

is only wanly amusing, or Margaret Atwood, who can be bitingly funny); in the daily "corrections" of the hilarious tabloid press (who need icons like Princess Diana so that they can have devils like Camilla Parker-Bowles); and in the kind of social comedy that descends from Evelyn Waugh and Kingsley Amis.

But what constitutes "correction" in a secular age? Who is correcting whom, and on what warrant? Lacking a true religious funding, modern "religious" correction tends to feel unmoored, a punishment in search of a sin. One reads Waugh reliably amused, but rarely with the feeling that what he is satirizing matters very much. Not surprisingly perhaps, a great deal of Waugh and Amis squanders itself on slightness; and, as if to compensate for this slightness, the rhetoric of correction gets more and more strident. Take the famous passage from *Decline and Fall*, when the primitive Welsh brass band makes its appearance at the school garden party:

Ten men of revolting appearance were approaching from the drive. They were low of brow, crafty of eye and crooked of limb. They advanced huddled together with the loping

tread of wolves, peering about them furtively as they came, as though in constant terror of ambush; they slavered at their mouths, which hung loosely over their receding chins, while each clutched under his ape-like arm a burden of curious and unaccountable shape.

The clumsiness of the writing almost renders its punitive tendencies harmless. That word "revolting" is gratuitous, and the men's animality is hammered home through simple repetition and assertion: "wolves . . . slavered . . . ape-like." And above all, there is the notion that appearance merits such cruel scrutiny.

If the traditional category of hypocrisy is premised on the notion that behind appearances may lie truth, then this passage is the inversion of that notion: here appearance has become truth, and the style announces that nothing more to be known exists. This is the pale, modern image of the gods at laughter, except that Waugh has arrogated to himself the privilege that Homer accords to his characters: "And unquenched laughter arose among the blessed gods/As they saw Hephaestus limping through the hall." Decline and fall, indeed. ■

Anne Hollander The Glittering Jumble

THE SUBSTANCE OF STYLE:
HOW THE RISE OF AESTHETIC
VALUE IS REMAKING COMMERCE,
CULTURE, AND CONSCIOUSNESS
By Virginia Postrel
(HarperCollins, 237 pp., \$24.95)

THIS BOOK PREACHES TO the converted, needlessly exhorting the long-since-addicted public to acknowledge the value of surface and appearance. Virginia Postrel is not an art critic or a design critic but an economics expert and a columnist, and her sense of the aesthetic dimension in mate-

rial life seems to have sharpened up only recently because she has observed, and here records, a recent increase in that aspect of consumerism. Toilet bowl brushes, which were functional in shape for generations, felt and looked at only by their users, now come in rainbow colors and in many different forms and materials with correspondingly various stands and holders. This fact cannot be just a matter of status, chic, or conspicuous consumption, since the humble object has never had much visual or tactile claim, and it is never advertised. Its new stylized condition must have come into existence, therefore, wholly to delight the senses of the user, so that toilet bowl brushes could compete in the marketplace along with lamps and rugs, cars and shoes, soft drinks and cough drops, all the perpetually re-stylized goods and

their re-stylized packaging that now make their pitch through the availability of a huge new variety in what she calls their "look and feel."

Postrel sees this kind of thing as an advance, indicative of something new and better in American civilization. Since she really believes that we all find pleasure and beauty less important than food and shelter, or than politics and religion, or even than sex and death or love and money, and that we find surfaces deceptive and attention to them frivolous, Postrel feels that she must argue in behalf of pleasure, beauty, and artifice and declare them to be deep and necessary, good in themselves.

Well, right, but we have always known this. What has really come about in the last thirty years is, instead, the same thing you can see everywhere else in American lives: a new worship of diversity as good in itself, minus any active judgment of goodness and badness or harmony and disharmony within it. *Those* are the things that we now refuse to acknowledge, not the value of pleasure, artifice, and beauty. If you think of buildings as consumer goods, for example, you often see artificial diversity created on an immense scale—stage-set-like shopping malls, vast groups of resort hotels cooked up to look cartoonishly historic or mythic, miles of eateries along 42nd Street similarly glittering with identically fake ethnic motifs. Postrel argues that such "inauthentic" environments please our diverse population, and that is what's good about them. Fake variety is egalitarian, nobody feels left out or condescended to, many different kinds of people like it, and isn't it lovely.

