

FASHION'S AWKWARD RELATIONSHIP WITH COOL – AND WHY IT MATTERS NOW

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Abstract

Fashion studies is burgeoning, and a timely explosion of critique and revision promises to take apart the glossy thresholds which have enabled clothes and their circulation to obscure the social relations between people. The politics of production vs consumption, the violence of taste, and the microaggressions of fashion gossip, all are being scrutinised with renewed energy and conviction, fuelled by the clarity of purpose climate crisis brings. A growing mental health crisis also underlines the seriousness of fashion's crimes. In this context, wanting to be or look 'cool' seems like a tragic joke. Here, I will question the extent to which coolness remains relevant to understanding and 'reimagining' fashion. What do we lose, if we ignore the pull of cool?

In fact, fashion has long had an awkward relationship with cool, partly because cool is itself an unresolved concept with several contradictory elements. Cool can simply mean fashionability – but it can also mean something that must transcend fashionability. Though humanities scholars have been fascinated by it, and many papers are published about how to find and market it, this paper will argue that fashion studies has tended to skirt around coolness, using synonyms and euphemisms to avoid having to confront what is arguably core to the fashion endeavour in modernising societies.

Furthermore, the theory available to explore coolness with has been developed largely in the era of the descendants of dandyism – and the incorporation of dissent into global branding (Frank, 1997) which took place in the latter decades of the 20th century. Some scholars conclude that what we mean by coolness is changing (e.g., Dar Nimrod et al, 2012). Of course, specifically what cool looks like and to whom is perpetually renegotiated, but more importantly, the social context for performances of cool has changed significantly since most of the theory still in use (e.g., Pountain and Robins, Belk et al, 2010) was established. This paper in development will begin to connect cool theory with newer theorisations of fashion (e.g., Busch,

2020; Payne, 2021) specifically in the context of contemporary forms of modernity and the networked, quantified self.

Introduction

The goal of ‘trying to be cool’ may often be derided, and ideal forms of selfhood may also be shifting, but the multiple and elusive motivations for fashion consumption, in which coolness is surely implicated, hold great power - even over those with stated commitment to progressive social and environmental sustainability goals. Some years ago, Alan Liu stated that ‘there is no more beauty, tragedy, good or evil – only cool or not cool’ (2004:3). Is this (still) true? And if it is, what does it mean for endeavours to reimagine, rethink and repurpose fashion in the service of the greater good?

Some have explored the possibilities of promoting sustainable fashion products and behaviours through cool, just as numerous articles continue to present research exploring ways to attach the magic of cool to wasteful products, ideas and services. But is cool, as a value, as a goal for self-hood, inherently incompatible with sustainability goals? Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t. It all depends on what we mean by cool – and this is our first stumbling block, because so far, there is a contradictory lack of consensus about what cool even is (Brown 2021). I do not have space here to fully explore this variety of perspectives on cool - this is the focus of another essay (Brown, 2021). However, it is useful to hold in mind five loose and overlapping themes. First, cool has been understood as a survival strategy and a crucible of cultural innovation in vexed experiences of modernity – for example among Black American jazz musicians (Macadams, 2002); second, it has been seen as a mode of capitalism which nullifies dissent by incorporating logics of rebellion and individualism (Frank, 1997).

Thirdly, it has been viewed as a form of distinction – or even a new class system - among consumers, especially the young (Belk et al, 2010). Fourth, some see it as a necessary response to the culture of technical rationality (Mentges, 2000; Liu, 2004); and finally, it has also been viewed as a contemporary form of dissent, which may not necessarily be commodified, expressed through performances of affectlessness (Berlant, 2015).

Evidently, fashion practices of myriad kinds may feature in each of these, yet the paper must begin by addressing the awkward relationship between coolness and fashion. This will demonstrate that simply to understand current fashion systems and behaviours, grappling with cool in a more conscious, concerted way is necessary. This is followed by a short, illustrative examination of whether and how cool figures in selected works of what could be called new fashion ‘acti-criticism’ (Busch, 2020 and Payne 2019, 2021) both in terms of how they understand the current dominant state of affairs in fashion, and how they imagine solutions, or futures.

