

Firm and Hard: Old Age, the ‘Youthful’ Body and Essentialist Discourses

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Abstract

Old age is generally seen to be the province of science and social welfare research agendas. Despite proliferating images of older men and women within popular culture ‘old age’ is a neglected area of research in the arts and humanities. One aim of this paper is to counter this neglect through an exploration of the ‘youthful’ aging body constituted in popular culture. Whether from the fields of music, TV or cinema, the figure of the aging star is an increasingly familiar feature of contemporary popular culture. The faces and the bodies of aging stars adorn the mesh of media circuits that promote and distribute their latest creative offering, or publicise the latest good cause, or gossip about the most recent personal events. Typically, the discourses adhering to aging stars are marked by a concern with an absence of wrinkles or extra flesh: an absence that constitutes firm skin and hard bodies as gendered, signifiers of ‘youthful’ aging. At the same time, the older consumer has become a prime advertising target for popular products such as insurance, home improvements and holidays. This advertising reiterates the constitution of old age as a time of opportunity rather than decline and degeneration. Some of the products on offer, such as face creams, hair colourings, health supplements and cosmetic surgery, promise older consumers the kind of airbrushed, botoxed ‘youthfulness’ that dominates aging stardom.

The intersection forged between circuits of stardom and advertising might seem to insert aging into postmodern, anti-foundational formulations of the contingent body in that aging need no longer be seen as a biologically programmed determinant. However, this paper argues that the constitution of the ‘youthful’ aged body is dependent on a discourse of biological, essential old age that underlies, and constantly threatens to rupture, its high maintenance veneer. Effectively, ‘youthfulness’ operates to signify the truth beneath the cultural façade written on the surface of the body, and in doing so, it rearticulates and secures essentialist formulations of the body.

This paper needs to be located in a fast developing, global scholarly network which is addressing questions of aging and old age. The network includes my own research group, UK based WAM (Women, Aging, Media) that received AHRC funding in 2008; the group DEDAL-LIT at the University of Lleida which has been at the forefront of this emergent area of research; ENAS (European Network of Ageing Studies) which has received funding from the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research for its project “Live to Be a Hundred: Cultural Narratives of Longevity”, and renowned international research centres at The Simpson Centre for the Humanities, University of Washington, USA, and The Centre for Gender and Diversity, University of Maastricht, the Netherlands.

The research emerging from this network is beginning to address a surprising gap in our existing research paradigms –popular representations of old age. Despite a proliferation of images of aging and old age in advertising, print and cinematic fictions, celebrity culture, music, it is striking that the fields of feminism, literary, film, media and cultural studies have had very little to say on this subject. It seems that even where not *explicitly* stated, existing

scholarship *implicitly* assumes that popular culture is the province of the young: that the body in popular culture is a young body. Obviously, the position in medicine and social sciences is very different and gerontology is a well established field of research. But there is little in this research that begins to address those questions of representation –identity, ideology, discourse and power– that underpin our endeavours. As I hope to suggest in this paper, we can no longer delay placing aging and old age at the forefront of our *future* scholarship on popular culture.

I will refer to aging and old age, but that is a matter of convenience and is not intended to suggest that old age is an essential stage of life. Like gender, old age is as much, if not more, a product of discourse than it is biology. As Kathleen Woodward suggests, “Just as studies in gender and sexuality examine the ways in which sex-gender systems operate in various cultures, so age studies is concerned with understanding how differences are produced by discursive formations, social practices, and material conditions” (1999, x). Thus, my basic position is that old age can be seen as a discursive construction that is mapped onto particular bodies in a similar fashion to gender, sexuality, class, or race. Of course, as Woodward also suggests, once we start to see old age and aging as a product of discourse we can no longer see it as a discrete life stage, but rather as, “...part of a larger continuum of discourse on age itself, a system of age that includes infancy, childhood, adolescence and young adulthood”(1999. x). That formulation of aging as continuum and old age as a product of discourse provides the intellectual underpinning of this paper.

