

Could Old Be the New Cool? Shifting Aesthetics of the Aging Body

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Abstract

We often think of “cool” as an imperative of youth. But what does it mean to think of “cool” in relation to the aging body? This essay engages the shifting aesthetics of aging bodies asking what this view of the self and identity signals and in what contexts? In philosophy and political theory aging is rarely studied in terms of views of the self, experience, or aesthetics; more frequently we see aging in terms of demographics, workers past their prime, or in a framework of decline. I argue that there is an emerging “cool” aesthetics of aging bodies that is not simply about chasing youth. These aesthetics revolve in particular around what aging bodies wear, or do not wear. That is, fashion in terms of clothing, accessories, dress, and ways to augment assisting tools (canes for example) has an outsized role in the aesthetics of the aging body. Although who ages well and how, and who can dress well and how, are shaped by nation, gender, class, religion, and other social identity categories, aging is an identity still undertheorized in fashion and political philosophy.

Keywords: Age; Fashion; Cool; Philosophy; Aesthetics.

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Introduction

The question, “Is old the new cool?” is meant as a provocation. It is a provocation to think conceptually and critically about the assumption that to be old is not to be cool. In this sense, the question reveals an assumption about the aesthetic category and judgment of “cool” — to be cool is to be young or youthful. This essay is an attempt to think conceptually and politically about that judgment of taste in relation to aging bodies as these bodies are presented to us in visual culture (both street and mainstream fashion through digital and print media), since I assume, with others, that an essential quality of being human is to be clothed and to be clothed in ways that can be read in terms of group identities and belonging.¹

More specifically, I make the assumption that fashion in terms of a Western philosophical tradition is usefully thought of in terms of aesthetics, building on the work of Giovanni Matteucci, Stefano Marino, and Elizabeth Wilson.² In this sense aesthetic judgments revolve around taste and assessments of the beautiful, or the sublime, or, in this case the “cool.” Taste is a particular kind of judgment which relies on a *sensus communis*, common sense, or sense of the community. Immanuel Kant in his third *Critique* explores this role of judgment based on soliciting agreement from others in an aesthetic mode that resonates with the political as to what is shared by a community, or, what is a matter of public concern.³ This is a more ordinary level of judgment seeking affirmation, feeling, and meaning with others rather than applying a rule to a particular case.⁴ Assuming “cool” operates as an aesthetic judgment of taste, cool then operates not in the sense of “cool”/“not cool” in terms of applying a rule (although that may happen), but rather the emergence of cool requires a shift in a shared sensibility to see new figures as “cool.” In this sense of newness, “cool” is intimately linked to fashion systems.

I extend the philosophy of aesthetic judgments in the realm of fashion as an ordinary aesthetics and a type of everyday judgment produced by individuals in shared public spaces. Therefore, I look at the politics of visibility and invisibility in the aesthetic judgment of “cool” when it comes to aging bodies. I argue there is a shifting aesthetics of the aging body from simple decline and invisibility to an aesthetics of style and creativity we could associate with “cool.” To the question “Is old the new cool?” I answer, yes, to an extent. To explore this claim, and its limitations, I trace some cultural shifts primarily in the United States as I look at the cultural artifacts of the “advanced style” movement produced by photographer and writer Ari Seth Cohen based in New York City. By noting the rise of stylish Instagram grandmas, mentioning additions of aging bodies into advertising and on runways, and reading Cohen’s books, blog, and film, I suggest we see the development of an ordinary, albeit limited shift, in reframing the aging body aesthetically through street fashion which has spilled over into high fashion proper. That is, we see hints of a developing shared sense, a *sensus communis*, or a social imaginary that helps to shift how we think of aging against the dominant decline narrative. This view has broader implications for a more inclusive democratic life across generations. However, despite my claim of a new “coolness” in aesthetic judgments in relation to aging bodies which I find valuable in visualizing aging in more humane ways, the arena of visibility and what counts as “cool” remains constrained by material resources, a primarily consumptive logic, and by the very counter-narrative aesthetic it offers.⁵

1. See Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress, & Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015²), 9; Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016).

2. Giovanni Matteucci and Stefano Marino, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives on Fashion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*.

3. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).

4. Linda Zerilli offers a rich exploration of soliciting this type of judgment in concert with others in *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

5. Counter-narratives are narratives that are told against the dominant narratives. In this case, against the dominant aesthetic narrative that sees the aged as decrepit, in decline, or uncool.