This will enable me to evaluate the relevance of cool theory to fashion studies today and to indicate the potential shortcomings of both cool theory and fashion theory, in terms of being able to move forward productively. The goal is not to resolve conceptual problems, but to illustrate the need for renewed research energy around coolness generally, and in order to understand and challenge existing fashion practices effectively in our current and moving cultural, technological and economic landscape.

Fashion and Cool – Awkward!

Despite cool being used in scholarship – and everyday speech - as a synonym for ‘fashionable’, the study of fashion (including fashionable subcultures), has barely engaged with the concept directly. Given the sheer volume of cool manifest and discussed in fashion magazine editorial, fashion images, and branding - not to mention the clear valorisation of nonchalance, the blasé, and disdain in fashion imagery- it is truly remarkable that this relationship has all but escaped explicit and rigorous scrutiny. Cool is fashion’s elephant in the room (well, one of them).

In 2000, Fashion Theory published a very useful article by Gabriele Mentges which does connect coolness with fashion in productive ways. Focused on the clothing and behaviours of German fighter pilots in WW1, Mentges neatly extrapolates relevance to aspects of fashion stretching forward and outward. The leather jacket is discussed as a cool signifier, yes, but she also explores aspects of the archetypal ‘fashion’ body (composed and smooth of movement), and face (expressionless disdain). Yet this was not developed into a substantial theory of how fashion and cool interrelate. In 2002, established fashion scholar Rebecca Arnold wrote about Louise Dahl-Wolfe, a fashion photographer known for her strikingly blasé, self-possessed, nonchalant imagery in the 1930s and beyond. But coolness is not explored in the imagery, nor deployed theoretically; instead, the focus is on ‘American- ness’ and ‘democracy’ as constructed against the fashion backdrop of Parisian/European dominance. In 2007, Caroline Evans, renowned scholar of modernity and fashion, in her review of fin de siècle haute fashion *Fashion at the Edge*, also avoided directly engaging with cool - Alexander McQueen’s aesthetic is described as one of ‘hard grace’. In this period, numerous core texts on cool were published, such as Stearns (1994), Frank (1997) Pountain and Robins (2000). Why did Arnold and Evans sidestep the ‘c’ word?

Another aim of this paper is to begin to bring fashion theory and cool theory into conversation, because although the literature of cool accepts aesthetic self-fashioning as integral to performances of cool, it has never directly concerned itself with the fashion system either, even when documenting subcultural innovations ‘against the mainstream’. (I ask - is it cool to be fashionable?). Thornton’s ‘subcultural capital’ is a take on Bourdieu’s cultural capital, for which she uses ‘cool’ as a colloquial shorthand; and Nancarrow et al coined a Maffesolian ‘tribal capital’ expressly to delineate cool (Nancarrow, Nancarrow and Page, 2002) yet these have not been related rigorously to being in/out or antagonistic to fashion. To consumption, but not to the specific goals and practices of fashion. The outcome of Nancarrow et al’s lack of explicit engagement with fashion is an elision between the ‘innovators’ and the ‘early adopters’ of Rogers’ original ‘diffusion of innovations’ (Rogers, 1962), who are more or less the same; brave and competent consumers of the new. Yet the perceived difference between ‘setting’ and ‘following’ a fashion trend – no matter how quickly or confidently - is routinely used to demarcate the all-too-important boundaries between cool and not cool.

This reminds us of the contradictory elements of cool (Haselstein et al say cool contains a ‘structural ambivalence’, 2013) some of which are most evident when viewed in the context of fashion. Michael’s study of young urban creatives’ ‘hipness’ (hip may not be an exact synonym for cool, but the terms are often used interchangeably) highlights this contradiction; her respondents ‘both upheld and derided the goal of trendiness’ (Michael, 2015).

