

# Clothing, age and the body: a critical review

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## **ABSTRACT**

Clothes are central to the ways older bodies are experienced, presented and understood within culture, so that dress forms a significant, though neglected, element in the constitution and experience of old age. Drawing on a range of secondary literature, this article traces how clothing intersects with three key debates in social gerontology, concerning the body, identity and agency. It examines the part played by clothing in the expression of social difference, and explores the role of age-ordering in determining the dress choices of older people, and its enforcement through moral discourses that discipline their bodies. Dress is, however, also an arena for the expression of identity and exercise of agency, and the article discusses how far older people are able to use clothing to resist or redefine the dominant meanings of age. Lastly the paper addresses questions of the changing cultural location of older people, and the role of consumer culture in the production of Third Age identities.

**KEY WORDS** – body, identity, agency, resistance, dress, clothing, consumption.

## **Introduction**

Clothes mediate between the naked body and the social world, the self and society, presenting a means whereby social expectations in relation to age act upon and are made manifest in the body. They thus play a potentially important role in our understanding of the cultural processes of ageing. Clothing and age has, however, been a neglected subject: there is little empirical or theoretical work that addresses the topic directly. I will argue in this article, however, that clothing and dress engage with three key current debates in social gerontology – those relating to the body, identity and agency – and that clothes provide an arena in which such debates can be pursued.

The body is central to the experience of ageing, though the extent of its relevance has been contested, particularly by cultural critics who have sought to emphasise the ways in which aged bodies are the product of the

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cultural discourses that constitute them and endow them with specific meanings. Clothing is significant to these debates because it mediates the relationship between the body and the social world, forming the vestimentary envelope that contains and makes manifest the body, offering a means whereby it is experienced, presented and given meaning in particular social contexts. We conceive of the body through the medium of dress. How clothing operates in relation to age is thus significant for our understanding of how cultural expectations concerning age act upon and present the body.

Questions of the body and age are also linked to debates about the nature of identity in high- or post-modernity. If identities have indeed altered, as post-modern critics claim, becoming more fluid and fragmented, more closely linked to the culture of consumption, how does this impact on the experience of age? In particular, how far has the emergence of the new social space of the Third Age, with its roots in consumer culture, affected the ways that identity in age is experienced; and what role does a factor of consumption like clothing play in this? Proponents of Third Age identities argue that these are constructed in terms of the extension of mainstream consumer culture to the aged. Such approaches suggest that the former pattern of age-ordering in dress has given way to a new fluidity, in which garments are chosen without consideration of, or in counter-valance to, considerations of age and its cultural associations. These assertions have, however, been challenged. Identities may be neither as fluid nor as optional as claimed, and voluntarism in relation to both identity and dress not as great as post-modern critics – themselves influenced by the discourses of consumer society – assert. The field of ageing, the body and dress provides one arena in which such questions can be explored.

Questions of choice and identity also raise issues of agency. Clothing in consumer culture is predominately articulated in terms of choice and the exercise of agency, though these choices take place in a cultural and economic context that constrains and shapes them closely. How free are older people to exercise agency in dress? In particular, how far are they able to use clothing to resist, reinterpret or redefine dominant messages about age? Clothing, particularly for older women, is often embedded in moral prescriptions that act to police their bodies and entrench the micro-social order. How far are they able to offer resistance to these meanings, and how does such resistance relate to the tension between strategies of age-denial or age-affirmation? Is it possible to pursue an ideal of agelessness, and what might this mean in the context of bodily change? The subject of clothing and the body thus raises a number of questions in relation to the meaning and experience of ageing in high- or post-modernity. Before discussing these, however, we need to address the question of why clothing

and age has been neglected in academic work, and to clarify two points concerning the scope of the subject.

### **The neglect of clothing and age**

One reason for the neglect lies in the nature of the academic analysis of fashion and its predominant location in the fields of art, art history and cultural studies (Hollander 1978; Craik 1994; Ribeiro 1995, 2002, 2005; Breward 2000; MacDonald *et al.* 2003). This has given a specific flavour to the analysis. Fashion studies tend to focus on the elite fashion of *haute couture* or of style leaders, or on the analysis of sub-cultural groups like street tribes (Polhemus 1994; Steele 1997). The fashion literature, like the fashion industry, is concerned with spectacle, display and creativity; it celebrates the edgy, the fashionable, the erotic and the transgressive (Evans 2003). Older people have little place in such a literature, indeed they are consciously excluded from it. A review of academic writing on fashion revealed almost nothing on age or on the clothing choices of older people. At the heart of the issue are the assumptions that fashion is all about sexuality and that older people – certainly in the eyes of the young – are beyond sex. Their clothing choices are, therefore, of no interest or relevance to studies of fashion, and indeed to include them would, in the eyes of many, degrade the subject matter.

