CHAPTER 9

Images of Aging: Cultural Representations of Later Life

Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth

INTRODUCTION: GLOBAL IMAGES

Why do we need to study images of ageing? In part it is a result of living in societies in which images can be readily reproduced to circulate in public and private life. In many areas of the contemporary world, it is hard to avoid images of youthful, fit and beautiful bodies of ten associated with idealized representations of a consumer lifestyle. These images are now global as even a cursory glance at the Internet quickly reveals. At the same time these consumer lifestyle ideals are accompanied by negative images of overweight and sickly bodies, those people we encounter in public spaces in the mall and street whose bodies have somehow betrayed them. Older people are often included in the latter category and in ageist stereotypes are caricatured as frail, forgetful, shabby, out-of-date and on the edge of senility and death. In a number of countries, campaigns have recently been mounted to counteract such negative images of older people; in Denmark, for example, explicit efforts are being made to confront the caricature of the older people as negative and outdated. In Australia, the government of Victoria has provided $50,000 to promote positive images of older men and women not in terms of the youthfulness of their external appearance but in celebration of their continuing contribution to social life—one billboard in Melbourne, Australia, urged readers to "Look past the wrinkles." The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (2002) included images of ageing as part of the promotion of a new plan of action to promote more positive attitudes towards older people.

Such counter images of positive ageing are increasingly evident and it is also clear that the various attempts to redefine the meaning of old age over the last twenty years occur within a changing social context. We all live in a world growing older: in the United States it is expected that the proportion of people

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over 65 will double to 70 million by 2030 (Seabrook 2004:7). In Britain, the
visibility of old people increased dramatically with the number of prisoners ris-
ing from 6 percent to 18 percent over the course of the twentieth century. Yet
if we consider the question of ageing on a global level, it is clear that global-
ization and the expansion of the neo-liberal market economy is producing a
range of differential effects. We cannot assume that all countries and govern-
ments will have the resources to follow the same solutions proposed in the
West. Will the image of the pensioner or senior citizen able to look forward to
a consumer lifestyle retirement apply around the world? Images of ageing can-
not be easily detached from the politics and economics of ageing.

SOCIAL GERONTOLOGY

In this changing and diverse social context there is an increasing tendency in
gerontology to acknowledge the importance of images of ageing. An indication
of broader changes in the interpretation of the ageing process can be found in
Blaikie's analysis of representations of ageing in popular culture (1999). In this
text the author shows how evidence of significant transformations in social atti-
tudes towards ageing and retirement can be found in images of ageing in pho-
tographs, films, popular fiction and the media.

It is therefore not surprising that the study of images of ageing has gradu-
ally moved from a marginal position in social gerontology to occupy a more
central position in discipline. Several examples can be cited: Shuichi Wada's
study of the image and status of older people in Japan (1995); the analysis by
Hummel, Rey and Lalive D'Epinay (1995) of the images produced by chil-
dren in an international competition, "Draw your grandma," which involved
children aged 6–14 years in thirty-three different countries; and Kaid and Gar-
ner's work (2004) on the portrayal of older adults in political advertising in
America. In the UK, one of the key textbooks on ageing by Bond, Coleman
and Peace, includes a chapter by the authors of this article on "Images of
Ageing" (1993).

This tendency reflects the contemporary global understanding that the ageing
process cannot be adequately explained solely in biological and medical terms
but is an interactive process involving social and cultural factors. From a bio-
medical perspective the ageing process after midlife is seen to be one of
decline into a dependent old age, but the alternative view of ageing as a com-
plex process of interaction between biological, psychological and social factors
has resulted in a more sustained interrogation of medical and policy-based
models of ageing, calling for an enlarged awareness of the ageing process as
lived experience which individuals and groups endow with specific meanings.
If the quality of later life is to be improved, it is argued, not only are medical
improvements necessary but people's attitudes towards the ageing process and
old age must be changed. This concern, as the examples briefly quoted above
show, has directed attention to images used to represent the process of ageing
into old age.