The problem is this: cool can simply mean popularity, fashionability – but it can also mean something that must somehow transcend fashionability. This connects to how cool may be used pejoratively (as a scholar of this subject I attract numerous boundary-marking responses where the really cool (?) people tell me they are ‘not interested in cool, or what the cool people do’). In this context, cool means ‘whatever everyone else thinks they require in order to fit in – or stand out’. But cool also means ‘someone who evidently does not care about the rules of fashion’ – OR someone who is so in tune with fashion’s ebbs and flows, that they are visibly ‘ahead of the curve’. (This contradiction is recently evident in Arielli’s discussion of cool in relation to aesthetic agency and self-construction (2020) but it also features, albeit unacknowledged, in numerous fashion studies, including the more recent assessments of fashion geared towards more sustainable fashion futures, as we shall see).

How can the same word mean all those things? And what about the aesthetic and material forms of cool, which absolutely must change for cool to fulfil its role as a form of social distinction, and yet which the evidence suggests also have several qualities (minimalism, androgyny, black) which have remained confoundingly constant since high modernism? We might conclude right now, and perhaps as some fashion scholars have already, that cool is just too vague and polysemic a word, and therefore, an academic red herring.

However, studies which combine multiple perspectives on cool such as Haselstein et al (2013), Brown (2015), reveal that despite contradictions, themes in the wider literature of cool overlap and rhyme enough to suggest substantial common threads, further scrutiny of which might hold the key to a more usable theory of cool.

Furthermore, this matters because the goal of cool is problematic for society. It is implicated in idealized ‘toxic’ masculinity associated with difficulty accessing education and violence against women (hooks, 2004); to the everyday narcissism of consumers who, enchanted by their own reflections, cannot see or refuse to see, the social, political and environmental consequences of their actions, from low-income fast-fashion consumers, to high-earning postfeminist neo-liberals in high-end fashion, failing to assist other women (Gill, 2016).

Cool in the New School of Fashion ‘Acti-criticism’

Indeed, this anti-sociality is especially evident in Otto Von Busch’s recent work *The Psychopolitics of Fashion*, which uses being ‘in or out, cool or not cool’ (2020:13) as the basis for his breath-taking inventory of ways in which fashion (under its ‘current state’) draws people into conflict with one another and themselves, in states of shame, anxiety, false freedom and oppression. For Busch, coolness is the achievement of fashionability, always at somebody else’s expense, someone necessarily deemed ‘uncool’. Here is a clear overlap between the goal of coolness and the scale of damage - psychological, social and environmental - done in the name of fashion. But do we understand cool well enough to use it productively in our attempts to ‘reimagine’ fashion for a more sustainable and equitable future? And what about the forms of cool not focused on fashionability? In a post growth/post- apocalyptic future, where survival is once more the primary goal, might coolness, in all its forms, be an irrelevance?

Next, I will explore how cool features in a small sample of works from fashion activism. Along with Otto Von Busch, I draw on Alice Payne's *Designing Fashion's Futures* (2021) and 'Fashion Futuring in the Anthropocene: Sustainable Fashion as "Taming" and "Rewilding"' (Payne, 2019). The works of Busch and Payne are characterized by their comprehensive use of cultural (and in Busch's case, psychological) theory, as it pertains to fashion, including the cultural implications of neo-liberalism and the rhetoric of cruel optimism (though Busch references Han (2018) rather than Berlant (2011)) which have also been used in recent considerations of coolness. Both Busch and Payne represent an activism which is informed by empirical research, and a radical pedagogy.

First, I will explore the potential connections with a variety of cool perspectives in Busch's poles of 'conflict' and 'courage' (2020) and in Payne's 'taming' and 'rewilding' (Payne, 2019). It is worth noting that 'conflict and courage' and 'taming and rewilding' do not denote the same things and do not operate as binaries in the same way. For Busch, 'conflict' and the resulting 'violence' is the major problem under the current state of fashion, whereas 'courage' is the quality we might strive towards which could potentially lead fashion practices away from their unbridled negative consequences. For Payne, both taming and rewilding are potential solutions to the crisis of the anthropocene, or the capitalocene, and although they could be viewed in opposition, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Neither author explicitly engages with cool theory, though the term is used sporadically, more so in Busch. My analysis draws on usage of the term but also discussion of ideas incorporated in cool summarised at the start of this paper.