In introducing this research, I will also draw on those research traditions that position popular culture as a site of hegemonic negotiation; more specifically as Stuart Hall (1997) suggests a negotiation over the dominant meanings of identity formations, and for my purposes, the identity in question is old age. My paper aims to trace some broad trends in globalised popular culture: trends that are indicative of competing discourses of aging and old age: trends that highlight a negotiation in the hegemonic meanings of aging and old age. Here, I will therefore be foregrounding those discourses of pathological old age that have their origins in medical and social science paradigms, and trace how these produce regulatory affects in popular cultural practices. I will also be tracing the competing model of youthful old age that has emerged in advertising and celebrity culture before suggesting some of the ideological work being performed by emerging formulations of old age.

As I have already suggested, research into aging and old age is dominated by the medical and the social sciences and crucially, this field of research is typically underpinned by a set of embedded assumptions that equates aging with decline and vulnerability:

assumptions founded on the clinical gaze. In *The Birth of the Clinic*, (1973) Foucault identifies the clinical gaze as an encounter in which the clinician seeks out the signs of disease and abnormality on the body of the patient through prior knowledge of the normal, healthy body. The clinical gaze is thus split between the normal and the pathological. It is in knowing the signs of the healthy body that the clinician can diagnose ill health, can recognise the abnormal. However, as Foucault also observes, the knowledge of the normal healthy body is produced through the discourses of clinicians –they decide the signs and meaning of the healthy body and then apply this knowledge in their encounters with patients.

This prior knowledge of an already determined normal possessed by the clinician establishes every clinical encounter as an operation of power. Crucially, these operations of power extend beyond the clinic and saturate broader social processes. Through the reiterations of the clinical gaze, medical science accrued the power to establish itself as a regime of truth and knowledge. As Foucault suggests, “...medical gestures, words, gazes, took on a philosophical density that had formerly belonged only to mathematical thought” (Foucault 1973: 199). In this regime of truth and knowledge, the young body is constituted as the healthy norm, whilst the aging body has been constituted as its unhealthy counterpart. Thus, the aging body is pathologised in terms of its mental and physical decline, with the result that any other ways in which it might be understood are occluded. In this dominant regime of truth and knowledge the aging body is *always already* a problem, *always already* pathologised and in need of treatment.



Image 1



Image 2

The images above typify this formulation of the aging body. Note, how they position us to adopt the clinical gaze, to draw distinctions between the normative healthy, young body and the decrepit body of old age. We recognise the pathology of the aging body because of our prior knowledge of what medical discourse constitutes as normal and healthy. I am not suggesting that the actual persons represented here are not in need of care and assistance, but I want to indicate that the clinical gaze is reductive.

The clinical gaze reduces the figure of the older person to little more than a set of pathological symptoms and excludes everything else that constitutes specific subjectivities. We see the symptoms on a body and not the subject of that body; we see what, rather than who. Through the clinical gaze we see old age in terms of vulnerability, frailty and decline. The clinical gaze that constructs older people as physically frail, as needing care and support also triggers powerful connotations of economic dependency that position objectified older people as drains on society, rather than seeing them as potentially valuable resources.

With that established I want to offer a short auto-ethnography of how this field of knowledge can shape popular cultural practices and operate to regulate the embodied meanings of aging.



Image 3

Image 3 is taken from publicity material for the 2010 Celebrating Age Festival (an annual event that takes place in Bristol, UK). It could not be further removed from the previous images (image 1 and image 2) that reiterate the equation between aging and decline and vulnerability. Instead, the representation of the joyful, vibrant, aging couple of The Celebrating Age publicity mobilises the ideal of ‘leisured later life’ that has been promoted over the last two decades by insurance and pension companies and those businesses offering specialised products, such as UK based Saga. This image of liberated old age is in marked contrast to the model of pathologised old age, whilst it also effectively erases the experience of the aging demographic whose pensions have been eroded, or lost, in the legalised gambling known as banking. Yet, as I know from experience, the joyful affirmations of The Celebrating Age publicity rapidly dissipate when attending the event.

