

# Fugly

by Silvia Bombardini



Gucci, FW15

***Fugly***: a freshly coined and swiftly espoused portmanteau insult that more and more liberally in recent seasons has served to describe, while saving on both breath and profanities, a debatable and usually womanly wardrobe choice, which up until then would have been called *fucking ugly*. It could be argued that the gratification of using the expletive may have caused it over the months to have worn out a bit. By rights, *fugly* is onomatopoeic. It's said raising both eyebrows, with eyes open wide and lips pursed as if one were chewing on a lemon – a mix of a *phfff* and a curse. It's the *I can't believe the nerve..!* of 2015. The harsh judgement that takes in, despite itself, a reluctant gasp of surprise. It unintentionally lets loose also a wisp of anxiety, which comes with the doubt that one might perhaps not be getting it, that one might be missing out. There's a specific word for this too: FoMO, the fear of missing out. Or, "*a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent*". It applies in this case. It turns people aggressive, *fugly* does, when they're aware that they're not savvy enough to be patronising. It's unsettling, and here's a suitably rude term to voice our distress while we wait for our eyes to adjust. *I just don't see it, you think. You say: boy, that's fugly.*

Fugly is unredeemable enough to question the subjectivity of ugliness. It is no mockery but has no subtlety whatsoever. Lame isn't fugly. If you dig it, it's lamesome at best. *If you're elegant you will look elegant in a garbage bag*, grandmothers used to say. Fugly is wearing this garbage bag when you wake up alone and hungover on the night bus on a Saturday morning. It's a DON'Ts candid in VICE magazine. It doesn't have to be vulgar, but can also be. Fugly has potential beyond your imagination.

On the catwalk, it needs to be said, it's a slightly different story. The f- in fugly becomes the marginally less offensive f- of fashion. It stands for the kind of deliberate ugliness which seemingly only people with a particular appreciation of fashion can understand or accept. Of course, haters are always gonna hate: fugly is Kim post-Kanye, or so they say. Forced to forgo the baby-dolls for horrible fashion-forward, fugly clothes in order to please her husband.

Outside fashion circles, it's indeed with various degrees of irony, condescension or scorn, depending on how offensive the industry has behaved as of late, that those in the loop, like Kanye West after all, are perceived. They are the entitled, unfathomable advocates with a stiff upper lip of what's imposed on the population at large as *refined taste*. Except that when the spectrum broadens, we may wish to say through insight, it does so both ways. Through the centuries, a penchant for fashion has had the unsuspecting insider wear with often misplaced dignity all sorts of ghastly trends. Generally, it's only in retrospect that we recognise them as such. But as the number of those pile up, in history and personal memory both, it's with some degree of fondness and most importantly, of self-awareness, that we're beginning to welcome the missteps inevitably still to come.

You've got to know the worst to understand the best. Sometimes, you might even want to wear the worst, just to be sure you've understood it properly. Self-awareness is key because the most covetable value that the fashion fugly conveys, and what above all distinguishes it from the average fugly, is knowledge. And this could come off as a bit geeky, but isn't it just a thrilling one to lust after, aspire to, or why not, knock off? Because as i-D magazine points out, quoting Valerie Steele in an online [think piece](#) on ugly footwear: "*The inelegant but comfortable shoe says 'I know who Phoebe Philo is'".* It doesn't even have to be an original Céline, to put the wearer in the spotlight and taunt those around them as if to imply, that there's this little secret they've yet to be let in on. *I know something you don't*, the fashion fugly teases – and it's aggravating enough to prompt the offense of the f- insult.

Granted, it doesn't sound in these terms like the most virtuous of goals, yet one doesn't dress fugly simply to alienate bystanders. Still, a hint of that same, quasi-subcultural defiance lingers: literally on occasion, as in Alexander Wang winter 2015 collection, inspired by goth Harajuku girls and metalheads. The bonding nature of an aesthetic all but collectively regarded as ugly is fundamental when building one's own identity in the underground. Similarly, if to dress beautifully is to follow conventions and meet expectations, to wear fugly is to disregard the notion of dressing to appeal. And universally, not just to the male gaze –

