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# How Does *Vogue* Negotiate Age?: Fashion, the Body, and the Older Woman

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## **Abstract**

This article addresses the role played by clothing and fashion in the constitution of age, exploring the changing ways in which aging is experienced, understood, and imagined in modern culture through an analysis of the responses of UK *Vogue*. As a high fashion journal, *Vogue* focuses on youth; age and aging represent a disruption of its cultural field. How it negotiates this issue is relevant to both students of fashion and of age. Older women in *Vogue* only feature sporadically, and predominantly in ways that dilute or efface their age. The current ideal is one of “Ageless Style” and cultural integration. But this has not always

been the case. In the 1950s UK *Vogue* regularly featured a distinctly older women in the form of the fictional Mrs Exeter. No such figure appears—or could appear—today, and this article explores the reasons behind this, in the changing social and cultural location of older people in contemporary consumption culture.

**KEYWORDS:** age, consumption, body, identity, fashion, dress, *Vogue*, Mrs Exeter

### **Introduction**

Fashion and age do not fit easily, or happily, together. There is a discordant quality in the mix. Fashion is assumed to be all about youth and beauty—so far removed from the world of age. And yet many older women are elegantly and smartly dressed. And many have relatively high spending power. From the perspective of a high-end magazine like *Vogue* this presents a conundrum: how to address a growing sector of the market without compromising its status as the premier organ of the fashion world. From the perspective of a student of culture, or of old age, however, the tensions between fashion and age and the responses of *Vogue* to them, offer an opportunity to explore the changing ways in which aging is experienced, understood, and imagined in modern culture. Age and aging, it has been suggested, are in the process of being reconfigured under the impact of demographic and social change. The nature of identity in later years may be changing, becoming more fluid, more open to negotiation. In this, cultural products such as clothing potentially have a role to play. An analysis of the responses of a magazine like *Vogue* offers us a means of evaluating these processes.

It also offers a means of extending the remit of fashion studies, which has been slow to engage with questions of age. Though there is a copious literature on clothing and identity, this has largely addressed younger age groups and radical, transgressive styles (Evans 1997; Holliday 2001; Khan 1993; Polhemus 1994; Rolley 1993). Older people rarely if ever feature in mainstream books on fashion; and what literature there is on clothing and age is tentative and sparse (Fairhurst 1998; Gibson 2000; Gullette 1999).

### **Aging, the Body, and Dress**

The article forms part of a UK-based empirical study funded by ESRC,<sup>1</sup> exploring the nature of embodiment in later years, using the arena of dress as a means to interrogate the complex interrelationships between bodily and the cultural factors in the constitution of age. Clothes mediate between the body and the social world (Entwistle 2000). They

are the vestimentary envelope that contains and presents the body; and they thus play an important part in the presentation and negotiation of identities, including aged identities (Twigg 2007, 2009).

“Age,” “aging,” “older people” are all culturally contingent terms and, as we shall see, their definitions are fluid and changing. “Age” and “aging” do not necessarily imply old age; they need to be understood as processes as much as categories, operating throughout the life course. For magazines like *Vogue*, however, aging sets in early, starting at the point at which youth begins to fade, often regarded as the late twenties. The primary focus of this article, however, is late middle years and beyond, broadly understood as fifties onwards.

### **Women’s Magazines and the Constitution of Identities**

We are familiar with the role of women’s magazines in the constitution of gendered—and classed—identities through extensive work that has explored such processes, particularly in relation to younger women. Though feminists of the second wave like Friedan and Tuchman presented magazines as key sites in the generation of oppressive and distorting versions of femininity (Gough-Yates 2003), later writers such as Winship (1987) and Hermes (1995) offer more nuanced accounts, unpacking the complex, polysemic messages within magazines, and the interactive processes whereby their content is made meaningful through the practices and perceptions of readers. Gough-Yates (2003), focusing on the phenomenon of the New Women magazines of the 1980s and 1990s, explored how new markets of potential readers were discursively constituted by media professionals through a focus on identity constitution and lifestyles, particularly in relation to the imagined category of the “new middle class.” More recently McRobbie (2008) has returned to her earlier work on girl’s magazines and the intersecting themes of gender and class, to attack current work within cultural studies for its complicity with post-feminist values. There is, thus, a large body of work that explores the role of magazines in the constitution of gendered—and classed—identities.

