

Josephine Dolan & Estella Tincknell (eds.)  
(2012). *Aging Femininities: Troubling Representations*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 248 pp. ISBN 1 4438 3883 7 (hardback)

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This edited volume is a collection of cultural studies on aging and femininity. The aim of the book is to contribute to an understanding of cultural representations of old age and aging, filling a lacuna in cultural studies, a field which hitherto has accentuated a youth perspective. The intent of the book is to further explore the contentions of Simone de Beauvoir and Germaine Greer, for instance, that post-menopausal women are rendered invisible. The chapters discuss how feminine aging today, in the form of successful agers, is more visible in contemporary society than it was before. However, this has come with demands for the disavowal of chronological age and the need to appear young and behave with decorum, in short what is upheld as “aging with grace.” The collected essays explore these altogether ambivalent and contradictory demands and aim to critique and challenge dominant discourses. The authors show that the field of cultural studies on aging is fruitful and criticize market-driven representations, whilst acknowledging the role of differing interpretations and readings of popular culture, as well as the pleasure involved in reading or watching media products.

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The authors include researchers and lecturers in media studies, literature, art, and drama, as well as PhD students and artists and photographers.

The material and methods used cover different aspects. For instance, one chapter is based on fieldwork in the tradition of auto-ethnography. Here Josephine Dolan explores how a festival purporting to celebrate aging by addressing its audience as frail and in need of care purveys information on vulnerability and risk, thus disciplining the visitors and positioning them as docile. Another chapter, written by Terry Bacon and Kate Brooks, also uses fieldwork to explore how beauty salons function both as treatment and as pleasure, but also as enforcing norms on the importance of appearances and of not "letting oneself go."

Several of the chapters focus on plays, movies, TV series, YouTube videos, and literature. Using contemporary mediated material such as popular television dramas with large audiences in numerous Western societies is interesting not least since one can presume that many readers of the analyses are familiar with the series and the characters portrayed. In a chapter on *Downton Abbey* and *Call the midwife*, Estella Tincknell shows how the different narratives can be interpreted in the light of the current global economic recession and the dismantling of the welfare state. In *Downton Abbey*, the universe of the stately manor comes across as an organic whole, with generous benefactors. The dowager is a witty matriarch and authority, always with an acidic comment dryly delivered, whereas the servant, O'Brien, appears as a complaining, spiteful spinster, rather than as a person justifiably protesting class privileges. *Call the midwife* portrays the advent of a welfare state, where thanks to the nuns and midwives employed at the nunnery, lives can be saved. These two narratives represent different discourses on the role of the welfare state. The nostalgic placing of the narrative in a historic past should not be mistaken as innocent; instead, both drama series negotiate complex meanings of ideologies, according to Tincknell.

Other chapters in the book use photography and art as points of departure. In one chapter, Mary MacMaster uses a famous painting, *Portrait of the Artist's mother*, as a starting point for interviews with women on aging and identity. Inspired by the painting of Mrs Whistler, the women pose for portraits whilst holding an object of their choice.

They are subsequently interviewed on their choices as well as on their thoughts on style with regards to dress and hairdo. The chapter, as suggested by the title, *Performing Mrs Whistler*, shed light on the performativity of both age and gender.

Two essays, one by Rosy Martin and one by Rosy Martin together with Kay Goodridge, explore the aging female body as a product of culture. The photos, which are reproduced in color print, are intriguing, thought provoking, subversive and humorous. They stay with the reader afterwards, having started an inner dialogue on the importance of images. I especially liked that the fitting room, otherwise a site for young people trying on clothes and identities, was explored in relation to aging femininity. The photographs focus on how women's bodies are fragmented into body parts, brimming with notions of femininity and how, as the body changes with age, these are considered declined, shriveled, and less attractive in a culture that values the youthful – even the prepubescent. The older female body speaks back in these works of art, Martin declares, and thus works as a corrective to stereotypes. These visuals, together with the written text allow the reader to use a different form of deciphering and reception. The photographs also contrast and thus question the more commercial visuals prevalent in contemporary society – representations of the so-called successful ager.

All of the chapters deserve recognition, but only a few can be mentioned here. Pamela Karantonis writes about opera divas, showing how the voice is not just a physical feature but also a cultural construction. Diane Railton and Paul Watson writing about Madonna and the spectacle of aging, discuss how her performances of aging drags this process out both in terms of delaying it and bringing it out into the open, thus showing the performativity of age. In a chapter on Dolly Parton, Abigail Gardner examines how Parton, using a combination of authenticity and artifice, manages the dilemma of growing old in a music industry with its constant demands of appearing young. Sherryl Wilson, in an analysis of friendship between older women in *Six feet under*, shows how a feeling of becoming invisible in middle age can also be a means of empowerment. Sadie Wearing discusses the impossible burden of growing older without aging, using the example of Helen Mirren to show the close proximity between fame and shame as regards celebrity culture.

This is a very readable collection that manages to fulfill what it sets out to do: interrogate and challenge conceptions of aging and femininity. This makes the reading hopeful. I especially appreciate the diversity of the methods and the material and the relevance of using current representations. My only criticism is that some theoretical concepts, for instance Elisabeth Grosz' term "prosthetic", which Joanne Garde-Hansen uses in her chapter, could have been further explained. It comes across as a potential key concept in understanding the role of and relationship between biology and culture, but would have needed more elaboration in order to also reach readers not already familiar with the theory. Still I must emphasize that a book such as this one, which leaves you with questions and ponderings, testifies to its ability to stimulate interest.

Altogether, the book shows how aging studies can benefit from using a cultural studies approach; not leaving the field of aging to either the market or to medicine. The analyses show that the arts and humanities and cultural studies of popular culture can shed light on aging, gender, and femininity. A book of this kind opens the field up for further exploration.