

# Is It 'Cause I'm Cool / Why You Dress Like Me is It Honesty or You Just a Fool

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## Abstract

*I'm cool. That's cool. He/She's the coolest:* exclamations like these have described various types of elements: names, things, cities, characters, in a constant search of novelty and more à la page, more exciting and, of course, more niche. Who is cool is unique, unrepeatable but with a lot of imitators who sublimate the image and reverberate through many different means of communication: from the traditional to the contemporary, from the mass media to the most elite channels. But what identifies a person, a product, or a city as cool? Is it a strategy? Is it marketing or a spontaneous attitude? Is it one of these things or a combination of them? Starting from this assumption and from some emblematic case studies from the worlds of fashion, art, music, and in general all the creative fields (from the Marchesa Casati to Frida Kahlo, from Anna Piaggi to Miuccia Prada, from the “presence” of John Galliano and Maurizio Cattelan to the “absence” of Martin Margiela and Banksy, from Virgil Abloh’s multitasking attitude to Alessandro Michele’s conceptual retro-aesthetics, from Tamara de Lempicka’s “being cool and famous strategy” to the analysis of the trends’ life cycle, from the movie parodies of Totò (the Neapolitan actor) to Steve Jobs’s cool-nerd aesthetics and the design of contemporary new icons, this paper intends to investigate the roots behind the construction of coolness. This is a concept, that to be long-term and broadly resilient and not to be lost in “the long tail” of niches and subcultures, requires, now more than ever, solid cultural foundations and distinct elements wisely mixed.

**Keywords:** Creative Industries; Fashion; Branding; Cool; Advertising.

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## Introduction

In 2004, Emma Landford sings “Is it 'cause I'm cool / Why you dress like me is it honesty or you just a fool,” the dancefloor hit — written by Mousse T., stage name of the German DJ with Turkish origins Mustafa Gündoğdu — which well defines the spirit of a period in which the cool/successful association is consolidated, as a communication, branding, and marketing tool. But can we say that: “If I am cool, I am successful” or that “If I am successful, I am cool”? Or is the opposite true: “If I am successful, I am uncool” and “If I am cool, I am not successful (or I do not care about it)”?

Indeed, if on the one hand, the essence of coolness is that *something* not easy to describe which, because of this indecipherability, attracts and intrigues; on the other hand, success can be precisely (often mathematically) defined and decoded through the lens of what Albert-László Barabási calls the “laws of success,” linked to the concepts of performance, network, persistence, will, and strategy.<sup>1</sup> Success can be quantified by considering, for example, the number of sales (as regards products), the number of likes (as regards an event or a person on social media), memory or recognition (as regards events or characters that have contributed to writing history). The same cannot be said when talking about coolness, to which only qualitative parameters are applicable. Furthermore, while “success is a collective phenomenon rather than an individual one,”<sup>2</sup> coolness, although needing to be decoded and recognised by a peer group, remains an individual and individualistic phenomenon. Success and coolness are certainly associated, but with unstable ties, especially when considering the origin of cool.

### *The Birth of Cool (Miles Davis, 1957)*

It is not easy to define when the term “cool” was born; and this is also due to the fact that there are many scientific fields that have studied the subject: from history of art to anthropology, from fashion to psychology, from communication to marketing.

The concept of cool can find its equivalent in the *sprezzatura*, a “product” of Made in Italy patented in the first decade of the 16th century by Baldassar Castiglione in *Il Cortegiano*,<sup>3</sup> though, as noted by Eugenia Paulicelli, still remaining a concept that can be interpreted in various ways:

...I have opted not to translate the term *sprezzatura* into English since the corresponding English term “nonchalance” commonly used to describe it does not do full justice to all the nuances of the word as it is employed by Castiglione. *Sprezzatura* takes on different meanings depending on its context. It can be associated with the concealing of artifice, looking natural, projecting a constructed or “gained naturalness” or simply with being graceful. In other circumstances, it can mean to be cool and calm even in the most trying of situations, without ever sacrificing style and distinction in dress and demeanor.<sup>4</sup>

We could therefore consider George Brummell and Oscar Wilde, who represent pure dandyism, the first cool people in history:

The dandy is a figure who makes his own life a work of art; he is at once an author and his own character. Dandyism, indeed, might be regarded as a form of autobiography that takes as its medium not words but fabric. Just as the diarist is both subject and object, so the dandy is at once the fashioner and the fashion plate.<sup>5</sup>

1. Albert-László Barabási, *The Formula: The Universal Laws of Success* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2018).

