

Researching Women, Ageing and Media: Developing the WAM Manifesto

In 2007 a group of British based academics working at the universities of Gloucestershire, West of England and York secured an Arts and Humanities Research Council Networking Grant in order to bring together scholars and practitioners from across the globe to study the relationship between older women as consumers, producers and subjects of popular media.

One of the innovative features of the networking project was to link academics from different cultural and intellectual backgrounds and to position emerging research on 'older women' in media and cultural studies alongside the established research in healthcare policy, gerontology, economics, social care etc.

This process brought together scholars and practitioners from across Europe, the United States and Africa. In the mix were young and old; experienced academics and those just starting out. A series of four workshops and an international conference formed the basis for future research by defining the field and scoping new areas for research.

The network was cited by the Arts and Humanities Research Council as an example of academic impact and the successful completion of the initial network project led first to the foundation of the collaborative Research Centre for Women, Ageing and Media (WAM) at the University of Gloucestershire (founded in 2010) and subsequently links formed at this stage led to WAM's involvement in the formation of the European Network in Aging Studies (ENAS) which had its inaugural launch in 2011 and where two members of WAM (myself and Josephine Dolan) sit on its steering committee.

As a unit, WAM is a research group consisting of 7 female scholars (aged between early 30s and early 60s) who are working together to explore a range of research themes focusing on older women and popular media forms (digital technologies, film, popular music and television).

So what have we found?

Basically, as we already knew from the literature base, existing academic studies and cultural policy work on ageing are dominated by knowledge created in the areas of healthcare, gerontology, economics, social care and sociology and WAM's research has enhanced this knowledge base by bringing cultural criticism to bear in order to analyze and make visible the ideologically powerful sphere of the representational.

As Ulla Krieberegg (one of our collaborative partners from the University of Graz in Austria) noted when addressing the ENAS inaugural conference, *Theorizing Age: Challenging the Disciplines* (Maastricht, Netherlands, 2011): 'just like music, film or literary texts, scientific anti-ageing research policy documents need to be analyzed as cultural texts in order to expose predominant cultural narratives. And as active cultural critics, we have to engage in interdisciplinary scientific projects in order to re-

frame the binary constructs of "young" and "old". WAM is currently involved in several funding bids which are seeking funding to do this.

Within the representational sphere, issues of gender, sexuality, race, identity and subjectivity have surfaced as the most significant strands of enquiry in our research in relation to debates focussing on the power dimensions, role and representation of women on film, on television and in popular music performance.

Many of the debates within the WAM workshops and the conferences that we have been involved with, have returned consistently to the theme of the lack of positive images and role models for women who are ageing. Even more crucially, however, debate has focussed on the lack of diversity in available representations of older women.

In mainstream media forms, representations of actual older women and also their fictional representations have tended to reduce them either to negative stereotypes (which act as a cultural warning to younger women of the traumas of ageing for women – often manipulating ideas of disgust or fear) or to functions such as care givers (rather than rounded human beings). With a few notable exceptions aside, dominant filmic representations of older women concentrate either on images of successful/'youthful' ageing or on narratives of decline and decay where older women's bodies are abject, scary and 'leaky'. Additionally, the theme of postmenopausal desire is nearly always problematic (either the object of humour or pity – or both).

As Abigail Gardner and I have argued (2012): 'Although Western societies are currently coming to a deeper realization of the probable economic, medical and health care impact of the massive demographic shift related to increasing human longevity, there is still relatively little understanding of the cultural identity formations that accompany such a change" (p.2). Even when ageing **is** received more positively in the media it tends to conform to a range of narrow and limited representations.

Research published so far by WAM (the collections, *Ageing femininities: troubling representations* (Dolan and Tincknell eds, 2012) and *Rock On: Women, Ageing and Popular Music* (Jennings and Gardner eds, 2012) suggest that what dominates media forms are actresses, presenters, performers and celebrity personalities who are either lauded as models of successful/ 'youthful ageing' or who are the unregulated objects of 'body snarking' if they present themselves in contrary or transgressive ways (Joanne Garde-Hansen and Kristyn Gorton's forthcoming article for *Feminist Media Studies* on Madonna explores the horrific extent to which online media trolling treats the subject of her ageing body and supposedly age inappropriate behaviour with disgust and hatred).

If the notions of so-called successful ageing in the media are linked to active ageing rather than cosmetic youthful ageing, then I have fewer problems with this but the extent to which this is promoted as one of the only valid ways for women to age ignores the real material constraints placed on many women's ability to do this due to poverty (particularly in the current economic climate).

My own work on older women in popular music stresses that 'ageing for women within contemporary western culture is fraught with representative difficulty – ageing in "public" brings with it specific challenges for women' (2012, p.6) because, even in so-called progressive western societies, girls and women are still not valued for who they are but for what they look like.

Furthermore, in an age of consumerist-driven post-feminism, women are being literally as well as ideologically, sold the delusion of successful ageing and therefore also simultaneously shackled to a lifetime's work of aspiring to something that the majority will never achieve.