Both authors provide rigorous accounts of fashion as it currently dominates (Busch's 'current state of fashion' and Payne's 'dominant fashion system'). In both accounts, fashionability and cool are used interchangeably, and cool therefore figures explicitly as a system of distinction based on a competitive and changing dynamic. This aligns with a variety of consumer perspectives on cool; for example, Belk et al (2010) studied the usage of the word 'cool' among a young international cohort, and, informed by cool's history and several previous theorisations, concluded that cool is a new mode of class distinction based on consumption. The idea of rebellion was on the wane, but waxing was what they call 'high key' cool – similar to 'glam cool' (Brown, 2015). This form of cool is strongly associated with celebrity culture and achieved – most likely against the odds – through the acquisition and confident display of wealth and significance. Fashion's bespoke and luxury offerings, as well as their trickled-down entry-level tokens and user-created fast-fashion clothing hauls are obvious tools and drivers toward this.

Both authors also recognize the role of sartorial rebellions in keeping fashion's pendulum swinging. Cool has long been associated with working class subcultures of the pre- and post-WW2 decades, and indeed with the cultural avant-gardes of bohemia, as well as marginalised and oppressed groups. This revolutionary energy, expressed as antagonism towards or ironically, as passion for the rule of fashion is indeed required by the system to innovate and propel the latest novelties, simultaneously excluding all those who are now out of step. Both authors know all too well that dissent expressed towards fashion at a symbolic level feeds it, and this is both a conundrum that creates what Busch calls the 'farce' of ethical fashion and

the reason for Payne's warning against 'making sustainable fashion cool' through aesthetic trend narratives (Payne, 2021:133). All that is cool, will inevitably become uncool. As mentioned in the introduction, this process of commodification of cool culture, dissent and its containment, noted from about the 1960s, has been widely seen not only as the death of the possibility of authentic cool (Frank, 1997) but also the far-reaching transformation of capitalism along neo-liberal lines (McGuigan, 2013). Cool is now capitalism's 'principle legitimating narrative' (McGuigan, 2014:229). According to McGuigan 'Cool is no longer cool' and certainly no longer 'some marginal dissident trend' (2013:265).

Conflict

Coolness is also key to Busch's discussion of fashion 'as conflict'. Citing Quartz and Asp (2016), he states: 'At the heart of fashion there is a conflict that we most often encounter in the colloquial terms of "in vs "out", or in the many forms expressing what is "cool" or "uncool"' (Busch, 2020). The competitive dynamics of trend setting and abandoning are fleshed out in terms very similar to those explored by Simmel and others (despite their historical context of a more visibly rigid and openly acknowledged class system than might be recognised today). Having the right, harder-to-access clothing, makes you 'better' – and the others worse. Needing to have it at precisely the right moment - so core to the fashion mindset that it is routinely parodied - increases the difficulty and intensifies the stakes. As Busch notes, fashion is devalued when it is shared (Busch, 2020). This resonates with cool takes on cultural capital but also with 'hip'; being wise to specialist, exclusive knowledge. If the knowledge is shared, no power or status can be drawn from it. (Hence hip's original value as a counter-hegemonic 'survival tactic' among Black mid-century jazz musicians).

In Busch's framing of fashion as conflict, fashionability is also assumed to be synonymous with coolness. In assessing the violence done by fashion, and between those who play the fashion game, Busch also touches on the illusory nature of individuality, and the expressive freedom or aesthetic autonomy so often promised by fashion. (Aesthetics of autonomy are in fact central to Arielli's (2020) and Warren and Campbells' (2014) conceptions of cool). This illusion is not, Busch says, because there is no real choice (though that may sometimes be the case) but, as Groys (2008), Bauman, (2000) and Han (2015) suggest, because we are 'forced to appear' and compelled to choose (Busch, 2020). This is the 'self- as-project' demanded by neo-liberal capitalism, to which sociological work on cool frequently refers (McGuigan 2014).

