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SERIALIZING AGE

AGING AND OLD AGE IN TV SERIES

[transcript] Aging Studies Volume VII
Serialized storytelling provides intriguing opportunities for critical representations of age and aging. In contrast to the finite character of films, television narratives can unfold across hundreds of episodes and multiple seasons. Contemporary viewing practices and new media technologies have resulted in complex television narratives, in which experimental temporalities and revisions of narrative linearity and chronological time have become key features. As the first of its kind, this volume investigates how TV series as a powerful cultural medium shape representations of age and aging, such as in “Orange Is The New Black”, “The Wire” or “Desperate Housewives”, to understand what it means to live in time.

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Serial Narrative, Temporality and Aging: An Introduction

ANITA WOHLMANN AND MARICEL ORÓ-PIQUERAS

According to Melissa Ames, “never before has narrative time played such an important role in mainstream television” (9). Time travel, time retardation and time compression, disruptions of the chronological flow through flashbacks and flashforwards – these experimental uses of time have become key devices within contemporary television narratives (9). The following three examples of TV series exemplify this link between the narrative use of experimental time and serial formats. Simultaneously, they draw on themes that are commonly discussed in age studies. 24 (2001-2010), a fictional real-time TV series, sells the illusion to be a pure record of time passing, even though it is a show that is, of course, extensively edited. The TV series constructs narrative time through a sense of constant acceleration and complication of the narrative action. These temporal aesthetics of 24 are interwoven with the representation of its protagonist, Jack Bauer, who is a grandfather in the ninth and final season. On the one hand, 24 challenges stereotypical notions of what it means to be an aging man and a grandfather (Bauer’s granddaughter stresses, for instance, that he does not look like a “grandpa”, to which Bauer replies that he couldn’t agree more with her). On the other hand, 24 substantiates and perpetuates stereotypes about male aging, such as mandatory resilience and a larger-than-life physical prowess. The second example, Damages (2007-2012) also experiments with narrative time, illustrating through its complex and multi-layered plot structure how temporality is intricately interwoven with knowledge production. In disrupting linearity and chronology through constant flashbacks and flashforwards, Damages implicitly critiques the idea of scientific, objec-
tive and chronological time (Pape 166). Within these narrative time experiments, *Damages* couches a conflictual intergenerational relationship of mentoring and rivalry between two female lawyers: Patty Hewes is the older star lawyer and Ellen Parsons embodies the younger mentee, who, throughout the five seasons of *Damages*, gradually emancipates from her mentor, leaving the older ‘mother figure’ behind. And, finally, in *Pushing Daisies* (2007-2009), the protagonist Ned is bestowed with the gift to reanimate the dead with his touch – a clue which reimagines the finality of death and offers a space to playfully engage with alternative temporalities, second chances and a lighthearted take on man’s search for longevity and (im)mortality through each episode’s fantastic and comic narrative.

Beyond such narrative temporal experiments, TV series have an idiosyncratic relation to time on a more structural level. William Uricchio analyzes television time through a focus on television as “a larger textual system” that is characterized by “heterochronia,” which makes viewers “experience a distinctive kind of time” (27). According to Uricchio, television’s time revolves around sequence (e.g., the sequence of the programming), interpenetration (e.g., the fragmentation of programs with advertisements) and repetition (e.g., headlines, advertisements, iconic footage) (32). In doing so, television disrupts time and vitiates sequence (32). Similarly, in their volume *Previously on…* (2010), Arno Meteling, Isabell Otto and Gabriele Schabacher argue that watching serial formats rhythmizes and structures our lives through an interplay of stasis and dynamics, continuity and interruption, repetition and variation (7). TV series thus have an immediate influence on how viewers experience time.

This effect is further heightened through the genres of television programming. The temporal experience of a sitcom, for example, which is commonly categorized as an episodic series, is different from watching a soap opera (serial) over years and even decades. While the episodic series stresses circularity, repetition and finitude, the serial is defined by linearity, open-endedness and a focus on change and process over time (e.g., Fiske 145, Mills 28). In the case of a soap opera, seriality implies an “infinitely extended middle” (Fiske 180), which entails a particular narrative structure (lacking closure, for example) and which implies, outside of the narrative, that the actors are aging with their audiences. Thus, the storylines on television and our own stories become intertwined in time throughout the episodes, seasons, years and sometimes
decades through which we follow a program. This linearity and sequential programming has been potentially disrupted and fundamentally changed with the new TV consumption practices, which allow viewers to radically change, control and individually pace their modes of watching a program through convenience technologies (e.g., DVD, DVR), or online watching and streaming possibilities. The infamous ‘binge watching’ is only one possible consequence of experiencing a TV series. Melissa Ames has noted another effect in her volume *Time in Television Narrative* (2013): The advent of the new viewing practices have also allowed producers and writers of TV series to be more adventurous, experimental and complex in how they tell their stories (4) – exactly because viewers can rewatch an episode, rewind a scene or stop and resume the viewing of a series on their own terms.

