THE F WORD:

EMILY RAINE FINDS A PLACE FOR FASHION IN FEMINISM

Fashion has always been treacherous terrain for feminists. They must carefully negotiate critiques of the toll fashion sometimes takes on women's bodies, wallets, and self-esteem, while recognizing its capacity for pleasure, power, and entrepreneurship. While they have proven quite skilled at attacking fashion's many shortcomings, I have consistently been saddened and disenchanted by their failure to notice its many benefits.

Feminism has a long history of disdain for clothing that is expressive, decorative, or extravagant – in short, everything about fashion that is fun. A hundred years ago, Simone de Beauvoir described her contemporaries' painful whalebone-and-steel corsets and spine-jarring heels as a form of bondage, and George Sand (a woman) advocated cross-dressing as liberated. Feminists since have critiqued the fashion and beauty industries for manipulating desires, and condemned the women who dress up for objectifying themselves by attending to appearances.

The rank and file of the sixties women's liberation movement universally sported a "natural," unisex look: tee-shirts, no bra, sandals, and jeans. This generation of feminism was steeped in revolutionary Marxist rhetoric that saw fashion as the epitome of capitalism. Any visible attempt at self-decoration implicated the wearer in contributing to her own oppression by dressing up for the sexist gaze. The trendy feminist movement was so popular that the "natural" feminist look itself became stylish, so that the no-fashion look was at the very height of fashion. The theme, it appears, is that a woman can dress like a feminist by giving up everything frilly, brightly coloured, and tight; above all, a woman is dressed like a feminist when she is dressed like a man.

As a feminist, a scholar, and a girl who likes clothes, I often find myself caught in the crossfire. I have watched my friends give up their vintage finds, big earrings, or dresses splattered with fruit prints when they get "real" jobs or have kids. Call it the *Legally Blonde* effect. But like many women, every time I catch myself doubting whether I look intelligent in knee-high boots or that grown-ups are allowed to wear hot pink, I wonder: *If I'm a feminist, then why can't I dress like a girl?*

While playing with clothing is one of the great daily joys of many women, those who are sympathetic to feminism often feel guilty for it. Sociologist Iris Marion Young has said that fashion theory constructs a rigid idea of "the woman well dressed for the male gaze, then endows with guilt the pleasure we might derive for ourselves in these clothes." The fashion-conscious feminist is made to feel doubly shamed for having twice betrayed the feminist cause: First for falling into the old patriarchal trap of mugging for the objectifying sexual gaze, then again for enjoying it.

This position doesn't leave much room for the satisfaction of playing with the spectacular identities that clothing can be used to design as an activity in and of itself. It assumes that a woman's interest in her attire is purely frivolous, seeking only to outdo her peers or impress sexual quarry. It ignores the relationships that clothing nourishes between women, the pride and power that can be gleaned from a solid outfit, and the game of using garments as costumes to craft public personas. Above all, it takes for granted that women who invest energy in their appearances are incapable of realizing that they are being manipulated; lambs who willingly nestle themselves in the fashion industry's rapacious jaw rather than rational, empowered individuals who choose to communicate using apparel.

By following this line of logic, feminism rehearses an older, very sexist condemnation of fashion as silly and impractical, based on the presumption that everything women do or take an interest in is completely asinine.

While fashion today is considered largely a woman's preoccupation, it has not always been so. Until the eighteenth century, wealthy women and men wore elaborate costumes to broadcast their wealth.

Fashion was a class, not a gender prerogative. When rich men took to the office after the Industrial Revolution, however, they gave up the satin, jewels, and furs of yore in favour of a modified hunting costume, easily recognizable in today's three-piece suit. Bourgeois women continued to exploit fashion's riches, flaunting expensive clothes in order to demonstrate their husbands' abilities to pay for it.

Since then, men's apparel has changed little, and even their accessories are muted and bland. Psychoanalyst J.C. Flügel

calls men's rejection of fashion "The Great Masculine Renunciation," arguing that it represses an innate human drive for exhibitionism and self-display. He finds that masculine narcissism has since been forced to find other outlets, such as professional or athletic showing off, and he proposes that the leering gaze and the fetishization of women's images may also be consequences. Flügel's theory suggests that fashion fulfills a basic need to communicate something of ourselves to one another in the vast anonymity of city life.

Recognizing some of these factors – or perhaps eager to wear lame to conferences – feminists began to explore ideas of fashion that legitimize the enjoyment of clothing without abandoning their criticisms of the fashion industry. It seemed that the solution lay in finding a system of dress that operates outside of mainstream media – the magazines that dictate colour coordination, the correct body type for the season, and the (inevitably high-end) brands we should buy – yet still allows women to play with clothing to create looks and personas. To many, vintage clothing provides such a system.