The topic of clothing and age has also been neglected in social gerontology. This is partly because of the bias in the discipline towards problematic old age and the challenges this presents at a societal level. This has produced an emphasis on the resources of the public and semi-public sectors rather than the world of private consumption, and on the themes of need, functioning and deficiency rather than expressivity, identity and choice. Recently, however, this emphasis has begun to change with the emergence of cultural gerontology (Cole 1992; Andersson 2002; Katz 2005) and of new and plural understandings of the meanings and significance of ageing and old age that have been influenced by post-modernism and the cultural turn. The emergence of the Third Age as a new social space, broadly encompassing late-middle age and associated with prosperity and leisure, has reinforced these trends. As Gilleard and Higgs (2000) argued, the later years need now to be seen as much in terms of consumption, social engagement and personal development, as of loss, frailty and decline. Clothing is in consequence of growing interest.

The third reason for the neglect of clothing and fashion relates to the widespread sense within the academy and beyond that these are trivial subjects that do not merit serious analysis. As Tseelon (2001) commented,

to engage in research on dress is to place oneself on the fringes of academic respectability. This has been particularly true in mainstream sociology, which has inherited many of the prejudices against fashion of earlier moralistic writing. From its inception, sociology, with its bias towards rationality and the masculine-defined worlds of work and the public sphere, tended to regard subjects like fashion as lightweight and superficial. Their association with the feminine further undermined their status. As Entwistle (2000) noted, there are parallels with the initial disregard in sociology for the body and emotion.

These perceptions were reinforced by the views of feminists of the 'Second Wave' who associated fashion with discredited and oppressive forms of femininity (Friedan 1963; Greer 1971; Daly 1979; Jeffries 2005). Fashion distorted the natural body through subordinating practices like high-heels, corsets and objectifying fashions that reduced women to objects of a sexualising gaze, rendering them unable to act effectively in the world. It diverted women's energies into trivial questions of appearance; and reinforced negative stereotypes of women as ever-changing, inconstant and narcissistic. Under the impact of post-modernism, however, there has been a revaluation of fashion in feminist writing as part of the wider development of studies of the body. As Wilson (1985) argued, the presentation and adornment of the body through dress is an inescapable fact of social life. There is no natural – or unnatural – way to dress, any more than there is a natural body; indeed for many women, dress presents a significant source of aesthetic pleasure, a valued opportunity for self-fashioning and for personal reflexivity. Post-modern feminism has thus recovered dress as a legitimate interest, and in doing so has challenged some of the denigration of women's culture that has traditionally been implicit in the condemnation of dress (Tseelon 1995).

### **Gender: men too?**

In this article, I will largely address questions of dress and age in relation to older women. This is because fashion and dress are culturally constituted as feminised, and the discourse is predominantly embodied in the lives of women. As a result, women in contemporary culture are more engaged than men with fashion at every level: they spend more money on clothes, spend more time shopping, and read more about the topic; although men are of course significantly involved in the higher levels of the fashion industry. Clothing for men since the 19th century and Flugel's (1930) 'Great Renunciation', by which men abandoned the richly coloured and decorated clothing of earlier centuries, has had a narrow range of reference,

closely concerned with correctness and micro-issues of style, and dominated by a subdued palette. Pre-occupation with dress in men is often condemned as effeminate, associating men with negatively-perceived female qualities of vanity and narcissism. In the dominant constructions of masculinity, it is dangerous territory; and men are often wary of the subject. In more recent years, some of this condemnation has eased, at least among younger men, with the impact of consumer society and the emergence of new masculine subjectivities such as 'metrosexual' man.<sup>1</sup> It remains the case, however, that men tend to be less involved than women in questions of fashion, and this is reflected in the literature which is heavily biased towards women. As a result, this article, though it aims to address both genders, is mainly concerned with the experiences of older women.

### **Clothing not fashion**

The article addresses clothing, not fashion. Most writing on dress is rooted in the analysis of fashion, both of elite designs and of the changes over time and cycles, which are seen as fundamental to how fashion and the 'Fashion System' work: Fine and Leopold (1993) presented the latter as the constellation of production, retail and media influences that together shape clothing choices. As we shall see, the historical emergence of this dynamic of change is linked to the rise of modernity. The concern of this article, however, is more with dress, by which is meant a focus on clothing as an everyday bodily practice in which various influences – including those of the fashion system – come into play. Such a focus is particularly relevant for older people who by and large are ignored by the fashion industry. Concentrating on clothing allows us to acknowledge the ways in which older people are also dressed; how they too wear clothes and make clothing choices. In particular, it allows us to extend the theoretical analysis to older men (and others) who are not normally considered in such studies, but for whom questions of clothing and dress are relevant.

