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‘They are truly hideous’: will we ever escape the puffer coat?

Alaina Demopoulos in New York

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Karl Lagerfeld once said that sweatpants were “a sign of defeat” and that anyone buying them had “lost control” of their life. (It should be noted that this was pre-pandemic, and the French designer was [kind of an awful person](#).) But for me, my personal fashion Waterloo was when I finally purchased a puffer.



The writer in her puffer coat, one of the only good puffers that exists. Photograph: Alaina Demopoulos

Undeniably warm, [puffer coats are a wintertime staple](#). Still, a certain style-conscious set bemoans their frumpy, bulbous, all-consuming silhouettes and drab colorways.

There *are* good puffers out there. I did not succumb to the black puffer coat, scourge of public transit commutes from November to March. Instead, in a gasp of resistance, I made sure that mine was colorful, choosing one with a red-to-purple gradient base and neon lightening print. Due to plenty of compliments, and even better insulation, I've even come to a begrudging acceptance of my dripped-out puffer.

But many others have given up searching for a puffer with personality altogether, resigned to a heavy black Columbia or Eddie Bauer number that swish-swishes with every step, as if to mock them for being so boring.

Will we ever escape the cult of the puffer?

Why the puffer is everywhere

A short history of the padded, quilted coat shows its endurance.

Eddie Bauer – who understandably wanted to create a better layering option after nearly dying of exposure when wearing just a wool sweater on a fishing trip – created the first one in the 1930s. Norma Kamali cemented the trend 40 years later when she introduced her famed sleeping bag coat. According to [Vox](#), Cher, Elton John, and the bouncers at Studio 54 were early adopters. People liked the cozy, cocooned shape. As someone who has put one on in a store (and promptly removed it after seeing a \$1,200 price tag), I can attest to its womb-like quality.

After 9/11, when traumatized New Yorkers needed a way to feel safe, sleeping bag coat sales reportedly shot up. Nowadays, dupes abound from both noted designers and fast fashion joints, with some going for under \$20 at H&M.

Stamps of approval for the puffer coat also came from 90s east coast rappers including Method Man and LL Cool J, who adopted it as their streetwear of choice. High fashion designers then appropriated that look – as they tend to do – especially Balenciaga, which debuted a bright-red, off-shoulder version in 2016 that spawned many iterations.

Derek Guy, a fashion industry writer and commentator also known as [“the menswear guy”](#) on X, says that the coat's ubiquity is partly to blame for so many people hating it.

“That Canada Goose style is so popular, and it intersects with this kind of modern business casual style,” Guy said, referencing the pricey, fur-trimmed parkas that have become urban staples while [drawing the ire](#) of animal rights groups. “But there are cool puffer jackets and flavorless ones. You can style it well or poorly, just like you can with anything.”



Norma Kamali's sleeping bag coat at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2018. Photograph: Zuma Press/Alamy

So how are people styling puffers in 2023?

These days, the puffer can be worn long, as Sarah Jessica Parker did to [comical effect](#) wearing Moncler during a snowy scene in *And Just Like That*. Or it can be cropped, as preferred by the TikTok girlies who rep hip-skimming versions of the Aritzia Super Puff, showing off their micro-miniskirts or tight jeans. I'm personally a fan of the [ballerina puffer](#), a simple black puffer adorned with cutesy pink bows, from the upstart New York store Les Miss. I'd buy it if my closet could spare the room. Prints also liven up the look, and [this reversible Farm Rio option](#) has not one, but two: horses or mushrooms.

And puffers get more leniency from skeptics when the wearer is braving an errand in colder temperatures. “If you can find the right fit and amount of puff, it’s a perfect winter coat,” said Brooke Bobb, the fashion news director of Harper’s Bazaar. “That being said, you should also invest in a tailored coat for dressier occasions, because a North Face will only take you so far.”