2. Barabási, 26.

3. Andrea Granelli and Flavia Trupia, *Retorica e business: Intuire, ragionare, sedurre nell'era digitale* (Milano: EGEA, 2014).

4. Eugenia Paulicelli, *Writing Fashion in Early Modern Italy: From Sprezzatura to Satire* (London-New York: Routledge, 2014).

5. Elizabeth Amann, *Dandyism in the Age of Revolution: The Art of the Cut* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 6.

The dandy embodies the coolness as a work of art that lives thanks to the public to whom he offers himself, coldly. A coolness that, as stated by Giuseppe Scaraffia, “discovers the reality of social relations”<sup>6</sup> and places the dandy at the centre of the scene, as an actor, and at the same time on the margins of society, as a snobby spectator.

Some scholars, such as the art historian Robert Farris Thompson, place instead the origin of coolness beyond the European borders and exactly in Africa, referring to the animist word *ititu* (precisely, cool), which composes one of the three pillars of the animist religion together with the *ashe* (command) and the *iwa* (character):

Cool is the overarching value that binds the concepts together ... the criterion of coolness seems to unite and animate all the other canons ... Cool philosophy is a strong intellectual attitude, affecting incredibly diverse provinces of artistic happening, yet leavened with humour and a sense of play. It is an all-important mediating process, accounting for similarities in art and vision in many tropical African societies. It is a matrix from which stem ideas about being generous.<sup>7</sup>

From Africa come, as descendants of slaves, the great musicians who found and populate the American music scene first, and the European one, later, with the new sounds of jazz. Music played in small spaces, often clandestine, where the windows were left open to let out the smoke of the cigarettes smoked by the artists and their public. But the windows let in cold air. A cold that extends to the type of music, lifestyle, and clothing of these musicians and their admirers. It is perhaps the jazz saxophonist Lester Young who uses for the first time the word “cool” extending its meaning from temperature to attitude.<sup>8</sup> In 1957, Norman Mailer in *The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster* identifies for the first time cool “as an attribute” of a particular social group, the hipster: “to be cool, to be in control of a situation because you have swung where the square has not.”<sup>9</sup>

Over the years, the growth of culture and mass production and the many changes that have affected all creative fields (from design to fashion, from art to professions related to new technologies, production, marketing, and communication) contribute to the construction of a multifaceted idea of coolness, making its definition and identification even more complex.

## *Cool Confusion* (The Clash, 1981)

Perhaps the confusion in defining the concept of cool makes coolness cool. A term, whose meaning has evolved to encompass and at the same time deny the concepts intrinsic to Castiglione’s *sprezzatura*, to Brummel’s dandyism, to the pride of African *ititu*, and to the attitude of jazz musicians, as in the rebellion expressed by the first icons of youth countercultures, such as Elvis Presley, James Dean, and Marlon Brando. The concept was then enriched by new cultural references deriving from very different areas: the new musical scenes, cinema, fashion, art, the study of subcultures and of those realities related to creative economies.<sup>10</sup> A multitude of fields that generates multiple interpretations. “What kind of entity is Cool? Is it a philosophy, a sensibility, a religion, an ideology, a personality type, a behavior, an attitude, a zeitgeist, a worldview?”<sup>11</sup> A shared and unique answer does not exist yet.

In 1994, Marcel Danesi, following Mailer’s reflections, ascribes the coolness as a feature of adolescence, the period of rebellion during which the peer group becomes essential for self-affirmation through the homologation to the rules of the group and the revolt against the status quo imposed by the “others”

6. Giuseppe Scaraffia, *Dizionario del dandy* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2007).

7. Robert Farris Thompson, *African Art in Motion* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1979), 43.

8. Lidia K. C. Manzo, “Cool,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Consumption and Consumer Studies*, ed. Daniel Thomas Cook and J. Michael Ryan (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 198.

