

*Historicizing Lifestyle: Mediating Taste, Consumption and Identity from the 1900s to 1970s*

David Bell and Joanne Hollows ed. Ashgate, 2006. 6 b&w illus. ISBN: 0 7546 4441 3 \$89.95/£45.00 hardback.

The title and subtitle of this book each point to distinct projects. The title promises a much-needed tracing of histories of lifestyle, or, more accurately, lifestyles. The changing meanings and practices of lifestyles are under-explored and yet crucial to our understanding of taste and consumption, social interaction, groups and networks, subcultures, and the relationship between society and the individual. For the purposes of design history, a historicized understanding of lifestyles can help us to contextualise individual objects or groups of objects into patterns of practice; the garment or table or wallpaper which may form the object of study is likely to reward focussed scrutiny, but it cannot adequately be understood without recourse to its neighbours within the spaces of consumption and their respective uses.

In their opening chapter, editors Bell and Hollows position themselves against many of their peers who have characterised lifestyle as a function of the recent past, associated with postmodernity (Featherstone) or late modernity (Giddens). In critiquing what they term a 'preoccupation with the novelty of contemporary lifestyle' (p. 2) among their fellow academics, Bell and Hollows present their historically-situated understanding of lifestyle as something new (while acknowledging Don Slater, Jukka Gronow and Frank Mort as some forerunners of their position). The contributors to this anthology hail from a range of related academic fields, including sociology, cultural studies, American studies, history, literature and media studies, and Bell and Hollows are able to present their position as new because they operate on the sociology/cultural studies axis. Design history has as one of its core achievements the illumination of lifestyles of the past and indeed a few familiar works are referred to in this book. Even design history, however, lacks a targeted study of the kind Bell and Hollows propose in their introductory chapter, which is why this book promises to form a useful tool for design historians.

The second project, indicated in the subtitle, is the study of mediating taste, consumption and identity. This work has been growing apace within cultural studies under the banner of Bourdieu's 'cultural intermediaries'. Bell and Hollows acknowledge a number of studies of specific examples of lifestyle media, such as women's magazines, but they argue that 'there has been less attention paid to continuities and discontinuities between these forms as lifestyle media' and 'therefore, this collection seeks to demonstrate not only how lifestyle has a history, but also how lifestyle media have a history.' (p. 4) In fact, the titling and structure of this anthology suggest that Bell and

Hollows believe that the project of historicizing lifestyle can be achieved through studies of mediation. While magazines and other channels of mediation are crucial in defining lifestyles, for the assumption upon which this book is based to be correct, lifestyle needs to be regarded as wholly mediated phenomenon and not something that can be fashioned, modified, honed and endlessly refashioned by the individuals whose patterns of daily life form the substance of lifestyles. Clearly, individuals and groups recognise and perpetuate lifestyles and they do not always do so through cultural artefacts of mediation such as those analysed here. There is a disjunction, therefore, between title and subtitle and the book delivers most successfully in relation to the latter rather than the former.

The chapters deal with a variety of topics: the cookery column in interwar *Good Housekeeping* magazine, *The Good Food Guide* and a precursor, *Ebony* magazine 1945-1974, *Playboy*, US West coast hippie lifestyle print culture, American 1930s self-help books, Michelin advertising and Heal's retailing techniques. Some of these topics are familiar: *Good Housekeeping* and *Playboy* have, for example, already proven to be remarkably rich resources for a number of cultural historians. Indeed two of the eight case studies presented in this book take *Playboy* as their core source, and both are by authors, Jancovich and Osgerby, who have previously published about that magazine, while editor Hollows has also published on *Playboy*. Other topics addressed here have received less sustained academic attention before now, with Sam Binkley's chapter 'Lifestyle Print Culture and the Mediation of Everyday Life: From Dispersing Images to Caring Texts' being a particularly welcome survey of an area of paraliterature dependent upon countercultural grassroots publishing. Binkley considers examples of how 'lifestyle print media provides readers with exhortations and advice meant to deflect the decentring effect of visual culture, and unify personal identity around a coherent notion of individual authenticity through style of life' (p. 109). Ultimately, Binkley's project of finding in the Foucauldian 'caring texts' he selects for analysis an antidote to insistence upon visibility and concomitant inauthenticity within postmodern society is contentious. Binkley's assertion that 'the difference between visual and discursive lifestyle media is apparent: while texts anchor meanings in concrete narratives, images tolerate ambiguity...' (p. 111) is absurd. If he were right, students of literature would have nothing to say.

Bill Osgerby's article separates itself from many others in the collection by stepping back from the mediating sources themselves to explore a past-time, scuba-diving, as exemplary of a what Belinda Wheaton terms 'lifestyle sport' (p. 89 ff.) He does so through a broader approach than that of his fellow contributors, providing thereby a fuller contextual backdrop for those cultural artefacts that he introduces into his analysis. When he does move to consider the representation of 'Aquatic

Allure', Osgerby refers across media taking in films such as Jaques Cousteau's documentary *Le Monde Du Silente* and Howard Hughes's *Underwater!* as well as the character of James Bond, a number of television series, advertising for products from Pepsi to Pontiac. His conclusion allows, however, that it is 'scuba diving's prominence in *Playboy* magazine that vividly reveals the sport's affinity with new masculine identities rooted in consumer practice and desire' (p. 104).

