

## Introduction: Being Cool Ain't Easy

Gioia Laura Iannilli\*      Stefano Marino\*\*

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Being cool ain't easy: this is all the more true today, when current reality has undergone a process of widespread aestheticization. In general, by "aestheticization" we refer here to the fact that in the last decades the aesthetic has apparently undergone an incredible process of extension and dissemination, and has fundamentally become an (often pressing) "imperative" while playing a relevant role in social practices, inasmuch as appearances and the expression of taste preferences have become determining factors for them. In short:

[t]he label aestheticization can be schematically referred to a process or set of processes; to a phenomenon; to an age. ... Aestheticization is synonymous with priority and emphasis of the aesthetic as compared to other elements and values that may be involved in experience (ethical, ethnical, religious, cognitive ones, etc.<sup>1</sup>

In this framework fashion surely plays a pivotal role: in fact, not only is fashion intrinsically connoted by the priority of appearances and taste over other features of experience, but it also does so while intertwining the aesthetic and the social implications it has. And this is presumably why the imperative "Be Cool!" is supposed to work on both levels and has such a deep impact on our reality. On the one hand, to be cool means having certain aesthetic features, inspiring certain behaviors and being connected to certain tastes, while on the other hand to be cool also means being able to make the latter convey towards good everyday practices. As has been observed,

[d]ue to its ability to produce a sense (or at least a semblance) of identity irrespective of substantial grounds, fashion represents an excellent test-bed to evaluate and assess the ambitions of an anthropology of contemporaneity: an age that, as we have seen, is characterized by a widespread aestheticity. Thanks to its capacity to punctuate and spell out, so to speak, the stream of experience that today seemingly cannot find any stable pivot or any previously defined and fixed principle (as, instead, it once happened in the aesthetic world centered on the fine arts), fashion becomes indeed the instrument allowing one to simply

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\* Università degli Studi di Roma "Tor Vergata" (Italy); Università di Bologna (Italy); ✉ [gioialaura.iannilli@gmail.com](mailto:gioialaura.iannilli@gmail.com)

\*\* Università di Bologna (Italy); ✉ [stefano.marino4@unibo.it](mailto:stefano.marino4@unibo.it)

1. Gioia Laura Iannilli, "Aestheticization," in *International Lexicon of Aesthetics*, Spring 2018 Edition, <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2018/spring/Aestheticization.pdf>, <https://doi.org/10.7413/18258630004>.

slide on the surface of things without at the same time losing him- or herself in a vague and indeterminate flow. From this point of view, the inner relationship connecting fashion to the ephemeral proves to be an extraordinary strong point to release oneself from a situation in which all criteria grounded on cognitively determinate or determinable contents have been dismissed. ... It outlines an experience of the ephemeral that almost leaves no trace and shies away from museums because, rather than defining standards, it represents a temporary, cyclical, “trendy” articulation of taste.<sup>2</sup>

If viewed from a philosophical perspective, in general, and if conceived of as a preeminently aesthetic phenomenon, in particular, fashion thus displays an immediate and evident affinity to temporariness, fleetingness, transience and ephemerality. And what could we imagine or think of as more akin to the temporary, the fleeting, the transient and the ephemeral than something that is not “beautiful” or “sublime”, in the traditional and indeed emphatic meaning of these aesthetic concepts, but merely “cool”? Arthur C. Danto once observed that both “the avant-garde art of the 1960s [and] the avant-garde philosophy of that period ... aspired to be ‘cool’.”<sup>3</sup> And according to Lars F. Svendsen fashions, “the most superficial of all phenomena,” “naturally also exist among academics and intellectuals,” who also have to do, at least to some extent, “with which subjects are ‘in’ and which are ‘out’, which approaches are ‘sexy’ and which are not”, namely which are ‘cool’, ‘fashionable’ or ‘trendy’ and which are not. For Svendsen, “[i]t would be naïve to believe that all this is governed by completely rational considerations, since it is just as much a question of constantly shifting taste. There is really no big difference between clothes and philosophy in this respect” — although he surely admits that “[t]he idea that philosophy, among other things, is a fashion-controlled process can seem somewhat objectionable to philosophers, who like to believe that exclusively rational choices underlie what themes and approaches they employ.”<sup>4</sup> Yet, this should not be seen as a mere and destructive “celebration of the ephemeral”, but as the recognition of the potentiality of — and hence as at least the attempt to better understand and practice — a peculiar way of dealing with things which is not grounded in supposedly absolute and abstract criteria or principles but is rooted in materiality, in our everyday contexts and their phenomena, with all of their contradictions and complexity.

