Good afternoon. It’s a privilege to be here at the IV annual SELICUP Conference, and I want to thank the conference organisers for such a well planned event stuffed with so many intellectual riches. I especially want to thank Dr Prieto-Arranz and Dr Bastida for the generous invitation to present some of my most recent research.

This research needs to be located in a fast developing network of scholars in Europe and the USA which is addressing questions of aging and old age. This network marks the linking of several research groups – UK based WAM (Women Ageing Media network) that received AHRC funding in 2008 and which is now affiliated to Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research project “Live to Be a Hundred: Cultural Narratives of Longevity” based at the University of Maastricht. I must particularly foreground the grup DEDAL-LIT at the university of Lleida which has been at the forefront of this emergent area of research.

These networks are beginning to address a surprising gap in our existing research paradigms. Despite a proliferation of images of aging and old age in popular forms of representation advertising, print and cinematic fictions, celebrity culture, music - It is striking that the fields of feminism, literary, film, media and cultural studies have had very little to say on this subject. It seems that even where not explicitly stated, existing scholarship implicitly assumes that popular culture is the province of the young: that the body in popular culture is a young body. Obviously, the position in medicine and social sciences is very different and gerontology is a well established field of research. But there is little in this research that begins to address the questions of representation, identity, ideology, discourse and power that underpin our endeavours.

As I hope to suggest today, we can no longer delay placing aging and old age at the forefront of our FUTURE scholarship on popular culture. Throughout this lecture I will refer to aging and old age, but that is a matter of convenience and is not intended to suggest that old age is an essential stage of life. Like gender, old age is as much, if not more, a product of discourse than it is biology. As Kathleen Woodward suggests OPEN QUOTE: ‘Just as Studies in gender and sexuality examine the ways in which sex-gender systems operate in various cultures, so age studies is concerned with understanding how differences are produced by discursive formations, social practices, and material conditions.,’ CLOSE QUOTE (x). Thus, I am suggesting that old age can be seen as a discursive construction that is mapped onto particular bodies in a similar fashion to gender, sexuality, class, race etc.
Of course, AS Woodward also suggests, once we start to see old age and aging as a product of discourse we can no longer see it as a discrete life stage, but rather as OPEN QUOTE, ‘part of a larger continuum of discourse on age itself, a system of age that includes infancy, childhood, adolescence and young adulthood’ CLOSE QUOTE (x). That formulation of aging and old age as products of discourse is the intellectual underpinning of what I am about to say.

I hope you haven’t come along hoping to hear a tightly argued and minutely detailed theoretical paper, because you will be sadly disappointed. Today, I aim to give a broad brushed analysis of some popular cultural forms. This analysis will be located in those research traditions that position popular culture as a site of hegemonic negotiation; more specifically as Stuart Hall suggests– a negotiation over the dominant meanings of identity formations. The identity in question is old age. My lecture today aims to trace some broad trends in global popular culture: trends that are indicative of competing discourses of aging and old age: trends that highlight a negotiation in the hegemonic meanings of aging and old age. In this lecture today I will be foregrounding those discourses of pathological old age that have their origins in medical and social science paradigms, and tracing how these produce regulatory affects in popular cultural practices. I will also be tracing the competing model of youthful old age that has emerged in advertising and celebrity culture before suggesting some of the ideological work being performed by this emergent discourse.

SLIDE 2

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

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

This prior knowledge of an already determined normal possessed by
the clinician establishes every clinical encounter as an operation of
power. Crucially, these operations of power extend beyond the clinic
and saturate broader social processes. Through the reiterations of the
clinical gaze, medical science accrued the power to establish itself as
a regime of truth and knowledge. As Foucault suggests, “…OPEN
QUOTE ‘medical gestures, words, gazes, took on a philosophical
density that had formerly belonged only to mathematical thought’
CLOSE QUOTE (Foucault, 1994/1963: 199). In this regime of truth and
knowledge, the young body is constituted as the healthy norm whilst
the aging body has been constituted as its unhealthy counterpart.
Thus, the aging body is pathologised in terms of its mental and physical
decline and any other ways in which it might be understood are
occluded. In this dominant regime of truth and knowledge the aging
body is always already a problem, always already pathologised and in
need of treatment.