As yet, however, these perceptions have not been extended to age; we have not seen a corresponding discussion of the potential role of women’s magazines in the constitution of aged identities. Partly this arises from systematic biases within cultural studies, which focuses heavily in the youthful and transgressive, reflecting the values of its subject matter in its own analyses. Partly it arises from a more general reluctance in sociology and social theory to incorporate age within the debate on intersectionality: other categories of difference or identity formation have been more readily acknowledged (Anthias 2001; Brewer 1993; Krekula 2007; Maynard 1994). In many ways, we are at the same point

in relation to age, as we were in the 1970s in relation to gender, when it was so obvious a category, so naturalized in biological difference, that we could not see its centrality. The significance of age and age ordering has been similarly obscured. We need to unpack those categories, to acknowledge their significance, but also to recognize their socially constructed and negotiated character. This article is a contribution to that intellectual and political process.

### **Vogue**

*Vogue* UK has a dual character as the premier British fashion magazine (together with the trade paper *Draper's Record*), and a lifestyle magazine aimed at well-off women. One of a stable of glossy journals produced by Condé Nast, it is part of an international publishing empire, with editions in fifteen countries. Each is distinctive, and reflects local commercial and visual culture, though in recent decades they have together become carriers of a globalized style that supports international branding (David 2006; Kopina 2007; Moeran 2004). *Vogue* is notable for an almost perfect match between editorial and advertising, with the high production values of its fashion spreads reflected in the adverts for major perfume and garment houses. Its high advertising revenue means it is one of the most profitable women's magazines. The current UK circulation is around 220,000, with an attributed readership of 1.2 million. Its target readership is described as "concentrated in the ABC1 20–44 demographic group. A high proportion are in some kind of job or profession and are in the higher income groups." The socio-demographic profile confirms this with a preponderance of As (BRAD 2008). In terms of age, the profile is biased towards those in their twenties and thirties, with a clear falling off from the mid-fifties.

15–24	23–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65+
215	124	92	88	52	39

A hundred represents the population profile, with values above and below representing greater and lesser uptake.

What issues does age pose for *Vogue*? The magazine, like other media outlets, is increasingly aware of changing demographics that mean that older people constitute a growing proportion of the population. Alexandra Shulman, the editor of UK *Vogue* noted in 2008 how "fifty percent of women are over 40." Many of these women have high disposable incomes and a personal history of consumption. In 2006 men and women over 45 spent £12.2 billion on clothing, an increase of 21 percent over 2001 (Mintel 2006). The Gray Pound represents a potentially profitable segment of the market, one of interest to advertisers (Key Note 2006). Mintel notes however that this group are often "frustrated shoppers," failing to find their desires or interests reflected

in the market. *Vogue* thus has a clear institutional interest in addressing these groups. But there is also a more personal reason that makes the subject relevant to the magazine, in the form of the lives of the journalists who work on *Vogue*, who need to be recognized as independent actors within this system of cultural production. Though most of the stylists and fashion editors in magazines like *Vogue* are young, senior journalists and editors are not. Alexandra Shulman, the editor of UK *Vogue* is in her early fifties, and Anna Wintour of US *Vogue* is in her early sixties. At a personal level they face the dilemmas of growing older while still retaining an active interest in dress and fashion. The fact that *Vogue* has, as we shall see, featured age-themed issues and debates under Shulman's editorship reflects this.

The difficulty for *Vogue*, however, comes from the nature of fashion itself, which is profoundly youth oriented. The high fashion scene is dominated by youth. Styles are designed for, and shown on, very young models, often with prepubescent bodies of extreme thinness; and this trend has grown over the last two decades. Most designers openly admit they design for young beautiful women, and they have little or no interest in other categories. Age is simply not fashionable or sexy. *Vogue*, if it is to succeed, needs to reflect this fashion *zeitgeist*.

Youth and beauty have, of course, always been linked, but the nature of late modern, consumption culture gives a new twist to the story. The dominance of the Visual in modern culture means we are surrounded by images, particularly from advertising, that celebrate bodily perfectionism, and from which all signs of imperfection are erased. We are familiar with the malign effects of this on younger women in relation to widespread levels of bodily dissatisfaction and anxiety underlying conditions such as anorexia (Bordo 1993; MacSween 1993; Wolf 1990). But it has an impact on older women also, supporting the widespread culture of fear of aging; for this new visual culture of perfectionism rests on an erasure of age. We are simply not accustomed to seeing older faces, except in certain defined settings (for example in advertising, largely confined to food (Zhang *et al.* 2006)). These settings do not include fashion. Aging has thus become a disruption in the visual field, a form of spoiled identity (Gullette 1997, 1999; Woodward 1991, 1999). To include such images in *Vogue* would be discordant, potentially undermining its status as a high fashion publication.