With the emergence of Netflix, a video-on-demand provider that also started to produce original programming several years ago, TV critics are anticipating a new era of television. Todd VanDerWerff, for example, argues that Netflix is inventing a new art form, a kind of hybrid between TV series and film, in which stories can be told over a period of ten or twelve hours. Serial formats thus have extended temporal opportunities to develop their plots while the streaming options blur the episodic boundaries and enable a continuous, long-term engagement with characters. This viewing experience is different from the “slice” quality of TV episodes or the 90-minutes scripts of conventional Hollywood movies. In a sense, these developments in serial storytelling echo age scholars’ calls for moving beyond the “slice-of-life approach” to aging in order to include more complex and expansive notions of what it means to live in time (e.g., Gullette 179).

These complex and multi-layered relations of TV series to temporality seem to offer alternatives to the chronological and linear notions of standardized time or ‘clock’ time. In this sense, Pamela Gravagne’s concept of the magical quality of cinematic time seems to be pertinent to TV series. Gravagne explores Gilles Deleuze’s concepts of the movement image (where time is “linear, orderly, knowable, and predictable” 50) and the time image (where time is “nonlinear and undecidable beforehand,” where “the future remains open” 52), arguing that, according to Deleuze,

[t]ime . . . does not trap us but is more like a kind of magic that can free us to live, continually opening up possibilities for becoming by giving us chance after
chance to combine our past with our present in all sorts of new and unexpected ways. (57)

If it is true that TV series, due to their repetitive make-up, give us “chance after chance” to understand and experience the magic of time as something that continually opens up “possibilities of becoming.” TV series emerge as a promising medium to study new, non-stereotypical, radical and inspirational representations of age and aging.

However, to our knowledge, the field of age studies does not seem to have explored this potential in TV series so far. While plenty of research has been conducted on the representation of age and aging in film, TV series, with their specific and peculiar relation to time, have not been studied in a comprehensive way – granted, of course, that there are analyses that focus on representations of age and aging in a specific TV series or contributions that examine both film and TV series side by side. A comprehensive volume, which combines the temporal specificities of TV series, television studies and age studies, is missing so far, and it is this lacuna that the present volume addresses.

The field, into which we are tapping, is a surprisingly rich field. Even though studies show that older people are still underrepresented in television compared to younger age groups (Harwood and Anderson), we found a number of intriguing examples of TV series which feature older protagonists. The Golden Girls (1985-1992), Murder She Wrote (1984-1996) or Miss Marple (1984-1992) focus on feisty older women who refuse to retire to a passive, detached and calm lifestyle. More recently, Netflix’ Grace and Frankie (2015-present) as well as the British TV series Vicious (2013-present) and Last Tango in Halifax (2012-present) illustrate an interest in the lives of older characters. Similarly, soap operas, according to John Fiske, provide an open-ended, ever-evolving space for middle-aged and older female characters to explore economic power, desire and sexuality (183-4). The soap-opera’s narrative aesthetics thus highlight process and continuity in representing femininity and aging (187). Besides these examples, there are numerous TV series featuring intriguing older figures as secondary characters, such as Mrs. McCluskey in Desperate Housewives, Lester Freamon in The Wire or the ‘golden girls’ in Orange is the New Black (for a closer analysis, please see the respective chapters in this volume).

In creating a link between television theory and concepts from age studies, we hope to tease out new approaches to understanding age and
aging by emphasizing how the specific medium of TV series impacts and produces alternative concepts of time and time passing. For this reason, we asked our contributors to keep the following guiding questions in mind: How does a TV series, in contrast to a film, represent age and aging? Which elements of a TV series generate a different understanding of temporality compared to film? Which concepts from television studies and age studies can productively be brought into dialog to elicit an understanding of how TV series negotiate age and aging? Do TV genres, such as episodic series and episodic serials, produce different concepts of time and if so, how does this affect the representation of age?

