

"Are We having Fun Yet?"

Virginia Postrel's The Substance of Style is smart, fun to read, and correct. She tells us that we have entered the "Age of Aesthetics," a time when beauty and style are to be found everywhere, at least for market economies. Every product, every place, and every experience now is supposed to offer a touch of the aesthetic. The reason is simple: increasingly wealthy and sophisticated customers demand "an enticing, stimulating, diverse, and beautiful world." (p.4)

The book surveys a wide variety of trends -- from fashion to cosmetic surgery to restaurant design -- and shows how they fit this common pattern. We hear about Martha Stewart, Starbucks, the iMac, fashion magazines, tiled floors, nice salad bowls, and the Michael Graves brush from Target. The age of Wonder Bread is gone, and the middle class can now buy a sense of style previously reserved for the wealthy. Postrel declines the enterprise of demarcation and does not try to draw a boundary between art and the pleasures of daily life.

Some of the best passages concern globalization. In Turkey the number of interior design magazines has number from one to forty in a decade. Japan is becoming a fashion capital, while South Korea and Singapore are becoming centers of design (p.14).

Any reader of my own works, which stress how commerce brings us plenty, diversity, and creativity, will not be surprised how thoroughly I agree with Postrel. So I will spend the rest of this review outlining my primary worry with the book, noting that my own research is open to the same questions.

To put it bluntly, sometimes I wonder just how much these aesthetic developments make us better off. No, I am not advocating a return to Mao's gray pajamas. I believe in market-oriented capitalism, including for the arts. But could the baroque proliferation of the aesthetic, in all of its manifestations, be an unimportant epiphenomenon, distinct from the main success story of capitalism? Could "the Buff Revolution," as we now describe the new and growing obsession with male bodies, be a temporary and not very effective antidote against our underlying boredom?

Postrel (pp.74-77) does an excellent job arguing against Bob Frank's relative status idea. We want beauty for its own sake, and not just to look better than others. I will add that the interiors of American homes, over the last few decades, have improved much more than their exteriors, contra to what Frank's hypothesis would predict.

But does beauty make us much happier? Perhaps we get used to our frame of reference and quickly take new beautiful objects as part of our assumed background. Postrel's own text points to some of these worries. We are told "Design that was once cutting edge is now a minimum standard, taken for granted by customers." (p.19) Later she writes: "The aesthetic age won't last forever. The innovations that today seem exciting, disturbing, or both will eventually become the backgrounds of our lives. We won't notice them unless they're missing." (p.189)

A broader literature, focusing on the psychology of happiness, questions whether new gadgets, beautiful or not, make people much happier. Daniel Kahneman suggests that people mistakenly forecast what will make them happy (search our archives at **MarginalRevolution**). And after the fact they overestimate the happiness value of fleeting aesthetic experiences, leading them to seek out those experiences again and again, with little real satisfaction.

I can think of a few lines of response. First, an aesthete might argue happiness be damned, and advocate "art for art's sake." Unlike many economists, I have sympathies for this attitude, but only when it applies to Mozart and Michelangelo. The first sentence of the book blurb mentions "airport terminals decorated like Starbucks" and "hair dye among teenage boys," which are much harder to defend in these exalted terms.

A second possibility is that we use the aesthetic to promote ourselves. Maybe blue hair dye per se makes no one especially happy, but it helps teenage boys signal their identities and thus to form the appropriate peer groups. The psychological literature stresses that friends are a good source of real happiness. Our interest in the aesthetic may be an indirect path to better and better-matched sets of friends.

In this case, however, it is less clear how well the modern world is doing. Robert Putnam stresses that, instead of being happy with friends, we are moving to a society of "bowling alone." I will review Putnam's new book soon, but in any case this is a tougher debate than what Postrel takes on. And if we defend the aesthetic for instrumental reasons, suddenly Putnam, not Postrel, is addressing the more relevant debate.

Third, we may choose to side with "meaning" rather than "happiness." Postrel (pp.190-1) argues that material manifestations of the aesthetic bring meaning into our lives. Modern design serves artifactual functions, above and beyond its use as a source of pleasure: "When we too are dust, our descendants will have Fashid's curvy plastic trash cans." What we own is, in part, what we are and what we will be.

Postrel closes the book on this note, and we cannot help but notice the self-referential character of the assertion. I liked not only this book, but also its dust jacket.