

From:

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The Ages of Life

Living and Aging in Conflict?

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The binary construction of »young« and »old«, which is based on a biogerontological model of aging as decline, can be redefined as the ambiguity of aging from a cultural studies perspective. This concept enables an analysis of the social functions of images of aging with the aim of providing a basis for interdisciplinary exchange on gerontological research.

The articles in this publication conceive the relationship between living and aging as a productive antagonism which focuses on the interplay between continuity and change as a marker of life course identity: aging and growing older are processes which cannot be reduced to the chronology of years but which are shaped by the individual's interaction with the changing circumstances of life.

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The Ages of Life

Living and Aging in Conflict?

Ulla Krieburnegg/Roberta Maierhofer

Representations determine how we understand age and aging and influence the way we perceive others and define ourselves over the life course. Iconographies and representations mark changes in social and cultural perceptions and have very real consequences in terms of social, political and cultural practice. From Ptolemy's cosmology of the seven ages of life and Galenic medicine's four elements to the ladder of years, which identified ages of life with social roles during the eighteenth century, redefinitions of living and aging can be chartered. In contemporary Western societies, ages of life have been seen as opportunities and challenges to construct individual biographies. In this process, the category of 'youth' has continually been extended towards the end of the life course, turning living and aging into apparently conflicting processes. These conflicts provide the basis of re-conceptualizations of the concept of aging, deconstructing the binary opposition of 'young' and 'old.' Bio-gerontological models of aging as decline can be redefined from a cultural studies perspective as the ambiguity of living and aging. This cultural ambiguity enables an analysis of the social functions of images of aging in order to provide a basis for interdisciplinary exchange on gerontological knowledge. Images of positive or 'successful aging' target and empower the affluent and healthy 'young old,' but exclude and stigmatize those of the 'oldest old' who face the realities of illness in old age. Apparently negative images of old age as physical decrepitude and disease are deconstructed when life even in the oldest age is appreciated as a form of 'successful frailty.'

Although consensus exists that any studies on aging and the life course have to bridge the gap between the abstract and the concrete, the personal and the political, theory and practice by providing an interdisciplinary plat-

form for research, only recently the field of ‘cultural gerontology’ – also known as ‘aging studies,’ ‘age studies,’ ‘humanistic or narrative gerontology’ – has gained acceptance as enabling such an interdisciplinary discourse. Even if many of the essays found here are firmly rooted within specific disciplines, by contributing to the third volume of *Aging Studies* an interdisciplinary discussion on aging and the life course is encouraged. In the humanities and social sciences, there has been a proliferation of identity-based studies. Age as an identity marker has so far been mostly ignored, although in contrast to other categories, the boundary of ‘age’ is always fluid providing a basis for deconstruction. By determining in what way ‘youth’ and ‘age’ come to have certain meanings at a particular place and time, and stressing the necessary interrelatedness of these meanings, an understanding of what is considered typically ‘young’ in a given society depends in part on being different from what is ‘old,’ and what is ‘old’ on ‘not being young.’ This understanding can lead to the conclusion that what is considered age-neutral, i.e. ‘universal’ is implicitly often male and young, and exclusive of the female and old. Kathleen Woodward argues in her book *Aging and Its Discontents* (1991)¹ that Western society has not been culturally inventive in producing age gradations, but merely distinguishes a single binary, young and old, which is hierarchically organized, youth being the valued term, the point of reference for defining who is old. Cultural representations of age remain locked in primarily negative stereotypes, whereas youth, subjectively speaking, remains a remarkably fluid and seemingly almost infinitely expandable category, it is a moveable marker (Woodward 6). Contrary to popular conceptions of old age, which tend to define it as a distinct period in life, old people themselves emphasize the continuity of the ageless self amid changes across the life span. It is, however, necessary to analyze representations of age and aging across the life course from a cultural perspective in order to regain an understanding of this fluid definition of identity.

