
Social Studies

Peter Trifonas and Effie Balomenos

GOOD TASTE

How what you choose defines who you are

260pp. Cambridge: Icon. £16.99.

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Good Taste by Peter Trifonas and Effie Balomenos is an entertaining exploration of disparate topics including trouser turn-ups, cleavages, body piercing, professional wrestling, Pot Noodle ("the slag of all snacks"), celebrity chefs, Feng Shui, "food porn", polyester-based anti-fashion statements ("the West Palm Beach Look"), "anti-gravity ingredients" in lotions and creams, Oprah Winfrey, Ozzy Osbourne and Immanuel Kant. One might well wonder, as does the blurb in a nice piece of negative advertising, what these diverse phenomena and personalities have in common, other than the fact that they all appear in this book. For the authors they all raise questions about the nature of taste. Where do particular tastes or fashions come from? To what extent are our tastes culturally determined and cynically manipulated? Why do people seem to care more than formerly about how they and their possessions look? What influence do our tastes have on how others see us and how we see ourselves?

Trifonas and Balomenos bring these questions to bear on the fugitive fashions of modern life. Fashion, according to Oscar Wilde, is "a thing so intolerably ugly that we have to change it every six months". The history of some of these fashions is well described and includes a lot of sometimes obsessively compelling detail, which could make this an essential source book for aliens who are struggling to make some sense of our earth lives. The reader will gain an improved understanding of how the formation of our tastes helps us, among other things, to fulfil an entrenched human need for bonding with others of similar tastes and thus to become a member of a community.

The authors put forward a burly bruiser of a thesis: what we choose defines who we are. But surely our tastes are only one aspect of our identity. There are many things in life that most of us value more highly than suave clothes and aesthetic lifestyles.

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