although that is maybe when the clash becomes most clear. She doesn't use the word herself, but in her popular blog *The Man Repeller*, Leandra Medine pictures her muse as *"she who outfits herself in a sartorially offensive mode that may result in repelling members of the opposite sex"*. Quite the reverse of what Kim Kardashian would supposedly be doing. It echoes another portrait that many decades beforehand, Elsa Schiaparelli had painted of her generous patron Daisy Fellowes, who *"would appear wearing the oddest monstrosity just to annoy everybody and show that she was not dependent on dictated taste"*, as reported in the catalogue of the Schiaparelli & Prada exhibition at the MET. Fugly is feminist, is political, it exudes confidence in such a way that beauty can't. Like a Comic Con t-shirt, one wears it for the benefit of the like minds, rare to encounter though they might be, or just for themselves at last. It could be a Comic Con t-shirt, worn inexplicably out of context.



House of Holland, pre-FW15 – a July shopping suggestion via [manrepeller.com](http://manrepeller.com)

Fugly channels the impudence and thrill of youthful experiments without its uncertainty, or the burdening need to fit in. To the letter at times, because fugly can be the ill-fitting, clothing that works against the body rather than around it and doesn't allow itself to be forgotten, like knitwear purposefully shrunk. It rejects the cultured laziness and ease of luxury and has all the appeal of an ongoing fight, the bittersweetness of growing pains. *"I base a lot of my ideas around the kind of awkwardness that comes with being a teenager"*, declares London designer Molly Goddard in an interview with *Dazed*, *"those silhouettes that happen when you're growing too fast"*. No surprise here, fashion always has borrowed from the aesthetics of youth, the spontaneous just as much as the busily crafted, and refined and polished them for the larger public. But the process of beautifying the looks in order for them to look acceptable to their new audiences has more and more lost importance. The final high-end product looks increasingly similar to its source, with sartorial craft

hidden so well you would think it shameful. From little distance, the price tag alone distinguishes the boutique purchase from something bought at a car boot sale, or even on the high-street. Everyone's favourite example of this is Slimane's Saint Laurent: reviewers have typed at length to compare the brand's alarmingly successful collections to the likes of clothes you could find at Topshop, Forever 21 or H&M. Fresh and glossy and not a little bit shallow, Hedi Slimane's work looks like fast fashion. But there's also Donatella Versace with her sex shop vibe, or J.W. Anderson whose FW15 collection could have been a mishmash of thrift store treasures. At odds as their visions might be, what they have in common is an unseemly attraction for cheapness. Its expensiveness is underplayed, yet their work is not the same as what we call quiet luxury – in that cheapness, is usually loud.

Still, *“even amid the homogenised dress codes of youth, class plays a part”*, observes Grayson Perry in a feature for [The Telegraph](#) about his series of tapestries *The Vanity of Small Differences*, *“such is the pervasiveness of bourgeois regard for authenticity and restraint”*. Willing itself anti-bourgeois, albeit from within, aims to refuse both of these values. There's a pleasure in wearing it that goes beyond its effect on others: irrational perhaps, and somehow perverse it may well be. Because if taste is internalized, ingrained since childhood, then to challenge it is as much of a violence as to overcome it is a victory. *“They were so hideous, and yet I longed for them”*, Rachel Cooke at [The Guardian](#) describes a pair of Prada sunglasses to her readers. The domination of our own default instinct in matters of taste, to opt for something we ourselves recognise as ugly, that's when the euphoria hits, and we feel empowered. We titillate with discomfort.

**SAINT LAURENT**  
PARIS



Saint Laurent, FW15

Where beautiful is honest, clear and clean as a pond, ugly is complex, majestic, has all the turbid depth of the sea. And in creative fields, though fashion generally tends to favour much shallower waters than its peers, the latter is usually where the best ideas come from. In a very real sense, too: the Savage Beauty exhibition notes upheld Atlantis, and by proxy, the notorious Armadillo shoes, as Alexander McQueen's greatest achievement. It has been pointed out how in fashion history, all that were new and destined to become ridiculously influential with time, was at first considered ugly. But hardly ever before have so many designers outside the avant-garde realm so deliberately pursued the unflattering and unpleasant. Prada is the exception that proves the rule: a guarantee of excellence, under wraps or not, and the loyalty that century-old Italian labels never fail to inspire, allowed Miuccia to issue tailored challenges for her clients back when no one else would yet have dared, and for them to be met, almost without fail. The success of the brand's trademark *ugly-chic* could even be seen as a possible catalyst for this behaviour in others, but there's now also a societal, cultural aspect to it. Our ideals of beauty have widened – it's only natural that our ideals of ugliness should as well. If there's still a line, however, between that which is unfamiliar and provoking and that which could virtually be called grotesque, fugly makes its point by leaning across it more than we would be comfortable with. That's no Carine Roitfeld's *jolie laide* that we're talking about. Fugly is one step further.