### ***Vogue* UK, 1990–2009**

This article is based on a content analysis of UK *Vogue* from 1990 to 2009. All covers and content pages were scrutinized and material relevant to age followed up; and from 2005 onwards, whole issues reviewed. A large part of the content of *Vogue*, as with other glossy magazines, is advertising. This is important both for its profitability

and appeal. In this article, however, I will confine my analysis to the editorial pages. Fashion advertisements almost never address older women in an overt way. They may do so covertly, but they can rarely be definitively identified as doing so. This is in contrast to the skincare advertisements that constantly and clearly address aging. Work by Coupland (2003) and others (Kang 1997; Reventos 1998; Williamson 1982) has explored the discursive strategies adopted in cosmetic advertisements and accompanying beauty pages; and other work in cultural gerontology has addressed questions of facial appearance and its relationship to cultures of aging (Furman 1997, 1999; Gilleard 2002; Hurd 2000). Though these questions are relevant to the central themes of this article, my primary focus here is on fashion and dress. In other work I plan to analyze fashion as it is featured in magazines aimed at older women, where the overall remit of the publication means that advertisements and editorial copy are addressed to this age group: there the task is to see how fashion is integrated into magazines aimed at older women. Here, however, the task is to understand how aging is integrated into a magazine centered on fashion.

Up until 2007, age was only intermittently featured in *Vogue*, and was wholly absent from its covers. The pattern was broken in July 2007 with an issue that addressed “Ageless Style” (Figure 1). This was followed in 2008 and 2009 (again July) with more extensively themed issues on the same subject. The 2007 cover featured eight models integrated into unity through being dressed in white. None showed any visible signs of age, though close scrutiny of one slightly blank face, might suggest cosmetic enhancement. Inside, however, their ages are revealed as 19–53 (the cosmetically enhanced Marie Helvin). The reader’s experience of the cover is one of lightness (white with touches of red), glamour, and youth. There are no visible signs of age. The sell lines include: “Vogue celebrates Ageless Style”; “working the trends: from seventeen to seventy”; “forever young: insider beauty tricks.” The 2008 cover depicts a single image, the actress Uma Thurman, described in the sell line as “facing forty with glamour.” (She is in her late thirties.) There are no visible signs of age on her face or hands, which are air brushed to perfection. There is, however, a slightly somber quality to the cover with predominant colors of gray, black, and gold. The sell lines include: “Ageless style: the best pieces at any age” and “How to grow old fashionably.” The latter, though it echoes the phrase growing old gracefully, is notable for its direct reference to growing old, something rare in magazine culture.

*Vogue* had on occasion addressed age in earlier issues, though not on the cover. Notably in 1998 it was the topic of a *Vogue* Debate. There were four such debates, which took the form of round table discussions by eight or so invited guests. The subjects were: ultra-slim models; appropriate dress for professional women; the absence of black models; and aging. Each carried a sense that it was a topic where *Vogue*

**Figure 1**  
Cover of *Vogue*, July  
2007, age issue. Patrick  
Demarchelier/*Vogue*. © The  
Condé Nast Publications Ltd.



was under fire: for promoting malign versions of the female body that supported the culture of anorexia; for failing to acknowledge the changes in women's lives resulting from entry into work where ultra-fashionable, frivolous or overtly sexual dress was inappropriate; for endorsing implicit racism through its promotion of an exclusively white model of beauty; and for excluding older women from view. The model and work debates were mentioned on the cover: the aging one was not. The panel for the aging debate were: the deputy editor of *Vogue* (42), the beauty director (age not given), a novelist (Fay Weldon, 66), director of a model agency (54), property administrator (66), retailing director (48), a designer (Edina Ronay, age not given), and a private GP (50). The discussion mostly turned around appearance rather than dress, with particular attention paid to cosmetic surgery and hormone-replacement therapy (HRT). The tone was largely up-beat, with a characteristic

magaziney emphasis on feeling good, the importance of positive thinking, and inner beauty. This last note was somewhat punctured, however, by the intervention of the beauty editor: "I have to say that it's an irony to listen to us all sitting around saying it's great to be older, when I know that the phones are ringing in the beauty department with women our age asking 'Where can I get botox injections?'" (Nov 1998: 266). The discussion was interspersed by full-page commissioned images of four older women, each named, and wearing *Vogue*-styled fashions. As we shall see this is unusual, the predominant treatment of age being small multiple images. The discussion ended with an editorial note that explained that unlike the other three debates, this one produced "no clear conclusions," and it was described as "not an easy topic."

