

***Ageing, Media, and Culture*. Edited by C. Lee Harrington, Denise D. Bielby, and Anthony R. Bardo. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014. Pp. 266. \$105.00 / £70.00 (hardcover); \$46.99 / £31.95 (paperback); \$44.50 / £29.95 (electronic). Reviewed by Josephine Dolan, University of the West of England, Bristol (Josie.Dolan@uwe.ac.uk)**

First appearing in 2014, this edited collection has made—and continues to make—a welcome contribution to an emergent body of scholarship located at the intersections of media and aging studies (in their broadest and most diverse iterations) from the likes of Blaikie (1999), Lipscomb and Marshall (2010), Chivers (2011), Dolan and Tincknell (2012), Jennings and Gardener (2012), Stotesbury and Swinnen (2012), Gravagne (2013), and Whelehan and Gwynne (2014). More particularly, the ambitions of editors C. Lee Harrington, Denise D. Bielby and Anthony R. Bardo to bring the knowledges of life-course research to bear on sociological approaches to the cultural industries in order “[t]o better understand how age is produced by these industries *as a social category*” (3) (emphasis in original) has resulted in a highly original collection that should become a key reference point for scholars working in cognate fields such as gerontology and/or cultural, film, television, fan, and celebrity studies as much as aging and media studies and their overlaps. The outstanding successes of this collection found both in its innovative and highly fertile interdisciplinary methodologies and in its perceptive and original insights into the dynamics of aging, media, and culture that emerge from critical and productive reviews of existing scholarship.

The collection is bracketed by a cogent introduction from the editors and two “Afterword(s)” by Cornel Sandvoss from Media Studies and Merrill Silverstein from Gerontology. The remainder of the book is logically and seamlessly organised into seven further sections: “Advertising and Marketing,” “Age Identities,” “Celebrity,” “Music,” “Fandom,” “Gender and Sexuality,” and “Social and New Media.” Commencing “Advertising and Marketing,” Shyon Bauman and Kim de Laat explore images of older adults in television advertising and identify four major

modes of portrayal: age as a comedic or treatable condition; age as a context for occupational or familial relationships; and a further, minor mode, in which age is incidental. They argue that these modes allow advertisers to “[m]anage a tension between culturally dominant devaluation of old age and the need to avoid negative and stereotypical portrayals of older adults” (14). Meanwhile, Anne L. Balazs’s study of “[t]he new aging consumer” finds wanting the evolution of advertising to “the elderly” as this identity is increasingly aligned with the baby boomer generation. As she suggests, “[M]arketers need to revisit their assumptions about the behaviour, values, and age identity that the elderly (however defined) hold.” (35). The following section, “Age Identities,” begins with a critical overview by Anne E. Barrett, Alexandre Raphael, and Justine Gunderson of existing literature that links media images and self-perceptions of aging. They elucidate the limitations of this literature and identify future directions for research in which quantitative methods should be informed by qualitative approaches, in order to better illuminate the assumed links between media images and individual views of aging, “[i]ncluding the magnitude, timing, scope, and timing of effects, the processes generating them, and variation across images, media types, and individuals” (49). Following on, from the platform of Huong Hoang’s legal battle against IMDb after its unwarranted disclosure of the actress’s date of birth meant that the distinction between her on and off screen age identities was unsustainable, Anthony R. Bardo teases out some complexities of age and gender inequalities in film and television in which women (actresses and characters) are seen to grow old at an earlier age than their male counterparts. He links this to a growing disconnect between chronological age and age identity and to the role of media engagement in the formation of age identities, suggesting that “[t]he truncated view of adulthood portrayed in popular media and the lack of relevance assigned to older characters, particularly women . . . should be of concern to life course scholars” (61).

Bardo's study of age identities and gender in film and television neatly segues to the book's third section, "Celebrity," which opens with Hilde Van den Bulck's account of celebrity culture as a site where a gendered struggle for hegemonic dominance is played out between competing meanings of old age (70) that are polarized as either decline and frailty or rejuvenation and durability. Noting that "[t]he aging of celebrity culture, like that of society, is not yet at an end," Van den Bulck quite rightly refuses a firm conclusion, arguing that the struggle for the meaning of old age will continue "[a]nd thus requires future academic research" (76). Where Van den Bulck explores the embodiment of widely circulating discourses of old age by multiple celebrities, Nathalie Claessens investigates the social meanings of specific celebrities in the particular context of the nursing home. Building on existing scholarship suggesting that the meanings of celebrity extend "[b]eyond entertainment" to include "[f]ood for social interactions, means to discuss moral issues, and social companions in the form of parasocial relationships" (79) to which the nursing home group largely conforms, Claessens original finding is that "[c]elebrities perform a specific function adapted to the nursing home population as an aide-memoire to promote reminiscence despite memory issues" (89).