9. Dick Pountain and David Robins, *Cool Rules: Anatomy of an Attitude* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 9.

10. Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

11. See Pountain and Robins, *Cool Rules*, 17.

(parents, teachers, institutions): “Coolness is a perceived state to which many (if not most) teens now aspire, even if its specific behavioural forms can vary substantially; and if teens do not aspire to coolness, they can certainly recognize its manifestations in their peers.”<sup>12</sup>

Hence, the concept of cool assumes, during adolescence, different forms and connotations, to indicate and define a wide range of products, places, and people. As noted by Teresa Labov too: “The word cool, and what it connotes, is known by virtually everyone [not only] in the North American teen subcultures, no matter what class, ethnic community, region, and so on, from which he or she comes.”<sup>13</sup>

For both youth cultures and subcultures, everything can paradoxically be cool and uncool at the same time, depending on the point of view.<sup>14</sup> The adjective goes beyond the physicality of the object of interest:

...cool is not something that is inherent in artifacts themselves, but rather in people's attitude toward them. The clothing designer Levi Strauss found out the hard way that cool is not an intrinsic property woven into the blue denim of its jeans: it was the way that their wearers perceived Levi's that made them cool, and within a few years that perception would be imperceptibly stolen away by Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfger.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the peer group (or, using the marketing vocabulary, target) becomes fundamental for its capability of perceiving, reading, and decoding the cultural references of a person's style, of an attitude, of a place, or of a product: objects of desire that define precise markets that, although representing niches, are capable of generating a well-defined economy.

Indeed, even though coolness also means rebellion against conformism and mass consumerism, with the passage of time, being *cool*, *hip*, *bohemian* generates alternative economies in spite of itself. In this way, new consumption trajectories are defined:

...according to Bell, capitalism underwent a profound transformation in the early twentieth century as it shifted from what Bell regarded as its rational focus on production to an irrational, anti-intellectual, promiscuous, and hedonistic emphasis on consumption. The driving force of this transformation, according to Bell was the new bohemians, who flocked to places like Greenwich Village in New York City in search of unconventional lifestyles and sexual liberation. ... a “new capitalism” that was now based on hedonism. ... however, consumption-based capitalism is inherently unsustainable because hedonistic consumption rewards instant self-gratification, whereas production depends on hard work and delayed gratification.<sup>16</sup>

Coolness thus turns out to be a fundamental ingredient of marketing, self-branding, and branding strategies, as demonstrated by the embezzlement carried out by the advertisers that in 1997 caused the “marketing conspiracy dreamed up by the UK record industry in cahoots with a certain American ice-cream manufacturer”<sup>17</sup>; the salt that makes products and services more appealing to an ever-growing public (or to a more significant number of niches); products or services often simple, but that a targeted and precise communication and storytelling strategy makes cool, and therefore objects of desire to be consumed.

12. Marcel Danesi, *Cool: The Signs and Meanings of Adolescence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 40.

13. Danesi, 40.

14. The Vigorsol 2018 campaign is emblematic. “Chew cool, look cool” is the slogan of the campaign created by Kettydo+ agency, in which a young man who chews a Vigorsol appears in multiple versions of coolness depending on the eyes of the beholder: from a child to a dog.

15. Daniel Thomas Cook and J. Michael Ryan (eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Consumption and Consumer Studies*. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 198.

16. Steven Quartz and Anette Asp, *Cool: How the Brain's Hidden Quest for Cool Drives Our Economy and Shapes Our World* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2016), 15.

17. See Pountain and Robins, *Cool Rules*, 25.

Coolness is elevated to an attribute that goes beyond personal data, cultural references, and social belonging, to incorporate lifestyles and consumption patterns.

### *Shades of Cool* (Lana Del Rey, 2014)

Concepts such as rebellion, self-control or insensitivity, self-expression, style, promiscuity or celibacy, boldness or privacy, and irony represent the complexity of the cool identity.<sup>18</sup> These characteristics define coolness, thanks also to the coding of peculiar signs and products.

