

Age Matters

Cultural Representations and the Politics of Ageing

Annual Conference of the German Association for the Study of British Cultures

22-24 November 2018, TU Dresden

– Call for Papers –

In 2017, the well-known actress Miriam Margolyes proclaimed that “old age is going to be shitty” (Ferguson 2017). Such a negative outlook is nothing singular and looks back on a long history. Though old age has also been associated with positive characteristics and virtues such as wisdom and experience, more often than not the downsides of the ageing process have been paramount. From Socrates, who allegedly regarded old age as “the most burdensome part in life” (Xenophon in Parkin 2005, 55), to Shakespeare, for whom the last stage of life was “sans everything” (*As You Like It*, 2.7.167), to today, old age has commonly been understood in terms of bodily and mental decline and as nothing to look forward to. Along with a strong focus on the aged, medicalised and problematic body, the elderly have been pushed to the margins of society and regarded as passive, unprogressive, burdensome. It seems as if it is indeed “old age, rather than death, that is to be contrasted with life” (de Beauvoir 1970, 539).

Yet, with life expectancy rates on the rise and birth and death rates declining in the West, our societies are ageing rapidly, and due to growing affluence and improving healthcare, most people enjoy not only a longer lifespan but also an extended third age, that is, the intermediate period between the entrance into retirement and ‘old’ old age. While narratives of decline are still pervasive, the experience and meaning of this period of life have become more fluid and heterogeneous over the last decades. As the elderly are no longer “expected to don the retirement uniform” (Blaikie 1999, 104), new possibilities and obligations have arisen leading to a “variety of potentially competing cultures of ageing” (Gilleard & Higgs 2000, 8). The increase of options as well as expectations is reflected and driven by the influx of ‘positive’ images in visual and print media which encourage senior citizens to engage in technologies of the self, be active, dress young, socialise, work and embrace age.

The problematics of old age have also come to increasingly occupy academia, and following the cultural turn, ageing studies/cultural gerontology have emerged as vibrant fields of study. Informed by poststructuralism and, among others, gender studies (Twigg & Martin 2014, 353), these approaches consider age as an ambiguous “phenomenon that is inextricably caught up in and realised through social and cultural practices” (Gilleard 2014, 36) and hence propose that we might be just as

much “aged by culture” as by nature (Gullette 2004, 12). Since culture has been recognised as constitutive of age and the elderly have gained in prominence in films, TV series, advertising and other forms of popular culture, it is high time that cultural studies scholars appreciate that age matters and give it the attention it deserves.

For the BritCult conference 2018, we therefore invite papers that discuss **cultural representations and narratives of ageing and old age** both in the present and the past. Though the conference concentrates on Britain and British society, we are not averse to papers that transcend this focus and allow for comparative perspectives.

Individual papers may discuss, but are not restricted to, the following issues:

- ageism and anti-ageing
- active, positive and successful ageing
- the role of consumption/consumerism
- ageing and the material world (ageing and the meaning of things)
- retirement, pensions, (health)care (including political perspectives and social policies)
- social and spatial segregation
- class, gender, ethnicity
- corporeality of ageing
- memory and the loss of memory
- age, power and authority; the elderly as agents
- sexuality and sexual desire

Keynote speakers: Prof Julia Twigg (Professor of Social Policy and Sociology, University of Kent)

Dr Chris Gilleard (Visiting Research Fellow, Psychiatry, University College London)

A selection of papers will be published in the *Journal for the Study of British Cultures*.

Please send your proposal of about 300 words and a short biographical note to Robert Troschitz (robert.troschitz@tu-dresden.de) by **31 March 2018**.

Organisers:

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Literature

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Ferguson, Donna (2017). "Miriam Margolyes: 'No One Tells You What Old Age Is like. I Don't Care about Raising Hell'." *The Guardian*, Last accessed: 15 Jan 2018
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