Hagging the image: challenging the role of photographic images in contemporary narratives of ageing femaleness in Anglo American culture

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HAGGING THE IMAGE:

Challenging the role of photographic images in contemporary narratives of ageing femaleness in Anglo American culture

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Abstract

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Contemporary feminist and academic writing on issues of age and representation in Anglo-American societies has been concerned with a relative lack of images of older women, demeaning stereotypical portrayals and combined issues of ageism and sexism playing out and through images in visual media. (Friedan, 1993, Dolan et al., 2013, Plunkett, 2012, Richards, 2012, White, 2012) In this dissertation, I critically examine the aesthetic practices and performative issues surrounding the representation of ageing femaleness in photographic imagery in Western culture that tacitly support an ageist-sexist 'youthful gaze' to ask: What artistic approach can critically negotiate and challenge the complexities that ageing femaleness represents? Focusing my analysis in three case studies clustered around issues of age, power and beauty, I identify the persistence of stereotypical tropes in aesthetic treatments – carnivalesque reversal and de-ikonised aestheticisation – as the two polarising components of a binary visual regime that constrains ageing female identity. Using my findings as the basis to forge an artistic approach that can critically address the complexities that ageing femaleness presents when captured in still photography, I drew on the work of Laura Mulvey and Judith Butler and my own background in theatre to forge a new approach that can encompass the difficulties in transactions from both sides of the camera 'in the round'.

The installation filmwork *Hagging the Image* (2015) was my critical response to the findings of my research. Employing the idea of theatre-in-the-round, this filmwork gives voice to women's thoughts, rather than making them solely the object of the youthful structure of the gaze, mutely 'captured' in still images. Instead, the audience

hears the infinite variety and contesting points of view of the women, presented to the audience in a filmwork that is part performative and part theatrical to heighten an awareness of the complexity of the cultural forces currently playing out in society around images of older women.

All art is at once surface and symbol.

Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.

Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.

It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.

From *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde

for my beautiful mother
and all the vain things
that charmed her most

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1. Introduction: Beginners

'Isn't she beautiful?' she demanded. I had been browsing postcards in the National Portrait Gallery bookshop in late January 2012 when a woman thrust a postcard in front of me. Several heads turned to witness our exchange. The card she held up, nearer to my face for better inspection, was a photograph of an old woman, shot in close up. She was pale-faced and old-skinned, posed directly to camera with her head resting on her hand. I could make out the collar of a well-dressed individual, but nothing else in the frame. The muted grey of the background had fallen out of focus and held no clues to location. It contrasted soothingly with her silver-white hair framing a face etched with a topography of fine lines, punctuated by the discreet red of lipstick and rouge. There was an intriguing ambiguity in her expression, simultaneously smiling and frowning; a vestige of irritation or surprise that the question of a picture should be asked at her age – at any age – or just a healthy wariness of the soul-snatching black eye of the camera? The woman asking seemed an indeterminate middle age herself, neither young nor old, but probably younger than I. She waited for my affirmation. I was to publicly make this act of attribution as a show of female solidarity. I hesitated. I did find the image beautifully wrought and visually interesting, though I was troubled in the provision of an unqualified response. For, surely, what she was demanding of this photograph was impossible? The enigmatic ambiguity in the expression of the depicted woman mirrored my own ambivalence. Why me? Why now? Why this? And why that tired old question of beauty? Still, I smiled at my interrogator and answered in the affirmative. To do anything else would have felt like a betrayal of sisterhood but the exchange stayed with me.

I had been questioning the relationship of age, femaleness, and photographic image since beginning a degree in photography in late 2002. My focus had grown out of my own experiences of a sudden unexpected psychic change around the age of forty; an event which was accompanied by the birth of my son and two years later the death of my mother from cancer in 2003 at the age of 75. Looking through her archive after her death, I was struck by a sudden gap. From a large number of photographs of her in youth as a famous actress and 'beauty' – images that included a variety of roles, public,

professional and private personas – she disappears in her early forties, only reappearing as the subject of my camera not long before her death. The reason for this sudden vanishing act piqued my interest and I began to explore issues of visibility of older women through academic research, in my photography and in conversation with my (mainly female) sitters. This work is a continuation and deepening of that enquiry which has resulted from conversations with women from the UK and US of their own experiences of age and gaze over their life course, and their delight, disappointment and irritations with portrayals of older women in visual media. I was struck by the recurrent themes in these conversations, a sense of fascination and frustration with photographic images and a longing for visual representation that could do justice to the energy, humour, power, and attractiveness of older women they experienced in everyday life. Initially, I set about to fill this apparent lacuna myself. However, my attempts to make images that could more fully represent the ageing female were intrinsically problematic. Working from within the symbolic set of power structures that operate through portraiture and the picturesque in the West, too often they contained, rather than released or empowered, the ageing women pictured. Without a sufficiently critical approach that could address the difficulties within this structural framework, my images were too easily assimilated into a visual economy and a constraining discourse that disadvantages older women.

In this dissertation, I critically examine performative issues and aesthetic practices in the creation of photographs of older women, using my research and findings as the basis from which to construct my own artistic response to the challenges that these images represent. The majority of studies on the representation of ageing have been conducted from a sociological perspective, for instance, Featherstone's *Images of Ageing* (1995, 1995b). These rarely address the underlying complexities that shape photographic production: the perspective of the practitioner and the technologies and performative aesthetics of the camera. By contrast, my dissertation explores the difficulties with the creation of photographic images that address a loss of gaze for women in later life. I do this through an examination of the complex of aesthetic and art historical discourses and conventions of portraiture and photographic practice that underlie and condition transactions with the image. Then in three case studies, chosen to exemplify particular issues in representation, I focus my analysis through a detailed examination of various

photographic images. Following these analyses, I present an account of the practical element of this doctorate, the filmwork *Hagging the Image* (2015), my artistic response to my theoretical research, and examine my own experience and difficulties in making a work that could speak to the issues I encountered.

1.1.   Cultural Background

Feminist writing since the seventies has sought to address the complexity of forces surrounding the (in)visibility of women in later life and separate a 'normal' consciousness of bodily decline, passing mortality and proximity to death from the anxieties and pressures produced by 'cultural' ageing (Beauvoir, 1973) and gendered double standards which render a woman sexually 'disqualified' (Sontag, 1972) at a much earlier age than men. In Anglo-American culture, the preservation of a 'positive' ongoing narrative and social identity is phrased around sexual identity and the need for intimacy in later life. 'Feminine' identity, conflated with a beautiful appearance and valorised in Western aesthetic discourses and in visual media, is seen to be jeopardised by signs of age (Bordo, 1993), and experienced by many older women as a loss of performative power (Butler et al., 2006) from which even the most powerful are not immune. Take for instance, the media coverage in the Daily Mail on the meeting between Teresa May and Nicola Sturgeon, which instead of focusing on their talks over Brexit and a second Scottish referendum, chose to comment on who had the most attractive legs; or the vitriolic campaign that Julia Gillard, Australia's first woman prime minster, was subjected to in 2011 where supporters brandished banners proclaiming 'Ditch the Witch' accompanied by pictures of a hag in a pointy hat riding a broomstick, a campaign seemingly endorsed by the opposition leader, Tony Abbott who had previously described Gillard as 'deliberately barren' after her conscious decision not to have children. Her ensuing speech on misogyny in which she commented on the 'deep suspicion of successful women', was hailed as a watershed moment in gender politics.

Figure 14: Australian opposition leader, Tony Abbot, in front of a 'Ditch the Witch' poster outside the parliament building in 2011

An emphasis on the necessity of visibility to command social and political power and in the formation of social identities – 'If I can't see it, I can't be it' – has focused on a relative lack of representation of older women in the media[1] (Dolan et al., 2013) and the erasure of the signs of age, particularly in photographs of women, where age is either minimised or perceived negatively (Krekula, 2007, Calasanti et al., 2006). Social gerontologists have, also, conceptualised the notion of a 'double jeopardy', which renders women doubly marginalised by the processes of ageing and being female (Chappell, 1980). However, recent research claims that women's experiences of irreversible 'invisible' physiological ageing result in a desire to fashion an outer appearance and representations that reflects an acceptance of deeper experiences of ageing, and a desire to show the ageing 'self' that runs counter to theories that emphasise the role of 'passing' for younger (Ballard et al., 2005, Woodspring, 2014). This in turn has led to a social concern with the production of more and 'better' images that can somehow give face to the 'real' beauty and power of older women.

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[1] In the last five years various cases of dismissal of older women from television shows have sparked accusations of ageism. Notably, in 2009 when expert judge, 66-year-old Arlene Phillips, was replaced by the relatively inexperienced 30-year-old Alesha Dixon, and in 2011 Miriam O'Reilly won her case for unfair dismissal due to age discrimination from the BBC programme, *Countryfile*.

Drawing on this cultural background, my research engages with issues of aesthetic production, age, gender, 'femininity' and representation. It considers several elements: a history of feminist investigation into the cultural production of gender, theories of spectatorship, particularly, Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytic critique of a male gaze typical of mainstream Hollywood cinema, and Judith Butler's writing around alterity and the iterative performativity of gender practices that keep cultural norms in place.

1.2.   Conceptual Framework and 'Dirty' Methodologies

My research is qualitative and situated within a critical discourse paradigm. My conceptual framework is feminist following in a tradition established in second-wave feminism of paying attention to the ways in which culture structures and enshrines gendered inequalities. The second-wave rallying call, 'the personal is political', argued that the personal arena was indicative and reflective of socio-political structures and addressing these structures required new critical frameworks that could expose and challenge cultural constructions of gender, thereby liberating women from masculine structures of power. With this aim in sight, post-structural feminists, drawing on the radical epistemology of Foucault, argued against essentialist standpoints instead embracing pluralities of conceptual thinking and methodologies to rethink agency and 'the relationship between language and the body, discourse and experience, academic theory and political practice.' (McGrath, 2002)

Foucauldian feminists also challenged the Cartesian frameworks and metaphysical positioning of historical accounts. Wendy Brown explains that conventional histories fail to grasp the subjugating forces that constitute the dynamic of history, whereas

> 'Genealogy promises dirty histories, histories of power and subjection,
> histories of bids of hegemony waged, won, or vanquished – the
> "endlessly repeated play of dominations" rather than histories of reason,
> meaning or higher purposes.' (2001: 104)

Whilst attending to the gendered language and male-privileged construction of history, second-wave feminism promoted the idea of situated knowledge to challenge androcentric authorship. Writing in the eighties, Donna Haraway (1988) advocated the importance of knowing where an individual is situated in society to counter a

transcendental standpoint epistemology where the knowledge producer stands outside of the text, omniscient, invisible and ahistorical. Insisting on the embodied nature of all vision, she argues instead for a 'politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims.' (1988: 594) What is required, she argues, is a doctrine of objectivity that holds people accountable for their actions and a critical practice that can shed light on how meaning is made that can also accommodate dialectic and paradox within critical feminist projects. With this aim in sight, feminist knowledge, claims Haraway, means examining the points of contradiction between social actors and the context in which they are situated with a lightness of touch that relinquishes a sense of mastery. Instead, feminist researchers, as hunters after cultural meaning, should become like the coyote or trickster – searching for truth – but knowing we may be hoodwinked as we chase our quarry. (1988: 594) Inquiry of this kind is effectively a conversation enacted through the quest after knowledge, which can encompass and deal with contradiction and complexity, and incorporate the object of knowledge as 'an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource' (1988: 592).

1.3. Situating the Author, Staging the Thesis

Haraway's theatrical metaphor and her conception of 'coyote' discourse resonate with my own practice. I engage in many conversations and dialogues not only with colleagues and sitters but also with myself in the different roles that I perform in my professional practice as a performer as well as a photographer. In this regard, I see my work as intrinsically reflexive in that it contemplates something I am a part of and do not stand outside of and responds to the timeframe and position I find myself playing out in society.

My personal life and theatrical background – reflected in theatrical terminology used throughout this dissertation – as performer/photographer undoubtedly colours both my practice and my writing, and the desire to examine my subject from both in front of the lens as a performance, and the dynamics and conventions of its construction from behind the lens, from the perspective of photographer and audience.

I grew up in London in the sixties into a white middle-class family with a working-class background on my mother's side. My mother was a highly politicised left-wing feminist. An only child, she had been evacuated to the home of her working-class Welsh grandparents in Oswestry, where she later matriculated, winning a scholarship to the local grammar school before going to RADA (the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art) when she was 16, where she so successfully lost her native midlands accent that she could never repeat it again. A TV star in the fifties in the first British adult soap, *The Grove Family* (1954-1957), she had divorced my father, also an actor, before I was one year old. I lived with her, my elder brother and maternal grandparents, three generations in one house in North West London until I was 9, an arrangement, which I am sure, has resulted in my appreciation of elders, though I never considered the age of my hard-working and stalwart grandparents to be important at the time. It was their deep care that anchored and supported me during a difficult childhood throughout which my mother was harassed, depressed and short of money. She gave up acting when I was 2 and never worked again, although later in life she was the first person on her side of the family to get a degree (from the Open University). My father, by contrast, had grown up in a well-to-do upper middle-class family in Essex and attended a public school. He also went to RADA at 16, leaving to join John Gielgud's company before he finished the course. Primarily a classical actor (he was a founding member of the Royal Shakespeare Company), he struck fame later than my mother playing leads at the RSC and then Grandier in Peter Hall's production of *The Devils* in 1961, the year I was born. A film career followed shortly after when he was signed to MGM and went to Hollywood when I was 4 years old. His long and distinguished career was rather overshadowed by tabloid interest in his many romantic liaisons and exploits as a handsome playboy. He continued to work as an actor right up to his death aged 87 in 2015.

Growing up within a family of performers gave me an awareness, made explicit by my mother, of how I 'performed' myself in daily life. From a very young age, it was quite disconcerting to constantly have my emotions critiqued on the convincingness of their portrayal, although it did make me painfully aware of how I appeared to others as well as the competing perspectives, conflicts and points of disjuncture within my own psyche. My father, when I did see him, and equally when he 'saw' me, which in both cases was not often, was highly critical of my physical appearance, and indeed

commented on the physical attractiveness (or not) of all the women he encountered but, in the main he chose to ignore me. (It is indicative of how transformational our story was that my father died looking at me – I had his gaze at the last – but that is another story.) These early experiences – and particularly the opposing ideological positions that my parents represented – perhaps explain my interest in performance and gaze and how individuals are constructed within the crosshairs of social views. This now manifests as a curiosity in the gender dynamics underlying representation, as well as the desire to identify, play out and understand exchanges from multiple points of view and from both sides of the camera. I do not consider myself, however, immune or outside of the dynamics of a patriarchal gaze, but having internalised it so thoroughly I am perhaps more alert, by dint of my personal and professional experiences, to its inflections playing through me as I transact in front of and behind the camera.

1.4.   Research Approach

I shall follow a tradition in artistic research that utilises a social scientific paradigm, identifying key theoretical approaches and voices and evaluating these against the objects of my study (Wisker, 2007) to tease out the major themes of my research. For the reasons above, I have rejected a positivist approach to my subject as too narrow a scope from which to view the complexity of psychosocial discourse where meaning is formed in the cultural spaces between social practices and is in constant dynamic movement. I would, however, like to suggest some philosophical adjustments to a purely discursive approach and at the same time challenge some of the positivist rejection of artistic research as having no grounding in the 'real' world (Wisker. 2007: 252).

The aesthetic affect of photography is currently highly contested in critical evaluations of photography (Campany, 2003, Dexter et al., 2003, Kelsey et al., 2008, Bright, 2005, Duve et al., 2002). Post-modern artistic practice since the sixties has sought to prove that the photograph is uncertain and mediated. John Berger made clear in his influential work *Ways of Seeing* (1972) that all visual images are subject to 'practices of looking' (Sturken et al., 2001) that condition their meaning. Seeing comes before words and establishes our place in the surrounding world, Berger asserts, however, 'the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe.' (1972: 8) Therefore, to fully

understand a visual work it is necessary to understand the image in a variety of ways, and

> 'to enquire into its provenance and into the social work that it does, to note its principles of inclusion and exclusion, to detect the roles that it makes available, to understand the way in which they are distributed, and to decode the hierarchies and differences that it naturalises.' (Gordon Fyfe et al., 1988: 1)

However, finding a methodological approach to photographic analysis that can encompass the mobility of the image, its construction and reception, has proved challenging and elusive. Post-conceptual art since the nineties has aimed to recuperate the photograph as a realist pictorial form that can entertain contradiction and discursively illuminate social dichotomy. (Roberts, 1998)

Hegelian and post-Hegelian philosophy theorises that dialectic and contradiction are inherent properties of reality and that synthesis of these elements can lead to social transformation. Utilising this philosophic stance, John Roberts makes the case for the recuperation of photographic realism in a methodology of dialectical realism, specific to photography. He claims that the overemphasis on photography as an objectifying medium is part of the discourse and rhetoric of post-structuralism and calls for a correction that can include social transformation as a result of discursive and dialogic analysis, which identifies and brings together the contradictions inherent in the image. Combining the operation of the photograph as a self-contained artefact, its indexical relationship to the world and its creation arising out of historical cultural practices produces a form for analysis that can entertain contradiction without falling down the rabbit hole of free-floating interpretation (1998: 2-13). Gillian Rose warns, however, that in visual analysis it is important to recognise that

> 'Images are not reducible to the play of factors or people that create them. They have their own agency and effect and operate in different ways to speech and text, which we could term "multimodal"' (2007: 11-12).

Rose lists the current debates in visual culture as the understanding that: images create their own effect, that these effects are mobilised in ways of seeing the image, are crucial

to visions and re-visions of social difference but are always contextualised by the site and visual preconceptions of the viewer. Thus there is a need for a critical approach in visual methodologies 'that thinks about the agency of the image, considers the social practices and effects of its viewing, and reflects on the specificity of that viewing by various audiences including the academic critic.' (2007: 26)

I use these criteria to structure my analysis within a methodological approach that aims to produce social transformation by bringing together a critical analysis of the contradictions inherent in the production of imagery. To do this, I will situate images in a historical context and perspective of the practitioner, look at how and why they were produced, analyse their compositional and stylistic qualities, and relate these pictorial elements to audience responses and perceptions. This 'relational web' (Pedwell. 2010: abstract) approach aims to deliver a snapshot of how images are made and perceived in society at the present time. I counterpoint this analysis with an account of my own practice (Schon, 1991), the artistic process I journeyed through as I responded to my analytical research, and how I arrived at my practical methodology, which was used to create the final piece of work presented alongside this dissertation. I am also including various appendices chronicling other experimental filmwork as resources for future researchers and artists wishing to explore similar territory.

1.5.   Preliminary Investigation

My preliminary research examined production and aesthetics of photographic images to expose underlying trends indicative of cultural attitudes. I found that artists attempting to leverage greater visibility for older women in photographs have typically turned to two types of aesthetic strategies – the first appeals to an aesthetic appreciation by appropriating the pictorial conventions of art and female beauty, the second configures a carnivalesque reversal (Bakhtin, 1968) that aims to disrupt and upturn the visual normative of portrayal. My study offers deeper understanding and insight into these polarising tropes, and discussion of the aesthetics and discourses that circulate around femaleness (including lifelong sexuality) in photographic images. My findings suggest value and danger in both approaches but also that these strategies in and of themselves point towards the configuration of the underlying structure and operation of a youthfully-oriented social gaze, which my practical project needed to address.

1.6.   Hypothesis

From the outset, narrowing the focus of the thesis and a methodological approach was extremely challenging. My thinking around and through possible artistic approaches and analytic methodologies went through various stages of confusion as I grappled to comprehend how the image I desired to see kept collapsing and vanishing under the weight of my own gaze. Tunnelling into these difficulties of desire and gaze, however, eventually led to a working theoretical methodology. Drawing on the work of Foucault (1977, 1979) and his theories on a regulating social gaze and the discursive formation of the subject through language and practices surrounding the body, key terms were identified which located the problematic as the intersubjective relation of ageing femaleness[2], power and beauty, and I discuss these themes throughout this dissertation. Bringing together findings from my academic research, as well as anecdotal and personal experience, my thinking culminated in a working **hypothesis** that:

> the multi-faceted diachrony and dynamic power of older women experienced in everyday life is un-representable from within Western aesthetic discourses currently operating through and around still photographic media.

1.7.   Key Question

My hypothesis, in turn, led to the **key question**:

> *What artistic approach can critically negotiate and challenge the complexities that ageing femaleness represents?*

I return to this question at the end of my dissertation in Chapter 10, when I present my filmwork, *Hagging the Image*.

During the course of my analysis, I present certain issues peculiar to photographic portraiture, ageing femaleness and the dissemination of power through photographic representation. In order to do so, I address several questions that feed into my research question and specifically relate to the production of the film work:

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[2] I use this term to link together the indivisible corporeality of ageing and femaleness and also to distinguish femaleness from 'femininity' as performative. I regard femaleness as the whole body of a woman that includes her face.

- Why is the image of the ageing woman so problematically dogged by negative associations?
- How are age and ageing represented in photographs of women?
- What role does photography play in the service of identity politics of ageing femaleness?
- How can we speak critically to visual media without actual women portrayed becoming a target for social hostility?
- What artistic method could remobilise and re-politicise issues with the way images of older women are viewed in relation to youth and beauty?

1.8.   Practical Methodology: The Round as an Exploratory Tool

My artistic approach followed on from and responded to my theoretical research and went through several radical changes. Searching for an artistic methodology that was capable of portraying collective histories, constructs, and mythologies, I drew on my background as an actress in theatre and, particularly, theatre-in-the-round, as a form of politicised community theatre that allowed for the articulation and playing out of scenarios and perspectives that cannot be voiced in actual communities.

The modern version of the round developed as a physical spatial model in the 1940s in the USA. It was deployed politically in the UK in the seventies as a device to break open audience complacency by addressing the realist illusion and issues of the 'fourth wall', a term for the imaginary wall that divides audience and actors. In realist dramas, actors behave as if there is a solid 'fourth' wall running along the line of the proscenium arch, which is invisible to the audience, allowing the audience to watch the action onstage vicariously, as if unobserved. This viewing framework is also present in TV and film. Breaking the fourth wall, as in Shakespearean soliloquies and asides, is often used as a theatrical device to elucidate the interior life of the character, who speaks her thoughts directly to the audience. (A notable recent example of this was the two main characters in the HBO series, *House of Cards*.) However, in-the-round staging presents the audience with a different viewing arrangement: rather than remain comfortably hidden, seeing across the empty space alerts the audience to their position as a spectator/participant in relation to the action onstage. This spatial arrangement adds an

extra dimension to audience perception that increases an awareness of the central action of the play as manifesting from within the confines and concerns of a community, a shared experience that highlights the role of the audience as individual members of that community with a constructive responsibility in and to the subject portrayed.

Using The Round as an exploratory method, I began to collect 'data' through roundtable discussion with groups of older women. In these groups, participants were given photographs depicting older women and asked to comment on what they saw. During these discussions on images of age and 'femininity' I was struck by the power and energy displayed in conversation in these groups, as well as the difference of opinions and variety of viewpoints that were expressed. It was also striking how quickly the group were able to get to grips with the subject and with cackling humour and direct language, identify and caustically comment on all the theoretical issues and problems I had painstakingly been exploring through my research. There seemed to me to be enormous potential in presenting these women and their critical perspectives to face an audience.

After reflection on the successes and difficulties of these exchanges, I defined a set of guidelines and filmed two roundtable discussions (as well as other imaginative approaches to the subject matter). In the process of making these films, the narrative figure of the Hag emerged in women's conversation as a powerfully critical and resistant force. History warns, however, of the dire consequences for actual women singled out and identified with this critical position, where they become the target for the projection of social hostility. I speculated, however, that sharing this role 'in the round' and theatricalising the content of the exchanges as a dialogic play around the image might interrupt the security of the unseen viewer's position long enough for new subject positions to be apprehended, rehearsed and released.

1.9.　Research Question

Bringing these elements together – my academic research and my personal and professional experience in theatre and photography as an actress and a portraitist – led to the formulation of a focused research question based on the key question above, ie. *What*

artistic approach can critically negotiate and challenge the complexities that ageing femaleness represents? I speculated,

- *Could a filmic 'theatre-in-the-round' provide a structure in which to unleash the resistant potential suggested by the figure of the Hag?*
- *And could this potential be utilised as a model for resistance to the youthful structure of the gaze?*

1.10.   Practical Element of the Thesis

The practical element of this doctorate is the result of a theatrical experiment that responds to my thesis culminating in a move away from the still image and the decision to create a filmwork 'in the round'. Using The Round as a conceptual device, I drew on a rich tradition of the transformational power of women's circles by considering encirclement in a number of ways: as a continuous movement, as an egalitarian practice where no one view is privileged, and as a method of moving around an absent centre. Employing these ideas, the filmwork gives voice to women's thoughts, rather than making them solely the object of the youthful structure of the gaze, mutely 'captured' in still images. Instead, the audience hears the infinite variety and contesting points of view of the women, released to the audience in a lens-based theatre-in-the-round that works around perceptions of the absence of an image. Recording actual women's conversation in this way enabled me to create a filmwork that was part performative and part theatrical to heighten an awareness of the complexity of the cultural forces currently playing out in society around images of older women. By encircling the absent subject from a variety of audience perspectives, my intention is to shift beyond the sense of a 'double jeopardy' that attaches to older women, allowing performative agency to return to the exhibition event. The resulting artwork is a strategic intervention that not only provides an opportunity to confront, pause and reflect upon ongoing social narratives but to create visual resources, methodologies and counter-strategies that question and challenge prevailing norms. Alongside the artwork, this dissertation represents a distillation of my thinking as it developed in the course of my study.

1.11.   Structure of the dissertation

The dissertation weaves a course through various aspects of my research. I begin with a *mise-en-scène* that describes the cultural backdrop to my study, feminist theories of the gaze and performative interventions, the transactive nature of photographic portraiture in the context of art history and in relation to the representation of age. I then offer three case studies focused around the portrayal of ageing, beauty and carnivalesque reversal in a variety of photographic projects. The last section offers a journey through my own practice and responses to the problematic I encountered in my study and the practical outcome and conclusions I reached.

In Chapter 2, I trace a brief history of ageing femaleness in cultural myth and legend to explore the power of the Hag and the poisonous associations that have been applied in the language surrounding her representation. In Chapter 3, I discuss feminist writing and insight into the cultural construction of ageing and 'femininity' from the 70s onwards. Working against this backdrop, in Chapter 4, I move on to discuss Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytic approach to the cinematic construction of a male gaze, alongside Judith Butler's work on performativity and theatricalised challenges to gender identity. Using these combined perspectives as a basis for analysis and strategic intervention, I examine and adjust these approaches to forge an analytic methodology and critical approach that takes account of feminist thinking on cultural narratives of ageing femaleness and the constructive role of the camera apparatus in representation.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the traditions and conventions of portraiture, the complexity of the underlying relationship between photographer, model and spectator, the desire for photographic representation and the dissemination of power via visual media. Extending this study to the representation of ageing in Chapter 6, I illustrate and investigate some of the complexities of pictorialisation in relation to a 19th century visual illustration that plays on the symbolic idea of the vanity of female beauty and attention to appearances. Using this image as a guide to question how discourses operating between classical ideals of beauty and the apprehension of age operate pictorially to evoke certain culturally conditioned responses, I examine the effect of uncanny images activated via aesthetic uncertainty. I also examine the basis of pejorative terminology attaching to the

appearance of ageing femaleness and how these terms are symbolically summoned in response to uncanny images presented in particular visual arrangements.

My investigation into photographic works that specifically focus on ageing femaleness gathers momentum in Chapters 7, 8, and 9 with three chapters that focus on individual works clustered around central themes. Leedy advises that the detailed examination of cultural conditions indicative of qualitative research is best encountered in well-targeted small-scale, intensive studies (Leedy et al. 2005) and accordingly, I present these three chapters as 'case studies' containing various photographic works chosen to contextualise, isolate and illustrate particular issues in finer detail.

In Chapter 7, I look further into aesthetic issues of portraiture and its relation to discourses of beauty and femaleness. Through an analysis of a number of projects including Harriet Walter's celebratory book and exhibition: *Facing It* (2010) and *Infinite Variety* (2011), I examine the difficulties with a discourse of beauty in images of older women. Walter's work was published at a point in my research when I was identifying issues with the attribution of beauty to older women through photographic representations and the performative dynamics from behind the lens. Our shared theatrical backgrounds, interest in photographic portrayal and the staging of female identity also made this work appealing as a case study. In addition, Walter generously agreed to meet and discuss her project which gave me the opportunity to interview her and understand more about what prompted her to make the project. (See *Appendix 2* for a transcript of our conversation.) I examine Walter's work alongside a variety of other projects to tease out particular issues in pictorial and photographic representation – the confusion between discourses of who and what is termed beautiful in a figurative photograph, aesthetic strategies, tropes and styles in representation of ageing and its relation to a youthful gaze.

In Chapter 8, I look in detail at Donigan Cumming's *Pretty Ribbons* and examine the political implications of carnivalesque reversal in the portrayal of an individual woman. This work, made in the nineties, has been influential in artistic circles and cultural gerontology and there was a range of writing and other media records of responses to the work that made it interesting as a case study. I also particularly wanted to respond to

Kathleen Woodward's observations made in 2006, which I read early on in my research. The breadth and variety of the images Cumming produced of Nettie Harris is still unusual. However, one photograph stood out and infected my imagination to the detriment of the overall project and I wanted to understand the reasons for that. My early findings had identified polarising tropes in portrayal and Cumming's work gave me the opportunity to explore carnivalesque reversal in depth.

Reversing and exposing the differences between 'high' and 'low' culture – that which is considered socially acceptable and that which is denied expression – the carnivalesque, offers some of the richest dissonances in culture and is, therefore, an attractive arena for discursive artistic interventions concerned with social classification. The carnivalesque body embraces and unites seemingly antithetical 'terminal' points in human cycles of becoming: 'birth-death, youth-age, top-bottom, face-lower bodily stratum, praise-abuse' (Bakhtin, 1968: 238), situating the material body as the representative locus of 'cosmic, social, topographical and linguistic elements of the world' (Stallybrass et al., 1986: 9). As a mode of representation that embraces old age and upturns normative codifications, the carnivalesque seems an obvious – and widely used – method to employ in photographic portraiture. But whilst the carnivalesque offers the potential to expose social inconsistencies by upturning expectations, it may also strengthen the political hierarchies it temporarily disrupts (Stallybrass et al., 1986).

In his analysis of the political effects of carnivalesque inversion, Stallybrass notes how carnival has moved from a ritual feature of European culture to a mode of understanding in contemporary cultural studies and artistic and academic discourses. However, for him, Bakhtin's utopian optimism and insistence on the positive outcomes of the carnivalesque is over-determined for carnival's uncritical populism demonises weaker social groups, particularly women, ethnic and religious minorities and those who don't belong 'in a process of displaced abjection.' (1986: 19) Bearing this analysis in mind, any artwork that seeks to address representation of ageing femaleness must be mindful of unwittingly feeding and strengthening the vertical hierarchies of a discourse that is played out in images of older women as the other to youthful beauty. Bringing to public view photographic portrayals that insistently focus on the somatic signs of age, whilst effecting a temporary release from constraint, may tacitly strengthen the demarcations of

a social divide by providing it with a material image and an indexical locus for the direction of unconscious hostility. Using the carnivalesque as a lens of enquiry, I discuss these issues in greater depth in Chapter 8. I also consider various other works within this case study, Jeurgen Teller's *Woo!* and Pinar Yolaçan's *Perishables,* to bring contrast and depth to the discussion and examine different artistic approaches to a similar problematic.

In my last case study in Chapter 9, Case Study 3, I examine Sheffield University's project *Look at Me!* (2011), which was part of a Europe-wide initiative, the *New Dynamics of Ageing* programme. Various photographic treatments, all made by women, included both carnivalesque approach and 'serious' photographic approaches. I look further into these artistic treatments, focusing particularly on 'serious' photography and melancholic effect and the unconscious 'daughterism' of two female photographers engaged in the project. (Copper, 1988) This project was running in parallel with my own research and an early dialogue between the research team and myself gave me the opportunity to follow its development and understand the processes and thinking behind the camera, attend the exhibition, as well as review the resulting images. Unlike the other case studies, the team and the photographers were all women so it also gave me chance to examine whether the carnivalesque/melancholic tropes identified in earlier works – particularly, Cumming's *Pretty Ribbons* from the nineties – were being played out elsewhere and were persistent tropes indicative of a youthful gaze internalised by all and unconsciously recreated in photographic practice from behind the camera.

Finally, in Chapter 10, I present my own project: *Hagging the Image* (2015)*,* a film installation presented as a lens-based theatre-in-the-round. Responding to my research led to the radical decision to move away from the production of still images in order to avoid recreating the performative dynamics I was identifying, and instead to expose the scaffolding of a 'youthful gaze' and focus the audience attention on the conversation circulating around images of older women rather than the image itself. Drawing on my background in theatre, resulted in the creation of a theatre-based installation model that draws on feminist methodologies and roundtable discussion to critically address questions of a lack in representation.

In the next chapter, I begin my dissertation by situating the representation of ageing femaleness in relation to historical social narratives, myth and legend, in order to trace a 'herstory' of the Dirty Goddess and the denigrated figure of the Hag.

2. A Hagiography of the Dirty Goddess: Myth and Hag Power

2.1. Introducing the Hag

The figure of the Hag has been a way of thinking through the construction of images of older women in patriarchal regimes of looking in Western culture in my work and, also, latterly in the work of Susan Pickard (2016). During the course of my roundtable interviews in 2013, the Hag lifted her head, arising from within and out of female conversation, as a potential model of resistance to patriarchal narratives attaching to images of older women. The Hag's ageing appearance has been called 'ugly', a pejorative term used to castigate older women who might draw on her critical power to resist the structures of a constraining social gaze and the discourses in Anglo-American culture of beauty and youth that surround female appearance. I shall be delving further into a 'youthful gaze' in the next two chapters and exploring pejorative terminologies and the way in which language and aesthetic treatments attach to older women in chapter 6. In this chapter, however, I begin my study by exploring the archetype of the Hag goddess in myth and legend in order to examine the basis for the deadly and poisonous associations that have become attached to the figure of the old woman.

In *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* Dorothy Dinnerstein (1976) suggests that the ambivalence of meanings associated with the female body in Western culture transforms woman symbolically into a 'dirty goddess'. Man's primordial fear of death has made the goddess a 'carnal scapegoat-idol', both venerated and despised, and this recognition plays out as a 'carnal ambivalence' (1976: 125) towards women that permeates male attitudes. Dinnerstein explains that the materiality of a woman's body as the primordial matrix from which all human life springs is 'representative of the body principle in all of us' (176: 125) but alongside the life-giving vitality associated with the matrixial body, is the fear of its loss which precipitates a recognition of the inevitability of death, mortality, and the impossibility of escape. This is the symbolic all-consuming life-taking aspect of the maternal archetype, here described by de Beauvoir:

> 'The Earth Mother engulfs the bones of her children ... Death is a
> woman.' (de Beauvoir cit Dinnerstein, 1976: 124)

In matriarchal goddess worshipping cultures these understandings, however fearful, were seen as part of a larger cycle of life, death and renewal where woman did not only

signify death itself but power over death. Dinnerstein argues these meanings have become corrupted and elided in the service of patriarchal narratives that wish to wrest control over the power of life and death that the Hag goddess represents. However, because woman also stands for and as an intermediary between man and unconscious, uncontrollable nature, she is therefore subjected to male jurisdiction, domination and control. (1976: 125) Dinnerstein thinks these powerful iconic associations are inescapable but despite the inevitability of a woman's body being caught up with the meaning of mortality, she contends that the emotional meaning of the link is 'profoundly mutable' and therefore can and, she thinks, **must** change. But in order for that change to happen, 'the meaning of maternity itself ... must also change.' (1976:128) This means attending to and rethinking the relationship between the nature of sexual desire and the link between mortality and the maternal flesh, along with the social meanings that attach to symbolic representations. To chart these changing meanings attached to the dirty goddess in her dual aspects as life-giving fertility goddess and life-taking crone, I now look back at a short 'herstory' of the Hag in myth and legend.

2.2.   Dishing the Dirt: a Hag History

The mythical power of the Hag reaches back to ideas of a pre-Christian history and social systems when women held authority independently of the delimitations of male jurisdiction (Walker, 1985: 127). Feminist historians such as Barbara Walker in her book *The Crone* (1985), have pieced together a social herstory of older women to examine how the meanings attached to ageing appearance is responsive to historical fluctuations; hoping within that examination, to free up and denaturalise the moralising and poisonous associations exerted by powerful historical and stereotypical tropes of representation. These accounts point to the recurrent reiterative appearance of the 'old witch' or 'hag' at various socio-political junctures, typically when resources and the fecundity of the workforce are perceived as under threat and with these, the social structures and interactions that govern the norms that regulate the status quo. Walker maintains that in goddess-worshipping pre-Christian societies women elders were venerated, particularly for their abilities as healers and midwives – *med-wife* – and this powerful social status later made them a target for hostility in patriarchally organised communities. She claims the medieval inquisitions need for income just after 1375 led to the creation of a new form of heresy that targeted female elders and midwives whose

business and property were outside their jurisdiction and control (Walker, 1985), denigrating the power and social status that older women previously enjoyed within the community.

Writing later in 2005, feminist and age historian, Pat Thane, examines medieval discourse attaching to ageing femaleness, arguing that in the past the accumulation of knowledge over the life course was viewed as a kind of magic that was either valued as wisdom or vilified as proof of witchcraft according to the psychosocial needs and circumstances of various historic communities. In the middle ages, the belief that old women were dangerous, she conjectures, was based on a combination of societal guilt over the justifiable anger of old women in feeling marginalised, combined with mistaken medieval ideas that postmenopausal women were venomous because of their physiology (2005: 14). In Western medieval culture menstrual blood was considered impure, harmful and having a destructive power. The post-menopausal female was even more dangerous because of the retention of the evil humours of the menses, a factor worsened by the poor 'meat' diet of poverty. Poor women already suffering from a marginalised social status were thus considered to be more 'venomous'. (2005)

2.3.   Hecate and Her Women

Hags appear in various forms in myth and legend, notably as the three fates who have the power to control destiny which no man can escape. The derivation from the Dutch or German word *heks* or *hexe* standing for 'witch', links the term to Hecate, the great and mysterious Night Hag, goddess of the moon and all that is illusory, liminal and at the threshold of vision. In ancient mythology, Hekate or Hecate was represented as multi-faceted: shapeshifting between singular, double and triple-faced aspects (like the phases of the moon), she had the ability to take on whatever form suited the contingencies of the situation.

Associated with the triplicate phases of the moon, *Hecate Triformis* presides over the waters that sustain life: the seas and tides, the menstrual cycles that govern fertility and the 'feminine' cycle of maiden-mother-crone; she also governs the waters of the River Styx, the river that divides living and dead and all at the cusp and in flux – the liminal borderlands between the real and imaginary, day and night, crossroads, turning points –

where one's past experiences inform and shape the sometimes fraught ambivalence that attaches to choices made when facing a fork in the road ahead and the consequences that ensue. Her three women, the *Moirai* or Fates, controlled sudden changes in fortune, turning the wheel of destiny, and shaping the journey from womb to tomb. Both the Greek *Moirai* or fates and the *Eumenides* or furies represented positive and negatively experienced consequences of these life and death decisions made within the crucible of social exchange. The furies – stereotypically embodied as three 'ugly' hags or nags – represent the critical inner voice that attends moral self-judgement waiting to tear the individual apart at the slightest sign of remorse or disavowal and can be seen as the counterparts to the mute support represented by the three inspirational muses. In legend, the furies appear most notably dogging the steps of Orestes as he wanders a social outcast in the wake of his matricide of Clytemnestra. Represented visually as adolescent, mature and old woman, Atropos, whose name means 'she who cannot be avoided', is represented as a fearsomely executive old woman who cuts the thread of life and mortal being, releasing the individual into the womb of death that precipitates rebirth and the renewing of the cycles of life. Clotho, the young woman, was the spinner, Lachesis, the mature woman, the measurer and Atropos, the old woman, the cutter. Together they wove the thread of an individual life and governed its destiny over which even Zeus had no control.

Double-faced the moon goddess is personified as the youthfully glamorous and much desired huntress, Artemis, and the awe-inspiring old Hecate. Crucially, these two aspects were considered inseparable and interwoven, 'continuous, the life/death duality. She is divine ambivalence.' (Gimbutas et al., 1982: 196) These two indivisible aspects of the goddess are perpetually in cycle from the luminous glamour of the Huntress at full moon to the mystery of the night Hag and all that is hidden from the human gaze by the dark of the moon. This mysterious aspect of the Hag – the ability to negotiate invisibly, out of sight – invests her actions with a seemingly capricious and inexplicable magical power as she goes about her business. In older versions of the Hecate myth this quality allowed her transact when all else had failed. In Robert Grave's account of the Greek legend, according to oral tradition, it was Hecate who mysteriously negotiated Persephone's release from Hades overwhelming control, ending Demeter's grief and restoring the cycles of fertility that support and sustain life on the earth. (Graves, 1955) In later

accounts of the story, the role of go-between was attributed to Mercury. (It is interesting to note that many of the most successful CIA operatives are older women who do not attract a sexual gaze and are able to observe interactions whilst going about their business un-noted.[3])

However, Hesiod's *Hymn to Hecate* establishes a favourable account of an ancient, all powerful and respected goddess, that reaches back to a pre-Hellenic matriarchal past when the cycles of fertility were revered above all else, an account with little of the overwhelmingly negative connotations that later attached to her representations. (Nilsson, 1999). Hecate's ancient origins predate the Olympian pantheon, although in Hesiod's account Hecate is still 'honoured above all others' by Zeus and is given power over the earth, the sea, and the heaven, 'thus exalted exceedingly even among immortals' (Hesiod, 1914).

2.4.   Gramayre and Glamour

The term 'glamour' finds its roots in the Scottish word, *gramayre*, and an enchantment related particularly to the overpowering force and fascination of a 'magical' beauty, a spellbinding charm exercised by women via their 'feminine' appearance. Linguistic expert, Richard Hudson notes that glamour – most often associated since the Hollywood era with photographic depictions of beautiful female stars – had much more threatening connotations in the past linked to witchcraft.

> 'In Scotland "glamour" was called the *deceptio visus* – a spell cast over the eyes. The connection with sight is found in the IE root *ghel (= to shine) […] Intended deception is part of "glamour" – the magic, of making something appear to the sight what it is not.'
>
> (1995)

Gramayre links the word to the casting of spells – incantations – occult learning and scholarship, thus linking 'feminine' glamour with a magical word power and profound (occult) learning presumably accumulated over a long study and lifetime.

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[3] This observation was made privately to me by a secret service operative from the UK.

Anatoly Liberman attributes the revival of medieval associations of *gramayre* as occult learning to Walter Scott who, in addition, linked it to the glamour of an enchantment and a sense of compelling beauty. The word has also been linked to older Norse words *glámr* – a poetic word for the moon, and *glámsýni* literally 'glam-sight' and the idea that female allure is a visual illusion and therefore, like the moon, changeable, unstable and prone to rupture, revealing something far more threatening. But the symbolism of the mysterious moon Goddess also links the notion of illusory 'feminine' glamour to the language of light and, specifically, the soft silvery luminosity of the moon. By contrast, the Night Hag is associated with the unseen face and dark of the moon and all that is liminal, murky and mysterious. This lunar mythology is still enshrined in Western popular culture. For instance, the play, *Dark of the Moon* (Berney & Richardson, 1945), draws on this convention linking witchcraft and beauty in a cautionary tale of conjuration and the fickleness of women based on the Ballard of Barbara Allen.

2.5.   Hubble Bubble, Toil and Trouble – Shakespeare's Hags

Possibly the most famous hags in literature are the three witches in Macbeth. The language with which Shakespeare clothes the appearance of the three 'filthy hags' (Act IV, scene I, line 20) in Macbeth suits the requirements of a malevolent and venomous narrative where the balance of power is shifting and order is in turmoil. Shakespeare draws together mythological characterisations from antiquity – the harpies and furies of Greek myth and the venomous witches of medieval and renaissance imagination – to evoke a poisonous political atmosphere that precipitates the playing out of deadly intentions, situating the 'weird sisters' in a windswept and barren landscape where they brew poisonous potions in a cauldron brimful of slimy, slithery ingredients that elicit a disgusted visceral response from the audience.

Shakespeare's primary source for Macbeth was Holinshed's Chronicles of 1587. Holinshed describes the weird sisters as 'three women in strange and wild apparell [sic], resembling creatures of 'elder world' who prophesy to Macbeth and Banquo only to vanish immediately out of their sight. Holinshed links the three prophetesses to the goddesses of destiny,

> 'or else some nymphs or fairies endued with knowledge of prophecy by
> their necromantical [sic] science'

<div align="right">(Muir et al., 1982)</div>

but does not describe their appearance in deprecating terms. (It should be noted that the Anglo-Saxon word 'wyrd' had different connotations to the modern word 'weird'. Shakespeare did not use the word 'weird' but 'wyrd' from 'weyward' or 'weyard' to describe the witches. This older usage connects the witches to the fearsome 'elder world' of the Greek *Moirai*, the fates and the crossing of the ways. (See previous section 2.4.) Events turn on the interpretation of three visual apparitions that speak in riddles, produced by the witches from their cauldron. Macbeth's inability to interpret these images outside of the bounds of his own imagination and frames of reference contributes to his eventual downfall.