I attended in 2009 with a group of friends, who, like me, are approaching retirement age. We went with the intention of developing some of the social links that

we know we will need when our careers no longer consume all our time. Yet, within twenty minutes of arriving at the celebration, with dread in her voice, one of my friends was asking, 'It's not going to be like this, is it?' Once she had voiced the question, the rest of the group felt free to concur and to air some real fears about the future represented by the festival. So what was it that filled us with such dread about our aging future?

The festival is organised by multiple agencies who have connections with Bristol's aging population. It targets the 50+ group and operates through two strands, namely entertainment and information. Surprisingly, the entertainment is part of the problem. It is decidedly nostalgic, and whilst there is nothing inherently wrong with that, this framing serves to invoke the pathologised aging body. Firstly, on the occasion I attended, the nostalgia was for big bands and jitterbugs, the legacy of Second World War popular culture. In terms of popular cultural legacies this undoubtedly places serious limits on the demographic appeal of the festival entertainment. It is 75 years since the Second World War ended, suggesting that anyone with personal memories of the period would now be in the 80+ group, effectively excluding any participants in the 50 to 80 demography, the first 30 years of the cited target group of the festival, most of whom are more likely to share a nostalgia for rock and roll, the swinging sixties and even punk.

Moreover, Bristol is a diverse multi-cultural society with large Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities, both of which have made significant contributions to the popular culture which is now a nostalgic memory for many over-fifties in the UK. One is forced to wonder what happened to Reggae and Bhangra, where were the Afro-Caribbean steel bands, the Indian drummers and the rappers that make up the rich seam of globalised popular culture. With these questions in place, the whiteness of the publicity couple comes into sharp relief: you are never too old, or too white, it seems. Richard Dyer (1997) has exposed the ubiquitous privileging of white identity in western forms of representation: a privileging that not only positions whiteness as the human norm, but also removes whiteness from the paradigm of race.

These worrying observations aside, the more troubling aspect of the entertainment was its tempo, boogie-woogie in slow motion, big band swing slowed to a death march. The implications here that 'the old dears mustn't get too excited' were compounded by the closing time of the festival at 4 pm, clearly, a discourse of 'they really must get home before it gets dark' was in operation. At risk of sounding like a stereotypical Brit

–there was no alcohol available– no sociable glass of wine or beer, just tea and cakes. The infantilisation implied here is staggering (clearly the stagger of outrage not excess alcohol). But never mind, if all this excitement became too much, the information on hand was guaranteed to reassure, as the police were there to advise on keeping burglars and muggers at bay, the charity Age Concern was there to advise on emergency alarm systems for people living alone, advice on sheltered accommodation was provided, so too that on specially adapted transport and a range of gadgets designed to counter the physical decline of the aging body. In short, the aging body at the centre of the celebration was the pathologised body constituted through the clinical gaze.

There was nothing to counter this depressing image of aging. Beyond the poster, there was little to represent active aging and old age; there were no representations from a range of outdoor pursuit clubs such as hiking, canoeing, rowing, bowls, team sports of all kinds, all of which have older members as participants, coaches and advisors. Equally there was no representation from those more cerebral pursuits such as local history groups, bridge, chess and art clubs, most of which are dominated by older members who have intellectual curiosity and/or specialised knowledge to share, and time to attend. Equally, there was no reminder of the long term commitment made by many older people to the voluntary sector, both in the UK and on long term overseas projects. So forget the vibrant poster, no wonder my friends and I felt so dispirited since we were positioned to recognise that there is not much cause for celebration, just a future of decline and vulnerability to anticipate. The overall effect of the festival was to constitute the aging body as passive, docile and decrepit, it operated to reiterate the dominant discourses of social science and medicine and we were positioned as passive objects within a regime of knowledge that pathologises the aging body. Despite our own positive experiences of aging and ongoing independence, we were regulated into this regime of knowledge and constituted as pathological objects of the clinical gaze.