Postrel does not try to argue that people like it because it's lovely—and it certainly is not that. The aesthetic effect of these environments is one of excitement, wonder, and hilarity always on the verge of being depressing and appalling, rather like the circus. Wherever many varieties of equally stylized things are on offer, actual visual taste is not much focused on, only visual "plenitude," as Postrel calls it. She means by this the display of many similar things in distractingly various shapes and colors, not an array of truly different things. Never mind if the things differ in a serious way, or fail to differ at all; what's important is that they seem different.

In the many composite phenomena now on our overburdened visual scene—the computer screen when you log on,

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the sensational trailers for movies—each individually dazzling component is canceled out by all the others. None gets any chance to have more visual value than another, so the whole ensemble is unintelligible and finally wearisome, especially if it comes in many colors, all in motion and flashing. A misguided belief is being acted on that since one brilliant color among six variant neutral shades suddenly looks marvelous—blazing with its distinct chromatic glory, promoting subtle distinctions among the dim others—why, then, seven different brilliant colors must naturally look seven times more marvelous, with glory for all, and no resentful neutrals left feeling oppressed and discriminated against. The issue of differing value among the equally glorious-looking is thus sidestepped.

Postrel believes that the “drab cubicles” on an office floor, or many computers and telephones in the same beige plastic, are bad; and that strikingly multi-colored laptops, or office floors paneled in many different glossy woods and furnished in multi-colored upholstery, are good. And so they can be; but polished, fancy, and many-colored are not intrinsically marvelous, any more than plain, simple, and monochromatic are bad and boring. Right now, we cannot find plain and simple at all, because they have been eclipsed by Plain And Simple, a category now available for the design of housewares and furnishings in a variety of shapes and shades suggesting the Shakers, the Fifties, or Art Deco. There is no doubt that waiting rooms designed with living room-like care can be nicer than those with hard benches lined up against blank walls; but sometimes well-worn austerity seems just right for the mood and the moment. The look of a modest lunch counter that has evolved over time without any effort to compete in the style race is getting more and more appealing—and much more rare. Even waiting in line at the notably unstylized post office has become something of a relief.

ANOTHER OPPOSITION THAT Postrel wants to maintain is between Fine Art and Good Design on the one hand, phenomena that she finds not only demanding but exclusive and usually riddled with ideology (Ornament is Crime, Form Follows Function, and—worst of all—Less is More), and on the other hand popular taste, which arises everywhere in

its natural diversity, and is now at last being generally catered to at higher and higher levels. The ideology behind this catering has escaped her notice, whereby freedom of aesthetic choice, made possible by freedom of enterprise, has become the visible symbol of freedom itself, along with the corollary principle that there can never be too much of all three.

What’s missing is the warning that the price of each is still eternal vigilance. Serious aesthetic choice is always a matter of refusal, of rejecting whole ranges of components and combinations that do not satisfy, and then distinguishing among those that do—and this takes constant (even if low-key) aesthetic attention and effort, even having to choose the preferable seat in the waiting room instead of just finding room to sit down. Many people say that they hate to shop, and this usually means that they hate being confronted with too many confusing choices while trying to hold on to a stubborn idea of what they really want, and not seeing it amid all the plenitude.

The history of design shows, moreover, that Fine Art and Good Design have not been in opposition to the looks of goods that satisfied popular taste, but have always provided the models for them. Popular taste included a certain division between the perceived goodness and fineness of what was new and that of what was old. In the first half of the twentieth century, the new products of Good Taste and Fine Art were simple and abstract, suggesting the perfection of machine production and the force of basic emotion, projecting a fresh honesty. The character of the formerly Good and Fine was ornate, complex in form and founded on artifice; and so Academic paintings, tufted furniture, and porcelain covered with roses became examples of Bad Taste. They were no less popular, but they went out of fashion, and so examples of them were cheaply made for the non-fashionable public that shopped at Woolworth’s. A fashionable sense of their Badness became justified by the crude look of derivative pictures and of mass-produced ornate china.