Aging Bodies, Resisting Simple Decline Narratives

What do I mean by the aging body? While aging is always contextual to time and space, in established democratic societies, aging is typically viewed as a problem or told through a narrative of decline. Simone de Beauvoir explores this general degeneration and what we could call an aesthetics of horror or the grotesque of old age as an objective and subjective experience always mediated by others. Beauvoir says that while some cultures value old age, in general “the vast majority of mankind look upon the coming of old age with sorrow or rebellion.”⁶ She continues, “It fills them with more aversion than death itself.”⁷ Her assessment is that how we see and experience old age as a horror or trial is part of a broader indictment of how we treat human beings at any age, since she argues society cares only about the ability of individuals to be profitable rather than as fellow humans or active citizens.⁸

We know empirically that the world population is aging rapidly based on census and demographic reports. According to the World Health Organization’s key facts about aging, aging is happening at a more rapid pace than in the past: “Between 2015 and 2050, the proportion of the world’s population over 60 years will nearly double from 12% to 22%. By 2020, the number of people aged 60 years and older will outnumber children younger than 5 years. In 2050, 80% of older people will be living in low- and middle-income countries.”⁹ How to make sense of these shifts in demographics is the task of governments, political, social, and cultural organizations as well as part of personal and family decisions in different political communities. Fashion studies offers one way to make sense of these shifts outside the rhetoric of threats, danger, and decline.

Still, aging, the aged, or old age depends on who defines it and how. There are general benchmarks in Western democracies. In the United States federal civil rights legislation such as the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) passed in 1967, states that age discrimination can occur after age forty. Most benchmarks, however, start at fifty. The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) one of the biggest and most well-known advocacy groups in the U.S. has fifty and over as the ages their group serves. A 2015 marketing report from The Innovation Group studied older Britains over fifty to determine what this generation is about and how brands can respond. Once called the Baby Boomers, the Innovation Group suggests calling them the “Elastic Generation” as they age differently, and purchase differently, than many in the fashion and cultural fields think.¹⁰ Focusing three years later on women in particular in the fifty to seventy age range, they find that the women of the Elastic Generation are “at the vanguard of this change” where “ageless living will become the norm for all of us” and that Elastic Generation women are “Ever the generation of rebels, they are reinventing life past fifty, as they forge the path others will follow.”¹¹ Likewise, for the blogger turned author and filmmaker Ari Seth Cohen, advanced style is from age fifty and over showing that in popular culture as well fifty appears to be the tipping point into “age.” An age range from fifty to seventy and beyond encompasses a wide range of experiences not all of which can be addressed in a marketing and brand report or in the selections of older street style subjects.

6. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 539.

7. Beauvoir, 539.

8. Beauvoir, 543. See also the well-known travel writer Paul Theroux in a recent *New York Times* essay starts his article saying: “In the casual opinion of most Americans, I am an old man, and therefore of little account, past my best.” And yet, for these reasons he says, at age 78 he still travels and writes. Theroux was born in 1941. See the “Paul Theroux’s Mexican Journey” Travel Section (September 28, 2019; last accessed September 28, 2019; <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/23/travel/paul-theroux-mexico-road-trip.html>).

9. “Aging and Health” (February 5, 2018; last accessed September 28, 2019; <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ageing-and-health>).

10. The report from 2017 states: “‘Elastic Generation: The Female Edit’ is a macro trend report that focuses on British women aged 53-72. It follows on from our original research that was published in 2015. Our research comprised several methodologies and covered the period May 2017 to December 2017” <https://www.jwtintelligence.com/2018/01/new-trend-report-elastic-generation-female-edit/>

11. “New Trend Report: Elastic Generation — The Female Edit” by JWT Intelligence (January 23, 2018; last accessed September 30, 2019; <https://www.jwtintelligence.com/2018/01/new-trend-report-elastic-generation-female-edit/>

Still, aging is a surprisingly undertheorized and understudied area of philosophy and political theory. While many feminist philosophers have explored aging,¹² perhaps because women are typically caregivers for both young and old and there is more pressure on women to age well, there hasn't been much focus on aging in terms of the self and the political community, most attention is in medical fields and social services. Diana Coole's work is one exception. Coole notes, "Political theorists have so far paid considerably less attention to age than other aspects of subaltern identity such as gender, race or ethnicity, but this situation seems likely to change."¹³ One reason for the change is the need to shift from the current framework of old equals older than forty, or simply non-productive workers, or the view of older folks as a kind of sublime in the natural disaster formulation of a "grey tsunami" threatening to overwhelm state services. There has been little space to think otherwise. The realm of aesthetics in relation to fashion, dress, and style offers one such space to think otherwise.

