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Beauty Boys or Iconoclasts?

Like watching a street artist create something stunning before your very eyes, the beauty boys of *Instagram* and *Youtube* captivate their audience with the process of transforming themselves from a regular looking guy into a glam diva. Like Alan Marcis, most of them want to make it clear that, “I’m a boy in makeup. I’m not trans. I’m not a drag queen.” They are simply men who like to express themselves through make-up, and feel empowered when they do so. As James Charles Dickinson explains, “it’s an art form for me. I’m still confident as a boy.” For Manny Gutierrez make-up represents “creative freedom” (Beck). A common theme among them is that make-up makes them feel like their exterior matches their authentic selves. Pierre

Bourdieu might say that this use of make-up was nothing less than “effecting one’s own objectification: offering a regulated image of oneself is a way of imposing the rules of one’s own perception” (Bourdieu 84). The beauty boy’s references to art, freedom, and self-realization through make-up are what constitute their appeal.

I intend to argue that their transgression of gender norms reinvigorates the make-up market, even, and maybe especially, for women and girls. Though there are many female make-up

artists, and women have been the cosmetic industries primary market for decades, it’s in this extension to a male demographic that make-up is transformed from a mere tool of gender



Figure 1- Beauty Boy and make-up artist Patrick Starr.

performance to an authentic, fun, and creative form of self-expression. Whether we agree with make-up being good for anyone, regardless of gender, beauty boys never-the-less create the perception that make-up frees you.

Beauty boys of *Instagram* and *Youtube* have amassed millions of followers, enough to catch the attention of big name brands looking to capitalize on new ways to market their product. Many of the top beauty boys have been picked up by these big brands to serve as ambassadors, spokespersons, or collaborators, using their reach as top “influencers” to push the products on social media via tutorials and product reviews. However, we don’t see them in traditional advertisements working as models. In fact, it is still very difficult to find ads that feature men in make-up in America¹. In my research, I only came across one ad campaign released in 2016 by *Anastasia Beverly Hills* that uses men to model a newly released “glow kit.” In contrast to the

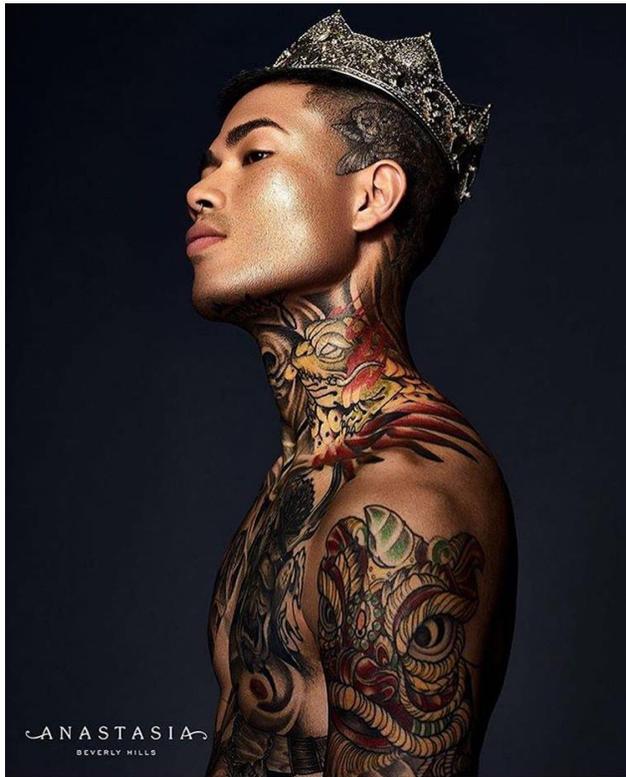


Figure 2

feminized presentations that can be seen from the influencers popular on *Instagram* and *Youtube*, these ads portray a more conventional masculinity despite their use of make-up.

In Figure 2, our first image from *Anastasia Beverly Hills*, you would hardly know he was even wearing make-up. He’s modeling the high-light kit, which is a minimal amount of make-up that is used to highlight facial structure rather than to add color. It makes

¹ South Korea is known for its acceptance of men in make-up and androgynous beauty standards.

sense for the company to use the angular edges of a masculine physique to market a high-light kit, as this logic doesn't preclude a female audience. In the image, he's wearing a crown, which is a symbol of royalty and authority. I argue that the coexistence of a crown and tattoos with make-up can be read like a sentence: Make-up is art, and art is power. The male subject of Figure 2, and of the subsequent images we'll observe, are similarly imbued with power. In Figure 3, we see the same model now wearing shoulder armor. Decorative and couture though it may be, it functions as a symbol of the warrior. In Figure 4, the crown is again used, but it's a black vinyl crown, reminiscent of vinyl records or patent leather. Combined with his playful use of eyeliner and his collection of metal bracelets, he evokes more of the rebel, or the rock star. In Figure 5, the model's dark skin is used to emphasize the vivid pigmentation of the product in a manner similar to war paint. He too, bears a crown.

What these series of ads convey about their male subjects then is the warrior, the rock-star, the rebel, and the king. All of these are in keeping with traditional masculine roles, and don't compromise the power, authority, or self-possession of a masculine aura. The signifiers of armor, crown, tattoos, and rock star accessories can be read like a didactic sentence—but make-up is tucked away in that sentence to both obscure and validate its presence. Pierre Bourdieu argues that "The legibility of the picture itself is a function of the legibility of its intention" (89). That these images are so full of symbols speaks to their intention to be legible, which acknowledges the possible confusion that might result in a viewer seeing men in make-up. To combat that confusion, the ads communicate a vision of a man who uses make-up as just another expression of his mastery, his art, without compromising his masculinity. W.J.T. Mitchell argues in his piece "What Do Pictures Really Want?" that the "position of the image is feminine," (75) as the female traditionally lacks power, or is dominated as the object in the subject/object

relation. Thus, it's an interesting twist to see these pictures of men, in make-up, doing their best to convey power and authority. Mitchel argues that pictures "above all . . . want a kind of mastery over the beholder . . ." (76). These images do seem as if they are trying to control the narrative we might assign to them, which belies their anxiety about their "feminine" position.



