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Being Old – or: Doing Age?

Drafting Age in Comics

»To the gods alone, old age and death never come« (608). Sophocles lamented old age in *Oedipus at Kolonos* and described everything that came with it as troublesome.. For centuries, the natural aging of the body has been used to be the very image of angst. Age has been considered an increasing and decreasing curve: After an initial growth and flourishing, decay follows, inevitably, even if the exact beginning of this last phase of life remains undefined. Depictions and readings of this last phase are characterized by dwindling attractiveness and sexual attraction (and activity), declining physical and mental abilities, as well as illness and imminent death. In short: the older the age, the less ideal the body becomes.

Recently, pathography has received considerable attention in comics studies. In these enquiries, the ageing and elderly body and mind, such as in cases of dementia, is depicted in clinical pictures. Often, these stories are told from the perspective of the relatives or caregivers; the sick are rarely the protagonists. An exception is Rebecca Roher's *Bird in a Cage*. The ageing of (grand-) parents is equated with illness and the need for care; their getting older becomes a narrative of the younger generations' concerns.

But the perception or experience of old age is not only relevant on the basis of physical and mental developments or comparisons. Age also matters with regard to how the term »generation« is understood. In the mid-twentieth century, especially since the 1960s, the linguistic use of the term in the western industrial nations reveals a diametrical view of age. Yet, the perception or experience of old age is not solely based on physical and mental development or comparison. Young and old are depicted as two opposing groups, where the latter is seen as embodying traditional values, reactionary attitudes and stagnation. Such »cultural patterns of interpretation« (Parnes/ Vedder/ Willer) create stereotypes which continue to have an effect. Regardless of the generational matters depicting the family experience (for example, grandparents) or units that are formed by shared generational experiences (»baby boomers«, senior citizens), the supposed opposition to the younger cohorts was subsequently stylized as an »economic generational conflict« (Krüger) rather than an ideal because of demographic changes in the 1980s. Thus, the economic consequences of the so-called »aging« of society increasingly shaped the public discourse.

In Germany, for example, this ultimately resulted in the expression ›Renterschwemme‹/ ›pensioner flood‹ (dwds), which negatively summarized the financial burdens on the social system due to the disproportionately increasing proportion of pensioners. In the recent past, the debate seems to revolve around the perceived gap in terms of values and ideals. This was also noticeable in the reporting and evaluation of the distribution of votes for ›Brexit‹ 2016, in which the entitlement of older people to vote on the future of the country was discussed (statista).

The interpretation of age and the corresponding assignment of social roles have changed considerably. Today, older people have diverse lifestyles, some of which are just as adventurous as those of the young. Countless comics pick up on this, and seniors are no longer just sidekicks, but protagonists. These can be *Les Vieux Fourneaux* (Lupano/ Cauuet) or the *Old Farts* (Vazelina). Memory is not only a topic because of its absence, but is also examined in terms of content, just like the changes in the ways we live together (as in *Special Exits: A Memoir* by Joyce Farmer).

So, how does the comic host debates in which classism, materialism and normative ideals come to the fore? Which images and experiences of the phenomenon of ›old age‹ are shown – and through whose voice? Is it still ›others‹ who are (indirectly) affected? The demographic change is noticeable beyond the panels of the comics industry: readers, as well as artists, are getting older. Indeed, Kaoru Endo, professor of sociology at Gakushuin University in Tokyo, states that for the manga market:

Different social problems and concerns rise up as opposed to when society is centered around young people, and manga that show the reality of an aging society are in demand from both readers and writers. Demand for stories focused on the elderly has grown alongside their audience: 27.7 percent of Japanese are older than 65, up from 21.5 percent just a decade ago. (Lies)

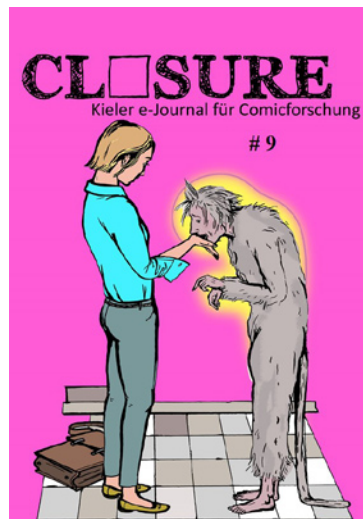


Abb. 1: Katharina Gschwendter, Titelbild CLOSURE #9

These aspects can be transferred to the entire market, as shown, for example, by the careers of Posy Simmonds or Alan Moore that have grown over a long period of time.

The ninth issue of CLOSURE brings together articles on these and other facets of age and aging in comics and its readership.