Concepts that define a style, also through a clothing alphabet composed of: sunglasses (to hide the expression, emphasising apathy and insensitivity towards the world), jeans and T-shirt (as elements of the working class, breaking with the rules of the bourgeois dress), and leather jacket (which thanks to cinematographic icons like James Dean and Marlon Brando has become the uniform of an entire generation of young rebels). Yet objects alone are not enough; to express coolness an attitude is also necessary. To be cool, the attitude must be “wrong” and must represent self-expression and rejection of the established rules. Holly Golightly, played by Audrey Hepburn, perfectly embodies coolness as an out-of-the-box attitude, when at dawn she stands in front of Tiffany’s window, eating a croissant and drinking a coffee from a paper cup, while wearing a Givenchy sheath dress, large dark glasses (to hide look and dark circles under the eyes caused by the crazy night just ended), a striking tiara, and a necklace of pearls. A precise selection of objects and a studied unconcerned attitude focused on the here and now, on the ego and not on the others, not without a subtle irony and hedonistic gratification.

Hedonism that becomes narcissism and that lives on the Hamletic dichotomy of being (present) or not (present) in a given place and at a given time. Need to mark one’s area of influence based on social recognition by others. As well narrated also by Nanni Moretti in *Ecce Bombo* during Michele’s telephone monologue:

No, really, I don’t like it. I also have a meeting at the bar with the others. Look, what kind of party is it? It’s not like at ten o’clock you’re all dancing and I’m sitting in a corner, is it? Ah no, if you dance, I won’t come. No, I’m not coming then. What are you saying? Will I be more noticed, if I come and stand apart or if I don’t come at all? I’ll come. So, I’ll come and stand next to a window, in profile, against the light. You tell me: Michele come here with us, come on, and I reply: Go, go, I’ll join you later. I’ll come, see you there. No, I don’t like it, I’m not coming. Oh no, yes. See you next time. Good evening!<sup>19</sup>

### *As Cool as I Am* (Dor Williams, 1996)

Absence and presence, being there or not, thus become the two extremes of coolness. Attitudes that contribute to building personal identity and, in some cases, also the identity of a company or a brand. The shyness of Miuccia Prada or of Consuelo Castiglioni, traditionally reticent about giving interviews and going out on the catwalk at the end of shows, is in evident contrast with the shamelessness and the excesses of Marc Jacobs and of John Galliano (at the time of Dior) who instead overexposed their own image.

Opposite attitudes that one can find also in Franco Moschino and Martin Margiela who represent not only two antithetical ways of being but also two examples of how it is possible to decline one’s personality in a fashion, communication, product, and brand project. While egocentrism, (self) irony, and excess

18. Thomas W. Hodgkinson, *How to Be Cool* (London: Icon Book, 2017), XIX.

19. “No, veramente, non mi va. Ho anche un mezzo appuntamento al bar con gli altri. Senti, ma che tipo di festa è? Non è che alle dieci state tutti a ballare i girotondi e io sto buttato in un angolo, no? Ah no, se si balla non vengo. No, allora non vengo. Che dici, vengo? Mi si nota di più se vengo e me ne sto in disparte o se non vengo per niente? Vengo. Vengo e mi metto, così, vicino a una finestra, di profilo, in controluce. Voi mi fate: Michele vieni di là con noi, dai, e io: andate, andate, vi raggiungo dopo. Vengo, ci vediamo là. No, non mi va, non vengo. Eh no, sì. Ciao, arrivederci. Buonasera!” (Nanni Moretti, *Ecce Bombo*, 1978).

describe the nature of the former, anonymity and conceptual and artistic research represent the DNA of the second.

In the same way, while everyone knows the face of Franco Moschino, very few people recognise Martin Margiela: the former uses himself as an irreverent testimonial of his many product lines (from denimwear to swimwear, from jewellery to footwear), whereas the latter does not even show up at the end of his fashion shows. To appear and not to appear become the opposite starting points that define the DNA of the two cool brands. It is interesting to note how — through different creative paths — the two designers were able to use, and at the same time subvert, the stereotypes of fashion and coolness, transferred from cinema, photography, art, and fashion.