The unstable atmosphere evoked by the hags' appearance in the play is met by a combination of fascination and venomous abusive language from Macbeth. This could be construed as fear of the uncontrollable power they seem to exercise over real and supernatural worlds, though whether they direct events or are agents of fate remains a question. In what is thought a later addition to the play, Hecate, appears as the driving force behind the activities of the three hags, though demoted of her goddess status she appears more as a 'super witch'. (Frost, 1968) But are the witches actual characters or psychological figurations – congealed projections of Macbeth's murderous ambitions? In the play, Shakespeare questions the evaluation of appearances for nothing is quite as it seems: 'Foul is fair and fair is foul' (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act I, Scene I, line 12). Shakespeare's ambivalent phrasing makes it unclear whether the hags are actual or illusory beings for they are not seen by all the characters in the play. Macbeth's disgusted and hostile response to the hags, however, is indicative of the persistence of widespread fear of the magical power of older women which has historically proved dangerous most often to themselves.
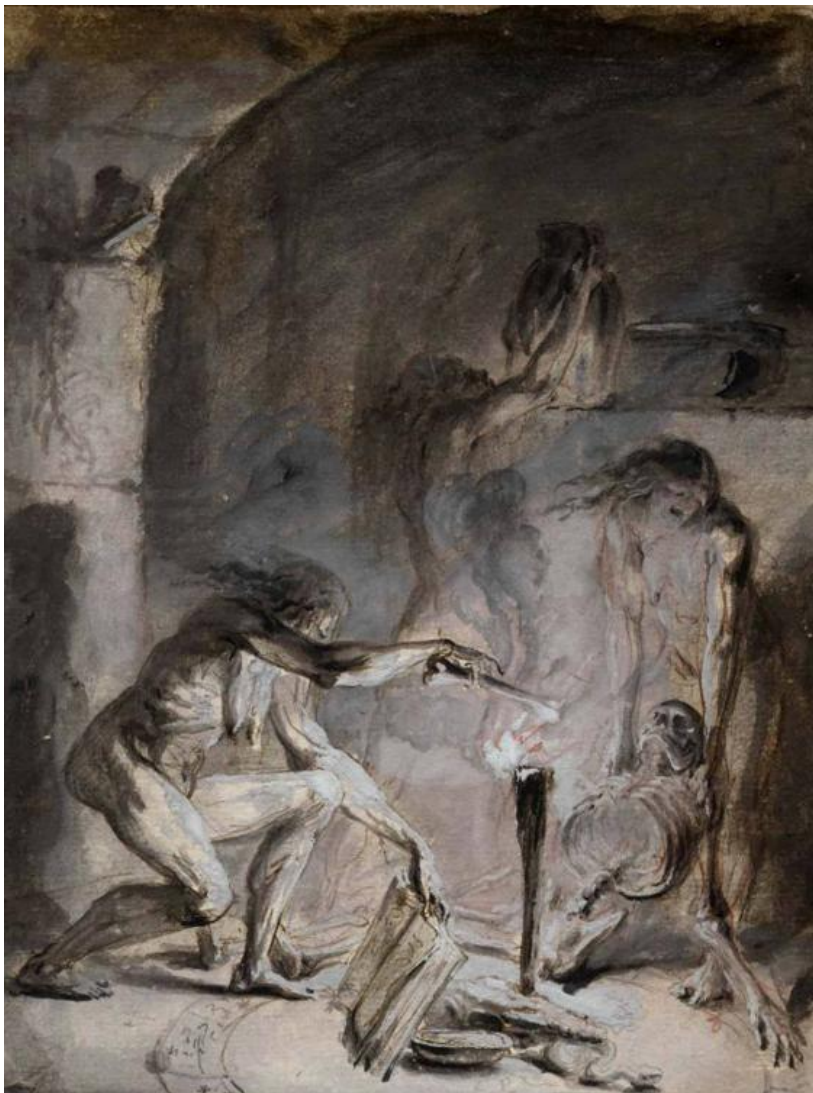
Figure 15: This witchcraft painting by Luis Paret y Alcazar, depicting three figures including a woman holding a bone above a flame (c. 1780), is notable for the emphasis on the naked body, a common trope in images depicting witches. The unclothed body associates ageing femaleness with a lack of social constraint. Here she is portrayed performing venomous life-taking practices, symbolised by the roasting bone, whilst consulting a book of occult learning.

2.6.   The Witchhunt: Trials & Tribulations

Lyndal Roper, in a fascinating account of witch trials in Baroque Germany, brings together anthropological and psychoanalytical perspectives to interpret the reasons why post-menopausal women were invariably targeted and trialled as witches. (2004) In an agrarian society where resources were scarce and fertility revered, older post-menopausal women inhabited a marginal status. Often widowed and financially impoverished, they were, consequently, outside male jurisdiction or protection, as well as the business of reproduction that sustained the economies of the community. Older women were victimised in times of scarcity, their marginal status making them the

targets of powerful communal projected fears and jealousies. 'Witchcraft accusations were a hall of mirrors where neighbours saw their own fear and greed in the shape of the witch.' (2004: 26) Antipathies were the result of a constellation of social factors that played out via the judicial process to enforce political power. But if hostility originated in masculine fear and fascination with the sexual potential of older females – beyond the authorised bounds of marriage, conception and the rigours of childbearing – they were played out within the confines of the female community. Accusations were almost always levelled by younger women of childbearing age from within the community, which led to the torture and confession of the unfortunate older woman, swiftly followed by her trial and death. Roper likens the confessional nature of this torture with Freud's talking cures of 300 years later noting the frequency with which women believed the charges made against them. Confessions followed a sensational but well-rehearsed script, elicited by a skilful inquisitor, a narrative that included initiation into witchcraft through intercourse with the devil, a sexual act ushering the post-menopausal woman into a frenzy of malevolent and poisonous activity targeting younger women, their infant progeny, and the livestock so vital to the survival of the agrarian community. This sensational narrative allowed the community to collectively imagine with a horrified thrill, an act of sexual transgression, featuring the infertile but still potentially active sexual body of the older woman.

The demise of the witchhunt, a superstitious narrative at odds with the ideologies of the enlightenment in the late eighteenth century, marked the end of physical torture and execution of the Hag. Her subsequent reappearance in the fairy tales of the 19th Century was, argues Roper, an imaginative leap of transference from the physical exercising of power to an imagined scene and cautionary tale recounted in the domestic bedtime stories of the bourgeois community and told against the image of the old witch – stories which persist today, retold in contemporary culture in high definition and monumental projection, as in the Disney studio's reimagining of 'classic' fairy tales and films like *Into the Woods* (2014), which retell a dispiritingly familiar narrative. Furthermore, Roper argues, the psychic distress and ambivalence of love and loathing between mother and child was now displaced by projecting them onto the image of the poisonously jealous older woman who would seek to destroy the domestic enclosure and care privileged in the symbiotic unit of mother-child.

Figure 16: Poster for Disney release, 'Into the Woods' (2014)
featuring Meryl Streep as the Witch

The witchhunt may no longer hold the threat of imminent physical death in the Anglo-American West, but contemporary narratives still recount a cautionary tale that warns of the social exclusion and dangers attached to appearing old, female, critical and independent. The recent TV dramatisation of the poisonous rivalry between ageing film stars, Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, in *Feud (2017)* played on a Hag narrative and the humiliation and difficulties that both academy award winning actresses faced trying to find work as they began to show their age and were no longer considered desirable or glamorous.

2.7.   Conclusions

In summary, ancient legend points to a pre-historic matriarchal culture where the archetype of the awesome Hag Goddess and her role in the cyclical nature of life and power over the matrixial cycles of birth and death was venerated and revered. Man's primordial fear of death has, however, cast her in the role of 'carnal scapegoat-idol', a dirty goddess, both desired and despised. (Dinnerstein, 1976)

Hags appear in literary narratives when instability threatens the security of the community. In the enlightenment these narratives shifted from the real persecution of so-called witches to the fearsome hags of the gothic imagination, and thence as cautionary tales told in the inner sanctum and security of the bourgeois nursery. From Grimm to Disney, the figure of the Hag is still called out in contemporary culture to represent all that is outside of patriarchal jurisdiction and therefore 'ugly' and necessary to control. A divisive situation which constrains actual older women critical of patriarchal authority from accessing a trajectory of accumulated knowledge, translated in later life as socio-political influence and power.

Mythic narratives suggest that following on from girl and woman power, hag power is a formidable facet of femaleness developed in later life and awakened through the cumulative impact of psychosomatic and socio-political experiences. This resistant aspect of older femaleness plays in chorus as part of a portmanteau of available many-aged selves accumulated over a long life (Gullette, 1997) and, as such, represents a critical energy with the authority to challenge the security of the status quo. However, this facet of femaleness also presents a problem in representation for Hag power is not a settled or iconic image but a dynamic irrepressible force, identified with, lived through and responsive to the multiple realities and dimensions of an ageing body and psyche. But can a deadly history be utilised creatively, harnessed in a different direction – to break the associations of a deadly, deadening image?

I will revisit the critical force of the Hag as a method for disruption in Chapter 9 when I discuss my own work. In the next chapter, I examine key feminist writing from the seventies onwards to tease out various themes and issues in the representation of female ageing. Picking out theoretical positions that pertain to my thesis, I deliver a brief

overview of feminist thinking on the combined issues of ageism and sexism to describe a cultural atmosphere from which this study and my artistic practice have emerged.

3. Feminist Perspectives: Cultural Ageing and Double Jeopardy

In this chapter I present an overview of key feminist writing on cultural attitudes to ageing since the 70s that are salient to my project. I offer these as a general backdrop that informed the thinking behind my work and, in particular, the enmeshment of issues of biological ageing and femaleness from 'cultural' ageing and its relation to 'femininity'.

The field of age studies is a comparatively recent development in the social sciences and humanities. The term 'ageism' was only coined in 1968 by gerontologist and psychiatrist, Professor Robert Butler, the first doctor to distinguish the language, attitudes and conflation of ageing with disease as contributing to the conditions of discrimination against the elderly. Age studies emerged alongside and in concert with second-wave feminism at a time when the nature of subjectivity and its relation to culture was being questioned. Both fields of study sought to distinguish the ways in which certain bodies and social positions are discriminated against and the perpetuation of social attitudes enshrined in culture. However, in comparison to the widespread discourse on the cultural constructions and nature of gender and exchanges of desire, issues of ageism and combined issues of ageism and sexism have received comparatively scant attention. Since the seventies and Simone de Beauvoir's investigation into the social dichotomies and inequalities that permeate the experience of ageing, feminists and age critics have argued for a revision of notions of ageing based on women's lived experience and further research into the representations (or lack of them) of older women in the media and arts.

3.1. Ageism and 'Femininity'

Feminist age studies aim to divide lived bodily experiences from the reiterative and constraining social practices that limit women from a full social role. In *The Second Sex* written in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir famously claimed 'One is not born but becomes a woman' (1973: 301), thereby opening a discourse and vocabulary with which to discuss what is now termed the sex-gender distinction and its social construction, a system that 'structured sexual difference and self-identification around the reflected image.' (Rideal et al., 2001: 9). Later, in her seminal work *Coming of Age* (1973) published in the

seventies at the beginning of second-wave feminism, de Beauvoir turned her attention to the complexity of forces surrounding the (in)visibility of women in later life, applying the same formulations to the material conditions and cultural mythologies surrounding the representation of old age. Her aim was to separate a 'normal' consciousness of bodily decline, passing mortality and proximity to death from the anxieties and pressures produced by 'cultural' ageing. Comparing the status of 'woman as Other' with the marginalised status of 'the old', de Beauvoir identifies the rhetoric of hurt and loss surrounding menopause, rendering a woman 'old' at a relatively young age and her life as having no value once her days of sexual fertility are past, whilst a man is deemed at the height of his professional and intellectual power. This change in status is partly internal and partly thrust upon the woman by the realisation that to remain in good faith with herself she must accept that society views her as 'old', a category that denies her experience as a continuous being. (2010: 267)

While noting the undeniable physical realities of old age, de Beauvoir exposes the mythical status of 'facts' about ageing and the dehumanising effect on women of their non-subject status, railing against a double dismissal of women which bars them from a fully realised social role and limits their intellectual projects and erotic possibilities. In *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre* (1984), de Beauvoir comments that no such restriction applied to Jean Paul Sartre who, in old age, was never marginalised or denied his intellectual projects despite the failing of his physical body. She concludes that in order for women to be in good faith with themselves and able to freely respond to the existential challenge of ageing, society must redress the socio-economic imbalances between men and women so that self-determination and meaning in old age are not only available to a wealthy, predominantly male, intellectual elite. She notes, however, an unavoidable crisis when we encounter our ageing bodies reflected in the 'alien eye' and responses of people around us for the first time. (1972: 289) De Beauvoir is referring to the 'alien eye' of a social gaze but she might as easily have been describing the glass eye of the camera, which facilitates a disciplining 'alien' gaze. The conflict engendered by this 'new state of biological equilibrium' (1972: 316) throws self-perception into crisis and involves a philosophical volte-face. In order to be in good faith with oneself and 'authentically' responsive to the changing experience and circumstance of individual existence, do we accept an externally received or an inwardly imagined notion of who

we are? Do we approximate our changing existence with a desired image of 'self' or a 'familiar' one?

Helen Small, in her literary review of philosophical works on ageing, notes in *La Vieillesse* the 'politics of outrage' but an inherent failure to transform the perceived dialectic (2007: 11-15). I agree with Small, there is a distinct problematic in de Beauvoir's writing which presents the experience of ageing as a binary opposition, a closed set of forces that pits subjective interiority against social objectification. This arrangement elides a subtler view of the porous boundaries between our self-view, our embodied and lived experiences, our social conditioning, and the view of sympathetic and familiar others, as well as the 'alien eye' of wider society. Ultimately, de Beauvoir's commitment to existential phenomenology causes her acceptance of the 'alien eye' as the ultimate register of truth, to which no challenge is deemed 'permissible' (Beauvoir, 1972: 290). Despite de Beauvoir's ground-breaking elucidation of the social problematics of ageing as they affect women, the tone of her treatise is pervasively melancholy and without any coherent strategy for change. It is relevant to note that at 52 years old de Beauvoir was just over the average age of menopause when she wrote the work. (The average age of menopause in the 70s was 49-51.) I suggest the melancholic tone of the writing is reflective not only of cultural attitudes to ageing women experienced as a change in gaze but of a personal experience brought on by the physical and psychic changes that occur rather earlier in midlife at menopause focusing a recognition of one's mortality yoked to the cessation of sexual fertility.

Written two years later, Susan Sontag's much shorter treatise, *The Double Standard of Aging* (1972), explores similar terrain. Sontag focuses specifically on culturally produced 'feminine' anxiety about telling one's age from a 'normal' consciousness of bodily decline, passing mortality and proximity to death. She argues, the objective 'sacred pain' of old age is of a different order to subjective, 'profane' pain of ageing, a moral and social affliction of the imagination epitomised by the masculine midlife crisis and particularised in the double standards of ageing which render most women 'sexually ineligible' (1972: 31) to partners of a similar age much earlier than men. In the second half of the essay, Sontag moves on to describe and examine the practices of 'femininity' as performance – an observation about the theatrical nature of gender that was later

developed by Judith Butler (which I shall develop in the next chapter). 'To be a woman is to be an actress', Sontag claims, and 'being feminine is a kind of theater' complete with 'costumes, *décor*, lighting and stylized gestures.' (1972: 34) Clearly echoing de Beauvoir, Sontag concludes that in order for women to be treated as 'full human beings' and remain in good faith within themselves, double standards surrounding female ageing must be made consciously visible and women made indignantly aware of the societal double-bind to which they are vulnerable. Sontag's essay is striking, not only in its proximity to Beauvoir's in terms of its exclusively heterosexual narrative and historical timeframe but for the delineation of 'femininity' as performative and culturally responsive and in her use of theatrical analogies to the staging and performance of gender which are particularly pertinent to photographic portraiture.

In the nineties, following de Beauvoir and Sontag's lead, several feminist writers undertook further investigation into issues of ageing, 'femininity' and a change of gaze. Germaine Greer (1991), Naomi Wolf (1991) and Betty Friedan (1993), were instrumental in the development of a growing discourse that drew attention to the influence of consumer culture and its relationship to ageist and gendered discourses. Greer focused on the pathologising construction of menopause, Wolf focused on consumer culture and the conflation of 'feminine' appearance with professional value in the workplace, whilst Friedan addressed a virtual media blackout of images of age, a rise in bio-medical narratives of age as decline and a Freudian-feminist emphasis on self-actualisation, as formative factors in dehumanising social perceptions of those in older age as outmoded and expendable. But her greatest contribution, thinks feminist gerontologist, Toni Calasanti, was bringing together the feminist observation that 'the personal is political' to the discourse of ageism. Although she never uses this term, Friedan suggests that ageism is a crisis at both individual and cultural levels manifesting as 'an unwillingness to rethink youthful constructions of creativity and to accept the responsibility for growth *across the life course* at every transitional period.' (cit Calasanti et al., 2006: 27)

Griselda Pollock, writing slightly later at the beginning of the millennium, has used a combination of art historical, feminist and psychoanalytic examination as a basis to challenge the domination of patriarchal art forms expressed in a history of art. Her work

notably focuses on age, as is evident in her essay *The Grace of Time* (2003), where she focuses on a photographic postcard of Antonio Canova's statue of *The Three Graces*. This image, Pollock contends, exemplifies the relationship between a woman's body being a sign of herself that 'disappears' with the abjectness of old age and is simultaneously morbid and fetishised. 'Old women in art are there to terrify us as a *memento mori*, juxtaposed as scary witches, hags, old bags to the soft fullness of the one moment of feminine desirability: youth.' (2003: 193) Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (1981) also famously configured the photograph as a *memento mori* that intimates death by virtue of resurrecting in a lifelike simulacrum what has already passed away. Regardless of whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph precipitates a catastrophe that has already occurred, thinks Barthes. Brought into contact with one another, these different registers – the morbidity of the photograph and the abjection associated with the Hag – amplify and conflate negative underlying cultural resonance, which attach to the subject of the photograph – in this case, the old woman pictured. Thus the image becomes a visual target for social hostility enduced by the fear of death that ageing femaleness has come to connote.

Two of the most influential feminist writers within humanities and age studies, Margaret Gullette and Kathleen Woodward, also emerged in the nineties. Gullette offers the notion of diachronic age, whilst Woodward suggests that feminist reliance on Freud and Lacan contributes to societal narratives of decline. She proposes the notion of a second mirror stage encountered in midlife, a theory particularly pertinent to this thesis as it relates to theories of spectatorship and photography that I will talk about in Chapter 4. However, first I will outline Gullette's notion of diachrony and ageing identity.

3.2.   Diachrony: a Multi-Aged Performance of Self

Feminist scholar and self-styled 'age critic', Margaret Morganroth Gullette, states that age ideology emphasises bodily biological age as 'feminine' identity itself, thereby interpellating older women within a decline narrative and the accompanying practice of passing for younger, a form of identity stripping that must be resisted on every level.' (1997: 111). Life-course studies, she argues, enshrines, reifies and institutionalises linearity and the invisible narratives and pervasive language that saturate an underlying progress/decline binary that begins in childhood. Speculating on the postmodern notion

that the self is made up of multiple co-identities which co-exist synchronously as well as sequentially, she offers the notion of diachronic identity – 'a portmanteau of selves ... connected in different ways, or intermittently, but sometimes barely at all, to a sensuously material body'. (2004: 127) This fluid array of inner identities can be evaluated, rearranged, discarded, disliked and modified according to individual needs of self-definition. Developing these 'storied identities' that become shapelier over time matters, argues Gullette, and is a 'healthy narcissism' connecting us to our embodied selves; practicing and exercising our 'achieved identities' builds up a resistance to decline narratives circulating in society and loosens the grip of body-based ideologies.

Gullette's theoretical position rests on the value of literary narrative as the primary vehicle to display diachronic identities but she feels that there is something to learn from the theatre in the performance of age, something she is unable to explain that is rooted in the egalitarian gaze afforded actors in the theatre; onstage all characters are potentially significant, equally compelling and worthy of our gaze. 'However, you define "presence", they've got it' (2004: 163), she declares, and this psychosomatic intensity is passed over to the audience. The mechanism by which this occurs and how it might be harnessed to challenge decline narratives is not something she is able to elucidate further. However, it is my intention to explore diachrony further within this study in relation to theatrical performance and cinematic and photographic images.

3.3.   The Youthful Structure of the Look

Kathleen Woodward has written extensively on the representation of ageing in literature, film, and art practices since the early 90s. Examining the representation of ageing in relation to psychoanalytic theory, she warns that the political aspirations of feminist discourse – to represent a multiplicity of femaleness – must navigate an underlying ageist and misogynistic bias in Freudian discourses of desire. The unwitting complicity of second-wave feminism with a 'decline narrative' is due, she thinks, in large part to its reliance on the ideas of Freud and Lacan in theories of spectatorship; psychoanalytic cathexis theoretically underpins an economy of procreative desire for the other that forecloses at the onset of menopause so that 'older women cannot exist' (1995: 87) and are excluded from a fully visible social role. Feminism, she claims, is inherently ageist.

In *Aging and its Discontents* (1991), Woodward conducts a prolonged investigation into the entwined perspectives of psychoanalysis and Western literature. Woodward believes that Freud constructed subjectivity and generational relation so firmly anchored in infancy that they repressed his own fear of ageing, which he associates with castration and creeping psychosomatic inertia (1991: 7). Woodward identifies decline narratives that valorise youthful appearance as evidence of a 'youthful structure of the look' (2006) and proposes the theoretical addition of a second mirror stage in later life where the transaction with the ageing appearance precipitates a crisis of self-image.

Psychoanalysis theorises the ego as a mental projection of the surface of the body and the default body, shaped in infancy, as covered with smooth flesh. In this regime, the ageing wrinkled body represents a deformation, a narcissistic wound to the ego. Thinking age from a Freudian perspective thus produces a darkly pessimistic and tragic portrait, complicit with the general emphasis in western culture on the appearance of the body as the 'dominant signifier of old age' (1991: 10). Narcissistic hostility readily enables the rejection of 'old' as 'alien' alongside a sense of uncanny double vision – that the ageing body, a prosthesis hiding the 'real' other, is itself unreal – the ageing corpus a hallucinatory vision, a transitory and grotesque theatrical spectacle. 'Strangeness, the uncanny, old age, decrepitude, death, fear, danger – all are linked together in this momentary drama of the mirror stage of old age.' (1991: 68)

Lacanian life course is figured as containing two transformational phases, the mirror stage and Oedipal conflict, both of which are characterised by aggression. Woodward suggests that a second mirror stage is enacted in midlife in response to the sight of the ageing body. This second mirror stage is the opposite of the first – where perception of an ideal unity in the mirror is contrasted with experience of the body as uncoordinated, resulting in the creation of ego and subject irreconcilably split and ushering the infant into the imaginary, a realm dominated by images, prior to language – the inverse mirror operates in reverse: what is whole is felt to reside within, not without.[4] (Woodward, 1991) Aggressivity is intensified and directed back towards the self as well as onto ageing others. In this scenario, the narcissistic impulse is involuted and the image of self rejected precipitating the loss of the imaginary.

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[4] See also section 4.1, page 40.

'If the psychic plot of the mirror stage of infancy is the anticipated trajectory from insufficiency to bodily wholeness, then the mirror stage of old age is the feared trajectory from wholeness to physical disintegration. The affect associated with one of despair, not joy.' (1991: 67)

This fear is driven out into the unconscious as an unharnessed remnant that is reactivated, particularly in response to still photographic portrait images, working as another mirror of self in which the signs of age provoke an anxious response and are consequently foreclosed.

Woodward's writing chimes with the widespread phenomena of midlife crisis, though it does not adequately account for more recent conceptions of identities, such as the MILFs and cougars where older women are considered and constructed as sexually confident and desirable whatever their age. However, Woodward's writing on unconscious responses to a fear of age within the discourse of psychoanalysis is particularly pertinent to the transactive nature of portraiture photography. Most importantly, her delineation of 'a youthful structure of the look' is a concept I shall be discussing further in the next chapter in relation to the work of Laura Mulvey and the male gaze.

3.4.   The Girling of Secondwave Feminism

Angela McRobbie's writing on the discourse of postfeminism (1991, 1999, 2000, 2009) adds another layer of complexity to Woodward's analysis. McRobbie delineates the failure of second-wave feminism to achieve itself as playing out in the double-entanglement of post-feminist discourse. Post-feminism, she claims, presumes the feminist battle to have been won so that an old-fashioned version of 'femininity' can be reclaimed (2009). McRobbie's focus is primarily on the masquerade of 'femininity' (Doane, 1982) and privileging of youthful beauty, which provides the ground for its mirror image: the absence of the ageing 'feminine' and consumerist technologies that erase the signs of age.

The neoliberal instruction to 'age well' and therefore invisibly is underscored by an exponential rise of cosmetic marketing and procedures that are implicitly 'anti-age'[5]. Programmes like *Ten Years Younger* underline the increasing pressure on women to 'pass' for younger and maintain a 'fit' and desirable appearance or risk social disapproval. Alongside these, programmes like the American *Cougar Town, Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*, actively sexualise older women as objects for the attention of younger men, although implicit in the portrayal of these relationships is the idea that this is perhaps a temporary arrangement. Despite feminist efforts to claim the cougar as a positively assertive role model, negative connotations still attach to the idea of the sexually active older woman in search of a younger mate as both predatory and desperate. Cougar dating sites have been labelled by Google as 'non-family friendly' and been subject to censorship, a ban not applied to the male equivalent, the so-called 'sugar daddy' sites (Kershaw, 2010).

In an essay on the 'girling' of midlife women, Sadie Wearing takes on the discourse of post-feminism and ageing femaleness and how it is playing out in the Hollywood 'rom com'. (2007) In these films the fearful 'other country' of the crone is pushed further into deep old age via the technologies of 'femininity' so that the ageing heroine may 'pass' as youthful, sexually desirable and compliant with the codes of age appropriate behaviour and appearance, she claims. However recent film roles – Annette Bening in *20th Century Woman* (2016) and Oscar winner, Frances McDormand in *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017), for instance – show evidence of a shift in roles for older women and the resistance of a few older female actors to pressure to surgically enhance their appearance or pass for younger onscreen. Though it should be noted that the prevalence of surgical intervention onscreen is creating an aesthetic all of its own, which simultaneously reflects and announces a concern with the signs of ageing as dismissal from public view.

3.5.   Maintenance of Appearance as Moral Imperative

Successful 'feminine' ageing assumes the ideal that the 'good' elderly woman be healthy, slim, discreetly sexy, and independent (Evans et al., 1995). Writing in the

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[5] The explicit use of 'anti-ageing' as a descriptive term for products was banned 10 years ago by the ASA though Allure magazine, published by Condé Nast, only decided to ban its use in everyday parlance throughout the magazine as recently as 2017.

nineties, gerontologist Mike Hepworth, drawing on Goffman's sociological and conceptual model of how the self derives meaning from moral constructs of the 'normal' and socially acceptable, explores the 'emerging tendency to construct moral distinctions between styles of ageing and old age' (Featherstone et al., 1995a: 176). In these narratives, the body and particularly the face are seen as the visible marker of a performative relationship to health and vitality, a relationship epitomised in the appellation of 'successful ageing' or 'positive' ageing. These categories are not objectively physical conditions but socially constructed categories reflecting prevailing preferences for 'individualised consumerism, voluntarism and decentralisation' (1995a: 177). These preferences foster an accelerating age-consciousness, a fear of ageing which is consequently perceived as a social problem only addressable by prescriptive normalising of styles of ageing described as 'positive' and discouraging, even punishing, deviance from these norms and, by implication, an inferior social position for those who do not comply or conform to these codes of ageing. Other studies also conclude that ageing becomes something of a moral enterprise in which 'letting oneself go' was only legitimised due to insurmountable ill health. Jerrome discovers that dependent disablement of the third age duly stigmatises the deep old from Goffman's definition of a full social acceptance (1968), characterising dependency as an unequal balance of power recognisable as the absence of a vital quality in the image of another as the marker of difference. She concludes, 'Old age is a moral category.' (1992: 142), Feminist gerontologist, Toni Calasanti agrees, she argues that in effect 'successful aging means not aging, not being "old" or, at the very least, not looking old… Fear of and disgust with growing old are widespread; people stigmatize it and associate it with personal failure, with "letting yourself go."' (2006: 15) Consequently, attention to the body and the maintenance of a youthful appearance becomes 'a lifelong project that requires increasing levels of work.' (2006: 15) The question remains, however, what are we calling 'old' in visual images?

In pictorial regimes, John Berger observes 'a woman's presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her' (1972: 45-46), unlike men who traditionally have been defined by their action and activity. For a woman to be portrayed within the idealised conventions of the photographic image as having 'let herself go' is therefore construed as a lack of self-respect and an act of self-dismissal,

rather than the result of time working out on the body. This was a view expressed by a roundtable participant in my own interviews in response to an image of artist Louise Bourgeois by Annie Liebovitz. (See *Appendix 1*, page 5.) Jumoke: 'Has this person not cared enough about themselves to get to this stage?' Her view mirrors an understanding that ageing appearance is somehow within the control of the individual and represents a form of self-care, which in turn impacts on the individual's social treatment. Calasanti argues that, furthermore, class, gender, and racial biases embedded in these middle-class standards emphasize control over and choice about aging which deflects attention away from pressing issues of age, gender and inequality. Understanding how ageism affects women will take a degree of feminist self-interrogation and reflexive practice, she thinks. Researchers will 'need to recognize ageism, as well as sexism, and hold ourselves accountable for overcoming it personally and politically, in the way we live our lives and engage with others.' (2006: 42)

3.6.   Age Slippage & Double Vision

More recently, Julia Twigg, Professor of Social Policy and Sociology at Kent University, has built on the idea of a psychic double vision in relation to aesthetic codes of beauty and age playing out in media representations. Examining alterations in codes of beauty and fashion in women's magazines, she contends that aesthetic systems formerly reliant on codes of 'feminine' passivity allied to ideal beauty are now increasingly based on an age ordering system where the distance from an ideally youthful appearance negatively colours perceptions (2004). She notes that women critically perceive fashion and magazine images ostensibly aimed at their age group as escapist fantasies, but that these images still serve to reflect wider cultural values where identification is made with images of women who are always 'younger than' the individual in question. This 'age slippage' (2004) has resulted in a tactical response by magazine publishers to use younger models for fashion and 'real' women within the parameters of a makeover culture, keeping in place the dual desires for the representation of 'real' women that are 'like' the average reader, and the need for an idealised imaginary version of the self that is younger than the actual age of its audience.

The need to engage with an older female audience reflects a shift in demographics of consumption and the increased spending power of the older populace and with it,

marketing that plays on social anxieties about ageing appearance. By positioning 'real' women as constantly in need of renewal, it reaffirms a requirement for constant self-maintenance, whilst satisfying the desire for an impossible image that is unattainable – a divisive situation which not only feeds a sense of injustice in older women who experience a growing sense of self-acceptance in later life, but also engenders an apprehension in younger women of a loss of performative power in later age (Butler et al., 2006) – moreover, this dualistic approach also reflects the dichotomies and difficulties in marrying these two competing registers together in photographic images.

3.7.   Conclusions

In this chapter, I've outlined some key concepts in theories of ageing femaleness. Dividing cultural from biological ageing to examine the meanings attached to representations of women as they grow older, this chapter examined the status of women as 'other' with the status of being old in Western society. Starting with de Beauvoir, what is striking in these accounts is a pervasive sense of dichotomisation between embodied self-image and social decline narratives and their troubling enmeshment with discourses of 'femininity', female beauty, and youth as highlighted by Kathleen Woodward's delineation of the structure of a youthful look and second mirror stage and Julia Twigg's description of a systematic pattern of 'age slippage' resulting from the internalisation of a split self view.

The unconsciousness with which we view images of others makes Kathleen Woodward's psychoanalytically focused work an invaluable tool for the appraisal and examination of unconscious mechanisms and how the sublimation of social aggressivity spurred by a crisis of self-image in midlife is projected onto ageing others, predominantly women. I shall, with some additions and adjustments, be referring to her theories on 'the youthful structure of the look' and second mirror stage throughout my writing. In the next chapter, I place her work in relationship to the work of Laura Mulvey, also employing a psychoanalytic theoretical framework, to describe the construction of a male gaze in cinematic viewing regimes. Woodward also links Lacan's theories of the mirror stage of ego formation in infancy – a theory pertinent and widely used in relation to photography – with her own theories of a second 'reverse' mirror stage where a horrified response to the ageing face is the reverse reaction to the idealisation associated with the first.

Freudian ego dynamics align smooth skin – also associated with a glamorous 'femininity' – with youth to which the signs of age precipitate a loss of identity. Translated into pictorial terms, youthful 'femininity' is configured and coded as a luminous radiance – an aesthetic trope which has significance in photographic portraiture practices and which I delve into further in Chapter 7 in relation to discourses of beauty.

In contemporary society, the pressure on older women to maintain their appearance, demonstrate a youthful radiance and age 'well' – a glowing complexion, slim figure, healthy lifestyle and 'positive' attitude – is a significant social pressure, which as Twigg's analysis of age slippage seems to suggest, manifests as the internalisation of a divided self-image played out in women's magazines as an image-based double vision. This sense of a divided image, played out by separating and pitting 'real' and imaginary versions of different aged selves in visual media strategies in women's magazines, allows images of older women to be positioned in an age ordering scheme as the 'lower' term and in need of a makeover. Ageing is thus configured as within the aegis of personal concern and control rather than as a political issue and the photographic image the arena in which these concerns can be played out against one another and evaluated.

Sontag's delineation of the difference between objective bodily decline and a socially induced pain of ageing that affects the imagination also sets the ground for an understanding of how images that play between two registers – the 'real' and the imaginary – work to enhance moralising social imperatives to perpetuate the double standards of combined ageism and sexism which affect women at an earlier age than men. Her extension of de Beauvoir's notion of becoming woman as analogous to a staged performance involving tropes of pose, costume, location, and lighting is a theme that I shall be pursuing in relation to the work of Judith Butler on gender performativity and the possibilities for theatrical intervention in the next chapter.

To summarise, feminist writing since the seventies has pointed to double standards in perceptions of ageing femaleness that are constraining for women in later life, stemming from an institutionalised combination of ageism and sexism. A second mirror stage, reached in midlife, precipitates a crisis of self-image that is unconsciously re-enacted in

response to images of ageing others as a way of distancing the ego from the castrative threat that age linked to death and femaleness represents, a view internalised as a youthful structure of the look by men and women alike. This unconscious conditioning (to the youthful structure of the look and denial of the ageing self) has resulted in media strategies that divide 'real' and imaginary images, positioning youth as the aspirational term and distance from a youthful appearance as a fall from grace. The discourse of post-feminism adds pressure to this unconscious patterning by aligning a cult of youth with consumer cultures and the reclamation of codes of 'femininity' and beauty where the constancy of a 'feminine' image is interrupted and undermined by the appearance of signs of age, exacerbating a social view that ageing is a personal responsibility to control rather than a socio-political issue to be addressed.

In the next chapter, I turn to methodological interventions in constructions of gender identity to examine the possibilities for a creative approach to representation.

4. Challenging Constructions of 'Femininity': Power, Performance & Performativity

In the previous chapter, I described feminist thinking and the emergence of age studies as critical factors in identifying and examining decline discourse and its cultural constructions. Here, I move onto key critical feminist thinking in regard to photographic and cinematic representation and the challenges specific to ageing femaleness in order to evaluate the potential pitfalls of various strategic approaches to performative intervention. My intention in doing so is to bring together perspectives from both sides of the camera in contact with theories of combined ageism and sexism. Laura Mulvey's work on practices of looking within a cinematic regime and Judith Butler's theories of gender performance are selected because they deal with the politics of gaze and performance played out in front of and from behind the camera and relayed to the audience. In the middle of this chapter I also take the opportunity to define some terms in relation to 'the youthful structure of the look' and theories of the gaze that I will use throughout the dissertation.

4.1.   Visual Pleasure and the Male Gaze

Feminist discourse has long contested the formative role that photography plays in the construction of gender. In 1975, Laura Mulvey's seminal treatise on male spectatorship, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, posited the idea of a patriarchal unconscious that naturalises certain viewing relationships that privilege a male gaze. Utilising a semiotic and a psychoanalytic approach, Mulvey argued that in patriarchal culture in the West, woman stands 'as signifier for the male other' within a symbolic system which facilitates the playing out of male fantasies of domination and control linguistically and through visual imagery (1999: 834).

> 'Psychoanalytic theory, as well as semiotics, abstracted sexualised
> images of women from a natural or referential context and forced one,
> rather, to examine these images as cultural constructions – that is, as a
> product of the society from which they emanated.' (Haraway, 1988)

Semiotic analysis posits that within any system of representation, there exist sets of culturally agreed codes and conventions recognised by both transmitter and receiver, that

are not fixed but change according to context. Objects, language and images constitute a sign consisting of a signifier and signified; the signifier is the form of the communication and the signified the meaning that is generated in terms of the historical, cultural and social identification of the receiver or viewer. A sign may denote a simple reality but connote a much larger referent system. The nature of signs can take many forms that signify a variety of meanings simultaneously. (Dyer, 1982) These factors are constantly changing; thus the meaning of any exchange may alter according to these differences.

Mulvey stresses that it is an image that provides the matrix and framework for the privileging of a male gaze. It is a view shared by John Berger in his non-psychoanalytical work, *Ways of Seeing*, where he contends that Western artistic discourses from the Renaissance construct the female body as the object of pictorial art, in a system designed to demonstrate masculine ownership and agency and feminine passivity, a viewing relation where

> '…men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (1972: 47)

Women thus interiorise a divided view of themselves as 'a spectacle to be assessed' (Rose, 2007: 9) and the window-like framing of the picture, the locus where transactions of gaze take place. (For more on the relationship of pictorial/photographic framing see *5.1, Framing an Encounter.)*

Following the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan, Mulvey locates the mirror as the site of narcissism and ego exchange in infancy that subsequently frames encounters with the reflections of others and exchanges of desire throughout the life course. For the infant, self-recognition is overlaid with a misrecognition that counts the idealised mirror image as superior to the flailing infant body, a process simultaneously separating and

locating the ego outside of the self.[6] This transaction precursors language for the child and sets the scene for the dance of identification and alienation played out in future erotic encounters. In cinematic viewing regimes, woman as representation signifies castration, inducing voyeuristic or fetishising mechanisms to circumvent her threat. Women's appearance is fragmented and fetishised onscreen in an erotic scopophilia, a 'feminine' appearance that reduces her to a passive recipient of a male gaze – woman as a sign – the bearer of meaning not the maker of meaning. By exposing the underlying psychic structure of the gaze, her aim was to provide knowledge and understanding of the scaffolding that enabled certain dynamics to play out. Posing questions to the validity of the structure would, in turn, result in the disruption of viewing pleasure as part of a contingent political strategy that could allow for the emergence of empowered roles for women.

Mulvey's central argument is that the cinematic form provides the vehicle for voyeurism in the service of a patriarchal culture. By shifting the voyeuristic emphasis of the gaze, in a way fundamentally different to theatre and live performance, via the control of the dimensions of time through narrative, editing and spatial relations (changes in focal distance, etc), cinematic codes create a gaze, a world and an object. Cinema plays on the tension between the scopophilic instinct (pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object) and the identification of ego libido processes that are played out and focused on the beautiful female star. The voyeuristic space of cinema and, by extension, photographic images, provides a structure of fascination that allows these experiences to be played out in adult life. However, pleasure in looking always refers back to the moment of ego creation: the castration complex. 'Hence the look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content, and it is woman as representation/image that crystallises this paradox.' (1975: 19) Woman thus constitutes a castrative threat to the male gaze.

Mulvey identifies two forms of pleasure in looking: active scopophilia – an instinctive drive where pleasure arises from the objectification of the other onscreen – and narcissistic identification via a fascination with the other onscreen as like oneself, a transaction crucial to the construction of ego libido. Freud saw these two interlinked aspects of viewing pleasure as mechanisms polarised in a dramatic torsion but without

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[6] See also section 3.3, page 32, *The Youthful Structure of the Look*.

inherent meaning in and of itself. Meaning is only attached as these mechanisms become linked to an idealisation via the symbolic order, which articulates desire through language. She identifies two modes of exit from castration anxiety, a re-enactment of the original trauma counter-balanced by devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object, or fetishistic scopophilia that builds up the physical beauty of the object 'transforming it into something satisfying in itself.' (1975: 21) The voyeuristic sadism of the first requires a linear temporal narrative in order to play out the trauma of castration and reassertion of control via punishment/forgiveness. Whilst fetishistic scopophilia 'can exist outside linear time as the erotic instinct is focussed on the look alone' (1975: 22) and emphasises pictorial space enclosed by a frame – rather than narrative or identification processes – and cyclic rather than linear time. These fetishised and iconic moments typically have the quality of a cut-out, a flatness rather than depth and a reduction of the visual field. However, the woman as an icon displayed for the gaze 'always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified.' (1975: 21)

Critics of the gaze have argued that it is reductionist and its reliance on a Freudian psychoanalytic reading cannot contain the concept of gender as distinct from a heterosexual account of sexuality, they argue for a multiplicity of viewpoints, such as black and lesbian spectatorship (Sturken et al. 2001: 82-93). However, despite these valid challenges to the implicit hetero-normative narrative of Mulvey's work, the basis of her political critique is still highly relevant as it describes the unconscious master/slave power relationship playing out from behind the camera and the unseen position of photographer/spectator. She also delineates the complex tri-fold mechanism whereby meanings of sexual difference are produced and which any strategic intervention must address, here described by Abigail Solomon-Godeau as, 'the look of the camera (the camera eye whose place is taken by the spectator), the look of the spectator, and the look of characters within the film itself.' (1988: 17)

Mulvey advocated analysis of viewing pleasure or beauty as a 'radical weapon' (1975: 15) that would lead to its destruction and open the doorway for a new conception and language of desire. Whether it is possible to permanently destroy the psychic structure of the gaze is questionable for (after Foucault) a disciplining social gaze moves to accommodate and frame new subject positions and reassert the status quo. Strategies of

representation are necessarily contingent and particular to the historical timeframe in which they operate and therefore any strategic disruption – temporary or otherwise – needs readjustment to encompass the discursive complexity of its time and the socio-political context and social narratives from which it emanates. However, before proceeding further with methodologies for strategic intervention, I want to pause to delineate some terms. There has been much debate over what constitutes the gaze (as opposed to the look) and the possibility and constitution of a female gaze. Although I do not wish to enter into a prolonged debate on these issues, I think it useful to clarify some terms.

4.2. Defining Gazes: the Male Gaze, the Look, the Female Gaze and the Youthful Gaze

Let me first address the difference between the gaze and the look. Jonathan Schroeder defines the gaze as an active relationship of superiority, 'to gaze implies more than to look at – it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze' (1998: 208). The gaze here is understood as a hierarchical power relationship of dominance, whereas the look implies a more general or casual act of vision. The gaze also connects what is looked at with who is doing the looking, thus connecting 'the aesthetic with the political, and the internal contents of photographs with the external world.' (Schroeder, 2005: 59). Some theorists make a further distinction between the gaze and the look, suggesting that the look is a mode open to all whilst the gaze reflects a gendered code of desire (Evans et al., 1995: 16), a reading which is implied in Woodward's theory of 'the youthful structure of the look' which affects all viewers, whilst in Mulvey's viewing schema, the male gaze defines a gendered power relation in which women are constructed as subordinate and the lower term.

Working on from Mulvey's theories, in the eighties E Ann Kaplan (1983) explored whether it is possible to avoid or stand outside of a male gaze. Quoting Kristeva and others on the impossibility of knowing what 'femininity' might be outside of male constructs, she concludes that although the gaze is not necessarily or literally male 'to own and activate the gaze, given our language and the structure of the unconscious, is to be in the "masculine" position' (2010: 216), regardless of who is doing the looking, and power therefore devolves to a spectatorial position which is male-identified. In this regime, the female gaze is absent of power. She explains that this is because within the

context of patriarchal culture 'woman' means 'that which is not represented, that which is unspoken, that which is left out of meanings and ideologies', and therefore is perceived as lacking or absent. Thus a male gaze,

> 'carries with it the power of action and of possession which is lacking in the female gaze. Women receive and return a gaze, but cannot act upon it. Second, the sexualization and objectification of women is not simply for the purposes of eroticism; from a psychoanalytic point of view, it is designed to annihilate the threat that woman (as castrated and possessing a sinister genital organ) poses.' (1983: 31)

Calasanti (2006) delineates a further challenge for feminism in relation to the male gaze in visual media. She warns, critiques have concentrated on this as male-defined but it is important to recognise that a youthful gaze is internalised by men and women alike and is therefore 'an intersecting axis of inequality' (Twigg 2004, 65). She observes that women grow invisible as sexual beings through the ageing process not only in terms of the disappearance of the desirous male gaze, for instance, but also in terms of neglect by younger members of the women's movement and lesbian communities as noted in the work of Cynthia Rich (1984) and Baba Copper (1988). Such invisibility calls forth a different set of responses and generates a different form of dependence than those experienced by younger women, which needs recognition and exploration and requires different research models and (in my case, artistic) strategies – that can encompass generational inequalities alongside other intersectional disparities.

To summarise, Mulvey's spectator assumes a male gaze to ward off the castrative threat that woman represents whereas Woodward describes an ageist 'look', regardless of gender, in which spectators see themselves as younger than old people encountered onscreen or in photographs. Although the ageist look precedes even a gendered male gaze (Thompson, 2006. Pickard, 2016), the interstices between the two produce a gaze projected primarily onto older women. Reading Mulvey's analysis of the male gaze in conjunction with Woodward's 'youthful structure of the look' (2006: 167) as a 'youthful gaze', therefore, provides a term of reference from which to view these viewing regimes as inextricably linked and as a framework for examination in how this plays out in photographic media. Although it will be useful at times to delineate and distinguish between these differing viewing relations, to clarify and save any confusion over these

associations, from henceforth I shall call the intersection of an ageist look and male gaze conjoined, 'the youthful gaze' to distinguish it from a broader ageism of the 'youthful structure of the look', as described by Woodward.

4.3.   Enacting Performative Interventions

I turn now to issues of performativity and gender. American philosopher and gender theorist, Judith Butler, highlights the important distinction between the biological causalities that structure existence and the meanings ascribed to bodies to examine the possibilities that might exist for cultural transformations of gender through specific corporeal acts, and the body as a locus for the dramatisation and materialising of possibilities. (1988, 1990, 1993, 1997a, 1997b, 2000, 2004, 2005) Influenced by the philosophical work of Foucault, Althusser and Austin in relation to the speech act and performative identity, her theories, based on the dynamics of the live event, point towards the value of performances that can show or exaggerate cultural inconsistencies and dichotomies; opening up fissures in the idea of gender as a seamless identity is a subversive act that shows gender construction to be illusory and therefore open to new forms of expression.

