

ments. Adams's portrait is fuller in detail, though occasionally marred by his unrelenting hostility to Jefferson. Brookhiser comes closer to saying why a modern reader would want to know about Gouverneur Morris: "Good principles make a man admirable; a good style makes him arresting. Morris's sparkling prose still shines

after two centuries. Reading it, we hear a voice—so vivid, we imagine the speaker has just left the room, and so delightful that we want him to come back."

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Selling Style

*THE SUBSTANCE OF STYLE:
How the Rise of Aesthetic Value Is Remaking
Commerce, Culture, and Consciousness.*
By Virginia Postrel. HarperCollins. 237 pp. \$24.95

Reviewed by Paul Fussell

This book is a further emanation of the spirit of "futurism" by the author of *The Future and Its Enemies: The Growing Conflict over Creativity, Enterprise, and Progress* (1998). It might be thought to resemble recent books of literary and artistic criticism by Wendy Steiner, *The Scandal of Pleasure* (1995), and Denis Donoghue, *Speaking of Beauty* (2003). But there the similarity ends. Those critics address the nature of what was once revered as high culture, whereas Virginia Postrel's book concerns low and middle "consumer culture" aiming at mercantile profit. "Style," design, and color, Postrel insists, are, happily, imposing themselves in places formerly valued for "substance"—function alone. To sell successfully now, she implies, a monkey wrench or tire pump ought to exhibit "aesthetic" but unfunctional elements. This I find curious, like much of the book, and rather depressing. For the aestheticized object is found to carry a higher price and thus to augment both the profit of the seller and the annoyance of the buyer.

But there is a moment of relief from such suggestions. A few of Postrel's pages are devoted to the work of sociologist Stanley Lieberman, who has studied changing styles in the naming of children, the way Sean has replaced John or Robert, and Kimberly has

replaced Mary or Susan. Why do these few pages seem an oasis of harmless interest? The answer is that they alone are not devoted to the topic of low moneymaking.

The current "Age of Aesthetics" that delights Postrel turns out to rely largely on trivial novelty for its success in moving merchandise. For example, one of the notable creations of the age is the reform of the old-fashioned toilet brush, which seemed to the uninformed to do the job without recourse to anything like beauty or charm. "Every day all over the world," she trumpets, "designers are working to make a better, prettier, more expensive toilet brush for every taste and every budget. The lowliest household tool has become an object of color, texture, personality, whimsy, even elegance. Dozens, probably hundreds, of distinctively designed toilet-brush sets are available—functional, flamboyant, modern, mahogany.

"For about five bucks, you can buy Rubbermaid's basic plastic bowl brush with a caddy, which comes in seven different colors, to hide the bristles and keep the drips off the floor. For \$8 you can take home a Michael Graves brush from Target, with a rounded blue handle and translucent white container. At \$14, you can have an Oxo brush, sleek and modern in a hard, shiny

white plastic holder that opens as smoothly as the bay door on a science-fiction spaceship. For \$32, you can order Philippe Starck's Excalibur brush, whose hilt-like handle creates a lid when sheathed in its caddy. If your tastes don't run to trendy designers, for around the same price you can get a brush that hides in a ceramic cowboy boot. At \$55, there's Stefano Giovannoni's Merdolino brush for Alessi, its bright green T-shaped handle sprouting like a cartoon plant from a red, yellow, or blue plastic pot. Cross the \$100 barrier, and you can find all sorts of chrome and crystal, brushed nickel and gold, ranging as high as \$400."

That gives a good idea of what's going on here. Postrel is celebrating ways manufacturers and merchants can enhance profits by putting novelty to preposterous ends, thus giving jobs to crowds of designers. And the institution of silly or mendacious advertising is the mechanism the Age of Aesthetics has found indispensable.

Curiously, while attending to Postrel's book, I have been regaled by a full-page review, in the *Times Literary Supplement*, of *The Burned Children of America*, a collection of stories edited by Marco Cassina and

Martina Testa. The *TLS*'s review focuses on the damage language suffers from the habits of advertising. The increasing difficulty, as novelist Zadie Smith says in the book's introduction, is writing "an emotive sentence that has not already been used to sell humidifiers, Pepsi, or suppositories." The shrewd misrepresentation common in advertising increasingly "doubles for life, supplants, creates simulacra." One example would be the recent national deceptions on Wall Street, as well as those involved in selling a war to the credulous as if it were a commodity aiming at profitable mass acceptance.

Postrel even has a kind word for what might seem questionable "styles" so long as they appear to be new, such as young people appearing in public with metal studs in their cheeks and tongues, safety pins through their nostrils, or other types of "radical piercing," in the contemporary jargon.

If that is to suggest future American culture and consciousness, please count me out.

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CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

AMERICA'S NEWCOMERS AND THE DYNAMICS OF DIVERSITY.

By Frank D. Bean and Gillian Stevens. Russell Sage Foundation. 309 pp. \$32.50

If the American public's post-September 11 mood swing on immigration seems particularly stark, perhaps that's because it began just as we were recovering from the last one. By late summer 2001, it had become acceptable for national politicians, especially members of Congress, to acknowledge that they might have gone too far in the late 1990s with legislation that, taking a page from California's book, restricted access to public benefits by noncitizens. On September 5 of that year, the new Mexican presi-

dent, Vicente Fox, visited his friend George W. Bush in Washington to attempt a historic deal: the "regularization" of unauthorized Mexican immigrants already in the United States and the launch of a new "guest workers" program that would permit many more Mexicans to cross the border. Six days later, when a group of illegal immigrants, mostly from Saudi Arabia, brought this country to its knees, the deal was dead.

Instead of focusing on flawed intelligence, shoddy law enforcement, or extraordinary naiveté about what was going on in flight schools, many officials trotted out familiar and convenient scapegoats—the millions of people here without visas or with