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# Growing old in the spotlight : social media and ageing

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## **Celebrity Culture and Ageing.**

### **Kirsty Fairclough-Isaacs**

Despite the proliferation of images of ageing in Western popular culture online and in print media in recent years, it is striking that media and cultural studies has virtually ignored the subject of ageing until recently. However, in recent years the burgeoning field of celebrity studies has begun to consider the ways in which ageing celebrities are both represented and configured in popular culture. This has focussed mainly on the ways in which ageing women are portrayed in social media; lifestyle television such as makeover shows; and in gossip websites, tabloids and magazines. Interestingly, there has been little work undertaken addressing men and ageing, except for some analysis of ageing Hollywood stars such as Sylvester Stallone (Feasey 2012). This chapter will review the emergent and key debates surrounding ageing, social media and celebrity, and provide an overview of a developing area within media and cultural studies.

### **The Neglected Field**

There has been a noticeable exclusion of the examination of ageing in celebrity studies. Reflecting on this absence, some scholars have begun to address how ageing impacts upon both stars and celebrities. In 2010, Chris Holmlund writing in the inaugural edition of *Celebrity Studies* journal suggested 'Assessing ageing is one of the key tasks confronting celebrity studies today.' (Holmlund, 2010:96). Holmlund questions why issues of ageing and its representations on screen have been noticeably absent from scholarship. Similarly, Deborah Jermyn suggests that there is a direct parallel between the notable absence of older women on screen and the lack of critical attention paid by scholars to their representations. She suggests,

The lack of such work does a particular disservice to women in a culture where the 'value' ascribed to them is so intrinsically tied up with youth, or accomplishing the illusion of it. In fact, we might say there is something of a parallel to be found, between the elision or invisibility of older women across many aspects of the media and public life, and their neglect within precisely

the critical fields which should be addressing this absence.(2012: 2).

Indeed, aside from feminist scholars Kathleen Woodward and Margaret Morganroth-Gullette, the absence of academic investigation is remarkable. Kathleen Woodward in her introduction to *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations* stated, 'In the humanities and the arts, aging is a subject that many believe holds little interest or relevance for them.' (Woodward 1999: xi) It would appear that little has changed until very recently. She goes on to suggest 'ageism is entrenched within feminism itself.' (Woodward 1999: xi). Here she notes that the preoccupations of second wave feminism tended to focus on issues that are associated with younger women. Indeed within existing feminist scholarship on media and cultural representations of women, there has been an assumption, often implicit, that these representations are reserved for the young. Youth oriented media has been and continues to be dominant. Josephine Dolan and Estella Tincknell in their book on ageing femininities suggest,

The stakes are now even higher than they were in 1999 when Woodward's crucial intervention into scholarship first appeared. In the context of an ageing demographic and of economic downturn, it becomes even more urgent for theorists to reshape these debates and to (figuratively) wrest the discourse of the aging body away from a return to essentialism.( Dolan and Tincknell 2012: ix).

Indeed, the need to reshape these debates is as pressing as Dolan and Tincknell suggest, especially in an era where appearance driven post-feminist discourses appear to be ever more dominant in the popular media. In order to provide an overview of the field of ageing and celebrity, it is necessary to explore how feminist scholarship has addressed ageing before going on to discuss more recent work that is focused on post-feminism, celebrity, social media and ageing.

Feminism has long critiqued the practice of treating women as a homogenous mass; and yet its own practices in relation to age belie this. It is reasonable to suggest that second wave feminists were largely preoccupied with earlier life issues such as motherhood, childcare, and equality in the workplace rather than issues

affecting women in older age, not least because many of the key personalities such as Germaine Greer were at the time young themselves. Age as a barrier, ageing representations in popular culture, and ageism in the media as a whole, have been largely ignored in feminist scholarship. The recent renewal of feminism in what has become known as the 'third wave', has continued this trend, tending to focus on the life choices of younger women.

Alongside this, the growth of post-feminist discourses which privilege makeover tropes, pseudo empowerment and objectification, reality television and celebrity culture has exploded in popularity, largely through formats that appear aimed at the young, such as social media and other online spaces. In this context, it appears vital that ageing becomes a point of focus for media and cultural theorists, so that we can begin to unpack the mixed messages, invisibility and often negative discourses that these formats espouse.