Butler's central concern is the exclusionary nature of identity formations, the demarcations of boundary conditions, their associative linguistic binaries, and how these combine to limit subject positions. Her methodological challenge to identity politics is based on the work of French philosopher, social historian and critic, Michel Foucault. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault argues that subject positions are the product of modernity operating through a complex network of social institutions, normative routines, surveillance, and self-regulation focused on the body. Power in post-modern society operates tacitly across social institutions via interdependent binary hierarchies which service the borders of the status quo in a reciprocal arrangement by naturalising pairs such as man/woman, masculine/feminine, black/white, beauty/ugliness, old/young. These terms constantly refer onto other pairs for their meaning that become entangled, chained together, naturalised, and enculturated.

Foucault's ideas tie identity formation to media representation as part of the discursive practices and cultural conditions of consumer culture. However, by offering the subject

as discursively constructed, Foucault opened up a challenge to essentialised, totalising and exclusionary claims about the nature of subjectivity and a shift from a foundational Cartesian conception of the self to a decentred notion of the subject (Foucault et al., 1977), a move that had profound implications for feminism and representation of the female subject. Foucault's destabilisation of the two central tenets of modernist conceptions of power: that subjects are autonomous agents and that power emanates from a central source, alongside his redefinition of sexuality as a social construct, have been used by feminists to question the association of women with the body and sex, and as a basis to forge methodologies that aim to expose and subvert the inconsistencies of gender norms which hold subject positions in place and thereby disempower women. Rather than recreating the original dichotomy by assuming a patriarchal role, Foucauldian feminists do this by subverting the categories that define women's inferiority. Destabilising the identity of 'woman' has contributed to the challenge of the Cartesian conception of a transcendental (male) subject and a de-centred version of feminism without a stable subject or universal normative goals.

Since Foucault, current notions of identity revolve around the idea of the de-centred subject responding to a multiplicity of societal addresses, seeking for a coherent narrative of self that marries inner drives and desires with outer social and external events; this work of narrative is a lifelong self-reflexive project, shaped against and responsive to the meta-narratives of society at large, enshrined in language and it is here that Butler aims to leverage. By exposing the inconsistencies in these chains of meaning, Butler aims to intervene in the process of naturalisation in order to leverage open and widen 'the horizon of intelligibility' so that other subject positions can be displayed.

Butler contends that heterosexual gender norms are created by the repetition of performative, stylised acts that ascribe the individual to a certain social category, regulate and naturalise bodily appearances and define the horizon of social intelligibility. She argues,

> 'sexual difference as transcendental ground must not only take shape within the horizon of intelligibility but structure and limit that horizon as well, it functions actively and normatively to constrain what will and will not count as an intelligible alternative within culture. Thus, as a transcendental claim, sexual difference should be rigorously opposed by

anyone who wants to guard against a theory that would prescribe in advance what kinds of sexual arrangements will and will not be permitted in intelligible culture. The inevitable vacillation between the transcendental and social functioning of the term makes its prescriptive function inevitable.' (2000)

According to Butler, the practices of 'femininity' are a regulatory fiction that appear natural but are actually a result of underlying social ideologies of gender roles inscribed onto subjectivities. These categories are open to contestation, she claims, but whether women assert or deny their 'femininity', they will be perceived as demonstrating a stance towards the presentation of self and sexuality and judged according to normative values and social perceptions.

Agency and transformative potential exists between the requirements of a socially enforced performativity and the exaggeration of gaps and splits produced by the failure to repeat a performance. It is in these margins, Butler asserts, that the phantasmagoric status of its construction is revealed and other identities have the opportunity to emerge. This conception of identity written in the margins between terms – thinking at the limit, thinking in the interval – bears a relation to Derrida's conception of double writing.

> 'Buying into this double, and precisely stratified, this launched and dislodging writing, we must also mark the interval between conversion, which bring below what was high, and the erupted emergence of a new "concept", a concept that can no longer be and never could be, included in the previous regime' (Derrida, 1981)

Identity is such a concept – operating 'under erasure' in the interval, contends Derrida, between reversal and emergence; an idea which cannot be thought in the old way, but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all. (cit Hall, 1996: 15-16) It is in this interval where Butler aims to intervene. Bringing social contradictions contained in performative speech acts towards one another allows the possibilities for new subject formations to emerge in the gaps between representations.

However, Butler's theatre-based model of performative intervention requires careful adjustment to take into account not only the lens as the constructive apparatus of the gaze, but a pictorial and cinematic history of aesthetics and female beauty that play into

framings of ageing bodies and femaleness – a topic I will take up in detail in Chapter 6. But for Canadian theatre practitioner and theoretician Anne Basting, there is a further fundamental complication – changes in both social and biological function alter the performance of one's identity in later age beyond the control of individual agency. According to Butler, identity is congealed across time and reiterative performativity but, for Basting, this model does not address the complications of embodied age. (1998: 9) Unlike youthful performativity where repetition anchors the construction of an illusory and fluid gender identity, in older women repetition of these same markers of 'femininity' is seen as an inescapable crystallised image, masking a hollow backward-looking and echoing self, creating a sense of stagnation which is further compounded by ill health. Consequently, a sense of mourning attaches to the ageing figure resulting from perceptions of a loss of control. Evading the negative connotations that attach to ageing femaleness has resulted in the practice of 'passing', a dominant form of performing age.[7] Kathleen Woodward makes the distinction between impersonation, which signals its construction as a performance and conveys ambiguity, and 'youthfulness as masquerade', which is presented as a seamless identity. Unlike impersonation 'passing depends on erasing the marks of performing an assumed identity' (Woodward, 2006: 185), the exposure of which risks social humiliation. This practice requires not only a reiterative attention to a 'feminine' identity but the concealment of ageing femaleness. So how can a relationship that conceals its construction be performed in camera without becoming a form of identity stripping that leads to social humiliation?

Basting examines notions of performativity and theatrical performance to find a model that can encompass the intersectional complexities that need to be addressed in performances of age. Performance entails taking on a role both socially and theatrically. Drawing on Richard Schechner's writing on the ritual suspension of time in the theatre and the re-enactment of everyday behaviour within that context and Butler's theories of performativity, Basting's model reads each performance of age through overlapping lenses of theatrical performance and theoretical performativity. The ritualistic suspension of time in Schechner's theatrical model (1985) and the flow of time in Butler's theoretical model,

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[7] See also Gullette's description of 'passing' in 3.2.

> 'creates a performance matrix in which meanings of old age can be
> questioned and potentially transformed but the older performer stands at
> the point of contradiction of these two senses of time – thick with
> potential, thick with time.' (Basting, 1998: 9)

Each performance, therefore, is read as establishing its meaning and evaluations of age within its own unique and contingent context. This dual focus allows for a critical dialogue to emerge that questions both the naturalness of physiological and embodied processes of age and the larger societal constructions of ageing (and in this case 'femininity').

Basting suggests, therefore, that Butler's model of performative transaction needs to be adjusted and melded with theatrical representation as a way to re-imagine old age in counterpoint to a decline narrative 'as a valuable stage of life' (1998: 2). She warns, however, that simply increasing the number of performances of age will not change the meanings associated with it; careful analysis of all the constituent factors are required.

> 'Instead, we must ask how each performance shapes its meaning of aging
> and old age by looking to all the choices that contribute to its creation:
> choices of costume, sound, movement, lighting, publicity, music, and
> text, to name but a few.' (1998: 6)

Basting's melding of performative performances of ageing brings together a recognition of the additional complexities in examination of artistic representation that need to encompass notions of time, embodiment and identity as well as socio-cultural perceptions to question how representations of ageing enter the social space.

4.4. Conclusions

In this chapter I outlined key theories central to my project that relate to the two sides of the camera: looking and performing. In summary, using psychoanalytic mirror theory to account for the castrative threat that woman represents in cinematic viewing regimes, Mulvey defines the structure of a male gaze as a gendered power relation transacting through codes of desire that produces woman as the inferior and lower term via an unseen and controlling gaze. By exposing the scaffolding of these mechanisms, her aim was to interrupt and intervene in the unconscious delivery of viewing pleasure. Whilst

requiring certain theoretical adjustments, her theories are pertinent to my project as the demonstrate the need to define and expose the unconscious apparatus of a youthful gaze. I defined this as a combined ageist 'look' – an intersecting axis of inequality internalised by all – and a patriarchal 'male' gaze – a gendered power relation operated through a controlling spectatorial gaze, which seeks to control and circumvent the castrative threat represented by woman. Mulvey identifies two exits from castration anxiety: narrative re-enactment leading to castigation of the object or fetishised beautification of the object in an atemporal iconicity, outside the narrative, that is visually satisfying in and of itself. My artistic strategy must therefore address both these mechanisms – narrative castigation and fetishised objectification – as well as the male-identified position of the spectator and the passive framing of 'femininity' onscreen. However, it is important to recognise that the audience position as an intersecting axis of a youthful gaze, is prone to unconscious intergenerational 'daughterism' that operates in conjunction with a patriarchal system internalised by all sexes, and this framework also needs to be considered and its formative mechanisms exposed.

The interwoven systems that constitute the youthful gaze legitimise one another through the chaining and overlapping of meanings enshrined in the language that surrounds and conditions imagery. Butler's method for strategic intervention aims to leverage the gaps where performance fails to deliver a cogent narrative. Bringing the inconsistencies in performative elements in contact with one another allows for recognition of other subject positions to be entertained. However, according to theatre practitioner Anne Basting, her theories do not sufficiently account for the complexity that the ageing female body represents and brings to the performance of 'femininity', which result in narratives of crystallisation and stasis that attach to the combination of ageing and 'femininity' as a failed performance, outside of individual control. Here mourning for the lost object of youth is attached to the performance of 'femininity' and the ageing female body. Basting suggests that performance and performativity need to be melded together in such a way that they encompass notions of time, embodiment and identity, as well as socio-cultural perceptions and for that to happen, serious attention must be made to the way that these discourses enter the social space of the stage.

Prising apart the complex enveloping structure of a youthful gaze requires careful analysis and rethinking of representational paradigms to navigate the complexities of scopophilic frisson and the fascination with female iconicity as it is constructed via lens-based media and its interstices with a youthful gaze. Challenges to this psychic structure, therefore, must necessarily include a component that exposes the constructive role of the camera apparatus and the way in which it shapes and frames the image, but any strategy also needs to tackle the difficulty with what Mulvey terms the privilege of the 'invisible guest' (1975: 26) – the unchallenged vantage point of the spectator. Solomon-Godeau notes that the photographic point of view (POV) may be considered as a locus where issues of subject positioning, the interpellation of the subject, and subject/objects-relations intersect (1988: 22) and the site from where the power relationship is transacted. A through examination of the perspective of the practitioner from behind the camera is required to understand not only the unconscious projection from the audience POV but its relation to that of the image-maker in her struggle to make a representation turn towards the audience with enough psycho-somatic intensity to be simultaneously eye-catching and register difference. Therefore, in order to critically address the viewing arrangement, a spatial mechanism that both exposes and addresses the audience/practitioner position needs to be included alongside a strategic mechanism that works both linguistically and visually: linguistically, to challenge cultural narratives enshrined in language, and visually to evade the fetishisation processes operating through iconic imagery. However, it is important to note the structural characteristics and frameworks that are transferable between film and still images – voyeurism and fetishism, the erotics of looking, the production of subject positions and of ideological function – and the significance of the ways in which they differ. Solomon-Godeau identifies this difference primarily as the link between narrative and Oedipal structure, the effect of the soundtrack and the physical difference between watching a film and looking at a photograph. (Godeau, 1988: 17) I shall examine these differences through the case studies and in my own filmwork.

In summary, Mulvey's challenge to the security of viewing pleasure together with Judith Butler's theorisation for performative intervention provide the basis for my methodological approach. However, this approach needs careful adjustment to encompass the multiple difficulties that the structure of a youthful gaze presents and,

correspondingly, an artistic strategy formulated that can address linguistic, visual and spatial elements that organise and scaffold patriarchal power regimes operating via photographic imagery.

In the next chapter, I delve deeper into the tri-partite construction of the photographic transaction to discuss the relationship between photographer and sitter, audience and image, issues of performativity and agency, and the aesthetic discourses and pictorial practices underlying the framework of photographic portraiture.

5. The Photographic Portrait: Power, Person & Picture

In this next chapter I briefly examine historical understandings and conventions in portraiture and photography to discuss the image as a transactive artefact in the service of power. As the relation between gaze and performance are central to this thesis, I investigate the underlying structure of the photographic portrait image and the performative relation of artist and model to elucidate how these are framed and together turned outwards to the audience as a photographic object. I then examine photographic portraits and pictorial iconography from an art historical perspective to look at the basis of persistent conventions in contemporary portrayals of women and beauty to identify ways in which portrait images have been used to support social power and influence. Finally, I move onto understandings of how images transact within larger screen-dominated social interactions in contemporary society. My intention in doing so is to define the challenges that ageing femaleness represents as a photographic image and its relation and usage in contemporary narratives of personal position and social power in Western culture. I also define various reference terms in relation to perceptions of photographs and theatrical staging techniques.

5.1.   The Transaction of the Photographic Portrait: Framing an Encounter

Despite the work of 20th century artists to make apparent the constructed nature of photographic portraits and the ease with which meaning can be manipulated, photographic portrait images continue to provide important information about our relationship to the world and the materiality of our existence. The relay of the portrait image operates between three primary and interrelated aspects: psychosocial enactment, art-historical object and aesthetic effect-mode of production. These elements are combined to create a figurative image that depicts a unique individual. But what makes the portrait image so enduringly compelling? The art historian, Erwin Panofsky, describes the portrait as a paradoxical form that contains two pre-requisites: it should at once portray contingent difference and continuous commonality (Panofsky, 1971).

> 'A portrait aims by definition at two essentials….On the one hand it
> seeks to bring out whatever it is in which the sitter differs from the rest of
> humanity and would even differ from himself were he portrayed at a

different moment or in a different situation; and this is what distinguishes a portrait from an 'ideal' figure or 'type'. On the other hand it seeks to bring out whatever the sitter has in common with the rest of humanity and what remains in him regardless of place and time; and this is what distinguishes a portrait from a figure forming part of a genre painting or narrative.' (1971: 194)

Here difference is figured as a conglomeration of aspects unique to the individual (including personal styling, clothes, hairstyle, environment) as they relate to a specific social 'identity', whereas commonality is a perception of what is shared between humans regardless of differences in gender, race, ethnicity, class or age – an atemporal and non-contingent remnant. Panofsky does not phrase this quality as essential to the individual *person* but as essential to the nature of a portrait *image*, that something remains irreducible to analysis yet apparent in its relay to the spectator as a persistent repository. This interplay – between a contingently particular other and an ineffable irreducible remnant – combine as a suggestion of a 'self' contained within the envelope of the picture.

Historically, the notion of portraiture included a sense of authorised encounter with the sitter – that two subjectivities combined to produce an idea that leads to the act of portrayal. (Although pictures can be taken without consent, the idea of the portrait is generally as a negotiated agreement. This kind of authorised encounter is still considered important in the acquisition of portraits in major gallery collections such as the National Portrait Gallery.) The artist acts to bring an idea together as an object – a material image – that is then offered to the viewer via a strategy of representation – a space in which this exchange can occur. In this sense the portrait is always 'for us', turned outwards towards the beholder as in a theatrical performance, and always performative – its materiality as a social object provides information to the conditions and historical timeframe under and through which it was produced. However, the invisible envelope through which we see the object of a photograph masks the performative relationship of photographer and model, for what we see is one figure that seems to stand for itself, rather than two subjectivities combined. In this way, the framework of the portrait photograph can be considered analogous to traditional theatrical staging where the proscenium arch hides the theatrical mechanisms supporting the stage illusion. In a similar way to the proscenium framing of the stage, we look into rather than at

photographs, viewing them as if they were transparent to their subject, despite knowing that what we see is a representation, we suspend our disbelief in order to consider the other before us.

This power of the photograph to provide transcription of appearance in a way that we regard as 'true' is described by Jonathan Friday as an 'attitude of transparency' (2002: 58-59) Although we realise that the picture is not the person, in one sense the unconscious regards it as being stencilled off reality {Sontag, 1977: 154} and, as such, a window into a perceptual reality. Rather like the stage illusionist who misdirects the audience attention, photographs may thus perfectly resemble and simultaneously obscure the construction of the subject they present. This arrangement: the proscenium arch which divides audience from actors and hides the paraphernalia and mechanics that support the staged illusion – I shall refer to in future as proscenium framing or framework.

The sense of photographic transparency allied with the hiding of the staging mechanism conceals the shaping hand of the photographer and the effort required to make the subject appear, lending instead a sense of a seamless self-presentation to the subject it portrays, a sensibility which can often override or elide other critical aspects of perception. In other words, on an unconscious level, we accept the image as given, that it represents a perceptual reality that is nevertheless a construct. In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag recounts an exchange between Gustav Janouch and Franz Kafka in 1921 after two photo-booth machines had arrived in Prague. These images are the perfect 'Know-Thyself,' exclaims Janouch. 'You mean to say, the Mistake-Thyself,' Kafka replies.

> '**Photography concentrates one's eye on the superficial. For that reason it obscures the hidden life which glimmers through the outlines of things like a play of light and shade.' (1977: 162)

The mechanical genesis, illusionistic accuracy, naturalistic perspective and reductive simplicity of the photographic apparatus adds another shaping layer of performativity to the photographic transaction that seems objective and transparent to the model. Perhaps this is what makes photographed faces appear so compellingly 'real' – firstly, we mistake the perspectival envelopment of the model by the lens and the frame for the

performative autonomy of the individual pictured; an initial miscomprehension which is compounded when we mistake all of this for the performative autonomy of the camera apparatus. This 'mistake', focuses attention on the surface image as a 'self-contained' entity and somewhat deflects attention away from other instrumental iconic conventions that are culturally learned: pictorial codifications of naturalistic portrayal – lighting, style of capture, composition, gesture, pose, style, etc. Instead the photograph appears as a 'given-to-be-seen', a culturally sanctioned object with whose underlying ideological construction we are invited to identify. This is what Barthes termed the rhetoric of the image: the underlying ideologies that an image communicates, the difference between what an image ostensibly denotes and connotes. (1977)

5.2.   Pose and Picture: the Codes of Portrayal

The Renaissance portrait, generally commissioned by the aristocracy, strove to depict denotative likeness, consolidating claims to power, genealogy and disseminating a wider presence in the world. By 'silently assimilating the real to the ideal' (Woodall, 1997: 3) naturalistic portraiture played a vital ideological role in the establishment of a ruling elite. Thus portrayal created linkages between recognisable physiognomic particularities and generalised idealised conceptions of facial and bodily appearance in the service of social aggrandisement that could secure an extended power based on the recognition of the appearance of divinely appointed rulers. The emulation of these exemplary figures gave rise to a visual repertoire in portrait painting wherein certain recognised positions, such as the society beauty, became associated with distinctive formats, attributes, poses and even pictorial languages. This method of characterisation persists today as the imitation of recognisable iconographic types in conservative portraiture. These are culturally understood (learnt) codifications that give stage directions to the audience on how to establish the figurative image according to social loci. However, the recognition of these signals seen through the transparent 'proscenium' framework of the photograph can also deflect attention away from and mask the power relation between the two subjectivities – artist-sitter – that combine to produce the image of a single individual.

The relative balance of these elements will affect perceptions of the 'realness' of the portrayal and where attributions or performative evaluations of power accrue – to the photographer or the subject. A portrait photographer may depend on another person

to complete his picture, but as fashion and portrait photographer, Richard Avedon, explains,

> 'The subject imagined, which in a sense is me, must be discovered in someone else willing to take part in a fiction he cannot possibly know about. My concerns are not his. We have separate ambitions for the image. His need to plead his case probably goes as deep as my need to plead mine, but the control is with me.' (1985)

Ultimately, however, performative agency defers to the photographer simultaneously on both sides of the camera and vicariously to the viewer who stands in her place.

In the past, painted portraits were most often single artefacts, where the power to disseminate the image was held by the commissioning patron. However, with photographs that circulate within contemporary culture, control over self-image and self-dissemination does not necessarily defer to the sitter – pictures are taken as well as made – and do not necessarily benefit or favour the model. In the 'reality' TV era and the economies of magazines like *Hello* and *Grazia*, 'bad' images work alongside idealised representations to elicit public attention, promote, establish and destabilise identity, masking and in turn unmasking subject positions. The ability to command a view via a self-image, 'good' or 'bad' is however, a valuable tool to extend the personal power of individuals but more problematically, the constant recreation of cultural norms affirms and consolidates the privileging of certain systems of representation which enshrine both gendered and ageist inequalities.

5.3.   Overcoming Separation: Vicarious Access

Art historian Joanna Woodall notes that the desire, which lies at the heart of naturalistic portraiture, is to overcome separation for some kind of personal gain – intimacy or power. The portrait offers this vicarious proximity as a substitute for a direct relationship, a talismanic transference via iconic appearance. (1997: 9) Historically, the value of the painted portrait as an object was often based on the social power the person wielded in life. During the Renaissance, for instance, an understanding of portraits as unmediated realism allowed these representations to act as direct substitutes for their sitters and transact on their behalf. Dissemination of images thereby consolidated and extended the reach of individual power beyond direct personal contact by providing a

proxy exchange via the image. In 1935, Walter Benjamin, in his political polemic on the democratisation of art through reproduction, claimed that in mass culture the human desire to banish spatial distance and gain greater access to objects of value is achieved via means of reproduction (1969).

> ' … the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly, … is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction.'

Continuing in this line of thinking, performance theorist, Philip Auslander, asserts the desire to collapse distance developing within new technologies has become a substitute for intimate contact as if we now 'can experience true proximity only in televisual terms.' (Auslander, 1999: 7) The contact provided by live performance and actual physical proximity is economically tied to the larger televisual or 'screenic' context of cultural interaction, which is experienced through multiple kinds of merchandise, recordings, live streams, photographic stills, etc. These interlaced and competing economies incorporate live performance, moving and still imagery indiscriminately as 'raw materials' (1995) that together provide a kind of illusory access. Probably the most striking photographic example of this in recent years has been the phenomenon of the photographic 'selfie'. Here the 'self' is a form of presentation, a construct and position from which people engage to transact and extend their social network, personal power and wealth, as in, to quote a much used example, the Kardashian family's use of social media imagery. An access, nevertheless, which draws on historical discourses of appearance, pictorial conventions and codes that work to establish a set of coordinates through which these pictures are framed and invisibly filtered and which have historically framed the beautiful woman as a spectacle to be possessed and ageing femaleness denied and rejected.

5.4.   Conclusions

In this section, I've provided a broad overview of issues of performativity and photographic images in relation to a history of art, and conventions of portraiture, and described its usage and exchange in contemporary culture within a televisual context dominated by screen-based interactions that nevertheless draw on older stereotypes and

pictorial conventions to establish a set of coordinates in which social meanings are generated and perceived.

I have identified photographic meaning as operating between three primary and interrelated aspects: psychosocial enactment, art-historical object and aesthetic effect-mode of production, which combine to produce an image. This tripartite framework, analogous to Mulvey's description of the three looks of cinema, by collapsing the shaping hand of the photographer with the transparency of photographic framing, transacts in a way that masks the dynamics of its underlying performative construction, a 'mistake' that allows the spectator, standing vicariously in the place of the image-maker, to view the resulting creation as a *gestalt*, complete unto itself. This theatrical framing masks the power-play of the two subjectivities – photographer and model – that combine to produce a portrayal. In this way, the framework of the portrait photograph can be considered analogous to traditional theatrical staging where the proscenium arch hides the theatrical mechanisms supporting the stage illusion, a flattening of a complex set of social and spatial coordinates into a two-dimensional arrangement that disguises the conditions of its genesis. In a similar way that we view and accept theatrical presentation performed onstage as a perceptual reality, we look into rather than at photographs, viewing them as if they were transparent to their subject, despite knowing that what we see is a representation. Rather like the stage illusionist who misdirects the audience attention, photographs may thus perfectly resemble and simultaneously obscure the subject whilst delivering ideological messages to the audience that play on visual rhetoric and conventions of portrayal.

In photographic portraits 'proscenium framework' enables and facilitates the naturalisation of symbolic narratives via iconic imagery that operates between poles of idealised and 'unmasked' representation. Together these polarising representations serve to provide the limits of a horizon of social legibility – who and what is considered powerful and cultural normatives of acceptability. Whilst all of these elements require consideration when attempting to establish and challenge the meanings attributed to certain kinds of portrayal, and the wresting or leveraging of power and identity in the politics of the image, even in 'authorised' encounters the question of agency and performative power defers to the photographer who creates the other as an act of

depiction and is therefore simultaneously active on both sides of the transaction, whereas the subject is bound as an image.

I have pieced apart these mechanisms to provide a basis for analysis of an invisible filter system that enables certain stereotypes and iconography to perpetuate. My analysis also provides me with an understanding of the sites I must address in my artistic strategy to interrupt the unconscious delivery of conventions which hide their underlying coordinates in relation to ideological construction, and how they operate in relation to discourses of 'femininity', beauty, youth and social status, which are now deployed and exchanged in a wider televisual and screen-based economy. In my project, the unconscious tendency to accept photographic images as transparent to the subject working in tandem with the unchallenged position of the audience/spectator outside the frame, needs to be negotiated and addressed and theatrical mechanisms identified that can bring an awareness of these codifications 'in the round', from both sides of the camera, as indicative of systemic ideological positions. Abigail Solomon-Godeau comments that the combination of 'supposed transparency, truth and naturalism' has made photographic images an 'especially potent purveyor of cultural ideology – particularly the ideology of gender'. (1988: 17) It is important therefore that an understanding of how the visual rhetoric which structures the youthful gaze is configured and the ways in which idealised and unmasked visual economies transact to affirm the boundaries of social acceptance in relation to ageing femaleness. The element of time inscribed on the body-features of ageing femaleness adds another shaping layer of performative transaction that complicates issues further and requires detailed analysis. However, by piecing apart these imbricated structures of portrayal and performance in front of the camera with the performative dynamics from behind the camera, I aim to understand how best to intervene and interrupt the transaction between these sites and the delivery and naturalisation of certain unconscious processes by which meanings are perpetuated.

Following this chapter, I turn specifically to the representation of youth and age. Using a visual illusion popular in the 19th century, I dig deeper into the graphic representation of ageing femaleness and the interplay of youth, age and gaze relative to psychoanalytic theories of the uncanny.

6. Troubling Vision

In this chapter I dig deeper into unconscious psychic mechanisms and how these play out in relation to images of ageing and ageing femaleness where visual pleasure and horrified frisson work as two sides of a viewing transaction activated in response to still images via a principle of aesthetic uncertainty, and the mirror and photograph as the framework for delivery of an uncanny double in figurative imagery. Using Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) as a focal point, I then begin a discussion of beauty and ugliness as moralising social discourses that attach to particular configurations in depictions of women and ageing encountered at the site of idealised representation – the portrait.

6.1. The Young Woman/Old Woman Illusion

In this section, I look in more detail at how images of ageing femaleness play out in relation to psychic viewing mechanisms that serve to limit an empowered response. To focus my discussion, I am using a visual illusion by the British cartoonist, William Ely Hill. Originally an illustration for the American magazine, *Puck,* the graphic was published in 1915 with the caption 'My Wife and My Mother-in-Law, they are both in this picture – Find them.' These cognitive illusions were popular in the 19th century as business illustrations for opticians selling their bifocals for obvious reasons – they make us doubt our vision. By the time Hill published his work, this particular illusion was already a familiar image. The earliest known version appeared in the mid-nineteenth century, coincidentally at around the same time as photography became widely available. As the caption suggests, it plays on the old trope that every woman eventually turns into her (forbidding and monstrous) mother. The image is constructed to turn on us with a similarly uneasy impact.

Figure 17: My Wife and My Mother-in-Law (1915) William Ely Hill

The picture shows two figures indivisibly as one. We look over the shoulder of young woman turning away from us, together with a larger older face of a woman in profile gazing off left. The young woman, a diminutive figure wrapped in fur, seems to be moving on the diagonal into the depths of picture. A sense of movement – towards the vanishing point and away from the viewer – means we chase after the elusive youthful figure. The older face, relatively larger and visually more imposing, appears closer to the surface plane of the image and silhouetted in profile, more like a cut-out, two-dimensional and flattened. Although both figures are ostensibly one entity made from the same graphic lines, they appear divided because the two graphics operate on different visual planes. This poses a problem for the viewer, as it is difficult to see both, one or other tends to dominate vision. To encompass both simultaneously requires an effort to defocus the eyes to an indistinct place that hovers at some undefined point between the two. The effort in trying to hold this unstable viewing position produces a seesawing, somewhat queasy sensation. Resolving the disturbance becomes an immediate physical imperative as visual equilibrium is challenged. Consequently, we

register a disturbance to our vision and the act of focus – normally an unconscious mechanism – becomes uncomfortably apparent. This challenge to the security of vision gives an immediate charge, a thrill or frisson not unlike the sensation of a fairground ride or a horror film, alongside an imperative to resolve the anxiety induced by the image and return to the relative security of the visual status quo.

6.2.   Aesthetic Uncertainty – Making Age Uncanny

Female vanity and difference were a common theme in these 19th century graphics which played on the ephemerality of life (typically, the beautiful woman at her mirror) and the inevitability of death (often indicated by a skull or an old woman) and the frisson of recognition when the apprehension of one is threatened by the eruption of the other from within the same image, an effect which works on the basis of a principle of aesthetic uncertainty. Aesthetic uncertainty depends on the idea that something previously familiar is in some way obscured or occluded, a concept related to Freud's uncanny (2003).

Figure 18: 'All is Vanity', Charles Allan Gilbert, (1892)

Freud located his pivotal notion of the uncanny within the realm of aesthetics and the anxious recognition of something or someone familiar made strange, the return of the repressed figuration bringing together in dialectical relation the anxious twin themes of death and desire epitomised in the Greek figures of *Thanatos* and *Eros*. For Freud the simultaneous evocation of these two repressed states, castration and death, epitomises the uncanny. Hal Foster's account of Freud's development of the theory of the uncanny in *Compulsive Beauty* includes a lucid précis,

> '...The uncanny for Freud involves the return of a familiar phenomenon (image or object, person or event) made strange by repression. This return of the repressed renders the subject anxious and the phenomenon ambiguous and this ambiguous anxiety produces the primary effects of the uncanny: (1) an indistinction between the real and the imagined [...] (2) a confusion between the animate and inanimate [...] and (3) a usurpation of the referent by the sign or of physical reality by psychic reality...' (1993: 7)

If we apply this formulation to the image above we can see that implicitly various terms begin to attach to the two oppositional figures, linking erotic love to youth and ageing femaleness to castration – physical death and the death of desire. Oscillating between the 'real' and the imagined, fear and fascination transfix the spectator, hold the gaze and thereby limit a fully empowered response. Constructed as an illusion within the confines of the pictorial frame, female youth and old age are pitted in opposition to one another, linking a dichotomised view of youth/age to an aesthetic framework of Western pictorial art and discourses of 'feminine' beauty, which play on the idea of a constructed 'feminine' beauty as glamorous fakery and appearances as deceptive and prone to rupture.

6.3.   Beauty, Ugliness and Ageing Femaleness

 The dual discourses that underpin a youthful gaze, combined with a Western reliance on classical notions that organise the aesthetic appreciation that underpins pictorialisation, are difficult to disentangle when presented as a *gestalt* through the enveloping structure of photography and a 'transparent' photo-realism that covers the ideological basis of its construction. Although it may appear that the widespread acceptance of the bold attempts of 20th century artists and postmodernism may have cancelled the requirement

for beauty in art – and to a certain extent, in society – cinema, TV, advertising and fashion still propose models of beauty with a foundation in classical Greek culture which are played out in relation to images of women. The discourse created around the maintenance of beauty in the image-conscious West, however, is now extending into later age where the associations with being called 'old' stimulate problematically negative responses.

Both hag and crone are described as 'ugly' old women. There are few comparable terms for old men, just as there is no terminology, as yet, for a beautiful old woman. A Google image search for 'old woman' yields a tide of toothless, gumless, gurning caricatures, peppered with exotic dignified elders from faraway cultures, paintings – mainly medieval and some modern – plus a prosthetic head of an old woman. Captions are often tagged with a second adjective, 'Sad Old Woman', 'Angry Old Woman', 'Mean Old Woman', 'Grotesque Old Woman', linking and naturalising meaning together. Codger and coot – both generally prefixed with 'old' – are words used to describe old men, though neither has quite the derogatory force and vitriol associated with calling a woman a hag. A coot is not exclusively male and has connotations of foolishness, perhaps approaching senility, but also of baldness. An old codger whilst evoking a sense of grumpiness or irritation is more about a grizzled attitude that has crystallised with age, rather than the shunning of the ageing physical appearance. Curmudgeon is also

used to describe the grumpiness associated with men in late life but is not exclusively a gendered term; when used as an adjective it describes generally surly behaviour rather than age and is often prefixed with 'old' to anchor its location in the lifecourse. The American use of geezer for an old man is also not universal; in the UK, a geezer is the equivalent of a guy or a dude. Other regional and colloquial words, like 'gadgy' from the North East of England, a word used in a similar way to codger, are also connected to old men. None of these terms, however, have anything like the venom and vitriol attached to the figure of the Hag.

Figure 19: 'The Three Ages and Death', also known as 'Vanity', Hans Baldun Grün c. 1510

The remnants of ancient ideas of beauty as a spiritual quality, linked to goodness and ugliness to a bad character, persist in modern society despite the increasing secularisation of the West. Sabine Melchior-Bonnet charting a cultural history of the mirror, notes the chaining of meanings and the summoning of symbolic systems that have attached women to the mirror, vanity and death, connecting visual representation to a negative moralising discourse and social narratives. However, mirrors were not always read as reflecting a negative self-regard or demonic alter ego. The mirror, like the Hag goddess, was divinely ambivalent, equally capable of showing a shining soul as a gruesome demon, witch or werewolf. 'To whomever knew how to look into it, the mirror once offered an untainted image of divinity.' (20012: xi) Jesus regarding himself in the mirror had none of the negative connotations of narcissistic self-regard that later became attached to narratives of the beautiful woman at her glass. The mirror was only later de-sacralised in the Renaissance when self-view was attached to conceptions of

'femininity' by associating the mirror with attention to a beautiful appearance, and the vanity of a frivolous self-regard. In these narratives,

> 'Beauty, wisdom, and vanity are reduced to a single symbol, for the same mirror that unveils beauty and incites desire also warns of the fragility of the qualities.' (2012: 215)

These pictorial summoning systems also ally 'feminine' vanity to old age and death, as in Hans Baldun Grün's painting *The Three Ages and Death*, also known as *Vanity,* which chains those links to a pejorative narrative, as the title suggests, of age and its locus, the female body. The steady linking of these repeated tropes – the practices of 'femininity' with narcissism and the mirror image, and the ageing woman's body with death – eventually devolved to a visual shorthand where the presentation of one threatens – with a horrified thrill – to evoke the spectre of the other. Within the picture frame, the uncanny doubled image: beautiful 'femininity' framed *mise en abyme* in the mirror – thus connotes the image of vanity, the loss of beauty and the hovering spectre of death, an operation now played out in the picture frame of the photographic portrait with its mirror-like transparency, the site where this play is enacted and its accompanying narratives unconsciously triggered.

6.4.   Reversing Expectations – Wilde's Portrait of Age and Youth

Oscar Wilde's gothic novel, *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, written in 1890, explores aesthetic uncertainty, the hideousness of age and the portrayal of a beautiful individual, questioning the relationship between the artistic object and subject. Although Wilde's novel focuses on a beautiful male youth and his hideous ageing alter ego, I include it here because of Wilde's emphasis on the portrait as the site of beauty, a theme which I will pick up in the next chapter, but also because it gives an indication of the primary narrative status of age over and above gender. (Thompson, 2006, Pickard, 2016)

Figure 20: Publicity image from the motion picture of 'The Portrait of Dorian Gray' (2009) utilising aesthetic uncertainty via a mise en abyme represented by the pictorial framing. Note also the direct gaze of the youthful Gray (representing a feminised beauty for Wilde) and the doubled up pose and costume of the skull in the frame

Wilde reverses the natural and aesthetic order by showing the progressive horribleness of Gray's alter ego as the uncanny ageing double in the painted portrait, at once like and unlike his 'real' self. Throughout the novel, Wilde repeatedly questions the relationship between the signs of moral degeneracy and the iconographic signs of age, and the question of ethics and aesthetics attaching to the image. Breaking apart these two sites into doubles and reversing expectations exacerbates a sensation of uncanniness by bringing together the stigmatised face – the preternaturally aged face perceived to be closest to death – to the site of aesthetic recognition of idealised public portrayal – the portrait; a doubling and reversal outside of a 'natural' temporal order that bears a striking resemblance to Freud's uncanny and the associated thrill of aesthetic uncertainty. However, whereas Wilde, like Shakespeare, explores these ideas via reversals in the text alone, the transition from literary narrative to filmed screenplay produced the necessity to produce poster images and recruit an audience by appealing to sensitive issues of beauty, age and castigating social narratives facing the audience via photo realistic depiction. In the illustration above taken from the 2009 motion picture adaptation, shock tactics are employed to force audience recognition. Graphics from the film used both a doubled framing, beautiful youth standing before a skull portrait, and a

photo-realist surreal depiction of a split face to denote the uncanny ageing process of the character. Wilde reverses expectations to analyse the distance between beauty and age and the portrait as the site of aesthetic contemplation and warns of the dangers of reading meaning or value via surface and symbol – ugliness and beauty – in life and in the portrait. The enmeshment of these exchanges is fraught with compound difficulties. Where should moral distinctions be made between beauty, youth and ugliness? How does the aesthetic image transact on behalf of the individual? And what do those attributions and exchange of face facilitate?
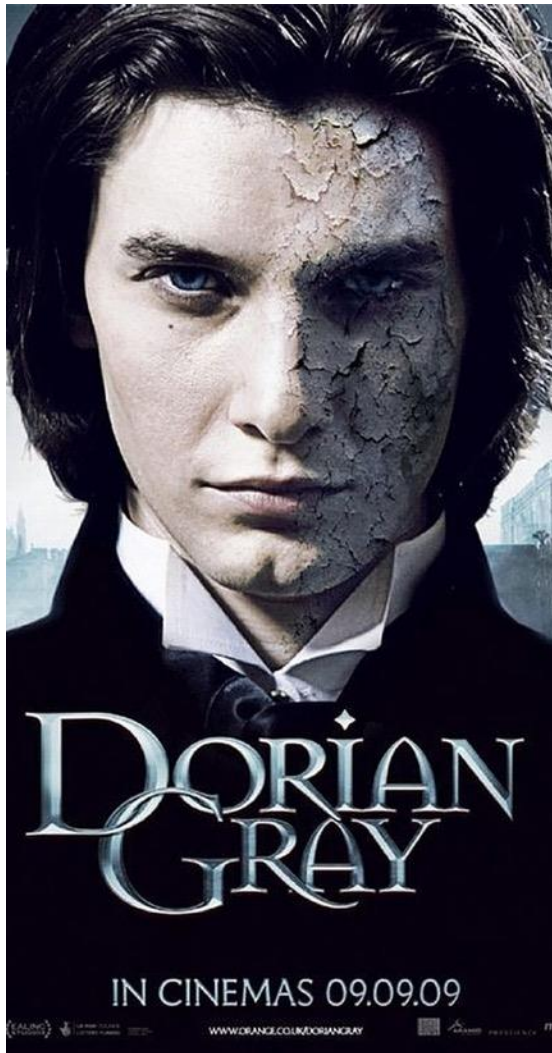
Figure 21: Publicity still from 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' (2009), here the face itself is split in two and presented frontally to the audience, a confrontational pose that implies a direct relationship to the spectator who is called to decipher the image. This surreal and constructed image also draws on the attention-grabbing effects of aesthetic uncertainty; the photograph here operates as transparent agent transacting between the imaginary visual realm and symbolic narratives.

The recognition of 'age' in photographs irrepressibly alters the dynamics of a relationship to 'self' perception. In a similar way to Freud's shocked self-recognition in the glass of a train door, Francois Jullien in his philosophical treatise on ageing, *The Silent Transformations*, describes the shock associated with seeing his own ageing via a photograph of himself as a younger man. Seeing the image of his own ageing 'self' stilled in a photograph precipitated a recognition of a fundamental change in the relationship of interiority and exteriority, a sense of autonomy, of 'me-ness', a 'self' generated from within, is fractured by the recognition of what is beyond 'self'-control. Replaced instead by a sense of continuous 'self'-unfolding, an incremental global process of which the 'I' is the successive product of corollary factors in constant shifting relation – a concept aligned with ancient notions of the triple goddess. (See section 2.3.) Jullien notes that the foundation of Western thought which is drawn from

Greek philosophical emphasis on determined forms has difficulty in encompassing a sensibility of cumulative indeterminacy and the fluidity of 'self' in constant shifting movement (Jullien et al., 2011: 6-7), resulting in a sense of disjuncture prompted by the visual apprehension of the ageing self seen via the 'alien eye' of the camera.

A medical emphasis on physical ageing as a process of degeneration adds weight to a societal belief that considers age to be a gradual process of uglification and, implicitly, a kind of moral degeneracy. Unlike beauty which is strictly delimited by recorded rules and classical ideals, ugliness is a far wider richly diverse term, 'Infinite, like God' thinks Umberto Eco. (2007b: 315) He argues that attributions of ugliness are relative not to aesthetic but socio-political qualifying criteria in its evaluations. The diffuse vagary of the term lends itself to catchall usage, 'an all-purpose repository for everything that [does] not quite fit'. The diffuseness of these categorisations, however, disguises the deadly consequences for bodies marked out as ugly. Significantly, the identification between ugliness and wickedness appears historically every time 'it was useful to represent the enemy.' (2007a) Eco notes a strongly misogynistic bent to many appraisals of older women in this vein. In these visual economies the dangerous bitch and the hideous old witch are complementary representations, intended to show up women's iniquities and punish them, says Deanna Petherbridge, co-curator of a major exhibition on witches, but also to warn and frighten men of the corrupting power of both youthful seductress and old Hag as 'In league with the Devil, she castrates and destroys by her ugliness, just as the beautiful young witch emasculates and corrupts by her beauty.' (2014)

In art, by contrast, ugliness has a history as a distinct strategy employed by artists alongside and in torsion with ideas of moral beauty that aim to dissolve uncomplicated categorisation and the moral readings that attaches to particular bodily appearance, as can be seen in the work of Cindy Sherman, Orlan and Joel Peter Witkin. However, the negative connotations of the uncanny double – mirror-framing and age-as-disease/death persist as in, for instance, Tom Hussey's award-winning photographic campaign produced for Exelon, a drug used to combat Alzheimer's. In these photographs social narratives attaching to the death of the self through the horror of self-forgetting (the photographs role here as *aide de memoire* is notable) were exacerbated by the use of an uncanny mirror double. Hussey draws on the mirror as the site of a glamorous idealised self and the simultaneous threat of its loss seen to transfix the audience attention through aesthetic uncertainty. Bringing together and collapsing the temporal span between these images in this constructed *mise-en-scène* sets the tone for a horrified frisson as spectators recoil from the ghostly shadow cast by the spectre of Alzheimer's and a

dehumanising decline in old age. Hussey's campaign included mirror images of men and some women within the campaign, which showed the ideal reflection of a younger professional self. However, a number of the images of women rested purely on allusions to beauty, *vanitas,* and ageing femaleness. (In Figure 22, it is interesting to note the difference in the illumination of the older woman's face, pictured in profile, which is side-lit, and the youthful glamorous image, which is frontally lit. This is a thread I shall pick up in the following chapter when I look further into photographic lighting.) Roth (2005) notes that the prevalence of representations of Alzheimer's attach, particularly, to white, middle-class women claiming that these correspond to dominant ideological depictions, but perhaps also because white middle-class women and Asian women 'privileged' as typifying 'femininity' in economies of the gaze, maybe the most critical and simultaneously responsive to these discourses in later life.

The trend to represent dementia-type illnesses attaching to female old age has moved from peripheral characterisation to central performances in recent movies such as the Oscar-nominated *Away from Her* (2006)*,* and the Oscar-winning, *Iris* (2001)*, The Iron Lady* (2011) and *Amour* (2012)*.* These narratives also provoke a fear of a loss of self-control and implicitly the need to maintain appearance and discipline the female body to ward against the unruliness represented by the old Hag. If hysteria was the constraining narrative of female sexuality serviced by photographic representation in early photography, (Didi-Huberman, 2004), conflating ageing femaleness and discourses of 'femininity' with the threat of dementia and a loss of identity could be deemed another configuration of a 'madness' discourse that disempowers women.

Figure 22: Image from Exelon campaign, Tom Hussey, (2013)

Figure 23: Image from Exelon campaign, Tom Hussey, (2013)

6.5.   Conclusions

 In this chapter I've examined how the operation of uncanny imagery presenting age and beauty together within the pictorial frame, works to activate unconsciously held attitudes and the dual drives that organise the youthful gaze. I also examined discourses of beauty and ugliness attaching to youthful 'femininity' and ageing femaleness as culturally defined. Visual imagery focused on the ageing female body and the signs of age produce a locus for moralising discourses that castigate older women, extending the reach of a constraining order of beauty into later age. Stepping outside these social limits is deemed 'ugly' as it represents a challenge to the youthful gaze.