A certain recklessness belongs with fugly. It needs to be risky to promise a thrill. And you wouldn't know it by browsing through the pictures of the 2015 winter shows, but to undertake fugly must be for designers a far riskier feat than it is for their customers. While you can ditch the bin bag and crawl back to pretty in time for your Saturday brunch if Fugly Friday went awry, their revenue, not just their credibility, will be on the line. If they haven't educated their clientele for decades on end like Rei Kawakubo has done, or as intensively and zealously as Jeremy Scott, for one shopper who will buy fugly many more won't. So what they do instead is relying on unconventional models shot at unfavourable angles in their campaigns, and first and foremost on styling, to appease the instinct and channel the theme – while still producing garments that you and I can try on and ask the saleslady, *does it suit me?*, without it being completely beside the point. Now, fugly styling could be an extreme case of vacation styling brought to the runway or shop window: clashing motives with gratuitous nonchalance and unabashed, flaunted utility. But what the medium has revealed itself especially well-suited for, in this respect, is the synthesis of a wearable equivalent for Freud's uncanny. Incongruous and familiar at once, the uncanny is to be found in juxtapositions. It repels us with cognitive dissonance, yet remains all along nothing but the sum of perfectly pleasant, layered parts.

You wouldn't hold it against them, Alessandro Michele at Gucci or Jonathan Anderson at Loewe, this small measure of caution. Even as you witness with some chagrin their collections dilute from fugly to merely subjective. Maybe on some level you would have relished being asked to wear the looks as they were, top-toe in their fugly glory. But it's hard to resent the offer of an effortless alternative designed to suit you

both, and whereas bad taste has been an ubiquitous trend at fashion weeks around the globe, only a handful have been the labels actually brave enough to go fully fugly with retail. You can still find them though, at both ends of the ladder. On the one side, are the recent graduates with lots to say and little to lose, like Molly Goddard or Ed Marler and all the pupils of Fashion East in London or VFiles in New York. Slim as their production is, sold mostly online or at independent alcoves like Machine-A in Soho, theirs is usually the target that more easily lends itself to it – more surprising, is to encounter fugly once again all the way up, where the undisputed fashion giants reside. Still it makes sense, somehow. They are the ones who couldn't care less about expectations, because they just simply do what they want: cue in Karl Lagerfeld and why not, his \$5,300, Austrian-themed, droopy in felt and lambskin Girl Chanel bag.



Girl Chanel bags

Indeed, fugly comes in many forms, those of accessories more often than not – Freud would have a field day with just how frequently it concerns the feet. But whereas it can happen sometimes to find fugly in the details too, one could make a case for a certain substantiality as required for the offensive side of fugly to express itself at its best. It's no golden rule: a zipper say, where there should have been buttons, could be easily very fugly. But hardly as effective as a chartreuse fur on the bottom half of a floral coat, worn at Giamba with fishnet tights layered over yet more florals. To be fair, fur on its own gets a running start, since in our perception of fashion as fugly, touch plays no small part. Overlong suede fringes, a mushrooming of furry patches, plush details, felt and plaid, ripped nylon, dévoré and corduroy were all the rage at the winter shows. They share something almost instinctually off-putting yet tempting, that we don't even have to open our eyes to both crave and dislike.

Pervasively, fugly appears to have seeped in at all levels of the fashion industry. If there' one sector still left to tackle, it will have to be Beauty. It goes without saying, it won't be easy – because, well, it's all around *beauty* that the sector is built. Our new awareness may now question its values, but a broader vision only stretches so far. To redeem the world of Beauty by means of fugly surely sounds much like an ill-fated, quixotic ordeal. Right? And yet, the early tendrils of fugly as a viable cosmetic option, and not just catwalk theatrics, already are making themselves known: the unibrow make-up that models wore at the Atsuro Tayama FW15 show, as a case in point.