Thinking about Aging Otherwise, Declining to Decline, Be Cool

As Giovanni Matteucci writes, "the challenge of fashion consists in an invitation to understand the realm of the aesthetic as a complex domain of mutually intertwined everyday practices, rather than a domain made up [of] clearly defined and indeed idealized cultural contexts."¹⁴ Fashion, he suggests, is best thought of as a "constellation" as an aesthetic phenomenon not a phenomenon with necessarily clear contents, but with shifting and ambiguous boundaries.¹⁵ For Elizabeth Wilson, "In all societies the body is 'dressed', and everywhere dress and adornment play symbolic, communicative, and aesthetic roles."¹⁶ Wilson argues there is a "vital *aesthetic* element to fashion."¹⁷ This element allows us to see dress and fashion as an expression of ideas and desires circulating in society especially visible in the modernity of city life.¹⁸ Fashion, dress, and style are intertwined in spaces of everyday encounters with others. With Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik I agree that we can think of "fashion in the broad sense of the term, that is, also referring to dress, appearances and style."¹⁹ I draw on this broadness and acknowledge fashion as change, change in terms of "dress styles changing" and as the new. Fashion is also the contested, and contested not simply in elite reviews of *haute couture*, but also in street style and everyday encounters.²⁰ While fashion does not account for all of the variations in dress,²¹ it is useful as a way to orient ourselves to the judgments of taste associated with fashion and how dress and style are not reducible to particular fashion trends, but are rather interactive as individuals and communities develop their own unique style or way of interweaving dress and fashion systems. In this regard Stefano Marino argues that fashion is an important element of our world where fashion's aesthetic potentialities lie:

...in the capacity of fashion to express by aesthetic means (that is, by means of variable combinations of forms, colors, structures, techniques, motifs, etc.) symbolic contents or ideas that come to play a relevant role in the definition of both our individual and collective identities. Besides this, the reason of its importance also lies to some extent in its capacity to call

12. Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Jane Gallop, *Sexuality, Disability, and Aging: Queer Temporalities of the Phallus* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

13. Diana Coole, "Reconstructing the Elderly: A Critical Analysis of Pensions and Population Policies in an Era of Demographic Ageing," *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 11, n. 1 (2012): 41-67.

14. Giovanni Matteucci, "Fashion: A Conceptual Constellation," in *Philosophical Perspectives on Fashion*, ed. Giovanni Matteucci and Stefano Marino, 77.

15. Matteucci, 71.

16. Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 3.

17. Wilson, 9.

18. Wilson, 9.

19. Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik, "Introduction" to *Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 3.

20. Entwistle, *Fashioned Body*, XV.

21. Entwistle, xvii.

traditional aesthetic standards into question, thus promoting a general rethinking of the range, value, significance, and limits of the *aesthetic dimension* as such.²²

Literally fashioning new views of aging bodies through dress and style is an aesthetic encounter with decline narrative of aging. It is, we could say a “declining to decline” as one ages.²³

While who or what determines the fashionable can be ambiguous and contradictory whether from elites or more ordinary judgments, fashion does require some sense of shared judgment, some feeling and assessment of the self from and with others. The idea of a *sensus communis*, what the political philosopher Hannah Arendt would call a shared world, or what I draw on in terms of theories of social imaginary significations from the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, sets a background of intelligibility. While Arendt and Castoriadis are both interested in the creation of the new as this appears in politics from the horrific — the Holocaust, totalitarianisms, the conformity of mass society — they are conversely interested in how we judge the potential for freedom in novel creations emerging in the interplay of the instituting and instituted imagination in the plurality of acting together or in a democratic mode. For my purposes, this is important when we think about what Castoriadis calls “new figures of the thinkable” that emerge to give shape to and create phenomena in the world.²⁴ While neither Arendt nor Castoriadis are particularly interested in non-heroic or ordinary examples of democratic potential, I suggest there are new figures captured by “cool” in relation to aging bodies which points us to an aesthetic and politics drawn from the everyday. We can track these in the artifacts of images in digital and print media. As historian of aging Andrew Achenbaum writes, “Images are integral to making bridges across conceptual islands.”²⁵ In representational politics, aging is something all bodies go through if you live long enough, yet how do we envision aging?²⁶ Beauvoir suggests that the elderly person is required to take a view of themselves from the outside. She writes, that the elderly person is “pointed out by custom, by the behaviors or others and by the vocabulary itself” such that “we try to picture what we are through the visions that others have of us.”²⁷ In a more positive sense of the pleasures for women in playing with clothing and fashion, Iris Marion Young writes, “Women take pleasure in clothes, not just wearing clothes, but also in looking at clothes and images of women in clothes, because they encourage fantasies of transport and transformation.”²⁸ The visions others have of us are often mediated in an aesthetic register through judgments of taste, such as “cool.”