The Drab Cubicle effect, the pre-Stylization Mode, is what Postrel thinks of as non-style, or “pure function,” as if she thought that designing purely utilitarian objects or spaces never used to require any aesthetic effort, or as if she had noticed none on the old cubicles and telephones. But one tenet of modern

design held that such things need more exacting aesthetic effort than anything else. A useful thing needs first to look recognizable for its use; then to look self-contained and self-confident, graceful and eager, like an athlete; then to look attractive to the hand, pleasing as an enabling bodily extension. Distraction arises, not pleasure, and the best effect fails, if the thing looks too glorious and stimulating in itself, like a fashion model. Similarly if a tool looks too harsh, if the pitchfork seems to threaten, a formal harmony can be designed for it to modify the threat and make the scary thing look pleasantly compliant with the user.

Modern design was developed to explore the expressive appeal of such combined clarity, grace, and discretion. In part it represented another Neoclassic revival, informed (though not formally influenced) by the simple grace of Georgian spoons and row houses, whether those were made of silver and stone for the rich or of tin and brick for the poor. During the twentieth century, many decorative things came to be designed on the model of useful objects, so that an elegant bracelet might suggest gears or a suspension bridge. Of course, formal lapses could occur, and some tableware might too much resemble dental instruments, while many buildings depressingly did resemble shoeboxes. But toys still were made in many colors and looked entertaining in themselves; and now we have manifestly entered a time when everything aims to look like a toy, including huge buildings, and many fashionable garments aim to look like clown costumes. Postrel seems to welcome this aesthetic condition, which appeals to a large range of infant sensibilities rather than trying to propose a large range of adult standards.

STYLIZATION HAS BECOME SO demanding to the eye because its practitioners now draw indiscriminately on the universe of past taste, yanking bits of it back into service and out of its context. Stylized products—buildings, movies, bracelets, toilet bowl brushes—get more pretentious the less artless they are, the more “ironic” their formal references, so that many things now seem alarmingly obese with extra aesthetic weight, too “decorative” in their very being, even if simple. Some of the public, confronting this pretension at every turn of ordinary life, may well feel subliminally challenged

to judge everything, gauge its success, respond to the "irony," catch the references, stand up to the assault of what's on view—unless, of course, people unconsciously begin to absorb most of it as if it were background noise, and feel that they must just try harder to find what they like in spite of it. When more and more of the public inevitably does that, then this glittering jumble in which we now swim will phase out as if it were another over-decorated Victorian Period but on a grander scale, and we will be in for a global bout of freshly minted, clear-eyed modernity, no doubt going by some other name.

MEANWHILE POSTREL IS DOCUMENTING the rise and the diffusion of expressive décor, eclectic design, and expanded choice. She has figures to prove that more stuff is being designed and manufactured and purveyed with the appeal of these characteristics primarily in mind than ever before, even by hard-headed General Electric, and that there are many more design schools, design departments, and design students than ever before, and in more countries; she notes that one company offers seven hundred styles of drawer-pull. She quotes an Australian article on this new state of things that says that formerly "sofas were for sitting on, and kettles were for making tea"—again as if a modest and unassuming visual style in things were somehow the product of biological growth, like the look of an egg.

Her main point is simply that highly noticeable design in itself has become an acknowledged competitive strategy, so that the public now expects to be perpetually captivated and entertained and flattered by the novelty and the variety of design in every kind of commodity, not just in the aspect of goods but in their physical ambience. Restaurants are as over-designed as the meals they serve; new boutiques selling wine or cheese or jams or cookies are fitted up like exquisite art galleries, with hushed spatial arrangements so arcane that the goods cannot readily be distinguished from the décor. Such establishments might not sit on the same street with the fake-ethnic diners, but the source of their overt allure is the same. And Starbucks might be on both streets, its interior carefully designed and lighted to promote casual lingering.