Inside the 2007 issue there is a brief editorial by Shulman defining her approach: "When I first thought about putting together an 'ageless style' issue of *Vogue* I was obsessed with what I didn't want it to be: something that told you what to wear at what age. The whole point of style and fashion is that it should be ageless ... we have concentrated on what you can wear at *any* age, whether you are in your teens or your seventies" (July 2007: 12). In the 2008 special issue Shulman wrote more directly on the experience of becoming fifty. The tone of the article is unanxious and balanced. She states that she is unwilling to get involved in battles that she is going to lose: "you can't win a battle against time." She notes how it is easier to face age if one has been nice looking but never beautiful: "For those whose identities are completely bound up in their good looks, the diminution is terrifying" (July 2008: 143). Her work means that she is steeped in fashion, but a personal level, though she enjoys clothes, she keeps them slightly at arms length. In relation to age she comments "there is no doubt that the question of what you *can* wear becomes more charged and complex as you age ... The fear of dressing inappropriately lurks like some ghastly spectre around the wardrobe: the insecurity about whether you are heading into a mutton-alert territory hovers determinedly." She concludes the article on a note confirming continuity of identity and pleasure in dress:

At some point we all think that we lose the person that we were when younger and become somebody old. But we don't, and our clothes, and the pleasures we take in them should reflect that. (July 2008: 185)

### **How Does *Vogue* Negotiate Age?**

Three strategies characterize *Vogue's* response: localization, dilution, and personalization. Localization refers to the strategy whereby older women are confined to certain parts of the magazine. Typically, and



most strongly, they feature in the beauty pages where anti-aging strategies are a central concern. As noted earlier, these are not the main focus of my analysis, but they form an important background to it. In terms of covers, as we have seen age only really features in text, not images: *Vogue* avoids compromising the visual appeal of this key sales feature. Beyond this, questions of age are confined to the features pages. They rarely if ever included in the fashion spreads that form the heart of *Vogue* and are its most prestigious part. These pages are dedicated to the mainstream of fashion. One exception did occur in 2005 with a fashion spread featuring a glamorous Charlotte Rampling as the heroine of a noir film, but it was shot in such low light that her features (and signs of age) were almost wholly disguised. Older women are thus localized in the features and beauty sections and largely absent from the mainstream, core fashion.

Dilution strategies are pursued through a number of classic techniques. The first of these, widely used across the magazine sector, is the Decades approach in which fashions are illustrated on women in their twenties, thirties, forties ... Until recently such decades tended to stop at the forties, with fifties being a daring extension. The “endpoint” of fashionability is however in the process of being pushed later, and the 2005 feature in *Vogue* included—exceptionally—a woman in her seventies. The article illustrated key trends, showing how these could be worn by all ages; the woman in her seventies featured “white.” She did, however, look somewhat different from the earlier decades—more distinctly old. By the time the format was repeated in 2008, *Vogue* managed to illustrate a woman in her seventies who, presumably through cosmetic surgery and airbrushing, was fully integrated with other images, being almost wholly devoid of the appearance of age.

Another classic dilution technique is that of Generations. The July 2007 issue featured Jane Birkin accompanied by her glamorous daughter in her twenties. It is a strategy often used by advertisers who want to show their clothes as relevant and sellable to all ages without compromising their fashionability, and so illustrate them in family groups. Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren pioneered such lifestyle advertising, featuring elite WASP pseudo-families. Dilution can also be achieved by features that show stylish women of all ages, typically illustrated by small pictures. These contrast with the full-page fashion spreads. Here the images of older women are diluted by small images and a predominance of younger women. Such pages enable the magazine to reach out to and relate to older readers by showing something of their lives, but without defining the magazine as aimed at this group. Another dilution strategy rests on showing style icons (July 2007) or famous designers such as Mary Quant (July 2008). This enables the feature to include pictures of these in their heyday as well as now. *Vogue* has an incomparable archive of past images that it deploys with great skill to make up spreads that address current visual interests. Older women

can be integrated into this as part of the wider engagement with the history of style.