So, what is “cool”? The relevant Oxford English Dictionary definition defines cool as a *colloquial* term originating in the United States which is: “The quality or condition of being cool ... hipness, stylishness.” A Wikipedia answer starts with:

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22. Stefano Marino, “Philosophical Accounts of Fashion in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century: A Historical Reconstruction,” in *Philosophical Perspectives on Fashion*, ed. Giovanni Matteucci and Stefano Marino, 55-6.
 23. See Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997). More recently Jane Gallop has drawn on Gullette’s counter narrative of decline in her own work on aging *Sexuality, Disability, and Aging: Queer Temporalities of the Phallus* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).
 24. Cornelius Castoriadis, “Logic, Imagination Reflection,” in *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and Imagination*, ed. David Ames Curtis (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 271. See also Zerilli, *Democratic Theory Judgment*.
 25. Andrew Achenbaum, “Images of Old Age in America, 1790-1970: A Vision and a Re-Vision,” in *Images of Aging: Cultural Representations of Later Life*, ed. Mike Featherstone and Andrew Wernick (New York: Routledge, 1995), 20.
 26. In other work on textiles and clothing I have explored resistant practices drawn from Maya communities in Guatemala and a sustainable fashion company in the U.S. South to argue for ethical, sustainable, and fair trade practices as practices of cultural preservation and material political interventions in the realm of craft, collective and individual property rights, and in contexts of decoloniality. This work on the aging body and the aesthetic imperatives of cool also draws on a framework of resistance to dominant ideals that dismiss or dispossess the aging body of visibility, humanity, or rights.
 27. Beauvoir, *Philosophy of Age*, 291.
 28. Young, “Women Recovering Our Clothes,” 71. Of course this is not only confined to women. Young also notes citing the work of fashion theorist Anne Hollander, “We experience our clothes, if Hollander is right, in the context of images of clothes from magazines, film, TV, that draw us into situations and personalities we can play at.” We can add new media such as blogs, Instagram, and other digital outlets as well.

Coolness is an aesthetic of attitude, behavior, comportment, appearance and style which is generally admired. Because of the varied and changing connotations of cool, as well as its subjective nature, the word has no single meaning. It has associations of composure and self-control (cf. the OED definition) and often is used as an expression of admiration or approval. Although commonly regarded as slang it is widely used among disparate social groups and has endured in usage for generations.²⁹

While “cool” might be most associated with youth or youthfulness as well as “street style” we could also see “cool” as “being real” or “being oneself” without caring what other people think as the online Urban Dictionary suggest.³⁰ While shifts in cool in fashion often emerge from street style especially as this facilitates a public presence, or visibility, to many marginalized groups from racial to sexual minorities, my suggestion is that this can be extended to aging bodies as a marginalized group that is gaining new visibility though the aesthetics and politics of “cool.”

Elizabeth Wilson says that “The urbanity of fashion masks all emotions, save that of triumph; the demeanor of the fashionable person must be blasé — cool.”³¹ This idea of “cool” is generally about a type of nonchalance or a type of self-confidence.

Photographed with a hip thrust forward to show off her Margiela apron dress and modishly frayed jeans, Lyn Slater projects a kind of swagger pretty rare among her peers. A professor at the Graduate School of Social Service at Fordham University, with hyper-chic side gigs as a model and blogger, she is known to a wider public as an Instagram idol. Sure, she’s 64, a time when some women her age are feeling pressed to close up shop. But if you are Ms. Slater, that’s not going to happen.³²

Slater has a well-known Instagram account, Accidental Icon, with followers from all age ranges. Her confident attitude as an older woman is enticing. She says: “I flaunt it, ... I’m not 20. I don’t want to be 20, but I’m really freaking cool. That’s what I think about when I’m posting a photo.”³³ These older women and so called Instagram grandmas are what La Ferla calls a “subversive cadre of women over 60 [who] prove that ‘old’ is not what it used to be.”³⁴ Indeed, they are cool.

