

Old Age, Gender and Constructions of the Contemporary

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Abstract: This article argues that older people – by virtue (at least in part) of their association with the past – lack visibility in dominant conceptions of the contemporary. With its (neo-) modernist emphasis on the innovative new, ‘the contemporary’ – as a descriptor of the present – aligns, prejudicially, with youth. The contemporary as category or concept is frequently discussed in metaphorical terms that align it with early phases of the life course. Within this frame older women are particularly troublesome to the discourse of the contemporary, wherein they represent a blockage in the flow of futurity. After offering a theorisation of the ways in which contemporary operates in these terms, the article concludes by considering two texts – a film, Michael Haneke’s *Amour* (2012), and a play, debbie tucker green’s *generations* (2005) – both of which craft encounters with narratives of old age and gender, and are commonly regarded as ‘contemporary’ according to the terms outlined.

Keywords: old age; ageing; contemporary; gender; Michael Haneke’s *Amour*; debbie tucker green’s *generations*

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Introduction

This article argues that the contemporary as a discursive formation tends to exclude on the basis of old age, and particularly female old age. The ways in which contemporary functions conceptually in current discourse moves beyond a factual description of a time period, to express normative evaluations and value judgements about what is, and is not, within its parameters. While increasingly alert to marginalisation based on gender, sex, sexuality and race (particularly in the context of the #metoo and Black Lives Matter movements), contemporary progressive discourse seems conversely to marginalise old people as incongruous to dynamic, forward-thinking contemporary cultures. There are examples of scholarly critiques of the ways in which the contemporary is exclusionary on the basis of gender¹ and race.² There are also experimental artists, such as ‘The White Pube’, who critique the whiteness of contemporary art. However, surprisingly (given the interest in critical temporalities shared by cultural gerontologists and critical theorists alike), there has not been scrutiny of how contemporary operates to exclude on the basis of age. Indeed, these other critiques largely ignore age, or, in the example of ‘The White Pube’ deploy a self-consciously brash, youthful intervention as a subversion of the (ageing) respectability of the whiteness of the contemporary – with the effect that white, reactionary and old become coarticulated.³

What follows is an analysis of the various ways in which contemporary is deployed and how the intersection of narratives of old age and gender produces a specific antagonism within the discourse of the contemporary. The article concludes with a reading of two visual and performance texts from the contemporary period within which gendered old age is instrumental to the ways meaning is produced: Michael Haneke’s film *Amour* (2012) and debbie tucker green’s play *generations* (2005). A large number of texts from a diversity of cultural forms might have formed the case studies for this article, but I have selected a film and a stage play partly in recognition of Julia Twigg’s and Wendy Martin’s observation that the visual has become dominant in the contemporary period ‘to some extent replacing the dominance of the word’, this move highlighting how ‘age itself is a visual phenomenon’, which is ‘particularly marked

¹ Thompson (2020).

² See Brar (2020) for a discussion of this in relation to music, and Gilroy (1993) for an exposure of the whiteness of experimentalism.

³ A photograph that illustrates this well is ‘The White Pube’ (Gabrielle de la Puente and Zarina Muhammad, both 23-years-old at the time the photograph was taken) standing in front of Grant Wood’s iconic painting ‘American Gothic’ (1930) usually housed in the Art Institute of Chicago. The painting depicts a white ageing farmer and his daughter (who could be mistaken for his wife) standing outside their house, him holding a pitchfork, and both looking stern and hostile. The painting was widely considered to be a satire of rural small-town Iowa.

for women.⁴ Furthermore, I wanted to select texts that express singularity in Derek Attridge's sense,⁵ and that are unambiguously contemporary, both in terms of period (twenty-first century) – and, crucially, in their exhibiting of qualities of active participation (aesthetically, culturally, politically) in the present moment.

The Contemporary

The etymological roots of the word 'contemporary' come from medieval Latin: 'con' means 'together with' and 'tempus' means 'time', 'season' or 'portion of time'. Used as an adjective, contemporary refers to the condition of living at the same time or belonging to the same historical moment, and contemporary as noun refers to one who co-exists at the same time as another. The term is equally aligned with the present moment: the first entry in the *Cambridge Dictionary* for contemporary is 'existing or happening now, and therefore seeming modern.'⁶ The fourth entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* is: 'Of or characteristic of the present time; modern; (esp. of furniture, clothing, etc.) having modern, as distinct from traditional, features or styling; (sometimes) *spec.* designating music, architecture, etc., which makes use of new, often experimental, ideas and techniques.'⁷

In line with this latter definition, dominant deployments of the contemporary prize the most up-to-date or cutting-edge thinking and aesthetics. Contemporary art is 'of' the historical present (which is different to being 'in' or 'about' it), which for cultural theorists Geoff Cox and Jacob Lund means that 'it somehow addresses and expresses the present.'⁸ Art that is of its present is deemed prescient, alive and more culturally relevant than art produced within the current period that is not judged to be in active dialogue with its moment. This argument is made trenchantly by the philosopher Peter Osborne in his book *Anywhere or Not at All: The Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (2013), where he describes contemporary as a 'selective concept' that 'promotes' and 'excludes': 'To claim something is contemporary is to make a claim for its significance in participating in the actuality of the present.'⁹ The attribution of the label contemporary is to imbue the recipient of such a marker with

⁴ Twigg and Martin (2015: 5).

