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Screening Old Age in British Contexts

Josephine Dolan and Julia Hallam

This special issue, ‘Screening Old Age in British Contexts’, was already in the pipeline when it became obvious to Elena Boschi and Christine Geraghty that dominant themes threading through contributions to their special issue of the journal in July 2016 meant that ‘Gender, ageing and sexuality in British cinema after Thatcher’ was its only meaningful title. The coincidence of two ‘age’ related issues being published by this journal within such a short space of time indicates that such scholarship is timely and relevant in the context of an ageing population and its connection to British cinema and television cultures. Indeed, we would suggest that this kind of sustained scholarly interest is long overdue since British screen studies has kept pace neither with demographic shifts, nor with ageing viewers and audiences, nor with the current proliferation of film and television productions that feature ageing protagonists played by ageing actors.

According to Age UK over a third of the total UK population is aged 50 years and over, and half of these are aged over 60 (2016: 3), whilst the United Nations reports that the world’s population aged 60 years or over has increased from 8 per cent in 1950 to 12 per cent in 2013 (2013: 11). In the context of multiple exhibition and consumption platforms it is difficult to fully assess the impact of the ageing population on globalised or localised British film and television industries, though there are strong suggestions of emerging trends. In the cinema sector, the BFI reports that UK films have ‘a particularly strong appeal for those aged 55 and above’ (2015: 2), whilst the popular appeal of cinema for older audiences has resulted in, and is supported by, the proliferation of ‘Silver Screen’ clubs in both independent and commercial chains. Equally, some of the British film industry’s most profitable films of the last decade, such as the *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2011) which grossed more than \$46

million from a \$10 million budget, have emerged from those featuring the concerns of the ageing population. Over the same period, critically acclaimed, popular television series, such as the 2013 winner of the British Academy for Television Award for Best Drama Series *Last Tango in Halifax* (BBC 1, 2012-2016) averaging viewing figures of over seven million, have amply demonstrated that screening old age is a viable enterprise. It therefore seems reasonable to assume that a dynamic exchange of interests and concerns *vis a vis* the ageing demographic circulates between the viewer, production and performance triad that constitutes British screen cultures.

Yet, the research that might confirm or repudiate this assumption is barely underway and consequently there exists very little critical interrogation of current narratives and their production histories or of recovered material from the past - from both documentary and dramatic traditions. The research that does exist, much of it produced by contributors to this issue, is all too frequently located within Cultural Gerontology and Ageing Studies (Dolan 2012; Wearing 2013; Wilson 2014; Swinnen 2015). Whilst this scholarship makes an invaluable contribution to those fields of study, it does little to place ageing and old age on the research agendas of British Cinema and Television Studies and consequently has little impact on its methodologies and knowledge production. Although globally successful British films such as *Iris* (2001), *Ladies in Lavender* (2005) and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* are key texts in two recent monographs about ageing and cinema (Chivers 2011; Gravagne 2013), the overall focus on the representation of old age in a globalised economy effaces the specific 'Britishness' of these films (derived from a combination of funding streams, production and social histories, aesthetics and cultural values), even in terms of being a localised product of a globalised film industry (Kim 2003). In marked contrast though, because its methodologies are highly sensitive to questions of national specificity, Celebrity Studies is currently one arena where British screen scholarship on age and ageing shines out

(see, for example, Jermyn and Holmes 2015), throwing into relief the surrounding deficit. Overall, the engagement with age and ageing by British cinema and television scholars is both marginalised and scattered, and consequently lacks the gravitas that accrues from the critical mass of coherent collections. In this context, it is especially gratifying that this journal is able to prioritise and foster such work, developing the critical frameworks and methodologies which are key to interrogating the production, representation and consumption of old age and ageing on screen.

Elsewhere, Dolan (2016) has discussed the vexed question of terminology since the terms ‘age’, ‘ageing’, ‘old age’, ‘elderly’, ‘senior’ and their ilk are notoriously imprecise and slippery, with their meanings contingent upon specific contexts. Such contingency is highlighted in this issue by Bolton’s analysis of *My Week with Marilyn* (2011) that foregrounds the reiteration of a commonplace gendered disparity in the formulation of ageing stars as it depicts Vivien Leigh (Julia Ormond) as past her prime, already old, whilst Laurence Olivier (Kenneth Brannagh), despite being a similar chronological age, is represented as still youthful and still vital. The contingent language of ageing and old age is largely irresolvable since efforts to rationalise and fix its slippages are always an arbitrary imposition, or the substitution of one contingency for another. Thus, across this issue the slippages of language become an unspoken part of its overall composition as the content and thrust of individual articles suggest the variable and particular meanings in play, either explicitly or implicitly. To be explicit here, the titular use of ‘old age’ takes account of anti-essentialist scholarship emerging from Cultural Gerontology and Ageing Studies that disarticulates age from biology and chronological time, and thus from bio-medical accounts of inevitable decay and decline (Gullette 2004; Lipscomb and Marshall 2010). At the same time, it adopts Gayatri Spivak’s (1988) notion of strategic essentialism - that is the philosophical acceptance of anti-essentialist principles, whilst also acting as if there are

stable, knowable, coherent and essential identities around which we can organise and initiate critical and political interventions.