Memory in the guise of boomer-generation, rock-music (auto) biographic narratives lies at the heart of Stephen Katz's contribution to the book's "Music" section. In the light of an obvious music/generation correlation, he suggests that "[t]he exploration of rock music is key to understanding the boomer phenomena and its cultural consequences, while linking it to the wider changes in our aging society . . ." (96). Katz suggests that rock classification systems narrativize this music genre as a "[t]imeless continuity" (98), while fans utilize those narratives to make sense of individual life course experiences, to establish multigenerational encounters, and to play out a boomer generational fantasy that "[y]ears of musical training and performing in front of adoring audiences" (102) is not a prerequisite of rock performance. The book remains with the

continuities of rock music cultures as Rebecca G. Adams and Justin T. Harmon interrogate “[t]he challenges to identity maintenance and community participation” (107) faced by the aging followers of the Grateful Dead, especially following the death of Jerry Garcia, the band’s iconic frontman. Here, as Adams and Harman observe, the “Deadheads” are organized through a robust infrastructure that not only facilitated the community’s survival after Garcia’s death, but has also been instrumental in securing its continuing “fit” in line with the physical, cognitive, and emotional implications of aging experienced by its members. Indeed, they argue that the ongoing activities of aging Deadheads offer many of the benefits associated with successful aging agendas as much as a sense of belonging to a long-standing community that is enriched by intergenerational encounters with followers from younger age groups.

The rich resonances of fandom across the life course implied by Katz, Adams, and Harmon that chime with “[f]an studies and media studies more broadly” (123) are made explicit by C. Lee Harrington and Denise D. Bielby as they “[h]ighlight the utility of life-course perspective to fan studies” (128) in their contribution to the book’s fifth section. Synthesizing scholarship that addresses “[f]our age based issues . . . fandom and life milestones, changes in the fan (self) over time, age norms within fandom, and changes in the fan object over time . . . ” (128), Harrington and Bielby suggest that the life course narratives of media fans are “[c]omplex interactions between our ‘real’ life (our biography), our autobiography (our storying of our life)” with media texts “[t]hat age along with us,” helping to “[c]onstruct, give meaning to, and guide the relationship between the two. . . ” (138). This, they argue, is of especial value as normative adult life is increasingly destabilized, with challenges to life increasingly mediated through fannish relations, while “[r]apid global aging partly *accounts for* and *contributes* to this transformation” (140) (emphasis in original). This “Fandom” section continues with Christine Scodari’s exploration of fan cultures at the gender/age intersection via one internet site, TwilightMOMS, that is dedicated to

the reworking of the vampire myth in Stephanie Meyer's Young Adult novels, and their film adaptations, through a particular focus on responses to the Edward/Bella romance (Robert Pattinson/Kristen Stewart) in *The Twilight Saga - Breaking Dawn Part 1* (2011). Juxtaposing existing scholarship with fan postings, Scodari's article implicitly identifies a complex web of age and gender tensions that play between the film's characters (the undead, forever young Edward and the human aging teen Bella) and a generational struggle for 'ownership' of the fan site between aging *Twilight* Moms and its younger posters. She concludes that older fans employ the fantasy escape of the central romance as a "[n]ostalgic reminiscence" (153) of young love and early motherhood while the text "[f]ossilizes readers in the stone of recollected youth" (153). From here she observes the need to develop "[c]ultural equipment for living that offers aging women a sense of currency" that moves beyond nostalgic reminiscence and enables "[a] sense of present and future possibility that could enhance their longevity" (154).

In the next section, "Gender and Sexuality," the book continues its cinematic theme as Leni Marshall and Aagje Swinnen shift attention from fan cultures to on-screen representations of "[v]isibly aged women's bodies, the connection between sexual activity and rejuvenation, expressions of sexual agency, and narrative revisions and restrictions" (158) through the films *The Mother* (Michell 2003), *Volke 9* (Dresen 2008), and *Innocence* (Cox 2000). Marshall and Swinnen argue that although these films "[s]eem to convey new and liberating possibilities in which chronologically endowed women express sexual agency," they nonetheless "[r]einforce ideological conventions" in that the protagonists "[a]re punished for transgressing traditional scripts," while their transformations do little more than "[s]upport male characters' abilities to enact virility, overcome fears of mortality, and /or develop emotionally" (166). Yet, despite these limitations, the films do "[g]esture towards means of appreciating and desiring ripened bodies" in ways suggestive of an emerging "[n]ew erotics of desire" that unsettles existing critical legacies that

privilege the gaze, while calling for new approaches to representation that “[r]educ[e] the primacy of aesthetics in the formation of erogeneity” (167). The representation of third age sexuality is also the focus of Barbara L. Marshall’s study of Canadian magazine *Zoomer*, which targets the forty-five and older demographic. Suggesting that the magazine exemplifies a current media trend that “[r]everses earlier tendencies to portray older people as both undesiring and undesirable” (169), Marshall goes on to illuminate how this trend serves to discipline and regulate later life sexuality. Coining the term “[p]ostageist ageism” (178) Marshall argues that ever-younger age groups are recruited into regulatory concerns about the possible impact of aging on desirability and sexuality and that “[p]articular manifestations of sexiness are folded into the work integral to ‘successful aging,’” while “[t]he contemporary sexualization of aging bodies intensifies the sense in which performing gender becomes a lifelong project” (179).