⁵ Attridge (2017). Attridge develops a theorisation of singularity with reference to examples of literature that create a distinctive crafting of otherness, a singular experience of alterity produced through artistic inventiveness that stages an ethical encounter with the reader. Although Attridge focuses on literature, his theorisation of singularity can be applied to other artistic forms.

⁶ *Cambridge Dictionary* (2023).

⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary* (2023).

⁸ Cox and Lund (2016: 9).

⁹ Osborne (2013: 2).

future-facing creativity, an orientation that simultaneously acknowledges the current moment as philosophically futureless – apocalyptic, stuck in a compressed or curtailed temporality, or an elongated present. As Osborne notes, the contemporary’s radical up-to-dateness benefits from both ‘the residual energies of the pre-war avant-garde, acting out a weakened version of its temporal logic of futurity’ as well as its distance from ‘that avant-garde’s ruptural historical futurity into the more expansive present of a new beginning.’¹⁰ The contemporary paradoxically resists periodisation: it is not a time in the sense of a definable period, but is, as art historian, Terry Smith, writes, ‘perpetual advent’.¹¹ This gives the contemporary a locomotive quality – life experienced as a relentless, ever-unfolding present, which is at once infinite and timeless.

There is a slippage between different meanings of the contemporary – contemporary as the present moment, as the relation between people in the same historical moment, and as signifying characteristics of the present – which produces a hermeneutic entanglement within which contemporary slides across all three meanings. Youth – as Susan Sontag notes – is ‘a metaphor for energy, restless mobility, appetite’; the youthful attributes of freshness, vigour and an anticipatory trajectory are equally attributes of the contemporary.¹² There is a slippage from abstract metaphor to actual experience, or from the contemporary understood in terms of a youthful imaginary to the suppression of older age within the scope of the contemporary. Those not judged to be actively engaged in their present moments risk exclusion from the category of the contemporary, and older people are particularly vulnerable to this exclusion.

Old Age and the Contemporary

The idea that old people are out of date and reactionary has resonated in political narratives in the recent period. A striking example in the UK is the way that the success of the Leave campaign in the European Union referendum of June 2016 and in the USA with the election of Donald Trump in November of the same year have been framed. The *Atlantic* ran the headline ‘Trump’s Graying Army’ with the subheading: ‘In the Republican nominee’s nostalgia-fueled campaign, older voters see their last chance to bring back the 1950s.’¹³ The subheading of an *Observer* article on the Brexit vote (typical of public pronouncements on the referendum) read: ‘Having overwhelmingly voted to remain, many feel betrayed by an older generation who turned their backs on

¹⁰ Osborne (2013: 16).

¹¹ Smith (2008: 9).

¹² Sontag (1972).

¹³ Ball (2016).

Europe but who will not be around to see the damage wreaked.¹⁴ That two of every five voters over 60 did not vote Leave has not been sufficiently acknowledged; nor have findings that the majority of Britain's oldest cohort – the wartime generation – voted decisively for remain.¹⁵ The refrain that old people were responsible for voting for something they would not live long enough to be affected by revealed a deep-rooted gerontophobic scepticism of older people's right to anticipate the future. Old people were blamed for delivering the 'wrong' result in the referendum, but worse, they were resented for having voted at all. Questioning older people's right to an equal franchise led some, such as Maja Založnik from the Oxford Institute of Population Ageing, to map the results of the referendum as if the votes had been weighted according to age.¹⁶ Založnik's intervention did not go so far as to call for a new voting system, but there have been serious proposals – in Japan at least – for just such a system.¹⁷

As part of a similar structure of thinking that equates old age with political regression, late life is equally not considered a phase of innovation, itself a deeply ideological concept. The French anthropologist Marc Augé in his 2015 book *The Future* observes that the notion of innovation is quite old, but, he notes, 'it has never been so often brandished, celebrated and invoked as it is today.'¹⁸ For Augé, the term innovation captures 'the neoliberal economy'; it is 'a symbol of initiative, dynamism and perpetual renewal'.¹⁹ Innovation is also a key component of contemporary culture: contemporary cultural forms break new ground, through an aesthetics of invigoration, and with the objective of producing energising effects (note the age-inflected metaphors). This vision of innovation is understood as cutting-edge, progressive or ahead of times but what is validated as 'contemporary' is often the pronouncement of a small number of national institutions, statutory bodies, quangos, organisations or individuals.

This philosophical perception of the contemporary exists within the context of a rapid growth in the pace of ageing populations worldwide, the presentation of which tends to be in the language of crisis rather than opportunity.²⁰ In recent decades, there has been a move to recognise that older people are not a homogeneous demographic that can be usefully understood under the generic label of 'old'; in fact, the period of

¹⁴ [Graham-Harrison \(2016\)](#).

¹⁵ [Devine \(2019\)](#).

¹⁶ [Založnik \(2016\)](#).

¹⁷ [Ishida and Oguro \(2018\)](#).

¹⁸ [Augé \(2016: 62\)](#).

¹⁹ [Augé \(2016: 69\)](#).