Fatima Sall put off buying a black puffer coat for as long as she could. Photograph: Fatima Sall

Aaron Royce, a digital editor at Footwear News, only wears puffer coats when the weather absolutely demands it. “I’ll wear mine when it’s freezing, raining, or sleeting,” he said. “It can be a bit stiff. When I’m sitting on the train or traveling, it’s much easier to wear a peacoat than it is to wear a puffer coat, because the material is so bulky.”

The same goes for Fatima Sall, a publicist who put off buying a puffer as long as she could. “They are truly hideous to my eye,” she said. “They are not travel-friendly, easy to hold or wear. I’m always fighting for my life when I put it on.” In photos with the black Zara coat she eventually bought, Sall poses with it draped off the shoulder – a quick way to add some visual zhuzh, but not a pose that holds up in a snowstorm.

What are stylish people wearing *instead of* puffers?

No matter what, some people just won't budge – like Angel Cuji, a New York artist who also works at a vintage store. “I was forced to as a kid, and I always hated how it swallowed me up,” he said. “My family bought whatever was on sale, so it was always the wrong size. I'd have something two sizes too big, and I felt like a marshmallow man.”

Cuji grew up to be “one of those people who will choose to freeze for the look”. He prefers a vintage patchwork leather jacket over a puffer, even though it's nowhere near as warm. When he needs to, he'll layer with Uniqlo's heat tech thermal innerwear. (Wool underlayers also make up for lack of insulation.)

“When I used to live with my grandparents in Queens, I'd take the bus home, which was always super delayed, especially during snowy days. I'd stand there for 30 minutes sometimes, shivering in my leather coat, just because I hate puffers so much.”



Angel Cuji would rather freeze than wear a puffer coat. Photograph: Angel Cuji

There are better ones, Cuji admits – he's a fan of Telfar's [collaboration](#) with Moose Knuckles. “I'd wear that one,” he said. “But for the most part, I go for my vintage fur coats and shearling. Shearling feels like wearing an Ugg boot.”

Ever since she could dress herself, Liv Reinertson lived by one rule: “Fashion has no temperature.” When she was a child, she loved wearing dresses so much that in third grade her mother had to bribe her to wear jeans on a snowy day. “Warm coats that look cute with dresses are simply non-existent,” she explained. She’s given up trying to find a stylish puffer.

Today, Reinertson designs clothes using vintage fabric, selling them from By Liv Handmade, a Brooklyn-based boutique. Last year, she began attaching skirts to the hems of quilt coats, calling them “quilt dusters”. And while they’re not insulating, she says she’ll put an “ugly-but-necessary” puffer down layer underneath the duster, where no one can see.

“It took many ruined looks and many wardrobe tantrums, but I finally cracked the code of cold-weather dressing,” she said.



Liv Reinertson designs fanciful winter coats that have room to layer puffers underneath, so that outerwear doesn’t ruin an outfit. Photograph: Liv Reinertson

Since the pandemic, [quilt coats](#) have emerged as a puffer alternative, as they are lightweight and also show some personality. Nikki Graver, who lives in Brooklyn and makes clothes under the label Nikki Nectarine, says their quilt jacket is “by far the coziest thing I own”. It has a deep hood, big pockets and a long silhouette – kind of like a Norma Kamali puffer.

“I think people are reimagining puffers, figuring out how to stay warm in a way that’s refreshing and unique,” they said. “The definition of what a puffer coat is evolving as well.”

Evolving, perhaps, but not fast enough for those who cannot stand those padded, but damn snuggly, monstrosities. In the meantime, if you’re curious, I got my lightning-bolt puffer from Daily Paper, an Amsterdam-based label. But that was three years ago and the style I copped no longer exists. Best of luck in your own search.

The far right is on the rise

June’s EU elections produced hard-right successes in core member states that range from the significant to the shocking.

In France, Marine Le Pen’s National Rally won in a victory so crushing that it prompted president Emmanuel Macron to call a snap parliamentary election. Could the president’s gamble blow open the doors to an extreme-right government?

In Germany, the radical Alternative für Deutschland finished second despite being mired in scandals including a lead candidate saying that the Nazi SS were “not all criminals”. Far-right parties also topped the polls in Italy and Austria.