

# Visual Signs of Ageing: What are We Looking at?

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## Abstract

Consumer culture has placed the ageing body in a dilemma of representation. Physical appearance has become increasingly important as a symbol of identity, and at the same time society idealizes youth. This study explores visual ageing empirically. By using photographs of older persons (70+) as starting point, it is explored how visual age is assessed and interpreted. It is shown that informants read age in a spread of stages and categories. Main age indicators are biological markers: skin, eyes, and hair colour, but supplemented by vigour, style, and grooming. Furthermore, in-depth interviews indicate that visual age is mainly interpreted into categories and moral regulations rooted in early modernity. Subsequently the question of a postmodern perspective of visual ageing is discussed in this article. The empirical findings in the study question a postmodern fluidity of visual signs – at least when the concern is signs of ageing.

Keywords: signs, ageing, appearance, age assessment, postmodernity, body.

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## Introduction

It is generally agreed that certain people look “old for their age” or “young for their age”. In older persons, “looking old for one’s age” has been considered an indicator of poor health within the medical world, and a recent study has proved an association between “looking old for one’s age” and mortality (Christensen et al. 2004). However, “looking old or young for one’s age” is not merely a medical issue. Postmodern culture emphasizes surface and looks. Visual representation(s) and physical appearance have become increasingly important cultural markers as symbols of identity (Bauman 1998; Giddens 1999). As the elderly generation is integrated in consumer culture, the body becomes a cultural focus for adults of all ages. Gilleard and Higgs point towards the ways in which the ageing body in consumer culture is increasingly presented with different ways of “being old”, but at the same time the ageing body suffers from “ageism” in a society that idealizes youth (Gilleard & Higgs 2000). Thus, aesthetically, the ageing body is positioned between the opportunities for self expression provided by consumer culture, and the visible nature of biology. This article seeks to explore visual ageing, and outlines some of the cultural and semiotic tensions generated in the field.

Others have focused on tensions generated between public images of ageing and the personal perceptions of the ageing body, and found them echoed in a more widespread tension existing in society between images and social realities (Featherstone & Hepworth 1991). In relation to the ageing body, it may therefore be theoretically relevant to distinguish between three different levels of meaning, as suggested by Öberg and Tornstam: a) the images of the ageing body in popular and consumer culture, b) individuals’ subjective experiences of their own bodies, and c) meanings attached to individuals’ bodies by other people (Öberg & Tornstam 1999). Most research into the appearance of the ageing body has been carried out within (a) popular and consumer culture (e.g. Featherstone 1982/1995; Bytheway & Johnson 1998; Gilleard & Higgs 2000), and (b) subjective experiences (e.g. research into the areas of “felt age” and “ideal age” by Öberg & Tornstam 1999; Öberg & Tornstam 2001). The empirical part of this paper focuses on the last aspect (c): How the appearance of older persons is perceived, and whether certain cultural meanings are attached to the reading of ageing signs. We hypothesize

that the postmodern theorising of images and visual representations of the ageing body in consumer culture might not be expressed – or might be different – at the level of meaning examined here.

In order to explore meanings attached to the reading of ageing signs, we need first to define “what age looks like”, and hence to examine: How is age assessed in older persons? What specific signs (biological? cultural?) are emphasized in the assessment of age in older persons?.

Apart from work in a medical context, most research into visual signs of ageing has been undertaken in social psychology. Here the focus has been partly on age appearance and specific biological features (e.g. babyfacedness or face shape) in younger or middle aged persons (e.g.: Berry & McArthur 1985; George & Hole 1998 or Burt & Perrett 1995), or partly on age-related stereotypes. For example, the study by Wernick and Manaster (1984) finds that unattractive faces are consistently rated as older than attractive faces (see also Hens 1991 and Deffenbacher et al. 1998); and Hummert shows that the older the person the more negative the stereotypes associated with them (Hummert 1993; Hummert et al 1995).

With this study we wish to investigate age assessment in older persons (70+ years of age), and to employ a cultural perspective to the reading and interpretation of ageing signs.

