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Sixty is the new Forty
ethics, ageism, and the eternal youth

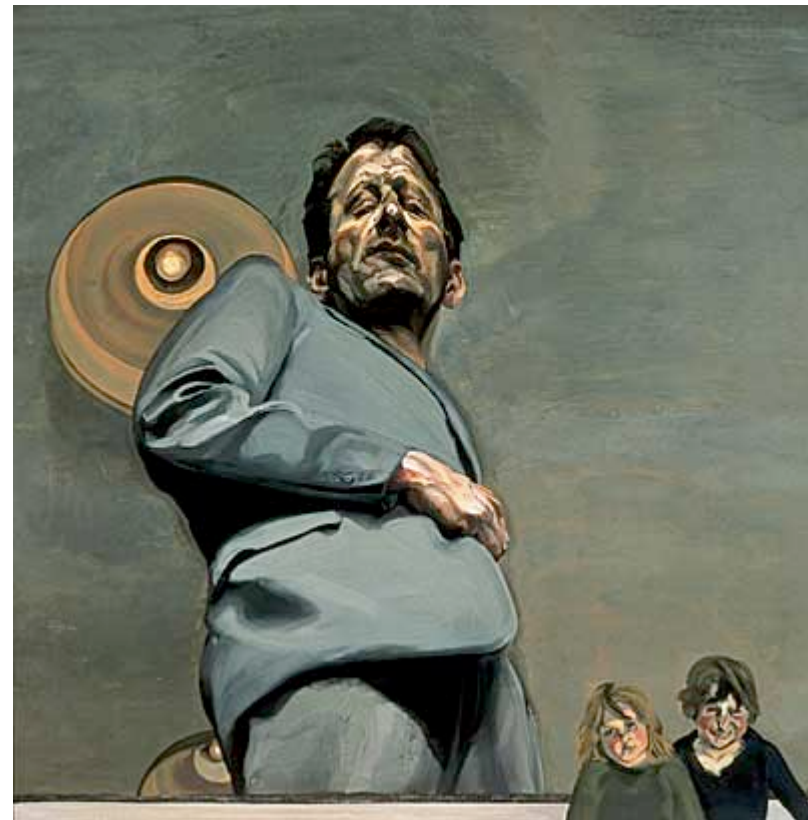
A new mantra

One of the new mantras of aging is the slogan "sixty is the new forty."
The slogan became in fashion when it was used by Ms Clinton (who was in that time 60 yo) in the 2008 competition for the Democratic presidential nomination, against Mr Obama (who was then 46)



Flourishing

Literally speaking, this slogan suggests that today being sixty year old is a condition of flourishing and full maturity, as in the past it was being forty. It implicitly implies that being forty is still a condition of immaturity and relative irresponsibility.



A Paradox

Such an apparently innocuous slogan hides a paradox, which concerns the way in which our society perceives and “metabolize” ageing and old age.

On one hand we are told that contemporary society is ageing, on the other hand, the mantra is that those who were one olders are now youngsters, say, contemporary society is in progress to rejuvenate (as a consequence a forty yo man is still an immature boy, unfit to become the US president).



The sides of the same coin?

According to an optimistic reading of this paradox, this statement is but the two sides of the same coin, say, people are living longer, because they are healthier, so they age slower, and consequently the whole society is chronologically ageing but biologically rejuvenating .



Are we sure that this is true?

Yet, this simple and commensensical reading of the “ageing paradox” is likely to be false.

First, age related demographic processes are definitely much more complex than the pure increasing of life expectance and life timespan extension. Second, the “ageing paradox” implies a value judgment, say, being a “good senior person” means to remain “young”.



Successful ageing 1

Today much focus is being given to the concept of 'successful ageing' which can be considered in both objective terms based on physical health (e.g. freedom from disability and disease) and subjective terms focusing on well-being, social connectedness and adaptation (Jeste, Depp and Vahia, 2010).



Successful ageing 2

Technology is supporting this trend by providing larger numbers of potentially 'old' people with a means for prolonging 'middle-age' via the use of anti-ageing technologies.

The aim of anti-ageing medicine and technology is to create conditions in which 'the problems of old age should be prevented, so that the impairment that comes with advancing years does not happen at all'.



