



## MY TURN: Ralph Keyes

# 'I Like Colonel Sanders'

Plastic America is easy to knock. There are so many targets, and such vulnerable ones—Colonel Sanders's smiling visage, the tinsel and glitter of shopping centers, our bumper-sticker clichés, and the identical rows of laundermat washing machines stretching coast to coast.

John Kenneth Galbraith thinks this car-dominated society has produced "the world's most hideous architecture"—in service stations, hot-dog stands and pizza parlors. The Harvard professor is sure that in time we'll recognize the need to set minimum esthetic standards for such locales, because they tend to be "designed by architects whose sole motivation is to be completely hideous."

That's nonsense. Car-oriented buildings aren't meant to be hideous. They're meant to be seen. Esthetics count little at 70 mph; the object of the exercise is that Colonel Sanders's smile can be seen miles away, and McDonald's golden arches.

Casual pot-shooting at the setting of mass commerce misses far more than it hits. Helping the country to look more like Harvard won't necessarily make it more humane. To knock plastic is to ignore the extent to which form follows function, the subtle ways that even garish parts of our culture serve genuine human needs.

Take laundermats. At a glance these are just ugly rows of washing machines and driers, complemented by a few cheap chairs littered with yesterday's newspaper. Yet laundermats are also community centers, one of the few places in urban/suburban America where people can hang out without being hassled. Transients meet over Tide in the laundermat, kids gather there after school and singles engage in laundermating, having discovered that washing clothes together is a good way to get acquainted. Psychiatrist Donald Muhich has spent time observing the groups of wom-

en who gather regularly in some laundermats, as they once did at streamside, and says the interaction he's seen constitutes "leaderless group therapy." The year before last a judge held an arraignment in the laundermat of a small Kentucky town. It was the closest thing to a public building in the town.

Shopping centers serve a similar function, particularly in the social void of our suburbs. While working for a Long Island newspaper, I once spent a week hanging around a big regional center, thinking to expose the materialistic corruption of kids who congregate there. What I found was a mixed-up but friendly group of people who huddled in the warmth of the covered mall and welcomed me into their community. That shopping center, like other enclosed, climate-controlled malls, was the most tranquil and pleasant environment I'd ever found within suburbia. Like a town square of old, it provided the opportunity to promenade

among the familiar faces of those living within. What I had overlooked was that these big, carnival-like centers are one of the few suburban environments where automobiles can't intrude, where one can walk without dodging bumpers or protecting one's ears from the roar of engines.

### BUMPER CROP

Shopping centers, like so much of plastic America, are a response to the omnipresence of cars in our lives. Bumper stickers are another response, an amusing if harmless triviality, and more. Since we now drive by each other as we once walked, today's bumper stickers must carry a heavy load:

Messages on the bulletin board—BOY SCOUT FAIR, MAY 8

Rolling graffiti—NIXON IS ROSEMARY'S BABY

Political commentary—DON'T BLAME ME, I VOTED FOR MCGOVERN

Dialogue—HAVE A NICE DAY—POW'S NEVER HAVE A NICE DAY

Reaching out—WAVE, I'M LONELY

IF YOU LIKE ME, GRIN.

In particular, bumper stickers have become a way we identify ourselves. Take something like HAPPINESS IS A GOOD SCRUM. Two drivers pass with that message on their bumpers, know they both play rugby, wave to each other and

grin, feel a little warmth and a common pursuit: community.

The search for community is what really underlies so many of our cultural forms, in obscure, distorted, sometimes ludicrous ways that reflect our uprootedness and longing for a more predictable environment. This is what Galbraith and all the other high culture critics don't account for in their outrage at our increasingly uniform garishness, those grotesque multicolor plastic configurations big enough to be seen from a speeding car.

One in five of us will change address every year and will look, in the process, for comforting points of reference. When crossing the country from Long Island to San Diego, I found it reassuring to know that despite all our divisions, something was gluing this nation together—A&W root beer. When we moved into a little frame house in Pacific Beach, Seven-Eleven's huge red-and-green sign up the street was a comfort. This was to be our friendly neighborhood store, just as it had been in Westbury. Even the kids outside seemed familiar, gathered on their banana-seat bikes. And even though I knew very little else about San Diego, I did know exactly where Seven-Eleven's magazines were shelved, where the milk was stored and the names of their Slurpees.

It's for reasons such as these that I've come to enjoy bumper-stickered conversation, the friendly pageantry of shopping centers, the trust that can be built over dirty underwear in a laundermat and the familiarity of my friendly corner franchises. This may not be my optimum environment, but so long as I'm dependent on a car, and expect to move now and then, I don't want anyone tinkering with the outside plastic settings that serve us so well in that process.

### PLASTIC SMILES

Even our most garish social structures meet some human needs, needs no longer being met by the hallowed walls of another time. Until those human needs, those functions of plastic America, are served better in other ways, please don't mess with the forms that are helping me stay afloat. I like Colonel Sanders. He's been a smiling friend to me on the road. Until this society does better with real human substitutes, I don't want anyone tinkering with that friendly old grandfather of mine.

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