Material from empirical investigation of age assessment will be presented in the “Results” section, followed by a thematic analysis, and subsequently a cultural analysis. Finally, our empirical findings will be related to postmodern themes, and to major theories of the ageing body in consumer culture.

## Material and Methods

As part of the 2001 and 2003 waves of the population based survey *The Longitudinal Study of Aging Danish Twins*<sup>1</sup> comprising elderly twins 70+ years of age the participants were asked to have their face photographs taken (2001 and 2003) as well as a full length photograph (2003). The fact that the older persons on the photographs were twins is of no importance to this particular study.

For the face photographs a distance of 0.6-meters was used with a neutral background, if possible (*photo examples no. 1 and 2*).

**Photo 1**



**Photo 2**



The older persons were not all photographed with neutral facial expressions, but according to Sheretz & Hess (1993), this has no effect on age estimation. The full length photographs were taken with the older person standing (if possible) in the home or at a place of the person's own choice. Distance in the full length photographs varied (*photo examples no. 3 and 4*).

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<sup>1</sup> The population based *Longitudinal Study of Aging Danish Twins* started in 1995. It comprises Danish monozygotic and dizygotic twins 70+ years of age. In 2001 2,448 twins participated. See Christensen et al. (2004), and Rexbye et al. (2006) for further information on the survey and selection of photos.

Photo 3



Photo 4



A computer set-up with 774 face photographs of single twins (shown independently in random order) was made. Forty persons (informants) of various age, gender, and background: 20 female nurses (age 25 to 49 years), ten male student teachers (age 22 to 37 years), and ten elderly women (age 70 to 87 years), assessed the visual age of each single twin from the photographs. Additionally, a computer set-up with 1,420 full length photographs of single twins was assessed by 11 nurses. The informants did not have any knowledge of the twin's age or age group (Christensen et al. 2004; Rexbye et al. 2006).

In connection with the age assessment, all the informants were interviewed concerning their assessments, and asked to fill in a written form stating which signs they emphasized during the assessments. Nine informants were further interviewed in-depth: Five female nurses (age 30 to 49), two male student teachers (age 33 and 37), and two elderly women (age 77 and 79). They were shown 12 full length photographs of the older persons (individually), and asked to elaborate on their age assessments, and to openly describe the photographs. These interviews were taped

and subsequently transcribed for coding and further thematic analysis (Kvale 1997/2002).

## Results

### *Age Assessment of Face Photographs (774 photographs, 40 informants)*

All 40 informants assessed the face photographs. Even though the informants did not ascribe the same age to the older persons – they could, for instance, differ by five years in their assessments of the same person – they still agreed on the ranking i.e. who looked younger or older (in statistical terms Chronbach alpha = 0.93).

Informants assessed age stepwise, and read the signs in “layers”. When assessing age in older persons (70+), there appears to be a boundary around 80, as most informants said they would first place the person in the photograph to be either over or under 80. Similarly the data analysis revealed that assessed age was closest to chronological age in the persons around 80 years of age. There was a tendency for those over 78 to be assessed as slightly younger than their chronological age – and for those under 78 to be assessed as slightly older than their chronological age (regression towards a mean of 78). After placing the photographed person either under or over 80, the informants would gradually estimate age on a scale commencing from ten years (e.g. is the person closer to 70 years?), five years (is the person 75 years?), and finally by single years (e.g. 77 years). Almost all informants emphasised *biological* age markers such as the *eyes* and the *skin* when assessing age. Most informants assigned importance to both eyes and skin, only one emphasised hair colour, and one facial expression. Concerning the *eyes*, the informants would note eye surroundings such as wrinkles, bags under the eyes, sunken and “watery eyes”, but just as importantly they would notice the gaze, e.g. if the elderly person’s gaze towards the camera was firm, if the person had a twinkle in his/her eye, showed signs of mental presence/ absence etc. They would use expressions such as “*being present*” and “*contact*”. Also vigour was ascribed to the eyes. Concerning the *skin*, wrinkles on the face and neck were seen as most important – especially loose skin on the neck

was noticed – secondly pigmentation, colour and sagging tissue. Even though only one informant saw hair colour as the most important age marker, it was commented by all informants as they described hair colour, volume, and quantity as co-factors in their age assessments. Especially women’s hair colour was noted (grey?, dark?, dye?). Hair quantity was noted both in men and women. However, as previously published our data analysis showed that hair quantity has little impact on age assessments in older men (70+) (Rexbye et al. 2005).