These images typify this formulation of the aging body. I am sure you
are aware of how they position us to adopt the clinical gaze. To
recognise the pathology of the aging body because of our prior
knowledge of what medical discourse constitutes as normal and
healthy. Now I am not suggesting that these patients are not in need of
care and assistance, but I want to indicate that the clinical gaze is
reductive. The clinical gaze reduces the figure of the older person to
little more than a set of pathological symptoms and excludes
everything else that constitutes specific subjectivities. We see the
symptoms on a body and not the subject of that body. Through the
clinical gaze we see old age in terms of vulnerability, frailty and decline.
The clinical gaze that constructs older people as physically frail in want
of care and support also triggers powerful connotations of economic
dependency that position the objects of its gaze as drains on society,
rather than seeing them as potentially valuable resources.

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

SLIDE 3

This is the image used to publicise the 2010 Celebrating Age Festival
that is an annual event where I live in Bristol. It could not be further
removed from the images on the previous slide that reiterate the equation between aging and decline and vulnerability. It is noteworthy that this particular representation of a joyful, vibrant aging couple is highly evocative of the ‘old age as liberation’ discourses deployed by private pension companies before they lost our money in the legitimised gambling known as banking investments: a legitimate gambling that underpins the current economic crisis. With gritted teeth I leave that aside and move on to recognise that this image is positive and life affirming. Yet, as I know from experience, such affirmations rapidly dissipate when attending this festival.

I attended with a group of friends, all of us circling retirement age. We went with the intention of developing some of the social links that we know we will need when our careers no longer consume all our time. Yet, within 20 minutes of arriving at the event, with dread in her voice, one of my friends was asking, ‘It’s not going to be like this, is it?’. Once she had voiced the question, the rest of the group felt free to concur and to air some real fears about the future represented by the festival. So what was it that filled us with such dread about our aging future?

The festival is organised by multiple agencies who have connections with Bristol’s aging population. It targets the 50+ group and operates through 2strands – entertainment and information. The entertainment is part of the problem. It is decidedly nostalgic, there’s nothing inherently wrong with that, but the way in which nostalgia is mobilised at this festival invokes the pathologised aging body. Firstly, on the occasion I attended, the nostalgia was for Big Bands and jitterbugs - the legacy of Second World War popular culture. In terms of popular cultural legacies this undoubtedly places serious limits on the demographic appeal of the festival entertainment. It is 75 years since the Second World War ended, suggesting that anyone with personal memories of the period would now be in the 80+ group, effectively excluding any participants in the 50 to 80 demography, that is excluding the first 30 years of the cited target group of the festival, most of whom are more likely to share a nostalgia for rock and roll, the swinging sixties and even punk.

Moreover, Bristol is a diverse multi-cultural society with large Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities, both of which have made significant contributions to the popular culture which is now a nostalgic memory for many over 50s in the UK. One is forced to wonder what happened to Reggae and Bangra – where are the Afro-Caribbean steel bands, the Indian drummers and the rappers that make up the rich seam of globalised popular culture. With these questions in place, the whiteness of the publicity couple comes into sharp relief. Your never too old or too white it seems. These worrying observations aside,
the more troubling aspect of the entertainment was its tempo, boogie woogie in slow motion, big band music slowed to a death march. The implications here that ‘the old dears mustn’t get too excited’ were compounded by the closing time of the festival - 4 pm – clearly, a discourse of ‘they really must get home before it gets dark’ was in operation. At risk of sounding like a stereotypical Brit – there was no alcohol available – no sociable glass of wine or beer, just tea and cakes. The infantalisation implied here is staggering – the stagger of outrage not excess alcohol.

But never mind, if all this excitement became too much, the information on hand was guaranteed to reassure – the police were there to advise on keeping burglars and muggers at bay, Age concern was there to advise on emergency alarm systems for people living alone, there was advice on sheltered accommodation, on specially adapted transport, on a range of gadgets designed to counter the physical decline of the aging body. In short, the aging body at the centre of the celebration was the pathologised body constituted through the clinical gaze. There was nothing to counter this depressing image of aging. Beyond the poster, there was little to represent active aging and old age - no representations from a range of outdoor pursuit clubs such as hiking, canoeing, rowing, bowls, team sports of all kinds—all of which have older members as participants, coaches, advisors –. Equally there was no representation from those more cerebral pursuits such as local history groups, bridge, chess and art clubs, – most of which are dominated by older members who have intellectual curiosity, and/or specialised knowledge to share, and time to attend. Equally, there was no reminder of the long term commitment made by many older people to the voluntary sector, both in the UK and on long term overseas projects. So forget the vibrant poster, no wonder my group of friends felt so dispirited. Not much cause for celebration then, just a future of decline and vulnerability to look forward to.