*Serializing Age: Aging and Old Age in TV Series* aims at bringing together the fields of TV studies and age studies in order to consider the relationships between the undeniable impact of TV in our everyday lives as well as the exponential aging of worldwide population. Despite our contributors’ heterogeneous points of departure, that range from literary and cultural studies, television studies to sociology and anthropology, their contributions share the conducting line of analyzing portrayals, representations and cultural beliefs related to old age and the aging process within TV series, specifically focusing on how the temporal construction of the narrative contributes to present alternative views of aging. As a complex experience, both at an individual and social level, the understanding of aging and the still limiting conceptions related to the aging body and old age require the consideration of an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary perspective in order to thresh pervading stereotypes of the aging process and old age and reformulate them as a continuation of individual concerns and hopes, traumas and desires that a person has encountered in his or her youth and middle age.

Together with the questioning of established beliefs and structures that the postmodern era brought with it, there are two key concepts that have triggered the conception of this volume: a new way of producing and watching TV programs in which the disruption of linearity and chronology contributes to challenge established cultural and social parameters, as well as a more fluid conceptualization of the life course in which age stages become movable markers. In relation to the second concept, in 1991, sociologists Mike Hepworth and Mike Featherstone noted how “[t]heorists of the movement towards a postmodern society point to an emerging de-institutionalisation and a de-differentiation of
the life course, with less emphasis than in the past being placed upon age-specific role transitions and scheduled identity development” (373). In this respect, Hepworth and Featherstone, among other age scholars, point to an economy based on services rather than physical work, the proliferation of an industry that relies on the obsession of taking care of external appearance in order to keep the external signs of ageing at bay and a globalized culture in which traditional values as well as family and social structures take as many shapes as citizens exist to account for the blurring of boundaries in age categories. Thus, given the extended format of TV series in time, both in relation to fictional time as well as broadcast time (even when binge watching), TV series become especially meaningful media in order to study and analyze how time is ordered and institutionalized and, with it, how age, aging and old age are negotiated in the contemporary Western world.

Within TV studies, the so-called post-network era television “has challenged its viewers like never before”, as Todd M. Sodano puts it (2012: 29) and, with it, concepts of time, linearity and chronology have also been shaken. Post-network TV refers to the changes in the industry both in the production and consumption of TV series which, according to Ames (2012), have resulted in “increasingly complex television narratives and alternative viewing practices” (4). The fact that viewers can ignore the flow planned by broadcast TV and decide on when, how and the intensity with which they will watch a TV series has made storytelling more sophisticated through narrative and temporal experimentations that Ames define as “the temporal tease” (8). Whereas this temporal tease has been present in soap operas for some time due to their lengthy duration which was translated, for example, in the coming back of characters that had supposedly died or the portrayal of characters who seemed not to age, temporal alterations have increased in post-network TV. TV series such as Lost and 24 set the grounds for such experimentations followed by series such as How I Met you Mother and Orange is the New Black in which the constant and complex use of flashbacks portray past and present, and even future, as inescapably merging with each other,ugly the same way as time merges in our minds and memory. In this respect, temporal experimentation in TV series becomes a laboratory in which cultural constructions related to the aging process may be deconstructed and challenged in inventive and creative ways. As Anita Wohlmann (2014) argued in Aged Young Adults, “paying close attention to the ways in which people refer to temporality
and timing is therefore crucial for understanding how these references can carry connotations that point to cultural meanings of age and aging” (50).

In *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations* (1999), Kathleen Woodward, drawing on Margaret Morganroth Gullette’s research, highlights the need to differentiate between biological aging and cultural aging and “abandon the older models of age-appropriate behavior and experience” (xiv). In other words, our lives are measured according to what Jan Baars (2012) names “chronometric time” which usually differs from “human time” (143). On the contrary, as Baars argues, “there is no such clock inside human beings which determines for all time and all places how people age” (148). As a complex experience in human beings, which is very much related to social and cultural conceptions of time patterned by the rituals through which a person is supposed to go in each appropriate age stage, the temporal disruption of contemporary TV series contributes to present life as a flexible and fluid continuum, rather than well-established stages, in which decisions are taken according to circumstances rather than imposed chronometric time. In this respect, the postmodern conception of the life course to which Featherstone and Hepworth referred is translated into narrative and temporal experimentation to which the contemporary viewer has become an expert, as both Ames and Sodano point out.