²⁰ See [Simmonds \(2023\)](#); [Adiseshiah \(2022\)](#). Since 1997, the global population has increased by 2 billion with the proportion of people aged 65 and over increasing by 50% (see [International Longevity Centre, 2022](#)). According to the World Health Organization, between 2015 and 2020, 'the proportion of the world's population over 60 years will nearly double from 12% to 22%' ([World Health Organization, 2022](#)).

life from 60 (the age at which Age UK pegs the beginnings of older age) can include four, five or more, decades. British historian and co-founder of the University of the Third Age (U3A), Peter Laslett, called for a new approach to post-middle age – or the ‘third age’ – in *A Fresh Map of Life: The Emergence of the Third Age* (1989). In this formulation ‘active’ or ‘successful’ are expressions of the ‘third age’, and contribute to a positive reimagining of older age. Sociologists Paul Higgs and Chris Gilleard have written much about the third age as a period of later life organised ‘around the themes of self-realisation and the pursuit of personal interests’.²¹ The third age as a space of refashioning the self, active agency, mobility and consumption works to defer old age to the ‘fourth age’, which in turn becomes the repository of proper old age or real old age associated with decline, frailty, dependence and burdensomeness. Thus, the discourse of the third age risks reinforcing a dichotomy of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ ageing. It produces what sociologist Barbara L. Marshall terms a form of ‘post-ageist ageism’.²² The pressure is to do the impossible: to age without getting old.

Hence, the prevalence of images of active ageing in the context of the third age – particularly in marketing and popular culture discourses – actually continues the reification of notions of youth rather than validates older age. The old person is still interpellated in public discourse – as exemplified in ‘elderly people’s road signs’, which feature graphics of figures stooping with walking sticks, sometimes with the accompanying words ‘SLOW elderly people’. Older individuals who comprise ‘the aged’ or ‘the elderly’ in these formulations do not signify as active inhabitants of the contemporary moment, but as ghostly figures: as out of date or untimely. To be contemporary is to participate dynamically in the present’s locomotion: ‘the elderly’ are wraithlike interruptions of that locomotion.

Old age is commonly articulated as untimely or anachronistic (which means against time), an equation captured in the title of Lynne Segal’s seminal book *Out of Time: The Perils and Pleasures of Ageing* (2012). Identifying the past as the temporal home of older people has in turn, wider ramifications for their social recognition. In her book *Enduring Time* (2017), Lisa Baraitser offers a philosophy of contemporary time to account for a dramatic change in contemporary experiences of temporality within the context of climate change, violent conflict, slow violence, permanent debt and widening social inequalities. The contemporary, as a temporal formation, Baraitser propounds, ‘renders the past old and obsolete in order for the new to emerge, precisely through its radical separation from the past disparaged *as* past.’²³ She identifies the dangers of ‘repudiating the past as bygone and the present as authentic when time is

²¹ Higgs and Gilleard (2014: 12).

²² Marshall (2015: 210).

²³ Baraitser (2017: 6).

understood as linear.²⁴ A linear philosophy of time means we conceive of the present moment as cutting edge and ‘condemn what we think of as “false” to being out-of-date or obsolete, belonging to an earlier time, and thereby expel these ideas, modes of thought, practices, concepts from the now.’²⁵

A much earlier work relevant to this discussion is Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project*, his unfinished opus written between 1927 and 1940 on the Parisian iron and glass shopping arcades built in the early to mid-nineteenth century, which, in their initial incarnation were charged with the promise of new modes and objects of consumption, but quickly came to signify petrified, forgotten images of the past; ‘for the first time’, Benjamin observed, ‘the most recent past becomes distant’.²⁶ Susan Buck-Morss, in her study of Benjamin’s work, writes: ‘The other side of mass culture’s hellish repetition of “the new” is the mortification of matter which is fashionable no longer.’²⁷ Mortification, understood in three of the *OED*’s senses as the ‘Death of part of the body’, ‘Deadening or destruction of vital or active qualities’, or ‘a state of torpor and insensibility preceding death’, form metonymical aspects of the discursive framing of the fourth age.²⁸ To mortify also means, as the *OED* says, ‘To cause to feel humiliated; to cause (a person) mortification, to embarrass’.²⁹ Embarrassment is the affect borne by the relation of old age to the contemporary: as awkwardness, out-of-place-ness, at once politically invisible and humiliatingly conspicuous. The slippage between old age, the past, mortification and indignity forms the discursive context within which older life so easily falls out of ethical registration.

Old Age, Gender and Contemporary

This notion of the out-of-date, untimely, object of embarrassment is animated acutely in the condition of *female* old age – as an obdurate remainder in the mires of the contemporary – stubborn, slow, stuck or all three, the effects of which are overdue, late or out of time. Thinking old age, contemporary and gender together is to encounter an ideological complex within which old women exemplify a more pronounced version of the kind of ageist temporal displacement I have outlined. A key contribution to the conceptualisation of gendered time, is Julia Kristeva’s essay ‘Women’s Time’ (1981),

²⁴ Baraitser (2017: 34).

²⁵ Baraitser (2017: 34).

²⁶ Benjamin, quoted in Buck-Morss (1989: 65).

²⁷ Buck-Morss (1989: 159).

²⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary* (2023).

²⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary* (2023).

which expounds ‘women’s time’ as radically antithetical to patriarchal time, and as unarticulated: as a temporal experience that goes against patriarchal time, one focused on reproduction and the body, sex and symbol – rather than the economics, production and social law of patriarchal time. Kristeva is interested in the generation of time: how human life forms itself through nature, which she calls ‘monumental time’, and in the recurring patterns and rhythms of lived female experience including menstruation and maternity – what she calls ‘cyclical time’. Her emphasis is simultaneity rather than sequence, being in space rather than chronological time. In this way, women’s time does not progress, it exists outside of what Rafael Núñez and Kensy Cooperrider call our ‘spatial construals of time’,³⁰ and this in turn is ontologically disruptive: ‘Female subjectivity as it gives itself up to intuition becomes a problem with respect to a certain conception of time: time as project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding; time as departure, progression, and arrival – in other words, the time of history.’³¹ Without sequential history, women’s subjectivity, for Kristeva, is instead produced through spatial relationality. The here, there and elsewhere are the conditions for subjectivation, not chronological time. Women’s time manifests in actual happening, in being over meaning, in being over becoming.

Baraitser’s *Enduring Time* is indebted to Kristeva’s essay in its examination of quotidian experiences of extended time: waiting, delaying, staying, remaining, enduring, returning and repeating. She calls for our engagement with “unbecoming” time – time that is lived as radically immovable.³² These forms of non-linear time she connects to the possibility of an ethics of care, care that requires a suspended form of time. In this way, care takes time: the rhythms of the person cared for determine (in part at least) the time needed for care activities to be completed. As Baraitser observes in a later interview,

Because we cannot control this pace, [...] care seems to entail staying in time that can feel disruptive to already established rhythms, so that time stagnates, becomes repetitive yet motionless. Often “care time” is not really experienced as moving, developing, flowing or unfolding. It can be emotionally full, but more often it is time that must be endured, suffered even, rather than embraced.³³

While Baraitser does not restrict her focus to gender (or ‘women’s time’ like Kristeva), care is simultaneously deeply imbricated in the politics of gender: caregivers globally, both paid and unpaid, are still mostly women.³⁴ Care is also intimately connected with

³⁰ Núñez and Cooperrider (2013).

³¹ Kristeva (1981: 17).

³² Baraitser (2017: 4).

³³ Kemmer *et al.* (2021: 24).

³⁴ Sharma *et al.* (2016); Swinkels *et al.* (2019).

age, 'the elderly' and children constituting most receivers of care, and many caregivers being older women.

In addition to the conceptual enmeshment of the past, untimeliness, dependency, care and stagnancy that form the semantic conditions of female old age in the contemporary, old women are also penalised due to what Sontag calls in the title of her essay, 'The Double Standards of Aging': women are more afflicted than men by ageing, which she sees as 'an ordeal of the imagination – a moral disease, a social pathology'.³⁵ Women, more than men, are adjudicated in terms of their sexual appeal, an appeal dependent on youthfulness, a double standard that leads feminist author, Cynthia Rich, to refer to the 'twice unseen' condition of old women – 'unseen because they are old, unseen because they are women.'³⁶ Sontag argues that with one or two exceptions (for example, physical strength and sport), masculinity – associated with 'competence, autonomy, self-control' – is not necessarily threatened in older age, whereas femininity – aligned with 'incompetence, helplessness, passivity, noncompetitiveness, being nice' – is not improved with ageing.³⁷ Like Simone de Beauvoir before her,³⁸ Sontag argues that for 'most women, aging means a humiliating process of gradual sexual disqualification.'³⁹

Age-normative constructions of the life course depend upon a developmental model of ageing, a model itself aligned more broadly with a historical progress narrative of linear development. While the latter has been thoroughly problematised in multiple disciplines in the humanities, the former – the notion that we go through a particular pattern of developmental phases in the ageing process – is still dominant. These phases are gendered, and for women are explained with reference to the development of their reproductive biologies, which in turn frame the scene of intergenerational relations. Not subscribing to the behaviours attributed to a particular age phase – 'not acting your age' for example – is a performance of anachronism. Mary Russo describes anachronism as 'a mistake in a normative systemization of time. [...] Given the common placement of women's lives within the symbolic confines of birth, reproduction, and death, the risk of anachronism is scandal.'⁴⁰ Behaving in a way that does not accord with one's age, Russo says, 'is not only inappropriate but dangerous, exposing the female subject, especially, to ridicule, contempt, pity, and scorn – the scandal of anachronism.'⁴¹ Thus older women are expected to act according to

³⁵ Sontag (1972).

³⁶ Rich (1984: 84).

³⁷ Sontag (1972).

³⁸ De Beauvoir (1977).

³⁹ Sontag (1972).

⁴⁰ Russo (1999: 21).

⁴¹ Russo (1999: 21).

age scripts, those scripts casting them in rapidly restrictive and marginal roles. Betty Friedan observed 30 years ago that ‘Aging is perceived as decline or deterioration from youth,’⁴² and as many of the articles in this special issue evidence, the ageing-as-decline narrative remains a prevailing frame in the public imagination for interpreting old age and gender.

Michael Haneke’s *Amour*

Having theorised the contemporary and critiqued that theorisation for its ageist exclusions, this final section seeks to demonstrate how two texts, distinctive as artworks for their exemplification of contemporary, participate in this politics. The first text I discuss is the Austrian director, Michael Haneke’s critically acclaimed French-language film *Amour*, which was screened at the 2012 Cannes Film Festival, where it won the Palme D’Or. It also won many other prestigious awards at multiple events and festivals.⁴³ Film has become of increasing interest to age studies scholars over the past decade and this has coincided with more attention in both mainstream and independent cinema to ageing and older age.⁴⁴ The subject matter in these films, as Aagje Swinnen has observed, spans the gamut of romantic narratives at one end of the spectrum to stories of illness and dementia at the other.⁴⁵ Haneke is an auteur with a distinctive signature, his films demanding that his audiences, as Elsie Walker observes, experience the work’s ‘radically reawakening possibilities of artistic construction.’⁴⁶ According to Walker, Haneke is ‘committed to nothing less than a re-evaluation of what cinema can do.’⁴⁷ This formal inventiveness coupled with an attention to the pressing topic of ageing and care makes it a peculiarly contemporary artwork according to the terms I have outlined.