Successful ageing 3

There are powerful economic and social forces which are moving society towards turning old age into a “perennial” middle age. The whole approach is aptly summarised by journalist Reinhard Wandtner, who wrote:

*“The trick is to die young.
But to put it off as long as
possible.”*



Successful ageing 4

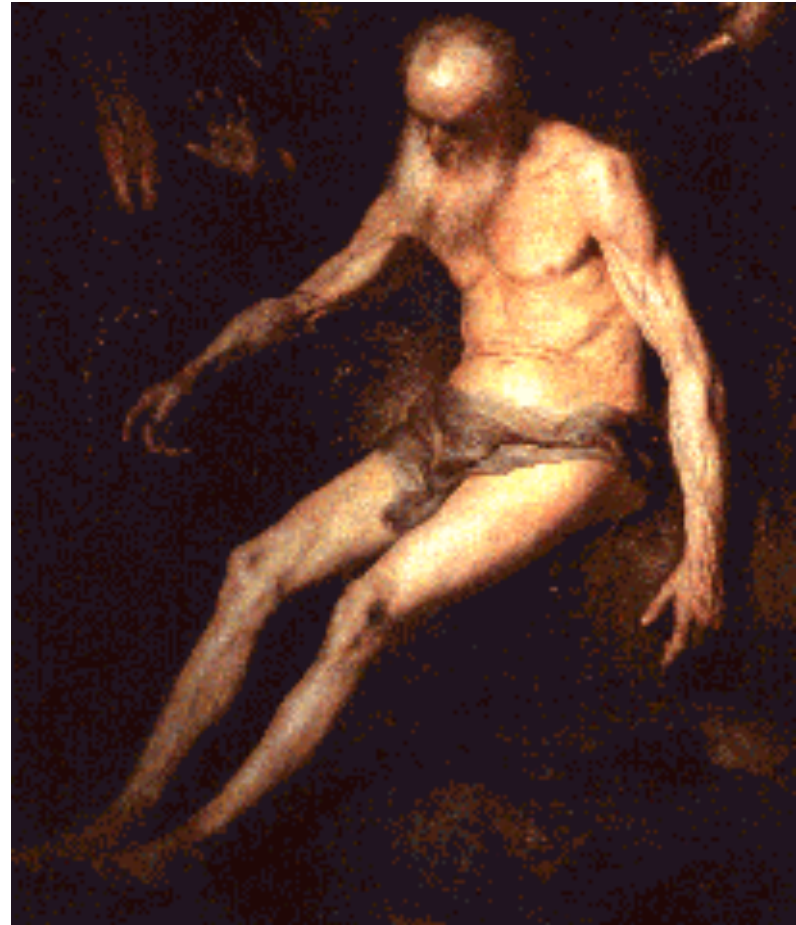
What though will become of those who do not succeed in ageing 'successfully'? The very use of this type of language concerning these issues is clearly emotive. No one likes to be 'unsuccessful'.

What's more, the use of the term 'anti-ageing' seems to imply an innate belief that ageing is bad (in line with 'anti-smoking', 'anti-drugs', 'anti-fat' and so on), a thing to be avoided at all costs.



Successful ageing 5

This unavoidably carries with it risks of stigmatization towards those who 'fail' to remain ever youthful or who simply don't want to (or cannot) mask their ageing. In other words, the attempt to stabilize people into a long term middle age will unavoidably generate outcasts, those who become visibly older.