Assunta Alegiani's autobiographical comic *Entgleiten* opens our issue on Comics and Aging. The German term ›Entgleiten‹ can be translated as ›slipping away‹ or ›losing control‹. Here, the term precedes a striking graphic work that traces the effects of Autism Spectrum Disorders on the person concerned, her family, and her relationships. In strikingly paced sequences, the comic registers multiple acts of losing and gaining control in the face of a diagnosis later in life. Here, age emerges as a crucial factor for the understanding of the diagnosis, its prehistory, and aftermath. Alegiani's graphic work registers the ripple effects as past situations are re-evaluated and relationships are viewed anew once a medical term is applied to an entangled set of symptoms. As a result of its sensitive and self-reflexive approach, *Entgleiten* is not only an entry into the burgeoning genre of graphic medicine; it is also autobiographical comic about the conditions of autobiography in the context of age, family, and medical conditions.

In her accompanying article »Panel by Panel: Considering Life on the Autism Spectrum Through Making an Auto/Biographical Comic«, **Assunta Alegiani** offers a corresponding inquiry into the intersections of illness, disability, gender and age. The article argues that in order to understand the trajectory of a medical condition, it is crucial to account for the conjunction of age and the ›extended body‹ in its diverse environments. By tracing how artistic practice inflected her thinking about age and illness, embodiment and form, Alegiani demonstrates that the comics medium can offer an approach to these entangled issues in its own right. The article traces the possibilities of artistic research, in the course of which sequential art doubles as a form of thought and inquiry in its own right. »Panel by Panel« makes the case for comics as a vector of understanding, a graphic rethinking of the conditions for a »flourishing life«. Or rather: lives, plural, in their intersectional plurality and lived reality.

Ruth Gehrmann and **Lisa Brau-Weglinski** provide an intersectional and multimedia approach in their contribution »*The Boys. Age and Gender as Power-Constituting Categories in Comic Series and Series*«. They examine the role of Madelyn/James Stillwell, a character associated with the superhero Homelander in a parent-like connection. Based on the difference between the original, in which the Stillwell is male, and the serial adaptation with a female Madelyn Stillwell, they analyze the specifically gendered staging of old age – and to what extent old age shows itself here as a relational phenomenon.

In »Graphic narratives as a portrait of generations« **Irmela Marei Krüger-Fürhoff** talks to the Berlin art therapist and illustrator **Charlotte Müller** about her comic book *Ein Haus mit*

vielen Fenstern. Gesammelte Lebensgeschichten, which was published in spring 2022. It was a finalist for the Berthold Leibinger Prize 2021 and is currently nominated for the *Opera Prima Award* of the BRAW – Bologna Ragazzi. The artist reports on her experiences with the people whose stories found their way into the comic and provides insights into the conceptual and aesthetic decisions involved in its creation. Irmela Krüger-Fürhoff discusses possible approaches to analysis, which, in addition to Age Studies, also include theories of memory and New Materialism.

In her essay »Narratives of remembering and forgetting in Alzheimer comics« **Naomi Lobnig** uses two selected comics to describe the view of and interaction with older people suffering from Alzheimer's disease. After first giving a brief insight into the disease, its visualization in popular culture, as well as the research field of *Graphic Patographies*, the text moves into the analysis of *Aliceheimer's* and *Vergiss dich nicht*. The de-construction of ways of speaking about and seeing Alzheimer's and dementia with a focus on gender imbalances is central to Lobnig's reflections. The article elaborates on the significance of comics as a medium for narratives of remembering and forgetting and the genre of the *Graphic Memoir*.

The authors of »Aging in/with Comics«, **Lucia Cedeira Serantes** and **Nicole K. Dalmer**, present their American Library Association supported project to create a reading list that compiles, structures, and reflects on depictions of aging in comics. In their article, they introduce their criteria for this collection and demonstrate how comics can stimulate processes of reflection on the aging process and thereby counteract one-sided negative associations of decay and loss. The work of the authors (accessible at comicsandaging.blog) provides an empirical basis, and in their article, they stress that their collection is also to be understood as an argument: comics have unique resources to not only depict global aging processes, but also enable a nuanced portrayal of ›old age‹. The article shows that comics confront demographic developments with graphic experiments that go beyond outdated views of what it is like to age – and beyond stereotypes about what it means to be ›outdated‹ in the first place.

Our open section features an article by **Helene L. Bongers** titled »Killing the Colorist? Artistic division of labor in the production process of *Batman: The Killing Joke*«. Bongers' contribution traces the unsuccessful collaboration between Brian Bolland who illustrated *The Killing Joke* and its colorist John Higgins. In her comparative analysis of the original edition and Bolland's digital colorizations in the anniversary edition, the author convincingly argues that the two colorizations create significant semantic differences regarding the perception of the story. Her sample reading allows for her to raise more general issues like questions of agency and authorship and the value of color in comic books. The latter, Bongers argues, is an aspect that is often underestimated and neglected by comics scholars. In contrast to this, her article shows that the interplay between illustration and colorization matters.

The ninth edition of CLOSURE is supplemented by reviews of current publications from research literature and comics.

We would like to thank the authors as well as the reviewers, and especially **Katharina Gschwendtner** for designing our cover (Fig. 1).

Kiel, March 2023

Susanne Schwertfeger for the CLOSURE-Team

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