I chose a familiar visual illusion dating from the 19th century, to demonstrate an uncanny effect operating via aesthetic uncertainty to draw and transfix the audience gaze. In the young woman/old woman illustration this affect is linked to 'feminine' youth and its other, ageing femaleness, which together represent a double threat to vision as they operate on different psychic registers. Aesthetic uncertainty operates through the creation of an uncanny double – two figures in one – that presents a challenge to the security of vision, registered as a horrified thrill when one image seemingly erupts from the other. The impossibility of holding the image together and controlling the effect, triggers unconscious viewing mechanisms that perceive the threat to vision as a potentially castrative threat to the ego. This aesthetic effect – the simultaneous evocation of two repressed states, castration and death, epitomises what Freud termed the uncanny. An affect which consists of three elements: a lack of distinction between the real and imagined, a confusion between the animate (vitalised or in motion) and inanimate (static), and a change or switch from one psychic register to another, ie. from physical ('real') to psychic (imaginary). (Foster, 1993: 7)

To understand how pejorative narratives are attached to visual conventions, I examined pictorial symbolism in art from the middle ages. I discussed how youth and vanity, beauty and ageing, ugliness and death are linked and yoked together symbolically and conflated over time to become familiar tropes that appear natural whilst operating via the unconscious dynamics of a youthful gaze. Following this, using Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a guide, I looked into the portrait as the site of idealised identity and aesthetic beauty. Wilde operates uncanny reversal and aesthetic uncertainty

to question the validity of social, moral and ethical discourses and their relation to beauty, here configured as the beautiful youth, in a literary narrative where images are only imagined and never shown. Subsequently, in the transition from literary narrative to cinema, poster images were produced that deployed and reiterated now familiar visual tropes to uncanny effect to catch and transfix an audience sensitive to issue of ageing as loss of beauty and social identity. A similar effect was evident in Tom Hussey's photographs for Exelon, which linked social identity to disease through uncanny reversal. In the advertising campaign, several ageing women were portrayed solely in relation to their beauty, unlike the men who were mirrored in relation to their professional roles, an aesthetic treatment deploying the link between *vanitas* and the practices of 'femininity', and their 'failure' in later life with physical disease and a loss of social identity.

To summarise, in this chapter I identify the psychic mechanisms that trigger uncanny response via doubling, division and reversal. This use of the uncanny links visual recognition of youthful beauty and ageing femaleness to the unconscious and the twin drives of death and desire where they are subject to the constraints of youthful gaze via castigating social narratives and fetishising voyeurism. However, the challenge to vision that ageing femaleness represents and the frisson induced by bringing together two repressed states: castration and death, desire and morbidity, into contact with one another, also represents a potential moment of suture from which new identities might emerge. These are issues I explore further in chapter 8 when I discuss the implications of carnivalesque reversal in photographic projects depicting ageing women. In the next chapter, however, I begin the first of three case studies, by delving deeper into the transactional role of photographic images and discourses of age, beauty and performative power, alongside a discussion of the aesthetics practices and effect of various photographic treatments.

7. Case Study 1: That Old Question of Beauty …

In this chapter, I examine issues of aesthetics, iconic conventions in portrayals of women, and female beauty and performative agency in relation to a number of projects, including Harriet Walter's portraiture projects, *Infinite Variety* (2010) and *Facing It* (2011). Walter notes the immediacy and power of the photographic portrait as a currency of exchange, 'The photographic image is the most easily transmittable comment about ourselves that we can make.' (Walter, 2011: 11). Her statement points to a belief in portraiture as a transactional mode of performative encounter and photography – or certain kinds of photography – as access and accurate transcription of the appearance of a real individual. It also allies and positions female appearance within discourses of pictorial interest, value and aesthetic beauty. In doing so, Walter makes certain assumptions about photography that I wish to explore in more depth, to examine, prise apart and question various complex issues in photographic portraits. For instance, technical issues, such as lighting and retouching, how these relate to historical notions of female pictorial portrayal, and how they are played out in differing contexts of art and visual media. To illustrate these issues more fully, alongside Walter's project, I discuss three other photographic projects and visual media engaging with issues of age and beauty: Joyce Tenneson's fine art project *Wise Women,* Suzy Lake's *Beauty at a Proper Distance,* and Dove's *Tick-box* campaign shot by the photographer, Rankin. The chapter concludes with a critical analysis of Walter's project where I question the value of attributing 'beauty' to images of older women.

I frame this enquiry in relation to Francette Pacteau's *The Symptom of* Beauty (1994). Beauty, Pacteau argues, is symptomatic of an unattainable desire for a primal symbiotic reunion with the mother, which affects men and women alike. Arguing from within a psychoanalytic framework of analysis, Pacteau examines the image of woman and the attribution of beauty, stepping back from the picture itself to examine the act and the fantasy which it frames of reunion with the mother, a union fractured in the mirror stage of infancy.

7.1. *The Symptom of Beauty,* Francette Pacteau

Pacteau analyses Freud's theory of sublimation against the image of beauty, suggesting that the desire to picture the beautiful woman is a sublimation of libidinal energy stemming from anxiety in early infancy at the absence of its mother and the withdrawal of warmth, nurture and intimacy she represents. In the scene at the breast, the face of the mother remains a constant distance to the uncoordinated body of the suckling infant, reaching and losing contact with the nipple. Return to the original state of oneness, however, holds an implicitly incestuous relationship at its core, which as the child matures is regarded as socially taboo. With the separation in infancy, the child succeeds in putting the mother at a 'correct' distance through seeing her as separate. This leads to the constancy of the visual as a privileged order and its loss as a potentially castrating threat. In adult life, this fear – over the potential disappearance of the archetypal female, the mother – is sublimated by the maintenance of a correct distance and visual constancy in regard to images of women, which, in turn, produces a sense of mastery temporarily allaying a fear of loss. Pleasure in looking is premised on a necessary distance and its subsequent erasure 'when the viewer takes the viewed into itself.' (Pacteau, 1994)

However, for Pacteau, the psychic constraints attaching to a discourse of beauty is an inescapable and underlying cause of distress for Western women.

> 'Freud observed that no man escapes castration anxiety; ... it seems to me that, at least within the so-called developed Western world in which I am situated, no woman escapes "beauty."' (1994: 14).

Unavoidably, from her earliest years, beauty will be either attributed or denied to her.

Women, unlike men, are identified with (not by) their faces. Whilst a man is expected and admired for a lifelong development of character – and marks of character are therefore prized – a woman's character is thought to be innate, static and continuous and any change, flaw or blemish, considered a detraction. According to Barthes, the ideal woman's face is a Garbo-like mask (1993: 56), a blank canvas, on which can be painted her 'best' face. Sontag notes, 'A woman's face is the canvas upon which she paints a revised, corrected portrait of herself … Her face is an emblem, an icon, a flag.' How well a woman can represent herself via her face and the fashioning of her appearance is

indicative of her 'real' likeness – her unchanging interiority – which shows how she should be treated by others and, therefore, 'her status as "object"' (1977: 23) However, in Western culture, beauty is the province of art that 'deprived of any anterior code would be mute' (Barthes cit. Pacteau, 1994: 1) and thus a condition which is established externally. Consequently, an underlying question of the attribution of beauty spectrally haunts representations of women for 'Behind the woman there is, always, the image to which the question of her beauty must be referred. As beautiful as...' (Pacteau, 1994: 31). This referential beauty, Pacteau maintains, is the province of figurative art – for in life the beautiful other is a fleeting and ephemeral image – always moving beyond our reach to vanish into abstraction and revealing instead a corporeal, 'monstrous', excessive femaleness. Thus the desire to pictorialise woman and pronounce the image 'beautiful', represents a desire to see oneself reflected back in the face of the other in order to address, master and control a primal fear of loss, a desire that Pacteau suggests is never satiated and therefore part of a cycle which is endlessly repeated.

7.2.   Beautiful Woman or Beautiful Image?

In photographs of women, the mobility of attributions of beauty can as easily attach to aesthetic treatment of the subject as the beauty of the individual pictured. Elizabeth Prettejohn charts how 19th century artists challenged the notion that the beautiful composition must necessarily contain a beautiful person, illustrating her thesis with Whistler's famous painting of his mother, *Arrangement in Grey and Black No.1*, which subsumed the identity of the sitter in favour of the skill of the artist. Whistler's intention in portraying his mother was not to demonstrate her identity as a subject but his artistic capacity to lend beauty by value of pictorial composition and the aesthetic use of colour to even the most ordinary and uninteresting of subjects in order for them to appear 'in a new light'. (Whistler, 1890) Whistler claimed that it was the purely compositional quality of tonal arrangement, a beauty that arose from the colour and compositional aesthetic quality brought to the surface of the image not attached to moral good or personal human beauty, which made the image remarkable.

> 'Take the picture of my mother, exhibited at the Royal Academy as an
> *Arrangement in Grey and Black*. Now that is what it is. To me it is
> interesting as a picture of my mother; but what can or ought the public do
> to care about the identity of the portrait?' (Whistler, 1890)

Étienne Gilson examines the confusion between what may be termed beautiful that applies to the fine arts and what can be termed beautiful in photography, arguing whereas in painting a certain amount of artistic license is essential and even desirable, the primary principle of good portrait photography is fidelity to the model.

> 'The aesthetics of photography are based upon the aesthetics of the image; the more faithful the image is to its model the better it is.' (Gilson et al., 1966: 33)

Gilson argues, therefore, that in the first instance, it is the beauty or ugliness of the model that determines the beauty of the photograph for

> 'What one justly admires in the image is nothing more than a fixed reflection of the beautiful in nature, not of a beauty created by art.' (1966: 43)

In this way, the word 'beauty' applies only analogously to photography. But if the first principle of painting is to produce a beautiful *image*, it shares its secondary aim with photography's prime purpose – to produce *resemblance*, though the methods are fundamentally different.

In the Renaissance, Vasari called for verisimilitude in painting – that it preserve the naturalness of the object it represents. It is at this point, argues Gilson that painting enters into competition with the *camera obscura*. The nature of photography defined at its inception was the art of fixing optical images captured in a *camera obscura* onto light sensitive material. The reproductions made via an artificial retina preserve an incredible exactitude and sensitivity to the original. Bayard described photographs as 'drawings engendered by light' and this is the core of the problem, thinks Gilson – what is the relationship between images drawn by light onto a screen and those drawn or painted by hand? (Gilson et al., 1966: 43) Aesthetic judgements of paintings are made regardless of the beauty of the object portrayed, as can be seen in the example of Whistler's depiction of his elderly mother. But for a photograph to be intrinsically beautiful regardless of its object, it would be effectively 'de-ikonized' (1966: 34) and therefore no longer strictly 'photographic'. It is here, argues Gilson, that the demarcations between good or 'straight' photography and 'art photography' are drawn. In art photography, increased pictorial beauty emphasises the skill of the artist and effectively de-ikonizes the subject.

In this case, beauty defers to artistic creativity not to its object. But, ultimately, Gilson reasons, beauty need not enter into the discussion of photographic images for the perfection of the image consists in its fidelity to the model. (Gilson also thinks that the sense of form is directly related to the graphic qualities of light captured via the lens.) However, confusion over the two orders of beauty in art and photography obscures proper discussion. Instead, photographs need to be evaluated against a combination of the unique qualities of the camera with a sense of form and the photographer's mood (1966: 43-46). The amount of skill entailed in making the photograph resemble the model is what defines a beautifully wrought 'good' photograph. In its construction and the choices made in its capture, it can be thought a performative reflection of the photographer. A photograph made with flawless technique of a beautiful object will be beautiful in this way on two counts: as a good and faithful image of a beautiful subject. Gilson goes on to differentiate between erotic photography (generally of women) designed to stimulate differing tastes of sexual attraction which 'proposes to the eyes objects of imaginary desires.' and 'Art as such, whose object is beauty… which has nothing to do with this category of facts.' (1966)

Gilson makes the distinction between 'good' photography and amateur photography, which is one of superior technique and eradication of a larger majority of variables that restrict resemblance to the model. Point and click photography makes no adjustment other than distance, framing and choice of subject matter available to the photographer. It does not allow for the adjustment of relative light values in a scene or depth of field. The eye will pick out the psychically important objects in a scene in a way that the camera cannot for, as Gilson notes, the lens does not see, it records a graphic image of light. We may see a face more clearly because we focus on it and meter our psychic light quotient accordingly to reflect our mind's eye. A point and shoot camera will take a midpoint meter reading with no psychic regard to who is seen but to what available light is present. (Gilson et al., 1966)

Although Gilson's thesis makes no attempt to interrogate the differing orders and codes of beauty against which art photography and actual women are adjudged, his analysis is certainly a useful lens through which to view the weighting between photographer and subject, as well as elucidating the confusion over aesthetic and photographic orders of

beauty and how they are weighted in the reception of the image and I shall be referring to his concepts of de-ikonisation and 'good' photography at different junctures throughout the remainder of this dissertation. To begin an illustration of this point over the aesthetics of the photographic image, performative prowess of the photographer and the 'real' beauty of ageing women, I turn now to Joyce Tenneson's project, *Wise Women*.

7.3.   'Real' Beauty in Soft Focus – Joyce Tenneson's *Wise Women*

Joyce Tenneson's *Wise Women* (2002) is a bestselling book containing 80 portraits of women aged between 60-100 accompanied by interviews. In a poll conducted by American Photo magazine in 1998, Tenneson was voted among the ten most influential women photographers in the history of photography. (1998: 42) In *Wise Women* she turns her attention to the portrayal of older women and a group of female avatars that age has 'enhanced', given Tenneson hope, and put at peace her fear of ageing. In this project she takes command of that fear photographically by imposing the uniformity of her vision on her subjects. The project is celebratory – of their insights, courage and beauty. These first two qualities are taken care of by the text and fame of her sitters, the last is mediated through a distinctive and highly manipulated aesthetic use of photography that draws on a history of formal portraiture. The images – taken digitally in recent years – are more like photogravure or the cartoons of Michelangelo than modern photographs. Tenneson is not concerned with 'natural' realism but the erasure of modernity in favour of a 'timeless' visual rhetoric with religious connotations and its relation to the imaginary or mythic figure of the elder woman, made beautiful by wisdom, experience and her artistry.

Figure 24: Wise Women (2002) Joyce Tenneson

In Tenneson's photographic work dynamic range is heavily constrained, flesh tones pushed to glowing luminosity diminish wrinkles to faint detail and produce a halo-like aura around the subjects which has been described as ethereally beautiful and other-worldly (Cristofovici, 2009). The painted canvas backgrounds recall 19th century portraiture studio practice and the diffuse lighting is reminiscent of the 'fuzzography' of the photographic pictorialists, equally beloved and derided for its romanticised effect. The Belgian pictorialist photographer, Leonard Misonne who championed a highly diffused use of light in camera and on print to engage audience imagination claimed,

> 'Light glorifies everything. It transforms and ennobles the most commonplace and ordinary subjects. The object is nothing; light is everything.' (Misonne cit Downes, 1947: 62)

Tenneson employs the romantic associations of this light quality to soften the impact of age in the image and the apprehensive recoil of the audience.

The prints are antiqued and parchment-like. This antiqued effect is heightened by the use of soft gauzy costuming to further float the women out of time and place and into idealised mummification – though Jessica Tandy's (the first of the two images)

sepulchral gaze still managed to scare some viewers, Tenneson suffocates any sense of the 'real' erupting from these photographs. The figures, central, static and formal, are beautifully presented and visually heavy. These de-ikonized artworks privilege the authorial vision of artist over and above resemblance to the beauty or otherwise of the woman depicted. Photographic realism is sacrificed to an iconography that privileges Tenneson the artist completely in control of her beautifully preserved – if fossilised – subject, moving these images into a mythic rendition that relates to the imaginary rather than an account of how these women appear in life and everyday encounter. Tenneson's desire for the preciousness of her subjects to be recognised results in a beautiful aesthetic which weights attribution of beauty towards Tenneson's photographic practice rather than the individual pictured.

7.4. 'Real' and Wrinkled – *Tick-Box,* the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty

The problem of how to realistically mediate the appearance of older women without overly aestheticising their appearance and still appeal to an audience responsive and conditioned to issues of beauty and 'good photography' has troubled feminist critics and photographers since the mid twentieth century. Pacteau notes that providing photographic representation, although a political imperative, does not resolve the question of beauty, which attaches as readily, if not more so, to the photographic portrait of women as it did to the painted image. Likewise, Joanna Frueh comments that thirty years on feminists have given up attempts to proscribe appearance but the problem of creating or naming a feminist model of a 'real woman' who is not a symptom of beauty still remains and the photograph provides the vehicle for these questions to be played out and debated (2001).

Figure 25: Irene Sinclair, 'Tickbox', Dove campaign (2005) Rankin

The Dove campaigns for 'real beauty', featuring 'ordinary' women, have sought to harness the powerful debate which demarcates the divide between the 'authentic' or 'real', and the phantasm of beauty. The award-winning campaign, *Tick-Box*, was shot by the UK photographer, Rankin, and aired in 2005. It presented monumentally sized billboard images of a group of women photographed individually in closeup, who differ from current conventions of beauty – freckled, plump, grey-haired, small breasted, old – for public judgement of their aesthetically-defined social value, indicated within the image as an embedded tickbox. Dove's ethical stance was similar in vein to the award-winning socially conscious Benetton campaigns, inaugurated in the early nineties, which linked documentary images and social issues to fashion, and the question of ethics to aesthetics. The visceral rawness of a picture of a newborn infant in the gloved hands of a midwife with umbilical cord still attached and covered in maternal blood, provoked widespread public outcry and revulsion. The Guardian noted, 'In the realm of advertising, traditionally occupied by pretense, the eruption of real life caused a scandal.' (2011) The resulting controversy and censorship provoked and divided audience attention, giving the brand an international profile and celebrity.

In Dove's campaign, the celebrity and fashion photographer, Rankin, who had previously brought heroin chic to the pages of ID and had a track record in tapping emerging trends in fashion and beauty with 'frank' and redefining portraits straddling fashion and art, was chosen to create 'positive' images of 'real' women that could command public attention. The campaign was a multi-media event, launched in 17 countries with an extensive billboard poster campaign web banners and printed media distributed in public places like cafes to create 'talkability'. The public were encouraged to vote online on a series of deliberately provocative questions, one of which was to answer whether they agreed that the picture of Irene Sinclair, a 95-year-old woman born in Guyana and living in London, showed her as 'wrinkled' or 'wonderful'. Notably, three images in the campaign surrounded issues of ageing: wrinkled/wonderful, grey/gorgeous, aging/ageless. Results from the poll on the Dove website were shown 'live' on a billboard in Times Square and the campaign elicited an unprecedented amount of coverage as the media debated issues of female beauty. Typically, discussion

centred on how 'ordinary' and representative these women actually were and their distance (or not) to achievable norms of beauty.

The intensely polarising effect of the debate produced by the enlarged spectacle of the female face in gigantic intimate closeup, drew attention away from the problematic of its underlying binary construction. The statement 'wrinkled' and the attribution 'wonderful' were presented as mutually exclusive choices, an either/or not a both/and, as if they belonged to the same symbolic system of apprehension, presenting complex issues as a binary and tacitly vertical relationship based on hierarchies of attribution. (This ordering from positive to negative was most apparent in an alternative caption 'Withered/Wonderful' which has more explicitly negative connotations.) To answer the question as subjectively 'wonderful' (and how can we know?) denies or diminishes the evident truth that Ms Sinclair is visibly 'wrinkled'. However, it was impossible to tick both boxes, which suggests that the underlying aim of the campaign was to mobilise a debate, and to recruit a target audience sensitive to hierarchies of taste and social dismissal. The somatic and political realities of ageing and the multiple underlying differences – such as class, ethnicity and economic circumstances – that may shape how ageing appears, were presented as if they are somehow a matter of personal choice and self-styling. Whilst presenting these registers as a matter of choice may question the way we attribute qualities to superficial appearance, it simultaneously naturalises visual categorisations within a hierarchical order of beauty that now increasingly includes and targets the signs of age by playing to the desire for representation.

7.5.   'Real' Beauty at a Proper Distance – Suzy Lake

Figure 26: Beauty at a Proper Distance/In Song (Installation view), (2002)
Suzy Lake, 52 3/4" x 39 1/8" x 1 1/2", Fuji-trans print lightbox

In contrast, feminist artist, Suzy Lake questions and deconstructs the logic of using photography to celebrate older women to an audience 'infatuated by youth' (Lake, 2001 - 2005). Creating work for a visual arts audience, Lake explores the mechanism of recoil in order to make explicit the signifiers of desire and the aesthetic structuring of a Western consumerist gaze by staging a confrontation with the ageing face. From a distance the large-scale colour Duratrans appear within a recognisable regime of beauty advertising techniques and rhetoric that use the monumental closeup to mirror the intimacy of a sensuous close encounter. However, on approach to the image, the facial creases, stained teeth and facial hair 'become aggressively apparent' (Lake, 2001 - 2005) shattering the glamorous illusion and creating a sense of recoil that surrounds the apprehension of ageing and its relation to a loss of desire. Lake's work makes apparent the negative readings that attach to close proximity of the ageing face and why images of the old are often aestheticised or softened to block the 'shock' of an initial encounter. These giant photographic transparencies are self-portraits. Shown in gallery installation as a triptych, Lake is nevertheless at one with herself on both sides of the camera, owning and controlling her own self-magnified gaze. Lake's project does not attempt to solve the situation but instead stage a confrontation by amplifying and reiterating an aesthetic treatment in a spatial arrangement that problematise the complacency of an exchange. Whilst challenging the media and advertising hoardings reticence in showing

ageing, the images still play on the aesthetics of high quality film and the framework of photographic glamour in order to focus attention in close up on the details that are withheld, thus making a hypervisible encounter with the ageing female face full of a scopic frisson that may inadvertently serve to limit a resistance to images rather than release it.

7.6.   The (Real?) Beauty of the Ageing Female – Harriet Walter, *Infinite Variety* (2010) and *Facing It* (2011)

Actress and writer, Harriet Walter's exhibition (2006) and catalogue, *Infinite Variety: The Beauty of the Ageing Female Face* (2010) and self-published book, *Facing It: Reflections on Images of Older Women* (2011), aims to reappropriate the term 'beauty' in relation to older women seen via their photographic image 'to readjust our focus' and untie the tangled knot of a cultural insistence on female beauty configured solely in youth. Walter's project is a collection of available and commissioned images of women between the ages of 48 to 95 in widely differing styles of photographic capture.

Walter's idea for the project began over a decade ago in response to a cluster of 'sudden' and interlinked events all occurring around the age of fifty: the registration of a change in her appearance due to ageing, the feeling of a loss of sexual visibility in society, a change in the roles she was being offered as a professional actress and the deteriorating health and subsequent death of her mother. 'The idea of collecting positive images of older beauty came to me when I was beginning to face the fact that I was no longer young. It's time to reclaim the O word.' (cit Shaw, 2012) Presenting a photographic collection was the simplest and most direct way of redressing an absence of 'natural', surgically unaltered, older female faces in the media and public domain, thought Walter, and the gesture of public exhibition a 'positive' intervention that defies 'the prejudice that tells us they are no longer interesting or valuable or beautiful.' (Walter, 2011: 11). (Although the collection includes a photograph of actress, Julie Christie, who had a facelift in the 1990s.) The work was originally a foyer exhibition at the RSC in Stratford Upon Avon in 2007 under the title, Infinite Variety, a reference to Shakespeare's Cleopatra – who Walter was playing – a queen 'wrinkl'd deep in time' struggling to retain power whilst coming to terms with her own ageing and its relation to her celebrated allure.

Walter, confessing to living 'under the sign of the beauty ideal' (Frueh, 2001), recalls how as a teenager her porous self-image was formed in response to photographs of luminous young women that she encountered in magazines. These images were for her a point of aspiration and empathetic contact. She would rehearse and emulate the individuals pictured, practising pose, gesture, even forging their signatures to explore the psychosomatic and phantasmal world of the other she saw.

> '… it was a kind of projection as an actress, I was kind of imaginatively and chameonly (sic) ... and feeling I am writing… and I would forge their signatures because I could write in their way ... and somehow if I could I could sort of be them…' (Parnell, 2012) [8]

At fifty, facing a midlife crisis of self-image, the death of her mother from Alzheimer's and a change in roles which were suddenly asexual, remote and functional – her method was the same – to collect photographed faces as inspiration. However, looking for representative photographs, Walter found a shortage of 'good' photography where the age of the sitter was noticeable. When she did, access to photographs was often refused due to a lack of budget although sometimes the woman photographed would also refuse permission.

The pejorative connotations in the West of being called or labelled 'old' makes searching for portrait images not a straightforward task. Although age is a metanarrative and often supplied immediately after a woman's name in written media/captioning, it is not a category that has been used in collections of portraiture which generally index images according to social position, achievement or important events. By contrast, the medical archive of the Wellcome Collection has a large collection of imagery catalogued under 'old woman'. Paintings and medical images may caption a figurative type such as 'the old woman', but portraiture collections do not generally record the age of the sitter. The National Portrait Gallery does not index numerical age and has only 4 pictures catalogued under 'old woman' made between the 16th and 19th centuries none of which are depictions of a named individual.[9]

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[8] Please see Appendix 2 for a full transcript of my interview with Harriet Walter.

[9] I am indebted to David Saywell from the National Portrait Gallery for this information. And also for his attempts to find a way to match birth date and date of work to provide me with a listing.

Although Walter had interest in her project from prestigious publishing houses and had already been published successfully as a writer, eventually the project was self-published because it was thought economically unviable. (Walter commented that if a great photographer 'like Mapplethorpe' had been involved this would have been a different enterprise. (Parnell, 2012)) With pressing time constraints, limited access, budget and a need to show diversity, she resorted to including a large number of snapshots. The quality of the artefact becomes material in these exchanges. Different kinds of capture have differing cultural values attached to them that, in turn, attach to the subject. The use of amateur or non-professional photography in this instance becomes a formative constraint, as there is a tension between the identities portrayed and the quality of the image that implicitly affects the evaluation of the subject. (See Gilson, page 88) But whilst the snapshot suggests amateur capture, it also suggests a lack of adjustment, a less manipulated image. Artists, such as Gillian Wearing, have used 'rough' work to access the visual language that these seemingly unconstructed images connote, but are they any more 'natural', 'real' or 'truthful' than a 'professional' image? Selfies, for instance, suggest the lack of an intermediary, which implies increased performativity as the subject is choosing how to represent herself – an increase in proximity that may stand in place of an authorised encounter and naturalistic resemblance.

The selfie provides the opportunity to act out an alter ego, to play out other versions of the self, a self-branding that participates in the commodification and broadcast of the self via social media. These 'bad' photographs work around and alongside 'good' professional images in an imagistic currency of exchange where they provide respite to the impossibility of flawless hyperreal images. But does this mean that they are less constrained – by social expectation or aesthetic representation – or outside of the same system? Or rather that these images work together to consolidate and demarcate boundaries? Photographer and cultural analyst, Marcus Bohr remarks, the copy-cat nature of selfies is primarily a mimetic response to an ideal beauty largely promoted through the media, advertising and the cult of the celebrity and an idea of the self which is actually 'about a form of beauty that is largely outside of the self' (2014).

Softness of light and evenness of skin-tone are qualities related to pictorial conventions of female glamour and sexual desirability. Etymologist, Anatoly Liberman claims that words beginning with 'gl' relate not only to light, essential to sight, but also to smoothness and sheen or lustre, which suggests that a glamorous image is one depicting smoothness and unbroken surfaces. (See also 2.4) This is obviously problematic when it comes to depiction of glamour and ageing together, as they seem to be visually exclusive and antithetical when framed in pictorial terms if not in life. In addition, different poses, photographic treatments and the quality of light can make more explicit surface detail not apparent in the real world of day-to-day interaction, which further complicates interactions with photographic portraits for what is it we are seeing and responding to?

The Hollywood photographer, George Hurrell, originally a painter, famous for his dramatic studio portraits of stars like Joan Crawford in the thirties and forties, employed 'hot light' – very bright areas of light that burn out detail – to visually caress his models and mobilise audience imagination. According to Mark Viera, this effect is particularly noticeable in his portrait of Veronica Lake where 'Hot light [is] spilling over her hair and onto her breasts. (Vieira, 2013: 265) But Hurrell resisted the notion of glamour that attached to his subjects. For him, all photography glamorises its subject, – i.e. is illusory play – the only question is one of emphasis – 'the dirt or the beauty'.

> , 'All of us glamourize everything … including the documentaries who glamourize filth and squalor. Even Weston does it taking a picture of a gnarled tree-trunk. It's a question of emphasising … the dirt or the beauty. … Bring out the best, conceal the worst and leave something to the imagination.' (2013: 273)

Hurrell's notion of glamour as emphasis returns the image to the divine ambivalence associated with the double-faced goddess, at once desirable and threatening. There is an underlying morality to Hurrell's notional glamour, however. Here glamorous beauty is the elevated term, the imaginary 'best', and the 'dirty' 'worst' is concealed or hidden by aesthetic photographic treatments of light and the evacuation of detail; treatments which minimise the registration of age as 'dirty' detail.

Social gerontologist Naomi Woodspring has explored understandings of what or who is considered beautiful in later life. She notes that when asked if old people could be beautiful, many of her interviewees would answer 'Yes!' enthusiastically but were then at a loss to describe what that meant in visual terms. Digging down deeper, she concludes that the overriding ideas of what constitutes ageing beauty, attaching to both sexes (men were also called beautiful in later age), was either classical good looks – good bone structure, slimness and symmetrical features – or something emanating from the individual's inner life recognised as a quality of light, radiance or lustre, coupled with a sense of vitality and animation – a problem in still images where the individual is frozen in the frame and stasis is read as devitalised. These qualities together indicated the vital luminousness regarded as beautiful in older people, but how these qualities might be portrayed in visual terms was not easy to describe even for the visual practitioners that she interviewed. (Forthcoming 2018)

If soft and 'hot' light minimises detail, hard directional light and three-quarter and profile pose (most typical of portraits of ageing) emphasise the opposite. Hard and side lighting are most commonly used in still and landscape photography because they heighten chiaroscuro and emphasise texture. Used on older skin – any skin – texture becomes more marked, shadows darker and more defined, details not necessarily apparent in real life are emphasised – the signs of age become more apparent. Lighting is therefore key to how and, indeed, if we read age in an image but light quality also intersects with readings of 'femininity' and sexual glamour. Unbroken light, luminosity and radiance in a history of art have connotations of spirituality that are linked with moral judgements that then attach to individuals pictured. The halo from medieval art onwards signifies a transcendent spirituality as emanating from and around the individual, aligning a seamless divine luminosity with individual radiance. Contemporary advertising slogans repeat these links between a (youthful) radiance and discourses of beauty and 'femininity' any interruption to which is deemed an threat to the youthful structure of the gaze and its corollary with the smooth unbroken surfaces of the ego. (See page 38 for Woodward's analysis of the default body of youth and its association to the ego.)

John Gage notes that historically a good likeness is not necessarily about a detailed exactitude of features or surface detail (1997) – the sketchier the image the more we fill in with our imaginations. The loose sketchiness of Gainsborough's paintings was thought to achieve this effect as well as Da Vinci's use of *sfumato*, a technique which blurs the harsh contrast and edges of certain hues or details, along with a soft falling off of light that creates enough indistinct pictorial space to mobilise and engage with the imagination of the spectator who fills out the lack with their own subjective interpretation, (Gombrich, 1950) thus making a sensual contact with the image. Different poses, photographic treatments, depth of field, lenses and the positioning of the light, as well as the quality of light can make explicit surface detail not apparent in the real world of daily interaction, adding further complexity to the affect of photographic portraits.

The combination of black and white photography and sculpted light graphically emphasises differences in light, shade and texture and therefore the registration and readings of age, as can be seen in the image below of sculptress, Caroline Stacey, and her bust in Carrera marble, *Woman with a Headdress*, made in 1982. The portrait, taken by photographer, Lucinda Douglas-Menzies in the late nineties, illustrates Stacey's art catalogue and was later included in Harriet Walter's exhibition and book. As an art catalogue illustration, the differences between the surface appearance of sculptor and aesthetic artwork are juxtaposed and creatively emphasised. However, taken out of its original context, uncaptioned within Walter's coordinates of age, beauty, value and power, its function changes. Instead of the relationship of artist/artwork where the subject of age is incidental and performativity relates not just to the aesthetic skill of the photographer but the skill of the woman pictured, in Walter's exhibition, age/youth/beauty become the subject in question. A question that is hugely complicated by the differing sites of beauty, for what exactly, are we looking at? The aesthetic beauty of the sculpted artwork next to a 'real' woman? A beautifully lit photograph of woman and object? An old woman in a beautifully composed picture? If attribution is to be made where should it be placed? With the artwork, not with the woman, it appears. She is the maker of something beautiful not the object of beauty. If this is instead a 'good' photograph, how is the audience able to adjudicate on whether this is a good likeness or not?

Figure 27: Caroline Stacey (late 1990s) Lucinda Douglas-Menzies
B&W bromide print, from 'Facing It', Harriet Walter

In life we experience the psychic image of another as a multi-sensorial composite image that envelops the individual and our perceptions of them. These impressions accrued over time can be linked together as a loose personal narrative that we overlay and attach to the photographic image, tracing a mnemonic route back to the multiple impressions stored in our mind's eye, adding and thereby ascribing a beauty of mind, say, to the image, an attribution contingent on a relationship experienced in life, a depth to the graphic. The multiplicity of these personal experiences, like Vaseline applied to the lens, may affectively soften any initial uncomfortable alterity of the portrayed image to an idealised cultural imprint, lending the suspended simulacrum a mobilising vitality through the imaginative projection of our affectionate (or not) memories and thereby raising the value of the iconic picture as an individual representation. In addition, captioning, may provide framing detail that profoundly changes a view of the sitter. Without this knowledge, the viewer is left with little to frame the image and ascribe beautiful outside of accepted aesthetic and cultural reference points. However, due to some women wishing to remain anonymous – an indicator of difficulty in itself – Walter withheld contextual information, relying instead on the images to 'speak' for themselves.

Instead, she is confident that contemplation of these individuals will reveal a meaning beyond the surface of the photograph and provide us insight and an appreciation of the 'real' individual pictured. But if meaning is beyond the surface image presented how can it be read as the beauty of the face it portrays?

In her text, Walter conjectures that 'If a face is allowed to age naturally, we see the child, the young and the old woman all at once, like the rings of a tree trunk.' (2011: 56) Her analogy brings together images that register on different spectrums as if they are transparent and transferable to one another. We cannot see the rings of a tree *through* its bark, we can *know* that they are hidden within from experience, imagine that they are there, but we can't *see* this *through* the surface of the tree, unless we chop it down – kill it – to expose what is inside. To illustrate her analogy, Walter shows us not a single image but three photographs of her mother, as child, mature and old woman. Why not one, if all three are visible in a photograph? In life we may, perhaps, experience different psychic manifestations of differing age identities occurring diachronically through movement, speech, performance, and our empathetic imagination, 'seeing' the experiences accrued through a lifetime playing as the synthesis of an individual. (2011: 56) But women – old or otherwise – are not tree trunks. If we see someone youthful in an image we see a youthful image – age is not the focus of the image or readily apparent.

If a face is allowed to age naturally, we see the child, the young and the old woman all at once, like the rings of a tree trunk. I tried to stretch this analogy to say that at the heart of the tree the green life continued to push outward while the exterior bark grew gnarled but a horticulturalist friend pointed out that it is actually the outer bark that is still living. At first I thought this new insight had destroyed my analogy, but on reflection I think it enhances it. What is seen as decay is actually evidence of ongoing life.

My Mother **Xandra** | Aged 3; Aged 40; Aged 70

As in the example above, a recurrent trope in representations of age is to present two photographs from different timeframes alongside one another, either as a diptych (or in Walter's example, a triptych) or a portrait of someone older near, holding or framed with another photograph of the sitter in their youth.

Combining images from the past to 'contextualise' the ageing corpus is a recurrent characteristic of representations depicting age, but one that obscures the truth that identity building is lifelong, and shaping, reflecting and reinterpreting individual narratives a constantly reiterative and elusive process. The different aged selves presented as separate images suggest the need for another image as a point of reference to contextualise the older face and the impossibility of the diachrony which Walter suggests may be true in the life of the individual as a singular image. If photographs are of a particular moment in time (as well as place) providing one alongside the other suggests the impossibility of return and an exacerbation or deepening of temporal awareness as the gap between the two, increasing the morbid potential of the photograph as the small incremental changes over lived time vanish into a precipitous nothingness which yawns like a chasm between the faces. Here, as a photographic image, the 'self' appears divided by time into separate entities, rather than indivisibly enfolded and incorporated in the living individual. The old in these displays are configured as a receptacle of memory, forever looking back at their resurrected younger selves, 'I am everything that I have done', rather than 'everything I could be' or 'everything I have brought to this moment'.

Walter cannot show the diachronic portrait she imagines because it doesn't exist within the aesthetic framework of naturalistic portraiture. Instead, by providing photographic doubles of a single individual, she is in danger of evoking the anxious frisson and *coup de vieux* associated with the apprehension of age difference as illustrated in the young woman/old woman illusion in Chapter 5. If the doubling in these images provokes an anxious response, it easily falls prey to an underlying aesthetic framework that puts the images back into a beautiful order where the elevated term is the youthful factor. Providing a second point of reference in a photograph provides the opportunity to make

a critical judgment in pictorial terms – to put the faces into some kind of vertical and aesthetic, as well as linear and chronological, order. Rather than ageing body and identity as one aspect of a multi-aged self that is seamlessly enmeshed and imbricated, the flattening division involves a separation and dissection which attaches to the female subject rather than the difficulty with the photographic portrayal. This is anachrony not diachrony – the mother looks back across the page at her youthful self as if divided from her aged self, not as one multi-faceted individual as Walter pictures older women in life. But it is not just the woman but also the photograph that ages. Along with us, technologies of capture too show the signs of age and this becomes an aesthetic in its own way which further complicates issues and judgements of beauty in relation to age.[10] Is the oldest photograph more valuable because it is rarer, better preserved, produced with superior equipment and photographic technique or because it pictures a young girl in soft light?

The work includes both famous and unknown women, many of whom Walter knows personally. There is a fundamental difference here in the relative power of these portrayals. Famous women have accrued narratives of social power and familiarity of recognition that stand in place of an affectionate response we might reserve for a family member. Women known as 'beauties' in their youth, would seem to maintain a status in older age, not just attributable to great bone structure, but having a previous narrative which the viewer may overlay on the photographed face – social power defers to famous name, beauty to previous adjudications; advantages nevertheless compromised by idealised standards of female beauty where wrinkles herald a fall from grace. By contrast, unknown faces, outside of this recognition, navigate idealised conventions and aesthetics of art from which age is excluded and viewed with unconscious hostility.

Walter's celebratory project, whilst feminist informed, has no adequate critical or conceptual scaffolding on which to hang the aesthetic diversity of these images of older women. Walter promotes the premise of a 'natural' unenhanced appearance as exemplary of a 'real' woman but fails to separate the person from the image, account for the aesthetic discourses which photographic images navigate, or the pictorial

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[10] I discuss this in more detail later in relation to *Look at Me* and Laura Pannack's images of older women from Sheffield.

conventions that affect perceptions of what is considered beautiful in art and who is considered beautiful in life. Nor does she interrogate why pictures of women need to be called beautiful to be valued. Although the 'positive' gesture of exhibition recruits female solidarity, and the sheer diversity of stylistic capture resists any attempt to categorise the exhibition overall, it does not unpick the underlying power issues and identity politics of the image and the expectations of the viewer, nor the wisdom of using photography to do so. But it is not only the mixed provenance of the images that makes the group show difficult to navigate, it is the desire to categorise women as 'types' and attribute beauty that is confusing.

7.7.   Conclusions

In this chapter, I've looked at the complex discourse of age, aesthetic beauty and female portrayal in photographs. I've also attempted to prise apart the complexity of issues of what is deemed beautiful in a photographic image, who is called beautiful in life, and where relative values of judgement are placed in relation to photographer and subject. Alongside these aims, I have related various artistic and photographic techniques and practices to portrait photography.

Pacteau uses a psychoanalytic lens to explain the relationship between pleasure in looking and the desire it represents of primal reunion with the figure of the mother, an insatiable desire, which reproduces itself endlessly in the context of the gaze and the requirement for an endlessly renewed image. The apprehension of ageing femaleness interrupts narratives of timelessness and visual constancy attached to women and discourses of desire.[11] The threat to visual constancy that images of older women represent, results in the tendency to produce idealised 'de-ikonised' imagery that re-establishes a sense of correct(ed) distance for the artist and the audience who stand in her place, and an aesthetic mastery that can override the meta-narrative of age and its association with loss. Various aestheticising techniques such as hot light, soft focus, extended subject distance, are used in this way to provide an image somewhat evacuated of detail in which the imagination of the onlooker may be 'safely' mobilised in the image of the other. Detail interrupts this process precipitating the apprehension of a castrative threat to vision. The act of attribution of beauty can also be seen as an attempt

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[11] See section 7.1, page 71

from beyond the frame to master the difficulties and allay a fear of loss of the maternal image. However, as a political speech act and critical strategy, the attribution of beauty whilst providing a temporary relief to the anxiety provoked by ageing femaleness in depiction, does not help the audience address the structure of the youthful gaze or its relation to discourses of beauty and the loss of desire.

Art historian and critic, Suzanne Hudson notes a crisis of criticism with real social and political purchase in the face of new aesthetic and cultural forms that arose in the wake of multiculturalism, identity politics and the culture wars. She recalls the contentiousness of the politics of exclusion in the 80s and 90s somewhat masking broader issues of public culture and who constitutes the body politic. At a moment when criticism should have been at its apogee, it retreated from broad-based debate on issues such as the aesthetic representation of excluded bodies, facilitating a return to beauty and ideas of taste and morality; a return symptomatic of a desire 'to shore up culture in the face of identity relativism' (2003: 117). This, thinks Hudson, is a beauty of appeasement papering over the cracks of social anxiousness, operating in service of reconciliation and maintenance of the status quo, silently filling the mute spaces left vacant of critical activity. (2003)

Walter's project too easily falls prey to a politics of appeasement whilst failing to negotiate the composite difficulties with the 'trap of the visual' (Phelan, 1993) as it relates to a youthful gaze. Contextualising photography within the loci of 'age', 'type' and 'beauty', implicitly elicits and simultaneously confines judgement within a framework of pictorial aesthetics and ideals of female beauty that exclude the marks of age. Rather than explore the resistance of older femaleness to being made simply beautiful, it attempts to insert the older female face-body into a regime of beauty and spectatorship where it becomes subject to hierarchical judgement and issues of taste. Obscuring a properly critical engagement with the relationship of beauty (and a need to control that which we fear) to being called old (and societal anxiousness of a loss of power and proximity to death) – and its societal projection onto images of older woman. Beauty is not so easily unyoked and reassigned from a controlling gaze however well intentioned those desires may be. We cannot see through the surface image to divine its meaning. The historical codifications of pictorial beauty and portraiture overwhelm the

status of the subject, tending to confirm expectations that the 'beauty of age' is down to the skill of the photographer or exists outside of the frame, and is therefore unseen.

In the realm of the visual, beauty does not exist in its own right. Power defers to the viewer and outside the frame of the photograph. Overlaying an attribution onto the surface image doesn't see through, interrogate or disinter the political dimension of beauty and femaleness, renegotiate the loci where it is judged or leverage empowerment for older women in economies of the picturesque; it recuperates beauty in service of social norms, locating older women within the crosshairs of a discourse where they are judged as having diminished status. Against these criteria, even women who do appear still 'beautiful' do not escape criticism but are judged lacking in youth. In this scenario there is no crisis of viewing pleasure as suggested by Laura Mulvey, the crisis is in attribution of a beauty that no longer services a depiction. Without a critical strategy the exhibition threatens to naturalise and depoliticise the reasons why women feel they must, even if they do not wish to, comply with normalising styles of appearance, reducing the complexities of ageing to a polarising debate on natural and cosmetically altered appearance instead of the difficulty with the fantasy of a beautiful picture. Beauty is not cancelled, just refurbished and relocated further into old age on individual women where it is more easily picked off or judged lacking. Before women can be seen differently, the difficulties with photographic images themselves need to be articulated and addressed. Merely presenting images and calling them beautiful does not elucidate or interrogate the discrepancies with narratives that exist outside of the frame or the confusion between aesthetic registers. Clustering images around the topic of beauty, however reassuring, does not have a sufficient critical mechanism to elucidate the problems with a youthful gaze.

In this chapter, I've looked at technical difficulties and discourses of ageing femaleness, beauty and iconic conventions in female portrayal in photographs. In the next chapter I turn my attention to images that attempt to reverse the aesthetic order. I examine the performative and political implications of carnivalesque strategies in the representation of a single woman, Nettie Harris, in Donigan Cumming's *Pretty Ribbons*.

8. Case Study 2: Carnivalesque Reversal: Donigan Cumming's *Pretty Ribbons* (1993-1996)

Pretty Ribbons is an examination of ageing and loss of gaze. Produced in the 1990s it can be considered a lightning rod to rising societal apprehensions of a rapidly changing demographic. The piece challenges the valorisation of youthful beauty, asserting its impact at the opposite end of the register, to heighten a theatrical encounter with the grotesquery associated with the female ageing body. In this chapter, using Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque reversal as a framework to examine the political ramifications of the images, I also want to respond to a question raised by Kathleen Woodward in her essay, Performing Age, Performing Gender (2006). In contrast to Michael Herzog's accompanying essays to the project which privilege Cumming's role as visionary artist and Harris as his collaborative muse and model, Woodward examines the work from a feminist standpoint, concentrating her attention on the performative role of Harris and her portrayal of ageing femaleness. In her essay, Woodward opines that her own previous youthfully structured imagination could not conceive of the older woman as sexual and expressively erotic. Whilst crediting Harris' performance for her reappraisal, she stresses the need for the work to be viewed in its entirety to mitigate the affective power of a handful of images that threaten to undermine the larger intentions of the project. Her comments suggest an uneasy conflict between her desire – in the spirit of feminist sisterhood – to identify with and support Harris' performance, and the mute power of single still images to jeopardise the value of that portrayal. Woodward does not analyse this discomfort in her writing but it is my intention to do so. My journey into one image, in particular, Nettie Harris with her pantyhose around her knees, standing next to an open fridge full of rotting food (*Figure 32*) has led me to examine the underlying cause of this discomfort.