The volume is divided into three sections which group the articles according to the narrative and temporal experimentation as well as the main topics tackled in the series analyzed in each chapter. The articles in section 1, “Between Screen and Reality: Negotiating the Effects of Old Age and Aging” establish connections between the fictional narratives of the series and experiences of aging and old age in real life. These connections either draw on how the actors’ lives intersect with the characters’ storylines or how some TV series aim at a realistic or sociological perspective on their characters’ entanglement in the social world. In “Time, Memory, and Aging on the Soaps”, C. Lee Harrington explores key issues of age and aging surrounding US daytime soap operas, focusing on temporal distortions such as rapid aging of infants and children or the elongation of young and mid-adulthood, a phenomenon which she names SORAS, in other words, “soap opera rapid aging syndrome.” In addition, Harrington analyzes interviews with soap opera ‘veterans’ to illustrate how age and aging affects the self-
image of the actors and how they deal with the challenges of working in a youth-oriented business. Whereas Harrington draws on a number of long-running American soap operas, from *Guiding Light* (1937-2009) to *General Hospital* (1963-2015), in order to support her arguments, Neal King focuses on the TV series *The Wire* (2002-2008) and the figure of Baltimore PD Detective Lester Freamon when facing retirement. In his contribution “Business as Usual: Retirement on The Wire,” King analyzes how, by the end of the series, Detective Freamon is not completely retired, which is a narrative choice that conforms with other cop action movies in which the masculinity of the main characters is preserved by having them keep an active role in society, away from accusations of “idleness” or “unproductiveness.” According to King, the innovative long-form narrative of *The Wire* focuses with an almost sociological interest on the minutiae of police work, representing it as tampered by politics and power hierarchies. Oddly, however, the series leaves aside the exploration of political, racial and particularly gendered inequality. In “Heroine or Caricature? The Older Woman in *Desperate Housewives*”, Ros Jennings and Maricel Oró-Piqueras focus on the portrayal of Karen McCluskey in *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012). Despite the fact that Karen McCluskey is presented as a secondary character in the first episodes, she becomes a central character as the series advances to the point of becoming the nexus among the four younger female protagonists of the series. Karen McCluskey moves from being portrayed as a stereotypical older woman, bad-humored and always nagging, to being presented under a more humane, though not less ambiguous lens as the series unfolds in time and space.

The four articles in section 2, “Temporality and Aging: Experiments with Magic, Narrative and Genre” share a playful tone provided by a conscious presentation of time as neither linear nor chronological. In “‘Vampires don’t age, but actors sure do:’ Fantasies of Youth and the Paradox of the Aging Vampire in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*”, Sally Chivers analyzes the popular figure of the vampire as portrayed in Joss Whedon’s television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and proves how its popularity reveals anxieties about population aging. At another level, directors have to deal with actors and actresses who play vampire roles for some years and whose bodies inescapably age. In “The Twilight of Their Lives? Magical Objects as Serial Devices and Catalysts of Aging in *The Twilight Zone*,” Marta Miquel-Baldellou draws on conceptions of age, aging and the passing of time presented in
the series through the use of tokens, domestic devices and technological apparatus that develop magical properties and metaphorical meanings to both highlight and subvert established cultural conceptions and expected roles in old age. Although *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964) was composed of independent episodes with new characters, settings and plots, Miquel-Baldellou claims that seriality is achieved through the introduction of these magical and metaphorical devices that contribute to disrupt chronology and a fixed ideological frame as well as through recurrent thematic concerns within the TV drama. Cecilia Colloseus looks at how temporality and maturity are linked in *How I Met your Mother* (2005-2014) in “Flashbacks, Flashforwards and Life Plans in *How I Met Your Mother*.” As Colloseus explains, in the series, the past of the story is the present of the audience, while the narrative is constructed by the main character who recollects, many times without exactitude, the past that he is retelling to his children. However, as Colloseus proves in her article, narrative experimentation is closer to giving a traditional message on expected social choices rather than the opposite. In the last contribution of this section, Anita Wohlmann and Julia Reichenpfader analyze the figure of the cougar in two American TV series, namely, *Damages* (2007-2012) and *Cougar Town* (2009-2015), and a German soap opera entitled *Verbotene Liebe* (1995-2015). In their article, Wohlmann and Reichenpfader explore the ways in which the different serialized formats curb or advance progressive representations of a figure “who is marked by non-normative notions of temporality” (182). The results of the analysis cautiously suggest that soap operas might be more open towards the representation of sexuality and desire in middle-age and old age compared to episodic series.