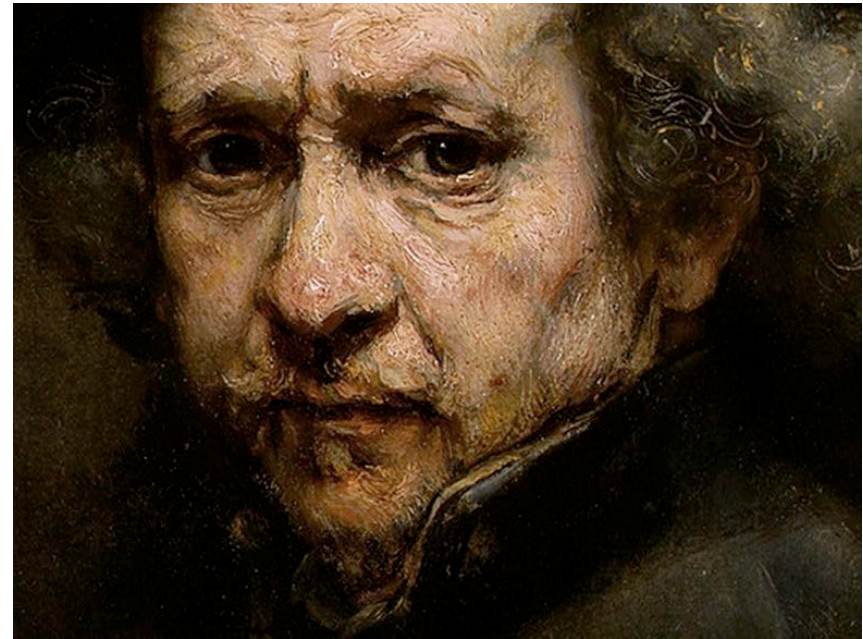
Successful ageing 6

People are asked to age and rejuvenate in the same time, and they are successful as far as they become older while they become younger. This is what psychiatrists call “double bind”, say, a communicational dilemma which usually provokes a psychotic reaction in the subject



The mask of the old

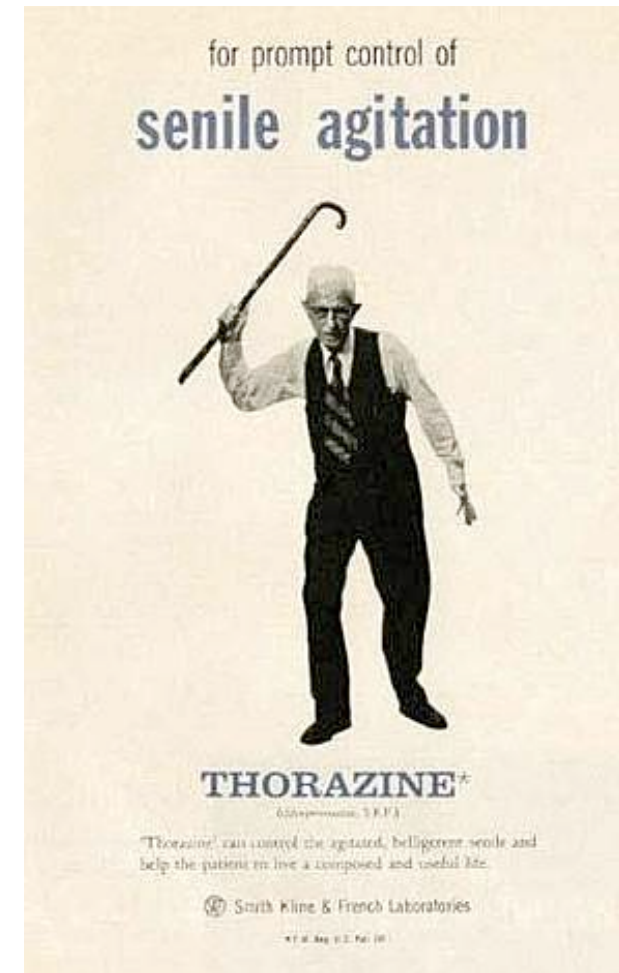
Interestingly enough, social research has demonstrated that people increasingly describe their experience of growing older by drawing on the idea that they remain the same person but a mask of an older person appears on their face.



A schizophrenogenic communication

A schizophrenogenic communication is a situation in which an individual receives two or more conflicting messages, with one message negating the other.

A successful response to one message implicates a failed response to the other, so that the person will be automatically wrong regardless of response.



A schizophrenic society

Our society is indeed becoming more and more schizophrenic as far as ageing is concerned. The notion of 'successfully' ageing actually suggests a collective denial of ageing, which is a denial of the vulnerability in each of us.



Power delusion

Of course, it is great to remain 'young' and active enough to be autonomous, to work, to enjoy your life, etc. And if technology can help it is welcome.

But this should not become a power delusion.



Power delusion

- The terrific social pressure towards rejuvenating technologies, cosmetic surgery, and medications would not be comprehensible without understanding that the illusion of eternal youthness, of an endless life span, is today the key to delusional power.



Human Power

The paradox inherent to any kind of human power is precisely that power is always on the verge of fading away, of revealing its illusory nature:

*"The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces, the solemn temples, the great globe itself, Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve, and, like this insubstantial pageant faded, leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff as dreams are made on; and our little life is rounded with sleep. Sir, I am wex'd; bear with my weakness; my old brain is troubled."
(The Tempest, IV, i, 153-159)*



Time is too short

- Prospero is one of the greatest Shakespearean old men. His time is over, his world fades into thin air. As all old men, he doesn't have much time and his power is now vanishing. Old men cannot make projects, because their time is too short.



Who has enough time?

Are we sure that these statements describe only old men's condition or would we do better to realize that they speak of the *human* condition? Who could claim to know how much time they still have?