Within the context of Cumming's work and my enquiry into carnivalesque method, I also make briefer examinations of treatments by several other artists to discuss the sexual display of ageing femaleness and issues of abjection and female flesh.

8.1. Carnivalesque Reversal in the Depiction of an Individual – Donigan Cumming, *Pretty Ribbons*

Donigan Cumming's *Pretty Ribbons* is a set of still photographs produced in the 80s and 90s that depict the Canadian actress and journalist, Nettie Harris, in a variety of intimate and revealing settings. The majority of the pictures were taken over a three-year period between 1989 and the Spring of 1992 just before Harris' death in Montreal in 1993, aged 81. These were initially presented in exhibition accompanied by an audio installation in 1993 and later published as a book with an accompanying essay by Michael Herzog in 1996. It is an analysis of this second work (as it is the only record currently available) that I am concentrating on in the following chapter.

Since the early 80s, experimental artist Donigan Cumming has been working with photography, video and multimedia installations, exploring themes of 'the body, truth and fiction, taboos of representation and social engagement' (Art, 2011). Cumming's target was the destabilisation of documentary visual practices which he views as facilitating the production of social narratives, tacitly supporting and naturalising underlying prejudices that marginalise vulnerable societal groups such as the poor, old, sick, and the disabled. The focus of his practice he credits to a childhood growing up alongside his mentally retarded elder brother, Julien, an experience that sensitised him to 'the paradoxes of life', putting him into contact with people, ideas and communities he might otherwise not have encountered or felt any empathy towards. (Cumming, 2000) Drawing his models from individuals he considers outside of mainstream representation, he places them in front of the camera within orchestrated domestic scenarios to suggest a context of social documentary; a framing medium in which he reflexively intervenes to problematise the instrumental capacity of lens-based media and the photographer's role in perpetuating 'myths of propaganda and sentimentality' (Enright, 2005).

The death of her spouse, shortage of money and a desire to perform prompted Harris to find employment as an extra and model where she met Cumming in 1982 in Montreal for an earlier project. Cumming's models were paid and 'released their work on the spot' (Hoolboom, 2007: 111–126) but they had, she said, an understanding and 'repartee…given to few' (1993) which developed over time – they worked together for over a decade until her death in 1993. Originally intended as a study of a man, Harris

was the only woman tested for *Pretty Ribbons*. A mixture of personal and aesthetic considerations – the way she looked, her ability to pose and to improvise within the frameworks he provided, her 'unmatchable' strength in life and in camera and her 'femaleness' – prompted Cumming to cast her as the central character, a change in focus he ascribes to understanding his own identity and place in the world through older women in his family. Two years into the project the relationship took on 'a very powerful resonance' (1993) when Cumming's mother died suddenly. An amicable and productive working partnership took on vestiges of maternal feeling that drew the pair closer.

The project is a lengthy series of photographs set within the confines of Harris' actual domestic environment blurring the line between the fictive and the actual. Harris is singled out as sexualised object of the camera gaze, which focuses insistently on her often-unclothed body in a variety of sexual poses. A gritty documentary aesthetic collides with a surreal amplified 'dramatic realism' (Sarah Berger, 2000). Cummings plies the dual registers of the photograph in an 'aggressive artlessness' (Hoolboom, 2007: 19) combined with a theatricalisation of pose and gesture which draws on a formative background in theatre and an interest in Artaud's theoretical conceptions of a Theatre of Cruelty. Cumming believes that by pushing his mediations 'too far' his audience will 'access the fear and anxiety within themselves' (2007: 19) and become conscious advocates for the characters he presents, a concept that relates to Aristotelian concepts of theatrical catharsis. The ensuing advocacy that Cumming suggests arises from that experience is not however something that Aristotle stated was a result of catharsis which was more of a personal emotional purgation experienced collectively. This forcing together of the documentary space of the photograph with an artificiality of style, pose and gesture aims to disrupt the expectations of his audience in a carnivalesque subversion of the symbolic order, exposing and questioning the inconsistencies of normative values that relegate certain bodies to a lower stratum of the social order.

Figure 29: Nettie Harris, 'Pretty Ribbons' (1993) Donigan Cumming

In this image, (*Figure 7*), Harris is caught seemingly oblivious to the camera's gaze in an autoerotic gesture of self-pleasuring. The decorative floral background and smooth satin texture of Harris' dress lend seductiveness to the image, which circulates in a geometric triangular composition leading to Harris' breast and exposed pubis. Any painterly aesthetic is disrupted by the lack of colour and the stark lighting and immediacy of Cumming's flashgun. The reflection of the flash on the wall above Harris looks faintly like an antique moon but reminds us that this is a staged construction, a play with a message that is at odds with the quasi-romantic setting. Staged in Harris' real-life surroundings, the photographic codifications of documentary are shifted into a heightened, somewhat distorted capture, amplifying a sense of the illusory nature of what is presented to camera, an effect exacerbated by the use of a wide lens. A wide-angle lens, when used in close proximity, produces an element of caricature, disrupting the perspectival illusion of photography as natural and purely objective. Cumming utilises this distorting foreshortening effect to amplify a surreal atmosphere and an encounter with Harris' body, which looms towards the viewer. This is not an image in which viewers are invited to sensuously lose themselves. The harsh lighting, sharp

focus, lack of colour and obvious artifice of the image undermine a sense of eroticism. Cumming literally brings the image up short, like Harris' dress, to consider the relationship between breast, pubis and autoerotic desire when graphically depicted on the body of an older woman. The off-kilter tilt of the image adds to this somehow queasy and destabilising effect, lodging the terrain of the image away from the rhetoric of documentary photography and nearer to the phantasmal realm of the cultural imaginary.

The images, with their vestiges of documentary veracity – both in the real-life environment of Harris' surroundings and the stylistic framework of social documentary – hover between the actual and the imaginary in a queasily shifting register that dislodges the viewer from any attempts to categorise what is given-to-be-seen as either one or the other. As a method of destabilisation it is effective, as it endlessly reproduces a sense of uncertainty, lending the work an unnerving quality, as it shifts uneasily from one realm to another. This straddling of registers points to the potential of photography to operate as theatre – to rehearse, reiterate and re-evaluate the associations of certain portrayals and performances. However, mediating that relationship is not straightforward. The complex transaction of the photograph resists attempts to decode the surfaces it offers to view – now indexically tracing a link to the real world – now evoking the atemporal iconicity of the imaginary. The photograph's seeming transparency (Friday, 2002) to this fascinating and fraught play conceals its own role as agent, carrying the viewer between figurations of life on Earth and life as we desire, imagine and fear it to be. Indeed, attempting to deflate the image in one realm risks inflating it in another where its action may consequently be enhanced. Downplaying the photograph as document, heightens its dramatic effect in the cultural imaginary where it potentially gains in phantasmal power which is arguably more potent, anchoring the discourse Cumming is intending to deflate more firmly within the imagination of the viewer.

Cumming argues that theatricalising the devices of documentary photography will make their effect apparent. But amplifying a visual rhetoric – pushing it too far – does not address the symbolic power relationship that underlies it or change its associative meaning; it recreates and exacerbates its effect. The viscerality and danger Artaud

imagined in live theatre was dependent on an actual physical and dynamic proximity of the actor's body to the audience. Cumming's work is dependent on the lens as the constructive instrument of the gaze. He interrogates a loss of gaze by using the camera to 'stare' but fails to account for the inflection that occurs when a camera enters the space between gazer and gazed-at, and the alteration in the nature of the transaction itself. Image making builds relationships. The camera does not 'stare', it is the apparatus that leverages permission for its operator and audience to do so, in order to get something in return. Amplifying its operation adds more hyperbole to the myth, it doesn't unpick the underlying scopophilic relationship between audience and other or turn the camera round to 'see' the audience, as Weegee, Cumming's hero, did. Neither does it provide the sense of danger that Artaud aimed at which was based on visceral proximity. The danger of a live event of theatre unfolds in actual time with real bodies, whereas the photographic image is a proxy outside of its original timeframe. Whilst the camera gives us a kind of access and the thrilling frisson of an imaginary encounter, the audience is nevertheless aware that the actual physical danger of a real body is removed.

Many images in *Pretty Ribbons* play on the distance of the male and female bodies of Cumming's players from the classical ideal, juxtaposing over-size and under-weight bodies against one another in a variety of sexual and intimate poses which draws on the teeming multiple bodies of the carnivalesque cavalcade. The 'grotesque body', as seen in the visceral art of Bruegel and Bosch, is always pictured in multiple, a teeming throng of transgressive, excessive, sensual, split and multiple selves. (Stallybrass et al., 1986). In Bakhtin's model, corporeal representation is never individualised but stands for all, becoming 'grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable' (1968: 19) – a heightened image. However, photographs in Cumming's project never contain more than two people – Harris and a number of different 'lovers'.

Despite Cumming's inclusion of men made vulnerable by nakedness, there are, nonetheless, differences between the treatment he reserves for his male and female characters. Whilst Cumming's men are faintly ridiculous, his treatment of Harris is insistently isolating, sexualised and noticeably without eye contact. Cumming reserves a foetal isolation for Harris as a recurrent trope in the project as illustrated in this final image which shows her head down, as if about to be born from life to death. (Liberman,

2005) In one seemingly post coital picture of Harris and a male model, the twosome lies curled foetal-like alongside one another but they are still connected, their bodies touching.

Figure 30: Nettie Harris, 'Pretty Ribbons' (1993)
Donigan Cumming

Harris often appears uncomfortable and contorted as object of the lens whereas Cumming's men look more 'natural' and at ease, subjects of the gaze. And whereas Harris is located within the bounds of a distinctly domestic, often cluttered environment and its garden, surrounded by kitchen apparatus, clothing and pictures, identifiable loci are almost completely absent in pictures of the men, which are simpler, almost studio-like. Cumming's documentary strategy thus locates Harris within a particular set of domestic coordinates that position and categorise her as the 'low Other' to normative ideals, the recognisable locale of documentary practice potentially strengthening these coordinates in the imagination of the audience.

Cumming maintains a black and white documentary aesthetic throughout the project, yet occasional switches to colour, rather like the Shakespearean move from dialogue to blank verse, mark a difference in tone to some images. The most striking example – and certainly most reproduced – is this image of Harris naked (actually part of a series of four), again in a foetal position, which employs a painterly aesthetic of muted tones and gentle faded colours. The downward gaze of social documentary photographers has been criticised as targeting those with little social power or prestige (Rosler, 1992). Here Cumming makes explicit a linguistic rhetoric by literally looking down on the diminutive and exposed body of Harris, allowing us to observe and encapsulate the scene from above.

Figure 31: Nettie Harris, 'Pretty Ribbons' (1993)
Donigan Cumming

In *Figure 10*, Harris is pictured lying naked in a foetal position on a faded floral carpet reminiscent of a pastoral setting. A round-framed photograph between her knees is presumably of her as a baby, connecting her to childhood and the associations of old age as a second infancy. An old-fashioned long pastel blue dress on a hanger with floral embroidery seems also from a bygone era. Harris' gaze is again averted; as if she has no recognition of the image she makes and is oblivious to the props arranged around her. The profile and lack of eye contact also recalls an often-used trope in the representation of age and one in which do not have to encounter the gaze of the other as a potential threat to our own identity.[12] Here we can observe Harris unchallenged, naked and isolated in the frame, privileging her as the object of the gaze, but also implying solitariness and vulnerability, an individual preoccupied with their own thoughts, removed, distant or excluded from the normal cut and thrust of human exchange. Harris' gaze is almost always avoided, limiting a confrontation with the spectator that might be read as an element of performative agency.

Nowhere in the project is a man presented in the same way. Are these contextual arrangements reflective of Cumming or Harris? Reflecting on past self-image evokes a narrative of melancholy and nostalgia, the subject forever looking back in time out of step with the present. Here this image links with the ironic title, *Pretty Ribbons*, and the small decorative fripperies associated with 'feminine' appearance that connote traditional views of the frivolousness and vacuity of female vanity. Pleasure in appearance and the desire to be seen and admired has had pejorative connotations in contemporary Western society, reaffirming Cartesian notions that connect femaleness with the physical body and 'masculinity' with the mind and higher thoughts. The image evokes a traditional view but does not unpick its naturalisation or the associative power of dismissive patriarchal discourse which have been used to illustrate women as narcissistically, passively self-preoccupied, rather than as politically engaged with representations of their own sexuality; nor does it does appear a depiction of the 'unmatchable strength' that Cumming attributes to Harris in life.

The grim theatricalisation of Harris' depiction amplifies a sense of isolation that attaches to her in particular. In *Figure 11*, this deliberately provocative photograph of Harris in

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[12] For more on the profile pose, see also pages 37-8, 52 and 88.

front of a full fridge of food with her pantyhose around her knees laughing 'maniacally' is a consciously staged encounter with the female body and asexualised and abject readings of the ageing corpus. Juxtaposed next to the open fridge of food, the image plays on the much-used visual metaphors of food and sex – appetites of, and for, the 'feminine' body – and the carnality of the flesh. Claude Lévi-Strauss proposed 'the raw and the cooked' (1970) as analogous to the interplay of registers that bring cultural and biological realities in contact with one another, and as an anthropological explanation of how mythologies are constructed through the use of motifs and imagery of what we accept and reject as beneficial or poisonous to our system. By making the image sexually explicit and linking Harris' body with decaying food, Cumming forces a confrontation with underlying collective fears that associate the female body in old age with death and decay, thrusting it into the consciousness of the viewer for re-examination within the realist discourse of the documentary photograph.

The ubiquity of death throughout life and the relatively rare sight of the corpse in modern Western society is a new phenomenon. In the past, death was a constant threat at any age, though childhood and childbirth were particularly dangerous moments within

Figure 32: Nettie Harris, 'Pretty Ribbons' (1993)
Donigan Cumming

the female life course. Surviving to old age was a rare achievement. The extension of life expectancy, the drop in infant mortality and deaths during childbirth have changed expectations, attaching the inescapable proximity of death to the bodily appearance of ageing. Kristeva uses the sight of the corpse to illustrate the horror that accompanies an experience of abjection induced, in this case, with the confrontation with that which prefigures our own death and the collapse of the symbolic system which orders subject/object relations. The abject response is to that which 'disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules' and is associated with the emergence of The Real in a Lacanian sense. (Kristeva, 1982) This is a primal repression that precedes binary and symbolic systems and instead relates to the moment of separation from the mother and division of animal urges from those of human culture.

The transgressive nature of Bakhtin's carnivalesque includes the possibility, at least, of desire within its ribald exchanges; possibilities of viewing pleasure that Cumming collapses in *Pretty Ribbons*. Pacteau notes that the Baktinian subject is one 'of pleasure in processes of exchange, never closed off but with open orifices which display its needs as deformities. Primitive and abject, it threatens the modern constraining and 'sanitized zones of our subjectivities' (Pacteau, 1994: 128) Cumming explores visual fascination with the physical fragility and impermanence of the body, the open fridge of food and unclothed Harris suggesting a visual corollary between the perishable nature, leaky boundaries and precarious status of both. Harris is made sexual object but not as an object of desire. Shakespeare connects the Hag to a visceral disgust through the language that clothes her appearance. Cumming presents a predominantly visual spectacle of the elderly body of Harris for his audience. The sight of Harris' visibly old and wrinkled body in a sexualised pose flouts conventional codes of sexual 'feminine' display that fetishes blemish free, poreless skin, smooth unbroken surfaces, softly undulating serpentine lines (Pollock, 2003), offering a chance to consider the asexualisation of the female body in old age and its relation to abjection.

Harris' open mouth is turned to one side in what appears an ambivalent laugh that could also be a grimace. Turning the face away from the camera can be construed as defiantly mocking and/or embarrassed. The cause of her laughter in this image seems attributable

to the pose she is striking for the camera. She is literally caught with her knickers down, a gesture that has connotations of the schoolyard and adolescent incitement of a sexual gaze. The act of pulling the knickers down can equally be read as the gesture that precedes urination or defecation, here bringing the toilet to the table when presented in the context of appetite and food, and a recoil, shame and disgust associated with 'dirty' behaviours as well as the idea of leaky boundaries around sex, the body and nourishment – what is efficacious and what potentially poisonous. The wide lens further distorts not only Harris' mouth but also the 'mouth' of the fridge door that seems to gape leeringly at the audience. The catching of expression between mouths implicates the onlooker in a triangulated exchange of retching gapes and an expression that connotes and transfers disgust.

Philosopher, Daniel Kelly, outlines the case for a disgust mechanism that is culturally transmitted. Many puzzling cultural differences, he claims, originate from an imperfect fit between a cognitive system that evolved to protect against poisons and pathogens and social and moral issues on which it has since been brought to bear. He warns that responses that may feel automatic are, in fact, culturally transmitted through 'a sentimental signalling system' that includes a largely unconscious and automatic facial 'gape', an expression empathically recognized by others, triggering their own disgust mechanism in response. (Kelly, 2011) The juxtaposition of Harris and the fridge gives the image a further sense of dichotomy and uneasy binaries playing out towards the viewer that circulate primarily around the viscerality of the body and sexual performance. The immediate effect is a repellence that attaches directly to the ageing body of Harris and her sexual display. A similar inducement to disgust and the gagging mechanism in response to eroticism and ageing femaleness can be seen in Ian Fleming's treatment of 'überbaddie' Rosa Klebb in *From Russia with Love*. Nicholas Lezard writing in the Guardian notes that Fleming 'poured all his disgust – and he had plenty – into his creation'. (2014) Fleming parodies the sexual advances of many young women who proposition Bond in a caricature of Klebb designed to link her villainy to the monstrousness of her ageing appearance and 'deviant' sexuality. Fleming's distaste peaks in a lesbian sex scene where he describes Klebb, wearing makeup and dressed in a semi-transparent nightgown as looking like 'the oldest and ugliest whore in the world', (Fleming, 2012 -a: 116) linking her ageing body and the exhibition of 'feminine' lesbian

sexuality with moral outrage and disgust. (A similar treatment is given to Blofield's mistress, Irma Blunt, who is described as 'too ugly to live' (2012 -b: 167) though her age is not mentioned.) Though Fleming links homosexuality and ugliness to criminality, age is not a factor in his treatment of his many male villains or youthful female seductresses.

Shakespeare symbolically connects the hags to visceral disgust by linking the language that clothes their appearance and murderous activity to the poisonously foul, slithery slimy ingredients from which they concoct their spells and curses but it is always unclear whether these apparitions are imaginary constructs springing from Macbeth's lust for power or actual supernatural entities. In *Pretty Ribbons*, however, Cumming presents an unambiguous visual play linking a real individual to rotting food and using the elderly body of Harris to transfix the imagination of his audience. Harris stands next to a full grimy fridge, the freezer box spilling, shows spoiling food but her body angular, gaunt and anorexically thin is reminiscent of the starved bodies of the survivors of the Holocaust. The plump fruit and vegetables contrasting with Harris' emaciated frame remind the viewer that the wasting of the body is due to constraints of age not the internalised self-regulation that makes anorexia a living death. But this image does not represent nourishment. In one of my exploratory workshops this image was read primarily as anorexic with age as a secondary factor. Participants commented that it was the emphasis of the thinness of the body and lack of eye contact that made them recoil from the image not the ageing skin.

Read from a psychoanalytic perspective, if Harris represents the maternal body she is unable to offer comfort or sustenance, at least, according to Cumming's gaze, in which we read the negation of desire for the maternal body. If the earlier image was ambivalently phrased, this is not. Cumming annihilates any chance of viewing pleasure and female identification by presenting a deadly double negative, an image of spoiled goods. The play he works out on the body of Harris is reliant on the cultural rhetoric of the Hag, but one that allows for no shapeshifting ambiguity to oscillate between seductress and witch – here the Hag is emptied of sensuality. Cumming effectively kills Harris off from exchange in this image, lending what was previously a symbolic narrative, the skin of a nihilistic image and a photographic materiality that traces an index to the ageing corpus of a nominated individual.

8.2.   Abject Fascination – Pinar Yolaçan, *Perishables*

A play on fascination with the abjection that attaches to ageing 'feminine' flesh is also explored in Perishables (2003), the work of Pinar Yolaçan. Yolaçan takes the 'turkey necks' and 'bingo wings' of corporeal age and aestheticises them in a visual play of mortality and identity, carefully negotiating the space between an aesthetics of 'feminine' beauty and fashion with a narrative of abjection and the flesh of the woman as meat for the scopophilic gaze. Yolaçan, originally from Turkey, trained as a fashion designer in London at Chelsea College of Art before finishing her studies in New York, where she now lives. Her images are part sculpture, part photography. Responding to her models' facial and fleshly characteristics, Yolaçan created individually crafted couture made out of dead animal parts, carefully chosen fabrics and fishing line, which she uses to sew them together. She then photographs her women to create large-scale portraits that echo the magnificent scale and detail of renaissance portraits and religious iconography. The work takes into account a history of portraiture and anthropological photography – a fascination with 'otherness' as evidence or truth of a relationship – a difference that has, historically, been exploited in the service of political hierarchies to naturalise and support the continuance of certain relations of power between different ethnic, gendered, national or tribal groups (Said, 1978). These images are obviously not documentary 'truths' but employ a theatrical trope to question the association between norms of beauty, female flesh, ageing and dismissal. This work follows on from Jana Sterbak's gallery installation, *Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* (1987) – Sterbak created a size 38 dress made from flank steak which was hung on a dressmaker's mannequin – and Louise Bourgeois' untitled installation work in 1996, a tree of dresses hanging from beef bone and butcher's hooks, works which leverage the vocabularies of self-fashioning decoration as social critique. Lady Gaga's infamous meat dress in 2010 later drew on the shocking impact of wearing raw flesh to provoke public attention to her distaste for the 'don't ask don't tell' policy of the US military.

Figure 33: 'Perishables' (2003) Pinar Yolaçan

Yolaçan plays on the aesthetic performance of art and 'feminine' beauty, questioning not only the relationship of 'feminine' beauty, ageing and abjection, but also the 'permanence' of the artwork to preserve the immortality of the flesh. In one image, a woman wears a necklace of chicken drumsticks (see *Figure 12*), another sports sleeves of tripe (*Figure 13*). Yolaçan's work subverts the codes of portraiture through which 'feminine' value and subjectivity is naturalised by reorganising the dress codes of beauty. The naked body is not presented, but the surface of the skin and flesh, as visual organs that convey ideas of female beauty written in flesh and fashioned through the reiteration of tropes in her artwork. Yolaçan reiterates these codifications through the use of a formal typology. Various women are portrayed using the same repeated theatrical device to heighten the audience perception on the imagistic associations being questioned.

Figure 34: 'Perishables' (2003) Pinar Yolaçan

The women's deadpan gaze to camera gives no indication of their attitudes to their own self-portrayal, throwing the emphasis back towards the viewer to unriddle the visual dichotomies presented – at first glance the images appear normal – but on further investigation the realisation that the women are dressed in meat provokes a more visceral mechanism of recoil and disgust at the sight of the raw flesh against the ageing skin. This jarring effect is most clearly demonstrated in *Figure 12* where the raw chicken drumsticks are instantly recognisable whereas the effect of *Figure 13* is reliant on knowing that the sleeves are made of tripe. The piece oscillates on the margin between visual pleasure and disgust, illustrating the narrow border between scopophilic pleasure and revulsion, and how easily this attaches to the pictorialised bodies of Yolaçan's female subjects. Yolaçan's art is the careful balancing of two registers within a typology, which shifts the focus from the individual as disgusting, to a more general view of female flesh as meat (and meet) for the gaze and its dismissal in later life; a dismissal which Yolaçan avoids by juxtaposing dead and living flesh, bringing together a theatrical vehicle for the sensual frisson of disgust to pique and engage the audience imagination. Yolaçan shows the fissures inherent in the situation but

the difficulties with evoking a disgusted response still problematically attach to the subject of ageing female flesh.

8.3.   The Fashioning of Desire & Age – Jeurgen Teller, *Woo!*

Jeurgen Teller's pictures of fashion designer, Vivienne Westwood, offer a different take on the representation of the ageing 'feminine' body and the transaction of sexual desire through the lens. Photographing in a similar way to Cumming with direct onboard camera flash, Teller presents Westwood in a decorative triptych that is at once direct – fully frontal – playful, colourful and monumental. Westwood is girlish, coquettishly posing naked for Teller's camera on her baroque sofa.

Figure 35: Vivienne Westwood no. 1 (2013) Jeurgen Teller

In *Woo!* An exhibition held at the ICA in early 2013, Teller showed a monumental triptych of naked images of the fashion designer, Vivienne Westwood, as the centrepiece of the exhibition. Teller positions her unadorned and over-exposed within a photographic economy of desire with rococo flourishes. Not considered a formal beauty, Westwood's alabaster skin is nonetheless pictorially luminous against the gold of the sofa. She appears as odalisque but there is no attempt to conform to a youthful ideal or suck in the soft sag of her stomach. She is not de-feminised or asexual, neither is she hiding the physical signs of age – a slick of red lipstick reveals a mouthful of yellowed teeth – as she flirtatiously performs to camera, straddling not only the demarcations between taste

and fashion but also the crone and coquette. Like Harris, Westwood's chair is decoratively floral but there is no queasy tilt to the camera, which is positioned straight on, not looking down or up, but frontally in a more formal pictorial arrangement. The colour is deftly managed to make visual parallels between Westwood's red lips, her flame-coloured hair and pubic hair, and the plump red and orange silk cushions on which she playfully reclines, the interplay of textures and colours circulating the eye around the three images internally and overall as a pictorially cohesive triplicate set.

As *agent provocateur,* Teller's oeuvre straddles the discourses of fashion and art, navigating the line between seduction and spectacle in what he terms 'a dramatic, over-heightened storytelling' (Teller cit Lipsky-Karasz, 2006) but in a photographic style that owes more of an allegiance to the stripped back narratives of the documentary photograph than the air-brushed hyperreal advertising image. Teller moved from Germany to London in 1986 and was an instrumental player in a photographic movement within the fashion industry known variously as 'dirty realism', 'anti-fashion' and 'heroin chic'. The anti-aesthetic snapshot glare of his oeuvre moves between commercial and personal work in fashion and art, blurring the line between photographer and subject, fact and fiction, celebrity and glamour. Teller pushes the boundaries of acceptability by treating the session as a game and the photographic result as a collaborative fiction, performatively positioning himself within the 'desiring machine' to highlight his own role in how the act of photography brings the world we experience into being. His signature 'unflattering' photographic style employs a lo-fi aesthetic of the unaltered snapshot into his carefully constructed but unposed portraiture. He employs no retouching in his work, photographing solely on film with two 35mm cameras with direct onboard flash in either hand, 'hypnotising' his subjects whilst switching from one to the other as the flash recharges. The currency of point and shoot instant photography with direct flash lends his images a stark directness whilst simultaneously overexposing what or whoever is closest to camera, reducing chiaroscuro and detail on the face and body and pushing the shadows behind the subject. This signature style may be one of the reasons why his images are so sought after within the fashion industry as his photographic aesthetic seems to straddle the desire for images which provide a direct closeup and intimate access – the suggestion that this is how his (normally glamorous) subjects appear at close proximity in 'real' life, and without

apparent artifice – whilst his on-board flashlight eradicates enough detail to lend his sitters a certain evacuated fluidity that provides the ground for spectatorial conjecture and projective fantasy.

Figure 36: Vivienne Westwood no. 3 (2013) Jeurgen Teller

Unlike Cumming's imagery, Westwood is not presented in diptych or binary juxtaposition, an arrangement that works across a central divide, nor referentially in relation to a youthful past. Instead, Teller presents the piece in exhibition as a triptych, drawing on the religious iconography of the altarpiece. Geometrical arrangements used in imagery throughout antiquity and a history of art has been used to stand for archetypal principles in contemplation of the mysteries. Jacobs argues that the interleaved structure of the medieval triptych was thought to represent not three separate or divided images but one single articulated painting – a painting with doors (2011). The conjoined parts explored the spiritual principles of the mysteries, the central (and when closed, most hidden) panel, being the most essential. Crucially, the tri-fold image was seen as representing an indivisible principle that could not be easily dismantled, but protectively hidden or opened for contemplation in a variety of arrangements (doors partly open or at right angles as well as stretched out). Teller's modern triptych provides a contemporary reworking of the altarpiece, presented now in the hallowed halls of modern culture – the

gallery – in full colour, monumental scale and intricate detail, an intimate meditation on three facets of fashion queen, Vivienne Westwood.

The medieval religious triptych represented the principle of three-ness, trinity, the triune three-in-one. Fundamental to the understanding of Christianity was the principle of mediation. The Christ figure represented a mediating or bridging mechanism between the unknowable numinous and the individual, physically incarnated man. The triptych was also heavily linked to Marian symbolism, the virgin mother as the vessel of the incarnated Christ and later grieving mother, alongside the Magdalene. Barbara Walker suggests that tri-fold symbolism reaches back to pre-patriarchal representations of the all-powerful triple goddess and the 'feminine' as the embodied and mediating principle between life and death, womb and tomb, 'she is the material cause of all change, manifestation and destruction … She is both mother and grave.' (Rawson cit Walker, 1985: 72) A mediating role between the kingdoms ruled over by the Greek pantheon and particularly the River Styx, the doorway to Hades, was originally performed by the goddess Hecate and later shared with Hermes, or Mercury, the psychopomp.

Figure 37: Installation, ICA, Woo! Vivienne Westwood, (2013) Jeurgen Teller

In Teller's triptych, the two side panels in landscape format, show the pouting and recumbent Westwood, the central and frontal image in portrait format, shows Westwood,

legs astride, feet planted, her vagina straight to camera, in the prime place of worship or contemplation. Westwood is well known for her self-confidence, punk style and transgressive attitude. In contrast to Cumming's images where Harris is depicted as unruly and deranged, Westwood appears at ease with the camera gaze and has pleasure in her own poses. The images when shown at the ICA in early 2013 are consistent with her lifelong narrative and the fame of her public persona that split the audience, eliciting both shocked responses of disgust and admiration at the fearlessness of her self-presentation. Age is implicit in the exhibition, the images of Westwood appear as part of a larger work, which is not arranged specifically around the topic of age, but an investigation of the world of appearances, appetites and desires according to Teller's camera, which encompasses women older and younger than he. Teller blurs the line between public and private, personal and valorised, giving equal priority within the exhibition to domestic scenes – an oversize picture of a kitten on the wall adjoining Westwood and quiet pictures of his ageing parents *Walking in the Woods* – to his fashion imagery and pictures of celebrities.

Figure 38: Charlotte Rampling & Jeurgen Teller, 'Louis XV' (2005) Jeurgen Teller

Also, included are pictures from *Louis XV* where a naked Teller literally makes an arse of himself in front of a sphinx-like Charlotte Rampling. Teller's practice includes a willingness to include and implicate himself in the record, deflating the notion of unseen authorial control and the objective distance of the artist, suggesting instead that what is

in front of the camera is, in part, an autobiographical event and therefore contains a proximity to a performative reality that nevertheless incorporates an element of phantasy – one which views older women as objects of desire and the freighted power exchanges and capture of gaze projected on and through the lens as folding back on its operator. Nevertheless, responses to the monumental images of Westwood, suggest that Westwood and Teller's transgressive play materialises the enlarged boundaries of a societal discourse that is now playing out around the bodies and sexuality of older women and that within these economies, narratives of fame are privileges that endure. Teller's tales are humorously self-deprecating; by contrast, Cumming's squalid depiction of Harris suggests humiliation in submission to the gaze of his camera.

8.4.   Critical Analysis of Cumming's Carnivalesque Depiction: Method and Madness

Bakhtin suggests that carnival madness is a temporary suspension of hierarchal rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions and is 'hostile to all that was immortalised and complete.' (1968: 109) The carnivalesque upturning of codifications, when used within the framework of photographic portraiture of a single individual, makes for an uneasy sit within Bakhtin's conditions for a necessarily brief – collectively experienced – liberation from societal norms, as it immortalises a temporary set of relations as if continuously in a suspended stasis,[13] and separates the participating community into actors, framers and viewers instead of one spontaneous and unruly ecstatic collective. This separating out of social relations asserts a vertical hierarchy as if permanently hung, divided and shimmering between positive and negative somatic boundaries. Cumming's use of a carnivalesque strategy in the service of a liberal politics of the body problematises questions of ageing and intimacy within a discourse of photography only to relocate the geographical locus of 'low' in the intimacy of the home environment and onto the isolated 'feminine' ageing body of Harris.

Harris, says Cumming, was a willing participant in his project and well aware of the impact of the images and the social disapproval she would face for breaking the social taboos surrounding the ageing female body, nudity and sexuality. Yet, despite their working familiarity, she was nervous as well as short of money when she agreed to

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[13] A stasis that is problematic in readings of age, see page 78.

disrobe for Cumming's camera for the first time (1993) which may be partly why the images feel so exploitative. Her initial reticence gave way later to a feeling of exhilaration and therapeutic release, 'I felt elated – free, free.' (1993) However, although the photographs brought her notoriety in Canada, she had to run the uncomfortable gauntlet of familial and social disapproval particularly in her hometown of Montreal, where deprecating comments were typically focused on the aesthetic appearance of her body and personal moral judgements about her self-portrayal (1993). (The same was also true for Vivienne Westwood in Teller's '*Woo!*') In contrast, criticism of Cumming's involvement revolved around the artistic objectivity and conceptual nature of his work and whether he was exploiting or supporting his subjects. Cumming upholds his methodologies by presenting his work as transgressively experimental, his models as willing participants in his political project that challenges a social withdrawal of gaze, somewhat disingenuously dismissing questions of exploitation by claiming his detractors are narrow-minded, fearful of his work and the deconstructive challenge it poses to the objectivity and ideological constructions of documentary. He does not completely interrogate the instrumentalism of his own position, choice of female subject or the reasons why he chose to focus so insistently on a woman in his employment he came to see as a mother figure. Exploitation or experimentation? It is a question that divides even the chorus of approval amongst his supporters.

In his essay on Cumming's project, Hans-Michael Herzog continuously remarks on the trusting nature of the relationship built between Cumming and Harris as the hallmark of authenticity that allows the work to be acceptable within artistic discourses sensitive to the power dynamics operating between the framing masculine gaze and the female body; a trust which permits Cumming the privilege of a 'merciless realism' (1996) and intimate access. Harris' performance, Herzog suggests, is only possible because Cumming cares about her with the purity of an objective documentarist, though it should be noted that Cumming's makes no such claim for himself. Herzog, however, attributes the power of the work to the aestheticising framework and the masterly hand of 'Cumming-the-photographer' in giving Harris' performances an aesthetic credibility unavailable to her alone. The evocation of Harris as a performative subject is not deemed to exist in her self-performance but in the pictorialisation achieved by the masterliness of her photographic capture. This is a reading reminiscent of Whistler's claims in his portrayal

of his mother – that the overlooked subject only becomes the prized object of the gaze through the masterly hand of the artist who lends her a temporary status as art object. (See earlier notes on Whistler's mother on page 86.) Following this line of argument, Cumming does not offer us the performative subject but deploys Harris' body as an experimental device to explore his own fears of social exclusion and loss of desire, the complexity and duration of the relationship masking the power dynamic of the lens that allows him a privileged access through Harris' goodwill and female 'strength' to read his fear of ageing on her face and not his own. The work may reflect underlying social fears but by providing a portrait image it once again gives materiality to the idea that these play out on the body of an old woman who stands in place of the mother.

Cumming's images are fraught with pitfalls for the female viewer, in particular, as they cannot renegotiate the psychic connotations of what Pollock terms the 'body-sign in the field of vision' (2003: 195). Pollock notes that any critical interruption in the dismissal of age involves allowing traces of the dialectics of death and sexuality to find some form of either signification or recognition as it tips into visibility, but that these attempts to open a space for sexual differencing necessarily struggle with a 'phallic psychic economy that invests the visual with certain morbid, fetishising or sadistic fantasies.' (2003: 177) (The infamous bath scene from Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) comes to mind in this regard when Jack Nicholson, in the act of embracing a nubile young woman discovers he is, in fact, holding the scabbed body of a much older cackling hag-woman.) The danger here, (as in Melanie Manchot's pictures of the naked body of her mother that Pollock examines), is that the specificity of Harris' body can tell us nothing about the psychic formation of the substitute mother-son relation between her and Cumming that allowed such play, whilst delivering in its stead an iconic image that reaches back into a misogynistic history of lethal negativity that surrounds the portrayal of the naked body of the old woman and her sexuality. Whilst evacuating the physical signs of age removes the older woman as a protagonist in erotic economies of depiction, to tear away at the idealised and eternally youthful maternal image is

> 'to rip away that masquerade, to disinvest the image of its delusional structure of commemorated and sublimated eroticization, is to return our gaze to a body reduced to flesh, and to time. In that, there is little chance of viewing pleasure, because what we then contemplate is our death.' (2003: 196)

If the divestment of masquerade leads to an experience of death it is one that is already latent in the transaction of the portrait photograph as it which points backwards to a body lost to time as if resurrected in the present. Barthes likens the motionless lifelikeness of the photographed face to a mask beneath which we see the dead, a sight presaging a recognition of our own mortality. (Barthes, 1981). However, his appraisal is not linked to the apprehension of age but to the passing of time and inevitably to death that awaits all mortal flesh, youthful or old.

Herzog argues that the evocation of Harris' unique subjectivity is something outside of the single frame and exists as the result of the overall diversity of images in the project. In this Kathleen Woodward agrees with him: to see age differently – in a way that challenges ageist and sexist societal conventions – it is crucial to spend time with the images as a body of work collected over time and in space to mute the shock that a single photograph—or two or three or four might have. She notes that the sympathetic viewer also requires time to resist 'what might be our impulse to view the photographs as somehow embodying a conventional documentary aesthetic' and 'ideally' (2006: 172) in order to understand the pictures we should read the book's narrative. Overcoming the affective trauma of single images is only attainable through a prolonged engagement with the project in its entirety. Her comments suggest a disjuncture between the power of individual images to activate unconsciously held attitudes and a broader view formed in response to a variety of impressions that are brought together in composite, providing a more nuanced, pluralistic and relational view of the marginalised subject, framed by a thoughtful textual analysis. Cut free from this framing narrative, however, the images are read within cultural codes of depiction that are deeply poisonous to older women.

8.5.   Conclusions

Cumming has talked of his own dissatisfaction with the 'muteness' of *Pretty Ribbons*, moving back to video, the moving image, to remobilise the differences and disjuncture between psychosomatic affect – the density of the physical body – and the meanings attributed to their performance. Immediately after completing *Pretty Ribbons*, his return to video was prompted by the need to demonstrate a more explicit questioning of the framing role of media, acknowledging a frustration with his earlier still photographic

work for not being more directly political in exposing the fraught power dynamic within the image.

> 'I could put myself into it in a way that I couldn't with photography, which is stuck in a profound way in its two-dimensionality. It's implacable – mute, I would say – more often that I'd like it to be. For that reason, I really liked the energy of video.' (Cumming cit Enright, 2005: 3)

In *A Prayer for Nettie*, released after Harris' death, he combines still and moving images and includes himself within the work, in one sequence (made prior to her death), panning back to show himself with camera in hand, astride the naked Harris. His move to video illustrates, perhaps, a difficulty in the deflation of the still image – theatrical or documentary – when it meets the 'density' of age inscribed on the female body, but also a problematic in the political ambitions of the work and the complexity of the terrain it negotiates and crucially, the need for a voice to counter the pliable muteness of the imagery and challenge the position of the spectator.

Returning to the question raised by Woodward – do particular images overwhelm the affect of the work overall? I think the answer is resoundingly, 'yes'. Despite the radical intentions of Cumming's art piece, these images by going 'too far' reinvoke the fearful associations of the Hag emptied out of her vitality and power. Instead, subliminally transferring a disgust and nihilism that prevents identification or a reading of performative self-portrayal, for what we see is not the desirability of Harris, or indeed Harris at all, but Cumming's fear of age articulated on the emptied-out body of his model in a kind of ritualised overkill. The heightening effect of Cumming's interpretation of a photographic 'theatre of cruelty' very effectively delivers a plaguing image to confront and infect the imagination of his audience, but by focusing so insistently on the physical body of Harris as a sign of decaying sexuality and provoking age-old associations with repulsion and disgust, does he not reinforce the idea of the unruly female body as the site for the locus of societal control? Whatever carnivalesque release Cumming manages in the work overall meets a dead end in the image of Harris with the fridge, infecting the atmosphere which overshadows the rest of the work with a deeply poisonous image.

As a piece, *Pretty Ribbons* is still unusual and outstanding in the breadth of its visual narrative, challenging the valorisation of youthful beauty, asserting its impact at the opposite end of the register, to heighten a theatrical encounter with the grotesquery that is associated with the female ageing body, equally fascinating in its visual power. But by pushing the negative image relentlessly *in extremis*, Cumming's work seems unwittingly to fall into a binary structuration that figures old women as the 'low Other', thereby strengthening the discursive borders of an ideological binary within the dominant social order which endlessly reproduces itself in the playing out of polarities – first one, then the other. This playing out of opposing positions provides a temporary relief from a lack of agency only to reinforce the horizons of demarcation by singling out particular individuals as a target for the gaze, reinforcing a psychological double bind that negates a political imperative. Teller's images, whilst a challenge to the cultural norm, do not strip the independently famous and fashionably transgressive Westwood and Rampling of glamour, though they are reliant on these narrative frameworks playing around the pictures to add value to the project and provoke audience attention. Whilst Yolaçan separates meat from model to formally examine *vanitas*, female beauty and the association between the two, she does not confront the viewer with the meat body itself. Cumming's work instead aims to strip the glamour from the gaze by putting images before the audience to shock them from their complacency. But by going too far, he demonstrates a performative nihilism on the body of an older woman who stands for his mother. This is not an empowering image for women. Viewed from a feminist perspective in a spirit of pluralistic and emancipatory investigation, if older women are to play a fully realised social role – that involves a greater spectrum of available 'performances' that encompass cumulative gains as well as pains – then a more delicate playing out needs to be effected, one that does not so easily collapse the complex exchanges of desire onto the recoil from the naked female corpus or reinvoke historically misogynistic ideas that attach to the emptied out appearance of the sexually active older woman. As Cumming's process to video indicates, the ambivalently operative muteness of the still image resists a political imperative that seeks to re-empower women.

In conclusion, Cumming's project demonstrates several crucial issues that need addressing when portraying older women through the lens. Firstly, an artwork needs to

avoid the abjection associated with the unclothed female body in later age. Secondly, the operative muteness of still imagery suggests the need for movement to keep an audience gaze from transfixing on single images and, particularly, to prevent the transparency effect and proscenium framework of still images facilitating social aggressivity aimed at individual older women. Thirdly, Cumming's work demonstrates the need for a narrative 'voice' or voices, in order to disrupt audience assumptions and unconscious readings and to repoliticise and make explicit the dynamics of exchange in images of older women.

In the next chapter, to roundup my analysis of polarising tropes in representation, I look at both carnivalesque depiction and 'good' photography in Sheffield University's *Look at Me!* Project.

9. Case Study 3: Performing Ageing Femaleness: The New Dynamics of Ageing – *Look at Me!* (2011)

In the last chapter I discussed the carnivalesque and touched briefly upon the melancholic as two polarising elements of a recurrent trope in depictions of ageing femaleness that reinform and reinforce the parameters and social binaries of a conditioning youthful gaze affecting representations of older women. In this piece of writing I explore 'serious' photography and 'melancholic' affect in more depth and briefly revisit carnivalesque reversal in relation to the New Dynamics of Ageing project, *Look at Me!*

In a paper for the *Journal of Aging Studies,* the project researcher, Dr Naomi Richards, analysed the difficulties with images from two of the photographer-led projects from a sociological perspective. Richards based her paper on the carnivalesque and melancholic trends I had identified in my early research (Parnell, 2010) and saw emerging in the Sheffield work of Laura Pannack and Monica Fernandez. (I was asked for feedback after the images first appeared on the project website before the exhibition and identified melancholic/carnivalesque conventions within the project via an email analysis of Pannack and Fernandez's images.) Richard's findings concurred with my research, noting that in attempting to provide images that did not overly glamorise older women, the two photographer-led participatory projects drew unconsciously on carnivalesque/melancholic conventions. She concluded that whilst atypical of mainstream media representation, the tropes were indicative of 'a far more widespread '"bi-polarity" in representational conventions' that were equally problematic (2012: 75). In this case study, I deepen this research by further examination of the performative effect of an internalised youthful gaze in both the younger female photographers and the older female participants. I also look at how these work out affectively within the general mood of the projects aesthetically and conceptually within individual images. Finally, I comment briefly on the effect of the culminating exhibition and its implications for my own work.

9.1. The New Dynamics of Ageing Programme

The New Dynamics of Ageing was an ambitious and well-funded eight-year cross council programme that aimed to improve the quality of life of older people in the UK and explore the socio-cultural backdrop and dynamic ways in which meanings and technologies of ageing were changing. The New Dynamics of Ageing Programme was a unique collaboration between five UK Research Councils – ESRC, EPSRC, BBSRC, MRC and AHRC – and is 'the largest and most ambitious research programme on ageing ever mounted in the UK'. (UK Research Council) It had a multidisciplinary focus and set out to encourage and develop new approaches and methodologies responsive to a changing demographic of age in the UK. It also had a strong focus on 'ageing well' (UK Research Council, 2005-2012). Amongst the initiatives was the photographic project, *Look at Me!,* which was launched in 2009 by a team from Sheffield University. [14] The team consisted of researchers in social gerontology from the University, headed by social scientist, Dr Lorna Warren, art therapist, Susan Hogan, the cultural development agency, Eventus, based in Sheffield, photographer and phototherapist, Rosy Martin, and photographers, Laura Pannack and Monica Fernandez. 41 women drawn from the local community who defined themselves as 'older' and interested in issues of ageism specific to women, were recruited to participate in four creative arts projects that explored personal responses to ageing. The resulting artworks were shown in Sheffield and have toured the UK since. The project aimed to 'transform the way society views older women' by using a range of visual research methods to 'negotiate and challenge images of ageing' (Department of Sociological Studies, 2009). The participatory nature of the project was innovative, the team claimed, as it allowed 'ordinary' older women – defined as non-celebrity and non-artist – the opportunity to create their own 'alternative' images of ageing. The curious definition of 'ordinary' women seems to imply that 'extraordinary' women are famous and/or artistic. By elevating these women to a special status and pitting 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' women in opposition to one another, this terminology implies an underlying hierarchical structure that divides women by their power to command an appearance within a lens-based regime, in effect returning women to a beauty ordering system that is precisely the problem that the project aimed to disrupt. The project was, also, responsive to the recent 'turn' to visual methodologies in

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[14] Also known as Representing Self, Representing Ageing (RSRA)

the social sciences and the development of visual research as 'a springboard for discussion of sensitive topics with women'. (Department of Sociological Studies, 2009)

In two projects, professional photographers were recruited to lead and photograph groups of volunteers. Unlike the other two projects where artworks were produced by the participants themselves, the job of producing the artworks and conceptual frameworks was assigned to two professional female photographers who were given a brief to produce 'visually arresting' and 'alternative' imagery that challenged 'the continuing authority of demeaning stereotypes of old age'. It should be noted that the demeaning stereotypes of old age included 'positive' images such as the 'golden couple'.