### **Clothing and the body**

In recent years, the body has been the subject of an extensive literature in the arts and social sciences. Initially, this work shared some of the gerontophobia that has characterised fashion studies; there was a tendency to avoid the subject of ageing bodies, and to focus on younger, sexier topics. Social gerontology was similarly reluctant to address the aged body, preferring to emphasise social-structural factors in the constitution

of age; though more recently there has been a greater willingness to engage with questions of the body and embodiment (Katz 1996; Öberg 1996; Gullette 1997, 1999, Tulle-Winton 1999, 2000; Woodward 1999; Gilleard and Higgs 2000; Wahidin 2002; Twigg 2004; Dumas *et al.* 2005).

Early work on the body, particularly that influenced by post-structuralism, sometimes adopted extreme versions of social constructionism that at times appeared to deny the existence of the physical body. The body disappeared in a cloud of language and discourse. Since then, particularly under the impact of various critiques – from the perspectives of medical sociology in the study of chronic illness and pain (Bury 1982, 1991; Leder 1990; Bendelow 1993; Lawton 2003), from the work broadly influenced by critical realism (Williams 1999), from a desire to transcend the implicit dualism of such accounts (Shilling 1993, 2005; Crossley 2001), and from the exegeses of embodiment associated with the work of Merleau-Ponty (1962) – there has been a return to a sense of the body as a concrete reality, as a generator as well as receptor of meanings. As a result, it is now more possible to acknowledge the physical reality of the body without abandoning the subject to biological reductionism.

These debates are significant because we need to understand clothing and ageing in terms of the interplay of cultural and biological factors. Most of the present discussion concerns social and cultural patterns: how clothes operate within a system of age-ordering; how we use clothes to display, underwrite and express social and cultural meanings; and how these are challenged, subverted and subtly altered by the behaviour and choices of individuals, albeit always operating in a social context. But the subject of clothing and age needs also to be related to physiological factors. The body changes as it ages (Smathers and Horridge 1978; Goldsberry *et al.* 1996), and these changes need to be incorporated into decisions about dress at an individual level. Styles that once fitted or ‘suited’ – the category is, of course, cultural – may no longer do so as the body ages. The transition to old age is indeed culturally negotiated, but the body plays a direct and immediate part. At an individual level, people come to recognise their own ageing through changes in bodily appearance, and these changes are reflected, or resisted, in clothing choices. In the Third Age – a post retirement period of health and leisure – most of these changes are ones of appearance rather than function, related to factors like muscle tone, skin quality, body shrinkage and thickening. But the transition to the Fourth Age – marked by the onset of more significant health problems – can impose more radical adjustments, as individuals accommodate changes in relation to, for example, mastectomy or colostomy, troubles with continence, and difficulties with feet and walking. All these present new demands in relation to dress and they need to be negotiated within cultural

and aesthetic structures. They can mean, however, that it becomes increasingly difficult to remain part of mainstream culture with respect to clothes. The interplay of the body and clothing thus presents opportunities to explore the ways in which ageing is both a physiological and cultural phenomenon, and the complex interplay of these factors in the lives of older people.

### **Identity, clothing and age**

Clothes are expressions of identity, one of the perennial means whereby we signal to the social world who and what we are; they are part of our repertoire of social technology, a means whereby ideas of identity are grounded in the visual (Tseelon 1995). But this expressivity operates within a cultural context that assigns distinctive meanings to social forms. They are part of how cultural expectations are translated into specific requirements in relation to appearance, and a means whereby identity in age is constituted at the level of individual bodies. We can explore this through the literature on clothing and social difference.

#### *Clothing and social difference*

Clothes play a vital though often unacknowledged role in the constitution of social difference (Beward 2000), as seen clearly in relation to gender. Fashion, as Entwistle (2000) noted, is obsessed with gender, with the complex interplay between sexed bodies and gendered modes of dress. Dress indeed provides a particularly clear example of Butler's (1990, 1993) concept of the performativity of gender. Clothes act to define and naturalise gender, rendering what is constituted and performed as if it were natural and self-evident. They make gender visible and obvious, reproducing it as a form of body style. Butler chose to focus on clothes, and in particular drag, precisely because of its capacity to disturb assumptions commonly made about the inter-linkages between sexed bodies, gendered performance and sexual identity.

Dress is also significant in relation to other forms of social difference, for example sexuality. There is now a considerable literature on gay and lesbian fashion and its role (particularly in the 20th century) in articulating the emergence of distinctive and visible sub-groups around the expression of sexuality (Rolley 1993; Holliday 2001). Similar work has explored the ways in which 'race' and ethnicity interact with norms of fashion, underpinning distinctively ethnic forms of dress, as well as the complex interactions between modes and styles associated with migrant cultures and their

variation, expression and counter-expression in the countries of adoption and subsequent descent (Khan 1993). Clothing can thus play an important part in signalling or erasing aspects of identity. The connection between clothing and class has been particularly well explored in sociology; and we shall see later how social class has been central to both the analysis of fashion and the explanation of its historical emergence. To this day, class remains a significant determinant of dress; we read social class position from clothing style. Clothing here reflects various influences – some economic but some partly sub-cultural – that reflect distinctive forms of dress associated with class-defined groups.

