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In Defense of Feminists Who Like Fashion

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In Defense of Feminists Who Like Fashion

Abstract

I'm sitting on the downtown R train one night in Manhattan, a copy of Vogue resting on my crossed legs. It is late and I am clearly unwinding peacefully as I thumb through page after glamorous page of my magazine. The train stops at Prince Street and there's the usual flux of people in and out. Those left inside settle as the train pulls out of the station.

"Ugh. Fashion is stupid," remarks one young man to another, both of whom are sitting diagonally from me and well within earshot. He's watching me ignore him as I continue enjoying my reading material. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, sexuality, gender, feminism, feminist, fashion, Vogue

Disciplines

American Material Culture | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Gender and Sexuality | Social Psychology and Interaction | Sociology | Sociology of Culture | Women's Studies

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Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](https://cupola.gettysburg.edu) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

IN DEFENSE OF FEMINISTS WHO LIKE FASHION

June 24, 2013

I'm sitting on the downtown R train one night in Manhattan, a copy of Vogue resting on my crossed legs. It is late and I am clearly unwinding peacefully as I thumb through page after glamorous page of my magazine. The train stops at Prince Street and there's the usual flux of people in and out. Those left inside settle as the train pulls out of the station.

"Ugh. Fashion is stupid," remarks one young man to another, both of whom are sitting diagonally from me and well within earshot. He's watching me ignore him as I continue enjoying my reading material.

"What a shallow endeavor," the other replies, thinking he sounds smarter than he is in actuality, "and all the girls who buy into it are shallow too." The offensive statement, clearly aimed at me, piques my interest and I bite.

"Why?" I dog ear my current page and close Vogue, Anne Hathaway staring at me beguilingly from the cover. "Other than to be rude, what makes you say that? How do you know I'm shallow?"

"It's all about appearances. What's more shallow than that?"

"You mean like judging a stranger on a train for her reading material? Gee, I don't know," they realize they are called out for doing exactly what they were being critical of and shut up. I'm not satisfied with their silence but accept it for what it is.

We come to a halt at the Whitehall station and I get up, making sure to grab my magazine while shooting the boys a look, and take my leave.

"Bitch," one of them says.



“Yup,” I calmly agree as I walk out of the subway car.

My mood is at a plateau below seething when I get to the ferry that will take me home to Staten Island. How could people make such ignorant statements and feel so superior?

Calling fashion and the related industries (i.e.: makeup) “shallow” is a copout. It’s lazy and dismissive. There are many legitimate reasons to dislike fashion and beauty industries- the use of child labor, the alienation of certain races, the irrefutable effect it has on body image- the list goes on. One can acknowledge and address flaws in something and still enjoy it. Fashion may be a lot of problematic things but it is not shallow.

For all intents and purposes, fashion is art. It is art you wear. Some follow the philosophy of “look good, feel good” while others subscribe to the notion that how you look is the first impression one gives of his or herself to the world.

The importance of art in the world and what it has given to it is undeniable. The different movements (Classical, Renaissance, Impressionism, Modernism, Abstract, take your pick) are reflections of the history of mankind. When one looks at a piece of art, be it portraiture or statue, one can come to thousands of conclusions about the circumstances surrounding the piece in question. What religion was prevalent during the production of this piece? What type of political mood was dominant and what was the attitude regarding the government? Why use a certain material over another? Much like a geologist studies the components of rocks to discover what happened to the earth eons ago, so do audiences of art to determine what happened on the earth.

If you, the reader, happen to have an interest in fashion, consider what modern events are reflected in current fashion trends. Neutral colors and simple cuts (shapes of clothes) have been making a comeback—perhaps measures of economic austerity around the world (Greece and Spain are vivid examples) are the source. Bold, untamed, natural eyebrows in the makeup industry are a reflection of the newest wave of the feminist movement (happy 50th, Equal Pay Act!) enacted and enjoyed by the 20-somethings of the world, tired of acts of atrocity committed against inspirational women (hats off to you, Malala Yousafazi.) A final example is the rise of environmental awareness, coinciding with clothing being made from eco-friendly or recycled materials, all of which reflects the present condition the Earth is in.

What most upsets me and is most crucial to the idea of fashion being “shallow” is the fact that the source of this insult is rooted in sexism. The majority of the [powerful figures](#) in the fashion world today are women, and fashion is one of the only areas in which women have more freedom of expression than men. We are able and encouraged to wear all sorts of colors, fabrics and styles. Accessories that are socially off-limits to men are encouraged for women. Fashion has traditionally been seen as a woman’s industry, is currently viewed as a woman’s industry and, for the foreseeable future, will continue to be a woman’s industry. It is therefore not surprising that fashion is viewed as frivolous and not to be taken seriously. Endeavors of women have yet to be given the attention and respect they deserve. Earlier, I referenced the Equal Pay Act—it has been fifty years since the inception of this well-intentioned bill and little progress has been made, even in an [industry dominated by women](#). The well-known statistic cited is that women make 77 cents to a man’s dollar, but that gap widens considerably when taking into account women of color.

The multi-billion dollar industry is patted on the head for its efforts as the ignoramus chuckles and sets its sights on supposedly less trivial pursuits.

Calling fashion “shallow” is an allegation without evidence. It is not the fault of the industry if one is incapable of seeing the true value behind all of the glimmer. It is an effigy to two types of ignorance. The first is a general one in which the beholder disregards the less obvious merits of many things in the world. The other, more sinister, is

the ignorance of the sexism, racism, and other -isms inherent in such judgments, which ultimately leads to the perpetuation of social inequalities.

The ferry docks on Staten Island as I finish the issue of Vogue from which I was distracted earlier. As I wait among the huddled crowd I wonder what reaction Ana Wintour, famed and feared engine behind Vogue, would have had to those boys on the subway.

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