The third strategy is that of personalization. In every case where an older woman is featured in *Vogue*, she is a named individual. These are always real women, not models, with real lives, though with the proviso that these are *Vogue* lives and, as a result, far from the lived reality of most people, even most readers.

This account of the treatment of age and aging should not lead us to think, however, that these are central themes for UK *Vogue*. They are not. They are marginal and sporadic. We noted how the three age-themed issues were published in July, a dead period for fashion magazines (though Alexandra Shulman confirmed in a research interview that the issues had put on readership). Otherwise features on older women are infrequent, and older women only appear occasionally. But this was not always so. During the 1950s, the older women had a regular slot in *Vogue* in the guise of Mrs Exeter.

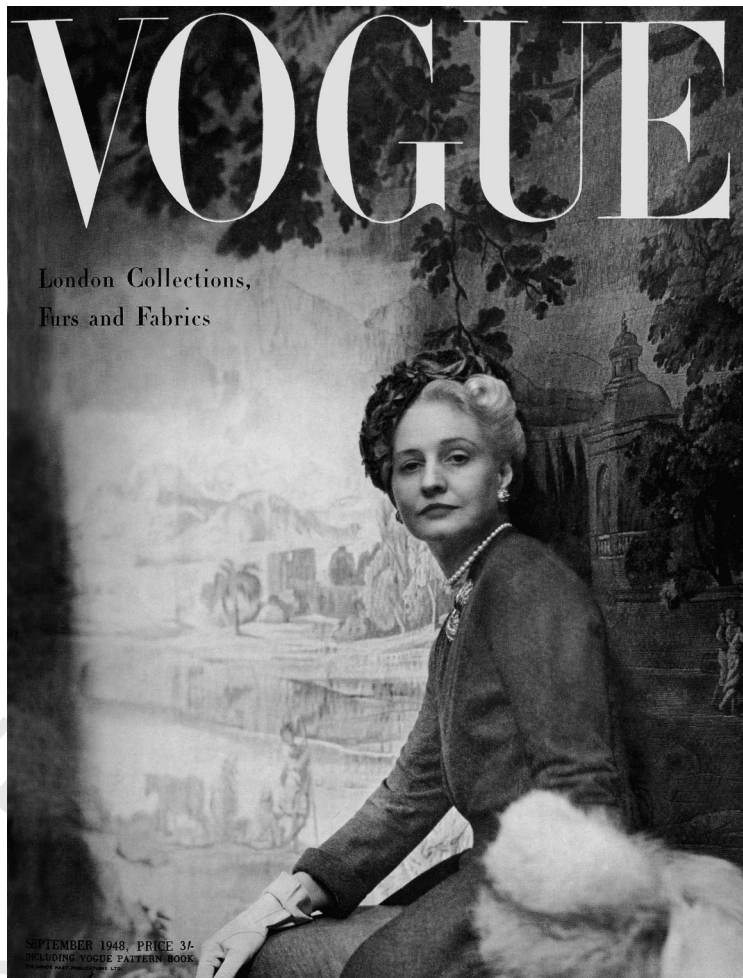
### **Mrs Exeter**

Mrs Exeter was a character developed by *Vogue* in the late 1940s to represent the older woman (Halls 2000). In 1949 she was described as “approaching sixty” (March 1949). She appeared twice on the cover of *Vogue* (Sept 1948 and Nov 1951), including in a glamorous shot by Cecil Beaton, and was a regular and successful feature through the 1950s (Figure 2). Initially represented by drawings, including by the artist John Ward, she developed a distinctive photographic image in the 1950s. By the end of the decade, however, Halls notes that she was getting steadily younger; and she eventually disappeared in the mid-1960s, killed off by the rise of youth fashion. The styles of the 1960s were particularly youth oriented, with very short skirts and a body ideal that valorized the prepubescent teenager. A quotation from Margot Smyly, the model most closely associated with the character of Mrs Exeter in the UK, conveys the pressures of the time, as fashion became more youth oriented, as well as the anger and pique of an older woman cast aside. Describing the 1960s she says: “It was a terrible time, a nasty, catty, horrible decade with a lot of ill feeling. Nothing blossomed” (November 1982: 154).