Much of the work on clothing and social difference takes the form of sub-cultural analyses that focus on the use of clothes and body-styling as a means of marking out the boundaries of the group, stabilising identity and registering belonging. These analyses, however, tend to be strongly focused on youth culture and transgressive, counter-cultural styles. Sub-group analysis is rarely deployed in relation to social groups who might be regarded as ‘conservative’ or ‘traditional’ in their cultural location, even where these may be socially marginalised and, to that extent, ‘counter cultural’ in their values. It is not particularly helpful, therefore, to think of older people and their dress in sub-cultural terms. A better way to present the issue is in terms of age-ordering.

### *The age-ordering of clothes*

The age-ordering of dress operates throughout the lifecourse. It is perhaps most evident in childhood, when distinctive age-related forms of dress are common. The degree to which childhood is marked out in this way has varied historically; and the popularisation of distinctive forms of dress for children is associated with the emergence of the modern culture of childhood that has roots in Romanticism. More recently, children’s clothes have become less, rather than more, distinctive, and approached adult modes, certainly in their reflection of the cycle of adult fashion, indicating the extension to children of consumption society. When we turn to older ages, however, the categorisations are less clear. There are not the same clues in relation to size that there are with children’s clothes. Indeed from one perspective there are no clothes for older people as such, but rather a range of clothing from which individuals make choices according to various lifestyle, income and aesthetic preferences. Nonetheless there are clearly observable differences in dress by adult age. There is no single point in the life-course or in terms of chronological age when these differences emerge: people adopt ‘older’ styles at different ages. The characterisation of such older styles is also somewhat blurred, but they clearly exist and are

recognisable to individuals living in the culture of western societies during the early 21st century.

If such age-ordering exists, what are its concrete manifestations? I want here to draw on Alison Lurie's novel, *Language of Clothes* (1992), in which she interpreted the meanings of various forms of dress. Lurie showed an understanding of the contingent nature of such meanings; and it is important in reviewing them to recognise that they are fluid and contextual, rooted in particular historical and social configurations. In general, attempts by fashion theorists to establish enduring interpretations of forms of dress have not proved successful, for the very plurality and cultural plasticity of dress resists such efforts. Indeed, some argue that clothing, and certainly fashion, follows its own aesthetic dynamic, which means that it cannot be fully reduced to social and cultural interpretations.

Lurie made three suggestions in relation to clothes and older people. The first is the tendency for older people's clothes to be longer and to some degree more shapeless than those of young adults; she refers to the history of the long robe and its association over many centuries with older men, particularly in a dignified context. This garment is no longer worn by men – except in its vestigial form of the judge's robe or academic gown – but it is echoed in women's clothes, with which the general rule 'longer equals older' applies, certainly to skirt lengths (1992: 51). Younger women, by contrast, are free to choose from a wider range of lengths. The shift towards looser cut, with less definition at the waist, is also characteristic of older women's dress, though here the style interacts with bodily change (Goldsberry *et al.* 1996).

Lurie also suggested connections between age and colour. Within the dominant colour system of the modern west, older women's dress is associated with muted, dull, soft colours like beige, grey, lilac and navy-blue. Iltanen's study (2005) of designers asked them to select garments appropriate for women aged in the fifties and sixties, and similarly found that the choices were predominantly dark or muted. Black as a colour, although connected with age in the past, now has more ambivalent meaning, since it evokes the dual meanings of mourning, and thus widowhood, but also of drama and display – the dangerous black of fashion and sexuality (Harvey 1995). Muted, quiet colours themselves have multiple referents, and in the last two decades have become associated for women with professional dress, including the shift in women's office clothes towards the sexually-neutral work ideal of men's suits. But worn by older women, these pale, grey, beige non-colours suggest social retirement, or a withdrawn and sidelined status.

The adoption of dull, neutral colours in old age relates to the more general practice of 'toning down', in which there is a retreat from eye-catching styles or overly sexual display. These neutral colours also draw on

counter meanings, in that they are consciously *not* bright, attention grabbing colours like yellow or red. Indeed such colours, particularly red, are often presented as ‘unflattering’ or unsuitable for older women, suggesting as they declaim overt sexuality, a brazen, vivid quality that is well conveyed by the word scarlet, with its multiple moral and social referents. We can hear echoes of this colour system in Jenny Joseph’s poem *Warning*, which achieved remarkable popularity, being voted the one of Britain’s favourite poems in a BBC poll in 1996.<sup>2</sup> Its success has had less to do with its quality as poetry than its resonance with the lives and feelings of many women. The poem describes everyday acts of defiance and resistance, a number of which relate to dress, notably the wearing of purple, which has come to represent the poem. As Lurie (1992) noted, purple is an ambivalent colour, associated with royalty and gorgeousness, but also vulgarity and coarseness. In emphasising this colour, Joseph’s poem encapsulated the resistance to demands to tone down behaviour and dress, and to become grey and invisible.