The overall effect of the festival was to constitute the aging body as passive, docile and decrepit, it operated to reiterate the dominant discourses of social science and medicine and we were positioned as passive objects within a regime of knowledge that pathologises the aging body. Despite our own positive experiences of aging and ongoing independence, we were regulated into this regime of knowledge and constituted as pathological objects of the clinical gaze.
Hollywood has traditionally played its part in reiterating the clinical gaze and the pathologisation of the aging body with stars being discarded once they begin to display any of the signs of aging. This is particularly acute for female stars since there are fewer roles for women in the first instance and youthful beauty is the female star’s most significant mode of cultural capital. Moreover, Hollywood’s particular logic of the heterosexual couple – older man, younger woman – has meant that roles for aging female stars have dried up well in advance of those for male stars of similar age. This logic has led the likes of Simone de Beauvoir and Germaine Greer to foreground the invisibility of older women in public life. They of course are also taking account of a broader public sphere in which popular culture is imbricated.

If the industrial practices of Hollywood that discards the aging star have served to reproduce the pathologised aging body, its on-screen representations have served their part too, most notably in those moments of rare self reflection when it has interrogated the fate of the fading older female star. For example, Joseph Mankiewicz’ 1950 film All About Eve displaces Hollywood with theatre before telling the story of how the aging star, Margo Channing (Bette Davis) is displaced by her protégé, Eve Arnold (Anne Baxter). However, in scenes such as this on the slide where the use of mirrors allows the film to literally reflect on the disposability of aging stars by foregrounding the endless supply of raw material waiting to be exploited does little more than affirm the status quo.

Ten years later, Bette Davis – again- was to play opposite Joan Crawford as the eponymous Baby Jane Hudson in Robert Aldrich’s 1960 film, Whatever Happened to Baby Jane. Adapted from Henry Farrell’s novel, Aldrich’s psychological thriller now forms part of the canon of Hollywood film. Even people who haven’t seen the film know that it traces a damaging sado-masochistic relationship between two sisters, both aging former stars. Jane from the silent era and Blanche from the early talkies. There is often a conflation made between the professional rivalry of Davis and Crawford and the characters they play: a conflation that is deployed to couch the film in terms of the authentic. Which is problematic since there is an all too easy slide between authentic and truthful. This matters because the film undoubtedly mobilises the clinical gaze and teases out an uneasy dynamic between psychological pathology and aging as pathology. This
dynamic is thrown into relief and rendered grotesque, monstrous and abject through what is now an iconographic image of Baby Jane.

**SLIDE 6**

Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard* also explores the fate of the aging Hollywood female star. Like *All About Eve* the film was released in 1950. However, where Margo Channing in *All About Eve* accepts her professional displacement, albeit reluctantly, *Sunset Boulevard*’s Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson) refuses to accept the conventional paradigm of aging. She takes a younger lover, she employs cosmetic techniques to alter the signs of aging, and she fights the refusal of studio bosses to give her work. However, this narrative does not celebrate or even sanction her resistant refusal of redundancy. Instead, the narrative traces Norma’s descent into a mental breakdown.

**CLIP – Sunset Boulevard**

Even without the grotesque make up of the child star that informs Baby Jane, Norma Desmond is pathologised and constituted as grotesque, abject because she attempts to refuse and reverse the effects of cultural aging by cosmetic transformation. and thus the film pathologises her refusal of the regulations of aging femininity and her attempt to secure an alternative or resistant paradigm of aging. She is represented as mad because she refuses to grow old in a proper manner.

But, as I am sure you all recognise, the times they are a changing, and 60 years on, Norma Desmond is no longer a marginal figure and now represents a dominant discourse of ‘youthful’ aging that dominates contemporary star and celebrity culture.

**SLIDE 7**

I’m about to Make a quick run through a gallery of some contemporary, cosmically enhanced, aging stars through which it is easy to recognise a shift in the regulation of aging in which aging and ‘youthful’ looks and an are no longer constituted as mutually exclusive, nor is their union produced as a pathological symptom. Indeed, ‘youthful’ old age is now constructed as desirable and accessible to all. There is some text on the slides that offer a brief summary of recent work by these stars, which I won’t read out.
Here Jane Fonda at 73, I always enjoy the irony that Hanoi Jane, that anti-American political activist is now an Ambassador for L’Oreal cosmetics.

SLIDE 8

Johnny Halliday at 67, may be retired from the music business but not from the headlines, and if they are to be believed he is most definitely not retiring from excess consumption.