### **Celebrity Studies and Ageing**

There has been a growing number of scholarly interventions addressing the gendering of ageing in Western popular culture. (Fairclough 2012, Jermyn 2012, Dolan and Tincknell 2012) Recently this has centered on the mechanisms that surround the ageing celebrity, with a particular emphasis on female celebrities. Celebrities are constantly scrutinised and subject to surveillance in a culture that appears to regard female celebrities as lightning rods for a range of societal issues. Online gossip and social media have made the scrutiny of the ageing female celebrity its primary function; and ageing through the lens of celebrity culture has been routinely represented as either desirable (but only within narrow boundaries) or almost abject.

Representations of, and discourses surrounding, the female body in gossip culture and social media are deeply embedded in the currency of the gossip industry and are

particularly concerned with discourses of ageing. Scholars such as Meredith Jones (2008) have concluded that the pre-occupation in the media with ageing faces and bodies of celebrities has concentrated on women. Much of this is concerned with speculation surrounding ageing and scrutiny of the use, or not of cosmetic surgery. In this context, female celebrities appear to embody social and moral anxieties, particularly concerning ageing. In celebrity culture, to fail to age well is often considered a failure of femininity. Jones suggests, 'While youth is privileged and is associated with sexuality, independence, beauty and productivity, ageing is degraded as frail, useless, unattractive and dependent' (Jones 2008: 85).

It is clear that the mass media is profoundly ageist in its attitudes to women. Older men by contrast can often maintain long and successful careers, ageing without the negative treatment by the media. From broadcasters, and presenters, to Hollywood film stars, men are allowed to age in the media and in celebrity culture. But they are not completely free from scrutiny. The majority of gossip centered around famous men clusters around their denial of the ageing process. They are closely scrutinised for attempting to hide signs of ageing, particularly hair loss; whereas women are routinely maligned if they *fail* to hide the signs of ageing. Indeed popular culture is able to accept, even celebrate an ageing man, but it is quite the opposite in relation to women.

There has been little scholarly intervention into the representations of the ageing man from a celebrity studies standpoint. The work in existence is largely based on examining the ageing male Hollywood star and his performances. (Holmlund 2010, Feasey 2012) It appears that scholars are slowly turning their gaze towards ageing as a fundamental aspect of the celebrity apparatus, examining how both male and female celebrities are represented. It should be noted that much of this analysis is also centered on white celebrities and their ageing narratives. It is interesting that the field has seldom explored issues of ethnicity and age, or within that varieties of ethnicity. Ageing Black women are largely invisible in these discourses. Celebrity culture and its associated gossip discourses remains heavily weighted towards to the scrutiny of white women. The few examples of Black female celebrities that do appear in mainstream celebrity gossip are often praised for ageing well, such as

global media brand Oprah Winfrey and singer Tina Turner. The discourses surrounding famous black women are quite different, particularly in gossip culture in that the scrutiny appears to be less vitriolic. Oprah Winfrey for example is often held up as the epitome of tasteful ageing. Winfrey appears to embrace the beauty and joy in growing older and is routinely praised for this approach in the mass media. There is much left to be investigated by celebrity culture scholars regarding ethnicity, celebrity and ageing.

What is clear is that celebrity culture positions women in a seemingly endless and open-ended process of re-inventing the self, providing sites to negotiate this self through evaluating celebrities and their lifestyle choices and ageing narratives. As Anthony Elliott suggests 'Celebrity culture speaks directly on certain basic concerns to do with body, ageing and desire-managing, as it does now, to dismantle dramatically the traditional notion that one looks older as one biologically ages' (Elliott 2008: 63). Indeed, it is the deeply gerontophobic media and current anxieties around older women that has driven the fear of ageing that is now so deeply ingrained in celebrity culture.