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WHAT ARE IMAGES?

How do we understand images? Who produces images and how are they dis-seminated? What is the relationship between images and the everyday world of lived experience? And how do we evaluate the potential for the reform of images in a more positive anti-ageist direction? What are the main directions of global flows of images around the world today?

On its most basic level an image is seen as a representation or copy of the original reality, as found, for example, in certain types of paintings, statues and photographs which aim to present an accurate likeness or "living image" of the human models. The impetus here is to produce valid documentary evidence of the person, as, for example, in a photograph of Queen Victoria in later life. Yet, as this reference to a royal and remote personage suggests, an image can also mean not so much an accurate copy or imitation of the actual individual but rather an impression, or incomplete rendition governed by interpretive and imaginative framing—something intended to reveal essential features of the persona, which are not evident in a superficial glance, or the preoccupation with an accurate recording of external appearance. A photograph of a famous older person may therefore be seen as an interpretation of the essential inner character of an individual which has been artfully constructed for public dis-play. Other examples of such images of historical celebrities in later life include Gandhi, Albert Schweitzer, Einstein and Mother Theresa. It is the interplay between these two interpretations of the term "image" (copy and impression) which leads to disputes over the distortion of an image in which the accuracy, imaginative input and representativeness are subjected to close scrutiny as in the question: "what was Queen Victoria 'really' like in old age?" (Rennell 2001). A further interpretation of an image as a mental impression refers to a representation deriving from any of the senses, including sound impressions, touch and smell. But it is the impact of the visual which the phrase "images of ageing most frequently connotes, and in the discussion in this chapter "images of ageing" refers to the public representations of older people in a visually and age-conscious society.

IMAGES, THE BODY AND THE SELF

Behind the public image of ageing are, of course, the "lived bodies" of indi-viduals who carry embodied memories. As Rennell (2001) shows, the widely publicized image of Queen Victoria as the grandmother of her people was in sharp contrast to the lived reality of her later life where not even her closest physician was allowed access to her ageing body. A similar example can be found in the concealment of the paralysis of the American President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The "lived body" of ageing points to the way in which our iden-tities are embodied and formed not just through internal biological and psycho-logical changes, but through encounters with other bodies in direct face-to-face communication, or perceived more indirectly as when we look at someone

across the street. As human beings, we experience a double aspect to our existence: our embodied identities work through both seeing (subjective perception) and also being seen by others.

In contemporary Western culture the dominant message is that a positive perception of the body is central to the way the body functions and performs. The perception of the body's functioning, health and outer appearance is formed in a social and cultural context which has two dimensions. It is firstly, predominantly, governed by the visual: a medium in which judgments (both positive and negative) are constantly made in the daily social interactions with others who can feedback positive and negative evaluations of the body. Secondly, it is a context in which we not only look at and are looked at by others, but in which we are confronted in our daily lives by countless images of the human body in the media and elsewhere.

In addition to the multitude of human images which can be found in paintings, drawings, statues, photographs, television, the cinema and the new digital media, there is the more fluid notion of body self-image (Ferguson 1997). This double sense of image—the image depicted and recorded in various visual media and the notion that our self-image is linked to our body images—suggests that the formation of our own body image and self-image take place in a cultural context in which images cannot be seen as transparent and neutral. Our perception of our own bodies is mediated by the direct and tacit judgments of others in interactions and our own reflexive judgments of their view, compounded by what we think we see in the mirror. Through this reflexive process we are guided by our culture to react emotionally and evaluate the relationship between public and self-images in ways which become habitual and taken for granted. In this way we learn different ways of seeing and assessing the repertoire of positive and negative body images and ways of looking at human bodies in different cultures. Every image of a human being is effectively an image of ageing, given that it provides a representation of the face and body which is of a person at a particular point on a chronological time scale and therefore immediately marked in terms of linear age. But our bodies do not just age in time, in tune with the mechanisms of some inner biological clock, but are "aged by culture" (Gullette 2004). The fact that we have "cultured bodies," therefore, suggests that our bodies are never just biomedical entities but are perceived through a cultural matrix in which the visible signs of the ageing of the body are not only externally displayed but have become regarded as manifestations of what is regarded in the Western tradition as a process of decline and loss.