Regardless of the different approaches and disciplines presented by the contributors in this volume, all share the conviction that there is a lack of understanding concerning cultural, social and political representations of age and aging. The approaches presented in this volume of the *Aging Studies* series take an interdependent life course perspective, thus explaining

1 | Kathleen Woodward. *Aging and Its Discontents. Freud and Other Fictions*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991.

the seeming paradox of autonomy and interdependence of individuals and age groups as they move through life. When talking about family structure and cultural change, the questions of life course, personal development and aging are of central concern. The aging individual and the conflicts, passions, and joys, exemplify more than any other stage in life the interplay between the private and the public, the individual and the communal, and stress the importance of relationships and connections. For a culture, permeated as it is with images of youth, our own aging is experienced through the mirror of others. The question how age is mediated in our culture is related to semantics of form. The ‘narrative turn’ has affected the theoretical foundations of both the humanities, social and life sciences. History, storytelling and images of aging are linked by narrative genres that are invested with cultural meanings. Focusing on the individual life story, the question is how the aging process, memory and the experience of time are incorporated into cultural narratives of aging.

LANDSCAPES AND CONTEXTS

The idea for this volume in the *Aging Studies* series was developed out of a program under the heading “Encounters in Bad Aussee” initiated by Irmtraud Fischer, former Vice Rector for Research at the University of Graz, who having grown up in the Salzkammergut, decided in 2009 to take the university to the region. At the turn of the 20th century, this Austrian lake region had become a summer meeting place for intellectuals, writers and artists from Vienna and Berlin. Through representations in art and literature this landscape became an almost iconic place of longing. Fischer’s idea was to continue the tradition of cultural, intellectual and artistic encounters by taking up discussions on contemporary issues and offering a platform for exchange in the context of a landscape – both real and imaginary – inscribed by history. In 2010, these “Encounters in Bad Aussee” were devoted to the topic of “Ages of Life,” where the topic of aging was discussed as a perceived contradiction to living. In a keynote address, Anne D. Basting, director of the Center on Age & Community (<http://www.ageandcommunity.org/>) spoke on the topic of memory and imagination, and how to link generations through creative engagement in art. Basting, both educator and artist, has developed research methods to embed arts into long-term care with a special focus on people with cognitive disabili-

ties. Basting's emphasis on improving the quality of life for communities and individuals as well as bridging the gap between academia and care-taking embodied well the intentions of these "Encounters in Bad Aussee." In her talk, Basting stressed the potential of creative engagement in caregiving and brought together theoretical and practical aspects of living and aging.

Combining the abstract and the concrete, "Encounters in Bad Aussee" not only offer stimulating talks and academic presentations for an interested public but also integrate 'life outside of the classroom.' All activities are accompanied by music, and the contemporary musician and composer Bertl Mütter played short pieces of music in-between the talks, during the hikes through the woods, and as a closing statement after the discussions. It is therefore not surprising that one picture taken of the musician playing his trombone, sitting on a stone in the middle of one of the lakes in the region was recently added to the picture-gallery of *TimeSlips Creative Storytelling* (<http://www.timeslips.org/>). *TimeSlips* is an interactive website founded by Anne Basting in 1998 featuring over a hundred images encouraging creative encounters by presenting different representations of life. Under the heading "Let your imagination soar. Start telling stories," *TimeSlips* aims at inclusion in both telling and creating stories triggered by various images. The pressure to remember is replaced, as the website states, by the freedom to imagine.

Fig. 1: Bertl Mütter playing the trombone at "Encounters in Bad Aussee"



STRUCTURE, METHODS AND APPROACHES

The book is structured in three parts. The first section deals with methods and approaches and more general introductions to aging from the perspectives of different disciplines. Contributions in the second and third part of this volume devote themselves to specific investigations concerning representations of the ages of life in media, art and literature.

In his contribution, Marvin Formosa raises the question, “Positive Aging in an Age of Neo-liberalism: Old Wine in New Bottles?” While in the 1970s and 1980s, older people were generally expected to embrace a passive lifestyle wholly dependent upon state welfare policy, common neo-liberal ideology encourages individuals to become ‘entrepreneurs of themselves’ and to behave according to the ideal of economic markets. Positive aging thus overlooks how in capitalism the drive of human beings to self-develop tends to be captive to the ideological hegemony of the commoditization of culture.