The fashion system is seen by the two designers as the establishment against which to fight, as the African American jazz musicians or the rebels of the American middleclass did. For Moschino the rebellion takes the form of the 1989 fashion show entitled *Stop the Fashion System*, during which the witches of the fashion system are destroyed by the free and unruly fashion of the Milanese designer. In the same year, Margiela rewrites the rules of fashion through his fashion show, during which the boundaries between audience and models, between the designed collection and everyday clothing, are demolished, defining a new relaxed and cooler approach. Freedom and artistic instinct in conflict with history: history as a starting point to subvert, redesign, and rewrite. A history of fashion manipulated, deformed, hybridised, disassembled, decomposed, and finally reassembled where new forms and new meanings are attributed to those archetypes of clothing which are the symbols of classic fashion, such as the Chanel suit for Moschino and the trench coat for Margiela.

T-shirts, jeans, and leather jackets (the uniform of the rebel interpreted by Marlon Brando and James Dean) take on new meanings and become iconic products of the two brands: for Moschino the (hyper-decorated) leather jacket becomes the new uniform of the *signorina bon ton*, while Margiela revises its dimensions defining new proportions; Moschino realises everything in denim (from wedding dresses to cassocks) under the motto “Chiunque tu sia!” [“Whoever you are!”], while Margiela uses jeans as an object to be reworked, to wear on inside out, or as constructive module for other garments; for Moschino the T-shirt is a surface where to declare his mottos, always ironic and irreverent, while for Margiela it is an archetype to decompose, deconstruct, deform, and again rework through cuts and new proportions.

The impenetrable gaze, often hidden, typical of cool iconography, becomes another identifying element of the two brands. Margiela hides the eyes of the models behind brushstrokes of paint, wigs, bandages, fabric masks, so as not to reveal any emotion and to focus on the creative process that generated the clothes worn by the models; Moschino plays with the icon of black glasses that becomes exaggerated, huge, impossible not to see, a mask that hide the face but at the same time attracts attention and highlights the presence of the person through the object.

While for Moschino the identity of the brand is codified through a real programmatic manifesto (*La Ricetta* di Moschino<sup>20</sup>), for Margiela it literally remains white paper, a colour that cancels everything, making neutral and without a clear identity all that it is applied to, creating a place suspended in time and without history; a colour that creates the identity of the brand and that, through performances, is applied to clothes, furnishings, shop windows, objects. Cool attitudes that, despite the diversity of the two designers, represent alternative paths capable of shifting from the personal sphere to the construction of a design concept first, and to the definition of a brand and its success then.

## *Ich Bin Cool* (Stereo Total, 2019)

If coolness, as observed, on the one hand can spontaneously — almost involuntarily — generate success, in other cases it becomes a tool for the strategic construction of one's identity and one's own success, even if only through the choice of the tone of white for the paper of a business card.<sup>21</sup>

20. Samuele Mazza, ed., *Moschino* (Milano: Leonardo Arte, 1997), 7.

21. Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1991), 44.

Looking at the art world, for example, Tamara de Lempicka can be considered a master as well as a forerunner of coolness as a strategy to emerge. “I’m tough, ambitious and I know exactly what I want. If that makes me a bitch, okay” is a phrase appeared on the pages of *People Magazine* in March 1985, pronounced by a semi-unknown Italian-American singer called Madonna; a quote that very well represents Tamara de Lempicka’s point of view too. In fact, the two artists have many characteristics in common and it is no coincidence that Madonna is today one of the greatest admirers and collectors of de Lempicka’s works.<sup>22</sup>

The life of Tamara de Lempicka was conceived and lived with the precise aim of achieving success, through a studied representation of herself as a synthesis of the spirit of the first decades of the last century. The artist, with her personality first and her art then, clearly and lucidly decoded the changes taking place at the beginning of the twentieth century and used them as tools for the construction of her own success.