Self-conscious informality joins self-

conscious gaudiness and exaggerated elegance among the normal looks for public interiors, everything with the look of a movie set calling attention chiefly to its role in a fantasy. Hotel rooms are the same, at mid-level as at high, all offering the Luxurious Look with much lush drapery and piquant extra pillows and no place to put anything down. Postrel notes that home decoration with exactly the same fantasy look, including the appropriate works of art for the walls, is now sold online or through catalogues at modest prices, instead of through decorators by appointment only. Special effects and production design, more than ever emphasized in movies, can now make life itself seem increasingly like a movie under the control of specialized stylists, and presumably just as ephemeral.

Actual quirky, private, individual taste seems likely to wither for lack of exercise in all of this, as seductive fashion claims every part of the material world. The more numbers of new choices are presented to the public, the less room for private invention and arrangement for self and surroundings. Personal stuff is not supposed to be kept around and repaired, selectively added to, subtracted from, altered slightly, re-discovered and re-combined, allowed to mellow at different speeds. The current right look suggests that a whole new scheme has been adopted, an entire old one discarded—the same process that only fashion in dress used to be accused of. It does seem that what has long been true for clothes and clothing accessories has spread to everything else, and also increased in the realm of personal appearance.

Postrel naturally takes up the theme of Fashion—here capitalized to mean the apparel business from the runway on down—which seems to be the model on which the marketing of all appearances has come to be based. Fashion may these days exert much more broadly its well-known iron grip on perception, whereby a skirt seems to have lengthened or a jacket's shoulders to have widened while the garment was hanging for a year in the closet, so that it suddenly looks unwearable instead of sensational. Now the kitchen utensils may start to do that in the drawer, and maybe even the new house, if the family goes away for enough months. Twentieth-century standardization is deplored by Postrel as having kept "aesthetics" from flourishing, even though all double beds became reassuringly the same size and all double sheets fit them,

all bottle caps nicely fit all bottles, and all light bulbs screwed happily into all lamp sockets. Standardization also produced housing-development houses all on one model, and Postrel really deplores those. She seems not to understand why anyone would like them—perhaps she hasn't been to Bath or Edinburgh or the Place des Vosges; but she is careful to add to her list of admonitions the maxim that tastes differ.

WHAT PREVAILED DURING the epoch of standardization was the idea that everybody should be able to get the same thing; but now we believe that each person should be able to get exactly what he likes the "look and feel" of. To market such an idea successfully it is still necessary to produce huge numbers of the same thing, only in deceptively different-seeming varieties. Fashion becomes more noticeable than ever, since to sell successfully all the varieties must still follow only the generally desirable trends in looks—a range of colors, yes, but only fashionable ones; a range of styles only within the pale of what's generally desirable. Postrel says approvingly that you can now get a wristwatch in any size, shape, or color. That may almost be true; but you cannot get an elegant bracelet wristwatch that has all twelve numbers, because all the numbers are believed to belong only on watches with a leather or nylon strap. Bracelet watches all have at least some blips instead of numbers.

The persistence of basic sameness in the middle of a distracting false variety only helps to prove that doing what everybody else does seems to be a profound human need. The sense of unique personal consciousness is best supported by group membership—it is the high school state of mind, doubtless so popular in movies because it tends to persist through life. The fashion business has always made its millions on the absolute singularity of You, only sustained by the comfort you feel in the crowd you resemble. Postrel amplifies her remark about differing tastes by demonstrating that a large market, to be successful, need not be a mass market. One of her examples is that housing-development houses now come variegated as well as uniform, so you can find your crowd and feel unique living there, even when the houses do all look alike. The variegated ones will simply look alike differently.

Meanwhile personal appearance has become a national obsession, with more sophisticated face-lifting, hair-altering, and hair-replacing methods becoming available every week, and the whole subject now mandatory in both social conversation and reportage, where it used to be absent. A political candidate's looks, grooming, and clothes are part of the news the way only a movie star's once were, and confessions at parties about private details of dress, underwear, hair, cosmetics, and cosmetic surgery are now mixed in with disclosures about physical and mental health, also once undiscussed at social gatherings. Meanwhile, what Postrel calls the "sensory profusion" in life is being further supported by innumerable and diverse hair, nail, tanning, and fitness salons for both sexes at all levels; and here she is quite right to praise the general rise in attention to forms of personal grooming, especially the re-birth of masculine interest in visually startling effects.

