

Inscriptions of Time: Towards a Multilevelled Conceptualization of Age

Caroline Bem (McGill University)

On December 25, 2013, Edward Snowden addressed a two-minute alternative Christmas message to the world, from Russia with love via the British television station Channel 4. The short speech, of course, was part of Snowden's relentless campaign denouncing what he terms a "worldwide system of mass surveillance." We live in an age where privacy is on the cusp of being rendered obsolete, Snowden warns us. "A child born today will grow up with no conception of privacy at all."¹ Snowden's symbolically invested child serves as a blank screen upon which a vision of the future is projected. The message, however brief and unassuming, aims to stir our collective consciousness and, perhaps, make history; in fact, it could almost be viewed as a 21st century equivalent of that other landmark speech whose 50th anniversary was celebrated in Washington this past summer. But whereas Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "four little children" were cast in the hopeful role of awaiting the day when they would "not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character," the rhetorical figure of Snowden's lone child exists in a dark present of almost-certain condemnation: "They'll never know what it means to have a private moment to themselves, an unrecorded, unanalyzed thought."²

¹ Catherine Taibi, "Edward Snowden to Deliver Channel 4's Christmas Message," *Huffington Post* (24 December, 2013 and January 16, 2014) http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/24/edward-snowden-christmas-channel-4_n_4498386.html (accessed January 20, 2014).

² *Ibid.*

Whether bleak or hopeful, in both of these instances, the essence of the present age, or epoch, is defined and made graspable in relation to the biological age of the youngest members of society—the citizens of tomorrow. In accordance with what François Hartog has termed “presentism,” Snowden applies the principles of responsibility and precaution to a future which, to avoid catastrophe, requires from us that we alter our present now.³ However, the interplay conjured up in his short speech between historical/collective and biological/individual time, between an already-historicized present and a future forever being predicted, is not only a potent rhetorical image. It also speaks to the conceptual richness of “Age,” which is what this fourth issue of *Seachange* is interested in parsing.

A brief enumeration of the most common associations conjured up by the term “Age” suffices to show how it mobilizes multiple levels of interplay between the individual and the collective, the biological and the historical. Thus, the present age is often viewed through the lens of a raging societal obsession with youth, going hand in hand with the so-called acceleration of time noted by historians since the early 1980s and now generally attributed to the rise of digital culture and the sense of ubiquity brought about by the omnipresence of new technologies in our everyday lives.⁴ Since Simone de

³ François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité: Présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2003), 211-215.

⁴ For a number of historians, the idea that, in the modern era, the fundamental tripartition of past-present-future is subjected to all kinds of shocks and distortions points to a significant crisis of temporality, understood alternatively as an acceleration of time by Reinhart Koselleck or, on the contrary, as a stretching out of time into *longue durée* by Fernand Braudel. The notions of a closed future, as in Félix Torres' writings, and of the acceleration of time as described by Koselleck, can also be applied

INSCRIPTIONS OF TIME

Beauvoir wrote her exhaustive treatise on the social, historical and philosophical implications of ageing in 1970, the question of ageism, which is a direct result of youth-obsession, has only come more strongly into focus.⁵ Even long after Susan Sontag pointed out the “double-standard of ageing” in 1972,⁶ the fear of old age and its ramifications—such as the spiral of aesthetic surgery its mere threat elicits—continues to be one of the principal sites where gender equality is negotiated. In 2011, for the first time in history, women surpassed men in overall education attainment in Canada, and in both college and bachelor degrees in the US.⁷ Yet, that very same year, a writer for one of *The Globe and Mail’s* blogs reported on the rise of a disturbing recent trend in the UK and US which was also spreading throughout Canadian aesthetic plastic surgery clinics: labioplasty, a form of female genital cosmetic surgery seeking to reduce the size of the labia minora in women showing no signs of physiological anomaly. While not related specifically to ageing, this

to new media practices: the closed aspect of the future is highly reminiscent of the lack of true choice within new media environments—the impression that everything, from our path through a website to global political events, has been pre-written or scripted—while that of acceleration relates back to ideas of ubiquity and chronic lack of time within the network society. See Fernand Braudel, “La longue durée” *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 13 4 (1958), 725-753; Fernand Braudel, *Écrits sur l’histoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 1969); Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Change*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985); Félix Torres, *Déjà vu. Post et néo-modernisme: Le Retour du passé* (Paris: Ramsay, 1986).

⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *La Vieillesse* Vols. 1 and 2 (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1970).

⁶ Susan Sontag, “The Double Standard of Aging,” *The Saturday Review* (September 23, 1972), 29-38.

⁷ For Canadian figures, see The Canadian Press, “More Women Than Men Have Post-Secondary Education,” *CBC News: Canada* (June 26, 2013) <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/more-women-than-men-have-post-secondary-education-1.1358656> (access January 20, 2014). For US figures, see Associated Press, “In a First, Women Surpass Men in College Degrees,” *CBS News* (April 26, 2011) <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/in-a-first-women-surpass-men-in-college-degrees/> (accessed January 20, 2014).

trend goes hand in hand with other procedures that fall under the general category of female genital cosmetic surgery, some of which seek to increase sexual response and others, such as vaginal tightening, which are a direct response to the effects of childbirth and ageing on the female body.⁸ Within the context of frequent reports of “successful women” battling stress,⁹ body image issues and even serious mental illness, such as late-onset anorexia,¹⁰ it becomes evident that, for women, societal developments of longstanding historical import and the construction of ageing as a “moral disease”¹¹ remain in conflict even today. However, as recent figures make clear, men are

⁸ It is generally thought that more and more women are turning to this procedure in order to conform to an aesthetic ideal promoted through increased exposure to mainstream pornographic imagery. See Zosia Belsky, “Women Pursue Labioplasty Even When They’re ‘Normal’ Down There: Study,” *The Globe and Mail “Hot Button” Blog* (August 25, 2011) <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/the-hot-button/women-pursue-labioplasty-even-when-theyre-normal-down-there-study/article616905/> (accessed January 20, 2014). See also Hayley Mick, “Hit Me With Your Best Shot,” *The Globe and Mail* (August 2, 2007) <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/hit-me-with-your-best-shot/article1079764/> (accessed January 20, 2014).

⁹ In addition to Anne-Marie Slaughter’s oft-cited *The Atlantic* piece denouncing the impossibility of juggling the demands of a high-ranking job with those of family life, a recent wave of articles report on women who abandoned their careers in order to devote themselves to their families. See Anne-Marie Slaughter, “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All,” *The Atlantic* (June 13, 2012) <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020/> (accessed January 21, 2014); Gaby Hinsliff, “I had it all, but I didn’t have a Life,” *The Guardian* (November 1, 2009) <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/nov/01/gaby-hinsliff-quits-working-motherhood> (accessed January 21, 2014); Rosa Prince, “Louisa Mensch, MP quits to care for family” *The Telegraph* (August 6, 2012) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/9455344/Louise-Mensch-MP-quits-to-care-for-young-family.html> (accessed January 20, 2014).

¹⁰ See for example: Randi Hutter Epstein, “When Eating Disorders Strike in Midlife,” *The New York Times* (July 13, 2009) <http://www.nytimes.com/ref/health/healthguide/esn-eating-disorders-ess.html> (accessed January 20, 2014).

¹¹ Sontag, “The Double-Standard,” 29.