In this context, Busch's unpacking of the notion of the 'fashion police' reveals it as far from a frivolous exaggeration. Rather, all of us involved uphold the law of fashion by enacting 'microaggressions', a term currently used to explain the constituency of oppressive disapproval faced by someone – a member of a marginalised group, or an individual being bullied – who routinely receives small, perhaps almost insignificant negative gestures: glances, sighs, or emphatic silences (2020:85). These are the ways we curtail each other's expressive freedoms. Furthermore this form of bullying – by the cool, popular, fashionable people - is typical of behaviour used to define 'in' and 'out' groups in school settings (as numerous high-school dramas illustrate).

These behaviours are also well documented in accounts of individuals renowned for their cool demeanour: proto-cool regency dandies asserted their inner and outer superiority over genuine aristocrats with them ('that calm and wandering gaze, that neither fixes nor will be fixed' (Lister in Walden, 2002:111); Andy Warhol orchestrated the social dynamics of the Factory with them ' your whole house of cards might fall if he didn't whisper his usual "oh,hi" as he passed by' (Koch, 1991:7). These have also been 'under the radar' forms of resistance to power, for example when Charlie Parker refused to remove his sunglasses in a white-owned nightclub, he turned his invisibility as Black American into an assertion of self-possession) Macadams, 2002).

This self-possession, and its related phenomena are important. Busch's work on conflict highlights the scale of what is at stake and at risk in fashion (see also Busch and Hwang, 2018). It simultaneously provides a strong justification for cool's appeal, not just in terms of the distinctions of fashionability, but also in the more affective sense of unshakeability. As Arielli puts it (2020) '...naturalness, absence of constraints, nonchalance and imperturbability (confidence, aplomb, and self-assurance: that is, the inner state of someone who is at ease).

In *Cool Shades* (Brown 2015) I argued that the increasing perils associated with getting your appearance wrong, in the context of fragmenting and expanding contexts and options, had long been one (significant) piece in the jigsaw of the appeal of the cool demeanour.

The allure of an image of someone in control, and on top of the moment, potentially signified by an unshakeable facial and bodily composure (Goffman, 1967) as well as clothing which demonstrates knowledge of what is now and next, speaks not just within the fashion system but in the context of the whole of the modern experience of the self – precarious, contingent and aware of your own lack of significance, like never before.

This view is supported by Arielli (2020) who states that

... practices of coolness based on aesthetic self-construction concern not only the domain of fashion and consumption, but also, could be considered exercises of autonomy and freedom in their own right

Busch interprets the cool, affectless face of fashion as vanity, narcissism and disdain for others, but the book fleshes out and writes large for our time, what some of the early sociologists of fashion and modern, urban life had foreseen, for example Simmel's blasé and neurasthenic personalities (Simmel and Wolff 1964); a hierarchy based not on class, but on the appearance of competence with the challenges of modernity.

Multiple, omni, meta

To the dynamics of social groupings, and the dimension of temporality core to the dominant fashion system, Busch adds the expansion of cultural possibility associated. He uses the metaphor of an inflating balloon to describe how trends are 'moving away from one another, multiplying, more and more styles become accessible at higher speeds, and only a click away' (Busch 2020:17). Who are you? What will you be? Janna Michael's study (2015) found that

her young urban creatives prized cultural omnivorousness and voraciousness – competence and connoisseurship of everything, while retaining a sense of individuality and continuity that affirms your authenticity – oh, and effortless. These freedoms are hard work. Cool is mastery.

Cool interventions in the dominant fashion system?

Though consumption-based cool may be associated with a postmodern culture, Bauman's 'liquid modernity' emphasises the intensification of conditions which straddle the periods in which cool has become a widely shared aspiration.

From both accounts, it is abundantly clear that cool is closely tied to the current, dominant system of fashion. But is cool – in any of its shades – present in the disruptive interventions worked for by these acti-critics? In one project, Busch asks participants to make monuments to unworn garments, respecting them as 'smothered selves', hoping to prize participants' relationships with clothes apart from allegiance to other people's rules (2020:134). Having the strength to wear these clothes without fear could imply the kind of self-possession and autonomy central to some conceptions of cool.