Indeed, the age narrative is a central narrative in gossip culture where the perpetual discussion of the age of female celebrities and whether their behaviour, lifestyle and look is 'age appropriate' feeds an increasingly dichotomized account of femininity. Julie Wilson in her analysis of the uses of celebrity gossip magazines suggests that 'Celebrity magazines invite readers to engage in processes called "star testing" and in doing so, double as a dispersed and distinctly post-feminist technology of governing women in the context of neo-liberalism' (Wilson 2010: 26.) For Wilson, star testing involves celebrity gossip aimed at 'younger and hipper' female audiences, which functions as a 'centre for the development of appropriately gendered selves' (Wilson, 30). Whilst celebrity magazines do indeed operate in this manner for this demographic, it is not too far a leap to suggest that the online celebrity gossip industry now functions in a much wider way to cultivate and maintain acceptable ways of living for a wider age group. Celebrity gossip and magazines have become so ubiquitous that they operate as a subtle and complex

form of social control, where making the 'correct' choices or not means that all women are mapped onto narratives of celebrity and are judged accordingly.

### **Social Media and Ageing**

The gossip industry, which traditionally operated through the print media, now has an additional, powerful and immediate mechanism through which it can scrutinise the ageing celebrity. Social media are now central to much of this scrutiny, and yet again it is the female image that receives the most attention. Celebrities are able to 'fight back' directly against the hyper-scrutiny of their ageing process through mechanisms such as Twitter, which is used by celebrities to build direct relationships with their fans and to present 'authentic' versions of themselves. Many of these selves are carefully staged and developed by managers and publicists who are engaged in constructing their employer's online presence. However, many celebrities now tweet themselves. Some have found that Twitter is a social networking site that needs to be used with caution; a number have been the targets of particularly misogynistic abuse. Hollywood star Kim Novak has most recently been the target of this online abuse due to her appearance at the Oscars in March 2014, where she was widely criticised for her use of cosmetic surgery. Turning to Facebook herself to attempt to silence her critics.

([http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx\\_factor/2014/04/21/kim\\_novak\\_answers\\_the\\_oscar\\_snarkers.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2014/04/21/kim_novak_answers_the_oscar_snarkers.html))

In Novak's case what was clearly present across social media was the consistent discussion of the 'appropriateness' of the ageing female celebrity. Here women are regularly placed in categories according to chronology. It is this 'correct and proper' approach to the fight against ageing that pervades much of the gossip industry, in conjunction with advertising images, television and other media which present ways to become like the celebrity and to 'overcome' the signs of ageing or to look 'ageless'.

### **Postfeminism and Age Narratives**

Gossip culture is linked to a post feminist discourse that runs deeply through popular media. Examining mainstream gossip magazines and blogs quickly reveals that a feminist voice is largely absent, in favour of the surge of post-feminist discourse which encourages women to 'empower' themselves by engaging in celebrity gossip. Tasker and Negra (2007) and Negra (2009) suggest that post feminism continually promotes empowerment but on closer inspection of its emotional touchstones it reveals a harsh sense of disapproval and judgment for any demonstrations of what Negra terms 'off-script femininity'. This is particularly evident when considering temporal issues. Tasker and Negra in *Interrogating Post feminism*, one of the key texts on postfeminism and popular culture suggest,

Post feminism evidences a distinct preoccupation with the temporal- women's lives are regularly conceived of as time-starved, women themselves are overworked, rushed, harassed, subject to their 'biological clocks', etc to such a degree that female adulthood is defined as a state of chronic temporal crisis. (Tasker and Negra 2007: 10).

Indeed, these temporal problems are perceived as 'fixable' only through engaging in a post-feminist, essentialist version of femininity, in which most of these problems can be solved by bodily technologies and procedures. The gossip industry encourages a micro-scrutiny of the female ageing body through social media in which no aspect of physical appearance can be left unattended, but must always be subject to 'making-over'.

It is not new to suggest that ageing as represented in popular culture is linked to a range of negative meanings associated with decay and invisibility. In popular culture the older female body is particularly vilified. Meredith Jones in her work on cosmetic surgery and popular culture addresses the ways in which cosmetic surgery aims to make all women adhere to a particular beauty norm, which maintains the mask of femininity. Jones suggests, 'These standards particularly relate to female celebrities, whose high visibility in the public sphere is tolerated only so long as they allow men (movie directors, fashion photographers, cosmetic surgeons) to frame, position and remake their bodies' (Jones 2008: 21). Jones goes on to suggest that the notion of the monstrous, grotesque older woman has a special place in the cosmetic surgery



world and that celebrities are 'the special agents of an abject, hybrid otherness that cosmetic surgery- as an emerging technology- requires to make itself legitimate.'(Jones, 2008 107) Here she suggests these monstrous figures must exist in order for the 'new natural' to be legitimised.