The third connection made by Lurie is rather different, and in some ways reverses the earlier meanings of sobriety and self-effacement. It concerns the return to childishness in the dress of some older people, particularly in America; she pointed to the bright colours and bold patterns normally associated with toddlers that have been adopted by some older Americans living in resorts or retirement villages. These clothes draw heavily on the repertoire of leisure dress, and part of their meaning is precisely to be ‘at play’, no longer constrained by the norms of business dress, with its emphasis on the sober, dark and structured. Sports-wear allows for body movement, and with it body spread. Elastic waistbands and *Spandex* fabrics accommodate the changes, but in ways that maintain an integration with mainstream younger clothing through the metaphor of sport. But they are also clothes that signal a return to the comfort and ease of babyhood; there is something asexual about the toddler-like shapes and colours. By the same token they are also easy to clean, again suggesting an association between the bodies of old people and of babies.

Before asking how rigid or extensive the age-ordering of clothes is, and how far there is evidence of individual resistance and change, we need to explore the links between clothing and morality, for it is through the operation of moral discourses around dress that age-ordering is maintained.

### **The moral ordering of dress: policing the aged body**

A recurrent feature in writing on dress has been the encoded moral language. Dress is frequently spoken of in moral terms, for example as

good, bad, faultless, correct, vulgar, tarty or cheap. Like food it attracts language that reaches beyond the phenomena being described. There is a powerful moral charge to this – an over-determined quality that draws strength from the ways in which both food and clothing are cultural fields concerned with the body, its expression and control. Dress is thus part of a set of wider processes around disciplining the body, constraining and enabling its expression, making it subject to the discourses of morality.

There are two ways in which this moral ordering operates differentially and distinctively in relation to older people. The first concerns the significance attached to lapses of dress. In general, being correctly dressed is an element of engaging successfully with the social world. Entwistle (2000) noted how unease and anxiety attach to failing to meet the standards required by the moral order of the social space, and how individuals feel vulnerable and embarrassed if their dress lets them down, through laddered tights, drooping hems, and other failures of appearance. But in relation to older people, these strictures operate in a harsher way, pointing to new and threatening meanings. Lapses of dress, like stains, visible food marks and gaping buttons, do not just offend against the performance norms of the social space, but signal a social and moral decline that may threaten a person's capacity to remain part of mainstream society. In the context of old age, there is no longer the possibility of Herrick's 'sweet disorder of the dress': the erotic evaporates, to be replaced by the untidy and derelict. Older people are thus caught within an altogether harsher moral climate in relation to dress – harsher at least if they do not want to accept the reduced and changed identities that such sartorial failings signal – a climate that disciplines and judges their bodies more strictly than those of younger people.

The second sense in which dress operates to police the bodies of older people relates to sexuality. Dress plays a central part in the expression of sexuality. Indeed from the perspective of mainstream fashion theory, sexuality is the key to fashion; and we noted earlier that the exclusion of older women from fashion discourse largely arose from assumptions about sexuality. For many older women, one of the most powerful discursive formations that restrains their clothes' choices is the old cultural trope, 'mutton dressed as lamb'. References to this recur, both in accounts of dress when they address age, and in the comments of respondents in studies about ageing (Fairhurst 1998; Holland 2004). 'Mutton dressed as lamb' is an oddly old-fashioned phrase, the culinary referent of which is now largely lost, but it is still widely recognised and used as a term of control, policing women's appearance. The action it castigates is dressing in an inappropriately youthful way, but underlying this is

the meaning of an inappropriately sexual way. One of Fairhurst's respondents evoked the meaning of the phrase: 'a lot of excessive jewellery on and very, very heavy make-up and pencil-type skirts and slits and big – high, you know, really big high heels. That to me is "mutton dressed as lamb"' (1998: 262). The phrase is only applied to women, and is linked to other dangers in the form of looking tarty, like an old slag, or a slapper. The references to prostitution underline the essentially sexual nature of the condemnation and the sense that is related to forms of sexuality that are deemed both inappropriate and to some degree threatening to the moral order.

The ambivalences that women feel about dressing down and adjusting their appearance with age are experienced even by those who adopt alternative, counter-cultural or 'anti-fashion' styles. Holland's (2004) study of women who adopt alternative appearance – coloured dreadlocks, tattoos, piercings, leather – illustrated the ambivalence felt by this group as they pondered their future old age. The section 'Defying the crone' reported the respondents' reflections on how, and how far, they can combine their 'difference' as alternative women with being middle-aged or elderly. Many recognised, with regret and at times defiance, the pressure to tone down their appearance. Being radical and outrageous was part of their self identity. But the prospect of old age brought new and unwelcome images in this regard, of the bag-lady and of the mad old witch with her cats. The fear was not one of being outrageous or different – this they had embraced – but of becoming monstrous or grotesque. The moral judgements imposed on older women who deviate from clothing norms are thus harsher than for women of younger years, and contain a negative, objectifying quality that is hard to reconcile with a positive identity.