Tamara de Lempicka is an interpreter of the zeitgeist of the *Années folles*, through a precise, cool identity linked both to her public image and her artistic production. A cool identity so carefully designed to allow her to pass through a century of history, despite the mixed fortunes of criticism and the market. Her ability to adapt to the different aesthetic phases that have taken place over the years made her become a symbol of that visual and cultural hybridisation in which we are immersed in the contemporary world.<sup>23</sup>

To realise the “Tamara personality,” the will to lead, discipline, method, and contacts in the world of art, high society, and communication were more fundamental than her artistic talent. Indeed, very well recounted are the long sessions she devoted every day to painting, and, as reported by some chronicles of the time, they were interrupted only by “necessities” such as massages and baths — these are narratives that can be attributed to careful construction and strategy by what today would be defined as conceived by an “experienced press office.” A press office embodied by Tamara herself who, though not giving interviews often, controlled the information to be disseminated and the statements to be released, cleverly balancing her presence and absence on worldly news and events.

Thus, Tamara de Lempicka defines a series of activities that today would be described as marketing and self-branding strategies. She creates an identity not of ephemeral socialite and of “wife of,” but of sophisticated artist and cool style icon, through the attentive management of her image, without neglecting the more traditional tools of social climbing: her two weddings, the choice of her artistic mentors as well as that of her lovers and customers/friends. Tamara de Lempicka’s fame even preceded here artistic fame! She was indeed an *ante-litteram* influencer able to use the media of the time to present herself to the world.

Her control craze went as far as to define in a precise way the spaces and places of narration of her image. The choice of the architect who designed her Paris home-studio, Robert Mallet-Stevens, is smart and not accidental at all: Mallet-Stevens was one of the most innovative architects of the time, famous for the designs of Villa Paul Poiret in Mézy, villa Noailles in Hyères, and the palaces of rue Mallet-Stevens in the 16<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris, as well as for his experience as set designer for the cinema<sup>24</sup>. According to Mallet-Stevens, “architecture ‘plays’ a role;”<sup>25</sup> and if not the central role, architecture still takes on the

22. In addition to possessing some of the most beautiful paintings by Tamara de Lempicka, Madonna played (especially in the second half of the 1980s) and honoured the painter of Polish origins on several occasions. Worth mentioning are: the paintings she reproduced and transformed into architecture in the video of *Open Your Heart*, 1986; the sexual ambiguity emphasised by the costumes designed by Jean-Paul Gaultier for the video of *Express Yourself*, 1989; the Tamara-style poses choreographed among easels with some reproductions of the Polish artist’s paintings in *Vogue*, 1990; the use giant posters of some paintings from her collection as backdrop during the 1990 *Blond Ambition Tour*, again with costumes by Jean-Paul Gaultier.

23. Andrea Mecacci, *Dopo Warhol. Il pop, il postmoderno, l'estetica diffusa* (Roma: Donzelli, 2017), 3.

24. Mallet-Stevens designed the sets of some of the first masterpieces of the French cinema at the beginning of the 20th century, such as *Le Jockey disparu*, 1921, by Jacques Rivet, *Le Tournoi dans la cite*, 1928, by Jean Renoir, *L'Inhumaine*, 1924, and *Le Vertige*, 1925-26, by Marcel L'Herbier.

25. Robert Mallet-Stevens, “Architetture del cinema,” in *cinema & cinema* n.47 (December 1986).

part of co-protagonist in the photos that portray Tamara de Lempicka at work in her Parisian studio-house at 7 rue Mechain. The rooms, furnished by Tamara's sister, Adrienne Górska, seem designed to look perfect in the two-dimensionality of the photographic film: the photographs of Tamara at work in her atelier set up with her paintings in progress or during studio parties regularly appear on the pages of fashion magazines and in the mundane chronicles of newspapers. A photoshoot of Tamara in her apartment is published on the pages of the magazine *Mobilier et Décoration* in January 1931. In the article, Georges Rémon celebrates the modernity of the artist and of the woman capable of influencing the taste of the era with her choices in the field of design and furnishings that “will soon become a must in interior design.”<sup>26</sup>