Of the *external* (non bodily) age markers, clothes and make-up were important factors. The informants would for instance use expressions such as “*grandmother style*” or “*strong colours make younger*” concerning the clothes. Style and grooming (or lack of) was seen as an indicator of how well the person was keeping up mentally and physically.

Age assessment was made in a number of stages. The informants agreed that bodily age markers indicated the main age classification, and that external markers gave slight distinctions, and could dislocate age assessments a few years in either direction. Age assessment was described as being most difficult when the signs “contradicted” each other, for instance if a person had younger looking skin and old-fashioned clothes/hairstyle. All informants agreed that there was a difference in assessing men’s and women’s age, but they did not agree on which was the easiest (not within gender either). Similarly, the data analysis showed no difference between how men’s and women’s ages were assessed. As reference persons for age estimations, the informants used family members or friends. Even the nurses (who all had geriatric experience) would relate to family members rather than to patients when assessing age.

Preliminary analysis of an inter group comparison of the informants’ age assessments of the older persons showed close mean values of: nurses 76.6 years, male student teachers 75.9 years, and women (70+) 77.5 years. Mean chronological age of the older persons was 77.7 years (2001).

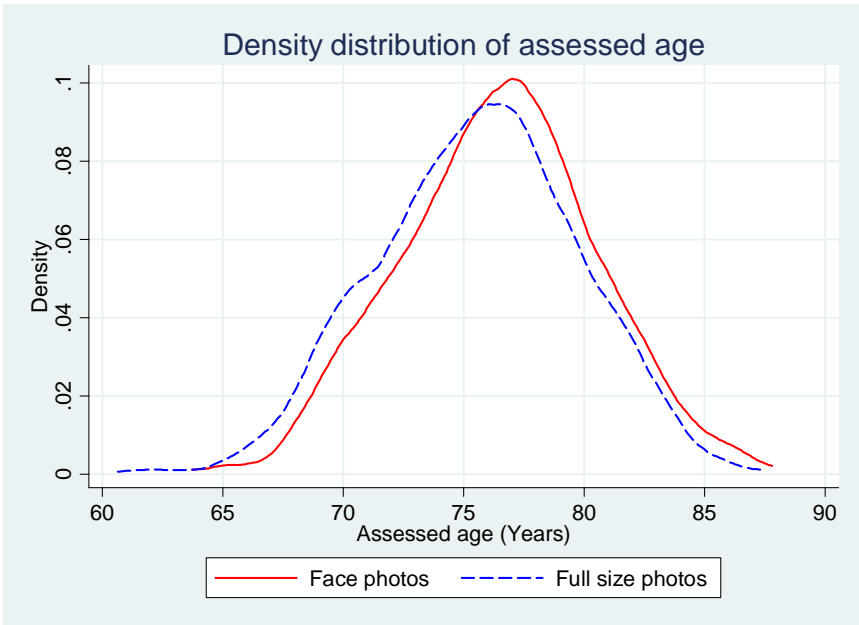
### *Assessment of Full Length Photographs (1420 photographs, 11 informants)*

The full length photographs were assessed by 11 informants (nurses). Even though the informants still emphasised the face, the full length photos added several dimensions to the sign reading and age assess-

ments. First of all the older person's bodily stature and posture were noticed. The clothes were now fully visible, and again style and grooming were seen as indicators of mental and physical condition. The style of furniture and the decor of the home was noticed with equivalent interpretation. Last, but not least, it was noted whether the home looked as if it was the person's own home or a nursing home.