Amour focuses on a couple – retired piano teachers in their 80s, Anne and Georges – in their tasteful, middle-class Parisian apartment with French antique furniture, original art and brief diegetic interludes of Schubert and Beethoven. Anne has two strokes,

⁴² Friedan (1993: 8).

⁴³ The following is a select sample: the Academy Award for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 85th Academy Awards; four categories including Best Film and Best Director at the 25th European Film Awards; Best Film, Best Director, and Best Actress Awards at the 47th National Society of Film Critics Awards; Best Leading Actress and Best Film Not in the English Language at the 66th British Academy Film Awards; and five awards including Best Film, Best Director, Best Actor and Best Actress in the 38th César Awards. Emmanuelle Riva who played Anne became the oldest person to win a BAFTA.

⁴⁴ See Chivers (2011); Cohen-Shalev (2012); Gravagne (2013); Garrett (2019); Falcus *et al.* (2023).

⁴⁵ Swinnen (2015: 71).

⁴⁶ Walker (2018: 15).

⁴⁷ Walker (2018: 15).

the first ten minutes into the film, which is followed a little later by a second, much more debilitating. She becomes increasingly in need of care and dependent on Georges. Georges honours Anne's wish not to move into institutional care, and much of the film's gaze is on Georges' care for Anne as emotionally and physically arduous, painfully mundane and difficult to bear. It marks Georges' caregiving as exceptionally – heroically even – patient and benevolent. The strain on him, which he rarely externalises, eventually leads to him smothering Anne with a pillow. As the cultural gerontologist, Margaret Morganroth Gullette, has claimed, this is an act the film seems not to subject to ethical scrutiny as viewers are encouraged to identify with Georges as a long-suffering and isolated caregiver at the expense of Anne's humanity. For Gullette, *Amour* is to be understood as 'a beautiful tragedy', or, she quips, as '*Othello* for the bedridden'.⁴⁸ The film is therefore rich material for thinking about the ways in which female old age figures as a blockage in the flow of time, and as an interloper in the contemporary.

In an interview for the *New York Times*, Haneke talks about *Amour* as an investigation into what the interviewer Dennis Lim calls 'the least palatable of subjects: aging, sickness and death', a comment that both links these three states and considers them – unproblematically – as self-evidently distasteful conditions.⁴⁹ Despite the film's interest in the lives of octogenarians, and the pleasures it takes in an older couple, the film's dramatic curiosity is in an encounter with an ageing-as-decline narrative, the truth of which is unquestioned. This perspective is given additional force through its casting. Georges is played by the actor Jean-Louis Trintignant, for whom Haneke wrote the script. Haneke had long been an admirer, and said of the actor: 'He radiated the warmth that I needed for the film.'⁵⁰ As a young man, Haneke had been 'captivated' by Emmanuelle Riva who played Anne.⁵¹ These two actors were haunted palimpsestically in *Amour* by their younger selves; Larry Rohter comments in another interview with Haneke, that he had 'mental images of these two great iconic figures of the French nouvelle vague [new wave] as the younger, more vigorous and physically beautiful figures they once were.'⁵² Encountering these characters through these casting narratives and performance histories intensifies the alignment of ageing with decline and the association of decline with dependency, a state assumed to be an appalling anathema to a contemporary prizing of independence.

Anne's is a body out of place, a disruption of somatic normalcy. Much of the camera's attention is on the awkwardness of her occupation of space in their apartment

⁴⁸ Gullette (2014: 212).

⁴⁹ Lim (2012).

⁵⁰ Haneke (2012).

⁵¹ Haneke (2012).

⁵² Rohter (2012).

which is configured not to accommodate ill health or disability with its collection of antiques, books and paintings, and characterful, but tricky to navigate, spatial design. Post-stroke, Anne is defined almost exclusively in terms of ill health and disability as we see multiple shots of her unable to control her body. Scenes of care with nurses show the communication as unidirectional, and Anne becomes increasingly infantilised and illegible to those around her, including her daughter, who describes Anne as ‘unrecognisable’, ‘talking gibberish’ and ‘mad’. In one scene Anne is naked, being washed. Sontag writes, ‘The body of an old woman, unlike that of an old man, is always understood as a body that can no longer be shown offered, unveiled. At best it may appear in costume. People still feel uneasy, thinking about what they might see if her mask dropped, if she took off her clothes.’⁵³ The exposure of Anne’s naked body might be read as an act of recognition – a transgressive encounter with the ageing female body as fleshly, profane and potentially erotic. Yet the scene’s self-conscious performance of unveiling presents the act as a cinematic transgression – as a Haneke-esque moment of spectatorial unsettlement – rather than a counternarrative to Sontag’s claim that ‘Aging in women is a process of becoming obscene sexually.’⁵⁴

