

“OBJECTIVE AGEING?”

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We are interested in ageing in material objects and in people. Norms of beauty are relevant here; beauty is persistently associated with youth and newness and this has affected our relationship with our own ageing (particularly in the West) and also with objects. These associations are important because aesthetic obsolescence of objects leads to dissatisfaction, detachment, and early disposal which has significant environmental and societal impacts. Whilst entrenched Western norms which perpetuate unattainable youthful perfection, reinforce ‘skin deep’ attitudes to ageing resulting in poor self-esteem and an increasingly ‘invisible’ older population.

In this article, we start to tease out and connect strands of thought, drawing on transdisciplinary constructs of ageing within the contexts of people and objects.

Although the relationship between people’s attitudes to the appearance of their own physical ageing and their possessions has yet to be extensively explored (Scarre, 2016), existing literature (from the diverse disciplines of gerontology and sustainable design) reveals similarities in how physical processes contribute to the ageing of objects and people and how the ageing of objects and people is perceived in Western society. *“Our concepts of the ageing of manufactured objects are heavily dependent on their association with our own ageing and with the passing of time measured in human terms”* (Scarre, 2016)

Physical ageing is not an optional process. Although it affects all human organs, it is the ageing of our skin that is most noticeable. UV exposure, pollution, smoke, stress, poor nutrition, and sleep deprivation age skin prematurely. When aged, smooth unblemished, youthful skin becomes mottled, sallow, coarse, leathery, dry, wrinkled and lined (Tobin, 2017). *“Physical ageing is inevitable but increasingly, there is a sense that this does not have to be accepted”* (Searing and Zeilig, 2017). Fuelled by *“sociocultural pressures to conform to youthful appearance”* (Harper, 2017) we spend time, money and energy trying to mask the physical signs of ageing and halt the natural processes of change (Searing and Zeilig, 2017; Tobin, 2017; Jankowski et al, 2016, Harper, 2017; Jerslev, 2017; Del Rosso, 2017). We feel compelled to navigate the *“Conflicting pressures to resist ageing while also needing to appear to be ageing gracefully”* (Janowski et. al, 2016, p. 555).

“Just like living beings mature and get older, so too artifacts degrade and their surfaces show signs of aging” (Rognoli and Karana 2014, p. 150). From the moment of purchase, pristine objects are subjected to an array of stimuli including wear, impact, heat, light, water and air which alter their tactile and aesthetic properties. Just as there are societal pressures concerning the aesthetics of maintaining a youthful appearance, so we also expect material possessions to defy the ageing effects of time. Delight at the untouched aesthetic of new products rapidly changes to dissatisfaction and detachment as they age (Nobels et. al, 2015). Diminishing production values resulting from an imperative to drive down costs results in the use of inexpensive, poor quality plastics that scratch and wear easily. Loss of empathy driven by ‘cosmetic obsolescence’ leads to dissatisfaction, detachment and premature disposal (Cooper, 2010).

Attitudes to ageing of objects and people are socially constructed and propagated through increasingly pervasive media and advertising. Despite calls to ban the term ‘anti-ageing’ in the cosmetics and beauty industries, ‘cosmeceutical’ advertisements featuring *“flawless, digitally enhanced faces of young and beautiful models and actresses”* persist (Jerslev, 2017). These advertisements utilise

persuasive imagery and language to reinforce, normalize and encourage conformity to unattainable Western ideals of youthful perfection resulting in “*commodified dissatisfaction*” (Del Rosso, 2017) Cosmetic companies claim that ageing is reversible, through persuasive imagery and language which exalt the virtue of cosmetic products in reducing, delaying, slowing, preventing or reversing the visible signs of ageing (Searing and Zeilig, 2017). The negative aspects of ageing are perpetuated by a youth-obsessed media. “*Claims of a life free from wrinkles, pores, and blemishes saturate advertisements in women’s magazines*” (Del Rosso, 2017, p. 186) and it is abundantly clear that the “*cosmeceutical face*” is something to be continuously and tirelessly “*worked on*” (Jerslev, 2018). Parallels between human and material ageing are suggested in the crossover of language “*Many of the terms in which we describe the ageing both of people and of things have a distinctly negative tone; they ‘wear out’, ‘decay’, ‘break down’, ‘deteriorate’, ‘pass their best’ (or ‘their prime’), ‘become useless’ (or ‘past it’), ‘weaken’, ‘rust’, ‘tarnish’ and so forth*” (Scarre, 2016) and minor changes to a new model are referred to as a ‘facelift’.

