

***How Pop Culture Shapes the Stages of a Woman's Life: From Toddlers-in-Tiaras to Cougars-on-the-Prowl.* Melissa Ames and Sarah Burcon. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Pp. 291. \$ 100.00 (hardback) \$ 79.99 (electronic).**

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The coauthors of this enjoyable and important study analyze the problematic media representations of women across different life stages. While the relation between media and gender is not a new scholarly concern, the life course approach chosen for this book affords a critical look at the ways in which media representations of different life stages are interwoven and build on each other, producing—in the long term—an intricate pattern of gender socialization. The book takes the perspective of feminist media criticism. Melissa Ames (who has explored temporality in an earlier study, *Time in Television Narrative*, 2012) and her colleague Sarah Burcon (the editor of *Fabricating the Body*, 2014) argue that the shaping of women's life stages through the media requires a fresh look: even though the media (wrongly) purport the notion that gender equality has been achieved, the authors observe a problematic backlash, which is, today, more prevalent and “scariest” because the current representations are cyclical and increasingly didactic (4), permeated by the self-help movement which has taken up speed since 9/11 and positing vulnerable “selves in need of rescue” while offering magical solutions (5).

Two metaphors inform the introduction. First, the notion of the funhouse mirror structures the central argument of the book. Following Ames and Burcon, “popular culture exists as a type of funhouse mirror constantly distorting the real world conditions that exist for women and girls and magnifying the gendered expectations they face” (5). Problematically, as the authors maintain, this mirror suggests a uniform life course with a distorted understanding of class, race, and sexual orientation. To some extent, the study itself reflects this uniform “fiction” of the life course when it follows a clearly heterosexual array

of life stages that cast women as princesses, damsels in distress, brides, wives, mothers, and insatiable cougars or MILFs. This heterosexual orientation is certainly due to the fact that Ames and Burcon trace the most popular media representations of women's life stages, which are typically heteronormative. When Ames and Burcon ask how women can "ever see beyond the [funhouse mirror's] blurry view of reality?" (5), they offer several examples of resistance: in chapter 7, for example, after the authors have discussed media representations of young girls (chapter 1), teenagers (chapter 2) and women in their twenties and thirties (chapters 3 to 6), they focus on the ways in which mothers have started to resist the fear mongering and scare tactics in parenting advice books and how these authors offer alternative concepts of motherhood through humorous, autobiographical texts (published as mom blogs, self-help books, or faux memoirs). Using parody, satire, and brutal honesty, these authors try to establish a more respectful, forgiving, and self-assertive environment for mothers-to-be (and for themselves). According to Ames and Burcon, these texts, as significant as they may be as counternarratives, fail to represent the realities of women's lives beyond their own white, middle-class perspective on motherhood. Furthermore, the humor of the texts is often at the expense of men, who, through stereotypical representations, serve as "punch lines" and not as allies (165).

The second metaphor in the introduction is the scar, which is meant to represent the repeated wounds inflicted by media representations to the self-awareness and dignity of women across the life course: "[T]he effect of these cultural narratives compounds over time like scar tissue unless such cultural narratives are engaged with critically" (10). In suggesting with this comparison that media representations also have a material effect, the authors claim that the very bodies and souls of women are affected by seemingly immaterial and fictitious media images and stories, which influence, for instance, women in their reproductive choices through simple but expensive solutions that thrive on a media-hyped paranoia (e.g., 131-32). Ames and Burcon end their analysis

on a hopeful note when they discuss how these scars can fade and how women can voice critique and present alternative narratives through critical engagement, media literacy programs, and Web 2.0 technology.