More than just 'untypical' portrayals, or portrayals of 'untypical' older women, the word 'alternative' that was used in the photographers' brief suggests an inherent critique of that which is not alternative, and rejection of that which is conventional or mainstream.

The connection between a healthy appearance and lifestyle has driven portrayals of age away from stoicism in the face of decline – the so-called 'heroes of ageing'. (Featherstone et al., 1995a) – to an emphasis on the extension of the privileges of young adulthood into the 'third age' which sees continued activity and sexuality into later life – epitomised as the 'golden' couple – the desirable face of ageing. Hepworth comments that the social construction of 'positive' ageing in advertising in the UK is often connected visually with rustic scenes of the English countryside that nostalgically evoke 'ye olde' times bygone. (1995) Instead, the team emphasised a focus on realistic physical and socio-environmental portrayal – that the women would be shown 'as they really are' and 'doing what they do' – albeit in a stylised or visually arresting way. It was hoped that these images in and of themselves, in public display, would impact on representations of old age. (Richards et al., 2012)

Two groups were recruited: The Green Estate community, all of whom were volunteers at the historic Elizabethan site of Manor Lodge, working either as tour guides or serving in the visitor centre; the women were aged between 60-74. The second group were from a residential sheltered housing scheme, Guildford Grange, and were aged 77-96.

9.2.   Serious Photography and Melancholy Affect: Green Estate, Laura Pannack

Social documentary photographer, Laura Pannack, an accomplished portraitist with an impressive portfolio of awards, was chosen particularly on the basis of the defamiliarising effect of her collection, *Young Love,* a self-assigned project in which she challenged negative and generalised stereotypes of young people (2012: 68). Pannack sought to challenge the trivialisation of 'first loves' as youthful naivety offering instead a re-reading of 'brave invincibility' within a changing culture of ephemeral relationship ties. (Pannack, 2012) Pannack's subjects are shown embracing, kissing, hugging, holding hands and physically in some kind of contact with one another. She was assigned the Green Estate group of volunteers from Manor Park. Many of the women from Green Estate were widowed or divorced and volunteered out of a desire to stay socially active, 'have fun' and make new friendships within the Manor House community (Richards et al., 2012: 69). The group emphasis in joining the project was thus weighted towards strengthening a local communal identity and deepening shared social links, rather than the portrayal of singular individuals.

Pannack met with the women as a group three times. In the first session, conversation revolved around opinions and experiences of ageing. In the second session, Pannack asked the women to bring photographic images of their mothers. The resulting conversation circulated around generational differences; the women collectively commenting that when they looked at images of their mother at the same age as they were now, they felt a lot younger (2012: 68). Significantly, discussion on why was not taken further – whether this was inherent to the image, a reflection of a youthful gaze, to do with styling, physical appearance alone or a combination of factors is unclear. Generational changes in diet, dress and lifestyle, cosmetics procedures, as well as styling, pose, expression, location, etc., may contribute to the feeling that people looked older – or, perhaps, less modern – in times past. Children are always younger than their parents. Maybe the sight of one's parent is enough for us to feel younger and, therefore, experience youthful-again or ourselves as more youthful. It has also been argued that the dynamics of a youthful gaze play out most particularly to images of the mother (Copper, 1988). In the 90s, LGBT feminist activist, Baba Copper, coined the term 'daughterism' to interrogate issues of projection by younger women towards older women that

constrained a full expression of their diversity, arguing the need for women to examine their own use of power and resist the temptation to project unresolved mother/daughter issues onto older women. (Copper, 1988: 129-130) However, these issues went unchallenged by the team. But it was not just the difference between generations but the aesthetic effect of the photographs that intrigued Pannack, which represented not only the differences between the women then and now, but a photographic capture and technologies that configured these women differently.

> '…those images aren't represented within society today and that's a sort of technical thing as well as something that we don't enjoy looking at as much in the media, it doesn't sell, you know, it's not flashy.' (Richards et al., 2012)

In response, Pannack decided to create a set of portraits that emulated analogue photographic techniques similar to those of the 1930s and 40s, connecting a photographic with a matriarchal and generational history.

The requirements of the brief for 'visually arresting' images are translated, in part, by Pannack into an emphasis on 'good' photographic technique combined with compositional and tonal aesthetics that relate the work to a history of art and classical portraiture, both practices which add value to the perceived status of the image. (See Étienne Gilson on 'good' photography, on page 88.) Pannack's analogue practice – she prefers to work on film – not only makes her images more technically demanding and expensive to produce but also confers a sense of preciousness on the photographic artefact. Using analogue film in a digital era at once focuses attention on the skill of the photographer alongside the relative rarity of the photographic object, conferring a superior status within contemporary fine art gallery practices, but it can also be seen as retrospective and nostalgic. David Bate writes that the absorption of analogue photographic codes and effects into digital photography can be read as the normative tendency to guard against ideological disruption by retaining the (imagined) stability of the past into the present. But, paradoxically, the effort to swallow the analogue within the digital is marking out the differences in social, cultural and historical terrains of photography so that they feel more distinct.

'The digital has made analogue photography appear more distinct as an entity, clearer in its outline and limits because there is something else.' (Bate, 2009: 41)

A distinction which Pannack may have hoped would transfer to her 'ordinary' and 'invisible' subjects but which simultaneously opens a divide, as it marks out a territory which may be interpreted as a nostalgic preoccupation with the past, a reading which, because of perceptions of photographic transparency (Friday, 2002), easily transfers to the subject rather than its photographic treatment.

Figure 39: Pat, 'Look at Me!' (2012) Laura Pannack

The women were portrayed singly against a canvas backdrop in directional soft light, an angled three-quarter pose and indirect gaze. This formalised and muted aesthetic threatens to de-ikonize the photographs and situate these as creative artistic acts that relate to skill and views of photographer (see Gilson, page 87). The sepia tonalities of the canvas background and the quality of light and tonal palette are reminiscent of the style of studio portraiture that Pannack had seen in the women's images of their mothers. This lends a distinctly nostalgic flavour to the resulting portraits, evoking a somewhat romanticised sensibility of the amber twilight of older age.

The John Lewis TV advert in 2010 titled *Always a Woman to Me* harnessed this sense of national nostalgia for a fulfilled life course, which concludes in a silvered marital

togetherness, depicting one woman from babyhood to old age in 90 seconds. The advert received over 300,000 YouTube hits during the first week it was aired. Craig Inglis, John Lewis's director of marketing, said:

> 'Whilst we expected the ad to have an impact, we have been overwhelmed by the volume of responses and how deeply it has affected people. … The numerous letters and emails we have received from both staff and customers suggests we have captured the mood of the nation.' (Groskop, 2010)

Pannack's retrospective styling combined with a raised chin and backward looking eyeline, as in Figures 16 and 17, makes the images reminiscent of the stoic 'hero of ageing' (Featherstone et al., 2005: 360) – a ubiquitous stereotype of older people that the team specifically wanted to avoid. The gentle softness of capture and the slightly muted and melancholy mood that the images convey may be a true reflection of Pannack's own attitude and feelings towards the women and, perhaps, a method to safeguard her subjects from the aggressivity associated with encounters with the ageing subject (see also Woodward, 1.3 and Lake, 6.3.), but although Pannack provided 'beautiful' images, this was not the critical address that the team had hoped for and they were not used in the exhibition or on the project website. Despite this, Pannack displays them now on her personal website which suggests that they are reflective of her view and practice.

Figure 40: June, 'Look at Me!' (2012) Laura Pannack

Along with these more traditional studio portraits, Pannack also made full colour photographs of the women in her signature style of social documentary. These were taken at locations the women frequented at home or at work – which was for most of them the Elizabethan manor house – and at the pub. The subdued tonalities, however, was an aesthetic that Pannack carried throughout, instructing her sitters when in ordinary dress to wear 'neutral tones', lending a desaturated aesthetic to the work overall. Although this may have been an attempt to make these images 'cooler' and more stylish, they act as a formal restraint on the performative expression of the subjects. Asking older women to wear colourless clothing suggests the draining of colour associated with the 'fading' of age and beauty, although black may be an exception for though it may still be associated with funereal mourning and widow's weeds it is also considered chic, depending on the cut of the clothing. (2013: 138) Ari Seth Cohen's *Advanced Style* blog and documentary film (2014) celebrates older women challenging the fashion codes of invisibility by wearing stylish, bright and colourful attire. Cohen's blog posts and street photography works on the unstructured immediacy and direct encounter of the mobile phone and the constant refreshing of images of fashionable older women to create a sense of vibrancy and movement. In general, however, a muting or softening of colours as well as cut and line is associated with ageing. Even when colours like red, particularly associated with an assertive sexuality, are worn, they are toned down to flatter older skin (Twigg, 2013).

'Toning down' is also associated with a loss of cultural agency. Samantha Holland notes that women who considered themselves 'alternative' in youth toned down their appearance in line with cultural expectations as an internalised response to older age being perceived as grotesque and monstrous (2004). Julia Twigg remarks that expectations about what is considered appropriate at various stages of the life course have been marked by changes in attire that were linked to a woman's social, marriageable and legal status (2012). However, the strict structuration around dress code and styling have shifted over the last century, particularly, in regard to colour which has been used as a strategy of resistance to challenge and disrupt cultural expectations. Jenny Joseph's poem, *When I am Old I Shall Wear Purple,* sparked an entire movement centred around challenges to expectations of dress codes, primarily for older women,

most notably the Red Hat Society in the USA. (Joseph, 1996, Red Hat Society, 2017)

Figure 41: June, 'Look at Me!' (2012) Laura Pannack

All Pannack's studio images (and the majority of the environmental portraits) employ an indirect gaze and are in profile or semi-profile, an ubiquitous pose of ageing subjects. Many non-professional models are uncomfortable with intense scrutiny via the camera. Asking someone to gaze elsewhere circumvents discomfort with the lens and implicitly the interrogating gaze of society. But although the semi-profile can be associated with power – the most obvious example being the head of the monarch on coinage where the subject, unconcerned with social approval has no need to return the gaze – aversion of the gaze is not the same as a formal profile image where the body and face are generally facing in the same direction and environmental details are downplayed. In Pannack's portrait above, (*Figure 20*), the static seated model is gazing out of a window. This may have been a stage direction from Pannack to turn the sitter's face towards the light source but the averted gaze off camera to somewhere 'outside' of where the sitter is, suggests an uncomfortable solitariness and disengagement. Gazing wistfully, worriedly or pensively off camera left coupled with subdued colour and muted light does not suggest authority but a backward looking melancholy. Kress argues that in the West we read from left to right and that the left is, therefore, 'read' symbolically as the past and, conversely, the right the future. Similarly, the top of the frame is heaven (the aspirational realm) and the bottom, earth (reality). (Kress et al., 1996: 207, Dondis, 1973) Therefore looking off left connotes looking 'backwards' towards time gone by and evokes a sense

of nostalgia. (See, also page 116.) When contexualised within a project with an emphasis on invisibility, this sad atmospheric framework becomes linguistically associated with reduced visibility and a loss of gaze. Richard notes that the participant was uncomfortable with Pannack's portrait because she looked 'sad' which was not reflective of her personality. She was not alone in feeling this way. There was a collective unease at the muted sadness of the portrayals and the pervasively sombre mood that coloured the photographs overall.

The problem of how and where to look in photographs is precariously poised for older women. The 'fall from grace' associated with ageing is produced by the combined effects of reduced collagen which plumps the skin, muscle wasting and gravity. In later life, the naso-labial line from nose to mouth becomes more pronounced and the corners of the mouth are pulled down. Consequently the resting countenance of older women is often read as grim or sad, a phenomenon related to the idea in recent popular culture known as 'resting bitch face' Exacerbated in later life because of facial changes associated with the ageing body, RBF is a gendered term of castigation, despite the equal incidence of sullenness in repose attributed to men. Smiling has been called the instant facelift as it raises the corners of the mouth and the cheeks, counteracting the force of gravity over time etched upon the face. In her book, *Lip Service* (2013: ix), Marianne LaFrance looks at the smile as a 'social act with consequences' (LaFrance, 2013: xiv) and the multiple ways in which they affect the bearers and recipients. LaFrance's study shows that gender expectations affect the smile: women smile more than men and are expected to do so as an affirmation of 'femininity'. Women smile when the task is to reduce hurt feelings, to relax, placate or appease others. Smiles confirm and affirm agreement, attraction, mutuality but they also can work in other ways to antagonise and mock depending on the circumstances. She points to scientific evidence of two separate neural pathways and types of smile – the involuntary and the voluntary – and speculative evidence that the former originally evolved as a 'true indicator of positive emotion' (LaFrance cit Williams, 2012), the so-called Duchenne smile after the French physiologist, Duchenne de Boulogne, and the second as a social defence mechanism when showing a true response may have undesirable consequences such as appearing vulnerable. LaFrance remarks that a non-smiling face is often a cause for concern but is

also 'a remarkable way to gain someone's attention' (LaFrance cit Williams, 2012). In the West, the higher the status of the individual, the less need there is to smile.

Smiles in photographic portraiture developed in the 20th century along with modern dentistry, shutter speed and fast film, and the ability to catch fleeting expressions. The visual rhetoric of the family album secured the cohesiveness of familial identity by showing smiling family members. The smile as a symbol of health, happiness, fitness and erotic appeal took off in 30s and 40s with the stepping up of cinema in response to WW1. The Hollywood star system made the smile fashionable and sexy, a style that is now widely emulated. (Rita Hayworth is credited with being the star to make the wide-open mouth and toothy smile fashionable.) The cheesy smile to camera is a cultural cliché but also an expectation and how people smile is now considered vital to a person's charisma. Professor Colin Jones comments that the expectation of smiling is now so widespread that it is only the passport photo and the painted portrait where smiles do not appear though the sexual rhetoric of a smouldering look generally involves a challenge or invitation to the gaze, which may be expressed as a pout or open lips (2014). He argues that since the selfie phenomenon, there is an increasing move away from smiling to the sulky 'trout pout'. (Sabur, 2017) But Pannack's attempts to avoid the smiling 'golden' face of age, has difficulty avoiding an oppositional reading and the persistent and ubiquitous stereotype of the sad 'old bag' a term acutely felt as castigation.

Ruth Shade recounts the long socio-cultural history of jokes about the 'old bag', the ageing woman who is now deemed ugly.

> 'I had your wife for nothing' [says one man to another].
>
> 'More fool you [comes the reply]. I'm her husband; I have to have the ugly bitch. You don't.' (Holt, 2008: 13)

Joke number 263 from *The Philogelos* (or *Laughter Lover*) is at least 2,300 years old but it sounds if not modern, at least a recent and familiar narrative still echoed throughout recent culture, as for instance, Ian Fleming's description of Rosa Klebb (see page 119).

Participants, though impressed with the quality of Pannack's photography, were critical of their portrayals which they felt showed them as sad, 'sagged and bagged' (Richards,

2012), portrayals that were at odds with many of their fun-loving personalities. In her paper, Richard's responds to this criticism by arguing that Pannack's images constitute a critical challenge to the 'positive' pole of ageism because they are unsmiling. These images, she claims, constitute a challenge to representational norms because people equate unsmiling with unhappiness for older women. Deadpan and frontality are associated with a quasi-ethnographic style of portraiture in art photography and gallery practice, as can be seen in work by artists like Rineke Dijkstra, Gillian Wearing, Thomas Ruff and others as well as in fashion photography which often follows artistic trends. This may have been the serious effect that Pannack was hoping to produce in her images that would raise the value of the image to the level of art and set it apart from the capture associated with the family album. However, without an adequate narrative structure that can address the difficulties with various stereotypes that attach to ageing femaleness, the pictures seem at odds with the aims of the project.

Figure 42: Carol, 'Look at Me!' (2012) Laura Pannack

The photograph of Carol above illustrates the problem where the combination of serious face to camera, frontal pose, Elizabethan dress and a ruined landscape combine to simultaneously comic and anachronistic effect. Although Carol is wearing her work clothes, depicting a woman in an archaic costume, rather than defamiliarising age, risks confirming familiar expectations of old-fashioned eccentricity – old people in 'old style

hats and coats' (Larkin, 2001), anachronistic and out of step with the present. The title, *Look at Me*, read against this image takes on a somewhat surreal signification – the bewildered figure out of time adrift amongst the ruins.

A sense of spectrality is particularly enhanced when other photographs are introduced within the frame lending an air of forlornness, the subject looking back at *temps perdu,* a trope, which in the context of the project title *Look at Me!,* does not suggest immediacy or dynamic encounter. Gilson notes that in photography,

> 'The mere fact of being there, for both people or things, can attain a degree of forlornness which confers upon them an archetypal value whose memory the photographer wishes to substantiate. It remains to be seen whether the image is really achievable.' (1966: 39)

If loss and the photograph have inextricable links it is a connotation shared with the losses accrued over a long life. This almost monotone image (*Figure 22*) from the project has a woman in a bedroom looking down at a framed photograph (the past made immediate, absence present). Because we join her in an intimate domestic space – alone on a double bed – the assumption is that the photographs she holds are of people intimate or dear to her. The direction of her eye line suggests that she is reflecting on times gone by (see page 144). The image can be read as a narrative portrayal of the solitariness of ageing, the depiction of a domestic setting framed through a gentle but stoic nostalgia.
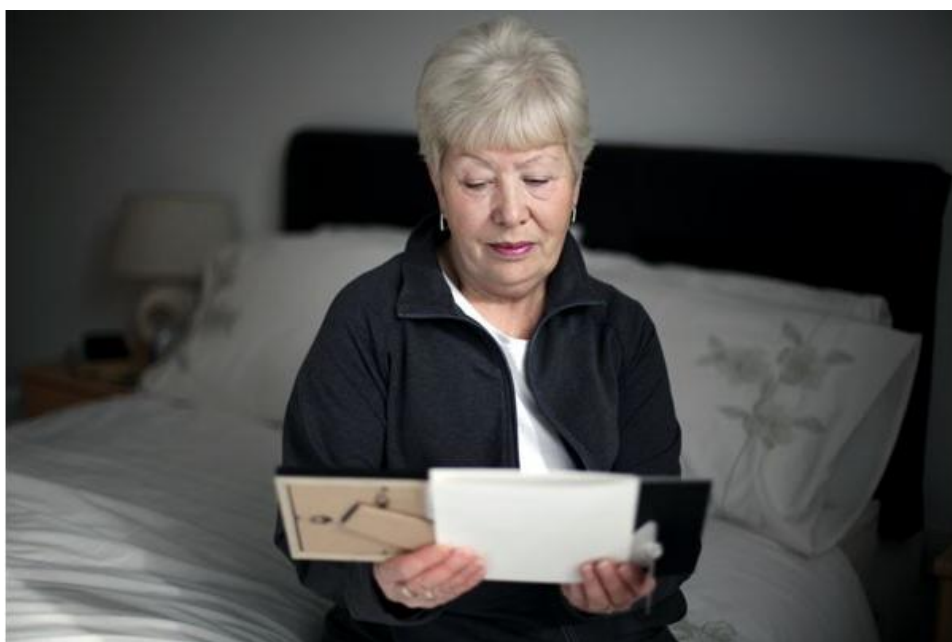
In her essay on the project, Richards positions Pannack's work as a permission to mourn because they depict women in a state of grief or loss. These images, she argues, run contrary to mainstream media where 'Grief and loss are not often captured on camera, and images which show these emotions are seldom seen in the media.' (2012: 70). Her statement disregards the widespread use of documentary images of trauma where mourners are often pictured with, holding or near to, pictures of their lost loved ones as a *memento mori*. (See also section 3.3, page 36.) This trope is ubiquitous though not necessarily linked to age *per se*, as losses can occur throughout the life course. However, her reading of mourning does not tally with the depictions. In Figure 43, Elaine may be actively engaged with the photograph, but we see her seated figure in a moment of contemplative reflection. June in Figure 41 is portrayed in a static image of contemplation in which there is a detached and pervasive mood of melancholy. Neither image suggests the active state of grief or a transitional state of mourning.

Kathleen Woodward writes that loneliness and loss is the primary association with old age. Old age is constituted in the popular imagination as an abiding and inescapable state of depressive inertia formed in response to an overwhelming increase in physical and emotional losses accrued over time, a negative societal view of ageing as 'a period of inevitable and crippling losses' (1993: 82). This is a view devoid of the creativity associated with active processes of mourning, where the inevitable cycles of loss that punctuate the rest of life are experienced as spurs to creative renewal and transformation. Instead, the losses of age construct the old as living in relation to memories of a past that had more life enhancing activity than the present. As age increases, these times of transition and adjustment are cumulative, marking time as a series of losses onto the ageing figure. Pannack's images do nothing to challenge that view, they do not provide the viewer with an active experience of mourning but rather a depiction of retrospective melancholy. Her avoidance of purely maternal roles of care moves the images away from hackneyed stereotypes such as the 'nanas that knit' (2009) and, in marked contrast to the other works within the project, Pannack does not attempt to portray 'feminine' beauty as masquerade and avoids the abject. But a pervasively melancholic mood that emanates from the work individually and overall attaches to the

subject of ageing femaleness, implying that it is a passive and motionless end, devoid of the critical cackling dynamism of the shapeshifting hag and the energy and humour it is easy to hear expressed in the women's comments. 'Sagged and bagged' is a brilliant and funny summation of their capture and precisely the dynamic energy missing from the images. Pannack provides us with a beautiful aesthetic but, like Harriet Walter's project, without a sufficient critical address to challenge the narratives circulating around photographic imagery of older women.

9.3. Upending the Subject – Monica Fernandez, *Before and After*

Monica Fernandez was commissioned to work with the sheltered housing at Guildford Grange because of her previous work exploring beauty and female appearance within a domestic setting. Fernandez describes her interest as observational and playful rather than politicised or critical, using photography to re-interpret mundane scenes where 'the ordinary becomes extraordinary and the grotesque and the beautiful might hug each other' (Fernandez, 2012). The women from Guildford Grange were in residential care and photographing them within their everyday institutional setting was problematic. The NDA project had at its core the United Nations call for images that did not depict women as stereotypically dependent or weak (2002). But a specific aspect of the brief was a realist element, that women should be shown 'as they are, doing what they do' albeit in a stylistically interesting way – a difficult brief for Fernandez to navigate, under the circumstances. Issues for these women centred on mobility – several of the participants were wheelchair bound – and community ties, rather than individual appearance, which they treated light-heartedly as irrelevant. Searching for an angle, she picked up on a resident's comment included in the brief, 'We're too old to take ourselves seriously'. (Richards, 2012: 72) And in a conceptual leap, decided to stage a pastiche, a 'failed' makeover. Setting up a makeshift studio in the centre, she photographed the participants first 'as themselves' and then with a variety of props: colourful ill-fitting clothes, clumsy makeup, and ridiculous wigs. The resulting images were displayed in diptych binaries as 'before and after' images.

Figure 44: Kathleen, 'Look at Me!' (2012) Monica Fernandez

The split image – photographs of the same individual presented in diptych (or triptych as in Harriet Walter's project) or the split face – are an overwhelmingly persistent trope of age, which is dependent on juxtaposition for the evaluation of meaning. Although Fernandez avoids the primary trope of ageing – showing youth and old age together – framing the project within the critical framework of makeover culture invites the audience to make judgements on these women solely based on their bodily appearance and personal style. This act does not privilege the 'made under' image but shows it as a divided issue – a material representation of a double bind – suggesting that both somehow fail to deliver what the viewer expects to see but without any critical mechanism for reappraisal. To compound the difficulties with her artistic strategy, the inconsistencies in Fernandez's approach played out when one participant was made under to fit within the parameters of the project. (See Figure 45.) (This image no longer appears within the display of the project.) If the aim is to ridicule a culture of 'feminine' masquerade, it tacitly suggests older women who choose or feel obliged to present themselves within these codes in later age are not only considered ridiculous – mutton dressed as lamb – but apolitical.

Angela McRobbie, in her analysis of post-feminism and symbolic violence in contemporary British society, argues that visibility now underpins a neo-liberal model of independent female citizenship. The media enables and actively creates spaces for a public enactment of underlying class tensions and intra-female aggression based on corporeal criticism. Consumer culture is projected via a media makeover culture, which affects and is, in turn, supported by the regulating state apparatus, becoming the accepted norm and undermining the seriousness of society. (2009) By presenting a 'failed' makeover without any critical strategy to make the scaffolding of the gaze apparent, Fernandez merely inserts these images into a familiar culture of adjudication in which both images fail to impress. Presented within an institutional setting, it lends the images an authority that is problematic and divisive.

Figure 45: Name Unknown, 'before' (left), 'after' (right), 'Look at Me!' (2012) Monica Fernandez

Erwin Olaf's *Mature* plays on a similar idea. Olaf deploys his mature models within the high gloss codifications of the advertising regime – sophisticated use of light, set, costume, pose and wardrobe – to satirise the codifications of a sexually provocative gaze. The images are captioned with the first names of famous supermodels – *Cyndi C* (Cyndi Crawford), *Claudia S* (Claudia Schiffer), *et al* – at once implying an intimacy

and a lack of authority of the subjects. The project mocks the codes of 'femininity' and the apparatus of consumerist exchanges of desire but is not supportive of the women it deploys, rather it makes apparent underlying readings that attach to the appearance of older women. These are not 'alternative' images. The critical aim of these images is targeted at industry norms and the bodies of older women that are read in particular ways. Olaf, however, does not use 'ordinary' women to makeover, and makes apparent where the phantasy, played out on the bodies of his models, ends.

Figure 46: Cindy C, 'Mature' (2009) Erwin Olaf

Like *Pretty Ribbons*, one particular image from Fernandez's work stood out for the team, becoming a signature image for the entire project. This was a 'before' picture of Hermine on her mobility scooter, legs in the air, head thrown back, eyes closed and mouth open. The image has been generally interpreted as Hermine in the throes of orgasm, the 'joystick' of the scooter acting as phallus, though it is unclear whether she is howling with ecstasy or pain. The image has been interpreted as a comic pose although this was not Hermine's intention. 'It wasn't supposed to be a happy pose, it was a pose "oh, I've had it now" kind of thing.' (Richards, 2012: 72) A therapeutic act of pent up frustration and release not pleasure. Not only does this not read in the resulting image –

exasperation appears as a somewhat unhinged sexual release – neither does it fit within the supposed naturalism of the 'before' shot. As a diptych the effects are confusing. As a single image, it has proved equally, if not more, problematic for viewing audiences – for what and whom does it represent? Fernandez's frustration with the mechanism of the consumerist system is projected onto the frustrated body of her participant, turned turtle, on the immobility scooter. Read from a psychoanalytic perspective as a reflection of the photographer's performativity, it is a troublingly sexualised representation that is suggestive of behaviour associated with mental illness rather than 'having fun'. What may have been a carnivalesque act of resistance in the moment of performance, seen from the perspective of the viewer, looks like pleasure in submission. Fenandez's privileged access to a therapeutic release turned towards the audience does not critique the system in favour of older women; it makes them a target for a youthful gaze. Similarly to Cumming's project with Harris, Fernandez's desire to master the frustrations and inadequacies of a social gaze is worked out on the body of an older woman. And also in a similar way to Cumming's work, it is difficult identify with this image, which seems highly exploitative, regardless of whether it was a woman who produced it or whether the participant was having 'fun'. Jeurgen Teller makes an arse of himself in front of Charlotte Rampling in a not dissimilar pose, but ultimately, it is he in charge of the camera and image and playing the fool against the narrative of a famously beautiful older woman who is not isolated in the frame, bound by the constraints of a mobility scooter, orthopedic shoes or conventions of female beauty. Issues of trust and projection become problematic for this is not self-parody, it is the playing out of a conceptual construct in which Fernandez's older women appear foolish and out of control.

Figure 47: Hermine (Before), 'Look at Me!' (2009) Monica Fernandez

9.4. Enacting Therapuetic Release: Rosy Martin – a Phototherapeutic Approach

Figure 48: Jude, 'Look at Me!' Led by Rosy Martin

Within the project, Rosy Martin's phototherapy group also produced an image of the world upside down but with a much lighter humorous touch. Martin uses photography as a therapeutic tool for reenactment, a practice she developed with Jo Spence in 1983. Spence and Martin explored the open space of the image as a stage on which to play out 'the inner shame of our ugliness' (Spence et al., 1995) and confront repressive stigma. The resulting practice, phototherapy, arose out of co-counselling, egalitarian attention and the creation of a non-judgemental viewing space. Photographs taken from the family album were employed as prompts for reciprocal reenactment of scenes of trauma to create, 'a non-naturalistic mode of re-presentation which aimed to create "a spectacle" while drawing upon, and yet slightly disrupting, well-known genres of photograph.' (Spence, 1995)

Phototherapy, as defined by Spence and Martin, is a replicable self-help method of using photographic self-portraiture as a starting point for understanding and contestation of current norms and divisions within society, remobilising personal associations by creating counter images as a spur to self-renewal. Women were paired and took turns reciprocally in front and behind the camera. In this image, one of the participants reenacts her girlhood by performing a handstand, demonstrating youthful movement – flexibility as opposed to the stasis associated with older age – as well as a carefree attitude – an antidote to the mourning associated with older age. The act is reminiscent of the ancient myth of the old woman, Baubo (associated with Hecate, see section 2.3,

page 20), who throwing her skirts over her head, exposes her genitals to the mourning Demeter, forcing her to break a laugh as a cure to a melancholy caused by the mother-daughter separation from the youthful Persephone (Doane, 1991). Wollen offers an interpretation of Baubo's exhibitionism as an act outside 'of phallogocentric grammar' (cit Doane, 1991: 66). This act hides the face of the performer, allowing the audience to witness the gesture – kicking up the heels – rather than attaching it to individual identity. But whilst performativity in Martin's group is reciprocally enacted as a game of trust between the women, it is interesting to note that the same polarising tropes were reiterated within these groups as in the other two photographer-led projects. The implication is that 'daughterism' and/or a youthful gaze are intergenerational and internalised – and these recurrent binaries are played out unconsciously in image production regardless of the age or gender of the participants.

9.5.   Conclusions: Carnivalesque/Melancholic – Dualising Polarities?

During our original email exchange in 2011, Richards, the *Look at Me* project researcher, commented that the profound conflict between 'aesthetic and artistic' agendas caused the artists involved to struggle to make the images both aesthetically interesting and conceptually relevant. This tension seemed to me intrinsically the problematic that needed critical examination, for the images were reinforcing a shared vocabulary of underlying meanings that were working in torsion with the project's aims. The formal constraint of the radical brief seemed impossible to manage under the circumstances in which the photographers found themselves and seem to have facilitated the playing out of unconscious dynamics. Perhaps this was due in part to a somewhat naïve attitude of the transparency effect of photographic images as 'self'-evident, rather than the construction of a pair of gazes, and a faith in the ability of women artists' to not only self-interrogate, but also understand the complexity of the discourses and aesthetics they were turning towards an audience.

Peggy Phelan notes the presumptions and underlying difficulties with a left-wing ideology of the visible where the relationship between representation and identity is thought to be linear and smoothly mimetic – you are what you are seen as. (1993: 6) Identity politics in this regime are conflated with visibility rather than with deflating or exposing the inconsistencies and power dynamics of the gaze. Asking artists to avoid

particular tropes becomes a formative constraint that allows unconscious traits to emerge that are equally if not more problematic. Indeed, the constraints of the radical brief and the title of the exhibition appear to amplify and heighten a sense of constraint, which by an oppositional stance tacitly reinforces the dispiriting demarcations of a system for 'ordinary' women that allows for very little mobility.

The explicit avoidance of stereotypical tropes in mainstream representation appears to have exacerbated a return to underlying and unconscious fears, which in the performative exchanges of Pannack's camera lent the images a pervasive stasis and melancholy. An emphasis on good photographic technique and composition, neutral tones, a lack of eye contact, deadpan or wistful facial expression and women pictured alone in subdued settings, contributes to a pervasive sense of pathos and sadness. The use of photographs as a generational link to the past in images of individual women – a recurrent trope in ageing – reiterates underlying narratives that age inevitably mourns losses located in the past and readings of a backward-looking solitary 'self' rather than an individual in continuous reinvention, responding to multiple societal addresses.

A theatricalised 'failed' makeover by Monica Fernandez positioned women within the regimes of a beauty discourse. But it was the upturned image of Hermine captured on the handlebars of her immobility scooter, an iconic image for the project, which has proved problematic for many women. What may have been a therapeutic release for the subject appears as a baffling and humiliating act of sexualised submission when turned towards the audience. These carnivalesque works by going too far, seem unwittingly to fall into a binary structuration that figures old women as the 'low Other', thereby strengthening the discursive borders of an ideological binary within the dominant social order which endlessly reproduces itself in the playing out of polarities. Although photography maybe a therapeutic release for some women - like Hermine, Harris and Westwood - they still become target practice for individual criticism on their appearance and sexual display, which returns women to primary discourses of femaleness and beauty.

In her conclusions Richards praises the artists for challenging dualising poles of representation.

> 'Laura's images challenge the 'positive' pole of ageism in that they show older women looking back in poses of melancholic reflection and, critically, not smiling (which people often find challenging because they equate it with unhappiness), while Monica's images challenge the 'negative' pole of ageism, showing not-so-grumpy older women 'having a laugh' and able to poke fun at themselves, at the 'make-over' format, and at the onlookers who are so keen to dismiss them, or to not see them at all.' (2012: 77)

This evaluation seems naïve. Is simply showing someone 'not smiling' a critical challenge to audience perceptions of melancholy? Surely the reason that 'positive' representations are ubiquitous is an underlying dread of appearing sad and therefore dismissed? Pannack's project provides no crisis of looking but a pervasive stasis and persistently melancholy atmosphere which overshadows individual portrayal, affirming rather than challenging fears of loss, a primary trope of old age, and locating it 'close to home' in portrayals of ordinary women. Fernandez's pastiche makeover plays into systems of adjudication of the appearance of women. Whether women look happy or sad in these depictions does not alert the audience to the difficulties in image production and the discourses underlying visual representation or why these images are uncomfortable or so easily dismissed. What Richards praises – 'challenges' which cluster around a dualising spectrum of representations of older women – seems indicative of what Stallybrass describes as the flexible action of an 'operative ambivalence' (1986: 5) that maintains and strengthens the demarcatory borders of the status quo and thereby an age ordering system that constrains images of older women. However, in accord with my findings, Richards concludes, that ultimately, despite the radical intentions of the brief, these two projects do not seem to be able to address an underlying problematic of polarising representations and meanings that attach to photographs of older women and that the politicised aims of the project – to provide a critical challenge to visual media and alternative images to those circulating in mainstream culture – failed to navigate the complexities of the discourses which underlie visual representation and the performative dynamic of the photographer/subject relationship.

9.6.   Postscript – In Exhibition

The four projects which made up *Look at Me!* were shown together in exhibition in Sheffield. Large-scale images were professionally produced and framed along with

contextual information – video diaries and other commentaries – including oppositional quotes from the participants on images that they did not like. The diversity of approaches arrayed around the space gave a diverse and multi-faceted impression overall. Certain images – like the Hermine scooter shot – were still difficult and problematic, overwhelming the gentler funnier images within the show. As I walked the exhibition, I was gripped, however, not by the images but the energy in the room, which was vibrant, sometimes riotous – fierce, funny, loud – sometimes reflective, quiet, considered. Women were deep in conversation and critical appraisal, rehearsing and altering their positions in these discussions as they tried to make sense of the images they saw and when I came away from the event, somewhat troubled by certain aspects of the project, it was this impression that provoked my interest. These conversations seemed to me more engaging than the pictures on the wall.

This third case study concludes my research and critical analysis into the aesthetic practices and performative issues of three projects portraying ageing women. In the next chapter, I present *Hagging the Image* (2015), my response to the issues I have encountered in my study.

10. *Hagging the Image* (2015)
A Theatre-In-The-Round of Photography
(as a Method of Evoking, Working Around & Unleashing the Dynamic Power of the Hag on Visual Media)

In this chapter I discuss the conceptual strategies that underpin my filmwork, *Hagging the Image* (2015), and following these draw together my findings and conclusions in the final chapter of the thesis. My film installation is my critical response to the issues discussed throughout this study. A critical conceptual model utilising photography needs to address the complexity of issues of performativity, transparency, and the historical and aesthetic traditions that combine to constrain and limit the practices and meanings attached to visual representation of older women in still photographs. My research has shown that images of older women follow a number of clichés that reinforce negative social perceptions of older women which are often worked out unconsciously in photographic practice by both photographers and subject, typically resulting in representations that work at opposite ends of a spectrum between discourses of aesthetic beauty and carnivalesque reversal. These polarising tropes of representation work to confirm and reassert a combined sexist-ageist youthful gaze and patriarchal set of power relations enshrined in conventions of depiction of women and the valorisation of youth and beauty in Western culture.

Feminist discourse has indicated the political efficacy in disruption of viewing pleasure. According to Mulvey, throwing the scopophilic regime into flux compromises the security of the viewing position, providing the ground for power to move, agency to erupt, new possibilities for identity to emerge. But feminist art critic Peggy Phelan, warns that the inherent problems and limitations to visual representation as a political goal of the Left is seemingly impervious to the problematic of the visual so successfully articulated by Mulvey and other feminist film theorists in the 70s and 80s. The obvious political need for representation of overlooked minorities notwithstanding, she argues for a much more nuanced relationship to the visual (1993: 6, 2014) stressing the need for art sensitive to the discourses of psychoanalysis that consciously negotiates the trap of visibility and the summoning of symbolic systems with its accompanying appetite for possession, categorisation and dismissal; a warning echoed by Kathleen Woodward in

relation to the cultural construction of a youthful gaze.[15] Bearing all these factors in mind, for the purposes of my project it was necessary to find a theatrical staging that could address the complacency of the viewing position of the spectator. Looking for a model, I drew upon my own background as an actress in the seventies and the concept of theatre-in-the-round.

10.1.   Theatre-in-the-Round

Theatre-in-the-round as a spatial arrangement began in the US in the 1940s but it was not until the late sixties and early seventies that the conceptual political dimension of theatre-in-the-round came to the fore. Theatres presenting politically activist and community work, utilised staging 'in the round' to emphasise a theatre that sprang from within, and was accessible to all members of the community. (Notably, the Cockpit, the Royal Court and the Orange Tree in London, the Manchester Royal Exchange, the Bolton Octagon, the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough and the New Vic Theatre in Newcastle Under Lyme.) Although the idea of theatre-in-the-round has its basis in the mediaeval tableaux and pageantry of the mystery plays and to a certain extent in the Graeco-Roman amphitheatre, modern variants physicalise a theatrical space where no backstage area exists, thus dispelling the notion that the play enacted is somehow natural and given, or beyond the control of the audience – an idea which nods at Brechtian ideas of distanciation. This spatial arrangement suggests that the action presented is fundamentally a cultural agreement and that the audience, in their differing positions seated around the arena, call forth the actors into the playing space in order to characterise, play out and reflect on aspects of social interaction and the consequences of certain ways of being within society. The empty space of the central playing area invites mobilisation of the audience imagination, whilst seeing across the auditorium reminds audience members that what is played out is a construction, in part, of one's own imagination. Thus, there is a sense of political responsibility to examine one's own position in relation to what is being played out and acknowledge the perspective of others arranged in different viewing positions around the stage area.

There is a surprising dearth of material on the politics of The Round. R G Gregory, now in his late eighties, is possibly the only theatre practitioner and playwright to write

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[15] See section 3.3.

extensively on the politics of The Round. I draw on his unpublished manuscript for this thesis. He contends that the power of this kind of theatre 'has less to do with behaviour and outward manifestation than with the release of inner worlds' that only this combination of language, movement and an audience-defined central space 'can conjure up' (2014). The privileged position of the declamatory actor, divided from audience in proscenium staging, is destabilised in this spatial arrangement where actors necessarily have to turn their backs on some members of the audience, who, in turn, can see each other across the empty space. This arrangement was crucial in breaking down the auratic privilege of proscenium framework where plays appear as a closed set of forces, thinks Gregory. It is a view shared by Stephen Joseph, theatre director and a pioneer of theatre-in-the-round in the UK, who talks of the civic value of The Round as an intimate space that breaks down the creative divide between players and audience. Creative drama, he conjectures, holds the possibility that individuals function better under the guidance of their own authority. The bare staging of The Round enables the release of some of the controlling aspects of production by the producer/director to facilitate a freer creative response from actors and audience (1968:135), providing a starker and distilled space in which 'certain aspects of civilised behaviour can be worked out, understood and, perhaps, advanced.' (Joseph, 1968:134). This aspect of theatre-in-the-round seemed particularly relevant to my own search for a theatrical structure that could expose my own performative role in its creation but with careful adjustments to take into account the difficulties with the camera apparatus and the challenge that the youthful gaze represents.

10.2.   The Circle & the Cyclic

Gregory's conceptions of time and temporality in The Round also seem to answer certain problematic issues about linear chronological and cyclical time which I was seeking to address. (See 4.1, Mulvey's ideas on linear temporal narratives on page 48. Also, pages 36 and 103.) According to Gregory, theatre-in-the-round draws on the origins of theatre as ritual enactment of the mysteries and representation of the cyclical round of life from conception to regeneration. In this vertical model the temporal is an inadequate expression of eternal processes in flux which are unaffected by death or limitation and are therefore uncontainable, unlike a linear chronology, where certain points along the lifecourse are privileged. Gregory contends that in the vertical

spatial/temporal realm evoked by The Round, all stages of the life course have equal weight and potentiality as all figurative characterisations are inadequate representations hinting at larger processes that are constantly in dynamic motion and with the potential to transform and renew. This vertical temporal model is, therefore, fundamentally inclusive and egalitarian, he argues. From the perspective of my thesis, The Round is therefore, a model that has the potential to challenge the privileging of youth and the constraints imposed by a linear horizontal chronology (Gullette, 2004), providing the opportunity to examine the inconsistencies of our relationship to youth and age as points on a timeline in the vertical time of theatre space.

Figure 49: Theatre-in-the-Round

Along with the concepts underpinning The Round, I also drew on a history of women's circles and a tradition of roundtable discussion as multivocal egalitarian practices, as well as touching on the connotations of the coven, as sites with the potential for transformation. Second wave feminism drew on a tradition of talking circles and lessons from the civil-rights movement in the US. In *My Life on the Road* Gloria Steinem remembers her first experience in one of these groups,

'It was the first time I witnessed the ancient and modern magic of groups
in which anyone may speak in turn, everyone must listen and consensus
is more important than time.' (cit Kramer, 2015)

Concepts of roundtable discussion and women's circles reach back to roots in ancient myth, most familiar in the Arthurian legends, but common to ritual gatherings of various communities. Feminist writer and activist, Starhawk, writes on the ritual practices of Wicca, common also to Celtic Witchcraft and Native American earth-based traditions, from the perspective of being a practicing witch rather than as an academic. In *Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority and Mystery* (1988)*, she talks about the traditional practice of casting a circle as a ritual space in which to contact Goddess energy and banish unwanted influences. In the sacred space of the coven,

'The circle symbolises our equality. Everyone can see everyone else;
there is no head nor tail, now is attention focused on one speaker.
Everyone can speak in the circle, and attention can move easily and
naturally around.' (1988: 104)

Ritual boundaries, she contends, 'can create a "liberated zone" of the spirit' (1988: 149) and become a political act. Having been cleansed from unwanted influences, the circle then becomes a space for new thinking. She uses the Women's Peace Camp at Greenham Common as an example of this kind of ritualised reclamation of a space.

In *Crones Don't Whine* (2003), Jungian therapist, Jean Shinonda Bolen also talks about the potency and resistant collective power that women's circles represents,

'The power to resist the collective comes from being in a small circle
with like-minded others. It allows us to keep on in the face of ridicule or
opposition that we don't know what we are talking about, or don't belong
wherever it is that we want to be. (2003: 105-6)

10.3.   Working Around a Central Absence

Following on from the idea of using theatre-in-the-round as a conceptual and spatial basis for my piece, I set to work to find a photographic strategy that could somehow represent older women and simultaneously evade the 'trap of the visual' (Phelan, 1993) whilst keeping the audience focused on the subject.

In a recent paper, Kathleen Woodward, speculating on how we can learn to see older women differently, argues that a contingent strategy may be to 'evacuate' the stage or screen (or photograph) of youth and of men so that a normative youth-old age system and the sex-gender system is diminished (2006: 167), allowing more complex narratives to emerge on their own terms. A similar methodology was utilised in the 1930s film, *The Women*. Originally a stage play, *The Women* was a film made in 1939 by George Cukor with a large cast (130 speaking roles) entirely composed of women. A comedy of manners, it focuses on a group of wealthy socialite white women from Manhattan. The script, by Clare Booth Luce (1903-1987) is complex, witty, acidic and phenomenally fast-paced. Luce was compared to Evelyn Waugh for her 'bitter humour' and epigrammatic one-liners. She learnt her trade writing captions at *Vogue* before rising to become Associate Editor and then Managing Editor of *Vanity Fair*, later becoming the first female ambassador and later a US Congresswoman.