INSCRIPTIONS OF TIME

increasingly affected by similar developments, with a 106% increase in cosmetic procedures noted between 1997 and 2012 by the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery.¹²

The present issue of *Seachange*, then, is divided into two categories. The first deals with specific aspects of the above-mentioned issues and, in particular, with questions of sexuality, well-being and long-term care that arise for both men and women in maturity and old age. Thus, through an analysis of three recent German films, Tatjana Schmidt explores the recent turn to a haptic representation of the ageing, predominantly female body and its possible role in easing social tensions and resolving ageist sentiments among Germany's rapidly-ageing population. Focusing, this time, on ageing men, Hélène Laurin's contribution to this issue takes as its starting point the autobiographical writings of Mötley Crüe frontman Nikki Sixx. In particular, Laurin is interested in Sixx's turn toward a brand of self-help which equates maturity with the attainment of wisdom and well-being. Turning to the question of long-term care, Annmarie Adams and Sally Chivers offer a nuanced and enlightening comparative account of several elderly care facilities. By drawing on examples of both interior and exterior architecture, as well as on an analysis of the visual content generated by institutions for

¹² "Men had almost 1 million cosmetic procedures, 10% of the total. The number of cosmetic procedures for men increased over 106% from 1997. The top five surgical procedures for men were: liposuction, rhinoplasty, eyelid surgery, breast reduction to treat enlarged male breast, and ear shaping." American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, Press Center, "Statistics 2012" (no date) <http://www.surgery.org/media/news-releases/cosmetic-procedures-increase-in-2012> (accessed January 21, 2014).

promotional purposes online, the authors draw attention to the ways in which the manufacturing of a homelike décor serves to mask the highly institutional and rigid organization of such facilities.

The second thread of writings presented in what follows explore other implications of “Age.” In particular, the question of time is taken up from a variety of angles. Marcienne Martin opens this issue with a theorization of age that is rooted in the notion of programmability. If the programmed life-span is a founding principle of biological life, asks Martin, what roles can be assigned in turn to structural and stochastic processes in the construction of our understanding of age? By looking successively at genetic, developmental and temporal aspects of programmability, Martin argues that biological age functions as a conceptual tool allowing us to apprehend the greater flow of time, where programmability forever verges on entropy. Going one step further, Rafico Ruiz weighs the viability and implications of an emerging geological concept, the “Anthropocene,” which is currently being evaluated for its ability to convey a geological paradigm shift wherein human activity on the earth’s ecological systems has become *the* dominant global geophysical force. Ruiz foregrounds the concept of “medium,” defined according to Mark Hansen and W. J. T. Mitchell, to bridge the gap between the evental, spatialized and relational dimensions of inscribed time. In Ruiz’s reading, then, the Anthropocene emerges as the spatio-historical locus where human actors and the environment intersect in what is always fundamentally a mediated relation. A somewhat similar concern, this time with the idea of age as geological inscription, underlies Pascale McCullough Manning and Andrea Charise’s contribution, which studies George Eliot’s *Silas Marner: The Weaver of Raveloe* (1861) as an instance of the “geological imaginary.” Combining attentive textual analysis and creative originality (McCullough Manning

INSCRIPTIONS OF TIME

provided an original hand-cut block print of a fossilized trilobite as a visual marker for the essay's sections), the authors explore the ways in which Eliot's novel superimposes the workings of geological time onto one man's ageing body, while taking care to relate the novel's overarching project to ongoing concerns with temporal inscriptions of age in contemporary artistic practice.

From geologically inscribed time it is only one leap to preservation, the question examined by Natalie Bussey in a piece that poses the problem of ageing contemporary art. Through an account that mixes theoretical reflections with vivid accounts of her recent visits to the studio of Contemporary Conservation Limited in New York, Bussey questions what she calls "the strange ahistorical veneer of the contemporary."¹³ Ultimately, she argues that, in order to enrich our thinking on the problematic category of "the contemporary" within art theoretical discourse, we must not only consider a work's ageing and reception history, but also the stage of its restoration and conservation as well.

Finally, a political portrait of the present age is traced by Cayley Sorochan in her review of Gregory Elliott's recent translation of Alain Badiou's *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings* ([2011] 2012). As its title suggests, Badiou's essay posits contemporary political uprisings, such as the events of the Arab Spring, as the catalysts of a return of History with a capital H. In addition to parsing the constituents of the political efficacy of riots, Badiou's text is particularly valuable for its undaunted exploration of the dictatorial dimension of popular democracy, a paradox which hinges on the continuity between the egalitarian democracy internal to movements and the popular dictatorship they impose externally.