Most informants found it easier to assess age from the full length photographs, as the quantity of information was much richer – even though the signs did not necessarily point in the same direction, and the interpretation was more complex. Preliminary data analysis showed that mean age was close – but approximately one year lower – in the assessments of all full length photographs from 2003 (75.6 years), compared to face photographs from 2003 (76.4 years). (Figure1). Mean chronological age of the older persons being 79.1 years (2003).

**Figure 1.** Assessed age in face photographs and full length photographs.





### *Thematic Analysis*

#### *In-Depth-Interviews (12 full length photographs, 9 informants)*

In the analysis of the in-depth interviews especially two key themes occurred: “activity” and “dress code”.

#### *Activity*

When describing the photographs and when elaborating on their age assessments, the informants would try to visually read the activity level of the older person. The informants related to “activity” in three terms: A) *physical activity* – they would all notice if the person on the photographs looked as if (s)he was physically active, i.e. if the clothes reflected activity – gardening, domestic duties, housework, etc. B) Most would notice signs of *social activity*, i.e. whether the older person looked as if (s)he gets out of the house – is dressed to socialize. One informant said:

She is wearing make-up and lipstick... so I guess she is still going out.... You could even say that she looks as if she has still got a job.  
(Student teacher, 33 years)

And he compared with his own relative:

My grandmother no longer goes to the hairdresser's [...] It's not necessary, because nobody really comes around any more... and she has also stopped going out. (Student teacher, 33 years)

Finally they would notice signs of c) *mental activity*, i.e. if the older person looked as if (s)he was keeping up-to-date – were the clothes up-to-date?, was there a DVD machine in the home?, etc.

As the above citations indicate the older persons were classified into two categories: active and non-active. The non-active were read to have gone on “standby” in life – looking as if they let time pass without involving themselves, as if time had stood still for years. One informant said the following about an elderly lady:

...but then she must at some point in time have decided that: “from now on I don't feel like changing my life anymore...from now on I just stick to the way things are”[...] I bet that people who know her think...well, she has been looking like this for the last 15 years... I

bet she has come to a standstill in her life... nothing to do about it ...she hasn't had a new hairdo for many, many years... and that's the way it is with everything else in her life.... (Student teacher, 37 years)

Non-activity was read off the clothes, the hairstyle, and the home. It was seen as a sign of ageing and was only expected – and accepted – in the oldest old. The move between activity and non-activity was seen to be a gradual process starting with leaving the labour market. The process could be extended, but the elderly persons themselves were responsible for keeping active. As one informant said:

... and he could be around 80 years old... someone who keeps well at the age of 80 because he is keeping himself going and he's got this dog... (Female nurse, 45 years)

Another informant says this about a different photograph:

...he has made sure to keep himself going. (Female nurse, 32 years)

### *Dress Code*

As for “dress code” the informants would notice if the older persons transgressed cultural codes of dressing – especially dressing younger than their age. The theme was especially prominent in talking of what could be analytically labelled as the two opposites, “mutton dressed as lamb” and “growing old gracefully”. An example of the first:

On one of the photographs an elderly lady is wearing jeans, a blue medium low-cut blouse, black belt and black shoes with fairly high heels (not pointed toes). Her hair is (dyed?) black. She is wearing gold jewellery. Her posture is straight and she has a smile on her face. Not much of the room in which she is standing is visible on the photo. She is 73 years old (which the informants do not know).<sup>2</sup> Most informants reacted on the photo of her:

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<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately we do not have permission to publish this photograph.