For readers interested in age studies and media representations of older women, chapters 8 and 9 are particularly interesting, and therefore I want to focus on these chapters for the remainder of this review. Ames and Burcon do not position their research within theories and concepts from age studies; however, since they discuss very contemporary examples of women's media representations, the analyses are an interesting and worthwhile read. In chapter 8, Ames and Burcon focus on the infamous "pumas," "cougars," and "MILFs" ("mother I'd like to fuck"), and thus on representations of mature women who are sexually active but often represented in a mocking and pejorative way because they, presumably, chase significantly younger men (often ten years or more). In analyzing a range of media representations—spanning films, music videos, and TV series—Ames and Burcon find that the terms puma, cougar, and MILF can be viewed as both empowering and degrading. This ambiguity is confirmed by a survey the authors conducted in 2009. In contrast to the earlier chapters, this section juxtaposes the authors' critical analyses of existing media texts with an attempt to determine how people actually react to representations of older women's sexuality and desire, or more specifically, how they evaluate the terms puma, cougar, and MILF. The survey, which comprised open-ended and close-ended questions, yielded 235 responses by men and women, both parents and non-parents and of different age groups. In their analysis of the data, Ames and Burcon find that popular culture, according to the respondents, has raised public awareness of the "hot mom' taboo" and that the "rise in media images of the cougar, puma, and MILF has helped to reverse the longstanding tradition of casting mothers as innocent or asexual creatures" (188). The authors also find, however, that despite the terms' empowering connotations, they are also considered problematic and criticized as objectifying, heteronormative, and reinforcing a double standard

between men and women (200). Still, Ames's and Burcon's takeaway message foregrounds the subversive quality of these ambiguous terms, and, in doing so, they focus on the ways in which women can appropriate and reclaim labels and thus determine for themselves which messages from the media they adopt and which ones they reject (201). In the field of age studies, sociologists Beth Montemurro and Jenna Marie Siefken conducted a study (published in *The Journal of Aging Studies* in 2014) that produced similar results: The authors examined 84 in-depth interviews with women between 2008 and 2011 and found, as did Ames and Burcon, that the term cougar is viewed ambiguously by the interviewed women—some find the labeling of women as predators and aggressors degrading while others embraced the term as a sign of an acceptance of older women's sexuality.

In chapter 9, "Beyond the Hot Flashes: New Portrayals of Mature Women," the authors focus on the representation of women over fifty and analyze films, TV-series, self-help books, and a musical that discuss the allegedly life-changing effects of menopause for women. Ames and Burcon exemplify the intersectionality of sexism and ageism when they find that the sexism they encountered in the media representations of different age stages is reinforced by ageist values and stereotypes. Ageism intensifies the double standard that many women face as they grow older when it impacts casting practices or results in cautionary tales about what women should fear. For an audience of age scholars, it may appear unfortunate that the chapter lumps together a vast and diverse group of people—all women "beyond 50"—into one life stage. The chapter only focuses on women between fifty and sixty and, in doing so, it does not mention a range of potentially exciting media representations of older women, such as Netflix's series *Grace and Frankie*, which stars actresses who are in their mid-seventies and older and who importantly expand the narrow age range of female visibility on the small screen (however problematic the series itself may be). Similarly, centenarians have received quite some media coverage, and it might have been interesting to have

these “extreme” ages analyzed as well. Having said that, the chapter discusses central topics, such as (in)visibility, sexual attractiveness, and menopause, and offers an enjoyable overview of recent media representations of mature women. The authors examine, for example, the problematic ways in which Caitlyn Jenner’s and Hilary Clinton’s sexuality and femininity has been discussed in the past few years and the mixed messages about female roles these two public women have stimulated.

In its conclusion, the book lists a number of ways in which media producers, authors, and celebrities have attempted to resist and change problematic media representations via online activism, commercials, marches, interventions by celebrities, and media literacy campaigns. As a “cross-over text intended for academic and mainstream audiences alike” (ix), the book is both very accessible and an enjoyable read. Moreover, it successfully targets and critically analyzes the manifold media representations of the female life course and the mixed messages they contain. Because the authors move beyond a slice-of-life approach (e.g., Gullette 2004) and engage in a broader discussion of the life span, *How Pop Culture Shapes the Stages of a Woman’s Life* is able to locate and foreground the compounding media messages about what it means to be a woman across the life course.

#### WORKS CITED

- Gullette, Margaret Morganroth. *Aged by Culture*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004.  
Montemurro, Beth and Jenna Marie Siefken, “Cougars on the Prowl? New Perceptions of Older Women’s Sexuality.” *Journal of Aging Studies*. 28 (2014): 35-43.