To illustrate how cool as an aesthetic judgment of taste and as a political phenomena of visibility produces more empathetic ways of seeing the aging body, I use as an example the work of the photographer and author Ari Seth Cohen whose blog,³⁵ books, and now a documentary film are organized around the term “advanced style.” Advanced style Cohen says is about featuring “people who live full creative lives. They live life to the fullest, age gracefully and continue to grow and challenge themselves.” In his “Introduction” to *Advanced Style*, Cohen talks about the influence of his grandmothers on his life. After moving to New York City as an adult in his twenties, Cohen began photographing stylish older women for his blog, then book published in his thirties. Saying he never considered old a bad word, he says: “To be old is to be experienced, wise, and advanced. The ladies I photograph challenge stereotypical views on age and aging.”³⁶

29. The Wikipedia entry starts with this description, emphasis in original, last accessed September 7, 2019: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cool_\(aesthetic\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cool_(aesthetic)).

30. The Urban Dictionary says: “A cool person to me is being real. Being themselves and not caring how other people view what they say or do. When I say you’re cool, that’s what I mean. Today too many people are concerned how others view them. Posting pictures on social media sites of themselves on vacation or where they are eating dinner that particular evening. Fuck that. Do things for yourself and for YOU to enjoy it, not to show everyone else what you’re doing” (last accessed September 7, 2019; <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Cool>).

31. Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 9.

32. Ruth La Ferla, “The Glamorous Grandmas of Instagram,” *New York Times* (June 20, 2018; last accessed September 28, 2019; <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/20/style/instagram-grandmas.html?searchResultPosition=1>).

33. La Ferla.

34. La Ferla.

35. See <https://www.advanced.style> (last accessed September 29, 2019).

36. Ari Seth Cohen, “Introduction” to *Advanced Style* (Brooklyn, New York: PowerHouse Books, 2012).

“Advanced Style” is clearly a play on words. Advanced in the sense of advanced in age and advanced in terms of refined, creative, or, in the parlance I use here, cool. For Cohen, being over fifty years old counts as “advanced” in age as he notes at the beginning of the documentary film *Advanced Style*.³⁷ Cohen has produced now three popular photography books based on the street photographs he takes of stylish older people, mostly women. His work has been covered in many media outlets and several of his subjects have become well-known with media appearances and often appearing in advertising or fashion campaigns.³⁸ The first book is *Advanced Style* (2012), followed by *Advanced Style: Older and Wiser* (2016), and most recently *Advanced Love* (2018). There is also a documentary film of 2014 also called *Advanced Style*.³⁹ Cohen produces what I argue is an aesthetics of cool associated with aging bodies. These works show aging bodies in a “complex domain of mutually entwined everyday practices” to return to Matteucci’s formulation. This is not “cool” as dictated by a fashion house or fashion elites, but a street level view of cool.

Cohen’s work features street style photography from several cities, but in particular New York City. The subjects he photographs have an affinity with Walter Benjamin’s *flâneur*, they are all expressive in their public presentation via fashionable clothing and accessories as they walk the streets. There is also a resonance in the Italian tradition of *sprezzatura* or having a well-turned out, nonchalant style, a term first coined in the sixteenth century and especially evident in stylish people, especially older people, walking around town or out for an evening *passagiata*.⁴⁰ While Cohen does not comment explicitly on questions of race, ethnic identity, or other identity categories that have been politically significant, most subjects are white appearing, some have darker skin or we recognize as African-American (such as former dancer Jacquie Tajah Murdock who danced at the Apollo Theater in New York City, a well-known theater showcasing African-American performance art and music). In the film we may recognize others as immigrants with an accented English or identified as Jewish. It is not surprising that women’s bodies have more prominence in these photographs, books, and the film given the particular pressure women face in relation to aging in general — the challenge of being no longer beautiful or desirable. While older men can famously look distinguished as they age, older women are typically rendered more invisible.