One obvious intervention is the acknowledgement that old age is both deeply personal and universal, though its specific manifestations are historically, socially, and economically specific. If we are lucky enough, we will all get old. Meanwhile, for most of us and regardless of our individual chronologies, old age exercises personal impact, either now or in the future as it figures in our own particular life course, in our concerns for loved ones, or even for the unloved of our communities. Whilst old age intersects with other identity formations like class (see Wilson in this issue), race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and disability in complex ways that undoubtedly exacerbate existing inequalities and privileges, yet it remains a common issue that touches us all. Consequently, the kinds of representations we see on our screens are a matter of personal import that have major ramifications for broader society. We thus suggest that representations of old age, the processes that produce them, and the ways in which they are circulated and used need to be given the kind of critical scrutiny accorded to representations of race, gender and sexuality in order to identify, and unpack, pejorative stereotypes that chime with the dominant social narrative of decline. Whilst ageism can operate against any age group, that directed towards old age is especially pernicious since it is supported by bio-medical accounts of burdensome degeneration and policy statements that constitute old age as a crisis to be borne by the state, by families and by individuals. Such narratives and attendant stereotypes rapidly accrue into a normalised familiarity of legitimised ‘common sense’ through the repeated screenings of cinema and television, and thus need to be identified and challenged.

Scholars of cinema and television are used to thinking about screening in relation to projection, broadcasting and streaming technologies, but here we want to invoke an alternative meaning – the process of grading, sorting, selecting and rejecting that is usually

associated with material practices but makes an apt metaphor for scholarly critical practices and interventions. Fundamentally, methodologies are produced through the processes of screening whereby objects of study and theoretical and critical approaches are selected or rejected. Similarly, analysis is predicated on grading the relevance of the multiple themes, motifs and discourses that constitute both the object of study and the critical material brought to bear on it and then of sorting them into coherent arguments and meaningful interventions. Thus the idea of screening old age does not simply speak to those projections, images and discourses of old age that circulate within British screen culture, but also points to the selection of particular objects of study and methodological processes that underpins each individual article in this issue.

Here, Bolton's close reading of *My Week with Marilyn* (2011) exposes how the film reproduces a pervasive image of Vivien Leigh as ageing and neurotic despite contrary accounts of archive material contemporaneous to Leigh's career, especially those contained in Colin Clarke's diaries (1995; 2011) on which the film is said to be based. Hills's article explores *Dr. Who's* (1963-) enduring fandom through Harrington and Bielby's (2013) account of the 'fannish transitional object' across the life course. Given the longevity of the series and its regular re-castings and re-imaginings over a 50 year history, he argues that Dr. Who can become a 'generational object' for multiple cohorts of fans. In various ways Jennings, Swinnen, Wearing and Wilson challenge the dominant cultural narrative of old age as decline. Jennings achieves this by foregrounding the positive intergenerational dynamics of two female ensemble television dramas *Tenko* (1981-1985) and *Call the Midwife* (2012...), while Swinnen explores an interplay between high cultural 'big C creativity' and life-skill 'small c creativity' (Boden 2004) in the films *Youth* (2012) and *Quartet* (2015) that exposes the limits of the former in meeting the challenges posed by ageing. Moving across TV and film dramas, Wearing suggests that *Mr Holmes* (2015), *The Fear* (2012), and the English language version

of *Wallander* (2008-2016) are sites whereby the meanings of memory loss within figurations of masculinity in the crime genre have a broader significance for thinking through the representational dilemmas of dementia that link to social and philosophical reflections on power, autonomy and selfhood. Wilson's analysis of the TV dramas *A Cream Cracker Under the Settee* (1988) and *She's Been Away* (1989) employs the concept of the life review (Butler 1975) to tease out processes of perception, altering reflections that enable positive interpretations of their protagonists late or end of life actions and decisions.

Crucially, the articles and interview published here combine with those contained in Boschi and Geraghty's issue and together establish a valuable foundation for necessary further research. Here Swinnen and Wearing confirm that textual analysis has the capacity to unsettle dominant ways of thinking about creativity or genre, gender and old age and those of Bolton, Jennings and Wilson powerfully illuminate the value of historical approaches to 'screening old age' while Dolan and Grist's interview with Jean Rogers highlights that valuable insights are to be gained from exploring peripheral institutions. However, we recognise that the disturbing 'whiteness' of our edition points to the pressing need for studies of old age, ethnicity and race. Equally, Hill's article on fandom merely scratches the surface of the research required to make sense of how images and texts are consumed and interpreted by ageing audiences. Of course, any future research should not be confined to the approaches suggested here but extended to all arenas of British screen scholarship concerned with both on-screen images and off-screen practices. At the very least, there needs to be a critical sensitivity to the impact of old age on the viewer, production, performer triad of British cinema and television.

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