When the Call for Papers for the ZoneModa 2019 International Conference “Be Cool! Aesthetic Imperatives and Social Practices” at the University of Bologna (Campus of Rimini) was launched, we aimed at inquiring into the issue of “coolness” as we deemed important a better understanding of what is actually at stake when we talk about the aesthetic in terms of “imperatives” and we inextricably link it to social practices. The questions we raised at the time were numerous and included for example:

- What does it mean and imply determining social relationships on the basis of values and criteria that are also, if not especially, aesthetic?
- How does fashion influence other domains of life and culture (art, design, mass media, music, lifestyle etc.), and actually lead them to focus or even centre their attention on aesthetic aspects in order to improve their impact on society?
- What is the exact role played by fashion with regard to such relevant phenomena as the increasing digitalization of our experience, the reorganization of economic processes of production, and finally globalization?
- To what extent is it possible to conceive of the aesthetic mediation carried out by fashion as an essential factor to achieve a fruitful and, so to speak, peaceful or non-colliding “fusion” of Western and Eastern cultural paradigms?

2. Giovanni Matteucci, “Fashion: A Conceptual Constellation,” in *Philosophical Perspectives on Fashion*, ed. Giovanni Matteucci and Stefano Marino (London-New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 66, 70.

3. Arthur C. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), XIX.

4. Lars F. Svendsen, *Fashion: A Philosophy* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 7, 15.

- Is it desirable today to have a conflict of aesthetic and ethical values, or at least some kind of difference and friction between the aesthetic and the ethical dimensions, or does the ongoing development of aestheticization progressively nullify any autonomous rest of “the ethical”?
- What does the socio-aesthetic relevance of fashion consist of?
- What’s the phenomenological, ontological, or social status of appearances?
- What are the prospects of the so-called “social fashion” (whether fashion can be socially engaged/beneficial; whether fashion helps define a new genre of fashion replacing the old cliché of elitism and class, etc.)?
- What is the relationship between fashion and body practices (tattoos, plastic surgery, scarification) seen as phenomena of aestheticization and also of constitution/expression of one’s identity?
- How is the concept of aestheticization, in general, related to questions concerning “cultural legitimacy” in such realms as mass media, film, television, gaming and web aesthetics?

We did not expect to have all of these issues covered, but we actually had quite a broad and varied response to our Call. The proceedings that we publish now in a special issue of “ZoneModa Journal” (for which we would like to express our sincerest gratitude to its editor Simona Segre Reinach and its co-editor Daniela Calanca) are a testimony to this response. The contributions presented at the conference and now included in this volume address coolness both historically and/or conceptually by relating it to such topics as communication, gender, context, feminism, style, normativity, identity, ethics, digital media, social practices, imperatives and the moving image (following here the articulation of the Panels, Plenary Sessions and Keynote Talks of the conference). The ZoneModa 2019 International Conference has been an occasion in which scholars from all over the world, and characterized by different backgrounds and scientific approaches, have shared different yet converging perspectives on a topic whose manifestations and potential are more than ever urgent to be critically (instead than passively or uncritically) understood, in a way that only an open and pluralist dialogue between philosophy and other social and human sciences can make possible.

As our readers will see, not only being cool but also and especially defining what’s “cool,” defining “coolness” as such, ain’t easy.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, as we said above, the contributions that we present and offer to the readers of “ZoneModa Journal” with this special issue address the topic from a variety of perspectives and approaches ranging from philosophy to sociology to cultural studies etc., and intersecting the question of coolness with such other questions as narrativity, feminism, the visual arts, the relationship between Western and non-Western traditions, sustainability, the moving image, normativity, identity, gender, language, new technologies, and many others. The leader of the legendary grunge band Nirvana, Kurt Cobain, famously claimed in his 1991 song *Stay Away* “I’d rather be dead than cool / I don’t know why” — before becoming himself in just a few months the new “big thing”, i.e. a great rockstar, a celebrity, an idol for millions of fans: that is, one of the trendiest and coolest figures in the musical and cultural scenario of that time, so cool to even inspire (unwillingly, indeed) the famous Marc Jacobs’s Spring 1993 grunge collection for Perry Ellis reissued in 2018 on the occasion of its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. While clearly testifying the contradictory and — freely adapting here to our purposes a Simmelian terminology — tragic character of contemporary culture and especially of the so-called “oppositional styles” extensively investigated by Elizabeth Wilson and others,<sup>6</sup> the ambivalent and tragic example of Cobain, as concretely embodying the cool/uncool dichotomy and also the culture industry’s capacity today of “precorporation” (instead than mere “incorporation”) “of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials,”<sup>7</sup> can also prove useful to testify what we have previously defined the difficulty of defining in a clear and one-sided way the concept of coolness. Far from considering this difficulty as a

5. See Luke Russell, “Tryhards, Fashion Victims, and Effortless Cool,” in *Fashion — Philosophy for Everyone: Thinking with Style*, ed. Jessica Wolfendale and Jeanette Kennett (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), 37–49.