Such reiterations of the pathologising clinical gaze have traditionally been central to Hollywood representations with the stars being discarded once they begin to display any of the signs of aging. This is particularly acute for female stars since there are fewer roles for women in the first instance and youthful beauty is the female star's most significant mode of cultural capital. Moreover, Hollywood's particular logic of the heterosexual couple –older man, younger woman– has meant that roles for aging female stars have dried up well in advance of those for male stars of similar age. This logic has led the likes of Simone de Beauvoir (1972) and Germaine Greer (1991) to foreground

the invisibility of older women in public life. They, of course, are also taking account of a broader public sphere in which popular culture is imbricated.



Image 4



Image 5

If the industrial practices of Hollywood that discards the aging star have served to reproduce the pathologised aging body, it's on-screen representations that have served their part too, most notably in those moments of rare self reflection when it has interrogated the fate of the fading older female star. For example, Joseph Mankiewicz's 1950 film *All About Eve* displaces Hollywood with theatre before telling the story of how the aging star, Margo Channing (Bette Davis) is displaced by her protégé, Eve Arnold (Anne Baxter). Ten years later, Bette Davis was to play opposite Joan Crawford as the eponymous Baby Jane Hudson in Robert Aldrich's 1960 film, *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* (see image 4). Adapted from Henry Farrell's novel, Aldrich's psychological thriller now forms part of the canon of Hollywood film. Even people who have not seen the film know that it traces a damaging sado-masochistic relationship between two sisters, both aging former stars, Jane from the silent era and Blanche from the early talkies. There is often a conflation made between the professional rivalry of Davis and Crawford and the characters they play: a conflation that is deployed to couch the film in terms of the authentic. This matters since there is an all too easy slide between authentic and truthful and this serves to validate the film's deployment of the clinical gaze as it teases out an uneasy dynamic between psychological pathology and aging as pathology. This dynamic is thrown into relief and rendered grotesque, monstrous and abject through what is now an iconographic image of Baby Jane.

Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (image 5) also explores the fate of the aging Hollywood female star. Like *All About Eve* the film was released in 1950, However, where Margo Channing in *All About Eve* accepts her professional displacement, albeit

reluctantly, *Sunset Boulevard's* Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson) refuses to accept the conventional paradigm of aging. She takes a younger lover, she employs cosmetic techniques to alter the signs of aging, and she fights the refusal of studio bosses to give her work. However, this narrative does not celebrate, or even sanction, her resistant refusal of redundancy. Instead, the narrative traces Norma's descent into a mental breakdown. Even without the grotesque make up of the child star that informs Baby Jane, Norma Desmond is pathologised and constituted as grotesque and abject because she attempts to refuse and reverse the effects of aging (both cultural and biological) by cosmetic transformation. Effectively, the film pathologises her resistance to, and refusal of, the regulations of aging femininity, and her attempt to secure an alternative or resistant paradigm of aging. She is represented as mad because she refuses to grow old in a proper manner.

But, to quote from popular culture, times are changing, and 60 years on, Norma Desmond is no longer a marginal figure and embodies a newly sanctioned discourse of 'youthful' aging that dominates contemporary star and celebrity culture. For instance, consider a random selection of stars whose careers are not diminished by old age: Jane Fonda at 73, Johnny Halliday at 67, Julio Iglesias at 67, Honor Blackman at 85, Morgan Freeman at 73, Judi Dench at 75, Mick Jagger at 67, Susan Sarandon at 64, Shirley Bassey at 73.