IMAGES OF AGING IN SOCIAL GERONTOLOGY

Visual representations of later life occur widely in the history of Western art. David Lowenthal's study of memory, history and changing attitudes towards the past (1985) includes a chapter on "The look of age" where he discusses the tendency in Western culture to value the appearance of ageing in objects (antique

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buildings, furniture, etc.) much more highly than the appearance of age in human beings. Antique objects age "gracefully" whilst human beings pass into a state of "decline." The idea that many people in Western culture find the external signs of human ageing displeasing or a source of disgust (Elias 1985) is persistent and well documented, but it is not simply a question of the disgust provoked by the external appearance of age as such—negative attitudes towards ageing extend beyond surface appearances to include attitudes towards the basic fact of chronological age. A good example is the celebration of the birthday in cards and other numerical markers of time passing.

As noted above, one of the central themes in the gerontological analysis of images of ageing in Western culture is the pervasive nature of negative or ageist images and the importance of replacing this ageist tradition with more positive images celebrating old age as a valued period of the lifecourse. As Bytheway (1995) shows, ageism is closely associated with a particular form of collective social imagery which ignores the diversity of individual experiences of ageing and lumps all older people together under a limited range of social categories. In his book, he compiles a record of visual and verbal images of ageism in order to show how deeply embedded they are in popular culture and their influence over our attitude towards older people. His examples include advertisements, cartoons, photographs, greeting cards and photographs of older people in care. Another striking example of the analysis of ageist imagery is detailed research by Warnes (1993) into the origins of the word "burden" and the ways in which it has become negatively associated with later life in the popular media and in political pronouncements about the "burden of old age" in contemporary society. As Warnes shows, this dismissive interpretation of old age is a social construction, reflecting negative beliefs and attitudes about old age rather than any valid objective evidence concerning the quality of life of older people or their ability to make a positive contribution to society. The experience of old age is thus shaped not simply by processes of biological change but through the power of the image of "burden" to shape our perceptions of growing older.

Ageism, then, refers to a process of collective stereotyping which emphasizes the negative features of ageing which are ultimately traced back to biomedical "decline," rather than the culturally determined value placed on later life. This interpretation of growing older has been described by Gullette (1997), who has carried out extensive research into images of ageing in fiction, as the "decline narrative." The "decline narrative" defines middle age (a period which begins around the age of 50) as the point of "entrance" into a physical decline which continues relentlessly into old age and death. Gullette (1985) shows, in her detailed analysis of cultural intersections between fictional and non-fictional literature on ageing, how this idea has become firmly fixed in the social imagination of later life.

Whilst the central concern of gerontologists with images of ageing continues to involve a critical engagement with evidence of ageism, a number of recent developments have added a layer of theoretical sophistication to this area of study.

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SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Social constructionism provides a critique of the "decline narrative" and the ways in which old age is "naturalized" and fixed, by conceptualizing ageing as a cultural category (Hockey and James 2003). It argues that the prejudice against later life, which the existing power balances operating in social and cultural life have helped to construct, can always be progressively reconstructed. A good example of this process is the effort which has been made to create active images of retirement as a dynamic phase of the lifecourse, in contrast to traditional images of retirement as a passive disengagement from social life and removal into a world represented by the "retirement uniform" prescribed for both women and men (Featherstone and Hepworth 1995).