6. See Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London-New York: Tauris & Co., 2003), 179–207.

7. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester-Washington: Zero Books, 2009), 9.

sign of theoretical inadequacy, inappropriateness and, as it were, backwardness, we rather incline to consider it as a symptom of the broadness and complexity of the question at issue, of the “*Sache selbst*” (to freely express the concept in a phenomenological fashion), and hence of the importance to inquire into it today from a vast, variegated, pluralist, multi- and interdisciplinary perspective. The contributions collected in this volume are precisely aimed at disclosing the possibility of investigating coolness (and, in connection to it, the aesthetic dimension in its relation to everydayness, fashion and popular culture) from a theoretical perspective of this kind, and as organizers of the conference (together with Giovanni Matteucci)<sup>8</sup> and editors of this volume we hope that our work will offer original and stimulating insights to the readers of “ZoneModa Journal.”<sup>9</sup>

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8. The organization and realization of the ZoneModa Conference 2019 would not have been possible without the fundamental suggestions and insights provided by Giovanni Matteucci, whose works on fashion also include, for instance: *Simmel on Fashion: A Commented Reading of the 1911 Essay* (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2015); “Fashion: A Conceptual Constellation,” 47–72; “Fashion,” in *International Lexicon of Aesthetics*, Autumn 2019 Edition, <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2019/autumn/Fashion.pdf>, <https://doi.org/10.7413/18258630066>.
  9. All the contributions included in this volume of proceedings derive directly from the “Be Cool! Aesthetic Imperatives and Social Practices” International Conference held at the University of Bologna, Rimini Campus, on May 16–18, 2019. After the peer-review of the proposals received was made by the scientific committee of the conference, the acceptance of the selected contributions for the conference also gave the right to be included in the publication of the proceedings. Hence the contributions included here appear (alphabetically) in the form in which all authors submitted them, except for the editing work that we, as editors, have made.

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**Gioia Laura Iannilli:** Università degli Studi di Roma "Tor Vergata" (Italy); Università di Bologna (Italy)

✉ [gioialaura.iannilli@gmail.com](mailto:gioialaura.iannilli@gmail.com)

She is a PhD candidate in Aesthetics at the University of Rome Tor Vergata (Philosophical-Social Sciences). She holds a PhD in Aesthetics from the University of Bologna (Architecture), from which she also received an MA in Visual Arts and a BA in Philosophy. Her areas of expertise are Everyday Aesthetics, Design Aesthetics, Fashion Aesthetics and Deweyan Aesthetics. She has presented her research in the framework of international conferences and authored a book, *L'estetico e il quotidiano: Design, Everyday Aesthetics, esperienza* (2019), and essays and book chapters on these topics. She is currently book review editor of *Studi di Estetica – Italian Journal of Aesthetics*, and member of the editorial board of the "International Lexicon of Aesthetics".

**Stefano Marino:** Università di Bologna (Italy)

✉ [stefano.marino4@unibo.it](mailto:stefano.marino4@unibo.it)

He is Associate Professor of Aesthetics at the University of Bologna. His main research interests include critical theory, philosophical hermeneutics, neopragmatism, somaesthetics, philosophy of music and aesthetics of fashion. He is the author of various books, among which *Le verità del non-vero. Tre studi su Adorno, teoria critica ed estetica* (2019), *Aesthetics, Metaphysics, Language: Essays on Heidegger and Gadamer* (2015), *Aufklärung in einer Krisenzeit: Ästhetik, Ethik und Metaphysik bei Theodor W. Adorno* (2015), *La filosofia di Frank Zappa. Un'interpretazione adorniana* (2014), *Gadamer and the Limits of the Modern Techno-Scientific Civilization* (2011). He has translated from German into Italian, or from English into Italian, books of Theodor W. Adorno, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Carolyn Korsmeyer, and he has co-edited (or is currently working at as co-editor) several collections of essays on Kant, Nietzsche, Gadamer, Adorno, fashion, feminism, popular culture, rock music and jazz.