A sense of liberated Edenic playfulness also runs through Busch's work - the promise of fashion in a space 'outside' or 'post' (as problematic as everyone knows that is). This image of freedom to experiment, express and play with self-identity through clothing is distinctly modern, and cool – and can be hard to distinguish from the romantic individualism underpinning cool forms of consumption (Michael, 2015). Many cool types

– subcultures, avant-gardes – have customized, cut, sewn and messed about with the detritus of the fashion system to achieve this. Whether or not this is a plausible exit from the dominance of the current state is not for me to discern. What matters is that Busch's 'courage' also seems to sit quite closely to cool in terms of composure, self-possession and autonomy.

Rewilding and taming with cool

Payne's 're-wilding' comprises numerous tactics for disrupting the 'nested networks' of fashion production, promotion, use and destruction (2021:8). In these, market dependence is attacked by facilitating networks for sharing and promoting making and mending skills. For example, Twigger Holroyd's recent installation 'A Temporary Outpost of the Blue Fashion Commons' pilots a parallel world (from the mother project Fashion Fictions) where a law has been passed banning production and sale of all blue garments, creating rarity value. Visitors 'try out' this world by swapping, mending and adapting existing blue garments, according to the rules of the commons. Of course, creativity and expression counter to the formal mechanisms of capitalist production and consumption are a central feature of subcultural theory, and therefore of Thornton's cool/subcultural capital. Unlike classic subcultural capital, however, is that 'membership' is not (necessarily) governed nor denoted by a shared aesthetic. Neither is the dissent purely symbolic, since participation can result in a tangible act of resistance – a mended

garment. Nor is membership tied to lifestage, or age. Indeed, lead participants in these projects may themselves be seen as pretty cool –rebellling against the status quo, resisting commodification of their knowledge (though willing to share it), and, crucially, exemplifying cool composure in the face of immense risk: maintaining hope and purpose while staring down species disaster.

Payne is not naïve about the difficulty of prizing fashion (and therefore, cool) apart from capitalism’s growth imperative’, yet, she believes that ‘other modes of engagement’ already exist and that a ‘post-growth’ fashion system is a possibility, alongside a ‘post- growth economics’ (2019:8). This constitutes a kind of renewed hope for subcultural rebellion.

Her concept of ‘taming’ fashion (Payne 2019, 2021) refers to a less radical ‘improvement’ of the current system - cleaner processes, more recycled material. This involves those cools related to competence with the latest technologies. Furthermore, multiple audience- and time-specific aesthetics of cool would be required to promote ‘tamed’ initiatives. Cool remains important because less wasteful forms of the symbolic distinctions associated with cool consumption could allow the current fashion system to evolve with lower impact.

Deeper and wider exploration of the literature and initiatives may tell us more, but in all these examples, cool remains relevant to how fashion scholars confront both the past and the future.

Moving Forward with Cool

With this in mind, it is worth noting several new directions in cool theory, as well as challenges to existing theory presented by a significantly altered context for cool behaviours (Brown, 2021).

As discussed, one of cool’s paradoxes is that although cool figures are widely admired, the health, morality and social impact of coolness, are frequently considered problematic: narcissistic, politically weak, easily incorporated into capitalist logics; a celebration of toxic masculinity. However, recent studies note the range of meanings associated with cool shifting to include more pro-social traits, from ‘nice-ness’ to ‘goodness’ and commitment to activism (Dar-Nimrod, et al. 2012).

Though the authenticity of this may be questioned, similarly to debates around ‘clicktivism’ and ‘slacktivism’ (Lane and Dal Cin, 2018), it requires us to rethink cool in two ways – is cool necessarily an anti-social goal, or has theory over-focused on these aspects of it? Also, web 2.0, social media and surveillance capitalism have changed the possible performance and parameters of cool significantly, but the theory has not caught up. This matters because the stylized doom of the ‘beat’, the dandy-esque ‘futile sovereigns of a futile world’ may no longer seem so admirable. Why mope about like James Dean when you could be doing something? A new paradox has emerged – we know believe that we can, as individuals, make an impact, but only as part of a network. Can anyone pull off the performance of effortlessness - so central to cool - in a world demanding we quantify and evidence our social lives, lay bare the (uncool) neediness of chasing ‘likes’? As Bauman said, ‘there are no leaders, only followers.... and would-be leaders must seduce their followers’ (2012:67). And if algorithms can predict trends

– who needs ‘cool people’ to forecast them? That mystical, embodied quality that Payne describes as cool – will it be – has it been - demystified?