The two closing chapters are most obviously of interest to *JDH* readers, with Stephen L. Harp providing a graphic design history of the appearance of Bibendum as signifier of leisured class in Michelin advertising and Tracey Potts offering an analysis of the promotion of design at Heals. Unfortunately, Harp's useful analysis is only marred by his labouring to describe a number of depictions of his pneumatic protagonist, which could easily have been cut had Harp only been allowed a few supporting figures. Their absence is inexplicable and disappointing given the allowance of three figures each for the chapters by Osgerby and Binkley, all of which are illuminating. Potts's chapter critiques what she terms 'the authorised biography of furnishing' (p. 158) citing Attfield, Putnam, Kirkham, Sparke, Woodham, Clarke and Pevsner among its authors, for an emphasis on the importance of educating consumers into accepting modernist domestic design. By contrast 'a sociological approach tells a different story' (p. 158), revealing that middle-class consumers were happy to adopt modernist design for its symbolic capital. Potts refers to some Heal's catalogues to prove her point and concludes her contribution thus:

Looking back, revisiting early sites of symbolic capital manufacture via archive records, enables a reconsideration of the birth of the designer's disposition as a modern domestic attitude. In exposing the capital interests at stage in effecting a shift of taste in the direction of the serial object, the class dimensions of the story of furnishing can be discerned. (p. 170)

This takes us all the way back to Adrian Forty's *Object of Desire* (1986). Potts's chapter is useful as a case study of Heal's containing some apt phrases and insightful close reading and her discussion of design consecrations constitutes a useful source with which to teach art and design students. However, to uncover the symbolic value of modern furniture as associated with cultured aesthetic qualities is not new, nor is the application of Bourdieu's work to the consumption of modern furniture and nor is the discussion of the interplay between art and commerce, gallery and showroom.

This book is an informative addition to the design historian's bookshelf. It will be an asset to scholars and students of consumption, leisure, histories of publishing and, to a lesser extent, reading, and cultural studies more generally. Taken individually, the chapters are almost uniformly

excellent. However, the anthology does not fully meet its editors' stated aims. While the assorted chapters do indeed explore 'how lifestyle media have a history' there is less information here about 'how lifestyle has a history'. In fact, there are some rather vague characterisations of lifestyle that underline the extent to which this latter project is simply not the focus here, such as Jason Chambers' assertion that 'Historians and theorists alike have characterized the lifestyle of the 1950s as a period of conformity.' (p. 54). This is a generalisation better not reproduced, even for the purposes of setting one's work in contrast, as it is simply inaccurate both as a description of the period and of its treatment by historians and theorists. Design historians would perhaps readily allow for a version of the 1950s in which the importance of consumption relied not solely on its status as a tool of conformism but equally as an instrument of burgeoning non-conformity. Chambers, like several of his fellow contributors, assumes a North American norm and elides lifestyle with mainstream culture. Many competing lifestyles might be offered as counter to the mainstream, including not only those recognised as subcultures, but also literary and artistic avant-gardes, stirrings of second-wave feminisms, vast changes in working-class cultural practices to name but a few. Binkley should not be singled out, as there are other worrisome lacunae. Typifying the tendency to isolationism in American Studies, Sue Currell insists on self-help literature as an American phenomenon, only borrowed by other regions of the world. In order to do this, she relegates what she calls 'complex transatlantic crossings in self-help traditions' and, notably, Samuel Smiles's seminal *Self-Help* of 1859, to a footnote (p. 141). She does this even while her fellow contributor, Stephen L. Harp, ably adopts such transatlantic crossings as his core subject by establishing French examples of advertising as preceding American achievements and influences.

Furthermore, understanding of the 'continuities and discontinuities between ... lifestyle media' (*op cit.* p. 4) comes not from the chapters but rather from their juxtaposition and is therefore the reader's task to discern. In fact, this anthology offers a group of case studies and, notwithstanding a workmanlike introduction in which each of the chapters receives an introduction, it does not add up to more than the sum of its parts. More cross-referencing by the authors would have helped, as would wider contextual discussions of the various lifestyle activities addressed, such as eating and ethical consumption, and more interconnecting parts from the editors so that a broader story might have emerged. In sum, the project of historicizing lifestyle might have been better tackled through an old-fashioned diachronic history tracking development and causation, although the multifarious nature of lifestyle or lifestyles is likely to resist such treatment. Existing monographs on lifestyle, such as that by Chaney, don't purport to provide a history of lifestyle, which is why this book was needed. But while this book *does* purport to place lifestyle within historical context (unless 'historicizing' means something else) by that yardstick, it is only partially successful. To

judge by *Historicizing Lifestyle* the market is still wide open for a history, or histories, of lifestyle to be written.

(1,866 words)

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