To speak of age-ordering and its moral enforcement can suggest, however, an over-rigid analysis, one in which culture presses down on older people and their bodies, imprisoning them in disciplinary structures, with little in the way of personal autonomy or agency. It also presents a somewhat ahistorical account, with no recognition of the changes that have occurred in the cultural location of older people and the treatment of their bodies. The following section examines these issues, including how far older people are able to exert agency in relation to dress, and how this relates to the tension between age-denial and age-affirmation in terms both of the body and identity. The last section will address questions of the changing structural location of older people and its potential implications for self expression and choice in dress. In other words, has the nature of ageing altered, so that cultural patterns like age-ordering are now less relevant?

### **Agency and dress: age resistance and age denial**

So far we have spoken of dress as something that is imposed by culture or the fashion or clothing system – a form of social ordering, reinforced by moralistic discourse. But we need to acknowledge the ways in which dress is also an arena for the exercise of agency. That is certainly how it is articulated in the prevailing consumer culture, in which individuals are encouraged to regard consumption as an expression of identity. Recent empirical work on the experiential aspects of dress has reinforced this interpretation. Guy *et al.* (2000), for example, argued that we need to refocus our understanding of dress away from the fashion system and its dictates, and towards the lived experience of clothes in individual women's lives. Work on consumption has tended to present clothing in terms of the initial point of purchase, but this is to miss the ways in which clothes are consumed and re-consumed over time, how they become 'active' in a wardrobe, are worn in different ways and are incorporated into different looks before eventually being discarded (Guy and Banim 2001). For many women, clothes are an important field for the exercise of agency and expression of identity.

Yet dress is also clearly the product of social and economic forces that are far from individual or particular to the self. The dress of most people reflects very closely the clothing presented to them through the fashion system, so that although individual choices are made, they are done so across a fairly narrow compass. People buy from the same market, and this shapes their choices. The ease with which we can recognise the dates of portrait photographs demonstrates this process: most people end up looking fairly alike and their appearance strongly reflects the period and their social group. Indeed the dream of agency in dress often appears paradoxically to be expressed by conformity, as can be seen in youth styles. Dress is experienced by the young as a significant source of self-expression, a genuine focus of agency in the experience of their lives, and yet clothing among the young frequently exhibits quite extreme conformity, in which the presentation of the body is 'policed' at a micro level. This paradox can be partly understood by reference to what Simmel recognised as the central tension in fashion, the conflict between the desire 'to fit in' and 'to stand out'. For Simmel, fashion expressed the tension between the desires for social equalisation and for individual differentiation and change, between the convergent and divergent forces of the individual and society (Simmel 1904/1971). Clothes can indeed be expressive of individuality and agency; they do have personal meanings that are distinctive to the individual. But their choice, and the meanings that attach to them, are to a large extent determined by the social,

economic and cultural contexts. The voluntarism of dress can be greatly exaggerated.

What does this mean for older people? We have already seen how the pressure to conform to age norms applies even to alternative women who consciously flout social norms in dress (Holland 2004). Agency for older people appears therefore to be fairly limited. But is this to miss the possibilities of resistance? Moreover, are moral strictures in relation to dress changing, so that resistance to ageing discourses is increasingly possible? Is ageing in the context of consumer culture a different experience, one in which there are new possibilities for the exercise of agency? As we shall see shortly, various assertions have been made to this effect, but there are also rival interpretations. Before exploring these questions, we need to touch on the debates concerning age-resistance, age-denial and the dream of agelessness, for all are relevant to the constraints that older people face in negotiating new practices in dress.

#### *Age-resistance and age-denial*

One way in which we can examine the intersections between the body, identity and agency is in terms of the tensions between the strategies of age-resistance and age-denial. Cultural critics like Gullette (1997, 1999) and Featherstone and Hepworth (1991) have traced the ways in which culture imposes negative meanings on the bodies of older people, which are then read back as the source of those meanings. For Gullette, we are aged not by our bodies but by culture; and the response should be one of challenge and resistance, as the title of her book *Cultural Combat* makes clear. Featherstone and Hepworth (1991) presented a parallel but slightly different interpretation in a chapter entitled, 'The mask of ageing and the post-modern life course', which pointed to the discrepancy people experience between the aged face in the mirror and the enduring sense of self. Ageing imposes a false mask over the self, impeding the individual's ability to be and to express who they really are. In this way, self-identity in age is increasingly at odds with bodily experience.