We glimpse Anne’s suffering, but the perspective is through Georges. Much of the film’s poignancy works through Georges’ stoical, gentle and self-sacrificial response to what is presented as an intolerable situation. Caregivers are usually women, ‘whose time’, as Baraitser notes, ‘can be constantly interrupted’.⁵⁵ Anne’s suffering is insufferable to Georges, but her suffering is not distinguished from the strain her care has on him as caregiver, a strain made the more powerful as it is rarely registered by him. This restraint is the more appreciable because he is practising care work usually performed by women. The film seems to suggest that Georges is heroic in his commitment to suffering, which is presented as an extraordinary act of love. Resonant of Italian Neorealism, as film scholar, Kevin Bongiorno observes, the film’s pace, typical of Haneke’s filmmaking, is extremely slow: ‘at times it is excruciating to wait for something to happen’.⁵⁶ The extended, static shots which show no sign of editing can be likened to Baraitser’s suspended time, as time endured; these shots reinforce Georges’ drawn-out experience of suffering, to which the viewer is anxious for a resolution, a resolution that can only mean Anne’s death according to the film’s logic.

Anne’s dependency and decline, her rapidly physical immobilisation and cognitive deterioration, are tangibly reflected in a cinematography that frustrates the flow of time, the progress of scenes and the emotional arc of both the characters and filmic perspective. The most powerful image of Anne’s disturbance of the contemporary

⁵³ Sontag (1972).

⁵⁴ Sontag (1972).

⁵⁵ Baraitser, in Kemmer *et al.* (2021: 24).

⁵⁶ Bongiorno (2016: 31).

is the opening scene, which starts at the story's end: emergency services break into the apartment after being alerted to bad smells emanating from within. After killing Anne, Georges had sealed the room with packing tape, but the stench has leaked out. Firefighters rush round holding handkerchiefs to their noses, their disgust palpable. Anne's body has been rotting in the room for days, perhaps weeks. Georges has attempted to arrest time, to contain Anne indefinitely in a sealed space, but she is a body out of time: her persistence within the contemporary functions as a contaminant. The decomposition of her body in death signalled potently by the toxic stench so offensive to the firefighters, has, in fact, been occurring in life – since her first stroke. She has become increasingly awkward, difficult, embarrassing and repulsive in her dependency. That Georges dedicates himself to caring for Anne in spite of the offensiveness of her persistent existence underlines the depth of his humanity at the expense of hers. In Teju Cole's review of *Amour*, he judges the film to orient itself around the question: 'What does it mean when someone – particularly someone vital and beloved – becomes *no one*?' (emphasis added).⁵⁷ When Georges smothers Anne, as Gullette complained, the act is not subject to ethical scrutiny, but more than that, Georges' action brings the suffering (Anne's, his, the viewer's) to a cathartic resolution. When Georges kills Anne, the decisiveness of this action brings relief, and in doing so produces spectatorial complicity in the film's interpellation of her as, by this point, 'no one'.

debbie tucker green's *generations*

I end with some reflections on *generations* (2005), a play by Black British playwright, debbie tucker green. While acknowledging the legitimate complaints of older female actors about the lack of diverse roles in older age, there have actually been dozens of new plays produced in the UK interested in older age in the twenty-first century.⁵⁸ However, many of these plays fail to escape the ageist implications of the discourse of the contemporary I outline above, and the majority of recent plays reproduce familiar narratives of ageing as a linear process of decline, older age as burdensome and the experience of getting old as self-evidently negative.

⁵⁷ Cole (2013).

⁵⁸ A few examples include: Bryony Lavery's *The Wedding Story* (2000), which is about a mother with Alzheimer's. Alecky Blythe's *Cruising* (2006) is a verbatim piece based on love and sex among the over-60s. Abi Morgan's *27* (2011) focuses on the politics and ethics of a scientific study of Alzheimer's disease, and her *Lovesong* (2011) on an old couple who have been together for 40 years. Tim Price's *Salt Root and Roe* (2011) is about septuagenarian identical twins who drown themselves because one has dementia.

The expectation that contemporary plays signal their relevancy through age-inflected metaphors has an impact that extends beyond the work's aesthetics. Commemorating the 70th birthday of Caryl Churchill, one of the most celebrated of experimental playwrights (and who is now in her mid-80s), Mark Ravenhill shared the following anecdote:

Recently, I was talking with a young German playwright. 'I love the British playwrights of your generation,' she said, 'Sarah Kane, Debbie Tucker Green [sic], Caryl Churchill.' Smiling, I told her that Churchill had her first stage play performed more than 35 years ago and is 70 this week. 'But how,' spluttered my colleague, 'can she write like such a young author and be such an old lady?'

How indeed?⁵⁹

Churchill's dramaturgy, striking for its experimentalism and shrewd encounter with the contemporary, is understood in this anecdote in terms of youthfulness. She is the more extraordinary because she is an 'old lady' with the innovative approach of a 'young author'.