Fashion is another tool in Tamara's hands to define her cool identity. The most beautiful creations by Lucien-Camille Lelong, Madame Grès, Marcel Rochas, Madeleine Vionnet, Paul Poiret, Coco Chanel, and Elsa Schiaparelli composed the artist's large wardrobe. A mutual exchange, the one between the Parisian couturiers and the Polish artist, who together fed the nascent fashion market through fashion photography and publishing. Way before her paintings, Tamara was known for the photographs where she was posing like a Hollywood diva, taken by the most talented photographers of the time like Madame D'Ora or Joffé, that often portray her intent on painting in her atelier. Tamara always looks cool, well-kept, with the most beautiful clothes, the most modern makeup and haircuts, the perfect light, and the confident and proud attitude of her beauty and sensuality. In this way, she builds her identity as a “mass icon that dictates the law of fashion.”<sup>27</sup>

Tamara understands the importance of communication and fully exploits its potential through the control of her image, both photographic and pictorial. The famous *Autoportrait* that appears in 1929 on the cover of the German fashion magazine *Die Dame* crowns her as one of the first cover girls in the history of fashion publishing. The portrait becomes a useful element of self-invention and self-inscription<sup>28</sup> that realises the ideal of a modern, emancipated, successful woman. In one word: cool. In the construction of this imaginary nothing is left to chance, not the car, nor the colours, nor the clothing: the iconic green Bugatti portrayed in the painting in fact was not green but yellow and it was not even a Bugatti but a Renault. As Gioia Mori makes clear, regarding the cover of *Die Dame*:

Conceived as film shots or magazine covers, her paintings stand out because of their continuous references to modernity, in an optimistic exaltation of feminist achievements and the new lifestyle. No painting like *Autoportrait* has been identified with the era in which it was born and with female liberation: the artist is portrayed in a bob and with deerskin gloves while driving a Bugatti that she has never owned — with a bold security, she claims a role that up to then had belonged only to men.<sup>29</sup>

Another element that contributes to the construction of the myth of this image is the accurate framing. A framing that owes much to the nascent image industries: publishing, advertising, fashion, and cinema. As Tamara herself stated, nothing can be left to chance: “There are no miracles. There is only what you make yourself.”<sup>30</sup>

This quote well describes one of the greatest literary scams of the early years of the twenty-first century, too. Set by the American writer Laura Victoria Albert by cleverly exploiting all the elements of coolness (rebellion, insensitivity, self-expression, style, promiscuity, privacy, and irony), it codifies what could be called the “JT LeRoy Effect” to achieve success.

26. Georges Rémon, “Architectures modernes. L'Atelier de Madame De Lempicka” in *Mobilier et Décoration* n. 9 (June 1, 1931), 1-10.

27. Federica Muzzarelli, *Moderne icone di moda* (Torino: Einaudi, 2013), 4.

28. Jess Berry, *House of Fashion: Haute Couture and the Modern Interior* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 107.

29. Gioia Mori, “Tamara de Lempicka: Ascesa e caduta di un ‘piccolo principe’” (Exhibition catalogue, Milano, Palazzo Reale, 5 October 2006 – 14 January 2007), in *Tamara de Lempicka*, ed. Gioia Mori (Milano, Skira: 2006), 34.

30. Uta Grosenick, ed., *Women Artists in the 20th and 21st Century* (Köln: Taschen, 2001), 306.

[JT LeRoy is] a ghost writer and at the same time a ghost character [who] unites three identities in the same person, two of which have remained in the shadows but are absolutely real. Laura Albert exists. Savannah Knoop (her sister-in-law) exists. JT LeRoy, on the other hand, does not exist and has never existed, but has been considered totally authentic.<sup>31</sup>

Laura Victoria Albert creates the coolest character of the early 2000s: a teenager with a difficult childhood, a rebel, who begins to write his own story about sexual abuse and promiscuity to get rid of the ghosts of the past. A boy (personified in real life by Savannah Knoop), with ambiguous sexuality, not inclined to public appearances, who always presents himself wearing men's clothes and dark glasses,<sup>32</sup> which further emphasise the mystery, the sexual ambiguity, the shyness, and the apathy that the public expects to see. Regardless of the literary quality of the books written by Laura Albert / JT LeRoy, these aspects have built the character's success, making her/him the coolest writer of the early 2000s. A coolness that attracted the attention not only of the general public but also of famous people, such as Madonna, Lou Reed, Courtney Love, Wynona Rider, Asia Argento (who directed the film adaptation of *The Heart Is Deceitful above All Things*) and Gus Van Sant (who wanted to make an adaptation of *Sarah*).

