

Amerikastudien/American Studies Special Issue Age Studies (56.1 2011)

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The essays presented in this edition of *Amerikastudien/American Studies* address the cultural presence of old age in the United States and its representation in different media. Working from different conceptual premises or disciplinary backgrounds, critics from the United States and Germany discuss how US culture constitutes a framework of discursive practices and also provides a vocabulary in which the problems of the elderly emerge, are constructed, (mis-)represented, or even silenced.

The critical analysis of old age is not simply new grist for our interpretive mills in literary and cultural studies; instead, we hope to enhance the awareness of how the process of disciplining the aging and aged—and this would include a Cultural Studies disciplining of age—is always incomplete and of how the process of the production of knowledge is one in which both knowledge and its limits are coming up for deliberation. With regard to the issue at hand here, the 'coming of age,' we suggest that we take these limitations not so much as lacunae, blind spots inside the field of knowledge about old age waiting to be 'filled,' but as a significant/signifying lack that characterizes the presence of age and the aged in our culture and turns them into truly 'impossible objects.'

The essays collected here take up the critical analysis of old age and aging from the perspective of such different media as photography, film, autobiographical narrative, and the novel, drawing attention to their respective representational politics. Rüdiger Kunow identifies in his opening essay a number of areas where 'old age' as a name for human life in time, as a cultural script, a biomedical condition, and a social-political status, can enter productively into a conversation with American studies. Heike Hartung focuses on the representative possibilities of

narrative fiction for depicting aging. In a comparative reading of American and English novels she probes the limits of development as they are delineated in contemporary rewritings of the *Bildungsroman* genre as well as in the metaphoric functions of representing dementia. Christoph Ribbat examines the supposedly marginalizing effect photographic portraiture has on the construction of old age. He questions this through close readings of images by Richard Avedon and Fazal Sheikh, arguing that their representations in fact transcend the problematic nature of the normative gaze. Nathan Carlin and Thomas R. Cole are also concerned with the visual representation of age, focusing on film as an iconic and narrative commentary on aging celebrities. They present a case study examining the movie *The Wrestler* and the way aging bodies are presented in the movie (fiction) as well as in the movie business ('real life') in Hollywood. Kate de Medeiros' essay analyzes several pieces of narrative from different elderly participants of self-stories workshops which took place over a course of eight years. The concept of "self stories" is an approach whereby instead of creating a single grand life narrative, participants bring together small, sometimes divergent and unrelated moments from their past, thus constructing their identities.