Like Churchill, Tucker Green is celebrated for being at the cutting edge, and praised for her distinctive signature style, which is simultaneously aesthetically stimulative and politically bracing. Also like Churchill, Tucker Green's work is deeply imbricated in the ethics and politics of the contemporary. Her work *generations* is a short play first seen at the National Theatre (Cottesloe) in June 2005. The play was revived at the Young Vic, London, in March 2007, in a production directed by Sacha Wares. The play offers a more affirmative account of ageing than many contemporary plays. It largely avoids the ageing-as-decline trope and does not reproduce the familiar narrative of intergenerational exchange as competitive and hostile.⁶⁰ It produces a mapping of contemporary that draws on a repetitious rhythm of time, wherein family, memory, and history require an alternative epistemological structure to be legible. Three generations of a Black South African family – named in the character list as Boyfriend, Girlfriend (older sister), Junior Sister, Mum, Dad, Grandma and Granddad – chat, laugh, tease and bicker within the warmth of the family home. In Tucker Green's distinctive style, the dialogue ebbs and flows, circles and repeats, and a beautiful dirge sung by an onstage choir opens the play – with 57 names called out, repeated and lamented over. The dirge offers the context for audience understanding of the disappearances of family members over the course of the play, who leave at the end of each scene to join the choir. Although not named in the play, *generations* is concerned with

⁵⁹ Ravenhill (2008).

⁶⁰ Contemporary plays that position generations against each other in a competition over rights, resources and as part of the so-called culture wars, include Mark Ravenhill's *The Cane* (2019) and Mike Bartlett, *Snowflake* (2018).

the brutal impact of the AIDS crisis in the wider context of global inequalities and racial capitalism.

The setting of the play takes place in the gendered domestic space of the kitchen and revolves around cooking. In place of the hegemonic equation of older age with decline and burdensomeness, and of intergenerational relations with rivalry and conflict, in tucker green's play, the connections rub and spark both within and across the three age cohorts. Referring to Boyfriend, the character Girlfriend from the youngest generation says, 'He asked me if I could cook, Mum.' Mum replies, 'This is how your Father started with me.' And Grandma says, 'This is how your Father started with me'.⁶¹ The conversational refrains are affectionate and comforting as well as teasing and provocative, their preoccupation with dating rituals and food appraising female value in terms of culinary skills. The men of all three generations reveal that the women could not cook after all. This seems like light-hearted banter, but the comedy is dependent on the alignment of femininity with domesticity, and is a joke whose humour is only intelligible through its basis in real life. tucker green is known for her prioritisation of Black women in her dramaturgy, and this is felt in *generations* too; the family's rhythmic exchanges are as replete with gendered barbs and stings, as they are with warmth and affection.⁶²

These exchanges repeat across three scenes before breaking down in the fourth and fifth as characters disappear individually or in pairs – first Junior Sister, then Boyfriend and Girlfriend, then Father and finally Mother. As part of these refrains, Grandma manipulates the link between old age and deficient memory in a flirtatious tussle with Grandad, 'He don't know what he's rememberin', she says in three of the scenes, but in the fourth Grandad unexpectedly breaks the rhythm and pre-empts her line with, 'forgotten nothing [...] And neither have you.'⁶³ This can be read through Elinor Fuchs's notion of 'estragement', a coinage that removes the 'n' from Brechtian estrangement (*Verfremdung*) to produce an amalgam of 'strange' (or 'estrange') and 'age': 'In an age-conscious *Verfremdung* scene the ageing figures may see as if for the first time.'⁶⁴ Although, here, it is equally the audience who sees as if for the first time. This instance of estragement makes visible – momentarily at least – the age-based scripts that condition social identity and family communication.

Theatre scholar, Lucy Tyler, reads the temporal structure of repetition in *generations* as reflecting a hybrid dramaturgy, which melds European playwriting traditions

⁶¹ tucker green (2005: 73).

⁶² See Adiseshiah and Bolton (2020). Lynette Goddard focuses specifically on Black mothers in tucker green's work, and draws attention to the ways in which issues are explored in her plays 'through Black women's perspectives' (Goddard, 2020: 111).

⁶³ tucker green (2005: 87).

⁶⁴ Fuchs (2014: 77).

and trans-African call-and-response storytelling.⁶⁵ Through circularity and repetition, the performance's articulation of old age, gender and generational exchange is not determined by linear time or developmental gendered age phases. The opening stage directions describe the conversations as '*fluid and constant, although some may be happening in different time frames between certain characters.*'⁶⁶ This fluidity extends to the choir, whose dirge begins in the prologue and continues throughout the play but with notable exceptions in the third and fifth scenes ('*Choir is silent*'),⁶⁷ which Tyler reads as the expression of 'black maternal mourning' as Mum has lost her daughter in scene three, and Grandmother her daughter in scene five.⁶⁸ It is illuminating to position Tyler's insight alongside one of Baraitser's forms of suspended time – 'repeating' – which she connects to maternal time, a time that is 'alive to the potentials of not moving on, whilst at the same time maintaining its link with the ethical principle of one's own future being bound up with the future of another.'⁶⁹ This conception of the ethical experience of Black maternal time forms the temporal conditions of *generations*, whereby the disappearance of the children of each generation is poignantly registered. Furthermore, the movement of each character from the central dramatic narrative as they step aside to join the choir, which collectively sings '*a continuous gentle dirge*'⁷⁰ is, as David Ian Rabey, writes, 'non-closural, indeed dis-closural: it dissolves both literal and conventionally mediated separations between temporal events'.⁷¹ This eschewal of closure is additionally marked by the dead characters remaining on stage, displaced but still connected to the living in a melancholic state of incomplete mourning.

