

Carte Semiotiche, Annali 10: Silver Age. New cultures of old age

Deadline: May 30, 2023

Carte Semiotiche

CALL FOR PAPERS: CARTE SEMIOTICHE, ANNALI 10 Silver Age. New cultures of old age edited by Mauro Portello and Maria Pia Pozzato

One of the most evident and pervasive phenomena of our time is the ageing of the population. The pressure of global demographics is now one of the many cataclysmic aspects of our age. It is possible to speak of various demographics (Western, Asian, African) that set different dynamics on a variable scale. Faced with an extended life span, older people have increased so much that welfare systems are in trouble. And yet, instead of an adequate cultural elaboration for such a phenomenon, we are instead witnessing the production of new imaginaries and narratives while reactivating tradition: whether it be Plato's approach to old age (the 'wise and precious' one) or Aristotle's (old age as a useless burden). Nevertheless, the question takes on unprecedented dimensions in the face of the staggering demographic figure of the nine billion human beings populating the planet today. The redefinition of social roles has often been addressed; for example, that of the grandparents, re-functionalized as free babysitters and sources of economic support; Another field in which research has already been pursued regards the problem of correcting the psycho-physical damage that old age inevitably entails, with medical but also cultural interventions.

However, a more in-depth reflection on the phenomenon could help to "free" old people from a forced enclosure in sociological grids and return them to their natural flow of life while respecting their individual unicum. Is it possible to return to social "progress" in old age? Having reached an advanced stage of life, could a person project themselves beyond the biological condition? The hope is that a cultural elaboration can prevail over the bio-physical fact, thanks to which each person, even in old age, can maintain their life project.

This issue of Carte Semiotiche aims to advance current thinking on the status of old age in a cultural sense that flanks statistical considerations and psycho-sociological readings with their methodological specificities.

The following is a non-exhaustive list of topics of interest to the issue regarding old age:

- The old person as a consumer. Given the quantitative relevance of the old person in society, advertising has rapidly changed by enhancing communication adapted to this type of consumer. On the one hand, this is done stylistically through language that favours traditional motifs and satisfies the public's expectations. On the other, through a strategy targeting specific product sectors or appealing to the older consumer. Those discourses, which Jean-Marie Floch would probably have described as referential or critical, must be applied to difficult products to sell, such as

denture fixatives, nappies, and prostate drugs. The Analysis of advertising communication could provide indications that go beyond those inherent to a "market for ageing" to give a greater inside into the representations through which society thinks of the third age today.

- Another area for reflection could be politics, which is currently involved in specific hot topics, such as the problem with pensions. In recent months, this discourse has led to strikes in France, and the population has been protesting vigorously against the government's proposed reform. In general, there is a growing interest in discourses concerning the individual economic (pensions), social (the new costs to be borne during a longer life) and systemic repercussions (should it be called welfare or abandonment?).

- Old age is directly and indirectly represented in urban and architectonic spaces. How those spaces are organised is relevant for manifesting this special treatment: there are specific tools and architecture for retired people, such as retirement homes and dedicated areas of gyms but also hotels, spas, waiting rooms, and special staircases, among others, in public and private buildings. More often, the governments plan a soft reduction of architectural barriers to help many senior users; those are not radical changes for people with disabilities but small "facilities" specially designed for the less agile. Hence, some analyses could refer to a remodulation of public or private space based on a bodily scheme, that of the senior citizen, which has its range of possibilities for movement and action. This theme is connected with the technologies developed to make life easier for the aged: robots capable of caring for non-self-sufficient people or a form of home automation tailored to people with age-specific disabilities are some outputs of this relation.

- Whereas in the past, the older person generally had side roles in the plot of comedies, films, and television series (though with obvious, well-known exceptions), recently, there has been a new prominence of the older person in very different areas of entertainment (for instance in television, theatre, cinema and music). There are more films which revolve around the so-called "Third Age", together with some television genres, such as the talent show *The Voice Senior* (in which only singers over sixty compete) or the docu-reality *Quelle brave ragazze* (where three celebrity women with an average age of eighty travel the world). Those are some examples of the spectacularisation of ageing where the main character(s) are not ridiculed as in a cruel corrida but bring out the idea of a late "golden age".