The articles in section 3, “Sex and Desire Through the Lens of Television Time,” explore selected TV series through the lenses of gender and queer studies, linking them with temporal and narrative experimentation in order to discern whether and to what extent normative conceptions of gender and age are undermined or highlighted. In “Still Looking: Gay Aging and Future in Contemporary US Television,” Dustin Goltz departs from an overview of gay men representations in TV series through the 80s and 90s, in which gay characters were mostly marginal and had no desirable future to look forward to. In contemporary American TV series, extended time and narrative innovation introduced by contemporary series present more comprehensive and nuanced representations of gay male characters.
within the life course. In analyzing two recent TV series that focus on older homosexual characters, *Vicious* (2012–present) and *Looking* (2014–present), Goltz explores the potential of contemporary TV series to complicate the earlier, youth-oriented representations. Eva Krainitzki’s chapter entitled “‘You’ve got time’: Ageing and queer (spacio)temporality in *Orange is The New Black*” relates the narrative and temporal experimentation of a series produced and launched by streaming network company Netflix with the portrayal of non-normative representations of female aging by drawing on the concept of queer temporality and space introduced by Judith Halberstam. As the title of Regina Spektor’s song already suggests, fluidity in the representations of sex and age identity is a key issue that Krainitzki analyzes and discusses in her article. In “Last Tango in Halifax: Desire and Ageing in Contemporary British Television”, Kristyn Gorton explores how Sally Wainwright’s TV series positions late-middle aged and older women’s desire as a focus point in the narrative as opposed to previous representations of late-middle aged and older women in British television whose own desires were usually upstaged by their children’s needs. On the contrary, in her article, Gorton highlights how the interrelationship between generations is strengthened when expressing and acknowledging each others’ (sexual) desires. In the last chapter, “Assimilating to Aerobics Culture? Fitness and Age Mimicry in *The Golden Girls*”, Thomas Küpper analyzes the interplay between the concepts of fitness and seductiveness in order to keep the signs of aging at bay, concepts which became popular in the 1980s with Jane Fonda. Drawing on Homi Bhaba’s notion of mimicry, Küpper explores how Blanche Dubois’ unsuccessful effort to imitate the behavior of a younger man in order to seduce him actually contributes to introduce mockery and humor in the representation of the apparently positive attributes of the younger man in the episode “Blanche and the Younger Man.”

The last contribution, “Aging Beyond the Rhetoric of Aging,” is a short essay by Mita Banerjee and Norbert Paul, which highlights the continuing relevance of investigating age and aging and, in doing so, expands the central concerns and concepts of this volume to the larger social significance of studying temporality, narrative and media. Banerjee and Paul link the central themes of this volume to the ways in which temporality, ability and corporeality are interwoven in the current cultural and biomedical rhetorics of aging.
This volume came together over the span of two years. In 2013, during the International Summer School Seggau in Austria, we discussed the first ideas and then quickly sent out a call for papers, which solicited contributions from age scholars who had been working in the areas of film and television before. In April 2014, we presented a panel on age and aging in TV series at the 8th International Conference on Cultural Gerontology and the 2nd Conference of the European Network in Aging Studies (ENAS) in Galway, Ireland. Neal King, Marta Miquel-Baldellou, Maricel Oró-Piqueras presented first drafts of their papers and Anita Wohlmann gave a general introduction into the overlapping interests of age, television and film studies. In autumn 2014, we had selected all our contributors and got started on putting the volume together. In May 2015, we presented another panel on age and aging in TV series during the inaugural conference of the North-American Network in Aging Studies (NANAS) in Oxford, Ohio. Eva Krainitzki presented her paper on *Orange is the New Black*, Roberta Maierhofer spoke about time travel in *Life on Mars* and *Ashes to Ashes* and Anita Wohlmann presented this volume’s chapter on cougars. Over this short amount of time, we received much encouragement and support and felt that we were working on a project that was considered relevant by age scholars and television scholars alike. We hope that this volume will live up to their expectations.

**Works Cited**


TELEVISION


Orange is the New Black. Creator Jenji Kohan, Netflix (2013-present).