Another example of the influence of images of ageing on our interpretation of biomedical change is found in Gubrium's (1986) analysis of the processes involved in the social construction of Alzheimer's disease in America. In this research into the difficult issue of determining the origins of signs of confusion in older people, Gubrium shows how images of Alzheimer's disease in, for example, poetry written by caregivers (a popular image is that of Alzheimer's as a "thief" who steals self) are used by carers to make sense of the identity changes that have taken place in suffering relatives. The changes in social and verbal competence resulting from the biomedical changes associated with Alzheimer's disease have to be given meaning through the use of culturally prescribed imagery. On the level of everyday lived experience, Alzheimer's disease is not only a biomedical problem: it challenges the meaning of the self and of life. The problem is that Alzheimer's disease as a biomedical category is still imprecisely defined and there are serious gaps in the diagnosis of the origins of mental confusion in later life [see Traphagan Part VI]. Gubrium argues that, faced with these problems, non-sufferers draw on visual and verbal images such as that of Alzheimer's as a "thief" to fill the knowledge vacuum. In this process "Alzheimer's disease" becomes a generalized label for all kinds of confusion associated with ageing.

Hockey and James (1993) adopt a similar analytical perspective when they examine the role of images in the construction of old age as a process of infantilization. Older people are not, of course, children, but there is strong evidence that when in residential care they are often treated as if they are. Older people who have become dependent in some way on their carers are treated as having reduced claims on conventional adult status. Thus, when addressed by carers, they may lose the adult title "Miss," "Mrs." or "Mr." and be summoned like children by their Christian names or given anonymous diminutive titles like "dear" or "love." The use of the metaphor of old age as a childlike state or "second childhood" therefore justifies and supports certain forms of care in which older people are denied the status of being fully adult, and Hockey and James' analysis provides persuasive evidence of the power of images to influence the ways in which carers relate to older people.

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Infantilization is, of course, regarded as a prime example of ageism and as such damaging to the elderly's self-esteem. Self-esteem is regarded as a key factor in positive ageing, and a crucial factor in the cultivation and maintenance of self-esteem is awareness of the approval of others. Self-esteem involves an affirmative interplay between the self and the external world; as described by Coleman (1993) it has two components: "self evaluation" (a comparative exercise) and "self worth" (1993:128). Self-worth arises out of positive interaction with others who perceive our value, and, if such positive evaluations are absent, then those older people who are directly affected are likely to experience a diminished sense of social worth (Coleman 1993:129).

The role of the approval of others in the maintenance of personal self-esteem raises another significant question concerning the influence of images of ageing on the subjective experience of growing older. Images of ageing create expectations in both younger and older people about how older people should speak and act. An important issue here is the discrepancy revealed in research between the subjective experience of ageing and attitudes and expectations of others towards those they perceive as older. A useful way of conceptualizing the distance that may exist in everyday experience of ageing between public images of ageing and private experience is to think of ageing as a kind of mask (Biggs 1993; Featherstone and Hepworth 1991, 1993). The image of ageing as a mask is most commonly expressed in the words "I don't feel old." In this image, the body and the self do not closely correspond and the outward appearance and functioning of the ageing body do not adequately represent the subjective experience of the inner self. The self, or the "I," in this model is usually experienced as "younger" than the body. The mask, as a sense of discrepancy between a "younger" subjective self and the outward appearance of the social category of "old person," is closely associated with ageist images. When images of old age are perceived to be negative then it is not surprising that older people may not wish to be identified as "old" or, as suggested above, may reluctantly enter into collaborative performance with others, during which they present themselves as old according to the conventional stereotypes. Old age thus becomes the performance of ageist stereotype and thereby perpetuates negative images of later life. As Coleman has indicated, a "culture's expectations of older people's roles within society have a vital place in encouraging or inhibiting personality change in later life" (Coleman 1993:96)—a judgment also supported in Kitwood's (1997) sociological analysis of the treatment of persons suffering from Alzheimer's disease. The difficulties in organizing speech and thought caused by neuropathology are aggravated by social interaction with those carers who refuse or are unable to help the sufferer maintain his or her former self. The self of the sufferer is thus masked not only by the disease but also by the social interaction of others. Negative and misleading images of Alzheimer's disease as "loss of self" thereby contribute reflexively towards the social construction of dementia.

