

Response to (More) Failure
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If failure is “culturally irrelevant,” why and how is it so alluring, appealing, seductive? We all fail sometimes; failure is part of the human condition and thus inherently inclusive. Failure in TV programming is less universal; it is more specifically linked to the marketplace wherein failure and success are all about dollars and numbers.

My response to the prompt cited above is idiosyncratic. What I’m primarily addressing are the by-products of failure: how a very successful series of TV shows --such shows as *HOW DO I LOOK?* and *WHAT NOT TO WEAR*-- are unfortunate proof positive of failed Feminism or perhaps the remnants of its misnomered sister, Post-Feminism.

The failure of Feminism is inherently inscribed in the premise and production of, for example, *HOW DO I LOOK?*. Based on women’s insecurities vis a vis our culture and media, this reality-type show builds upon the fear that we’re not good enough, ever, that no matter how decent, educated, and successful we may be in our life, it’s always time to back peddle, to scrutinize ourself very carefully in the mirror, and ask: How do I look? Based on the assumption that we’re never stylish and chic enough, we must be merciless with ourselves; we must continually undermine our confidence and ask, how do I look?

And if we’re not up to such honest, self scrutiny, have no fear; our mothers and sisters, our boyfriends and husbands, best friends and co-workers are. They’ll gladly do it for us. They’ll gladly send in our names and stories, dutifully and joyfully nominate us for correction, for reconfiguration. If we are chosen, we will be generically reconfigured. We will be made into more attractive, more stylish, more acceptable, more respectable daughters and sisters, girlfriends and wives, best friends and co-workers.

Clearly, we are never chic enough, sexy enough, feminine enough, trendy enough, attractive enough for our friends, families, or work places. In order to be valued, in order to be loved, according to this TV script, we must go through a styling, feminizing process. We must be shamed, publicly humiliated for all to see.

For *WHAT NOT TO WEAR*, we will be stalked, unknowingly followed and recorded by the show’s cameras. We will be shown in our sweats, in our ill-fitting outfits, under-coiffed, under-groomed, shameful, for all to see. However difficult and responsible, however productive and caring our lives may be, the spotlight will be on our failure, our failure to be attractive, jaunty stylistas. Trapped, cornered, we shameful women will be confronted with our failure: How could we have let ourselves go? Do we realize how dreadfully out of style we are? Do we not know what we look like? How uncool we are? While the TV audience watches, the chosen women are processed -- shopped, dressed, made-up, hair colored and styled-- to become consumer generated products of the style industry. But it’s okay, because by the end of the show, for the grand reveal, we will finally be worthy.

We used to talk about the dangers and consequences of female objectification. Now, it seems, the (TV) focus is on re-creating and re-establishing that essential objectification and thereby endorsing the rampant sexism such objectification precludes. This can only be happening in a world where Feminism has failed, or where Post-Feminism has assumed Feminism's legal and economic successes as proof that Feminism is no longer viable. It's okay, no, today it's cool for woman to be the object of the gaze; she just has to prove that she's up for it, that she can measure up.

Another idiosyncratic response to the questions factoring Failure focuses on the by-products of reality TV's makeovers: what happens when the show is over, the woman reconfigured. Let's talk about Post-Traumatic Reality TV Stress Disorder, what happens when that daughter or sister, wife or girlfriend, co-worker or friend goes home. We can imagine the honeymoon glow surrounding the reconfigured woman and her sponsor. But when the hair needs to be redone, the make-up's hard to keep up with, and the veneer is fading, what of the visceral confrontations? We can just as easily imagine the anger and betrayal felt by the chosen women: I thought you loved me for who I am. Have you always been ashamed of me? How dare you humiliate in front of the world; I thought you loved me. Is it all about how I look and dress? Is that all that really matters after all?

Great successes, momentous, highly significant, concrete legal changes have been enacted via second wave Feminism: we all know this. We also know this: the primary, psychological testament and bodily evidence of Feminism's failure is evident in the overt objectification projected in HOW DO I LOOK ? and other similar successful makeover programs.

More Failure
Session 5
Friday, October 10
3:00-5:00 p.m.
Quadrangle Room (Level 3)