Image 6

Indeed some stars such as Shirley Bassey have seen striking revivals in their careers over recent years. Image 6 represents Bassey's moment of triumph at the 2007 Glastonbury Festival. After years positioned as a gay icon, she is now back in the mainstream and is the darling of contemporary song writers. Her 2009 album *The*

Performance showcases material written for Bassey by leading contemporary songwriters such as Gary Barlow, The Pet Shop Boys, Rufus Wainwright, whilst its production provided a focus for Alan Yentob's TV documentary, *The Girl From Tiger Bay*, which in turn is the title of song written by James Bradfield and Nicholas Jones (better known as Nicky Wire) of The Manic Street Preachers. The point of this gallery of older stars who are still working and who are still central to contemporary popular culture is to establish that a paradigm shift has taken place in the construction of stardom and celebrity, since older stars are no longer redundant. However, as I will elaborate, this acceptance is conditional: conditional on their ability to embody the signs of 'youthful' aging that were so heavily pathologised in *Sunset Boulevard* sixty years ago. That conditionality points to the hegemonic struggle over the meaning of aging identities that I foregrounded in the introductory paragraphs. We are living through a hegemonic struggle for the meaning of old age: a struggle between the pathologised old age of the clinical gaze and the emergent discourse of youthful aging. This recognition begs the following question: what is at stake in that struggle?

I will begin answering that question by thinking further on this transformation in attitudes: a transformation that is not confined to Hollywood culture, or even the broader celebrity culture that has become a mini industry in its own right. Where Hollywood once normalised the use of make up, it is now at the forefront of makeover culture. The discourse of the 'make over' is globally recycled and is manifested through TV shows, magazine features, advertising, week-end breaks, cosmetic procedure travel. Here one example, the US TV show *Ten years Younger* (page on IMDB) was imported to the UK, then in turn was exported, and made globally available via Sky and the world wide web and reproduced in Nicky Hambleton-Jones' book.

The basic premise of the show is that women are exhibited in the street whilst passers by are asked to guess her age, there follows a make-over, which frequently involves surgery, always involves dental procedures and botox, and always involves styling, hair, make up and clothes. The value of the intervention is then affirmed when for second time the woman is publicly exhibited, her age assessed, and lo and behold, she is affirmed as looking 'ten years younger'. Much as it pains me, issues of time mean that I will have to gloss over the gendered politics of the programme and the problematic omission of the dangers of cosmetic surgery. Instead, I will simply foreground the ways in which the aging body is first pathologised, and then treated,

with the underlying assumption that this is beneficial. In effect, this is another version of the clinical gaze.

To suggest that the 'make over' is gendered is not the same as saying that men escape this mode of regulation. Googling 'man's makeover' brings up 7 and a half million hits that variously promote balding treatments, botox, weight loss, muscle gain, depilation, tattoos, fashion advice, cosmetic surgery, and of course, Viagra. Whilst both men and women are the targets of the discourses of youthful aging, the embodiment of those discourses is aligned with formations of gender. In his work on stars as complex semiotic systems Richard Dyer observes that stars function to embody social values, to make social values appear to be properties of an individual and to stem from specific bodies, rather than being culturally produced. Even the most cursory analysis of aging stars illuminates the embodiment of youthful aging and how that embodiment operates to secure gender difference. It is here that those discourses of firm and hard signalled in the title of this lecture come into play.

Let us begin with constructions of firm skin, that is, skin unwrinkled, unmarked by expression, environment and/or genetic pre-disposition. In the youthful aging paradigm, firm skin, however achieved, is highly desirable and frequently, the faces of stars and celebrities display these markers of youthful aging. As do the bodies that purport to be unmarked by pregnancy or overindulgence. We know, there are various technologies in play here. Some such as botox and various surgical procedures, such as face lifts, tummy tucks, breast and pec enlargements literally cut into the body and erase the signs of aging through the inscriptions of 'youth' on the bodily flesh. Others, as Vivian Sobchak (1999) reminds us, are special effects of the camera; those "magic: transformations of special computergraphic and cosmetic effects that instantaneously nip and tuck ... the buttocks, smooth and lift ...the face and breast" (1999: 206). Whether achieved through the pain and discomfort of bodily inscriptions or through bloodless and painless virtual inscriptions, the discourse of smooth skin is rendered demonstrably achievable and desirable through the body of the star.

