

Safe rebellion gives freedom to consume

Patriarchy is woven into our society, like an invisible garment we wear every day and never remove. When we put it on, who knows, but once it's on it rarely — if ever — comes off.

"Central to the patriarchal assumption of men's superiority over women is the social construct of passivity/materiality as female and animal, and activity/spirituality as male and distinctly human," writes Vandana Shiva. "This is reflected in dualisms like mind/body, with the mind being nonmaterial, male, and active, and the body physical, female, and passive."

No one is removed from a patriarchal influence. This includes me. There are perhaps people who are isolated from the internal thought tracks it forces upon us, but nobody is free from its effects. This is because life is not separate. And whereas in the past we might have had the luxury of isolating ourselves from environmental problems, or running away from them, we can't do that anymore. Our interconnectedness is beginning to become apparent in the most horrific of ways, in the way we rape our lands, cultivate, domesticate, redefine and diminish life when we deem it necessary, and consume the vast majority of the earth's resources.

In the meantime, this arrangement allows us to cultivate our minds with the perception that we have freedom to choose, and freedom to live, unfettered by anything but a lack of money. What this perspective lacks to take into account is that we are products of a specific historical arrangement, which determines what those choices are in the first place. Our very idea of individuality and independence is a commodity, bought and sold.

David Byrne once said the following of rapper Eminem: "I can never lose sight of the fact that his music is corporate rebellion marketed in a corporate way. He's said to have this threatening quality — but how can he be threatening if his music is sold by one of the biggest companies in the world? I think teenage fans realize that it's safe, a safe kind of rebellion."

This captures precisely what our notions of individuality and independence are: Teenage, safe rebellion that does not challenge the system in any way. It's freedom to do what they — corporations, government, media — tell you to do. It's the freedom to consume. One critique of Byrne's statement I would make is that I do not think we are aware of this hoax. We genuinely think we're



Aaron Shakra
Out of range

exercising our freedom of choice.

What would be an example of this commodity-based freedom? I've spoken a lot this term (see ODE, April 15 and April 29, in particular) about gender socialization, which restricts the freedom of both women and men. Of course, men may never realize this because they are socialized into a gender role based around the archetypes of strength, power and authority. These are the widely accepted norms of masculinity, are they not? To willingly choose to surrender a position of power means accepting a perspective that is not your own and incorporate the "other" into your reality.

Women, unfortunately, are affected the most blatantly. Films such as Jean Kilbourne's "Killing Us Softly" series and books such as Margo Maine's "Body Wars" discuss in great lengths the effects a media-based culture has on a woman's relationship with her body.

Regardless of your aesthetic sensibility, consider this taboo subject: Women and shaving. This example is interesting because the creation of this norm is easy to trace. It was not long ago that things were different. The Shaving Historical Timeline, available at <http://www.quikshave.com/timeline.htm> explains.

"It all began with the May, 1915, edition of Harper's Bazaar magazine that featured a model sporting the latest fashion. She wore a sleeveless evening gown that exposed, for the first time in fashion, her bare shoulders and her armpits. A young marketing executive with the Wilkinson Sword company, who also made razor blades for men, designed a campaign to convince the women of North America that: (a) underarm hair was unhygienic, and (b) it was unfeminine."

The site continues: "In two years, the sales of razor blades doubled as our grandmothers and

great grandmothers made themselves conform to this socially constructed gender stereotype. This norm for North American women has been reinforced by several generations of daughters who role-modeled their mothers."

There you have it, the creation of a norm that is now virtually unquestionable, nay, even unmentionable across the large majority of the population. And what is it based upon? Initially, to sell razors, to convince the public they needed something that they didn't. Which is basically the function of advertising these days. Historically, this has created one more divide between the feminine and masculine. To have body hair is clearly unfeminine.

The July 2001 issue of the Student Insurgent quoted a University of Southern California professor who discussed "how much the current model of attractiveness resembles a child. Small bodies, heads which are somewhat large in proportion to bodies, and large eyes set low on the face, and small noses are basic components of a stereotypically attractive female." Obviously, this is referring to women.

In an uncredited study "The Symbolic Nature of Feminine Body Hair," the author notes, "The message that filters through into adulthood is that women who are clean-shaven are just that: clean, as well as attractive ... Body hair, particularly armpit hair, is seen as dirty, messy, and bad. The woman with armpit hair is considered to be 'not as feminine, well-kept or groomed' in the words of one informant."

Those who deviate risk being associated with labels and other denigrating terms. But it's a really strange time that.

Regardless of other reasons, any decision to shave has not been made in a cultural vacuum away from socialization. And of course, given any reason, why aren't a large proportion of guys shaving their legs and armpits? The reasons presented here should answer this question. Although perhaps, one day, corporations will find a way to tap into this market as well. After all, no one is safe from the plague of capitalism.

To be continued (one last time).

Contact the Pulse editor at aaronshakra@dailyemerald.com. His opinions do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.

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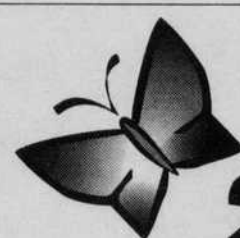
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