Postrel points out that we now see more good-looking people around us than were ever visible at once in human history, and that we have hugely broadened our standards of physical beauty, along with our liking for many more ways people have of fixing themselves up. People now actively enjoy surveying styles of looks that are not theirs, and all acknowledge that tallness, slimness, and blondness create only one way of looking good. All ways to look good now come in many piquant varieties for both sexes, often sustained by obvious artifice, along with clothes in striking modes not just ignored or tolerated but appreciated by observers who would never wear them. The stars of video and the music business have combined with local ethnic mixtures to make an exceptionally rich visual banquet out of modern urban fashion, now being perpetually renewed by the apparel business and the grooming boom. One part of this feast consists of the old coats and shoes worn for decades and never thrown away, still ready amid the great variety of the new to provide a nice old way to look good. Notably, Postrel does not discuss that new adventure in retro-taste, the vintage-fashion market; but its economics may not be very interesting.

Getting accustomed to the constant view of vastly differing attire among fellow citizens is no bad thing. It somehow promotes a sense of hope and peace, whereas looking at a table lamp in the

form of a fresh cabbage alongside another table lamp in the form of an ancient firearm somehow does not. Lifeless objects are anyway no match for the clad living body, always a fluctuating set of familiar and alien mysteries, always potentially engaging. Although much is disgusting and ridiculous among the current ways that clad bodies appear, just as in any epoch, our expanded sense of what is attractive can now allow us to encompass more serenely the presence of what is not. *Nihil humanum*, etc.; and we always know that this too shall pass.

Postrel brings up antiquated (though still voiced) objections to the appeal of appearances on the grounds that they always hide the truth, and she gives examples from social critics such as Daniel Bell, who long ago called the marketing of fashion and cosmetics "the machinery of a wicked gratification of instant desire," and called their advertisement "this task of selling illusions, the persuasions of the witches' craft" expressly to emphasize the malign workings of capitalism. Content and packaging are now

patently wedded, however, as capitalism has been sanctified and the union of bodies, cosmetics, and garments has been sanctified along with it, in the sacred forging of "identities." This is one of Postrel's favorite words, meaning selves completed by their chosen forms of clothing and grooming, and in due course by their chosen cars, houses, and restaurants; and brand "identities" are forged the same way, through the marriage of their substance with their "look and feel."

The strong objection of the "Puritan" kind is really not to the deceptiveness of surface but to its irrational power, which Postrel is unnecessarily enjoining us to rejoice in. Those who formulated the old objections feared loss of the power of reason, and especially of language, both sanctified in much earlier days as exclusive avenues to the power of truth. But surfaces are not engaged in deception, their aim is to be loved for themselves; and appearance is one form of truth, as the makers and lovers of art have known from the beginning. ■

Richard A. Posner

Wedding Bell Blues

SAME-SEX MARRIAGE
AND THE CONSTITUTION
By Evan Gerstmann
(Cambridge University Press,
222 pp., \$22)

IN JUNE, THE SUPREME COURT, IN a case called *Lawrence v. Texas*, ruled that statutes criminalizing homosexual sodomy are unconstitutional. Immediately lawyers began wondering whether this meant that homosexuals have a constitutional right to marry. (To marry persons of their sex, that is; there is no prohibition against a homosexual marrying a person of the opposite sex.) They were encouraged in their speculation by Justice Antonin Scalia's suggestion, in his dissenting opinion, that the logic of the majority opinion so dictated. Evan Gerstmann has now produced a forceful and tough-minded brief for the result that Scalia dreads. But as he explains, the *Lawrence* decision came down just days before his

book went to press, so he was unable to discuss the decision's bearing on the homosexual-marriage issue except briefly in a preface; or to discuss the recent decision of the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts in *Goodridge v. Department of Public Health*, holding that the Massachusetts constitution creates a right of homosexual marriage.

When I say that Gerstmann's book is tough-minded, I mean that it rejects a number of the arguments made by advocates of a right of homosexual marriage, such as that homosexuals should be considered a "suspect class" (the sensible term would be "suspect classification"), the curious phrase for a group, such as blacks, that has historically been discriminated against; or that forbidding homosexual marriage is a form of sex

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