SLIDE 9

Staying with the global pop music industry, Julio Iglesias continues to tour and his age of 67 does not dilute his star image of the romantic sex symbol.

SLIDE 10

At 85, Honor Blackman is Frequently held up as an example of graceful aging, and she is especially popular with Saga magazine – whose target audience over 50s

SLIDE 11

Now that Morgan Freeman has reached 73 his star persona is informed by a statesman like gravitas that would be the envy of any president: a gravitas that runs totally counter to Hollywood stereotypes of African Americans – the Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks mapped by film historian Donald Bogle

SLIDE 12

Judi Dench is that rare phenomenon, a rarely unemployed actress, but in the 15 or so years since she reached 60, the official retirement age for women in the UK, her domestic fame as a stalwart of British theatre and TV has been globalised by her role as M in the Bond franchise, by performances in ‘heritage’ costume drama in film and TV, as well as her role in the 2009 film, Rage, Sally Potter’s talking heads take on the fashion industry. Throughout, Dench is dressed in black, set against intense fuchsia, she is, as Jonathan Romney of The Independent on Sunday (20 Sept. 2009): puts it, OPEN QUOTE ‘magnificently spiky, spitting contemptuous aperçus whilst lighting a spliff from a handy little pistol’ CLOSEQUOTE. [ see link http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/rage-sally-potter-95-mins-15-1790270.html] Eva Kranitzi (unpublished paper, Screen 2010) argues that Dench’s
recent roles certainly defies any attempts to position her in the cosy ‘national treasure’ formulation usually accorded to older British actresses who live long enough who stay around.

**SLIDE 13**

Mick Jagger, now 67 - One always suspects that there is one more tour to come

**SLIDE 14**

Susan Sarandon at 64 continues to attract serious roles and continues to attract the red carpet attention usually reserved for much younger actresses, whilst the attention paid to her breasts usefully reminds us that visible older women can be positioned as objects of the male gaze just as easily as their younger counterparts.

**SLIDE 15**

Finally, the amazing Shirley Bassey, here in her moment of triumph at the 2007 Glastonbury Festival. After years positioned as a gay icon, at 73, she is now back in the mainstream and is the darling of contemporary song writers. Her 2009 album *The Performance* showcases material written for Bassey by leading contemporary songwriters such as Gary Barlow, The Pet Shop Boys, Rufus Wainwright, whilst its production provided a focus for Alan Yentob’s TV documentary, *The Girl From Tiger Bay* – which in turn is the title of song written by James Bradfield and Nicholas Jones (better known Nicky Wire) of The Manic Street Preacher.

That’s the last slide in the gallery and it does not represent an exhaustive list of aging stars and celebrities, though it may well have been exhausting to sit through – and I am sure that you can readily add to it. And I am equally sure that you have readily taken the point that a paradigm shift has taken place in the construction of stardom and celebrity – older stars are no longer redundant, provided that they exhibit the signs of the ‘youthful aging body that was pathologised in *Sunset Boulevard*.

As I suggested in my introduction, there is an hegemonic struggle in play, a struggle for the meaning of old age: a struggle between the pathologised old age of the clinical gaze and the emergent discourse of youthful aging. But what is at stake in that struggle?
I’ll begin answering that question by thinking further on this transformation in attitudes: a transformation that is not confined to Hollywood culture, or even the broader celebrity culture that has become a mini industry in its own right. Where Hollywood once normalised the use of make up, it is now at the forefront of makeover culture. The discourse of the ‘make over’ is globally recycled and is manifested through TV shows, magazine features, advertising, weekend breaks, cosmetic procedure travel. Here one example, the US TV show Ten years Younger (page on IMDB) was imported to the UK, then in turn was exported, and made globally available via Sky and the world wide web and reproduced in Nicky Hambleton-Jones’ book.

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

Don’t for one minute assume that men escape this mode of regulation CLICK ON LINK.

The examples shown here highlight the extent to which discourses and technologies of youthful ageing are coming to dominate contemporary cultural practices, regardless of gender. They also make visible the extent to which the compulsion to erase the signs of aging is pivotal to the practices of make over culture.

Whilst both men and women are the targets of the discourses of youthful aging, the embodiment of those discourses is aligned with formations of gender. In his work on stars as complex semiotic systems Richard Dyer observes that stars function to embody social values, to make social values appear to be properties of an individual and to stem from specific bodies, rather than being culturally produced. Even the most cursory analysis of aging stars illuminates the embodiment of
youthful aging and how that embodiment operates to secure gender difference. It is here that those discourses of firm and hard signalled in the title of this lecture come into play.