Nevertheless, the unspeakable loss of life denoted through the disappearance of family members in each scene is made the more forceful through the hegemonic notion that it is unnatural for children and parents to die before grandparents. Hence, the grandparents, who survive their children and grandchildren, are left alone on stage – appearing as social anachronisms – persisting in the present anomalously. Unlike in *Amour*, the play does not go as far as to will the grandparents' deaths, but it makes its intervention felt through registering their survival as aberrant relative to the deaths of younger family members. Social reproduction as a process of the production of time – that is, the creation of a new generation – is also the ontological norm, whose transgression is instrumental to the play's intervention. In this way, *generations* is contingent on age-normative frames about linear life course development

⁶⁵ Tyler (2020).

⁶⁶ tucker green (2005: 66).

⁶⁷ tucker green (2005: 81, 87).

⁶⁸ Tyler (2020: 145).

⁶⁹ Baraitser (2017: 79).

⁷⁰ tucker green (2005: 67).

⁷¹ Rabey (2020: 197).

and family narratives in order to make incisive its political interjection in a racialised global public health crisis.

Conclusion

There have been growing numbers of creative outputs by artists considered to be working at the cutting edge that validate older lives as material of interest for aesthetic treatment and cultural scrutiny. This might be part of a broader epochal self-concern along the lines of art theorist, Boris Groys' claim that 'The Middle Ages were interested in eternity, the Renaissance was interested in the past, modernity was interested in the future. Our epoch is interested primarily in itself.'⁷² With a marked rise in a global ageing population – the largest proportion of which, as Pat Thane notes elsewhere in this special issue, are still women – and increasing attention in the public sphere to these changes in demographics and their social, political and economic implications, it would be surprising if artists in creative encounters with the contemporary, did not produce narratives of old age and gender in their work. As part of this, there has been greater sensitivity to the complexities of ageing identities, including the heterogeneity of personality, the erotics of older age, the continuing possibility of liveliness and late life as an opportunity for creativity and self-making. These visions of active ageing jostle with older, more familiar narratives of frailty, dependency and ill health (increasingly often, dementia). All of these reflect the eclecticism of lived realities of late life, but rarely are these binary versions of old age co-produced as part of the same lived experience. One is *either* agile *or* dependent, sexually active *or* frail, creative *or* passive.

The contemporary as communicated through an age-inflected idiom provides an additional context for understanding artistic contemplations of old age and gender in the present period. Haneke and Tucker Green are both celebrated for their singularity as artists; working at the cutting edge; being at once aesthetically stylish *and* ethically/politically germane to the now; and for fashioning intellectually and affectively provocative encounters with audiences. To be sure *Amour* must be welcomed for insisting that old age and the performances of older actors are subjects of great cinematic fascination. In dedicating 127 minutes to this old couple – whose focus is distilled further through restricting the action to Anne and Georges' apartment – Haneke brings his stylish cinematography into an association with older age. Yet the film depends on a conventional gendered narrative of old age for its provocation. Ultimately, *Amour* reproduces a binaristic depiction of older age as either active and independent

⁷² Groys (2016: 137).

(worth living) or passive and dependent (not worth living). In the brief period before Anne's stroke, and in some flashbacks, we see her as a chic exemplification of positive ageing: active, culturally discerning and complex. After Anne becomes ill, the expansive, subtle profundity of her social presence is hollowed out, and she reduces to a slow, floundering, incapacitated body. Presenting after the first stroke as a sober deceleration in movement, growth and change, Anne then rapidly regresses after the second stroke to a prattling juvenility, a grisly mix of ageing female flesh and infantile dependence. The film does not entertain the possibility that physical frailty and social dependence might not exhaust the terms by which late life is defined, or that these conditions might not, in fact, cause *only* pain, sorrow and frustration to both cared for and caregiver.

generations largely avoids producing the sexist and ageist tropes of *Amour*. tucker green's dramaturgy is radical – both in its approach to theatre making and in its probing of epistemological frameworks. What makes her drama fresh is a rousing confrontation with the urgent issues of the current period pursued through a cool melding of poetic and musical forms, and dramaturgical inheritances from Black African diasporic and European cultural traditions. In probing epistemological givens about the structure of time, life course development and generational relationships, *generations* disconnects the ageist and sexist linkages in gendered narratives of ageing that follow a linear chronology with a narrative arc determined by reproduction and stages of decline. The play's refiguration of time – as non-linear and repetitious, as suspended time in Baraitser's sense – enables an ethics of association between and across ages and generations, in its elegiac registration of the unspeakable deaths of family members. Though literally unspeakable – no one speaks of the deaths, no one mentions AIDS – the hard-to-bear horror of this situation is conveyed through the grandparents as the last family members standing, as anachronous, untimely, over-stayers.

*

It is pleasing to see what has long been overdue: a growing representation, by contemporary artists working at the cutting edge, of gendered late life on our screens and stages. What is imperative now is to see more imaginative, subtle and complex narratives of old age and gender, where artists use the resources of contemporary aesthetics and culture to probe conventional frames, epistemologies and philosophies, and provide counter-depictions that envision gendered older life in all its density. If the ageing-as-decline narrative must still be encountered in some form, it is instructive to remember that decline has two meanings. Decline signifies deterioration, senescence or decrepitude, characteristics familiar to figurations of ageing, but equally decline means refusal, repudiation or eschewal. What we might like to see practised is

this latter meaning of decline, decline as wilful non-cooperation with the governing impulses of the contemporary. Decline understood in this sense potentially enables a radical form of obstinacy, which carries with it some registration of an anti-ageist politics.

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