¹³ W.J.T. Mitchell, "Images," in *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 52.

It is our hope that, taken together, the wide range of disciplinary methods and object choices evidenced across these contributions will offer a multi-levelled portrait of “Age,” demonstrating the concept’s rich potential and opening the way for ongoing elaborations of its numerous philosophical, historical, and theoretical dimensions.

Caroline Bem is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University. Her thesis, titled “From Writing Tablets to System Reboots: *Death Proof* and the Cinematic Diptych,” examines Quentin Tarantino’s 2007 film *Death Proof* from the perspective of art history, narrative theory and (video)game studies. She was the Assistant Editor for the journal *Intermédialités* which is based at Université de Montréal (www.intermedialites.ca) and she is co-founder and co-editor of *Seachange*. Her wider research interests include narrative theory in film, literature, and video games, as well as contemporary art ranging from painting to performance and new media installations. She has published exhibition reviews in *Border Crossings*, *Canadian Art* and *Ciel Variable*.

Bibliography

American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, Press Center. “Statistics 2012” (no date) <http://www.surgery.org/media/news-releases/cosmetic-procedures-increase-in-2012> (accessed January 21, 2014).

Associated Press. “In a First, Women Surpass Men in College Degrees,” *CBS News* (April 26, 2011) <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/in-a-first-women-surpass-men-in-college-degrees/> (accessed January 20, 2014).

INSCRIPTIONS OF TIME

Beauvoir, Simone de. *La Vieillesse* Vols. 1 and 2. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1970.

Belsky, Zosia. "Women Pursue Labioplasty Even When They're 'Normal' Down There: Study," *The Globe and Mail "Hot Button" Blog* (August 25, 2011) <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/the-hot-button/women-pursue-labioplasty-even-when-theyre-normal-down-there-study/article616905/> (accessed January 20, 2014).

Braudel, Fernand. "La longue durée." *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 13, no. 4 (1958): 725-753.

———. *Écrits sur l'histoire*. Paris : Flammarion, 1969.

Canadian Press, The. "More Women Than Men Have Post-Secondary Education," *CBC News: Canada* (June 26, 2013) <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/more-women-than-men-have-post-secondary-education-1.1358656> (accessed January 20, 2014).

Hartog, François. *Régimes d'historicité: Présentisme et expériences du temps*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2003.

Hinsliff, Gaby. "I had it all, but I didn't have a Life," *The Guardian* (November 1, 2009) <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/nov/01/gaby-hinsliff-quits-working-motherhood> (accessed January 21, 2014).

Hutter Epstein, Randi. "When Eating Disorders Strike in Midlife," *The New York Times* (July 13, 2009) <http://www.nytimes.com/ref/health/healthguide/esn-eating-disorders-ess.html> (accessed January 20, 2014).

Koselleck, Reinhart. *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Change*, trans. Keith Tribe. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985.

Mick, Hayley. "Hit Me With Your Best Shot," *The Globe and Mail* (August 2, 2007) <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/hit-me-with-your-best-shot/article1079764/> (accessed January 20, 2014).

Mitchell, W.J.T. "Images." *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Prince, Rosa. "Louisa Mensch, MP quits to care for family" *The Telegraph* (August 6, 2012) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/9455344/>

Louise-Mensch-MP-quits-to-care-for-young-family.html (access January 20, 2014).

Slaughter, Anne-Marie. "Why Women Still Can't Have It All," *The Atlantic* (June 13, 2012) <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020/> (accessed January 21, 2014).

Sontag, Susan. "The Double Standard of Aging." *The Saturday Review* (September 23, 1972): 29-38.

Taibi, Catherine. "Edward Snowden to Deliver Channel 4's Christmas Message," *Huffington Post* (24 December, 2013 and January 16, 2014) http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/24/edward-snowden-christmas-channel-4_n_4498386.html (accessed January 20, 2014).

Torres, Félix. *Déjà vu. Post et néo-modernisme: Le Retour du passé*. Paris: Ramsay, 1986.