Figure 3



Figure 5



Figure 4

In contrast, the make-up stars on social media make no such pandering concessions to the throne of masculinity. This implies two things: (1) that beauty boy vloggers have an audience that has chosen them based on expectations that have little to do with gender norms. And (2) the audience for these more traditional ads by *Anastasia Beverly Hills* are attempting to include a different audience, one that perhaps has not yet bought into male make-up. These images work to “persuade others” or extend “an invitation to understanding . . . self-discovery or to come to self-knowledge” (Foss 6). To use Sonja Foss’s terminology, they construct a “framework” (using the symbols of crown, tattoos, armor) that create a new space for men in make-up. Foss articulates, “The frameworks and labels we choose to apply to what we encounter influence our perceptions of what we experience and thus the kind of world in which we live” (6). We can suppose, then, that these ads attempt to create a world that would perceive male make-up as not a threat to masculinity, but an artistic expression that underscores his mastery, or power.

The argument that men and make-up can co-exist without compromising their masculinity comes through better without text, because as J. Anthony Blair contends, “The case for visual arguments in advertising will be more convincing if it can be made with purely visual ads” (29). The ads seem to say that make-up only makes these male subjects more individualistic—like the crowns, the tattoos, and other accessories, make-up is just one more tool to make them unique. Note that in Figure 6, make-up is used to paint on the



Figure 6

semblance of a tattoo. In Figure 7, golden tears have been painted under his eyes. Neither of these applications of make-up are functional in a way that would make them wearable day in and day out. Rather, they are linking the use of make-up to just another variation on tattooing, and just another way to be artistic. This fanciful art will be shown to be in stark contrast with how the same company uses their female models.



Figure 7

Consistent in the *Anastasia Beverly Hills* ads featuring female models (see Figures 8-11) is natural or tousled hair, clean, bare skin exposed till above the breasts, bedroom eyes, and a full face of make-up that is detectable, but mostly muted. This muted quality of their make-up can be attributed to the double-edged sword of beauty expectations held over women: be beautiful, but don't look like you're trying. Don't deceive men with make-up. If make-up is rhetoric, then women's rhetorical use of make-up has always come under suspicion. Hanno Ehses points out the historical suspicion directed towards rhetoric in general. "A common prejudice and misunderstanding associates rhetoric with the bombastic and hollow, with fraud and seduction, with deceit and sheer ornamentation" (3). The muted and "natural" appearance of these models is

a reaction to this prejudice. They invoke the spirit of “I woke up like this” in their tousled hair and sleepy expressions to dispel the appearance of deceit. Ironically though, this thought, this gesture towards natural beauty, is still a type of rhetoric. As Ehses states, “There is no ‘thought’ unclothed by rhetoric” (8). The rhetoric of the female models then is to make you believe they aren’t using rhetoric, which functions as an acknowledgment and acceptance of the viewers gaze.



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11

None of them are particularly distinct or convey any sense of individuality in the way that the men do. There is a soft quality to the pictures overall, that set the women in a fantasy

realm that is fuzzy around the edges. They seem to wait, to anticipate, to receive the gaze of the viewer, where-as the men seemed indifferent or to even challenge the viewers gaze. If the men can be seen to be loaded with symbols to leave us in no doubt of who they are, then the women come off as blank—like canvases that have nothing to do but receive what is painted upon them, or like classical statues that need only to be looked upon. Also unlike the male images, these women could easily wear these looks in their day to day lives, while the men’s make-up (remember golden tears and neck wings) didn’t care to offer a functional look. In this way, make-up for women is still a matter adhering to standard beauty expectations, while appearing as if she’s not trying too hard to do so. There is nothing transgressive in this; it rather more accurately can be cast as conformity, and thus it fails to be art in the way the men’s ads are.

However, the men’s ads, along with the beauty boys, do something to counteract the blank conformity and passivity we see in the women’s ads. They render make-up something that is for everyone, something that is fun, and something that helps you capture your authentic self. While women may still admittedly only be perpetually playing into gender norms by being interpellated (Althusser) by this rhetoric, it underscores the transgressive nature of art, as well the iconoclast like function of beauty boys. Their presence disrupts something once static and makes it new and exciting.

Brands like L’Oreal have added men to their campaigns as just another category to fill out a list of diverse people (see Figure 12). This appeals to the female consumer who values inclusion, gender fluidity, and freedom of self-expression. It also counteracts the sneaking feeling that the use of make-up is an act of conformity; ads like L’oreal call her into a broader and more diverse community where she is not alone, but instead, validated. J. Anthony Blair speaks to this appropriation of social issues in advertisements. He explains that advertisers can

“create an ad that the viewer feels good about or identifies with and the viewer will transfer those feelings and that identification to your company or product(s)” (32). Thus, the inclusion of men becomes a way for women to feel good about their use of make-up. By freeing men from the shackles of gender performance, women are also freed. Paradoxically though, they are also further bound to the cosmetic industry. The only ones who seem to escape from the “freedom” of make-up as portrayed in these ads, are heterosexual men.



Figure 12

The question remains: is make-up a tool that helps individuals achieve self-actualization? Or are capitalist forces merely seizing upon social trends to further entrench us as consumers of their products? Is it another iteration of sexism that a craft traditionally dominated by women becomes “art” when men use it? I can’t say that analyzing these images answer any of these questions, but they do illuminate the questions themselves.

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