Karin Lövgren explores limitations and possibilities of a cultural studies approach to aging studies in her article entitled “Celebrating or Denying Age? On Cultural Studies as an Analytical Approach in Gerontology.” Analyzing popular magazines intended for an older female audience, Lövgren discusses the interflow of cultural notions between readers and different cultural intermediaries, and comes to the conclusion that both producers and consumers are sensitive to shared cultural notions. These notions are reflected, produced, and reproduced in mediated texts and ads, and are then used as resources in constructing the self. Lövgren encourages an analysis of these cultural concepts of aging in order to determine what ‘doing age’ means in cultural and social terms.

Sharon-Dale Stone challenges in her contribution “Age-Related Disability – Believing is Seeing is Experiencing” the common assumption that aging and disability go hand in hand. The ubiquity of this common-sense notion that old age and disability are coterminous underpins the taken-for-granted construct of ‘age-related disability,’ a notion suggesting that the aging process itself is disabling and prevents us from questioning its validity. This article proposes that we need to question the idea that the aging process causes the acquisition of disabling impairments. Given the lack of convincing evidence to support the belief that aging causes disability, but considering the propensity of people to more easily notice disability in elders, we need to ask how much of our bodily experience is materialized as a result of our imaginations.

Cultural constructions also play an important role when considering legal structures concerning age. Jürgen Pirker and Nora Melzer-Azodanloo discuss in their essay, “Aged by Law? Ages of Life in Austrian Law,” how rules and regulations create reality and contribute to our perceptions of age and life phases. This article analyzes various Austrian legal provisions on age and deals with their development and justification. In a very specific discussion of the Austrian situation, the authors provide an overview of age limitations and discuss in which ways law makes us young or old, and which images of life phases are constituted by age regulations.

REPRESENTATIONS OF AGES OF LIFE IN MEDIA, ART AND LITERATURE

Recognizing the importance of cultural interpretations of media, art and literature, various representations of aging have been analyzed in the second and third section of this book in order to establish a basis for understanding the implicit meaning of aging. The process of aging has often been evaluated in relation to dominant culture, suggesting there is one and only one life course which necessarily involves a period of progress and a resulting time of decline. Cultural manifestations such as in media, the arts and literature have often reflected this perception of aging and contributed to this archetypal representation of the aged, but have also offered interpretations on how to transcend and subvert conventional and stereotypical notions of aging.

MEDIA AND ART

In the article “‘The Journey into the Land of Forgetfulness:’ Metaphors of Aging and Dementia in the Media,” Heinrich Grebe, Welf-Gerrit Otto and Harm-Peer Zimmermann provide an insightful discussion on the use of metaphors of aging and dementia in media. Their data analysis shows the meaning making capability of such metaphors. In order to reduce the complexity of neuromedical research and making issues involved accessible to a wider social debate, the metaphor of a container or a hard drive is used. However, orientational knowledge created by such metaphors limits our perceptions linking dementia to concepts such as absence, loss, regression,

or darkness. Rather than substituting public demonization of dementia by an idealized image of the condition, this article calls for greater social inclusion of people with dementia by showing the variety of possible experiences. In this way, living and growing old with dementia might be reconciled rather than being seen as a contradiction in terms.

The contribution “Representation of Old Age in Media: Fear of Aging or Cult of Youth?” by Julian Wangler discusses how age discourse in German speaking countries changed over the past three decades and now presents much more variety. In this article, Wangler focuses on relevance, specifics and potential of images of old age in media representations. This analysis does not restrict itself to an analysis of representation of the old, but calls for an expansion of the scope of research to images and representations of all age groups and all stages of life.

Age-specific distinctions have always been present in advertisements in the regional Austrian province of Styria, as Eva Klein’s essay, “Age Images in Advertising. An Art-Historical Analysis of Advertisement Images in the Austrian Province of Styria” shows. These distinctions have always been very clearly defined in terms of gender difference. Since 1900, women have been presented as constructed ideal types, and present-day advertising has continued with this gendered portrayal of young women. Currently, attempts have been made in advertisement campaigns to counteract the established practice of focusing on youth and its medial staging. Although these attempts are exceptions to the rule, these efforts can be seen as a conscious challenge of the norm practiced in advertising illustrations dominating public space for more than a century.

