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## Book Review

*Dolan, Josephine and Estella Tincknell, eds. Aging Femininities: Troubling Representations. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. 2012. Hardback. ISBN-13: 978-1-4438-3883-2 , ISBN-10: 1-4438-3883-7 , Price: £39.99*

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## Book Review

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Media, cultural and feminist studies, according to editors Dolan and Tincknell, have failed to address cultural representations of aging women. Implicitly, only the young and "young bodies" are worthy of the "theoretical gaze" [vii]. In cultural theory, older women are marginalized or "pathologised." Yet aging women are increasingly topics of public concern, and images of "successful aging", especially celebrities like Helen Mirren, are proliferating. Only gerontology, embedded in an essentialist, body-as-simply-biology framework, seems to take older women seriously.

The editors hope this volume will stimulate reflection on and eventually reshape debates about "aging femininity" and "wrest the discourse of the aging body away from a return to essentialism." [ix]. They wish to revisit earlier feminist writings, especially Simone de Beauvoir's deeply negative view of postmenopausal women as both invisible and filled with self-loathing.

The book offers valuable perspectives on aging from media, film, and cultural studies. It is the culmination of several conferences and workshops, beginning in 2007, leading to the Women, Aging, Media [WAM] research network of UK scholars; and the European Network of Aging Studies. The 18 authors (17 from the UK), come from the humanities [Drama, English, Art, Photography; Film and Culture Studies] rather than the social or medical sciences.

The book covers many representational formats: drama, stories, paintings, photography, TV series, films, popular singers, opera, photography, festivals, and a beauty salon. Analyses come from critical cultural theory, with some "ethnographic" research. Women subjects range from 40 to 90, but mainly are over 55.

After an excellent introduction, sixteen chapters cluster into four thematic sections. "Cultural Herstories" examines past representations of femininity in: Post-WWI British Dramas ("the spinster"); stories by Edgar Allan Poe; "Celebration at 90" by renown British painter W. Barns-Graham"; "Whistler's Mother"; and two UK "period dramas" (Downton Abby and Call the Midwife). Section 2, Regulations and Transgressions, explores contemporary representations in a "Celebration of Age Festival"; a beauty salon, and in photo-video-collages created from photo-therapy workshops for older women. Section 3: Problematic Postfeminists? offers critical "readings" of the popular USA TV series, Six Feet Under; the film Heading South; and media coverage of Helen Mirren. Section 4: Divas and Dolls, focuses on three celebrities: 79-year old screen-star Honor Blackman, singers Dolly Parton and Madonna; and the "The Paradox of Age and Femininity" in the Opera Diva.

For those relatively unfamiliar with popular culture, the book samples this powerfully-influential world. Many UK productions and celebrities have global audiences ["Downton Abby"], as do those from the USA. Yet authors, research settings and participants are solidly British, popular media commentaries are drawn from UK newspapers or magazines like *Saga* . Many scholarly references are from the UK...along, apparently, with the recurring metaphor for aging ["mutton dressed up as lamb"].

The volume also illustrates the articulation of postmodern, post-structuralist theory with cultural feminist theory. The introduction, and many authors, draw upon theorists like Foucault, Kristeva, and Judith Butler [cf. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 1990, London: Routledge.]. Representation--whether positive or negative---entails issues of power and control, the power to discipline and regulate bodies--literally and figuratively, externally and through internalized mechanisms of self-policing. Such subtle, pervasive, processes produce women's "consent to oppression" and their policing of transgressions by other women." [p. xi].

Bacon and Brooks explore the Beauty Salon as a gendered, meaning-rich site, linked to "beauty treatments" that are "...part of a Foucauldian regime for the containment and regulation of femininity" [p.83]. But such places are becoming "therapeutic" sites, where "health therapies" are consumption practices necessary for a "healthy lifestyle", especially for aging women ." Framed as "treats" and "pleasurable", the beauty salon "complicates" the "containment" perspective since women exert "agency" and experience pleasure.( p.87)

These and other articles remind us of the profound role popular culture, and a consumerist-driven, advertising- saturated society, plays in constructing contemporary meanings around gender and aging. Aging women provide grist for the never-ending consumer mill. Images of "successful aging" seem to contradict long-standing themes of aging as "decline". Yet the new "hot" ["cougar"] older woman must constantly work [and buy products] to ward off this still-dreaded state. Women's "empowerment", definitions of self and acceptability reside in their bodies...even for Madonna. And cultural transgressions still exact a price, at least in movies like *Going South*, where "older" women violate conventional age and racial hierarchies.

Yet resistance is possible. Drawing on bodies as "discursively inscribed", the products of culture and discourse rather than essential, biological entities (p.111), women pose for photographs, "performing" their version of Whistler's Mother. Other women create "performance pieces" from photo-collages, challenging conventional images, disrupting discourse by deliberately re-viewing anxiety-linked bodily areas, like bellies [the book's cover photo].

One can find weaknesses in any volume. Since the analyses here are not based on anthropological-type research, I'm not sure how to evaluate their validity. I'm especially concerned about how different audiences, diverse by gender, culture, class, ethnicity, etc., might interpret these representations. I'd like more "real" ethnography, that is, in-depth exploration of "native" perceptions-attitudes. And cross-cultural comparison is lacking, both in the interpretation and the representations of aging women.

Nevertheless, I recommend the volume to anthropologists, to anyone working in the field of aging, including in health and biological sciences, and to anyone who is or will become "aged" ! The book is "good to think with", the introduction provides a useful overview, and one can pick and choose from the various short [10-15 pages] chapters as interest and time dictates. The editors have fulfilled their goal!