One of the things that is striking about Mrs Exeter from the perspective of today is how old she is, and how unrepentantly so: *Vogue* writes in 1949, “Approaching 60, Mrs Exeter does not look a day younger, a fact she accepts with perfect good humour and reasonableness.” This is in marked contrast to the dominant discourse today, where the aim is to look ten years younger. It is true that the cover images in 1940s and 1950s do cheat slightly, showing her with gray hair but a smooth face, but at least she does feature clearly as an older woman and on the

**Figure 2**

Cover of *Vogue*, September 1948, image of Mrs Exeter. Cecil Beaton/*Vogue*. © The Condé Nast Publications Ltd.



cover. This is in contrast to today when even the age-themed issues of 2007 and 2008 show much younger women, and erase all signs of age. One area where *Vogue* always refused to compromise, however, was weight. Halls notes that *Vogue* never addressed the problem of middle-aged spread: Mrs Exeter was always shown as extremely slim. Today, of course, slimness is a prominent anti-aging strategy.

The phenomenon of Mrs Exeter is an interesting one; and we can ask why, despite remaining something of a memory in *Vogue*'s collective consciousness (she features from time to time in articles), she has not been—and indeed could not be—revived. Part of the reason is that she is so much a figure of her times, the 1950s, and she remains confined by that period. Her identity is heavily inflected with class and gender. With her elegant, restrained clothes, she epitomizes the

bourgeois lady of the period. Always referred to by her married name, she remains encased within her marriage. It is inconceivable that she could have had a job. She thus represents a way of life that has ceased to exist for the majority of middle- and upper-middle-class women who are the main audience for the magazine.

There are, however, other reasons why she is beyond revival, and these relate to the changed ways in which age is experienced, understood, and imagined today. Though Mrs Exeter was a minor figure in *Vogue* in the 1950s, she was a regular one, and to that degree occupied an acknowledged position within the magazine. As we noted, she appeared on two covers, featured as a distinctively older woman with white hair. This is in contrast to today when age is featured on the cover only through text, not image. Though she is more defined—and confined—by her age than would be the case today, she is oddly also more visible. She has a clear presence within the structure of the magazine, reflecting her secure place in the age structure of society. She has a distinctive slot in the age hierarchy, as she does in the gender and class ones, reflecting an era when identities were more fixed culturally in terms of social categorizations and structures.

### **The Changing Cultural Location of Age**

Since that period, however, a series of social and cultural shifts have reconstituted the meaning and experience of age. Theorized under the broad terminology of the condition of postmodernity (or late or second modernity), these changes present a set of interconnected processes that together impact on the situation of age. The first concerns the disembedding of the normative life course, with the growth of longer and recurring periods of education and training; the decline of single, life-long employment; portfolio careers; more fluid family forms; and less fixed sexual and marital mores. This has its impact on the definition and experience of old age (Higgs 2006). In the early part of the twentieth century, retirement marked the point of entry into old age, as it still does in government statistics, where older people are defined as those over pensionable age (60/65). But with greater fluidity in careers, early retirement, and more women in the labor force in part-time occupations, retirement is not the fixed point it once was. Moreover the lives of those in their sixties, particularly those in good health and with adequate income, are not greatly different from those in their fifties. As a result a new social space has emerged, that of the Third Age, marked by leisure, pleasure, self-realization, and consumption. Indeed some theorists (Öberg and Tornstam 1999, 2001) argue that later life has been reconceptualized in terms of an extended plateau of late middle years, only disrupted by the onset of serious illness, marking the shift into the Fourth Age. In relation to magazines and retailing, what this means is

that there is a large category of people who do not perceive themselves as old and see no reason why they should be treated as such. As Biggs *et al.* (2007) found, they identify with younger age cohorts and expect to remain integrated with them, not be treated as a separate or different category.

The second major change since the 1950s and the era of Mrs Exeter concerns the shift in locus of identity from production to consumption. The declining salience of class in people's lives has meant that consumption has come to be an increasingly important marker of identity. Indeed, as Giddens (1991) and others argue, under conditions of post- or high modernity, identities themselves become more fluid and open, less embedded in social structures such as class or the normative life cycle. As a result they are more the product of choice and self-creation, though at the same time more fragile and unstable. In this context, cultural goods become an increasingly important means whereby individuals construct "narratives of the self," anchor identities, as well as display aspects of Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984). Lifestyle thus becomes an increasingly important marker of the self. These changes are reflected in the magazine sector in the shift from segmentation based broadly on class, as in the 1950s, to more complex forms based on lifestyle. Gough-Yates (2003) has analyzed the changes that occurred from the 1960s, accelerating in the 1990s, with the rise of lifestyle segmentation. Women's magazines, of course, still retain very strong class and age segmentation, but the dominant presentation is in terms of lifestyle, appealing to all with a particular attitude or lifestyle. This is part of the meaning of UK *Vogue's* recurring tag line of Ageless Style—presenting an approach that transcends age categorization and seeks to appeal on the basis simply of attitude and style of life; what this says is that fashionability does not have to be confined by age structures. But ageless style does not represent the whole truth for *Vogue*. However much the magazine promotes the ideal of lifestyle, the reality of marketing is that segmentation is closely based on traditional categorizations like age, class, and gender. *Vogue* cannot allow itself to appear in any way to be a magazine aimed older women, to do so would be to undermine its core appeal. It would, furthermore, fly in the face of all the values of fashion and the fashion world which, as we have seen, are wholly centered on youth, and rigorously exclude age from view.