To present older women then with a sense of “shout-out” style is a type of coolness, and also often a type of sexiness in this postmenopausal set which does have an edge to it. If we look at the images we see a great deal of creativity and style in self-presentation even within the constraints of how older bodies are expected to appear in public — these subjects do not shrink into the background. There are colorful clothing combinations, patterns, hats, texture, and fabulous shoes. We see the play aspect of fashion, dress, and clothing combined. All of Cohen’s subjects stand out for their style, although some are more eccentric than others in the books. As we can see in the photos, but we learn more about in the interviews in the film, their dress and style is a combination of high and low, exclusive fashion (sometimes the Chanel bag) and vintage finds. Not all of Cohen’s seven New York subjects featured in the film are wealthy, some have retired from media or design jobs, some are still looking for more work or to put their creative talents to use. Cohen appears in parts of the film as something of an agent, also a friend, helping to shepherd media appearances or fashion shoots for some of his older ladies. Cohen and his subjects often talk about the messages they get from others, especially older women, about the inspiration they take from the blog and books. There is something freeing, and refreshing, to see older people have a sense of self, and the confidence to not make much of what others think especially given the disciplinarity of much of fashion and appearances for bodies of all ages. Cohen does have an aesthetic

37. Director Lina Plioplyte; Writers Ari Cohen, Lina Plioplyte. 2014.

38. This is also shown in the film with, for example, appearances on the U.S. morning show *The View* as well as Cohen and three other women going to the talk show *Ricki Lake*. We also see in the film how some of the subjects of his photos and the film were featured in advertising such as for Kmart and for the Paris fashion house Lanvin. *Advanced Style* the book sold very well and the film has also been reviewed favorably in mainstream media.

39. Director Lina Plioplyte; Writers Ari Cohen, Lina Plioplyte. 2014.

40. Thanks to Eleonora Corbanese for this point made in her presentation “The Anatomy of Coolness” and in conversation at the “Be Cool! Aesthetic Imperatives and Social Practices” Conference (University of Bologna, Rimini Campus: May 17, 2019).

preference, he picks subjects who like to play with color, texture, clothing of different eras, stunning accessories, and often hats. Still, I suggest the overall aesthetic of advanced style is in keeping with the emergence of “cool” in relation to aging bodies as a studied nonchalance to be admired and imitated if not now, then later in life.

While I am looking at the aesthetics of cool in relation to aging bodies found in street style presentations, the embodied experience of these aging bodies should also be acknowledged. As Joanne Entwistle argues, the body and experience of embodiment is how bodies become social and produce political meanings. Her work is important to theorize this experience in terms of adornment and clothing. We experience our bodies in spaces where the pressure to conform and the ability to play with our self-presentation is shaped by social and political forces outside our control. In *Advanced Style* the film, we do have narrations about the pleasure of looking good, or being turned out well, or appearing as “cool” as an older person. There is also attention to challenges of aging such as caring for an aging spouse or friend, health scares, the death of one of the fellow advanced style ladies, Zelda Kaplan age ninety-five, who dies while in attendance with Cohen and others at a show during New York Fashion Week. Aging does bring with it these challenges. To the credit of the film, these realities are included. Still, the overall tone, the overall message, is one of joy and finding pleasure in self-presentation as stylish older bodies. It is an upbeat film.

I have been arguing that the aesthetics of cool creates space to refigure the aging body in more humane, empathetic, and ethical ways producing a visibility to aging outside the rhetoric of decrepitude or decay. In this sense, “cool” can tap into a democratic judgment of a *sensus communis* or construct social imaginary significations that allow for aging bodies to be full parts of a democratic community in this imaginative realm. However, despite my appreciation of an emerging aesthetic of cool in relation to aging bodies as offering a positive counterpoint to narratives of decline, invisibility, and inattention as fellow citizen or workers, there are several limitations of this claim to keep in mind. What counts as “cool” remains constrained by material resources, a primarily consumptive logic, and by the very counter-narrative aesthetic it offers.

First, there is the question of resources and leisure. With this type of street style in this demographic, most of the subjects emerge from creative fields, are retired, and have some social mobility as well as physical mobility. Notably in the books we do not know much about the biographies of all but a few of the subjects, and those biographies tend to be upbeat and inspirational. Instead we see beautiful photos of stylish older folks. This covers over, or does not draw our attention to what makes possible such ability to appear on the street even in a wheelchair or with a cane and be noticed. While the street is famously open to all walks of life, not all bodies can access this public space in the same way if more immobile or without the confidence or ability to do so. While retirement for many can be a new opportunity for growth and activity with a second career or more civic engagement, this leisure time can also lead to loneliness or loss of self.