Although less is known about the effects of media representations and advertising on attitudes towards ageing possessions, advertising has been, and continues to be, instrumental in stimulating planned obsolescence. The marketing of electronic devices with sleek, shiny surface finishes arouses a desire for new products whilst simultaneously promoting dissatisfaction with the ‘old’ (Cooper, 2010). Whether intentionally or not, consumers treatment of their existing possessions declines in response to their growing desire for upgrades. Users increasingly ‘cavalier’ and ‘reckless’ attitude towards the care of the object and, its likely worsening condition, arguably provide the impetus and justification for replacement.



Figure 1: Advertising portrays unblemished, pristine surfaces (both human and artificial), both of which are destined to change with time and use, with these changes generally perceived negatively (images credits: left <https://joeychong.com/2013/08/25/14-days-challenge-to-flawless-skin-with-lancome-visionnaire-skincare-range>; right: www.apple.com)

The stimuli which cause changes in the skin and in the surface of objects are similar: ultraviolet light, abrasion, heat, dirt and chemicals. The combination of these stimuli and their action on a particular

material, combined with cleaning and maintenance, creates a unique patina on the surface of every object, and the ‘signs of ageing’ on skin. This accumulation of patina on an object reveals a narrative of its story a tangible manifestation of past experiences and memories with potential to create emotional value (Zijlema et. al, 2016)

The pressure to conform to ‘plasticized’ beauty is countered by the philosophies of wabi-sabi which emphasise the value of irregularity, imperfection and authenticity and which prizes “*the beauty of faded, eroded, oxidized, scratched, intimate, rough, earthy, vanishing, elusive, ephemeral things*” (Sartwell, 2006 in: Salvia et. al, 2010) and *kintsugi* - in which *the beauty of that which was broken and visibly mended* is celebrated (Buetow and Wallis, 2017). The concealment and eradication of wrinkles, lines and visible scars erases ‘traces’ of the past; the inscription and repository of time and memories represented within the skin’s surface (Jerslev, 2018). These “*ephemeral patterns*” are “*signs of ... an ongoing engagement with life*”. They should not be hidden or obscured but celebrated, valued and appreciated (Buetow and Wallis, 2017) as it is these lines, marks, blemishes, cuts and scratches that represent a visual narrative of a life lived. Survival, strength, and fortitude is given form through the elaboration of mastectomy scars with tattoos, pride is revealed in unconcealed stretch marks and caesarean scars, and resilience is demonstrated in artful prostheses (see Figure 2). The ‘loss’ of smooth, unblemished skin is replaced with a deep acknowledgement of the “*beauty in perfect imperfection*” (Buetow and Wallis, 2017). Parallels can be seen in the movement of unapologetic ‘visible repair’ in which ‘flaws’ are celebrated as unique artistry to be displayed and not hidden. “*In a world where almost everything you buy is mass-produced, isn’t it nice to have something that is totally unique because of its scars?*” (Sugru, 2018).



Figure 2: Artist Sarah Shakeel celebrates stretch marks (often considered ‘flaws’ and ‘imperfections’) by digitally embellishing visible lines with *Kintsugi* inspired gold; Photographer Grace Elizabeth’s Gold Dust Project (www.photographybygrace.co.uk) captures the emotional value in stretch marks and scarring from C-

sections, by beautifying postpartum women's scars with gold paint; an example of Kintsugi; 'Multiple Family' (Jetske de Groot, 2007 <http://jetskedegroot.com/works.php?categorieID=8>), a collection of chairs disaggregated and re-assembled to celebrate "a new aesthetic of imperfection"; 'Dispatchwork' by artist Jan Vormann (<https://www.janvormann.com/testbild/dispatchwork/>) who fixes crumbling walls and monuments using Lego and a teapot lid fixed with Sugru.

We firmly believe that in Western societies negative perceptions of ageing possessions are influenced by deeper systemic, cultural, aesthetic, and philosophical responses to human ageing. We suspect that by challenging negative attitudes towards ageing we can activate altered perceptions in which an ageing aesthetic is valued in people and their possessions. This is vital, given the rapid ageing of populations and the environmental consequences associated with manufacture, use and disposal.

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