The third interrelated development is the rise of consumption culture. Consumption is sometimes presented as performing an integrative function in modern culture, acting to incorporate individuals into a common culture of lifestyle; and to this degree it potentially offers older people a means whereby they can remain part of the mainstream, counteracting the cultural exclusion traditionally associated with old age. Those currently in their fifties and sixties—sometimes loosely termed baby boomers—are often presented as a pioneer generation (Gilleard and Higgs 2000; Jones *et al.* 2008)—the cohort that grew up with youth culture in the 1960s and matured with the consumption boom

of the 1980s and 1990s. They are accustomed to consumption, and see no reason to give it up. In relation to clothes, this means refusing to adopt the frumpy age-related styles of previous generations. Age ordering in dress, it is asserted, has gone. Older women can wear the same clothes and shop in the same fashion-conscious stores as the rest of the population. Or that, at least, is what the ideology suggests. The reality is less clear, and norms of age appropriate dress are still operative. We saw how Shulman, despite espousing the ideology of ageless style, still referred to the anxieties and dangers of being inappropriately dressed, and in terms of the old cultural trope of mutton dressed as lamb. Dreams of integration through consumption are also predicated in capacity to spend, and though *Vogue's* target readership will always be well off, many—indeed most—older women are not.

The extension of fashionability to older women, however, comes at a price: consumption culture presents new demands as well as new pleasures; new threats of exclusion as well as integration. Magazines, particularly ones like *Vogue*, present clothes as a source of pleasure, in which putting together distinctive looks is regarded a creative act, an opportunity to express one's individuality. But as Clarke and Miller (2002) demonstrate, clothes can be as much a source of anxiety as joy, as individuals try to measure up to cultural norms of which they feel they have limited grasp. The truth is that most people want to be acceptable, to fit in, and to meet current appearance norms. That, rather than standing out, is the dominant impulse. With regard to age, this means avoiding clothes that are deemed "unsuitable," usually by virtue of being too young, too showy, too blatantly sexy. In a culture like the 1950s where age norms for older women were relatively clear, and where age ordering in dress was stronger, dressing appropriately was easier, even if more limiting. But in the more transitional or fluid culture of today, where such norms are believed to be no longer relevant, individuals are forced to puzzle it out for themselves. Articles about aging and dress are replete with expressions of uncertainty and anxiety; and advice from journalists typically veers between caution and boldness: advising on the need to be "careful" and to avoid "inappropriate" looks, at the same time as containing injunctions that "there are no rules now." The possibility of giving up, and of opting out, is also less available today. In cultures and periods where older women are wholly out of the orbit of fashion, it is possible to retire from the demands of appearance, to embrace invisibility, but as culture extends new opportunities to older women, it also imposes new demands. The influx of cheap mass clothing in the 1990s has driven forward the further democratization of fashion, extending the market for fashion to new social groups, among which are children and the middle aged. As a result, the life world and bodies of older women (and children) have—for better or worse—been increasingly colonized by the ideal of fashionability.

*Vogue's* response also needs to be understood in relation to the culture of anti-aging. Bordo (1993) and other critics (Wolf 1990) have commented on the ways in which women in modern cultures spend more and more of their time disciplining their bodies according to the beauty ideal; and these tendencies have been extended to older women through the culture and industry of anti-aging. Fear of aging, or of displaying the visible marks of age, has become major cultural preoccupation of Western societies, supporting a multi-billion pound industry (Gilleard and Higgs 2000). This is largely located in the beauty sector, but dress also plays a part, as the popularity of magazine features and make-over shows demonstrates (McRobbie 2004; Smyczynska 2008). Successful aging within consumption culture is increasingly presented in terms of aging without showing the visible signs of doing so. We noted how in 2008 *Vogue* chose as an image in a decades spread to represent the seventies, a woman whose appearance was almost indistinguishable from that of a fashionable woman in her fifties. *Vogue* consistently features older women who look decades younger than their age, and achieving that state is valorized as the ideal. Here the aim is not to move graciously on to the next stage of life like Mrs Exeter, but to look ten years younger and to remain actively integrated into the world of appearance and consumption.