Again, as we all know, discourses of the firm body dominate the paradigm of youthful aging. This can be achieved through some of the same bodily and virtual technologies as smooth skin. But equally, regimes of diet and exercise that intersect with discourses of the healthy body are promoted by stars, and the ostensible beneficial effects of the latest diet and the latest 'work out' are seen to be embodied by the stars. But firmness is where gender difference becomes apparent. The firm body has different

meanings within formations of femininity and masculinity. Within femininity, firmness connotes slender legs, pert breasts and buttocks, a flat stomach, which in turn are signifiers of youthful aging. This is usefully exemplified by the iconic paparazzi image of Helen Mirren (image 7), then aged 62.



Image 7

It is noteworthy how following the circulation of this photograph, Mirren was rapidly constituted as embodying an ideal of, and to be role model for, aging femininity. Only days after this image appeared the global media mesh was saturated with advice for older women on how to achieve a similar, firm but feminine, body. Even now, Googling ‘Mirren bikini’ brings up over 400,000 hits.

Within masculinity, firmness tends to speak of character and purposefulness in ways that it never does within femininity. Think Morgan Freeman, or Tom Hanks for instance. Moreover, in formations of masculinity, firmness and hardness tend to be elided. Increasingly, male movie stars have the kind of worked on, worked out, hard bodies that used to be the province of the sporting star and now, the rock hard six pack stomach a la Brad Pitt and Daniel Craig is all the better displayed by the depilation of the hairy chest that in the hey day of Burt Reynolds and Sean Connery, was the signifier of potent masculinity. Given Hollywood’s restrictions on the display of the flaccid penis, let alone an erect one, the representation of potent masculinity is reliant on visual displacements such as the hairy chest or the six pack abs. Over the course of a long career, Jack Nicholson has perfected the raised eyebrow technique of displacement. In certain roles such as Melvin Udall in *As Good As It Gets* (James L Brooks, 1998) a raised eyebrow from Jack is highly suggestive that another part of the anatomy is

similarly rising. When taken with a stream of roles in which he is either lover to several women at once, such as *The Witches of Eastwick* (George Miller, 1987), or he plays the lover of much younger women in films like *As Good As It Gets* (James L Brooks, 1998), *Something's Gotta Give* (Nancy Meyers, 2003) or as in his most recent film, *How do you Know?* (James L Brooks, 2010), Nicholson is not only constructed as both irresistible and potent, that construction firmly penetrates formulations of youthful aging.

So far I have focussed on the production and consumption of youthful aging as a regulatory and embodied discursive identity formation. Without suggesting that economics are not in themselves discursively produced, it is not difficult to forge connections to the economic imperatives of youthful aging. For instance, Jack Nicholson's embodiment of youthful aging is also an embodiment of potent, hard masculinity: an embodiment that helps secure gender difference, and just as significantly, it also invites powerful resonances with the Viagra industry. Although not as explicit as Jane Fonda's endorsement of L'Oreal cosmetics, Nicholson's potently masculine star persona effectively supports the pathology of 'male sexual dysfunction' that the consumption of Viagra promises to remedy. In highly gendered ways, the consumption of the signs of youthful aging is inextricably linked to the consumption of all those goods, services, treatments, techniques, commodity sales, media opportunities that have consolidated into a globalised 'youthing' industry. The technologies of 'youthful aging' are predicated on transience and disposability: they are the ultimate consumer product in that under the aegis of maintenance they require more and more consumption. As a sub-section of a larger beauty and fitness industry 'youthing' is also a major employer, both in terms of providing services and in manufacturing the commodities that are purchased on the promise that they will halt, delay or even overcome aging.