...it is something about the smile, the hair, the whole outfit... Guess I wouldn't dress up like that, in jeans and all, if I were her...but okay, she wants to give the impression that she is still hip, and she doesn't want people to think that she is one day over...70...but....but...I don't know about that... (Elderly woman, 79 years old)

“Mutton dressed as lamb” has been a well known phenomenon at least since the eighteenth century describing women who act or dress much younger than prescribed by the cultural norms for their age (Tamke 1978, cited in: Featherstone & Hepworth 1991: 321). The metaphor rests on the idea that lamb is tastier than mutton, which is tougher because of age, and the former is more highly valued than the latter (Fairhurst 1998). What seems just as important though, is that the phrase implies looking cheap – and has implicit references to prostitution (Twigg 2007). In our material concept of deception expressed by the term “dressed as” is also important. The “*but...but*” in the quotation clearly expresses that trying to look younger than your age is seen as deceiving and cheating. And the intentions are revealed. Another informant states this about the same photograph:

I think there is something forced about her wanting to appear young and this makes her look even older than she actually is. (Student teacher, 37 years old)

When the attempt to look younger seems forced or overacted, the representation backfires. He also comments on the same photograph:

...black shoes and high heels...this makes me think of my own mother and other ladies her age. I mean, nice old ladies of that generation... they do not wear high heels and jeans...because only the “cheap girls” of the city did that. (Student teacher, 37 years old)

This shows that “trying too hard” easily gets moral decay attached to it. By dressing “out of age” the lady on the photo is not trustworthy. Not only is she perceived to be cheating but also to be cheap – and the two go hand in hand in a moral downfall. Interestingly, the last quotation explicitly points towards the moral codes attached to the appearance of older persons being specific to – and following – the older generation. The student teacher views the photograph with the “moral eyes” of the

generation he is assessing (his mother's), not with the morals of his own time.

In opposition to this is "ageing gracefully" which means acting and dressing according to age. One photograph shows another lady standing in her living room. Her posture is straight and she has a moderate smile on her face. She is wearing a red turtle neck blouse with a long (ivory?) necklace, and black trousers. Her hair is blond and curly. Much of the living room is visible and shows a (tidy) room with a beige couch, a wooden coffee table and two paintings on the wall.<sup>3</sup> This lady is also 73 years old, and the informants talk of her in expressions such as:

She looks neat. (Elderly lady, 77 years old)

Or:

She is well groomed and well-maintained. (Nurse, 49 years old)

And:

...she hasn't put on these clothes because she wants to look younger; that's just the way she dresses... it's not forced, and it gives her style, right? (Student teacher, 37 years old)

By dressing according to age this lady is keeping within the norms of appearance for older women.

Interestingly, the data analysis showed that the mean value of the age assessments of the full length photograph of the lady analytically categorised as "mutton dressed as lamb" was 62.27 years, and mean value for the lady categorised as "ageing gracefully" was 67.91 years. Chronological age of both ladies were 73 years.

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<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately we do not have permission to publish this photograph.

## Discussion

### *Age Assessment*

Our study shows that age assessment is a complex act. In assessing age in older persons (70+) the informants read age in a spread of stages and categories. Signs were continuously weighed against each other and age negotiated. The main age indicators were biological markers: skin, eyes, hair colour, but supplemented by vigour, style, and grooming, and related to accepted codes of appearance. However, though age assessing is a complex matter, it was striking how similarly the informants described the process, assessed the age of each older person in comparison to the others, and categorized the ageing signs. This suggests that their reading and interpretation of ageing signs were made on a basis of shared references.

### *Activity*

When looking at older persons all informants would try to visually read the activity level of the older person. Signs of physical, mental, and social activity were noticed and commented on. But why this pronounced emphasis on representations of activity? In the following we argue that activity possesses a central position in an interaction between three discourses.