Literature is full of impostors and noms de plume, from George Eliot to "Robert Galbraith" (aka JK Rowling), but JT LeRoy is something else. George Eliot never did high-end fashion shoots, or received backstage passes to U2 gigs, or was sent Kabbalah books by Madonna. Some see Albert/LeRoy as a fraud on the make, a player exploiting the kindness and credulity of celebrities, care workers and fans; others regard her as a complex, postmodern artist, whose literary talent justified the masquerade. Was this one of the greatest literary hoaxes of the modern age? Or a strategic confidence trick?<sup>33</sup>

It is not easy to answer these questions, what is certain is that through the strategic construction of a cool narrative and image Albert/LeRoy achieved what many artists dream of: cult status combined with mainstream celebrity.<sup>34</sup>

### *Hard to Be Cool* (Joe Nichols, 2013)

Can coolness and success coexist? Can they be the same thing? In some cases, they can, and Moschino and Margiela are perfect examples. If we then consider the rules of success of Albert-László Barabási (performance drives success; network drives success; success is unbounded; previous success × fitness = future successes; with persistence successes can come at any time), and we replace the word success with the word coolness, the result does not change, rather it strengthens and contributes in a certain sense to defining the concept of cool as a communication and marketing tool: performance drives coolness; network drives coolness; coolness is unbounded; previous coolness × fitness = future coolness; with persistence coolness can come at any time. A set of rules that, in a sense, define a very close relationship between the strategy of Tamara de Lempicka and JT LeRoy and the attitude of Margiela and Moschino, where being cool and having coolness become two sides of the same coin. A medal that presupposes in both cases the presence of an audience willing to admire and emulate the idol of the moment. An audience, a network of peers, that has exploded, especially nowadays, fragmenting into an almost infinite myriad of subcultures and market niches.<sup>35</sup>

The last three decades have witnessed an explosion of new routes to status (labeled subcultures, lifestyles, consumer microcultures, consumer tribes, or brand communities) in our increasingly fragmented and

31. Filippo D'Arino, *Manuale di sparizione: La sfida dell'invisibilità nella società del controllo* (Roma: Castelvecchi, 2006), 148.

32. Gary L. Hardcastle and George A. Reisch, ed., *Bullshit and Philosophy: Guaranteed to Get Perfect Results Every Time* (Chicago: Open Court, 2006), XI.

33. Steve Rose, "JT LeRoy Unmasked: The Extraordinary Story of a Modern Literary Hoax," *The Guardian* (July 20, 2016).

34. See Rose.

35. Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More* (London: Random House, 2009).

pluralistic society.<sup>36</sup>

A plurality and fragmentation that define not only a potentially infinite number of niches but also an endless level of coolness, connected to the fact that each group considers specific products, people, and places to be cool. With postmodernity, the traditional aesthetics and cultural categories break. In the era of social media and overexposure, Diesel AW 2019 advertising campaign may be right when it states that it is more cool to be a follower.

Paraphrasing Andy Warhol, everyone will be cool for fifteen minutes; fifteen minutes that at the same time become the death of the coolness itself, where everyone is both cool and uncool and where the presence of someone who, like Totò in *Totò a colori*, or like Rudy & Nick, the two old men of *The Muppet Show*, or the child of *The Emperor's New Clothes*, can affirm in front of the adoring public: "The king is naked."

Perhaps, especially at the present time, we can only agree with T. W. Hodgkinson when he says that "the coolest person who ever lived is someone we've never heard of."<sup>37</sup>

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36. See Quartz and Asp, *Cool*, 19.

37. See Hodgkinson, *How to Be Cool*, XXVII.

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