The slogan that 70 is the new 60 has a hard, economic rationale and I would suggest that youthful aging is being used as lever in the contraction of the welfare state in various European nations. Youthful aging is no longer confined to discourses of a leisured old age but is being used to regulate aging bodies in order to reduce the burden on health and pension services. By the end of 2010 France was riven with social unrest with activists protesting against proposals to raise the retirement age from 60 to 62. Germany already has a retirement age of 67, Spain is attempting to raise the age from 65 to 67, and I have no doubt that the Cameron government has the British retirement

age in its sights. There is no uniform retirement age within western culture, but there is a dominant discourse within governments that raising the age of retirement is one way of reducing national liabilities. In order to do this, governments need healthy, older bodies. The fit body is fit for work, therefore the regulation of the aging body is inextricably linked to the regulation of the state within capitalist logic. We are increasingly pressured into adopting 'healthy lifestyles' to keep ourselves fit and young, young and healthy. Stop that smoking, stop that drinking, get out there and exercise. For what? Basically, so that we can remain part of the cycle of production and consumption that secures capitalist economical structures.

It is little wonder therefore that the youthful aging body has become a site of cultural anxiety on those occasions when the always already pathologised signs of old age rupture the embodied construction of youthful aging. Since coming to public attention as the 'material girl' of the 1980s, Madonna has mesmerised with her ability to switch between distinct sexed and gendered identities in the representational spaces of her videos (Switchenberg 1994) and for her ability to exemplify the toned, youthful body (Railton and Watson forthcoming). Indeed, Madonna has been presented as evidence of the plastic, mutable body that defied essentialist formulations. However, since she reached her 50s, she has been increasingly vilified in the press for the display of her aging body, signified by her sinewy arms, her gnarled, bony, wrinkly and veiny hands. Effectively, the hands are constituted as signs of a 'real old age' that can not be effaced by the interventions of the 'youthing' industry; they are pathologised as signs of 'real old age' that lie in wait and rupture the veneer of youthful aging. Railton and Watson (forthcoming) suggest that the discourses constructing Madonna's body as aging do so by reiterating formulations of the grotesque and the abject. No longer the darling material girl, Madonna is now akin to Norma Desmond or Baby Jane. No longer the plastic body of consumer choice, Madonna is constructed and vilified as living evidence of biological destiny and the ravages time; and the body that once embodied the discourses of plasticity now refutes the promises of delayed, deferred, overcome aging.

The most likely effects of this on the 'youthing' industries are an increased effort to close over the rupture of youthful aging: to develop and promote even more techniques, procedures and products that will close the ideological seam under threat. And Madonna's aging hands are unlikely to counter those bids to extend the working age since, paradoxically, she also embodies the aging body preserved for work through

diet and fitness regimes. Capitalism does not really care how we look so long as we can perform in the cycle of production and consumption. The appeal to the ‘looks’ of aging is the sugar on the pill, the bread and circuses that produces a docile workforce and keeps many of us chained to the capitalist treadmill.

Before finishing, a final point is necessary. I would suggest that the hegemonic struggle for the meaning of old age is also part of the hegemonic struggle for the meaning of the body: a struggle between biological essentialism and cultural constructionist positions. The stakes are high. Whilst capitalism may not be unduly affected by the rearticulation of the biological or essential body in the guise of old age, it does have huge ramifications for social justice and equal opportunities. The dislocation of gendered, sexual, classed, raced and ethnic identities from biological and essentialised formulations has been central to the struggle against identity motivated prejudices, exclusions and acts of violence. Those battles are not won yet. If we are not vigilant to the rearticulation and operation of essentialised discourse then we not only risk any further progress that may be made for social justice, we also place at risk some of the hard won protections for those individuals and groups culturally positioned as marginal and/or minority and therefore not worthy of the same rights as those with dominant identities. The watchword for future research in the field of popular culture is vigilance.

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Filmography

- All About Eve* (Joseph Mankiewicz, 1950)
- As Good As It Gets* (James L Brooks, 1998)
- How do you Know?* (James L Brooks, 2010)
- Something's Gotta Give* (Nancy Meyers, 2003)
- Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950)
- The Girl From Tiger Bay* (Alan Yentob, BBC One, First broadcast Tuesday 24 November 2009)
- The Witches of Eastwick* (George Miller, 1987)
- Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* (Robert Aldrich, 1960)