CONSUMER CULTURE, POSTMODERN TENDENCIES AND GLOBALIZATION

It has frequently been argued that a significant factor in the formation of cultural expectations of older people in society is the rapid expansion of consumer culture. This social development has played a crucial role in changing public attitudes towards ageing and the experience of growing older. Not only does a greater part of social life revolve around leisure and the purchase and utilization of commodities, but the culture of consumption suggests a world of new opportunities of self-improvement, fulfillment and expanded possibilities as more and more activities are mediated through images of the good life (Featherstone 1991, 2001; Featherstone and Hepworth 1982). The imagery of consumer culture places a strong emphasis upon the body and body maintenance and the active cultivation of youthful lifestyles, including the potential to renew and transform the body through new technologies, and the integration into mechanic systems which makes possible cyborg and "posthuman" bodies. All of these present the body as renewable, and ageing as something which can be held at bay and even "defeated" through purchase, hard work and dedication (Featherstone 1982).

The high value placed in consumer culture on visual imagery has been regarded as particularly influential by gerontologists, who are now beginning to explore the implications of consumer culture for the future of ageing (Gilleard and Higgs 2000). But this is not to suggest that consumer culture only works through general stereotypes of idealized images of ageing which everyone is persuaded to follow. Rather, consumer culture cannot today be seen as producing a unified dominant culture in which everyone follows the same pattern of behavior. Studies of media usage by older people and portrayals of older people in the media in America conclude that older people are "a diverse, heterogeneous group" (Robinson et al. 2004). In addition, what have been referred to as "postmodern" tendencies within consumer culture have become more evident since the 1980s, and are manifest in greater product differentiation and the exercise of personal choice, which can include the rejection of ageist imagery. As was noted in the anti-ageist examples from Australia, Denmark and Madrid (above), the struggle to promote alternative images of ageing works directly against the youthful stereotyping of later life in consumer culture.

Consumer culture includes an expansion in the range of alternative and bohemian lifestyles, along with the growth of urban spaces of experimentation and identity exploration, especially in large cities. The traditional age-stereotypical dress styles are less in evidence and there has been a migration of more youthful and casual styles across the lifecourse. More positive images of ageing and later life are evident, especially in retirement and self-help literature which seeks to blur the boundaries between middle and later life (Featherstone and Hepworth 1995), leading towards a less regulated and socially sanctioned "postmodern" lifecourse (Hockey and James 2003).

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Under the impact of globalization, Western metropolises have become more diverse and multicultural with a wide range of ethnic styles and cultural forms evident. We are confronted by an expanding range of styles of dress, modes of adornment, body shapes and sizes and modes of self-presentation, which are more difficult "to read." There are therefore more varied and conflicting models of ageing and later life in circulation, along with a diversity of family and lifestyle forms, ranging from traditional to extended families in which the grandparent role still operates, to single households in which older people have chosen to explore single lifestyles.

The direction of this change also has implications for gender distinctions in experiences of ageing, which have also recently come to the forefront of gerontology. The emergence of feminist gerontology has focused attention on the important question of the difference gender makes to the process of ageing (Arber and Ginn 1995; Bernard 2001; Woodward 1999). Feminist theorization of the body and ageing has resulted in a number of studies of images of ageing women, including representations of ageing women examined in a historical context (Gullette 1985; Harper 1997; Mangum 1999; Woodward 1999). Since Sontag's pioneering article (1978), the negative impact of images has been seen to be greater on men than on women because of the relative importance of the appearance of women in a world divided into public and private spheres and with a gendered division of labour. But the global impact of consumer culture and the "postmodern turn" have, it is argued, destabilized the division of labour along lines of gender and this development has significant implications, at least as far as future generations of older people are concerned, for the experience of ageing. As Fairhurst (1998) shows, men are now facing similar problems to women as far as the appearance of ageing is concerned. Gullette (2004), too, has noted the merging of gender issues with regard to ageing in response to changes in the occupational structuring of society.