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

Whether achieved through the pain and discomfort of bodily inscriptions or through bloodless and painless virtual inscriptions, the discourse of smooth skin is rendered demonstrably achievable and desirable through the body of the star.

Again, as we all know, discourses of the firm body dominate the paradigm of youthful aging. This can be achieved through some of the same bodily and virtual technologies as smooth skin. But equally, regimes of diet and exercise that intersect with discourses of the healthy body are promoted by stars, and the ostensible beneficial effects of the latest diet and the latest ‘work out’ are seen to be embodied by the stars.

But firmness is where gender difference becomes apparent. The firm body has different meanings within formations of femininity and masculinity. Within femininity, firmness connotes slender legs, pert breasts and buttocks, a flat stomach, which in turn are signifiers of youthful aging. This is usefully exemplified by the paparazzi image of Helen Mirren, then aged 62. It is noteworthy how following the circulation of this photograph, Mirren was rapidly constituted as embodying an ideal of, and to be role model for, aging femininity. Only days after this image appeared the global media mesh was saturated with advice for older women on how to achieve a similar, firm but feminine, body. Even now, Googling ‘Mirren bikini’ brings up over 400,000 hits.
Within masculinity, firmness tends to speak of character and purposefulness in ways that it never does within femininity. Think Morgan Freeman, or Tom Hanks for instance, Moreover, in formations of masculinity, firmness and hardness tend to be elided. Increasingly, male movie stars have the kind of worked on, worked out, hard bodies that used to be the province of the sporting star and now, the rock hard six pack stomach a la Brad Pitt and Daniel Craig is all the better displayed by the depilation of the hairy chest that in the hey day of Burt Reynolds and Sean Connery, was the signifier of potent masculinity.

Given Hollywood’s restrictions on the display of the flaccid penis, let alone an erect one, the representation of potent masculinity is reliant on visual displacements such as the hairy chest or the six pack abs. Over the course of a long career, Jack Nicholson has perfected the raised eyebrow technique of displacement. A raised eyebrow from Jack is highly suggestive that other parts of the anatomy are similarly rising.

When taken with a stream of roles in which he is either lover to several women at once such as The Witches of Eastwick (1987 George Miller), or he plays the lover of much younger women in films like Something’s Gotta Give (Nancy Meyers 2003) As Good As It Gets (James L Brooks, 1998) or as in his most recent film, How do you Know? (James L Brooks, Dec 2010) where he plays an older executive competing for the affections of a 27 year old woman, Nicholson is not only constructed as both irresistible and potent, that construction firmly penetrates formulations of youthful aging.

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

The slogan that 70 is the new 60 has a hard, economic rationale and I would suggest that youthful aging is being used as lever in the contraction of the welfare state in various European nations. Youthful aging is no longer confined to discourses of a leisured old age but is being used to regulate aging bodies in order to reduce the burden on health and pension services. Just this weekend France was riven with social unrest resulting from resistance to proposals to raise retirement age from 60 to 62. Germany already has a retirement age of 67, Spain is attempting to raise the age from 65 to 67, and I have no doubt that the Cameron government has the British retirement age in its sights. There is no uniform retirement age within western culture, but there is a dominant discourse within governments that raising the age of retirement is one way of reducing national liabilities. In order to do this, governments need healthy, older bodies. The fit body is fit for work; therefore the regulation of the aging body is inextricably linked to the regulation of the state within capitalist logic. We are increasingly pressured into adopting ‘healthy lifestyles’ to keep ourselves fit and young - young and healthy. Stop that smoking, stop that drinking, get out there and exercise. For what? Basically, So that we can remain part of the cycle of production and consumption that secures capitalist economical structures.

SLIDE 19

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

The most likely effects of this on the ‘youthing’ industries are an increased effort to close over the rupture of youthful aging: to develop and promote even more techniques, procedures and products that will close the ideological seam under threat. And Madonna’s aging hands are unlikely to counter those bids to extend the working age since, paradoxically, she also embodies the aging body preserved for work through diet and fitness regimes. Capitalism does not really care how we look so long as we can perform in the cycle of production and consumption. The appeal to the ‘looks’ of aging is the sugar on the pill, the bread and circuses that produces a docile workforce and keeps many of us chained to the capitalist treadmill.

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