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## Book Review

Review of Haring, Nicole, Roberta Maierhofer, and Barbara Ratzenböck, eds. *Gender and Age/Aging in Popular Culture: Representations in Film, Music, Literature, and Social Media*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag. 2023. Price: \$57,25 (Paperback), Open Access (eBook)

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## Book Review

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*Gender and Age/Aging in Popular Culture* is the twenty-second contribution to the Transcript Aging Studies series. The editors, Nicole Haring, Roberta Maierhofer, and Barbara Ratzenböck, all have extensive experience in research at the intersection of aging and gender studies. The volume covers a broad array of subjects, ranging from aging masculinity in film (Chapter 1 and 2) to older women in music (Chapter 5 and 6). The significance of this volume lies in the way the contributing authors challenge representations of aging and gender in popular culture, and the lived experiences compared to those representations. The volume recognizes the potential impact these representations can have on gendered and aging experiences, while acknowledging the politics of popular culture. Furthermore, the contributing authors, coming from diverse backgrounds such as sociology, gerontology, gender and queer studies, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, memory studies, film, music, and media studies enrich the edited volume by employing varied methodologies, ranging from close readings to virtual ethnography.

The introduction contextualizes popular culture, age and gender and provides a brief summary of the different contributions, emphasizing the political dimension of popular culture and highlighting its role in representing gender and aging (10). In the first chapter titled “Introspective Conflict in the Middle of a Moveable Feast,” Leonor Acosta Bustamante analyses how the city of Rome in Paolo Sorrentino's film *The Great Beauty* (2013), figures both as a diegetic space within the narrative and as a reflection of the protagonist's personal state and self-perception as he ages. The protagonist is Jep Gambardella, a 65-year-old man who struggles with issues of sexuality, loss, and existential nihilism as he navigates through the shifting landscape of Roman society. Through Gambardella, Sorrentino explores the complexities of aging, portraying old age as a period of loss and nostalgia, while also challenging traditional notions of masculinity and societal expectations.

In “Cinema and Glory” (Chapter 2), Raquel Medina explores representations of aging as a manifestation of decline, particularly in the film *Pain and Glory* (Almodóvar, 2019). The film centers around Salvador Mallo, a film director who reflects on his life, past relationships, and the choices he has made, as he grapples with the physical and emotional pain of growing older. Medina examines the process of aging through an intersectional lens and critically examines the dominant stereotypes associated with older homosexual men. They are often depicted as the archetypal “dirty old man,” (38) a representation that can be attributed to the dominant focus on youth within the LGBTQ+ community. Medina also discusses

how the film challenges the conventional perception of chronological time by presenting Salvador Mallo at various moments in life, thereby moving away from traditional chronological storytelling.

Chapter 3, “The Celluloid Hurdles” by Shlomit Aharoni Lir and Liat Ayalon focuses on the production aspect of popular culture. The authors pay particular attention to the challenges female filmmakers face in establishing a presence in the Israeli film industry and assuming the title of director. The analysis includes various quotes on the difficulties women face in the film industry. The authors provide valuable insights into the first-hand experiences of female directors and the adversities they encounter not only in Israel but also in global contexts. The concept of “Celluloid Hurdles” (71) denotes the different barriers and challenges that women face, hindering their progress in the competitive world of film making. The use of the documentary film *In the Director’s Chair Sits a Woman* (Zamir 2020) for thematic analysis is very interesting.

In Chapter 4 “Be the Captain They Remember” Isabella Hesse employs virtual ethnography of Star Trek fan groups on Facebook to study the fans’ perspectives on the series’ aging protagonist, Picard. The chapter explores discourses on aging in the show and among fans, with an emphasis on successful aging. The analysis reveals that some fans appreciate the captain aging alongside them, while others criticize the series for its lack of continuity, highlighting the heterogeneousness of the fandom group. The discussions about the characters reveal a discrepancy in how attractiveness is perceived for men and women: whereas men were referred to as aging “like a fine wine,” women are more objectified and sexualized. The analysis also highlights that women are pressured to fight the effects of aging more than men, reflecting a gendered double standard in the way aging is discussed in the Facebook fan group.