While consumer culture offers body maintenance and fitness routines along with a more positive active energetic image of later life, it also provides fast food and the pleasures of the inactive life of the television viewer. Currently over 60 percent of people living in the United States are overweight, with around 20 percent of these defined as obese (Critser 2003). For the legions of "failed" dieters and gym-goers who cannot attain the body image ideals of consumer culture, there is the hope of the technological fix. The assumption of technological solutions to the problem of the ageing process is also found in the treatment offered to women for the menopause, with hormone replacement therapy (HRT) widely advocated and used, despite evidence of cancer risk. The image of a "youth pill," of the desire to avoid the negative consequences of ageing, is very much part of the publicity surrounding HRT. This now applies to men as well as women. While the male menopause is clearly not a medical condition, the term has continued to resurface regularly in the media over the last 30 years, featuring a discourse of loss and decline with the usual consumer culture medical and fitness remedies offered (Featherstone and Hepworth 1995; Hepworth and Featherstone 1982; Marshall and Katz 2002). With

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the help of the new "love drugs" such as Viagra, and a growing army of imita-
tors (similar drugs are being designed for women), men are told they will be
able to "enjoy sex forever." The problems of ageing may well be featured neg-
atively and ageist discourses may dominate, yet consumer culture always holds
out new positive images of ageing, exemplary profiles of the "heroes of
ageing" who fight decline, along with the "quick fix" solutions which are there
to be purchased.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As we have indicated, images are now accepted as an integral feature of the
process of defining ageing and old age which is the very basis of the discipline
of social gerontology. Images shape and constitute both professional and lay
conceptions of what it means to grow older, and therefore the treatment that
older people receive. Not surprisingly, the study of the history of images of
ageing is the study of the history of our ideas about ageing. And, on the level
of practical everyday experience, the analysis of the care of older people and
of patterns of social interaction in later life shows that verbal and visual images
are regularly deployed and manipulated to produce ageing and old age as a
social activity. We cannot therefore escape the process through which images
shape these definitions, but we can understand the context within which they
constitute lived experience and enhance our awareness of the possibility of
change. Images are always historical and therefore never eternally fixed. Nor
are images neutral, they always carry a moral and political message concerning
the value we place on older people and the distinctions we make between ac-
ceptable and unacceptable forms of ageing (Hepworth 1995).

And yet serious gaps in our knowledge of images of ageing remain. On the
level of culture and history, we have only recently begun to collect and analyse
the range of images available. On the level of lived experience, the sociologi-
cal understanding of ageing as a process of interaction through which older
people compare themselves with others requires a great deal more research into
how people perceive and respond to images—the role played by images in
interpersonal relationships through which individuals make sense of growing
older. There is also a significant gap in our knowledge of ethnic variations in
images of ageing (Wray 2003).

One of the most significant pointers to future research is a more nuanced
sense of the process of globalization as generating both uniformities and differ-
ences [see Fry Part III]. The global postmodern, then, does not point to a new
universal stage of postmodernity which supplants modernity, which everyone
will have to go through; rather, it suggests a world of expanding differences
which are also transmitted through the global media. The various economic,
social and cultural power struggles evident globally open up the possibility that
no single model of ageing, such as the Westernized consumer culture image,
will prevail. This possibility goes beyond recent gerontological concern with
postmodern flexibility within a Western context (Gilleard and Higgs 2000) to

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prompt us to look more closely at alternative images of ageing, for example in Chinese and Indian cultures, in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Thus the study of images of ageing opens prospect of greater diversity in the future images of ageing, reflecting wider shifts in the global distribution of power than have tended to predominate in the gerontological imagination.

NOTE

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