

Mirror Mirror: Representations and Reflections on Age and Aging

An Introduction

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“Mirror Mirror” was the title of a conference that I curated for the London College of Fashion (October 2013) and is equally appropriate for this timely and original collection of essays and artwork.

The apparent dissonance of a conference on age and aging within an internationally renowned center for fashion initially caused general consternation. However, the ephemeral, shifting, and yet pervasive world of fashion proved to be a useful trope for reconsidering some of the ways in which age and aging are being enacted, experienced, and mediated in the twenty-first century. The conference attracted an extraordinarily diverse audience comprising artists, designers, journalists, academics, and “fashionistas.” The UK national press described the event as “surprisingly stimulating” (Walmsley-Johnson). The aim of this collection is, similarly, to surprise and stimulate. The articles and artwork transcend traditional academic boundaries and are intended to provoke new debates and even some alternative insights into the business of aging in the twenty-first century.

The title “Mirror Mirror” was deliberately chosen for its wide and somewhat provocative appeal. From fairy tales to visual art, the association of mirrors with age is deeply ingrained within our collective consciousness. Images of older women scrutinizing and adjusting their appearances were a popular satirical conceit in eighteenth-century drawings (Ribeiro 178). The notion that time is a flaw on the faces of women has a long cultural history and yet disturbingly retains contemporary resonance. Vast industries continue to flourish by encouraging us to view aging as irksome and avoidable. *Being Otherwise*, the artwork by Parnell and discussion by Woodspring in this collection, reminds us of the universal cultural patterns that underlie our contemporary image-saturated

society. Here new images of Hecate are discussed as they create a visual language imbricating the mythic, the archetypal, and the contemporary.

The relevance of understanding identities of age as embodied, enacted, and corporeal unifies this collection. Age is positioned as an experience that is at once somatic and visual. After all, the roles that the body and that care practices have for “new” generations of older people are subject to increasing scrutiny. The importance of distinguishing between embodiment and corporeality in order to properly contextualize the new narratives and performances of later life is discussed here by Gilleard and Higgs in their essay “Aging, Embodiment, and the Somatic Turn.” This article draws upon the authors’ recent book (2013) and reviews the relationship between postwar culture, the sociology of the body, aging, and intergenerationality. The article makes what is familiar new, in that readers are enabled to view their cultural experiences as these are historically situated. The authors neatly define the theoretical space of the aging body and embodiment.

Themes of performance and embodiment are apparent in Augarten’s photographs of members of the “Young at Heart” chorus. These show older men and women consciously performing age. These performances echo the way in which David Bowie “plays” a man in his seventies in the video for his single “The Stars (are out tonight).” In both cases, older people don an aging identity, which may or may not be their own. Questions of verisimilitude are raised: is it more or less truthful to play at aging as an older person? How should the viewer “read” these performances? In the context of performance, notions of the “mask” of aging gain a new interest (Featherstone and Hepworth 371).

There is a curious resonance between Augarten’s photograph of an older man squarely facing an unseen audience and yet at a slight angle to the main frame and Winstanley’s portrait of Juri Arrak, an older Estonian artist. These images of older creative men betray a vulnerability that seems at once particular and universal. The artist, Arrak, holds his painting in a way that seems to make it both an offering and a protective shield. Perhaps this is an observation about the role of creativity in later life?

Sue Kreitzman embraces creativity as a form of identity in later life and as a means of subverting social expectations about later life. In response to the persistent association of age with erasure or social invisibility, Sue Kreitzman is defiantly visible. As she notes: “I regard myself as a work of art to be assembled anew each day.” Through her art and by consciously curating her appearance (drawing on traditions of folk art and outsider art), Sue enacts a sort of resistance to stereotypes of aging as decline. The images by Kate Munro (who was a commissioned artist for the Mirror Mirror conference) demonstrate the liberation that can be possible for older people when they are invited to dress up. Contrary to the expectations of the artist, the care home residents she worked with did not want to reminisce. They were wholly engaged in playing with their identities, using bright hats and feather boas. Keara Stewart’s sensitive drawings of the care home residents hint at the internal lives of her subjects.

The central role that clothes play in the creation of our identities has been widely explored by fashion studies (Gonzalez and Bovone). However, the role that clothing and style may have in the lives of older people has, until recently, been overlooked (Twigg 1). There is evidence within popular UK culture that this may be changing, with television programs highlighting the plight of the older shopper and newspapers featuring clothes for older (thin) women. This is due to the compelling pressures of demographic changes and market forces. The grey pound is a significant currency. However, as Twigg observes, “Men have traditionally been excluded from the territory of fashion”(19). This gap is addressed in an insightful and original article by Sadkowska, Wilde, and Fisher. The authors investigate the ways some older men negotiate their aging identities through the medium of clothing and fashion. Fashion, for the men in this study, became a strategy for negotiating their own aging masculinities. This article makes a valuable contribution to wider debates on aging, gender, and fashion within cultural gerontology. The panache and evident style of George Skeggs, as photographed by Winstanley, provides a visual analogue to this article.

The importance of clothing in the performance of identity is further examined by Buse and Twigg. Their article “Clothing, Embodied Identity, and Dementia” raises the important issue of clothing and dress for understanding the experiences of people with dementia, and for more fully supporting their selfhood. The authors make important connections between clothing and dress and the provision of person-centered dementia care. The article makes a significant contribution to the growing recognition of the role of the body, embodiment, and questions of appearance for people living with a dementia (Ward, Campbell, and Keady). Representing the experience of living with dementia is at the heart of Maldonado Branco’s work, in which books are modified to show the progressive confusion and disorientations associated with Alzheimer’s disease. The text rotations and changes in typeface in “The Book of Genesis According to Vasco Branco” is an especially eloquent visual metaphor for the way in which this illness challenges the authority of time, space, and identity.

This collection of articles and art is wide-ranging and does not shirk from the complexities and contradictions of aging. Using the lens of fashion and the body, issues as diffuse as selfhood, creativity, clothing, embodiment, and the shifting cultural location of old age are illuminated. It is hoped that the insights provided here can help us to formulate alternative cultural imaginaries of later life. The acclaimed performance lecture by Small Things that was presented at the Mirror Mirror conference provides one such reflection: “How Do You See Me?”¹ features a group of older people exploring issues of personal identity within a shared historical moment. Like the other work gathered here and consistent with the vision of *Age, Culture, Humanities*, the piece challenges us to rethink our view of later life and celebrate its diversity, potential, and inventiveness.

NOTES

¹For more on this performance, see: smallthings.org.uk/performance-projects/how-do-you-see-me/.

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