- One can also consider the field of visual arts (painting, photography, video art). The representation of old age in art history is mainly related to a memento mori, as in Giorgione's famous painting (*Portrait of an Old Woman*, 1506). While contemporary examples, such as the portrait of an already elderly Queen Elizabeth painted by Lucian Freud in 2001, have other connotations, such as that of power. The nexus between the third age and art can also be studied from the viewers' point of view, with reference to museum visits and exhibitions that take special account of the interests and needs of elderly people.

- Many novels have been devoted to old age in the last twenty years. A vast corpus can be assembled in this field (among others, Philip Roth, Benoîte Groult, Adolfo Bioy Casares, Henning Mankell, Elsa Chabrol, Arno Geiger, Siri Hustvedt, Clara Sereni, Fred Vargas). If interesting and justified, it is also possible to work on a restricted corpus.

- Another aspect closely linked to the anthropological approach and the semiotics of cultures is

the relativity of values regarding ageing according to cultures, geographical areas, and ideological stances. For instance, a drastic opposition is evident in the United States between a feminist way of ageing (keeping grey hair visible, not using make-up, and wearing comfortable clothes, etc.), contrasted to a “Jane Fonda-style” in which doing gymnastics, having cosmetic surgery, wearing heavy make-up or youthful clothes is the day to day of most Americans. Degrowth philosophies also lead to models of ageing based on small activities, preferably in isolated or less urbanised areas, in economically and socially supportive communities. Then, the aged person has a different relevance depending on the religious and productive spheres and in specific forms of social organisations (systems of parental relations, hierarchical structures, etc.). Finally, still inherent to the area of values,

one can analyse the subject of death, which is close to that of old age (Wijkmark 2008).

- Senior lifestyles and forms of life today can be analysed, and hence the practices in which a considerable part of the population is involved, increasingly healthy and active despite their advanced age. Eating habits and diets (Del Toma 2001); personal care and the beauty sphere, where the use of cosmetics and plastic surgery leads people to live with youthful aesthetic standards; the whole field of fitness can be analysed considering, for instance, soft gymnastics or entertainment, on which “real” manuals have come out (Franchini 2002); fashion can be another field of interest. More often, old person models can be seen parading on the most important catwalks or posing in fashion shoots; elderly-friendly tourism is asserting itself, which, however, admits an infinite series of modalities since it ranges from the quietest short-haul bus trip to trekking in Tibet.

- All these areas can be considered individually or taken into account in a configurative way, perhaps to propose a taxonomy of forms of old age. It might emerge, for instance, the “old-fashioned” person, for whom everything runs its course; or, vice versa, the “reactive” person of those who do not recognise the concluding phase of life as an obstacle; or, even, the ones that think old age as a “wise” period, and think they are a precious source of knowledge; or the “mindful” person, completely bent towards the past; but also the variant of the “fools” or the ones wholly dedicated to “community-based” commitments. Different passions can underpin each type of attitude, characterised, for example, by the opposition hilarious/mopey, serene/sad, serious/ironic, defensive/open, elegiac/clinic (Portello 2013).

The proposed themes can be approached from different types of textuality, practices, media and social contexts.

The Editorial Board invites interested scholars to send an abstract with a proposal of the contribution of max 500 words in English, French, Italian, Spanish (please a short bibliography attached) by the 30th MAY 2023 to the following addresses: mariapia.pozzato@unibo.it ; mauroportello@gmail.com and cartesemiotiche@semio-cross.it

Contributions in Italian, English, French, Spanish

Summary

Abstract length: about 500 words

The abstract must contain the indications of a minimum bibliography of reference

Articles length: max. 40,000 characters, including spaces (about 8000 words)

Images: b/w in body text and colour in a separate file (jpeg, png, resolution at least 1500 pixels on the largest side)

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Abstract submission deadline: 30-05-2023

Date of communication acceptance of proposals: 10-06-2023

Deadline for delivery of selected contributions: 30-09-2023

End of the review process: NOVEMBER 2023

Expected release date of the volume: JANUARY 2024

Reference:

CFP: Carte Semiotiche, Annali 10: Silver Age. New cultures of old age. In: ArtHist.net, May 12, 2023
(accessed Jun 19, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/39271>>.