Thomas Küpper’s essay “Of Mimicry and Age: Fashion Ambivalences of the Young-Old” seeks to show how changes in perception of age(ing) influence the fashion discourse with implications for the fashion industry. Homi Bhabha’s term ‘mimicry’ is of imminent value for these considerations as it can describe unintentional subversive practices. These effects (intended or not) constitute the ambivalences that are characteristic for the fashion of the young-old.

LITERATURE

Cynthia Skenazi's essay, "The Irony of the Ages of Life: Etienne Pasquier's *Les Jeux Poétiques* (1610)," is about an ironic tale of the ages of life. The 81-year-old French poet Etienne Pasquier playfully questions abstract accounts of the life cycle as a repetitive and timeless sequence of ages. Throughout his collection, age is not only thought of as simply a measure of time between birth and death, but as the way people perceive themselves and the way others see them. Pasquier used stereotyped and abstract accounts of the stages of the life cycle to promote a varied notion of aging as a social and literary process.

Perceptions of age are dependent on culture, Marta Miquel-Baldellou argues in her contribution "Past the Mirror of Victorian Aging and Beyond: Recurring Transatlantic Archetypes of the Aged." Based on Teresa Mangum's understanding that the Victorian period invented the concept of old age, Miquel-Baldellou discusses historical, political and cultural differences between English and American narratives of age by focusing on male and female aging archetypes. In Victorian England, aging characters were often associated with positive images, whereas in American narratives old characters were often perceived as personifications of the past subjection to the Old World, symbolizing an old order that had to be left behind.

In her paper "Beyond Dis-Ease: Positive Female Aging against the Cult of Invalidism in Ellen Glasgow's Last Two Novels," Emma Domínguez-Rué examines the relationship between illness and invalidism. Taking an autobiographical approach, this essay contends that the two novels *In This Our Life* and *Beyond Defeat: An Epilogue to an Era* served Glasgow to imagine a fictional homeland in which characters recover and find fulfillment in maturity and age.

Recent fiction of the twenty-first century has provided new narratives on the experience of aging, Helen Chupin asserts in her contribution to the volume with the title, "Growing Old and Searching for Identity in Anne Tyler's *Noah's Compass* (2009) and Umberto Eco's *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* (2004): A Contemporary Semantics of Aging." Chupin argues that the numerous images of aging that these otherwise very different novels share (physical shocks, amnesia, returns to childhood homes, attempts to combine the past and the present) reflect the difficulties encountered in giving meaning to the transitional stage of life of sixty-year-old men.

In her essay “Man, Interrupted: Intersections of Masculinity, Disability, and Old Age in John Coetzee’s *Slow Man*,” Katharina Zilles discusses a powerful narrative of aging corporeality. Zilles reads bodies – including those written or told – as a major site of construction and concretization of age(ing) and the basis of the production of the age-other. As her analysis of *Slow Man* shows, the experience of age(ing) significantly alters notions and images of gendered identity. ‘Coming of age’ remains unaccomplished, since the protagonist fails to find and adapt to a new age role in order to resolve the process of becoming other.

Salman Rushdie’s interest in women and aging are explored by Dana Bădulescu in her essay “Too Old To Rock? Rushdie’s Vina Apsara ‘Surging into Her Mid-Forties Full of Beauty and Courage.’” Rushdie, detecting a growing tendency towards ‘masculinism’ in Indian society due to the availability of ultrasound tests to determine the gender of unborn children, has focused in his work on strong and aging women. Bădulescu discusses Vina Apsara as an exceptional woman who is magnified by mythical associations and lifted to iconicity while she is alive, and to a cult after her death. This protagonist is shown as a woman in transition to middle-age whose association with rock ‘n’ roll provides the backdrop for a discourse on age and aging.

This collection of essays aims to explore the relationship between living and aging as a productive antagonism which focuses on the interplay between continuity and change as a marker of life course identity. Aging and growing old are processes which cannot be reduced to a chronology of years but which are shaped by the individual’s interaction with changing circumstances of life. To the degree that it enables agency, living and aging – as the contributions to this volume show – allow for subversive deconstruction of normative age concepts.

FIGURE

Photo credits: Brad Lichtenstein