The action centres on a beauty parlour where a nail technician relays gossip between the main protagonists. Key themes are the ideal woman, marriage and female friendships. Conversation revolves around 'feminine' strategies to find love and secure a partner, making the missing man the object of their desiring gaze and central to the action. In the last scene the gigantic shadow of the heroine's philandering husband is projected onto the wall of the family home. As she runs to him, the status quo is restored and the story ends. The film was shot in black and white but includes as its central scene, in another radical move for the time, a fashion show shot in Technicolor. The mute mannequins displaying an idealised femaleness are thus singled out for 'poetic' attention and raised on the catwalk runway above the heads of the speaking women in a symbolical display of transcendent statuesque beauty – a *tableaux vivante*.

Luce uses discourses of 'feminine' beauty as a Trojan horse to acidly observe the lethal dynamics of sexual politics played out between women eager to secure a male gaze. Contingent to its time, the razor-sharp wit of the dialogue is thus directed towards a conservative internalised feminine politics and class distinctions that delimit normative relationships rather than the radical disruption of a patriarchal order and political dynamics that kept women in their place. Nevertheless it questions the available roles for women in an order defined by men. Two elements, in particular, act as constraining

factors: firstly, the inclusion of the fashion show as the centrepiece of the film elevates the mute models above the 'ordinary' women in the film, setting the boundaries of an order of female beauty and secondly, the focus of the piece revolves around the powerful central character who is male – we could read this absent central figure as the director, Cukor, invisibly orchestrating the women around his own desiring gaze. As a dramatic device, it very effectively recruits the audience imagination on the omnipresence of the unseen man; so although there are no men in the film, the women are still effectively satellites orbiting a masculine central force as indicated in the parenthesis of the full title – *The Women (It's all about men!)*.

More recently, Rosanna Arquette used a similar evacuating strategy in her documentary, *Searching for Debra Winger* (2002). Known for her critical and outspoken dissatisfaction with roles for women, Winger gave up acting at the height of a glittering career. Arquette explores why, chasing the cause of her disappearance through a series of conversational interviews with well-known working actresses (and one man) who offer varying perspectives, anecdotal experience and personal speculation on Winger's exit from the public arena. The film culminates in an interview with Winger who explains that her exit was a conflict between public scrutiny and a normal domestic life that was impossible to reconcile. A year later, Winger's long-awaited return to the screen went almost unremarked.

Arquette's film is almost entirely peopled by women, evacuating men from the screen and interrogating public scrutiny, motherhood and relationships 'in the round' from a plurality of female viewpoints. (The question of an ageing appearance comes up indirectly in conversation as a limiting factor in diminished roles for older women.) The film succeeds in holding the audience attention as it chases Winger's disappearance through conversation, a structure that provides a locus for the conversation and dramatic tension. However, the conventional ending is something of a disappointment as it fails to adequately critique the politics of a system for the actresses within it, suggesting instead it is a straightforward choice between a personal and a public life. As a conceptual strategy, however, it successfully holds together performative viewpoints, bringing together public and private personas of the actresses interviewed and holding the audience attention around the missing woman in the way of a whodunit. Both these

pieces successfully focus and engage with women as politically active players in their own right. The action in both revolves around the absence of a central character. This indirect strategy – holding the main player offstage but central to the plot – enables the audience imagination to mobilise in the evacuated absence of visible detail, instead an imaginative collective portrait is built around the character through conversational dialogue.

Wim Wenders' tribute to Pina Bausch, *Pina* (2011), also offers a portrait around the absence of its central 'character'. Bausch died whilst the film was in production. Memories and anecdotes are voiced over by the dancers as the camera circles individual company members seated alone in a room. Wenders' film intercuts dance theatre with documentary footage, an interplay between a poetics of theatre and the performative address of the documentary which honours Bausch's theatrical legacy. Bausch stripped away superficiality in theatrical presentation – bare staging, pared down costuming – to focus on the reiterated gestures and dynamics of sexual exchange. David W Price comments that what distinguishes Bausch is her development of an art form based upon a binary opposition that does not reproduce an either/or dichotomy but a dialectical theatricality by setting in motion two components: in part performance – 'made up of the realities of the imaginary' and in part theatrical 'made up of specific symbolic structures' (cit Féral, 1982: 178) which are played out upon the bodies of the dancers, exploring the construction of gender as both expressive and performative.

Wenders translates these concepts to a filmic platform weaving together performance and performativity, staging dance pieces within the theatre arena which is at times lit to show the auditorium as well as in 'real' urban settings, together with documentary portraits in which the dancers speak from their personal experience about the effect of Bausch's work on them as individuals. These symbolically combine to make Bausch's influence central and pervasive. Like the other films, we chase the absence of the protagonist through her work and its effect on all the participants. Unlike *The Women*, in Wender's film, he shares the central role of the unseen director with Bausch, a woman whose influence is experienced from a variety of perspectives and vantage points.

Drawing on these examples for my own piece, I utilised a combined strategy of evacuation: an absence of men – the film is made up only of older women working a central absence: a fully faceted representation of the older woman. The evacuation of the central 'character' facilitates the mobilisation of the audience's imagination as a tool to explore the absent image from their own perspective building a portrait that has personal meaning without providing a material image.

These elements – a theatre-in-the-round working around a central absence – formed the basis of my practical methodology. Whilst withholding the image from the main action of the film, I looked for a way to present still media images that could evade the tendency for audiences to become transfixed by the image of the ageing female subject and project unconscious hostility and aggression onto the ageing female subject.

10.4.   Montage & Female Muliplicity

Photographer and artist, Roni Horn's serial portraits of Helene Cixous and Isabel Huppert theatricalise female identity by asserting the futility of a single image to express anything more than a fragmented and transient reality. In both projects Horn plays on the image as text and index, and the portraiture session as a conversation between sitter and artist, a game of hide and seek where her desire to capture the femaleness of the other results in a seemingly endless array of pictures.

Helene Cixous is renowned for her *ecriture feminine,* in which she challenges, remobilises, destabilises phallocentric symbolism and meaning, overflowing constraints and form of text to wrestle with the gender distinctions of literature and text. Horn's 'texts' play on this idea of 'feminine' elusiveness, the evasion of capture, constant reinvention. Cixous is only lightly fastened down, the photographs are close up, pared down, clipping the top of the head, the face entering from different sides of the page or print, turning this way and that, are seemingly difficult to hold in place in the frame. The catalogue with these multiple takes becomes like a flick book, the framed face flickering almost into motion. The viewing transaction and the idea that the portrait can contain the person are destabilised in the chase after an image. Horn chases Cixous' face, the desire for another face and another image endlessly reproducing itself. Horn's desire for intimate contact with her subjects is never satisfied or complete. Horn's project eschews

the idea of categorisation and singularity both of which are essentialised in aesthetic discourses of female beauty and the value of the artistic object – in Horn's images beauty if addressed at all, is dealt with indirectly as symptomatic rather than problematic.

In *Portrait of an Image* (2005), Horn and the French actress Isabel Huppert play on the notion of self-impersonation – Huppert finding a particular facial expression for various of her screen roles – which were then played out to camera. These 'essentialised' selves were fictive creations, the actress constructing a temporary identity in a *mise en abyme* of performance as 'a way of showing herself without referring to a central core' (Lebovici, 2009). The studio setting of the images provides no contextual clues. The only loci given to the audience are the women's faces and the titles of the projects. The title of Horn's *Portrait of an Image* deconstructs the indexical relation of photograph to a named individual, suggesting instead that the portrait reflects the image the portraitist seeks to show to herself. And that desire – to see another me – is endlessly reflecting and reproducing itself in serial images, as in Horn's serial photography. The serial image destabilises the idea of the single portrait as a 'special' object offering privileged access and the desire to read a meaning behind or beyond the surface of the image by presenting an assemblage of playful selves, a myriad of multiple expressivities to choose from. All of these relate indexically to the women pictured – authorised by the consent of the sitter and technical prowess and recognised artistic status of Horn – but the assignment of meaning and categorisation is problematised.

Figure 50: 'Portrait of an Image' (with Isabelle Huppert), (2005)
100 photographs in up to 20 sequences of 5, 31.75 x 38 cm / 12 1/2 x 15 in
Installation view, Hauser & Wirth Zürich, 2006

Horn's multiple images deflate the notion that a single image can contain an individual, emphasising the gaps between representations where desire is remobilised. I had noticed during my evaluations of several projects – Harriet Walter's plethora of single images and Sheffield's gallery show – that whilst individual images were problematic, altogether the effect was similar to a film montage where eventually my frustration with trying to find what I was missing in these images blurred to nothingness, but somewhere within the prolonged act of attention, a stronger impression of what was elusive and missing from the picture had formed in my mind's eye. This effect reminded me of Barthes' search for the image of his mother in *Camera Lucida*.

Barthes describes leafing through a sheaf of old photographs in search of a 'just image' of his mother. Along the way, he sees pictures that describe her 'crudest identity, her legal status', as well as numerous analogues which show a 'likeness' of individual expression and finally a coincident moment of complete personal recognition, 'there she is!' Barthes describes his experience as a 'kind of metamorphosis' where all the previous images he'd viewed became 'so many masks' that vanished to leave behind 'a soul, ageless but not timeless', consubstantial with the face he had seen and loved throughout her lifetime. (2000: 109-110)

We could wonder if Barthes had only ever seen this one particular image whether his experience would have been the same or whether the many images he dismisses as 'not Her', provide the ground, attitude and expectation which culminate in the moment of recognition which finally attaches to this image in particular. Horn's multiple images have the same sense of shifting ground and of a quality evading capture evoked through what any single image lacks. But in the flickering between the images the suggestion of a 'self' beyond capture emerges, as if the frames of a film sequence have been singled out and the structure of the viewing mechanism forensically displayed on the museum wall. For the purposes of my project, however, as already identified in the work of Donigan Cumming, using still images could provide a locus for social aggressivity, which I needed to avoid. I conjectured that deploying film within a theatre-in-the-round could provide a sense of a self beyond capture and also the opportunity to address issues of a narrative voice. In this format, reconstituting single still images as a filmic montage might also, evoke a recognition of how together single images build a narrative, whilst simultaneously bring a sense of release from the stasis and capture associated with the deadening effect – the combined morbidity attaching to the photographic image as *memento mori* and the Hag as the face of death – that in still photographic images proves so problematic. (I have always been concerned to provide escape routes for my subjects in quite the opposite way to the practice of Diane Arbus who pinned her subjects like so many 'dead butterflies' within the frame. (cit Rob Marshall, 2014: 215) I wondered if this effect, utilised within a filmic theatre-in-the-round and arrayed around a sense of absence, could work around the difficulties with single images that threaten to transfix the subject and therefore dominate and overwhelm the overall value of a project.

10.5.   In Practice: Workshops and Filming

Having found a conceptual model, I tested its viability in two informal roundtable workshops that I recorded on audio in the Spring of 2013. An early idea had been to use this material as the basis for 'case notes' displayed on a round table, forming part of a gallery installation that included enlarged still images of various older female characters around the walls. However, following my analysis of various other projects as discussed in the case studies in Chapters 7, 8, and 9, displaying a material still image seemed to me intrinsically problematic. It also went against the notion of theatre-in-the-round as a necessarily temporary and ephemeral structure erected for the purposes of playing out

the cultural imaginary as a collective act of community. For this reason, I made the decision to move to film and, initially, to explore the subject from a variety of approaches, some imaginative and others performative. My method was experimental and evolved within the practice of making my artwork as I explored the subject with the participants and in the editing process.

10.6.   Other Filmed Approaches

In this rather extensive section I wish to provide a record of other filmed approaches to my subject, which ended up being cut for various reasons that I shall explain. Not all of these pieces were inherently 'unsuccessful' in terms of my thesis. My purpose in reflecting on them here is to illustrate how the final work evolved out of a messy process of 'spitting out' imagery in relation to theoretical research, as well as to provide, some necessarily brief analyses and reflections on how these worked within the broader scope of my project. I also provide these approaches as a guide and resource for future researchers in the hope that they can pick up these conversations from where I have left off. I have therefore included in the resources an earlier iteration of the film (*Appendix 5)*, which includes many of the pieces described below and my original shooting script, *Appendix 6*.

In the early stages of my research I found my growing awareness of the complexity of the problematic collapsed my practice. Every time an image appeared in my mind's eye and I tried to articulate how that might look in practice, it buckled under the weight of theoretical criticism and I was left with no strategy and no image. I felt effectively gagged and blocked and could no longer pick up my camera. My experience is, of course, not uncommon. Victor Burgin notes the same paralysis his second-year students faced having encountered photographic theory, every time they raised their camera to take a picture, they stopped to ask themselves if it was politically correct. The inevitable result was they stopped taking pictures altogether. His advice was: 'Shoot first, ask questions later.' (cit Campany, 2003) I reflect on that period now and the collapse of my thinking as a vital part of my creative process (resulting in my hypothesis) but it was certainly challenging. Eventually out of that collapse, very slowly, came the beginnings of a new approach, the absence of the image became central to my exploration, as described in section 10.3, as did the need to shift from still imagery to film to counter

the morbidity, transfixing potential and stuck stasis of the still image which compounded negative readings attaching particularly to ageing femaleness. Having made that shift, I decided to stop the self-editing process and explore by making.

Initially, in the Spring of 2013, I held two informal workshops (recorded on audio) with women from two mixed ability dance groups for older women, a local community dance group in Bethnal Green, *the Green Candle Dance Company* and members from *Hot Flush*. From these initial workshops I developed an approach to the filming of roundtable conversations circulating around photographs of older women, which I had drawn from art practices and in the media. Alongside this approach, I also experimented and filmed various other experimental pieces as a way of exploring a variety of theoretical issues I had encountered during my textual research, such as Woodward's second mirror stage (see 3.3, page 37). I discuss these rejected films first before describing the filming and editing process of the roundtable footage, which eventually became the basis of the final piece.

I worked on movement pieces with two dance groups; one of these was eventually dropped for the purposes of the thesis as it played too easily within a melancholic regime of aesthetic beauty. In 2014 I worked with two groups of dancers: *Hot Flush*, a dance group of older women formed by two ex-members of Arlene Phillip's troupe, *Hot Gossip* and *The Green Candle Dance Company* in Bethnal Green under the directorship of Fergus Early OBE, an ethnically diverse community of older dancers aged between 60-90 years old, which includes both working- and middle-class members of all sexes. Early has a background as a dancer at the Royal Ballet Company but has worked primarily in community theatre and theatre-in-the-round. He formed the Green Candle Dance Company in 1987 to provide access to dance for all members of the community. I went to meet the group originally to find a single dancer who could perform a piece centred around long hair in older age.

In the past long hair for women has been a signifier of youth and grey hair a signifier of age. In contemporary British culture grey hair has triggered discrimination against older women in the workplace (Ward et al., 2010) though recently advertisers hoping to recruit older women and the grey pound and dollar have deployed models with long silver hair

as a signifier of 'femininity' and age. Age slippage, however, is addressed by the use of models, who are, in the main, relatively young midlife women. (A recent example is photographer Yasmina Rossi who fronted an M&S Christmas campaign in 2012.) Age here is signified by grey hair and glamour by a radiant complexion. (Another strategy has been to use older women with a easily recognisable and aspirational social status and accompanying narrative that serves to 'caption' their image, such as Vanessa Redgrave in the recent Gucci campaign.) The social stigma attached to grey long hair from menopause to young old age, however, cause many women to hesitate before going grey, making grey hair a relatively uncommon and, therefore, exotic choice in midlife and young old age.
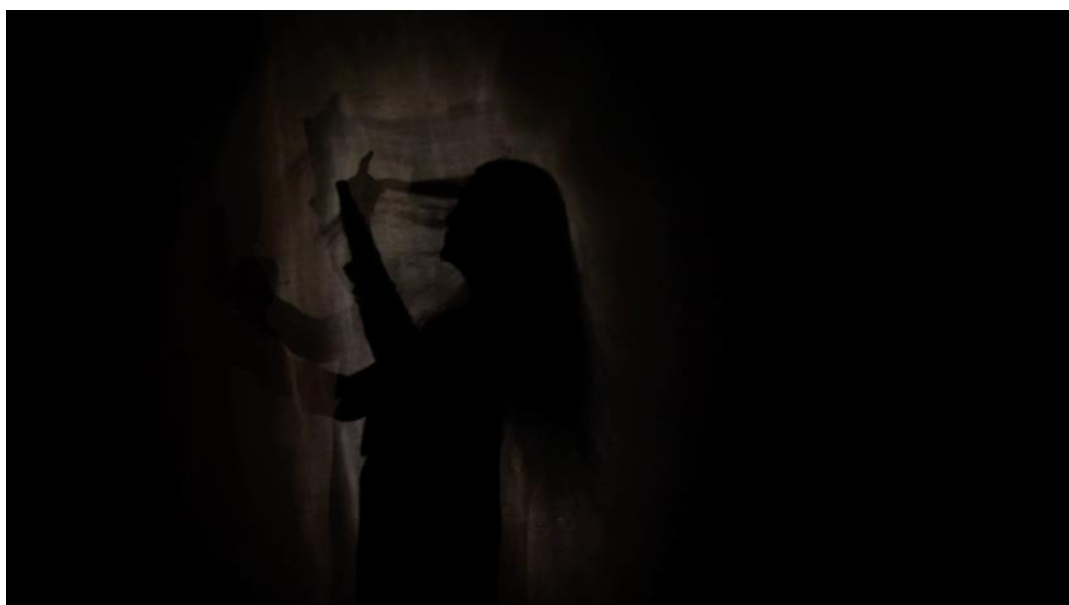
Figure 51: Nina Ezra, Screenshot from 'The Skin You're In' (2014), Sukey Parnell Johnson

Nina Ezra, in her seventies, one of the dancers in the Green Candle company, had waist-length hair which she wore loose, a relatively common occurrence in the Indian culture where she was born and raised, which may partly explain her comfort with her physical appearance in late life. I asked her if she would film an imaginative sequence combing her long silver hair. Against this image of youthful- and female-associated self-styling and maintenance, I wanted to explore Woodward's idea of a second mirror stage. (See section 3.3, page 38.)

During the course of the preliminary audio recordings, two women (both white, one with working-class background and the other middle-class) had described their shock at encountering their ageing reflection in the mirror and in photographs. A choursed refrain to this encounter via the photographic self-image was, 'That's not me.' To explore this, I wanted to explore a second mirror stage in an imaginative visual way that could indicate its social construction. I asked my prop-maker, Patrick Milne, if he could construct a mirror with handles that could 'break' and fragment in a number of pieces. This was to suggest not only the shattering of a previous self image but the idea of it breaking into a multi-faced self-image and performance, an idea drawing on the multi-faceted aspects of the Hag goddess (see 2.3.) and Gullette's notion of multi-aged performance of self (see 3.2). The piece began by women holding the unbroken mirror up to Ezra. As the mirror came apart, the audience see the reflection of the curtains of the theatre, a theatrical *mise en abyme* intended to alert the spectator to the staged and constructed nature of the presentation, and the role of the audience in upholding an image from their own particular vantage point. During the filming of that sequence, as we were turning the whole unbroken mirror towards Nina, it threw up a highly aesthetic shadowy reflection onto the wall of the stage in which she was silhouetted. This shadow play called to mind the allegory of Plato's cave and the Platonic ideal as dimly apprehended. The shadowy silhouette was also intended to show the idea of a loss of gaze and detail in the image as suggested by Woodward. However, it effectively also de-ikonises and aestheticises the appearance of Ezra, deferring power to my directorial vision and therefore to the audience who stand in my place.

Figure 52: Kim Dung Ngo, Connie Wensley, Jean Harwood, Fazeela Dauhoo & Nina Ezra (with back to camera) from the Green Candle Dance Company. Screenshot from 'The Skin You're In' (2014), Sukey Parnell Johnson

Figure 53: Dancers from the Green Candle Dance Company. Screenshot 'The Skin You're In' (2014), Sukey Parnell Johnson

Figure 54: Dancers from the Green Candle Dance Company. Screenshot from 'The Skin You're In' (2014), Sukey Parnell Johnson

I also filmed the group of women by using the camera to circle around the outward looking group. There was a moment where the camera showed three of the women looking in different directions that drew on the triple goddess imagery of the *Moirai*. (See also page section 2.3, page 22.) However, although test audiences found these pieces moving and aesthetically beautiful, it was felt that although there was a collective

power in the allusion to Hecate's women that the downward gaze of the encircled women and the de-ikonised beauty of the shadowplay would overwhelm audience readings and the sequence was put aside.

Figure 55: Dancers from the Green Candle Dance Company. Screenshot from 'The Skin You're In' (2014), Sukey Parnell Johnson

For similar reasons, I chose not to include a film made with actress, Lysette Anthony, dubbed 'the face of the 'eighties' in her teens by photographer, David Bailey. Anthony and I worked on an imaginative piece phrased around the reflected self-image in the mirror and in photographs. My idea was a play on how we overlay previous 'snapshot' images onto older faces as a palimpsest to soften the confrontation with age as if the woman is no longer worthy of view.[16] Anthony and I wanted to question the privilege of youth as beauty. Anthony is highly aware of herself on camera as a 'beauty' and the fall from grace that age is claimed to represent. In her fifties, she is also undoubtedly beautiful. (I am resisting saying 'still beautiful', a phrase associated with a youthful gaze and the idea that beauty has a sell-by date.) Anthony was keen to challenge those perceptions in herself and to claim the resistant power she feels now in later age. However, the ambivalence of her position was played out in private conversation when

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[16] See also section 7.6, page 79.

she spoke, shuddering, of her actress mother, also considered a 'beauty' in her youth, and how hideous she had felt in old age. For the film, we created a visual narrative of approach and retreat to camera. Mirrors, thresholds, and portals have been a strong theme in my photographic work. I use these liminal spaces to draw on the idea of transition and juncture but also as framing devices to alert and make conscious to the viewer the framing of the woman they see and her self-presentation to the camera. In this piece Anthony is shown reflected in a mirror, in a pool and seen through a window. The danger here is, of course, that for some members of the audience, this kind of arrangement precipitates an uncanny response, which forecloses the image.

Figure 56: Lysette Anthony holding a picture of herself as 'the face of the eighties' by David Bailey. Screenshot from 'The Skin You're In' (2014), Sukey Parnell Johnson

In one sequence, Anthony approaches, retreats and returns to a misted window, holding up a lifesize photographic image of herself as a young model in front of her face. The framing of the window was a trope to suggest the proscenium framework of the photographic and the staging of identity, and the transparency of the glass the invisible interface that shapes the transaction between actor and audience. Misting and clear glass made a difference in how we received the face presented, misting – like applying Vaseline to the lens, is an aestheticising practice in photography associated with 'femininity'. I wanted to show the softening effect of overlaid images as kind of

palimpsest that sends the image back in time whilst being composed of many differently aged image-selves which are indivisible and perhaps 'irreducible'. (Solomon-Godeau, 1988: 23); this was to experiment with the notion of depth and layers of images as a way to evoke the indivisibility of a multi-aged self. We dripped water like tears (on set it was dubbed 'the crying window') down the misted window behind which Anthony smiles to suggest that any sadness or melancholic readings were not coming from the subject but were audience projections onto the lost object of youth. The misting of the window softens the image – the lack of detail making the face appear more youthful – but also serves to withhold visual contact and frustrate audience scopophilia. I cut between sharp and soft images to draw attention to the difference between the two treatments but also the audience's role in the meaning-making process. Using a direct frontal address to the camera drew attention to a sense of encounter with the gaze of the audience and an awareness of Anthony as the self-conscious object of the gaze. The effect of this sequence moving between aesthetic treatments, however, split these into different sites and recreated therefore a sense of visual frisson that was transfixing. (See 6.2.)

Figure 57: Actress, Lysette Anthony behind a misted window and 'the crying window'. Screenshot from 'The Skin You're In' (2014), Sukey Parnell Johnson

We also filmed a sequence of Anthony floating photographic images of herself in a pool of water and pushing them away. The intention was to challenge that idea that she would want to hold onto her youthful image. Anthony felt strongly that she wanted to distance and relinquish the image of herself in youth – we used a copy of David Bailey's photograph of her as a teenage model – and that where she is now is stronger, more confident and more powerful than the vulnerable and manipulated young woman she had been then.

*Figure 58: Lysette Anthony about to float photographs in a pool of water. Screenshot from 'The Skin You're In'
(2014), Sukey Parnell Johnson*

In the edit, I cut the sequence to run counter to normal time, running footage backwards
to make the audience question what they were seeing as somehow given or 'natural'.
This included the 'crying window' where tears travelled upwards quite against the laws
of gravity reversing the normal weeping narrative of melancholy, a surreal device
alerting the audience to the construct of what they are seeing. I originally set this
sequence to a piece of cello music, however, the pathos of the piece coloured the mood
and transferred rather too easily to the subject, providing another melancholic reading
which was problematic. I later (following the method I used eventually for the
roundtable sequences) interviewed Anthony and made an audio edit, which was played
over the filmed sequence. A formative moment in Anthony's early career had been
arriving at her first film premiere, the movie *Krull* in which she played the
princess/heroine, only to discover with horror as she was sitting in the audience, that she
had been voiced over by another actress. (She went on to be nominated for an academy
award for her role in Woody Allen's *Husbands and Wives.*) Using her own voice and
speech and being able to talk to her youthful image about being a 'beauty' and the
constraints that represents seemed a particularly appropriate and restorative act to
perform. However, in the final analysis, this sequence, whilst forming part of my
research, was not included in the strategy I employed for the doctoral piece. Its

sequential inclusion in the final piece would have turned the film into a linear narrative, which I decided to reject in favour of a looped film.

Figure 59: My mother actress, Sheila Sweet, as a child and young woman. Screenshot from 'The Skin You're In' (2014), Sukey Parnell Johnson

Drawing on my personal history, I made an autobiographical piece that explored a loss of gaze in relation to the maternal image. I had been questioning invisibility from menopause, midlife and old age in conversation with friends and sitters for some time already and wanted to explore and record a piece around my own experience. As mentioned in the introduction, after my mother's death in 2003, I had found an archive of photographs of her as a young woman. It was striking how she disappears in the photographs from this archive in her late thirties only to reappear at the end of her life when I pick up the camera. I was striking too that my childhood stepmother, American film actress Kim Novak, had also disappeared from the screen around the same age. Although I had no particular desire to put myself in front of the camera, I wanted to include myself in the piece to show that I was not outside of the subject I was exploring and to implicate my own gaze. The treatment centred on me looking at images of my mother and looking back at myself, using the same mirror as Anthony in the sequence above. (A device to connect our gazes and alert the audience to the staged nature of the presentation but also a canny use of shooting time and location.) The sequence begins with the sound of a projector, which projects no image, throwing a white light up to the wall in which my shadow is framed. In this sequence I wanted to imply that the

projected image was unformed, shadowy and unclear and as such was in a process of reformation. It was also a small nod to Plato's cave throwing shadows up to the wall. However, it is my hand controlling the projection and therefore the framing of the image and in this sequence I hold the power. The camera movement, in and out of focus, however, suggests the shaping hand of the photographer/director and the difficulty involved in bringing the self-image into focus. Liz Rideal suggests that self-portraits for women artists are often a way to access and interrogate the self as 'other', 'a self defined in and through representation' (2001: 8) in an attempt to make the self known and understood to the self. (2001: 9) This is certainly true of my own practice where I make images and stage performances in order to reflect on and to myself my own 'optical unconscious'. But it is also a way to control what is beyond my control – in this scenario, the loss of my mother('s)-image and how that it inflects on my sense of myself – and, by being both sides of the camera, release some of the frustration of being caught up in a social gaze. Originally, I had intended to include my own voiceover and a speech (included in the shooting script in *Appendix 6*) I had written in response to the search for my mother's lost years and missing image.) I also asked my former stepmother, Kim Novak, if she would consider voicing over the piece in the role of the glamorous movie star that disappears from the screen in later age. (This was just before the media furore that erupted over her appearance when she came briefly out of retirement to present the Oscar for *Frozen* in 2014.) She politely declined. Listening through to audiotapes of women talking about denying their photographic appearance, I decided instead to use a women's 'chorus' to express different positions and perspectives on photographic self-encounters.

Figure 60: BCU (big close up) of the author, Sukey Parnell Johnson. Screenshot from 'The Skin You're In' (2014), Sukey Parnell Johnson

I did not present this sequence within the final film although I do not consider it unsuccessful. However, it was a meditative slow-paced piece of film and eventually the decision was made to distil footage and use fast cuts as a method to unleash Hag power in the filmwork. Using this piece would unnecessarily interrupt the cyclic nature of the presentation and narrative in a way that would soften and slow its impact.

Figure 61: Carrie Grant under frosted Perspex. Screenshot from 'The Skin You're In' (2014), Sukey Parnell Johnson

I made another imaginative sequence with vocal coach and TV presenter, Carrie Grant who appears in both roundtable discussions. I had made portraits of Grant before for two MA projects on midlife transition and gaze, *Women of an Uncertain Age* and *Through a Glass Darkly*. Grant is well-known for her striking and original self-presentation and we have had an ongoing conversation about beauty, sexuality and self-image over many years. I wanted to explore some ideas with her in a very loose and experimental way around freezing time on the surface of the face but also as a way of connecting to a previous image we made together where she is floating in a derelict swimming pool, which references Millais' *Ophelia*. In that image we subtly recoded aspects of the

original to provide a modern variant. In Millais' image, Ophelia is drowning. In our image, Grant appears to be floating not drowning, suspended in a dreamlike arrangement above the clouds. In my doctoral project, I wanted to explore the Ophelia imagery further but change the perspective.

In some ideas for an installation that would include various experimental film pieces, I had originally thought of embedding a sequence in the floor so that the audience looks down at the image of a woman beneath their feet as if frozen beneath the surface of an iced pool. It was a way of thinking through the requirement to freeze time and the suffocation this represented as an aesthetic constraint on older women and placing them in a subordinate position to a dominating 'downward' gaze. (Rosler, 1992) In practice, this sequence evolved when we had the idea of filming Carrie from both sides of the icy surface, from above- and underwater, to give the footage an added dimension and perspective. The under-the-ice sequence brought to my mind Snow White encased in glass having eaten the poison apple of her jealous stepmother. In the edit, however, I felt the image was too easily appropriated by a youthful gaze without making explicit – or explicit enough – the fetishisation that it represents of youth and beauty combined. To address this, I edited footage as fragments onscreen that never quite fit together to show the constructed nature of a beauty ideal (resting on classical notions of 'femininity') and made up of different fragments joined together by the artist's shaping hand. I alternated this with the underwater footage.

The underwater sequence was not only challenging to film but played out aesthetically in the edit quite differently than I had imagined. I had been quite fascinated (a dangerous sign!) by how this sequence appeared to 'unmask' Grant. The action of the water on her makeup made it resemble a crumbling *Pierrette* white-face mask. In filming Grant had framed and touched her face with her hands, whilst approaching the camera in super closeup, collapsing a 'correct' distance and exposing the masquerade of 'femininity' in a similar way to Suzy Lake's work discussed in 7.5, effectively unmasking Grant and divesting her of her mystery and making the image subject to morbid and sadistic fetishisation.[17] It also evoked negative connotations of female vanity attaching to women who continue to perform themselves in youthful ways in later life without sufficiently

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[17] See Griselda Pollock, page 29.

showing the scaffolding mechanism of the gaze or the social requirement for the maintenance of a 'femininity' that requires this kind of performance. Although there was no emphasis on the naked body, unmasking Grant in this way probably comes some way towards the overkill I describe in Cumming's work in Chapter 7, as it divides her image into binary sites making her vulnerable to hierarchical judgements of taste. It also draws to mind a concept of age as prosthesis that I absolutely did not wish to recreate (Featherstone, 1991), as it suggests a divided self rather than the fluid incorporeality and diachrony I was aiming to evoke.[18]

Possibly the most interesting part of the footage was the serendipitous result of our difficulties in filming. Grant and the camera kept rising to the surface of the pool, which appeared a mirror-like surface until she broke through it. When I looked at this in the edit, I was reminded of Jean Cocteau's film, *Orphée* (1949), where the mirror is used as the analogy for a gateway to the underworld. (Cocteau used a bath of mercury as a mirror-like surface for *Orphée* to reach into. His lead actor, Jean Marais wore gloves to prevent the toxins killing him. It is also interesting to note that in the film Death is a woman, played by the actress María Victoria Casares y Pérez.) When I flipped the footage, instead of rising to the surface, it appeared that Grant was reaching through and falling into a mirror. Highly experimental, these sequences combine to provide visually stimulating and aesthetically beautiful imagery of a beautiful subject but as the purposes of the thesis was to find a methodology that could counteract any tendency for misappropriation and misreading of the footage, I felt that the vulnerability of Grant to a consuming gaze was too difficult to properly manage within this particular context.

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[18] See also Freud's ideas of the uncanny as a prosthesis on page 31.

Figure 62: Carrie Grant 'falling' into the surface of the water. Screenshot from 'The Skin You're In' (2014), Sukey Parnell Johnson
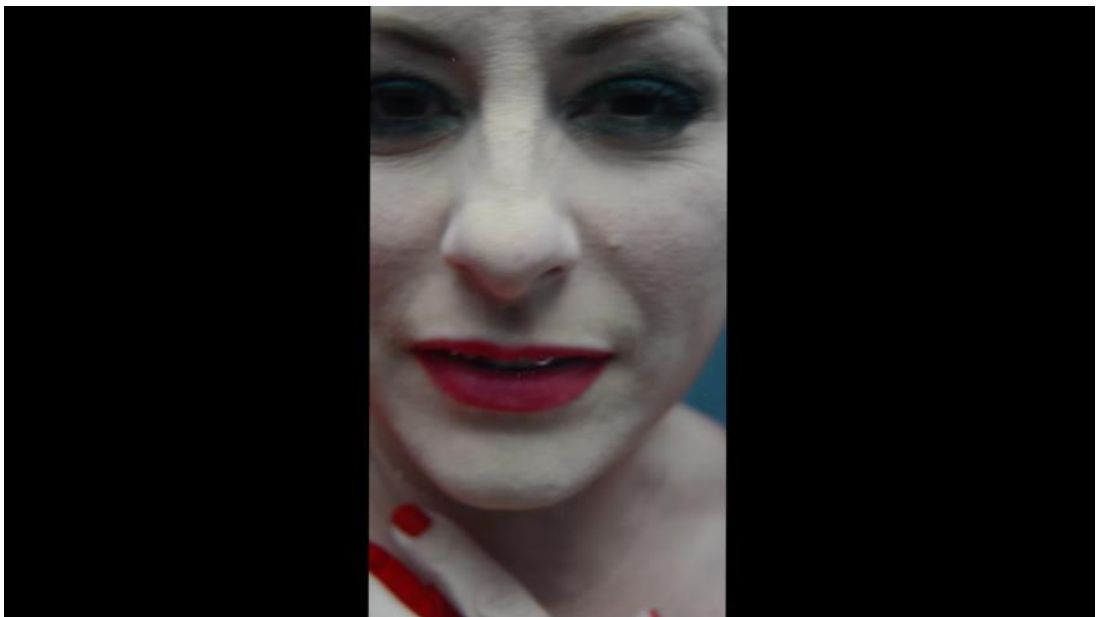

Figure 63: Carrie Grant 'Pierrette' white face filmed underwater. Screenshot from 'The Skin You're In' (2014), Sukey Parnell Johnson

Possibly the most striking footage I made was what came to be known as the Hecate sequence. I had been thinking about age as uglification and psychoanalytic readings of broken and wrinkled skin as representing a deformation to the ego (see page 38). As I've commented elsewhere, luminous skin and radiance are qualities associated with

'femininity' and vitality, a narrative in which wrinkles represent a contradiction. Thinking about the skin as surface reflecting a collective ego, I thought about how often I use silver reflectors in my portraiture; I also thought about the silvering of age and the silver halides, the active ingredient in celluloid film, as they cluster in response to light to create the photographic negative. Silver leaf clings to surfaces to become a second skin that nevertheless shows the contours of the terrain beneath in a highly reflective and luminous way. As a pure experiment, I wondered what it would be like to silver the face of one of the actors. Originally, I had cast an actress who cancelled a day before the shoot; radical activist, Raga Woods (née Tessa Fothergill), who had been a participant in the roundtable discussions, agreed to step in at short notice. Originally, I conceived of this project as a series of still images that showed the silvering of Raga's face, stage by stage. However, I also intended to film the completed transformation under different lighting conditions and from multiple angles as a way of showing the transformation that lighting effects make on different surfaces.

Figure 64: Raga Woods as the silver moon goddess, Hecate. Screenshot from 'The Skin You're In' (2014), Sukey Parnell Johnson

In his portraiture project, *Metamorphoses* (1937), Helmar Lerski illustrated just how far light encodes facial readings in a photographic series of intense closeups of a young actor. Using light alone, he illustrated that different character readings of the face were produced and dependent on the angles and quality of the lighting. Film theorist, Siegfried Kracauer wrote of the experiment in wonder that, 'Out of the original face there arose, evoked by the varying lights, a hundred different faces', among them was the face of an old woman (1960: 162) His experiment points to the transformatory potential of light alone to transform the subject, something I wanted to allude to in this

sequence. I also wanted to explore the visual rhetoric of 'hot light' and side light and the different facets of the goddess seen as different lighting effects as the camera circles Wood. There was a collective gasp in the studio when we saw the footage on the back of the camera. Woods not only looked other to her normal Bohemian self-styling in bold colours and layers of fabric, but distinctly 'other' altogether. The movement of eyes showing through the silver mask added a sense of viscerality to the piece, like the ghost in the machine. I had set out to show something the ambivalent alterity of the Hecate archetype and I think this piece succeeds in demonstrating that, however, the aim of my project is to reveal the scaffolding of the gaze and the highly aesthetic nature of the film did not adequately play within those aims.

A recurrent motif through the original film was the idea of something or someone elusive or missing, a motif prompted by the disappearance of my mother from photographs in midlife. I played on this idea a second time in a somewhat whimsical piece of footage with actress, Tusse Silberg, who I had also photographed for *Women of an Uncertain Age.* The piece played on the idea of chasing round an absence of an image in the way of a whodunit whilst withholding the actual woman from screen, an idea aimed to increase hyperbolic theatrical tension and pique the audience imagination, Various devices pertaining to framings: windows, doorways, curtains, reflections, receding images, shadowy figures, fetishised closeups, were used to suggest an unseen presence. I also included some reflexive photographic tropes – a photography studio with a beauty dish (a light that provides a very soft luminosity used particularly in beauty images – see 'hot light', page 98), a wind machine, a developing Polaroid that is cut before we can make out the face of the woman... These pieces of footage were originally intended as a linking device for use throughout the piece; however, eventually I distilled this idea to the narrative pursuit of the Hag in a gossipy conversation and chasing an image through montage.

Figure 65: Actress Tusse Silberg, silhouetted. Screenshot from 'The Skin You're In' (2014), Sukey Parnell Johnson

Figure 66: The 'absent' window frame. Screenshot from 'The Skin You're In' (2014), Sukey Parnell Johnson

Figure 67: Actress Tusse Silberg from a distance. Screenshot from 'The Skin You're In' (2014), Sukey Parnell Johnson

Out of all these films, the only footage that remains is taken from a dance routine by the group, *Hot Flush.* It accompanies the audio recording of a workshop with members of the group.

Figure 68: Gigi de Courcy Swoffer and Dominique McConnell Wood from the Fan Danse Macabre. Screenshot from 'Hagging the Image' (2015), Sukey Parnell Johnson

Figure 69: Gigi de Courcy Swoffer and Dominique McConnell Wood from the Fan Danse Macabre. Screenshot from 'Hagging the Image' (2015), Sukey Parnell Johnson

I had originally photographed members of *Hot Flush* in 2011 when I was still exploring a photographic stills approach to my subject. I had already photographed two of the dancers for another project, *The Secret Ball* (2008-2014). This set of portraits focused on alt party scene revellers at an annual event, held at a secret location in the UK. The extended network of friends that attended these events came from many different backgrounds that, in the early years at least, cut across class boundaries. A generally playful Dionysian atmosphere prevailed where people typically experimented with their identity and appearance. Begun originally as a vanity project to provide some respite from the intensity of my MA, I quickly became enthralled by the intensity of the encounters with camera and exchanges, which were often made in only a few minutes. The heightened state of excitement many of the partygoers experienced, coupled with the assumption of different personas, I considered analogous to the hyperbolic energetic state of the actor about to go onstage and the focus it takes to turn a characterisation towards the audience. The assumed 'mask' or festive persona the revellers adopted coupled with a Dionysian exuberance combined to release performance and aspects of individuals that were normally suppressed or unseen in daily life. This gave the resulting photographs an intensity, which translates to focus the audience attention on the image.

I took my interest in the heightened theatrical moment of encounter with the camera, backstage to a Hot Flush performance, photographing the dancers just before they went onstage in a makeshift studio to examine what, if anything, would travel towards the audience. I was later persuaded to join the group as a dancer myself. I had danced professionally briefly on leaving drama school when I was 19 in the rival group to Hot Gossip. Ali Hierley and Dominique McConnell-Wood suggested I join the group for class and eventually persuaded me to dance in two performances myself. The second, in the theatre at Oxford House in Bethnal Green, was where I met Fergus Early. Watching the fan dance sequence from the side of the stage I was struck by how it related to my work on a sexual gaze in later life and was simultaneously troubled by how it seemed to just repeat a performance of 'femininity' rather than interrogate it. These observations prompted a dialogue with Dominique McConnell-Wood about using a fan dance sequence, with certain adjustments, within the film I was making for the doctorate to highlight the construction of a sexual position. It was agreed we would film a sequence for the project.

I continue with a discussion of how this was used in the final film a little later in this chapter on page 204, but I now want to turn to the filming of the roundtable workshops, which became the main body of the filmwork. However, I do want to stress that all of these messy experiments above contributed to my eventual 'dirty' practice and to the final piece that I present here.

Figure 70: Rina Rosselson and Anna Chen (in the background), roundtable sequence. Screenshot from 'Hagging the Image' (2015), Sukey Parnell Johnson

10.7.   Roundtable Workshops and Filming

I have described the idea of The Round and the various practices it connotes earlier in this chapter. In this section I chart the practical methods employed to create the filmed footage.

My participants were all older women who expressed an interest in the subject of ageing femaleness and social visibility. I aimed to draw together an ethnically diverse group. Several women identified themselves as originally from working-class backgrounds but the majority were middle-class. Included in the roundtable discussions were women who work, or have worked, in the media. My cast included TV and radio presenters, casting directors, a makeup artist, a performance artist, a spoken word artist, a DJ, a political feminist writer, dancers and choreographers, TV producers, as well as women interested in age from other perspectives: a Lacanian psychoanalyst, a critical gerontologist focused on film media, a business woman and management consultant, an interior designer and a marketing consultant. These women provided a variety of perspectives and experiences on the representation and shaping of women in social interaction – in print, onscreen, onstage – and were, in the main, used to voicing and challenging opinions about the representation of 'femininity', image and self-image.

Figure 71: Anna Raeburn, roundtable sequence. Screenshot from Hagging the Image' (2015), Sukey Parnell Johnson

Women were invited to attend filming in late Spring 2013. I withheld direction on dress and makeup. Women chose what they wanted to wear and if they wore makeup or not. Sometimes women would alter their appearance – literally let their hair down – or change outfit during the course of a workshop. Women who appeared in different workshops restyled themselves as they saw fit.

I asked women to respond to several photographs of older women. What became apparent during the preliminary workshops was the difficulty that women had in distinguishing between the representation and the subject herself and the unconsciousness of projections that became attached to actual women. To work around this unconscious tendency, when I came to film the ensuing conversations I gave three conditions for the conversation:

- Women were to describe what they saw and how it made them feel personally
- If they recognised a woman, they should withhold the name of the sitter and speak about the image itself rather than the identity of the model
- They should pass images around the group and listen to each other's points of view

In practice, women found withholding the name of the sitters fantastically hard but freeing, as it allowed them to speak about what they saw in life and what was missing from representation in front of them, thereby building a collective portrait around the absence of an image that could do justice to the subject they knew in everyday encounters. Removing the need to protect individual identity freed the participants to speak about the image with less constraint, respond openly and spontaneously, give voice to views and criticism normally suppressed. This allowed energy to move around the room, subject positions to be challenged, others rehearsed, views to be destabilised. It also gave women in the groups an active focus and authority not only over the photographs in question but in front of my lens.

The experimental nature of the filming resulted in a variety of photographic approaches that became a performative element of the piece. The varying quality of the equipment and the different levels of experience of my student crew resulted in very different aesthetics and qualities of the footage. (This was particularly true for the second roundtable filming.) Capture shifts between different cameras, lens, colour gamut, perspectives, lighting, etc. in a movement that constantly dislodges a settled viewing perspective. Initially I found these aethetic variations very frustrating but I came to realise that they were creating an affect which was unsettling in itself and was perhaps useful as it disrupted a single viewing position.

I also adopted a camera technique called 'lens whacking' where the camera lens is detached from the body of the camera and loosely held over the open aperture. This technique draws attention to the aestheticising hand of the photographer by making obvious alterations in focus, lens blurring and sharpening. Other elements also made the constructive role of the lens apparent further disrupting the theatrical illusion of a seamless viewing position. For instance, the technical difficulties in filming in the round meant that occasionally a camera operator would be visible as they shifted position. Occasionally, also, participants would break the illusion of the fourth wall and speak directly to camera as in a Shakespearean soliloquy or aside. I used the camera from behind the seated women to obscure a view of the photographs they hold, so that the controlling gaze of the camera is frustrated from multiple angles. Throughout the film

the women shift position, in relation to one another, and in relation to the topic; there is a suggestion of other aspects of life offstage – the sounds of everyday life inexplicably make their way into the action – we hear birds singing, crows cawing, children playing, bracelets clattering. All of these performative elements make their mark, becoming an intrinsic part of the play. By establishing and then breaking conventions, these proliferating approaches in continuous reinvention disrupt the cohesiveness of a single settled viewing position and keep the piece moving away from a resolution.

