense that the Age of Plastics had arrived. But suspicion of duplicity and vulgarity had also become commonplace, replacing the original somewhat utopian feel at the origin of the new substance.

The more decisive time for plastics was World War II, with wartime pressure for all manner of substitutes for raw materials. With the postwar economic surge, plastic was truly in the driver’s seat, and at the same time became culturally synonymous with the cultural designation of cheap and shoddy.

Testimony to the latter was the opening scene of the 1967 film, “The Graduate,” when at Dustin Hoffman’s character’s graduation party, a friend of the family provides him with sage advice: “I just want to say one word. Plastics.” The word that had become to many “emblematic of all that is fake and wrong with the modern material world,” according to Stephen Fenichell, author of *Plastic: The Making of a Synthetic Century*.

At the time of “The Graduate” and what it expressed in no uncertain terms, the reigning cultural paradigm was postmodernism. It rejected the distinction between high and low cultures, and discarded categories like authenticity. Postmodernism was consumption über alles, judgements be damned; what’s to resist?

One of its patron saints, French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard, proclaimed in his essay, “Natural Wood, Cultural Wood,” that technology is the inevitable ruler and undoes any natural/unnatural distinction. Plastics champion, Italian designer Enzo Manzini, celebrated surface, paralleling postmodern rejection of depth or causality in his essay, “Objects and their Skin.” Plastics culture and postmodern anti-values: a rather perfect congruence.

The vacuity of the postmodern reached its zenith in the 1990s in terms of intellectual dominance, but its nihilism had certainly leached into the wider culture. The materiality of plastics, however, has anything but waned. By 1968, production was increasing at a rate more than ten times that of metals production. In 1988, a retired DuPont chemist predicted that humanity would “perish by being smothered in plastic.”

As plastics production, dependent on the petrochemical basis of all industrial productionism, continues to soar, the prospect of recycling this avalanche is the popular response. So, the solution, such as it is, is confined to the sphere of consumption, not production. Not forgetting that the substance at hand was designed to be non-biodegradable.

Only a small fraction of plastics in the U.S. is recycled; eight percent is a commonly cited figure. Mostly, collected plastics are exported; the rest go into landfills or are incinerated.

The nuts and bolts of recycling processes—the industrial reality—is pretty mysterious. A bit of a sacred cow, better left unknown. Some contend that when the entire process—all the steps—is considered, the amount of energy required is a net increase. Recycling fails the efficiency test. Given the complexity of plastics, their enormous variety (utilizing an almost endless difference in polymers or complex molecular identities), there is no magic wand, no one-size-fits-all recycling solution.

Recycling may be something of a fiction, but the negative reality of plastics is certainly no illusion. Among the toxic effects, an aspect that has risen to prominence, is microplastics. The term itself was only coined in the UK in 2004, but relatively speaking, was long in the making. As of 2014, it was estimated that there were perhaps 50 trillion tiny particles of plastic in the world’s oceans alone. In very recent years, the enormity of plastic’s presence at the deepest level has demanded attention. Not just its ubiquity, but even more importantly, its invasiveness.

The Spring 2023 issue of *Harvard Medicine* featured “Microplastics Everywhere,” making the point—including every part of our bodies. A recent issue of *The New Lede*, an environmental journal, reported a new study found microplastics in every human brain sample tested, with levels increasing over time. In the same week, an Austrian study found plastic particles in bottled water, leading to incidences of high blood pressure.

Civilization exists mainly as a technosphere built on plastic. Certain features wouldn’t exist without it. Industrial medicine with its foundational tubes, bags, etc. But we are held hostage to modern medicine with its procedures and vaccines. Without it, I’d probably not have survived to write these lines. We need a drastically different approach, a non-plastic world, in which the price of our survival doesn’t include the progressive death of life overall.

So many reasons to turn away from this world.

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