In “Gender, Rage, and Age” (Chapter 5) Karen Fournier examines the association between aging women and feelings of anger in Alanis Morissette’s “Reasons I Drink.” Fournier builds upon Helene Moglen’s feminist concept of transaging. Transaging captures the discrepancy between a woman’s personal experiences with aging and society’s perception of the aging process. Fournier examines how Morissette’s latest album still contains anger, though less intense than in her younger years. Media often portray older adults, including Morissette, as calm, denying her anger, suggesting she is aging gracefully. However, the analysis shows that her music continues to express anger and challenges the traditional views on aging, presenting a more liberating narrative of female aging.

The sixth chapter, “On Being Silenced and Breaking Cycles” by Melinda Niehus-Kettler focuses on the work of Tori Amos, an American singer-songwriter, who sings about taboo political themes such as domestic violence and rape. The author analyses Amos’ aging process, along with the intergenerational experiences of her mother and daughter, integral to her own story. The chapter highlights the potential impact of aging on an artist’s appearance and the fading of its significance while they age. Niehus-Kettler refers to Madonna’s music, clothing, and make-up, as challenges to hegemonic norms and discourses, exemplifying defiance against criticisms of her appearance and plastic surgery. Both Madonna and Amos resist dominant ideas of aging and societal expectations with empowering their audiences by giving voice to vulnerability and critiquing sexism and ageism.

Nicole Haring’s chapter “Intersectional Aging” offers valuable insights into the significance of adopting an intersectional approach to understanding the complexities of aging. Drawing upon Roberta Maierhofer’s (2004a, 2004b) concept of “anocriticism,” Haring analyses Bernardine Evaristo’s (2019) novel *Girl, Woman, Other*. Evaristo challenges traditional beliefs about aging based on gender by highlighting the unique journey of older women as they embrace their sensual selves and regain control over their aging bodies. Haring argues that through its rejection of societal norms, the novel celebrates

the diverse personal narratives of its characters and provides a nuanced exploration of aging that emphasizes intersectionality and relationality.

In the final chapter “WhatsApp Aunts: Ageism, Sexism, and the Marginalisation of Older People in Brazilian Politics,” Mariana Castelli-Rosa and Mariana Lins look at the stereotype of the “WhatsApp aunt,” and the impact this stereotype has on societal dynamics and politics. The “WhatsApp aunt” refers to older right-wing adults who are considered to be politically active online. The stereotype is both sexist and ageist, as it represents older women as spreading fake news. Castelli-Rosa and Lin offer a captivating exploration of how these stereotypes pertaining to older women are strategically leveraged in politics to propagate disinformation and of the resultant lack of credibility afforded to older women in general. The authors observe that both left- and right-wing political factions exploit the stereotype of the WhatsApp aunt, albeit in different manners. For example, older adults are used as central point for mockery and anger in Brazilian politics, while older women are not liable for Bolsonaro’s victory in 2018. The authors argue that the spread of misinformation is linked to structural inequalities in Brazil, and critically recognize that these stereotypes reflect the ageist and sexist ideas in society and politics.

*Gender and Age/Aging in Popular Culture* is a highly engaging volume that offers a diverse range of perspectives from films, music, and social media. The strength of this volume lies in its exploration of how various forms of popular culture, such as music, film, TV shows, and social media, assign cultural significance to gender and age in contemporary society. However, despite its significance, the authors fail to move beyond neoliberal notions of aging. Furthermore, only a few contributors provide information on their methodologies, and not all chapters critically engage with their own analysis and conclusions. Nevertheless, this book is valuable for scholars in film studies, cultural studies, cultural gerontology, and critical gerontology.

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