Coupled with this is also the reality that for many women, where ties to an idealized youthful heterosexual femininity are a strong platform for identity, this is still something that is often too uncomfortable to reflect on too deeply.

In taking a broadly feminist and cultural studies approach, WAM are aware that the many public expressions of ageing in the West (such as in a proliferation of representations of old age in the news media and popular media forms such as film and television) are highly instrumental in the formulation of superficial and limited views of ageing and old age (lacking awareness of diversity and in-depth engagements with everyday cultural encounters/experiences).

These understandings and representations are also highly instrumental in the formulation of intergenerational misunderstandings and divisions, where flows of knowledge, creativity, emotional and economic resources become popularly conceived of as flowing in one direction only, from young to old. Policy makers seem to remind us daily that we are faced with a ticking social and economic time bomb caused by the changing demographic to an ageing population – and that the young will pay for this. At the same time the contributions of women and especially older women to society are neither sufficiently recognized nor welcomed (in the current UK economic climate the role of grandmothers in childcare cannot be underestimated).

Current research taking place at WAM questions this model of one directional flow by exploring issues of intergenerationality, creativity, identities (kinship, individual, community, national and international) in relation not only to representations, but to experiences, practices and also investments in popular cultural forms such as film, music, television and digital forms of media communication such as *Facebook* and *Skype*.

So where does this take us? Current research tells us that most women are pressurized by the media and celebrity culture into trying to hang on to various versions of youthful femininity as they age.

But while this is the dominant picture, it is important to recognize that some women in the media refuse to surrender completely to the force of dominant stereotypes and have developed strategies to challenge them. There are also pleasures to be found in relation to existing representations and performances of older women in the media, even if they, in true feminist tradition, have to be read against the grain (for instance,

WAM Research Fellow, Eva Krainitzki's recent doctoral thesis which argues that the later life roles of Judi Dench can offer specific lesbian viewing pleasures).

Within the sphere of popular music, for instance, my research suggests that Shirley Bassey has tackled the shaping force of youthful femininity by tackling it head on. In her BBC Electric Prom, broadcast from London's Roundhouse, 23rd October 2009, my analysis suggests that Bassey's ageing is not produced as trauma but as a rich experience incorporating deliberate performance strategies of screening Bassey's own youthful images as backdrop against her live older self and her most contemporary repertoire against her hits accumulated over 50 years (Jennings, 2012).

As the images that I am presenting illustrate, she is not the sylph-like figure of her early career but she has the realistic figure of a woman who works hard to stay fit and is happy of what she has achieved. Hers is a well-managed body but not one (so frequently circulated in the western media) of unrealistic perfection.

The inevitable 'bingo wings' (which are the natural concomitant of age for the average older women, and the stick with which older actresses, celebrities, presenters and performers are publicly beaten) are not disguised or covered. The audience is asked to compare her current and previous body and her current and previous music and she is blatantly unapologetic about both/ all these factors.

Running the workshops, conferences and summer schools as part of WAM's research programme has had a profound personal effect on me. In particular it has made me re-encounter and reformulate my relationship with a more hard line feminism than I have espoused for some time.

Encountering the emotion, the eloquence, the fear and the anger that has been in the room when groups of female academics and practitioners have debated women, ageing and media has taken me back to my first encounters with feminism in the women's groups of the 1970s and 80s.

The need, in these academic settings, to share, question, rail against and challenge distorted, negative and limited representations of women in general, and older women in particular, has generated consistent demands for a more 'back to basics' feminism than has been articulated recently in media and cultural studies (for instance what will the current pornification of younger women lead to in terms of later life representations and identities?).

Until recently, ageing and older women have constituted a blind spot in recent academic feminism (where its attention has been on pre-menopausal women and young women especially).

Close to home in the academy, the 2007/8 economic downturn has begun to have an unexpected effect with many older women taking redundancy as the burden of the financial challenges for universities in this country begin to hit hard. There is

therefore the danger that the voice of the experienced older woman will also lessen in academic discourse.

At the end of the July 2012 WAM Summer School, there was a call from the participants for WAM to move beyond simple cultural criticism to become more activist and to generate a WAM manifesto for action based on the significant issues that are being raised in research carried out in relation to women, ageing and media.

To conclude, I leave you with its first public articulation.

Colleagues working together as part of WAM's collaborative research group demand that:

1. The academy and the public sector recognize, address, challenge and refuse misogyny directed at older women in the media and public life.
2. The media should aspire to more diversity in representations of old age than the dominant consumerist notions of ageing for women in public currently do.
3. Issues of class race, non-normative sexualities and materiality need to be recognized and responded to in relation to older women, both in academic work on representation and in public policy.
4. Older women need to be at the centre of debates to discuss their own identities, their own lives and the policies governing them.
5. Ageing studies need to produce research that explores intergenerationality as a means for old and young to work together in their diversities to produce real world outcomes and incremental change.
6. Research on women, ageing and media should be recognized as a form of activism that strives to empower women and older women in particular, by demanding that a wider range of older women should be more visible in all areas of the media and media representation.

References:

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