As scholars such as Negra (2009) and Jones (2008) have suggested, ageing is configured in contemporary media, particularly in online gossip and social media as a narcissistic problem, not a fate that is universal. To draw attention to ageing and older people in popular culture is to recognise mortality and to face life's inevitable conclusion. Older people are not routinely visible in popular culture, but they are present in the background, as a seemingly uncomfortable reminder to a celebrity obsessed, transformation focused popular media that there is actually no successful way to fight it. Yet, we are constantly bombarded with suggested ways to overcome this process through advertising, marketing, the visibility of youthful older people in celebrity culture and through the promotion of a lifestyle trajectory that suggests there is no need to succumb to old age anymore, as the technologies exist to stave it off, or at least keep it at bay. The abject dread of ageing is hidden, or at least allayed, by the escapist and wish fulfillment narratives played out in cinema, on television and within advertising, which promotes both the fear of ageing and the 'magical' products to dispel it.

Julia Twigg argues,

Consumer culture is quintessentially youth culture in that it presents and promotes youthfulness as the ideal; and this has profound consequences for how we experience aging in high- or postmodernity. The bodies featured in the media are never old; and the emphasis on perfectionism and the visible eradication of age is reinforced in the growing industry of age denial. Consumer culture is increasingly targeted on those in their middle and later years, particularly those with money and leisure to consume, but a large part of its activity is concerned with selling of youth and youthfulness. (Twigg 2004, 61)

Indeed, ageing bodies are suffused with cultural meaning and reflect deeply inscribed cultural attitudes. It is clear that youth is privileged in contemporary

society and its roots are deeply woven into culture, where there is an almost obsessive need to hold onto markers of youth as long as possible; to the point that individuals are either seen as belonging to one of two categories, either young or old. It would seem that youth now appears to stretch out farther into middle age than ever before. Holmlund argues,

Today, moreover, middle age increasingly matters. With 78 million people in the US aged 44–62, Internet and print marketing, movies, television and more tout rejuvenation through Botox, steroids, plastic surgery and wardrobe/cosmetic make-overs. Hollywood stars and celebrities point us towards a brave new world where mature adulthood is seen primarily in chronological, biological and medical terms (2010,96).

As discussed earlier, the female celebrity is perhaps the most visible site where some of these tensions, surrounding ageing, femininity and the body are played out. Here, the overriding trope is one of the suspension of time in order to maintain currency in celebrity culture. Age anxieties are intrinsic to the gossip industry, there is a consistent focus on discourses of age, whether it be if a celebrity is behaving in an age-appropriate way, how they dress for their age and if and how well they stave off the ageing process by participating in cosmetic surgery technologies. Sadie Wearing suggests, 'Ageing in post-feminist culture seems marked by both a gesturing toward utopian desires to transcend time and chronology evident in makeover paradigms and a concurrent tendency to emphasise time, chronology and generational (and sexual) difference' (Wearing in Tasker and Negra 2007: 298). Indeed, what must also be considered the key focus of the gossip industry in post feminist culture is the consistent discussion of the 'appropriateness' of the female celebrity in terms of their age, situating women in categories according to chronology. It is this 'correct and proper' approach to fighting ageing that pervades much of the gossip industry in conjunction with advertising images, television and other media which present ways to become like the celebrity and 'overcome' the signs of ageing or to look 'ageless'. In her article on performing age and gender, Kathleen Woodward points to this overriding negative association with ageing in western culture. Woodward explores what she terms 'the youthful structure of the look' which exhorts us to pass for younger once we reach a certain age. She explains,

In our mass-mediated society, age and gender structure each other in a complex set of reverberating feedback loops, conspiring to render the older female body paradoxically both hyper visible and invisible. It would seem that the wish of our visual culture is to erase the older female body from view. (Woodward 2006, 163).