The question of activity is central in a health discourse. It is firmly rooted in our medically and gerontologically founded knowledge concerning the fact that physical and mental activity helps in maintaining skills in old age. The split between non-activity and activity is also pronounced in the well known disengagement/activity division of social gerontology concerning older persons' withdrawal from society. This division is rooted in disengagement theory and activity theory. Disengagement theory places the reasons for withdrawal within the process of ageing itself, whereas activity theory emphasises the way societal structures leave no room for older persons. The consequences of action related to theory have been, either to leave the older person in peace (disengagement), or to provide opportunities for activity and participation (activity). Within the practical care of older persons, ideologies related to

activity have been far more dominant (Solem 2005). In fact, through the years, the concept of activity has been consolidated by professionals as a universal answer to health and successful ageing. As Stephen Katz puts it:

The association of activity with well-being in old age seems so obvious and indisputable that questioning it within gerontological circles would be considered unprofessional, if not heretical. (Katz 2000: 135)

“Use it or lose it” has become the message, and this influences the way the appearance of older persons is viewed. Signs of physical, mental and social activity are noticed, expected – and inactivity is only accepted in the oldest old.

Apart from a health discourse the activity/non-activity divide also writes itself into a moral-ethical discourse linked to productivity and the nature of modernity. Max Weber was the first to point towards a link between the Protestant Ethic and the emergence of capitalist society, with its emphasize on the virtues of diligence and hard work that are still functioning. The work ethic can be seen as having a twofold purpose in early modernity: as a mean for both disciplining the body and the soul. In the Calvinist tradition believers held out hope of heavenly rewards, and toiled for the glory of God. The nineteenth century moralists shifted the promise towards earthly rewards, and the work ethic motivated the middle class to toil because it was useful to both the individual and the common weal (Ekerdt 1986). “Idleness is the work of the devil” an old saying similarly goes, pin-pointing the fact that indolence and inactivity are viewed as morally unacceptable. This permeates old age too. Ekerdt sees the construction of the active “busy ethic” in retirement to be a form of moral regulation corresponding to the work ethic:

It is not the actual pace of activity but the preoccupation with activity and the affirmation of its desirability that matters. (ibid: 243)  
(See also Katz 2000: 139)

By transforming the work ethic into an “activity ethic” in later life, the abstract ideals and moral values of the work ethic are continued. Unproductivity – now inactivity – has a moral meaning and is unacceptable. Older persons too feel morally obliged to keep active and maintain inde-

pendency (see for instance Hepworth 1995) – and furthermore to be visibly active (see also Gubrium 1973).

Yet another discourse comes into play here: that of postmodernity – and with it the value of motion. Zygmunt Bauman writes on the management of the postmodern identity:

If the modern “problem of identity” was how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable, the postmodern “problem of identity” is primarily how to avoid fixations and keep options open. (Bauman 1995: 81)

The abstract ideals and values derived from the creation of postmodern identity are those of flexibility, of continuous energy, and being “on the move”. Fitness is valued as a capacity to move swiftly to where the action is and to take in new experiences. Never to stand still (*ibid.*). Hence to be busy and to perform activity is to be successful, and this adds yet another dimension to the reading of signs of activity.

Thus, activity has become a strong cultural ideal as it coordinates (and accumulates) gerontological expertise, values derived from early modernity, and postmodern norms. Visual statements of activity in older persons have become proof of successful ageing – of health, morals and managing life.

### *Dress Code*

The other main theme occurring in the analysis of the in-depth-interviews was that of “dress code”, especially dressing according to age. When looking at the data from the actual age assessment, the lady described in the analytical category of “mutton dressed as lamb” can be said to be successful as she is assessed to be younger looking – if that really was intended. Interestingly, though, almost all informants reacted negatively to the photo. But why did informants react so strongly? Is it to what must seem to be obvious signs of vanity? Signs of sexual activity? If that is so, then one could say that the only sign of activity not permitted

in elderly is that of sexual activity. This might apply only to women as our empiric material unfortunately does not give a basis for an interpretation within that area in men.<sup>4</sup> However, clearly women past fertility are not expected – or allowed? – to show any signs of sexual activity. This is not new. The very concept of elderly women engaging in sexual activity has been repugnant to society for hundreds of years – at least back to the seventeenth century – since the only approved aim of sex has been that of reproduction (Thane 2005).

The negative reactions to the lady on the photograph show that apparently some very old distinctions between accepted and non-accepted appearance of older persons still apply. This confirms that, although the postmodern opportunities of self representation are supposed to be fluid and flexible, it is still not a question of free choice – when biology hits old age another set of rules applies.