### Conclusion

*Vogue* is an aspirational magazine that floats on dreams of aesthetic perfection and youthful beauty. As such it has a symbiotic relationship with consumption culture. It is unsurprising therefore that it should face tensions in engaging with the issue of aging. Age and aging are problematic subjects within the world of *Vogue*—disruptive of its visual field. How it negotiates these tensions is therefore a subject of interest both to students of fashion studies and cultural gerontology.

From the perspective of fashion studies, *Vogue* is always a key source, embodying the current vision of the fashion world and its reception in the broader culture. Fashion studies has, however, neglected older people. Reflecting the values of the fashion world, it has remained preoccupied with the youthful and transgressive; remarkably little work has been undertaken that addresses older people or the processes of aging. Beyond forty there is silence. And yet, as we noted, a growing proportion of the population—over half—is now over forty. They too wear clothes, select garments, express their identities, buy and discard fashions; and their choices and behaviors merit analysis. Fashion studies needs to encompass this group. A focus on age is also significant for fashion studies because of changes within the wider culture. We noted how consumption culture is being extended to older age groups as the current cohort of baby boomers ages. The nature of later years is in the process of shifting, as the new social space of the Third Age opens

out. Here consumption offers the promise of new forms of social integration, ones that link older people to the mainstream through shared lifestyle. The growth of mass markets of cheap fashionable clothing means that more and more people—including the middle aged and old—are brought within its orbit. Fashion studies need to be able to reflect this shift in the nature and remit of fashionability. Embracing the topic of age would also assist fashion studies to move beyond its current core, to encompass a larger analytic territory in which clothing and dress are more broadly conceived, in Entwistle's terms, as "situated body practice" (2000).

But *Vogue* is also a significant source from the perspective of the student of age. The body is a key dimension in aging, but until recently social gerontology has fought shy of it, fearing to endorse falsely reductionist accounts in which age is seen as solely the product of bodily decline. More recently, however, there has been a recognition of the need to recapture the subject, to acknowledge the ways in which the body plays a part in the social and cultural constitution of age. Clothes are part of this, lying as they do on the interface between the self and society. They are central to how we present our bodies to the world. How fashion and the fashion system treats age is therefore instructive for the wider understanding of the processes of age.

*Vogue* also allows us to explore the role of consumption culture in the changing cultural location of older women. We saw how the responses of *Vogue* in the 1950s differed from now. Then older women were differently positioned in the magazine, reflecting their different position in culture, more separate, more contained within age structures—as they were within class and gender ones. Mrs Exeter is more limited by her age—and yet in a certain way also more openly acknowledged. Today the cultural position of older women has changed. As we saw, *Vogue* promotes an ideal of Ageless Style in which seamless integration is the goal, and in which older women—if they choose and if they pursue the ideal of fashionability—can remain part of the mainstream. And yet, as we also noted, this integration was based on an effacement of age. The covers that featured Ageless Style showed no signs of age at all. *Vogue* repeatedly features, and sets up as the ideal, women who look decades younger than their chronological age. The new cultural ideal of successful aging is indeed to age without showing the visual signs of doing so.

Lastly *Vogue* is also potentially significant as a source of images of how to age that are current within contemporary culture. We noted the role of magazines in the cultural constitution of identities, particularly in relation to gender, class, and youth, but they can play a part in relation to age also, assisting older women to negotiate changing aspects of their identities. *Vogue*, of course, is not aimed at older women, and the vast majority of them will never see a copy, but it does contribute to the general culture, particularly visual culture that is increasingly significant under conditions of late or second modernity. As such, it



has things to say about how age is imagined, negotiated, and, to some degree experienced, in modern culture.

### Note

1. Based on qualitative interviews with older women (55 and over), interviews in the world of media and retail, and content analysis of women's magazines, the study addresses the ways in which older women negotiate changes in appearance and social identity through dress; the tensions between age resistance and age denial; and the role of consumption culture and the fashion system in reconfiguring the experience of age. The study was funded by the UK Economic and Social Science Research Council (ESRC) grant reference ESRC RES 000 22 2079.

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