Kaja Silverman argues that second-hand rags offer an outlet that avoids both a "Great Feminine Renunciation" and submission to Vogue magazine. She sees wearing vintage as a positive feminist practice because it plays up the commonalities between women of different eras, highlighting, for example, similarities between forties fashions and eighties feminist theory. "Because it establishes a dialogue between the present-day wearers of that clothing and its original wearers, vintage also provides a means of salvaging the images that have traditionally sustained feminine subjectivity, images that have been consigned to the wastebasket not only by fashion but by 'orthodox' feminism."

Vintage also subverts fashion's built-in obsolescence, returning the value to old seasons' discards. This is a vital issue, considering that textile and garment manufacturing requires (mostly) female workers in the South to labour under appalling sweatshop conditions to create seasonally disposable wares for (mostly) female consumers in the North. The relative cheapness of second-hand goods also allows less-privileged consumers to buy more and better clothing, enabling poor women to take greater risks and freedoms. Think of it this way: If you can only afford one pair of pants, you'll make damned well sure to get a pair that you can wear to work and that match everything. With two pairs, you might be able to buy the slinky red ones, too. Buying used goods makes room in even the tightest budget for a bit of frivolity, provided you have the time to seek it out.

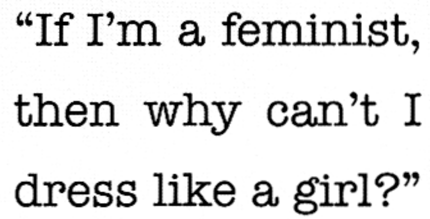
Eighties feminism also praised vintage for providing women with both entrepreneurial and social opportunities. The vast majority of vintage retailers are female-owned small businesses patronized and staffed mostly by women, facilitating a semiclosed cycle of consumption, disposal, retrieval, and reconsumption peopled almost entirely by women. Used-clothing stores are also commonly used to launch or subsidize small, independent designers – again, mostly younger women – where fledgling design houses share store space with hand-picked vintage items. Vintage vendors are part of a broader collector economy of "rag picking," where seasoned buyers comb used-goods depots such as the Salvation Army for particularly nice second-hand pieces to collect or resell. Determining which goods are worth saving involves a trained attention to details and a solid dose of taste.

Casual rag picking is a rite of passage for many, enabling young girls to learn about fashion history and experiment with different looks on the cheap. Buying vintage individualizes taste, for the goods available are set apart from mainstream fashion media trends. Scouring second-hand racks is also highly social – the fact is females of the human species prefer to hunt in packs. Second-hand shopping lets us share knowledge about brands, textiles, or design and tailoring details; to cultivate knowledge of old fashions; and to boast about past finds.

Vintage shopping is much like record, stamp or coin collecting among men—each is a collector culture operating its own hierarchy of value that only connoisseurs can appreciate, each accords status in demonstrations of this skill, and each is dominated by one gender, almost entirely at the exclusion of the other. With vintage, experience fosters a level of connoisseurship to distinguish the difference between, say, a fifties crepe shift by an obscure designer and a dime-a-dozen seventies polyester op art dress. It trains us to treat vintage pieces as art objects, each with its own peculiar character and history. Scholar Angela McRobbie claims that in making such distinctions seasoned pickers "can attain the status of a connoisseur, an achievement that mitigates against established associations of fashion consumption with irrational and hysterical traits." By sharing our acquaintance with vintage goods, both the garments and the collectors who know to nab them are validated. Vintage is rare in its cultivation of such feminine specialized knowledge because it is a collector field that is not perceived to be dominated by men. McRobbie also points out that women tend to feel more comfortable developing skills in realms stereotyped to be outside of male cultural expertise, and fashion is one area where women are seen to reign supreme.

Perhaps the greatest thing about vintage, though, is that each piece is unique and exclusive, so it must be worn in a personalized way. While feminism makes many compelling arguments in favour of second-hand clothing, the one message that surges out of each is the conviction that fashion is a positive feminine practice wherever and whenever women use clothing meaningfully and creatively. It reminds that fashion is ultimately about using garments to express yourself and that what is powerful and fashionable in a well-put-together outfit is the woman who shines through in it.

Since the nineteen eighties, the tide of vintage cheerleading has abated as feminist fashion critics have turned their attentions elsewhere. However, this period of fashion theory is dear to me for having opened up a space where women who identify with feminist issues could feel okay about their desire to dress up, without fear of being criticized by peers for "selling out." It authenticated especially the weirdest, most idiosyncratic fashions, as art objects that are a testament to the women of their times. Every piece is somehow brilliant because it is girlie, a signifier of something that women are extremely good at. The feminists' attention to rag picking makes the jangling bangles and flapper fringes and the endless mountains of crap that accumulate in my smelly wardrobe a source of pride, and each hard-won find becomes a trophy for hours of scouring. Because of this, I could finally consider myself a feminist fashionista.



FURTHER RESOURCES:
Old Clothes, New Looks: Second Hand Fashion by Alexandra Palmer and Hazel Clark (Eds.) (Berg, 2005)
Second Hand Cultures by Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe (Berg, 2003)
Fresh Lipstick: Redressing Fashion and Feminism by Linda M. Scott (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005)

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