### *Signs of Ageing and Postmodernity*

The significance of age-related appearance can partly be attributed to contemporary cultural trends: postmodernity and consumer culture. With these trends visual images and choices of life style have become increasingly dominant in expressions of individual identity. The post-modern perspective of age and ageing has been characterized in terms of cultural bricolage: diversity, fragmentation, blurring boundaries between young and old in a dechronologized life course (Cole 1997; Powell & Longino 2002); and hence the absence of clear guidelines through the life course, and increased flexibility in the negotiation of self-representation (Biggs 1997). With cultural primacy put on visual statements, one of the pivotal points of postmodernity is the question of representation and referentials. From a semiotic perspective the relation between *signifiers* and *signifiés* are loosening. Baudrillard (1983) even talks of a semiotic excess that has turned reality into a meaningless hyper-reality, and he

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<sup>4</sup> For feminist research in this area, see for instance Hockey and James (2003) (overview), or Schwaiger (2006).



refers to a “liquidation of all referentials” (ibid). The concept of a hyper-reality seems exaggerated, but it points towards the field of visual representation – and visual communication – undergoing radical changes. According to Baudrillard the changes implicate an overall referential shift from “productivity” in the modern era, to “simulation” in the postmodern – supposedly resulting in increased possibilities of visual self-representation and performance. However, when it comes to old age, visible age is not appreciated in a consumer culture that values youthful appearance, and hence negative language and images of later life tend to be reinforced (Powell & Longino 2002; Bytheway 1998). Thus age-related appearance has become a field of conflicting matters in consumer culture.

The question of the ageing body’s status and limited possibilities of visual identity statements in consumer culture have been subject to theorizing within the last decades. For Featherstone and Hepworth (1989) the question of “mask of ageing” arises as diverse lifestyle choices are made available through consumer culture, and by the fact that the ageing body becomes increasingly unresponsive to consumer opportunities as others attribute negative qualities to physical signs of ageing. Woodward (1991) argues that our own fear of dying is mirrored in the cultural representations of old age. In her study of representations of old age in twentieth century literature she finds that our culture’s representations of ageing are predominantly negative and inextricably linked to our personal anxieties and fear of death (Woodward 1991). “We are”, she writes, “unable to adopt a position of pure social constructivism” to the ageing body (ibid: 18). Following Woodward, our own personal anxieties and fear of dying cannot be neglected when looking at older people. We cannot detach the body in decline from the meanings we attach to old age. Hepworth underlines that at the present time (1995) the social construction of positive ageing both in everyday life and by professionals’ attempts, is to transform later life into an extended middle age terminating in a quick and painless exit: dying on time (Hepworth 1995). Biggs and Powell (2001) point towards the co-existence of established and emerging “master narratives” of biological decline on the one hand and consumer agelessness on the other, “talking to different populations and promoting contradictory, yet interrelated, narratives by which to age” (ibid: 96–7).

Our empirical material confirms some, and opposes other theories. Following Hepworth (1995), one could say that – in relation to the theme of *activity* – the informants are looking for visible signs of activity in older persons, and that older persons are not expected or allowed to “let go” until late old age: until the time of dying. Older persons were not read to perform “agelessness” or “extended middle age”. However, the process going from “activity” to “inactivity” works equivalently and was expected to be prolonged at the older persons’ will. Activity is “life” and inactivity is “death”. Hepworth also stresses (inspired by Gubrium 1986 and Woodward 1991) that in order to cope with old age we transform images of decay into images of disease. Behind this lies the belief that if ageing is transformed into illness, then it is not the biological ageing that is to be feared but illness and the failure to combat it (Hepworth 1995). Here we see that images of old age and biological decay are transformed into images of inactivity, and hence approached accordingly.