Ethnographies of those in ‘hipster’ occupations like urban bartending and barbering have also revealed they are motivated by desire for less alienating, and ‘more meaningful’ work, despite having been educated for (increasingly systematized) professions (Ocejo, 2017). Luvaas’ ethnography of the Indonesian DIY fashion scene (2012) argued that an international ‘moral imperative’ to contribute creatively was also emerging. These developments also point towards cool as craft, dignity and socially-connected work.

Uncomfortable questions about how cultural and emotional survival strategies innovated under pressure of slavery and racism, came to permeate white, western, middle class youth culture, and beyond have occupied a critical strand of cool discourse which is no less important in the context of decolonisation debates. Recent scholarship has confirmed cool as an increasingly global phenomenon with local variations, and of course this intersects with the shifting geopolitics of the fashion industry. Something similar could be said of how working-class culture has been mined for cool (Rizzo, 2015). Finally, cool has been acknowledged as significant to radicalization to the far-right (Nagle, 2017), where the deployment of cool tactics seems to resurrect some of the forms of cool thought dead by young liberal subjects in recent studies, and fashion of course, is a tool.

Additionally, the wider pressures of what Bauman called liquid life - complex, contingent and precarious - affect everyone and create an environment in which cool composure is increasingly necessary but difficult to achieve. Fashion plays a critical part in this as both problem and solution. Stylised cool detachment of various kinds is a useful retreat from an overwhelming sense of risk (Macadams, 2002; Brown, 2015; Dinerstein, 2018). Our current era, which adds the ultimate crisis to this list - the crisis of global heating and outstripping the Earth’s resources, surely redoubles the likely value of cool responses.

Conclusion

There are other points to make – and other ways to explore the potential for cool theory to help us understand and move forward with fashion as history and in our futures. This exercise has been just a starting point, yet it has demonstrated three main things:

The first, is that cool is present as a spectre in the house of our understanding of the current state of fashion, and as a guiding spirit in our hopes for fashion’s futures. I hope I have managed to demonstrate this enough to show that cool theory is needed, and it needs to be adapted and rethought. The second – and I think this is potentially a critical, perhaps even liberating point - is that fashionability is not synonymous with cool. Cool is not – as it comes across in many fashion-related studies – merely a product of the dominant fashion system. Fashion provides a variety of ways that people can express the desired state of cool (whether they are, or feel, cool or not), and we may approve or disapprove of those ways. The third point - and it is related to the second - is that fashion, in its current state, along with all the other dimensions of change, contingency, risk and precarity in late modernity, constitutes a series of attacks on people’s

composure that helps to make people who manage to retain it, seem worthy of admiration, ergo, cool.

Sociologists of the absurd, Lyman and Scott, warned, in their 1970 essay 'Coolness in Everyday Life', not that cool had been commodified, but that 'risk had been democratised'. In their words, 'keeping cool is now a problem for everyone' (1989:155). They focused less on consumer aesthetics of symbolic dissent and more on embodied urban life discussed by Simmel, Goffman and others. These conditions are now reforming under conditions of connectivity and surveillance and in the context of climate crisis.

Finally, perhaps fashion could also hold a key to new considerations of cool theory. In demonstrating that cool may be perceived by being fashionable (following trends competently) being avant garde (showing aesthetic autonomy by setting trends) and by working to disrupt the smooth operation of fashion's dominant systems (the anti-critics themselves) it is possible that the idea of cool as composure (in the face of all those modernizing forces, which threaten to uproot us), can be more clearly seen. The fact that some of the popular personifications of cool are profoundly anti-social, and that some attempts to achieve it result in troubling or destructive behaviours, should not distract us from the underlying appetite for self-possession, composure and dignity in the face of the great challenges of selfhood today.

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