10.8.   The Hag: Toxic Avenger – Reclaiming Critical Power

I had been aware that the work needed a powerful narrative device that could speak symbolically to the structure of a youthful gaze (as defined in section 4.2, page 50). Emerging unprompted from conversation in the workshops, the figure of the Hag appeared to fit this challenging role. I argued previously in Chapter 2, that the Hag is a critical and powerful aspect of femaleness that has been denigrated. An old woman with unseen magical power and a lethal history, myth and fairytale describe her as poisonous, powerful, and physically repellent. I have also argued previously that unlike beauty, ugliness is culturally defined and used at moments socio-political upheaval when it is 'useful to describe the enemy' (Eco, 2007) and link physical appearance to visceral mechanisms of social disgust. (See 8.1 for a detailed examination of the linking of these mechanisms.) In her role as 'toxic avenger', the Hag appears at important narrative junctures to challenge the status quo, to test resolve and intentions, illusions of control and the hunger for power. The boiling cauldron is where mischief is brewed. Circling the bubbling pot, the hags whisper and shriek their incantations. Poison is spat out, stirred into furious motion and the magic begins. By the end of the story the Hag is nowhere to be seen – dead, transfigured or mysteriously vanished.

In *Black Skin and African* (1963), Fanon offers a psychoanalytically-based account of how racist cultural trauma is constructed from a process that shifts individually focused marginalisation to widespread cultural trauma that pervasively naturalises an ideology of exclusion through attaching ugliness to physical markers. Values, beliefs and ideals are transplanted into the 'home and mind of the native' conveyed indirectly through social intermediaries – in particular, the spoken voice – via conversational exchanges, texts, radio, the media, etc. He contends that bodies marked out in this way are effectively

positioned for dismissal and eradication. Fanon's insistence on the spoken voice as the medium for the transmission of cultural ideologies surrounding appearance has significance for my own work and the need to find an art method that could simultaneously expose the cultural constructions of ageing femaleness in spoken exchanges without undermining the authority of the women involved or their conversational exchanges and use of vernacular speech.

The trivialisation of female gossip as a negatively malicious force maligns the critical effect of collective female communication and discourse. The gossiper in older editions of the Oxford Dictionary been described as 'a person, mostly a woman, of light and trifling character.' (Kartzow, 2009: 16) The term itself is related to women in later life. Barbara Walker defines the gossip as 'an archaic word for a woman, especially one past middle age' (1983: 350). Daly and Caputi trace the word to its archaic roots as a godparent, or 'good fairy' – a female friend invited to bless the birth of a child – 'the Fates, Fairies, Familiars, and Friends who invite themselves to be Present at any Female Act of Creation' (1993: 305). These roots trace a path to Hecate and her women, the *Moirai*, who speak the grammar (*gramayre*) of the cycles that govern life and death. 'To tell like a Gossip' is 'to divine and communicate the secrets of the Elements, the wisdom of the stars.' and exercise the 'Elemental Female Power of Naming', (1993: 305) a festivity of wordplay which takes place amongst female friends, Boon-Companions. These conversations are in the vernacular – the mother tongue – in a hag grammar that demystifies, taking off the mask of jargon and the niceties of social exchange to get to the 'ugly' truth. The roots of vernacular relate to ordinary language of the everyday, 'home-born' and of its time and place. Words are used expediently, to cut to the quick, strip to the bone, grind up, dig down. Composting the ground for new forms to emerge. 'Hagging' is thus proposed as a way to begin a conversation, start talking about what is difficult to express, to wind a way into a trajectory of understanding that is down-to-earth, ordinary and because of this, why its value has often been overlooked.

In the workshops, spoken into conversation as a performative speech act, the Hag emerged as a dynamic force, a powerful and critical position that allowed women to vent their frustrations with an order of beauty and the limitations of visual media images that play in a cult of youth that has historically marginalised older women. What was also

apparent from holding the workshops was the power of these women's 'gossip' groups to quickly get to grips, examine and unpick the difficulties with the images presented and collectively 'hag' the image. But I also recognised that in my piece – which incorporated photographic capture – it was important that this 'hagging' role needed not only to be shared out as an unruly collective performative speech act to protect individual identities but theatricalised to counteract the camera as a recording device and the piece being shown outside of its original time and context.

Bringing together all my participants on two one day shoots enacted the hyperbolic excitement and tension of a theatre performance, ensuring the footage had enough energy to turn it towards an audience as a theatrical event whilst still being a 'real' conversation with actual women. These recordings provided me with extensive 'data' for the piece that was then distilled and transcribed into a play around the absence of a fully faceted image. I had taken early inspiration for the imaginative theatrical presentation of roundtable discussions from Caryl Churchill's play *Top Girls* (1982). Churchill constructed her politicised exploration of the effects of capitalism on women in Thatcher's Britain of the 1980s from feminist conversations with women in the USA, comparing an American individualistic notion of feminism based on personal power and wealth with a socialist and collective British perspective on female empowerment. The play is considered seminal for its questioning of 80s politics and 'its structural disregard for the boundaries of time and conventional form' (Royal Court, 2014). The first act of the play is an imaginary conversation between women from different historical timeframes placed around a dinner table, who discuss their experiences of power and its loss within different patriarchal cultures.

10.9.   Editing My Own Youthful Gaze

When I came to cut the film, my incessant desire to picture women in a 'better' light or angle, shape a 'beautiful' aesthetic and play out my own desires and fears was a formative constraint which needed addressing. In order to release my own gaze from the constraints of the scopic master-slave power relationship, the film was cut using what I now call a 'blindfold' method – I cut the action to the transcribed words without regard for the picture. As a method, it stopped my own tendency to become transfixed by

certain images or sequences that were visually arresting, or impose my desire to 'correct' the footage, instead letting it remain raw and unfinished and aesthetically challenging.

Figure 72: Dominique McConnell Wood from the Fan Danse Macabre sequence. Screenshot from 'The Skin You're In' (2015), Sukey Parnell Johnson

To further disrupt a purely documentary feel to the piece, I included an imaginative piece of footage to break up the action. The fan dance sequence, choreographed by a member of the *Hot Flush* company, Dominique McConnell-Wood, was already extant. When I first saw it performed onstage, I commented to Wood that I felt the piece is too easily assimilated into a youthful gaze and regime that is now extending its reach to older women. I thought it needed another element to theatricalise and expose the scaffolding of a youthful gaze and show the inconsistencies between polarised views and responses to the woman/old woman illusion. I suggested it might be interesting if, as the women turned their backs to the audience, another appearance or facet was revealed; something that could bring an awareness of erotic and death drives into contact with one another. Wood was intrigued by this idea. Stylised body stockings and headdresses, half showgirl and half skeleton, were made for the film by costumier Wendy Chevous, bringing together the titillation of a burlesque performance with the frisson of the *danse macabre*.

The constant movement between the two sides of the body drew on the dual associations of desire and death attaching to the female body. I wanted to play on these not only as a

nod to the indivisible nature of the dialectic represented by the Hecate archetype in her double-faced aspect but showing the division into two separated images – seductress and skeleton – as obvious constructs of a youthful gaze. We filmed the dance with strong 'hot' theatre lighting, made obvious like an artificial moon. I wanted to experiment with moving the dancers through different light qualities to show the audience how light affected what they saw. (An idea I experimented with in the Hecate sequence above. See page 192.) However, the confrontation with the camera overwhelmed the exposure of the performativity of the camera. Instead, certain shots – as in Cumming's work –

Figure 73: Stereoscopic Equipment

threatened to infect the viewers' imagination and transfix the audience, rendering the subtler dimensions of the work invalid. McConnell Wood, whilst being supportive of the aims of the project, was also noticeably shocked by the footage where she was seen 'warts and all'. Eventually I dropped the majority of the film. Whatever *my* feelings about how she looked, I recognised that for Wood and for many of the audience, there was not a sufficiently critical mechanism in the piece at this stage to support a different reading of the imagery. I was also conscious that this could be a form of performative power wielded from behind the camera and identity stripping and overkill that I did not want to project onto my female subject. The footage was shelved.

When I came to edit the film, however, I wanted to include some of the audio dialogue from the Hot Flush workshop to accompany the women's comments. In the original edit, as I had no experience in editing, student editor Stephen Richardson began cutting footage for me and we experimented with different effects, drawing on a history of photography and cinema. To heighten theatrical effect, the two dancers are projected in flickering circles, made during the editing process, shimmying by turns between

seductress and spectre. This rather surreal sequence is reminiscent of the stereoscope pairs of images for left and right eye, or the flickering peepholes of the zoetrope lightshow. It is a device intended to disrupt the unconsciousness of viewing pleasure by making the act of vision apparent whilst the dancers provoke and titillate the gaze, playfully revealing and hiding their different appearances to the audience. Originally this was intended to be part of a sequence with closeup footage and music. However, I wasn't happy with the initial edit. I was having difficulty articulating what I saw in my

Figure 74: The Victorian Zoetrope or 'Wheel of Life'

mind's eye and communicating this to Richardson. Eventually in frustration, I began to cut footage myself to illustrate my meaning– a steep and sharp learning curve – and then took it on myself. The film changed radically at this point as I was able to experiment creatively with all the footage in an intensely personal and experimental way and bring to the surface nebulous underlying currents in my own thinking for examination and review. This experimental phase culminated in a first iteration of the filmwork, *The Skin You're In* (2014).

10.10. Working Titles

The titling of film and thesis went through many changes and reworkings. It began as *The Magic Mirror*. By the time I had made the move to film, the collapse of my thinking had made me realise that I was never going to be able to make single still images that would satisfy the desire for a *juste* image of older women. In a supervision meeting with my director of studies, Mark Little, I repeated a conversation with one of my women's groups when I had said, that I had come to realise 'I cannot provide the image you need'. This became the first working title for the original screenplay. Two different cuts from early edits went to conference symposiums to support papers and gauge audience response. There was a lot of interest in the films, people were intrigued and found them moving and but they were also spurs to debate and discussion. The first of these films which focused on the Hecate and the Green Candle Dance company footage, was called *Being Otherwise,* a title focused on age as alterity. The second, *The Skin You're In*, was a title suggested by roundtable participant, Anna Raeburn, during a brainstorm. It was meant to suggest the surface appearance of the skin and its relationship to the mirror-like surface of the photographic image and had been offered in response to the silver-leaf experiment footage. However, eventually, it was rejected as the focus was too heavily weighted on ageing femaleness and the body rather than its relationship to representation. During a moratorium of the *The Skin You're In,* it became apparent that the Hag dialogue was where the potential and force of the film lay and a narrative device that could challenge the structure of the youthful gaze. The title changed to reflect Hagging as the critical force with the authority to challenge a youthful gaze.

10.11. Cutting to the Quick

All the other footage was dropped and my method distilled into a filmed wordplay transcripted from the roundtable conversations that sped around the conversation. The idea for cutting different lines of dialogue from various conversations as one, came together out of several different trial approaches. The first was the challenge of cutting hours of footage from roundtable discussions on both audio and film together to turn the subject towards the audience in a coherent manner. Another prompt was the need for appropriate sound for several of the pieces originally intended to be set to music. The music, however, produced an emotional atmosphere that detracted from the intentions of the work to expose the construct of the youthful gaze. Because of this, I began to

experiment with some of the audio-only conversations as voiceover against the surreal imagery.

Having shot several roundtable conversations, in playback, I was struck by how recurrent themes transcended and resonated across and beyond individual conversations, making them seem part of a larger dialogue circulating around a mysterious central 'missing' figure. Cutting together these different workshops as if they were all one, moved the piece away from pure documentary and towards a 'poetics' of a mother tongue, a further heightening of the piece that could intensify its symbolic and theatrical impact. It also allowed for the distillation and intensification of the dialogue and quickening of the pace of the repartee to keep the audience chasing rather than fixating on the subject. With this in mind, I brought together and reworked all the dialogue as raw material for a single conversation that jumps across time and space. All the workshops were transcribed and cut into single lines. Without paying attention to a sequential order, I clustered lines into small takes of dialogue, cutting across the different timeframes and groups of women to break up a linear chronology and its deadening associations with a decline narrative, threading a line through the script by linking keywords. I employed artistic license in rearranging these pieces of text in a constructed wordplay grouped around the recurrent themes reiterated across the groups in order to turn these towards the audience in a distilled format.

The final element of the piece is a photographic montage. Using media images found online (including images used in workshops), montages punctuate the 'takes' of the film. These flickering faces – like the shapeshifting optical illusion discussed in section 6.1 – eventually overwhelm vision, blur and vanish until the viewer is left with their own melded impressionistic response. The montages are accompanied by the sound of a projector, an audio remnant of the projector sequence of my mother, to alert the spectator to the cuts and gaps between the representations and to imply the presence of an unseen hand pushing the button. The montaged sequences, together with the burlesque footage, also provide punctuation and relief to the intensity of the performative conversational exchanges, adding an expressive imaginary element within a larger hybrid piece that is part performative and part theatrical.

This concludes the account of my artistic research and the process I went through to arrive at the final installation filmwork presented. In the next and final chapter of my dissertation I review and appraise the work and rationale behind *Hagging the Image* (2015).

11. Conclusion

To write a conclusion that responds to my research question and the formulation of an artistic approach that could critically negotiate and challenge the complexities that ageing femaleness represents, I need to step back from the end product I am presenting in installation – the film, *Hagging the Image* (2015) – and reflect upon the research that directly informed the film's production.

11.1. The Research Process: Theories and Concepts

As outlined in my introduction, I began my research with the hypothesis that the multi-faceted diachrony and dynamic power of older women experienced in everyday life is un-representable from within the current aesthetic framework of Western society within which visual images play.[19] I have argued that the ugliness of the Hag is culturally defined, constraining an archetypal and ambivalent force that has been denigrated and denied because it wields a critical power outside of patriarchal jurisdiction and the constraining discourses of female beauty. It was my contention that the proscenium-like structure of photographic portraiture facilitates the uncritical playing out of a youthful gaze as the visual element of this discourse. This problematic formed the basis for my attempt to build a method of representation that could remobilise the Hag as a resistant aspect of femaleness that challenges limiting cultural conceptions of older women. My hope was that by bringing together opposing viewpoints and cultural inconsistencies demonstrated in performative conversation, distilled into theatricalised dialogues and enacted in the ritual space of a theatre setting, I could leverage the 'horizon of intelligibility'[20] long enough for the audience to apprehend new spaces of ageing female identity that challenge constraining stereotypes of older women.

I have argued throughout and in the summary above, that the persistence of negative associations that attach to photographs of ageing femaleness is due to a number of factors circulating around the portrayal of ageing and 'femininity', resulting in stereotypical artistic 'melancholic' and carnivalesque approaches and tropes that in the practice of still photography are hard to avoid. Photographic portraits provide a spur to

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[19] See page 9.

[20] See section 4.3, Judith Butler's 'horizon of intelligibility', page 44.

conversation and debate but operate within a particular set of symbolic power relations defined beyond the frame, which limit representation. The discourse around the ageing woman's appearance focuses predominantly on the role of sexual visibility that attaches to the body of the woman and ideas of female beauty located in a youthful appearance. Older women braving social disapproval by choosing to appear are caught between the crosshairs of conscious and unconsciously held attitudes. The envelopment of the model by the shaping apparatus of the lens masks the performative conditions of its construction, turning towards the audience a pair of subjectivities as if one figure onto which negative perceptions become attached which, in turn, become attached to actual individuals due to the attitude of transparency with which we regard photographic imagery. Consequently, aims to diversify visual representation by providing 'positive' or counter-images and provoke a 'liberating' discourse are caught up in a seemingly transparent, and consequently naturalised, binary system that is too easily recuperated, repackaged and remobilised in the service of a consumerist gaze of youthful beauty and hierarchies of taste. These images become the target for societal aggressivity working within the constraining discourses of idealised beauty internalised by men and women alike as a youthful gaze.

In the introduction of this thesis I set out to address several questions:

- *Why are images of ageing women persistently dogged by negative associations?*
- *How are age and ageing represented in photographs of women?*
- *What role does photography play in the service of identity politics of ageing femaleness?*
- *How can we speak critically to visual media without actual women portrayed becoming a target for social hostility?*
- *And, finally, what artistic method could remobilise and re-politicise issues with the way images of older women are viewed in relation to youth and beauty?*

To answer the question, 'How are age and ageing represented in photographs of women?' I rooted my study within the context of feminist writing on ageing femaleness since the 70s to examine the cultural conditions in which 'femininity' and ageing femaleness are viewed. My preliminary research examined production and aesthetics of photographic images to expose underlying trends indicative of cultural attitudes that

work to constrain representation. Using the Hag as a lens of enquiry into the negativity surrounding the appearance of older women, I began by unearthing a history of the dirty goddess in Chapter 2 to dig down to a historical basis for persistent social narratives, how meanings have changed over time, and to chart a 'herstory' of the archetypal goddess and her many divinely ambivalent facets. In Chapters 3, 4, and 6, I explored the negativity attaching to older women via the chaining of binary terms that link moral judgment and negative associations to visual signifiers that service an underlying patriarchal ideological system.

Using the combined work of feminist theorists, particularly the work of Butler and Mulvey, as a theoretical tool for investigation, in Chapter 4 I began to look at the way in which performative power from behind the camera and the performance captured in images before the camera, combine to trigger unconscious mechanisms of a combined ageist and sexist 'youthful' gaze, that work to affirm, naturalise and limit the possibilities for social identities. In Chapter 5 I contextualised my study by exploring the ways in which the camera apparatus and the conventions of art historical portraiture affect representations of women and ageing femaleness, and how these are played out in contemporary society in a wider televisual context of image exchange. Deepening that enquiry in Chapter 6, I looked at specific aesthetic mechanisms that trigger uncanny responses to images by colliding the visual rhetorics associated with a youthful structure of the look with the mechanisms that scaffold a male gaze; Working through an aesthetic uncertainty, these dual discourse framed together as one, unsettle the psychic viewing mechanisms that organise the unconscious, producing perceptions of a castrative threat to viewing pleasure which allows negative narratives and fetishised voyeurism to divide the image into separate sites, pitting a valourised youthful discourse of beauty which has historically constrained women as passive object to the gaze, against its 'low' other, ageing femaleness.

Early in my research, I was struck by the recurrence of polarising tropes in photographic representations attempting to challenge the invisibility of older women. This polarising binary of representation tacitly reinforces the demarcations of a visual order for older women that courses through social narratives. An emphasis on aesthetics and beauty typically results in images that are seen as a sad end to a long life. By contrast,

carnivalesque reversal and confrontation with the erotic frisson of ageing femaleness hints at radical disruption of an order of beauty. However, its destabilising potential is jeopardised by the power of single still images to overwhelm and foreclose the value of the larger project of portrayal, thereby tacitly reinforcing the boundaries of a youthful gaze. Thus, what may have been a therapeutic release for the women involved, out of its original timeframe and as a stilled image, becomes a potential stumbling block for other women seeking to follow, for it represents capture rather than release. The question was how to speak critically to this effect in my own artistic practice.

To discuss how age and ageing are represented in photographs of women (and as a means to investigate potential strategies for the production my own work), I examined a number of photographic works arranged as three case studies. These studies worked as vehicles to critically address the underlying complexities that shape photographic production: the perspective of the practitioner, the technologies and performative aesthetics of the camera, and the complex aesthetic and historical discourses and conventions of portraiture and photographic practice. In Chapter 7, in my first case study, That Old Question of Beauty … I examined ageing femaleness and discourses of beauty in various photographic artworks, exhibitions and commercial projects, examining the work of artists Joyce Tennyson, Suzy Lake and photographer, Rankin, to explore issues of representation and audience response. I chose to focus on Harriet Walter's celebratory projects: *Facing It* and *Infinite Variety*, to prise apart a number of aesthetic issues, in particular, the insertion of the older female face-body into a regime of pictorial beauty and spectatorship. An emphasis on beauty in photographs of older women leads to aesthetic confusion of what constitutes 'feminine' beauty and what is beautiful in an artwork, who is considered beautiful, and what is considered beautiful in art and photography, without elucidating the difficulties with the attribution of beauty itself or the need to identify unconscious fears that are projected onto ageing femaleness. In Walter's project, I argued that the constraints of beauty as a framing criterion coupled with a lack of critical mechanism that could negotiate this confusion too easily fell prey to a politics of appeasement and the unconscious 'trap of the visual' where power is deferred to the photographer/viewer. Placing ageing femaleness within this regime, makes it subject to hierarchical judgement and issues of taste in which it is judged lacking, tacitly strengthening the boundaries of a youthful gaze. I concluded that merely

attributing beauty to photographs of women did not address the issues that constrained representation.

In my second case study in Chapter 8, Donigan Cumming's *Pretty Ribbons,* I examined the political implications of carnivalesque reversal in the portrayal of an individual woman, Nettie Harris, as well as the work of Jeurgen Teller and Pinar Yolaçan. Cumming puts pictures before us we don't often see. In a theatrically staged encounter with the female body and asexualised and abject readings of the ageing corpus, he exploits the scopophilic frisson and thrill of the sexual body of the older woman, forcing a confrontation with morbid underlying collective fear of death. Cumming aims to infect the imagination of his viewer as a spur to social consciousness in favour of his overlooked subject. He does this through an insistent use of certain tropes – a 'merciless' amplified documentary realism, a lack of eye contact, foetal isolation and the intense sexual objectification of Harris. However, these symbolic devices cannot address or expose the underlying relationship and exchange of gaze between photographer and model, or the privileged power the lens affords Cumming, unseen beyond the frame. Eventually, Harris is sacrificed to the camera gaze in a striking and humiliating *coup de grace,* leaving behind an iconic still image that represents the negation of desire for the maternal body. What remains stilled in the frame is a threateningly nihilistic and poisonously iconic image, which morbidly infects the imagination and prevents identification with its subject. I concluded that ultimately transgressive behaviour involving displays of the naked female body struggle with the morbid and fetishised phallic fantasies of a psychic economy, which cannot renegotiate the complexity of time inscribed on the female body or the psychic connotations of what Pollock calls the 'body-sign in the field of vision', where a woman's body constitutes a sign of herself that 'disappears' with the abjectness of old age.[21] (2003: 193). Social myths are perpetuated and enhanced by the use of the photographic apparatus which, by providing a material image working uncertainly between imaginary and realist discourse, adds a locus and stimulant for the outpouring of social hostility that then attaches to actual individuals. Immediately after the project, a frustration with the limitations and muteness of photographic images prompted Cumming's move to video in a new attempt

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[21] See also page 30.

to expose the political dynamics of the gaze, a move that had significance for my work as I too encountered similar difficulties.

In Chapter 9 I examined Sheffield's *Look at Me*! a project run by women with a radical agenda, which aimed to leverage representation and transform the way society views 'ordinary' older women. However, despite the project's feminist aims, a majority of images did not evade the same underlying binary tropes in representation that polarised broadly into carnivalesque and melancholic depiction. In all the case studies, the larger aims to widen representation of older women met a difficulty between the power of individual images to activate unconsciously held attitudes and the broader value of prolonged exposure and responses formed in the larger exhibition overall.

Responding to my findings led to a conceptual model that circulates around an absence of a fully representative image. My research question asked: *Could a filmic 'theatre-in-the-round' provide a structure in which to unleash the resistant potential suggested by the figure of the Hag? And could this potential be utilised as a model for resistance to the youthful structure of the gaze*? (See page 12.) In order to answer that question, in the following section, I appraise the elements of my artistic methodology and outline the rationale behind the filmwork, *Hagging the Image* (2015).

11.2.   Artistic Methodology & Rationale: *Hagging the Image* (2015)

To break up the ground of a stable viewing position in the photographs of older women, a theatrical model needed to address the performative role of camera and photographer, the passivity of the audience interaction in exchange, the stasis attributed to the older female subject and discourses of beauty in still imagery, unconscious hostility produced in response to the appearance of ageing femaleness onscreen or in the photographic frame, and the abjection associated with the female body and practices of 'femininity'. It also needed to have a critical narrative element that could challenge pejorative terminologies that attach to ageing femaleness. All these issues – from the performance in front of the camera and its performative construction outside of the frame – needed to be addressed 'in the round' in order for the unconscious structuring of the youthful gaze and audience complacency to be challenged critically and viewing positions destabilised. In this next section I briefly chronicle the ingredients of the concoction that

I created, the mixing of my methods and the rationale behind my thinking. This section necessarily interweaves, repeats and layers the strategic interventions that I deployed to encompass the tripartite structure of the photographic apparatus.

11.2.1. Spatial Model to Expose the Scaffold of the Gaze

I utilised a conceptual model of theatre-in-the-round as a political position and spatial arrangement to expose the apparatus and scaffolding of the gaze. I had arrived at my theatrical model by considering the theatrical illusion produced by proscenium staging as analogous to the framework of the photographic image, and the way in which its construction conceals the performative role of the photographer and spectator and the staged mechanics of the presented action. By contrast, the bare staging of The Round strips away the glamour and paraphernalia of the theatrical illusion hidden behind the proscenium arch to focus on how social interaction is constructed and shaped in the dynamic narrative exchange that surrounds the passivity of the image, confronting and empowering the audience with their own responsibility to view the action as emerging from within the community. The symbolic rules of that society and the inconsistencies within various ideological vantage points are then played out as a collective responsibility in which the spectator is an active and conscious participant. This element was used to address the position of the audience as an 'invisible guest' and expose the pejorative language and inconsistencies of view of the speech acts attaching to the images of ageing femaleness as ideological, not natural, and indicative of a patriarchal culture emerging from social exchange rather than out of the image itself.
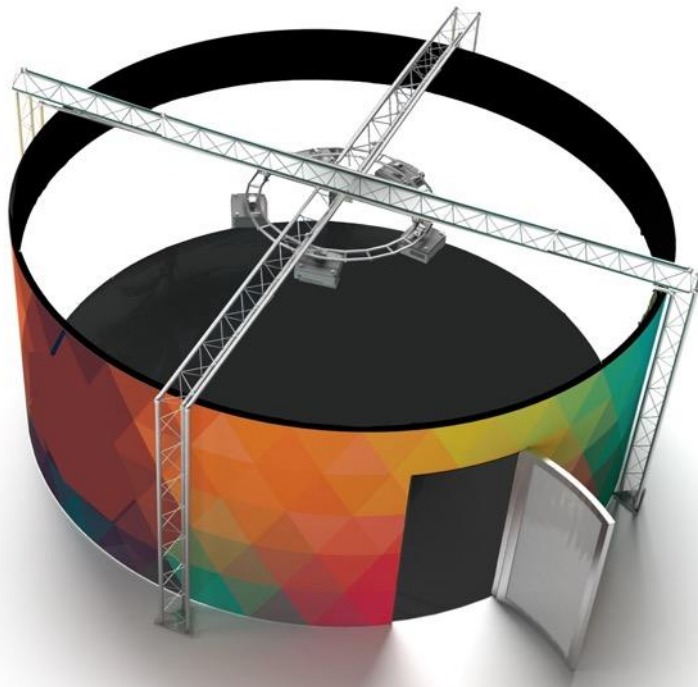
Figure 75: Diagram of filmic theatre-in-the-round. Audience enter and stand in the central space.

11.2.2. Adapting a Theatre-in-Round

I am utilising theatre-in-the-round not only as a conceptual device to heighten audience awareness of the role of the spectator as a constructive element of the youthful gaze, but spatially by arranging the action around the auditorium rather than in a traditional cinematic or proscenium staging. In installation, this is presented as a multi-screen projection. The action cuts from screen to screen around the spectator so that they stand in the central area. Standing in the place of the absent photographic image, they effectively become the object of the gaze as it is expressed around the viewing space, from woman to woman in the film, and in spoken exchanges that cross the stage.

I have adapted the conceptual basis of theatre-in-the-round to incorporate the constructive apparatus of the lens in several ways. Firstly, I constructed a play within a play of and on photography and ageing femaleness, a reflexive *mise en abyme*, which alerts the audience to the construction of the theatrical spectacle they are witnessing and

their own position in relation to the staged illusion projected around them. The narrative exchange revolves around still photographs withheld from the camera perspective as they are passed from hand to hand around the circle, denying the installation audience the opportunity to view and target individual women pictured. The image is the central subject of the piece but withheld from the gaze, described not seen. The installation audience are standing in the central position of the arena, the place where, in a normal production in-the-round, the acting is performed. They stand, therefore, in the place of the absent subject, becoming the object of the gaze as they watch a film of a female audience exchange views across the arena. This filmed 'chorus' of women are projected and arrayed around the screened edges of the auditorium, as if they are sitting around the stage as they respond critically to photographs. Turning the gaze of the 'chorus' onto the installation spectator in this theatrical setting jars the installation audience out of their normally unseen position as 'invisible guest', whilst the narrative screenplay circulating around the (absent) image exposes fissures and inconsistencies in the views and attitudes to photographs of ageing women. The filmed exchanges are arrhythmic; the women of the 'chorus' appear in random places from around the circumference of the screen, forcing the installation audience to constantly shift position as they watch the exchanges and chase the image. This movement was to guard against a sense of stasis and morbidity attaching to any of the women filmed, and also to heighten an awareness of the instability of the audience position as a method of disrupting viewing pleasure.

11.2.1. Evacuating the Stage of Youth and Men

Based on a speculative notion voiced by Kathleen Woodward in her paper, *Performing Age, Performing Gender* (2006: 176), the film also deploys a strategic evacuation of the stage of youth and men, allowing only older women to hold the theatrical space and normalising the authority and diversity of this community. The fast-paced narrative and the chase after a missing image hold the audience attention as the action moves from screen to screen, a strategy that uses narrative movement as a Trojan horse to keep the audience attention whilst presenting a collective Hagging and dis-rule that whips around the topic. This prevents individual women in the chorus being singled out and targeted whilst prolonged audience attention on the group familiarises the audience with different performative self-stylings of ageing femaleness. As the older women's circle appears to block the gaze of the camera eye, discussing images we never see or are able to identify

directly, they at once deny a view (of the photograph) and appear indirectly to the subject – as older women themselves, and as both audience and 'chorus'. Bringing these elements together, the dynamic exchange of the narrative focuses the audience attention not on women as the passive object of the gaze or mourning a loss of view – but as active speaking authorities in relation to the subject of ageing femaleness.
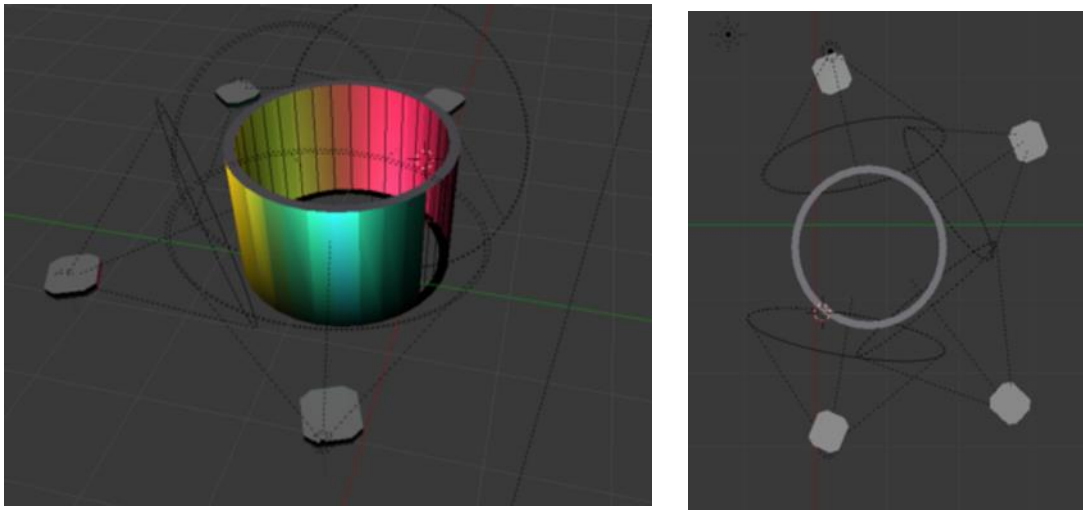

Figure 76: Diagram of filmic theatre-in-the-round. Audience enter and stand in the central space.

11.2.2. Stillness, Stasis and Stuckness

My thesis argues that single images of women, frozen out of movement and context, become targets of a consuming gaze. Consequently, I chose to use moving image to present an ephemeral structure for portrayal. Using moving image counteracts the sense of stasis and crystallisation that attaches to the sight of ageing femaleness as a hollowly echoing 'self' devoid of youth and life. (Basting, 1998) Showing older women in the process of continuous dynamic exchange over the length of this piece, allows these connotations to become unsettled. In the editing process, the speed of repartee and constant movement of these exchanges was distilled and increased to further resist readings of melancholy and stasis that attach to images of older women and bring into contact with one another the inconsistencies of a binary social narrative that limits the ageing female subject.

In my representational paradigm, the ritual suspension of time provided by the atemporal space of theatre[22] is set against the immediate action of a live event. The theatrical suspension of space/time coupled with filmed action where women play themselves, voicing their own opinions as performative speech acts (instead of only appearing as a mute image) provides a bridging mechanism and opportunity to pause and reflect on the meanings ascribed to particular ways of being. In practical terms, it allows the audience to become familiar with a diverse group of older women over a prolonged viewing time, softening the impact and aggressivity with the unconscious 'strangeness' that is projected onto unfamiliar ageing others and allowing the opportunity for these differences to be melded and entertained imaginatively in the safe time and space of theatre. Theatre's ritual suspension of time allows a cyclical sense of the temporal to infuse and interrupt a 'natural' linear chronology of time that plays within a society-wide decline narrative. Instead, the sense of theatrical atemporality and the cyclical creates a release from privileged points in the lifespan, freeing the audience to entertain conjecture of other responses and subject positions, other possibilities to be played out, rehearsed and considered. Holding these models in dialectic relation to one another 'creates a performance matrix in which meanings of old age can be questioned and potentially transformed' (Basting, 1998: 10) and allows for a dialogue to emerge to question both the naturalness of the image and the larger societal constructions of ageing and femaleness.

11.2.3.   Montage & Multiplicity

Drawing on my previous research into the impact of single still images, [23] I employed a montage slideshow in my final installation as a strategy to show and simultaneously interrupt and frustrate the desire of audiences to fixate on certain images and categorise actual women. It also allowed me to challenge the idea that single images can deliver an essentialised 'self', as discussed earlier in this chapter in section 10.4 on Horn's serial images of Helene Cixous and Barthes. As in the narrative approach, the speed of the montage does not allow the viewer time to target or fixate on individual appearances. Instead, the montage of still images becomes a shimmering movement as the many faces of the women blend together, allowing the audience the opportunity to bring to mind a

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[22] As described by Schechner on page 46 and Gregory on page 140.

[23] See Chapter 8, and particularly 8.4 for difficulties with single still images.

composite image personal to them that represents the ageing subject. I also used the montage to break up the intensity of the narrative exchanges allowing a moment of pause and reflection before the action begins again.

As an aside, I considered adding an appendix to this thesis of the images that were used as prompts to conversation in the filmed and recorded workshops. Eventually, I decided against it. It is my feeling that, in line with my thesis, providing these individual images would provide a locus for criticism and aggressivity that might attach to the actual women pictured in these photographs. Consequently, I withhold these images to talk about their effect, rather than risk adding to the problematic of the discourse I describe.

11.2.4. Hag Glamour

In addition to the roundtable footage and montage, I introduced a light-hearted graphic visual element to theatricalise and draw attention to the difficulty of oscillation between erotic (*Eros*) and death (*Thanatos*) drives that organise a youthful gaze and the summoning up of symbolic systems through aesthetic uncertainty that draw on the anxiety associated with the uncanny. (See section 6.2.) Two dancers appear in flickering light as if seen through multiple peepholes. Dressed in rather obvious body stockings they are two-faced, by turns burlesque seductress and skeleton, comedic and sinister. This play is intended to expose the inconsistencies in the register of a youthful gaze that projects lust for life and fear of death onto the appearance of ageing femaleness, but it also provides carnivalesque moments of comic relief and a surreal imaginary element to the intensity of the spoken exchanges that prevent it from appearing as a realist documentary.

11.2.5. Hag Grammar

I used the notion of women's gossip as a method of unleashing the Hag. Withholding the name and image of actual women allowed tongues to loosen and views normally suppressed to be voiced. In the safe space of theatre, women could unleash their pent up Hag power and by taking off the mask of jargon, cut to the quick with a lethal expediency building a performative speech act spoken with the immediacy of the vernacular. Hag grammar and the symbolic power of naming was evident in workshops, in conversation, and during filming – women were critically and dialectically engaged in

dismantling representations from a variety of perspectives, sharing insights, contesting each other's views in raw humorous exchanges. When women hag, they give vent to negative associations, claiming an older and 'ugly' power to release its poisonous associations hagging the image, these contemporary maenads symbolically stripped the meat from the bones of a patriarchal gaze, drawing on an older female energy to reclaim it for themselves, and pass it on around the group. My artwork deploys this quality of female exchange and experience to examine visual media. Unleashing the Hag through a gossip circle, utilises a politics of outrage not as an individual attack onto other women, but onto images as expressions of a patriarchal culture that is constraining a fuller expression of female power. Passing the photograph in a ritualised action from woman to woman, point-to-point, around the circle enabled the conversation to flow and spiral around the subject in a cauldron of fast moving exchange. Collectively, in a conversation that gathered momentum, women were able to close in and cover a range of diverse points without ever closing down or compromising the subject.

By bringing a roundtable of shapeshifters to bear on visual media within the structure of a screenic theatre-in-the-round, I unleash the power of collective female voices and perspectives to strip out a stable viewpoint. Women pop up in different positions, different arrangements, different outfits and self-styling. As the women dance round the spectator, shifting position, presenting no fixed target for the gaze, the Hag unleashed through a collective speech act whips in a ferocious snaking movement around the circle, spitting poison, temporarily shattering a glamorous spell to seize power, she cuts to the quick and moves on. This fast-moving speech act illustrates the inconsistencies within individual subject positions by placing them in close relation to one another through the editing process and screenplay.

As unseen images are passed from hand to hand, views are exchanged across the emptied out central space that the audience occupies. The participants move position, literally and subjectively, playfully trying out other points of view, presenting a 'self' in camera only to challenge or alter that view and impersonate other 'selves'. This allows real women to performatively voice a variety of views that break up stereotypical notions that may attach to their phenomenal appearance and suggests a mobility and fluid exchange from no fixed position woven in collective concert. As the action moves

randomly from screen to screen the central viewing position is destabilised, as the audience have to move physically to chase the symbolic movement of power as it is spoken from various positions around them. In post-production, these exchanges were further orchestrated and heightened through a deconstructive wordplay which threaded performative exchanges together to create a theatrically presented version of a performatively 'real' scenario. This combination of performative perspectives and theatrical presentation unified the piece according to cyclical and vertical theatre time rather than a linear chronology, allowing the audience to view the action in a different arrangement to everyday horizontal narratives that lead to the same inevitable conclusions.

11.2.6. Summary

By exposing the fissures between the 'natural' and social orders exhibited in performance my conceptual model combines a theatre-in-the-round with an audience of older women acting as chorus to play on a central absence of representation by 'Hagging' the (unseen) image. This performative 'event' enables the articulation of definite and actual responses to visual media – how the image is perceived and its apparent effect on real individuals – whilst utilising the hyperbolic tension of the theatrical event to heighten a sensibility of what is beyond the current horizon of representation. In this way, my conceptual and practical model answers the need for nuanced strategies to navigate societal issues and a particular set of power relations playing out in imagery of older women.

This concludes my description and rationale of my working methodology. In the next chapter I bring together my conclusions on my research and my critical response, the filmwork *Hagging the Image* (2015)

11.3. Final Curtain Call

As part of a multi-layered approach, I utilised a theatre-in-the-round of photography as a spatial and conceptual paradigm to expose the audience's constructive role and the use of language in response to images. Holding the audience attention for a prolonged period

of time by chasing the absence in portrayal allows women to articulate a variety of perspectives. This prolonged exposure introduces older women not as the topic of a passively 'beautiful' picture but focused and at work, circling around perceptions of an absence in representation in authorative acts of description and criticism.

Withholding the photographs from the camera eye allowed me to protect the identities of individual women portrayed in still photographs from becoming the target of the gaze and interrupt unconscious tendencies of the audience to identify, categorise, and dismiss actual women via their photographic image. Instead, this strategy of 'evacuation' from the central stage area mobilises the audience imagination to focus attention on the unseen subject, whilst denying the pleasure and closure of scopic frisson.[24] Instead the lack of image is evoked through speech (incantation) rather than shown as a pictorial representation. It was a simple method to vocalise what was missing without transfixing the audience's attention on a material image. It also allowed me to avoid referencing a single 'core' identity or subject position, allowing multiple perspectives to be voiced. Presented within a theatre-in-the-round, circulating around an absence intensifies a focus on the inadequacies of the image to fully represent the multi-faceted dynamism of older women and remobilise debate on the conditions under which images are viewed.

During the course of my study I made a radical shift from still to moving image as a way of addressing and the underlying narrative circulating around images of older women and as a method to exposure the inconsistencies of views that mark ageing femaleness as a target for collective hostility engendered by the frustrations of a youthful gaze. Together montage and narrative film combine to evoke a self beyond capture and counteract the effect produced by the stasis of still imagery. Deploying film in a theatre-in-the-round and its links to cyclical temporality provided me with a strategic mechanism that could address the difficulty with linear timeframes, and re-mobilise debate to counter the 'stuckness' of a discourse working out of still photographic representation.

By portraying multiple perspectives, my artwork considers the idea that feminism is not a unified discourse (Caelli et al., 2003). Drawing on the principle of talking circles and

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[24] See section on scopophilia on page 40 and scopic frisson on 58.

the vernacular of female gossip (see page 202) I constructed a feminist experimental methodology that does not privilege one voice above another but portrays multiple perspectives to expose the inconsistencies, fissure and flaws of a youthful gaze. These temporary ruptures provide the ground for new versions of ageing female identities to manifest. The unruliness of the Hag whispering through the group via the power of collective gossip draws on an empowering trajectory of oral history, clear female communication as an expression of situated knowledge, providing a 'herstory' that counters a transcendental viewpoint and androcentric history of ageing femaleness. The difficulties imposed on women by conventions of beauty justify the mobilisation of Hag force to emasculate the existing power structure and allow the potential for new identities to emerge that benefit the community as a whole, challenging not only an inherent sexism in images of older women, but the internalisation of a 'youthful structure of the look' that affects all members of the community.

Considered together, the research documentation and the film installation propose an alternative strategy for how we depict and view images of older women. When I started exploring these issues through my photography in 2003 there was very little photographic work, with the notable exception of Jo Spence and Rosy Martin's work, that focused on the context of femaleness and ageing. In recent years, I have seen an exponential rise in the discourse surrounding age and accompanying studies that examine the complex dynamics that this changing demographic represents. However, there is scant critical writing that engages with the practice of making images of ageing and the problems encountered in the processes of representation itself. My reflective writing on my own practice of photography provides a chance to contemplate and understand my own unconsciousness and reflect on the value of my artistic responses and adjust the artistic strategies I adopted in the making of my final piece. Writing from a practitioner's perspective, allowed me to examine the performative constraints of the camera apparatus and the technical issues that arise in the practice of photographic portraiture which shape the artefact, as well as the codifications and techniques used in the making of portrait images and how these affect and condition subsequent readings of the picture. Grounding my research in theoretical discourses about photography and embedding my practice in research into images of ageing femaleness, has enabled a

critical dialogue to evolve that builds upon what has gone before, leaving behind what I hope will be valuable evidence and resources for future social and artistic projects.

In this thesis I have charted the conceptual ideas that underpin my project, *Hagging the Image* (2015), a film installation that engages critically with a lack of empowering representation in still images of older women. This performative 'event' shown in-the-round creates new spaces for female representation that reflect an actual community's experiences, providing important historically situated information on a variety of female experience. My participants were drawn from different ethnicities, professions and hold a variety of political views but would, generally, identify themselves as middle-class, although several come from working-class backgrounds. Like several of the case study projects, my group contains a mixture of famous and unknown women who wield different social power in regard to their appearance and have differing socio-economic status. However, I acknowledge that there is a significant lack of working-class perspective, which would benefit from further research. Although I have chosen in this thesis to view ageism through the lens of identity problems, I recognise that not all women are equally oppressed and there is a danger with identity politics that they can deflect attention away from other political situations and imperatives, class and economic dynamics. Despite this, age, as Calasanti points out, has been somewhat under-theorised by comparison to the majority of gender studies (2006) and creates unique challenges in approach that require innovative methods and rethinking of representational paradigms and attention to cultural differences between different groups and what these represent. (Calasanti, 2006: 42) My dissertation and artwork does, I hope, add to a growing body of research into ageing and representation as it affects women. I have focused on understanding the intersection of a male gaze and a youthful structure of the look and how this plays out in photographic media as a youthful gaze from both sides of the camera. My hope in offering my particular perspective as a practitioner in front and behind the camera, is that by exposing the mechanisms that scaffold a youthful gaze, my work will support and fuel other future projects, which can delve further into other areas of inequality.

To conclude, by investigating the issues that prevent women from claiming an unfettered voice, I seek to provide a new paradigmatic space of resistance for all women as they

age that can navigate the poison of historically negative social narratives and the trap of the visual. By offering a scenario that characterises differing views and voices in an even-handed manner, I aim to develop understanding of the current issues surrounding the basis for the pejorative language and perceptions circulating around images of older women and move beyond polarising tropes of representation and readings. Providing work that proffers alternative ways of seeing and speaking about the complex dynamics and contradictory forces that play on women through their visual representation (or lack of it) is a strategic intervention. It not only provides an opportunity to confront, pause and reflect upon ongoing societal narratives, but also creates visual resources and conceptual strategies that problematise and challenge prevailing norms. By presenting a diversity of viewpoints that dialogue within the same space the chance to resonate in an atmosphere of fluidity and open mindedness, I aim to remobilise and repoliticise visual media as a confrontation with unconscious and consciously held cultural attitudes and provoke new knowledge through the interstices between conflicting views.

for my beautiful daughter
a Hagiography and dirty gramayre
for weyward moments in cycles to come

12. Bibliography

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