Neither Featherstone and Hepworth nor Gullette denied the existence of bodily ageing, although their work has at times been interpreted as coming near to doing so, with their emphasis on the cultural constitution of the body. Some have seen a dream of agelessness as implicit in their approaches, in which identity is seen as something quite separate from the body and the processes of age. As a result, their work has been criticised by those who see it as endorsing a false dualism of the body and the self (Oberg 1996; Biggs 1997; Conway and Hockey 1998; Andrews 1999; Kontos 1999). For Andrews, the dream of agelessness, though superficially

attractive, is ultimately erosive since it requires people to deny who and what they are by virtue of having lived the lives that they have. It devalues the ways in which we are our bodies, and how changes in relation to them are part of ourselves. Identity is thus not just the product of the individual's current assertion of choice, as extreme post-modernists suggest, but of a long personal history in which the experience of bodily ageing is part (Vincent 1999). Continuity here is not the same as agelessness. Age-resistance is something that comes perilously near age-denial. Such strategies, Andrews argued, are ultimately self defeating, not only because the body inevitably ages, but because they involve the internalisation of society's devaluation of older people. As Andrews put it, 'Oblivious to the sources of our strength in old age and to the possibility of self renewal, we blindly create and sustain the conditions of our own self censorship, and ultimately our own defeat'. By this means, 'the dignity of the self is replaced by a secret self loathing' (1999: 307).

We can see some of the ways in which these tensions are played out in clothing choices. Age-resistance can mean rejecting the cultural denigration implicit in the processes that assign to older women drab, frumpy, shapeless and concealing garments – clothing that endorses the cultural norm of invisibility and that acts to entrench the sidelined status of the old. Such strategies, however, contain their own dangers in the form of radical age-denial through the pursuit of youth styles that present the body – and the self – as if it were unchanged, and in so doing actually expose and emphasise those changes. By the same token, the pursuit of age-denial can lead individuals into strategies that undermine, in Andrew's words, the dignity of self, and frustrate what Fairhurst (1998) reported as the widely endorsed aim of 'growing old gracefully'.

Part of the difficulty in assessing such strategies comes from the way in which resistance is itself a profoundly ambiguous term. This holds true both of its Foucauldian origins, where the foundation of resistance remains untheorised – its existence asserted but its sources opaque – and its use more generally in sociology, where problems recurrently arise in relation to what can properly be regarded as resistance. Is the exaggerated fluffy, pink, femininity of Barbara Cartland, as suggested by Holland (2004), resistance to the cultural demand to tone down and retreat from female sexuality, or exaggerated conformity to the discourses of conventional femininity?<sup>3</sup> As Furman (1997) noted in her classic account of the beauty-shop and age, what counts as resistance and what capitulation is far from clear, so that ambiguity is piled on ambiguity. In this way, post-modern analyses often generate as many problems as they seek to resolve. There is no simple answer to the tension between age resistance and age denial.

**Consumer culture: the challenge to or entrenchment of age-ordering**

This final section examines the debates about consumption and its role in the reconstitution of old age. We noted earlier the powerful tradition of age-ordering in dress. But has this given way to new fluidity in the face of consumer culture? Or has it reasserted itself in more subtle forms? The emergence of the Third Age as a new cultural space has, cultural critics argue, disrupted the old narrative of age in terms of marginalisation and decline. The institutional structures that once ordered the life-course have been destabilised, disembedding individuals from earlier sources of identity and presenting them with new opportunities for choice and self-ascription. For Gilleard and Higgs (2005), there is in addition a cohort effect, arising from the maturation of a generation that pioneered youth culture and its subsequent development into consumer culture, so that their attainment of the Third Age status marks a new stage in the cultural constitution of age. These elders have no wish to forgo the pleasures of consumption, and no desire or intention to adopt 'older' styles or modes of life. Their wish is to remain part of mainstream consumer culture. Age-ordering from their perspective is oppressive, something to be resisted.

This interpretation in terms of growing fluidity and choice is consistent with the widely held perception that the dress of people in middle and later years is no longer constrained by cultural norms. The old hierarchies in relation to age and dress appear to have broken down, together with the institutional structures that previously entrenched a normative life-cycle, with the result that the age-ordering that was a prominent feature of the dress of older people in previous generations has gone. This is certainly how the clothing industry itself, conscious of the economic power of older consumers (Sawchuk 1995; Long 1998), presents the situation. From the corporate perspectives of retailers and advertisers, there are no clothes for older people as such, just a variety of modes aimed at different lifestyles, which customers are free to choose as they wish.