Second, there is a consumptive logic to much of this new attention to aging bodies as “cool” given the reality that this generation often has more disposable income than the previous much older generation before it or the generations following them. This is explicitly acknowledged by advertisers seeking to diversify their appeal with older models or appeals to an older demographic. While there can be good intentions behind including older women as models such as in the British designer Simone Rocha’s show of 2017 who said she was thinking about mothers, daughters, and granddaughters in choosing to have an age range in her models, but it is also good business.⁴¹ The *Advanced Style* film and advanced aesthetics counters this consumptive logic somewhat by noting the thrifting and creativity of dress since money can’t buy style, but even here the view of the individual as a self-creation emerges which resonates perhaps uncomfortably with neoliberal views of self-making more so than a rhetoric of sustainability or recycling or thrift. Cool is often marketed for aging bodies whose resources as a post-war generation have in general outpaced the previous and the following generations. Cool older folks are good for

41. Maire Bladt, “Who Were the Older Models Walking for Simone Rocha?,” *Vogue* (February 19, 2017; last accessed September 17, 2019; <https://www.vogue.fr/fashion/top-models/diaporama/fwah2017-simone-rocha-london-fashion-week-older-models-fall-winter-2017-2018-benedetta-barzini-jan-de-villeneuve-marie-sophie-wilson-cecilia-chancellor/41028>).

business. But there are many things that older bodies, cool or not, need such as quality health care, adequate housing, social lives, the possibility to work, and sustainable resources especially if caring for other family members from adult children, peers, to grandchildren.

Third, this is an urban centered view of cool — which arguably is part of an aesthetic of cool — but this view can deny or squeeze out other views of positive aging bodies in fashion, dress, and clothing appearances. It is also one not only particular to Cohen's view; we see this in the presentation of other well-known age icons such as Iris Apfel whose style also tends to the more daring in clothing and accessory choices.⁴² In relation to the film *Advanced Style*, reviewer Anita Gates, while appreciating how “captivating, even uplifting at times” the film can be, worries that in the quest to make older women visible the view of aesthetics of the sixty and over set is reduced to the “eccentric.”⁴³ This view of cool is also almost relentlessly positive. This narrowness in the aesthetic squeezes out space for other ways to imagine aging bodies in popular culture and denies a broader range of experiences of aging which does have its difficulties, tragedies, and challenges. It covers over the leaking bodies, the aches and pains, the adjustments that also are part of aging in relation to sexuality, sex, sense of self, and material circumstances. To offer a contrast to the photographs, images, and narratives of cool that I have presented, I turn briefly to two portraitists: Rembrandt van Rijn, the well-known Dutch painter of the 17th century and Alice Neel an American 20th century painter. Both take themselves as subjects and paint themselves in old age in ways that broaden the aesthetic register of the aging body. Rembrandt, for example, shows a tiredness in his expression in a late portrait after financial losses and family troubles.⁴⁴ The presentation of his face puts his clothing into the background but the dark quality of his dress showcases the fatigued expression on his face. Alice Neel paints herself in some chic glasses but naked, the lack of clothing revealing something not often seen, and not so much in evidence in the “cool” aesthetic I have discussed — more of the sagging body, the wrinkles of age, the slump in posture — but with a directness to her gaze.⁴⁵ Both self-portraits do have direct gazes. Both artists ask of us the viewers to see aging in new ways, ways that expand the aesthetic to encompass a more complex experience of life.

Conclusion

While cool is a welcome shift in the social imaginaries of aging bodies as shown in street fashion of once overlooked bodies, it is familiar as a consumerist, individualist model, and we should not stop there if we are interested in who and how we become aging bodies in public spaces. Nonetheless, the “cool” aesthetic of aging bodies is a positive step in reimagining how we see aging bodies as we continue to struggle with what it would mean to be more equal and more free across the trajectory of a lifetime.

42. See the film “Iris” directed by Albert Maysles (2014).

43. See Anita Gates, “What Becomes a Woman Most?” film review, *New York Times* (September 25, 2014; last accessed September 28, 2019; <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/26/movies/advanced-style-about-fashion-plates-of-a-certain-vintage.html?searchResultPosition=4>).

44. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait* <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.79.html>, 1659, Oil on Canvas, Andrew W. Mellon Collection, 1937.1.72

45. 1980 Self Portrait, Oil on Canvas, 54 x 40 inches / 137.2 x 101.6 cm, National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C.

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