In the book’s penultimate section, “Social/New Media,” Kelly Quinn maps current understandings of social media’s limited use by older people that stems variously from low income, inadequate technology, a poor fit between interface design and the physical conditions of aging, perceptions that new media/internet use is irrelevant to everyday life, and a related failure to recognize the benefits of social use, especially in terms of social connectedness and the mitigation of late life loneliness. Quinn concludes that future research designed to facilitate greater “[d]igital inclusion must encompass an understanding of the perceptions and attitudes of older adults in addition to building literacy skills . . . ” (192). Next, Rosa Mikeal Martey enters the virtual game World of Warcraft, where the arbitrary connection between chronological age and the possession of leadership skills and experience has the potential to be destabilized because of the absence of embodied, physical age cues, yet existing scholarship suggests that generational patterns of language use makes “[i]dentifying who is older and younger, even in the space of limited identity cues . . . quite straightforward” (197). However, following

a two year project that systematically identified and plotted variables in chat, movement, and avatar appearance in World of Warcraft and SL gaming sessions, and was informed by post-session interviews, Martey concludes that statistical modelling did a “[p]retty good job predicting whether someone is over or under thirty years old. Players, however, were not particularly good at guessing each other’s age” (201). This, Martey suggests, opens the possibility that any age-related gaming behavior is “[r]educed as people seek to fit into the group and follow the group norms rather than assert individual age identities” (202) and that the reduction, or even absence, of age cues avoids “[t]riggering some of the social and cultural roles that age position entails” (202).

A similar repudiation of age regulation emerges in Cornel Sandvoss’s “Afterword: A View from Media Studies.” First, Sandvoss observes that “old” mass media and “new” convergence media are “[l]ess easily separable than such a binary classification suggests” (206), due to the recycling of mass media content on social media; the erosions of differences between professional and user-generated content; an increasing awareness that media needs to be understood in terms of uses, rituals, and lived practices as much as representational systems. Adding that “[m]edia are intrinsically embedded in the contemporary life course” (208), he then cites the intergenerational club culture of Ibiza as a site where the imbrication of memory in its rituals and practices has the potential to unsettle cultural aging and that “[t]his is one of many conceptual syntheses that will be needed to further our understanding of transformations to the self” (210). Finally, Merrill Silverstein’s “Afterword: A View from Gerontology” consolidates the collection’s rationale and its ambition to unpack the media’s role in “[b]oth magnifying and distorting public conceptualizations of aging” (216). For Silverstein, this distortion involves challenging the success/failure dichotomy that stereotypes late life frailty as a joyless existence with no quality of life. While the focus on the dynamic properties of biography and history that underpin life course approaches to aging do offer some mitigation to the reductions

of the success/failure dichotomy, Silverstein offers the cogent reminder that we also need to understand the specific adaptations to aging made by individuals as well as “[t]he paradoxes and contradictions of what is a dynamic population that is redefined with every cohort that replenishes it” (216).

Overall, this collection more than achieves its aims, and though some individual essays are more attuned to the concerns of aging studies more broadly than to the life-course scholarship suggested in the introduction, this should be seen as enriching, rather than diminishing the knowledge produced. However, whilst holding fast to my conviction that this is an important collection of articles that makes an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the dynamic between aging, media, and culture, it is important to note several concerns. The first emerges from the “Music” section and its strangely gender-blind accounts of seemingly masculine cultures of rock legends and fan groups. Is the masculinity in the telling or in the case studies? Either way, an opportunity has been missed to follow Marshall’s example in thinking through some of the issues arising from representations of aging masculinity, or to develop methodologies in which aging masculinity is offered the kind of scrutiny accorded to its feminine counterpart in several other contributions in the collection, or at least to reflect on the absence of aging masculinity in existing scholarship and to identify it as a project for future research. The second emerges from those accounts of “ageless” interactions in the virtual and clubbing arenas. The idea is incredibly seductive, but begs questions about economic and social privileges through which these spaces are created, the limits of such temporary and provisional sites, and the problems of studying age in isolation from other forms of identity such as race, class, gender, disability, sexuality, and so on. More disturbing, though, is the collection’s problematic “whiteness.” Undoubtedly, in part, this stems from the privilege accorded to white identities in media circuits, which in turn is reproduced in the existing scholarship reviewed within individual articles and, unfortunately, this

is then further reproduced in analysis and in suggestions for future research. My point here is not so much the absence of “race” focused articles in the collection, but the ease with which a normalized white hegemony can be produced and reproduced. It is a salutary lesson from which we can all learn. Learning from each other, developing each other’s ideas are amongst the underlying principles that establish this collection as a valuable and recommendable contribution to the knowledges produced at the intersection of aging, media, and culture.

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