Not all analysts, however, endorse this view; and Crane (2000), writing from the perspective of a theorist of dress rather than a social gerontologist, has advanced a radically different interpretation. She argued that age in relation to dress, rather than reducing in significance, has increased, replacing the previously dominant role of social class. Sociologists from Veblen (1899/1918) and Simmel (1904/1971) to the present have accorded a primary role to social class in the explanation of fashion, tracing the shift from feudally-ordered societies, in which distinctive clothes were used to mark social categories and enforced by means of sumptuary laws, towards class-based societies in which competitive emulation and the pursuit of class-based distinction fuel the engine of fashion. The emergence of class

society is thus linked to changes in the clothing system, as dress becomes a tool in the battle for social status, part of the dynamic of competitive emulation and display in which styles are diffused downwards from social elites. By these means, the upper classes attempt constantly to display their distinction and to separate themselves from the 'lower orders' by display.

Crane argued, however, that from the late-20th century, this dynamic of class no longer had its former primacy, and that the engine of fashion has shifted to age. 'Instead of the upper class seeking to differentiate itself from other social classes, the young seek to differentiate themselves from the middle aged and the elderly. As trends diffuse to older age groups, younger age groups adopt new styles' (2000: 198). Such a perception certainly matches features of the clothing retail market, which since the 1980s has become increasingly differentiated, with the result that mainstream high-street staples that could once trade across the age range now find it difficult to do so. The clothing market has become fragmented and differentiated; and in this, age operates as a hidden, unacknowledged variable. Far from disappearing, age-ordering may have been transformed into a more subtle form, representing a new dynamic of change.

## **Conclusions**

One of the most significant developments in social gerontology during the last decade has been the emergence of the cultural dimension in the analysis of age. We have moved from an approach dominated by public policy and social welfare concerns, and implicitly structured by medical discourses, to one that recognises how old age and ageing need to be set within the cultural context that constitutes as well as frames them. In this article, I have argued that clothing presents a particularly apt subject for these new approaches, standing as it does at the interface between the body and the social world, the forces of individual agency and choice and those of collective culture. As such, it encapsulates the key debates in relation to the body, identity and agency. As we have seen, clothes are one of the principal means whereby we present and see the body, so that how dress operates in relation to age is significant for our understanding of how cultural expectations act directly at a bodily level. Clothing choices in old age, however, also reflect changes in the body, and dress thus offers a field in which the complex interplay between physiological and cultural influences in the constitution of old age can be explored.

Clothing has also traditionally embedded age-ordering. As we have seen, this is an elusive phenomenon. The retail industry is certainly reluctant to

refer to it, and many older people repudiate its influence, but there is evidence that this cultural form persists; this review has traced the features that mark it out. Some in relation to cut and – perhaps – colour can be seen as responses to changes in the body, but their predominant meanings relate to cultural estimations of the status of older people. Pale, drab colours and loose, shapeless forms underwrite invisibility and point to social marginalisation. Not all clothing worn by older people is of this type, and we have also noted the widespread adoption of relaxed, easy forms of dress that seek to maintain older people in mainstream culture through the imagery of sport; though such forms of dress also contain messages about asexuality and second childhood.

Clothing also exposes the ways in which some disciplinary discourses impinge upon the lives of older people. As we have noted, these discourses operate in distinctive and frequently moralistic ways with reference to older people, with condemnations of inappropriate dress as unsuitable sexual display falling particularly heavily on older women. The moral perils of old age, however, refer not just to sexuality but also to dereliction, and older people can find themselves judged with a new harshness by lapses of dress, which come to signal an incapacity to maintain the body in a socially-acceptable manner, thereby threatening wider condemnation and eventual social exclusion.

This account of age-ordering and the impress of cultural forms has, however, been criticised by those who argue that it is too rigid and treats culture as fixed and pre-determined, and something which deterministically bears down on individuals, enforcing its meanings and disciplining their bodies. It has been shown that clothes are also an arena for the expression of agency and choice, which opens up possibilities of resistance and change, although as noted in relation to the body itself, questions of resistance are far from straightforward. They raise layers of ambiguity, in which it is often hard to distinguish strategies of age resistance from those of age denial. Whatever post-modern critics may claim, identities cannot entirely float free from bodily experience, nor are they unconstrained by cultural ascriptions. It may be the case, however, that the cultural location of older people is itself changing. Exponents of the Third Age argue that consumer culture has opened up new opportunities for resistance to traditional discourses of age, and has helped to integrate older people into the mainstream. But as we have noted, there are reasons to be sceptical of this analysis in relation to clothes. Cultural forms are themselves protean. The nature of the fashion and clothing system may itself be shifting, with age replacing class as the primary engine of change. Far from integrating older people into the mainstream, consumer culture may be imposing new and more subtle forms of age-ordering.

## NOTES

- 1 On 'metrosexual' man, this is a recent term that denotes fashionable, urban heterosexual men whose interests encompass clothing and design commonly associated with gay culture.
- 2 The poem appeared in the collection *Rose in the Afternoon, and Other Poems* (Joseph 1974) and was included in Larkin (1973).
- 3 For non-British readers, Barbara Cartland was a celebrated romantic novelist who maintained well into old age an appearance of extreme femininity, with billowing pink chiffon and heavy false eyelashes.

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