

## **STAGES: ON AGEING, COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE**

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Stages can mean “phase, step, or period”, “part of a process”, “theatrical stage”, or even “level, position, or scene of action”. Because it condenses diverse meanings that are, at the same time, closely related to the works published in this issue of *Diffractions*, we chose this term as an ideal umbrella under which to gather the different contributions and reflections on ageing and old age in the arts, the media, and culture.

As an expression of development or process, Stages establishes a direct link with the phases of life and, consequently, with discussions around the construction of age as a social category. Age is thus understood as a social practice: part of a process that is not merely biological, but multidimensional, involving social, cultural, economic, and historical aspects.

First of all, it should be noted that age only began to be used as a classificatory criterion for organising social life from the sixteenth century onwards (Ariès 1981). Before that, in the absence of an established life-course periodisation, children and adults often shared the same forms of work. With the emergence of schooling and

of disciplines such as pedagogy, developmental psychology, and paediatrics, children acquired a distinct status and began to be understood in their specificity.

Over time, the chronological organisation of life became institutionalised across different societies and cultures. Age came to structure education systems, work, family roles, and public policies. From birth to death, age began to shape how we are seen and represented, how we are expected to behave, how we understand our place in the world, and how we relate to one another and to the social realities around us.

Unlike childhood, old age was gradually consolidated as a natural and universal category. Through geriatrics and gerontology – disciplines initially focused on the biological aspects of ageing – this stage of life was socially coded as one of declining health and autonomy. As Nogueira and Capitanini (1999) observe, “the invention of the ‘third age’, which tends to be situated between retirement and old age, is the result of the generalisation of retirement systems and the intervention of institutions and agents (geriatricians, gerontologists, etc.) who, by specialising in the management of old age, contribute to the affirmation of both the category and the population it designates” (80).

However, in recent decades the sciences – especially within the Arts and Humanities – have increasingly sought to broaden perspectives on ageing and old age. Contexts of ageing and lived experiences in later life have moved to the centre of investigation, and diversity and complexity have begun to challenge long-standing ageist stereotypes and prejudices. It is from these expanded meanings of Stages that we bring together the works briefly presented below.

Because ageing is not a fixed concept, and because it unfolds in specific contexts and through contingent intersections, interdisciplinary approaches tend to open up new methods and perspectives on the phenomenon. The present collection of essays engages with diverse data, cultural artefacts, and theories that help us to make sense of – or indeed to question – rigid parameters surrounding the ageing process.

One particularly relevant aspect that emerges from these dissonances and multiple engagements with ageing is an appeal to non-Eurocentric ways of approaching processes of ageing. In “Drifting Histories”, Maria Menzel (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Germany) examines how the writer Namwali Serpell proposes a narrative structure that, by foregrounding a matrilineal

framework, challenges linear and patriarchal conceptions of history and progress. In “Intergenerational Communication in India”, Boobal Krishnan Natrayan (Central University of Tamil Nadu, India) adopts a communication-studies perspective to explore how media portrayals of older adults shape younger adults’ attitudes and behaviours, building on a scientific corpus that places Western and Asian intergenerational dynamics in dialogue, exposing both their structural differences and their shared constraints.

Similarly, in the review of Mary Del Priore’s *Uma história da velhice no Brasil* (A History of Old Age in Brazil), published in 2025, we identify the tensions that a formerly colonised territory continues to negotiate in relation to how older people are recognised and represented in historical documents, biographies, visual culture and the press. This difficult undertaking reveals not only how historical views of ageing are radically constrained, but also how some of the most revealing aspects lie in absences and contradictions. These, in turn, point to the ways in which older people who fall outside linear conceptions of history have resisted over time through visual and written culture – an argument closely aligned with Schwarcz’s (2026) recent work.

Another dimension that runs throughout the issue is the importance of the arts and cultural representations in disrupting fixed categories such as ageing and in generating new imaginaries that challenge norms and empty stereotypes of their meaning. In “Life Standing on Still Life”, Mário Avelar (UCP, Portugal) argues that the music video for Johnny Cash’s song *Hurt* – through its lyrical choices, its association with the still-life pictorial genre, and its staging of Cash’s persona – complexifies discussions of ageing and confronts stigmas associated with old age. In “Photographs, Words and a Surrealist Game”, Alfredo Brant (UCP, Portugal) examines how his own artistic practice with the Alcântara Senior University fostered singular and original perspectives on the urban experience in Lisbon.

“Agency and Autonomy”, by Sonia York-Pryce (Flinders University, Australia), focuses on exemplary older dancers who, through their unique and embodied artistic practices, challenge preconceptions of what a dancing body should act and look like. Agency is also one of the main concerns in our own contribution in Portuguese, “A autopercepção do envelhecimento e as tecnologias digitais” (The Self-Perception of Ageing and Digital Technologies), in which two

think tanks carried out in Portugal reveal key aspects in the use of digital media by older people and how those are perceived and addressed.

In Rita Wengorovius’s artistic contribution “From Home to Stage” – inspired by the author’s dramaturgical work and accompanied by rich photographic documentation –, the active role of older performers is foregrounded, encouraging a critical perspective attentive to the cultural, ethical, and political implications of undertaking such an artistic endeavour.

Finally, in the interview conducted with Pam Schweitzer, British educator, theatre director, and author, we reflect on her own active role in creating conditions for older people – particularly members of minority communities in the United Kingdom – to engage in oral history and drama-based practices. Her account reveals the multiplicity of forms and contexts through which reminiscence work can be shaped and mobilised.

We hope that this journey across fields such as communication, literature, theatre, music, history, dance, and photography points to methods, concepts, and objects of study capable of fostering caring, ethical, and thought-provoking ways of engaging with the phenomenon of ageing. At the same time, reflecting on stages of life demands attention to the diversity of social, cultural, and economic backgrounds from which experiences of ageing emerge. Such reflection must remain responsive to rapidly changing contexts, as contemporary societies grow ever more complex and interconnected. It therefore calls not only for interpretation but for critical responsibility: to actively challenge stigmas and dismantle stereotypes historically attached to particular age groups, and to promote more inclusive, nuanced understandings of later life that recognise agency, plurality, and dignity across generations.

## References

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