Dress and clothing could provide an arena in which a postmodern blurring of boundaries between young and old could be recognized. In a postmodern context the former pattern of age-ordering in dress is supposed to give way to a new fluidity, in which clothes can be chosen without consideration of, or in counter-valance to, considerations of age (Twigg 2007). However, as Twigg also stresses, voluntarism in relation to dress (and identity) might not be as great as claimed by postmodernists (Twigg 2007). This is confirmed in our empirical material. As inauthenticity and performance are supposed to be the very core of the postmodern condition (Baudrillard 1983), the woman related to the term “mutton dressed as lamb” could have been seen simply to have chosen not to become old, or to be *performing* a younger age. She is, however, read to be cheating with her age, to be deceiving and to not be trustworthy. As her appearance is not accepted, our study yet again does not confirm a loosening of the relations between *signifiers* and *signifiés* of ageing signs, or a resymbolization of age. According to our empirical material the appearance of older persons is still defined by quite narrow margins.

As for the sexual activity read into the photograph related to the “mutton dressed as lamb” phenomenon, there also seems to be some contradiction. Katz and Marshall (2003, and Marshall & Katz 2002) em-

phasize that the convergence of consumer culture and medical expertise has led to a change of focus concerning ageing and sexual activity, as active sexuality is now promoted as a signal indicator of positive and successful aging. However, as previously shown, the lady on the photograph is not read into a consumerist interpretation of sexual activity as a signal of successful ageing. On the contrary, she is considered to be cheap. The terms of “mutton dressed as lamb”, and “ageing gracefully” are old categories linked to ideas and morals of early modernity. Western culture has a solid historical tradition of moral regulations of old age (Cole 1997) that is not easily revised. On the level of meaning examined here, rigid age norms deeply rooted in the past still play a profound role in the interpretation of ageing signs.

A few remarks on the limitations of our study should be made. As a result of the specific empirical focus chosen in this study, the older persons' subjective experiences of their own bodies, e.g. possible experiences of social invisibility, are ignored. Furthermore, the photographs are of persons over 70 years old, which is not quite the “baby boomer” generation. The photographed persons were born before 1933 and hence belong to an “older” generation. This might influence the reading and interpretation of the ageing signs. No doubt, an ongoing postmodern dechronologization of the life course might escalate and call for further resymbolization of age with the “baby boomer” generation, as they have been socialised in consumption. The strength of the study is that the photographs are not “postmodern” or “popular culture” but ordinary photographs of older persons in their homes, thus enabling a reading in this level of meaning. Another strength is the homogeneity of the informants' reading of age and ageing signs despite differences in their ages and backgrounds.

## Conclusions

Consumer culture has put an emphasis on ageing appearance. This study explores visual age and how signs of age are read and interpreted. Initially the complexity of the negotiation of biological and cultural signs when age is assessed is described. The main indicators of age are biologi-

cal: skin, eyes and hair colour – but supplemented by vigour, style and grooming.

The in-depth interviews show that *activity* and *dress code* are key themes in the reading and interpretation of visual ageing signs. The informants interpret signs of physical, social and mental *activity* as indicators of successful ageing – of health, morals and managing life. In this, several discourses interact: gerontological expertise, work ethics rooted in early modernity, and postmodern values. The theme of *dress code* shows that former patterns of age-ordering in dress still apply, as informants link clothing and dress to categorizations rooted in early modernity. These findings question the concept of postmodernity. The pivotal point of postmodernity is the question of representation and referentials, as postmodernity has been characterized in terms of fluidity of signs. As a consequence of this, the postmodern perspective of age and ageing has been characterized in terms of diversity, and blurring boundaries between young and old. The resymbolization of signs of ageing is, however, not found in the empirical material of this study, as both *activity* and *dress code* are subject to moral regulations – and linked to categorisations – rooted in early modernity. All in all, the referential shift from “productivity” to “simulation”, as indicated by Baudrillard, seems to be more advanced in the level of meaning of popular and consumer culture, than in the reading of visual age, in the context we have examined. This study questions a postmodern fluidity of visual signs – at least when the concern is signs of ageing.

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