This hyper-visibility of the older female body is evident in gossip culture, it is treated as disgusting and ugly unless it has been modified 'correctly' by cosmetic surgery, or is considered hyper-feminine and associated with glamour. Older famous women, such as, Sophia Loren and Raquel Welch are repeatedly held up as the epitome of older glamour. They are associated with a nostalgic notion of femininity, firmly linked to their places in Classical Hollywood. There are a number of stars and celebrities who have already gained a cultural currency as 'sexier older women'; they all appear much younger and apparently engage in cosmetic surgery techniques in order to maintain their looks. Women such as Joan Collins, Meryl Streep, Andie McDowell, Christie Brinkley and Jane Seymour all exude markers of hyper-femininity, and regularly appear in celebrity culture as women who are considered 'appropriately' feminine. Woodward's assessment of the older female body certainly holds true when examined through gossip culture. These women are hyper-visible, and many are linked to the promotion of consumer products that exhort how to maintain a youthful look. Vituperative representations of ageing women in post-feminist gossip culture emphasise the need for continual reinvention. This discourse supports the notion that prescriptive management of the ageing process will provide a means to ostensibly rescue the self. Women are taught to internalise temporal constraints and only through a variety of prescriptive cosmetic technologies will they be able to defy time.

### **Celebrity, Reality Television and Ageing**

Reality television is now a staple of the televisual landscape and has grown exponentially since the early days of *Big Brother*. Reality television as a genre is now wide in scope, but is always connected to discourses of celebrity whether it is celebrity reality TV or television talent and reality game shows that routinely produce celebrities from the general public. It is now responsible for the making,

breaking and resurrecting of celebrity careers. Women are usually focussed on in reality television, whether they are famous or not, for their looks. This often become a key talking point in peripheral discourses in the tabloids and in online gossip. More so if the participants are celebrities. There is little scholarly work that is focussed on reality television and ageing. However, Brenda Weber has recently considered the notion of what she terms utopic infantile celebrity. This is the idea that the youthful body confers dividends in terms of fame. The celebrity that is bestowed upon members of the public through the mechanisms of reality weight-loss shows such as *The Biggest Loser* (2004 -present), the more precarious the terms of that fame are. Weber states, 'Utopic infantile celebrity fissures, however, in matters of age and biological motherhood, since its promises of youthful possibility are restricted to those whose large bodies have blocked hetero-normative romance and childbirth rather than those who have already experienced it.' (Weber 2012:65) Weber's essay elucidates the fragile terms of reality-celebrity. The 'made over' individual is given the responsibility of representing the ways in which ageing can be eluded and how the actual chronological age is less significant than what is often termed the 'real' age. This refers to the age of the actual overweight body that can almost be reversed due to the weight loss and makeover during the course of the series. In this context, this is configured as hugely aspirational and offers the promise of a better life due to the 'successful' management of their ageing process. There are interesting gender issues in relation to representations of ageing celebrity in reality television. Famous women in reality television are subject to scrutiny as has become the norm more widely in popular culture. They are presented in an environment where the audience sees the 'real' signs of ageing in programmes such as *Big Brother* and the UK's *I'm A Celebrity Get Me Out Of Here!* (ITV). The harsh environment that is mostly stripped of the staples of television production, professional lighting and make up, cannot help but present the celebrity warts and all. Celebrities are stripped bare and often look so different than their usual camera-ready image. It seems that men are subject to similar ridicule in this environment. In a programme such as *I'm A Celebrity Get Me Out Of Here!* a number of those cast are often older, typically over 50, men routinely classed as 'has-beens', whose star and career has faded over time. The show is a popular choice for many such men as it allows massive exposure after long

periods out of the limelight. Naturally, there is curiosity on the part of the public as to how these celebrities look. Yet despite the huge popularity of these programmes, the scholarly area of reality television, celebrity and ageing is very much in its infancy, but as the focus has shifted within celebrity studies to a focus on ageing, there is much yet to explore in terms of reality TV and the representations of ageing within it.

## **Conclusion**

Analysis of the ageing celebrity is opening up the field to consider what ageing might mean for the celebrity and their image, for popular understandings of the celebrity and how celebrity might impact upon popular ideas about ageing itself. Superficially it appears that representations of ageing in popular culture are affirming the newly increased visibility of older people. Yet in reality they continue to be largely regressive and negative. It remains the task of media and cultural theorists to address these representations, and to find ways of challenging a deeply gerontophobic popular media. Recent scholarship has made some positive interventions into the analysis of ageing, culture and the media but there is clearly some way to go.

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