

Successful Images of Successful Ageing?

Representations of Vigorous Elderly People in a Swedish Educational Television Programme¹

Kristina Wallander

Abstract

The dominant discourse concerning older people used to be one of decline and loss. Lately, however, representations of old age have tended to be more diverse and two paradigms have been introduced – one framing enfeeblement and one framing new, positive roles for older people, conceptualized as successful ageing. The present article demonstrates how representations of vigorous elderly people are construed in the programme *VeteranTV*, produced by UR, Swedish educational television. Part of the aim of *VeteranTV* was to enhance the image of life after 65 in an anti-ageist spirit. The article discusses the images of vigorous elderly people with respect to their emphasis on sameness or difference, their age-coding, the discourses and subject positions emphasized in them, and not least, their possible ageism.

Keywords: images of older people, successful ageing, ageism, UR, educational discourse, narrative strategies

Introduction: Age Prejudice and Portrayals of Positive Ageing

Age prejudice has been described as the most socially condoned and institutionalized form of prejudice in the world (Nelson 2002: ix). The media often play a part in reproducing stereotyped old age images, and one dominant media discourse concerning older people tells a narrow tale of decline and loss. Lately, however, representations of old age have tended to be more diverse and two paradigms have been introduced – one framing enfeeblement and one framing new, positive roles for older people (Gilleard and Higgs 2005; Lundgren and Ljuslinder 2011; Nilsson 2008). It is not unusual for television programmes to present their audience with 70- or 80-year-olds who have travelled to far-away places, toured with jazz bands or engaged in parachuting (cf. Nilsson and Jönson 2009: 101). This can certainly be understood as a step forward, and studies have demonstrated that you can temporarily reduce implicitly negative age stereotypes by highlighting positive representatives of older people (Levy and Banaji 2002: 68). Yet descriptions of sprightly pensioners must also be subjected to critical scrutiny. Are such images of so-called positive ageing in fact free of age prejudice?

Specific television formats for representation of older persons are now on offer, and this is a study of one such format, *VeteranTV* (VeteranTV), produced by UR, Swedish

educational television, between 2005 and 2009. The programme was created for use in two university courses, one concentrating on failing health in old people and the other on healthy ageing. The two perspectives on ageing gave rise to narratives about decline and loss but also about so-called “positive ageing” (cf. Katz 2001/2002). The latter term has been the subject of lively debate, as has its relation to similar concepts such as “healthy”, “productive” and “successful” ageing. I will use the term to refer to old age representations that seemingly aim at describing older people in a positively charged manner, i. e. representations that run counter to the loss and decline paradigm. In the present article, I focus on such representations of “positive” ageing: images of vigorous pensioners.

The team behind *VeteranTV* had the ambition to improve the general image of ageing. The wish to “transcode” is clearly perceptible – that is, to take an existing characterization of a group or category and apply a new characterization to it (Hall 1997: 270). “When we started,” says Bobbo Krull, one of the programme’s two presenter-reporters, “we wanted to show that there actually are older people and contradict the picture that ‘old’ is the same as ‘unsexy’ or ‘unglamorous’” (*Veteraner på veteran-tv* 2008), and in an interview given when the series was first launched Özz Nûjen, the other presenter-reporter, said they wanted to upgrade the image of older people by presenting them as people just like us. The “us/them” perspective in Nûjen’s statement is worth noting: even though he stresses the similarities between old and young, he also distinguishes sharply between the categories.

The old are bloody cool people, like you and me.... We want to show what it’s like to grow old in Sweden. In the media it’s all about bedsores and neglect. But actually, old people have loads of fun too. They fuck like us, eat and party like us, says Özz Nûjen. (Lindner 2005; my italics.)

Both presenter-reporters are around thirty years old, and a key idea behind *VeteranTV* is to contrast old and young. When UR introduced the format to other European broadcasters in 2009, they strongly emphasized the encounter between younger and older people. “It’s the delightful, moving or funny moments they create together that make this series so special and helps us recognize the individualities behind the white hair and the wrinkles.” (*VeteranTV: A TV series about the beauty and the agony of growing old!* 2009) *VeteranTV Europa* (2010) worked along the same lines, and when Finnish YLE took over the format in *Situation Senior* (2010), two young male presenter-reporters were teamed with the pensioners. As a consequence, quite young reporters have in fact been entrusted with the right to describe and interpret the world of elderly people.

Does the Programme Succeed in Realizing its Anti-ageist Ambitions?

The aim of my article is to examine the implementation of the anti-ageist ambitions behind *VeteranTV*. My question concerns the extent to which the people behind the programme were able to realize their aspiration to improve the image of older people and to demonstrate that old people are just like us (that is, “us” in the norm-setting middle age). I also question whether people over 65 years of age are described in terms of sameness or difference when compared with other groups, particularly with young people. Most of all, I wish to discuss whether – despite all the good intentions – ageism is reflected, explicitly or implicitly, in the excerpts from the programmes I have studied.

An Active Life is Portrayed as a Precondition for Positive Ageing

Between the years 2005 and 2009, *VeteranTV* produced 33 instalments of 30 minutes each. I have watched them all and systematically observed their form and content: genres, subjects, forms of presentation, and narrative strategies. A typical instalment comprises five or six segments; a total of 191 segments were broadcast over the five years. Most of the segments illustrate problems related to ageing; however, one or two segments in each instalment portray encounters between the two presenter-reporters and vigorous pensioners. Given my aim, these episodes are of particular interest and are the segments on which I will focus here. My core material, then, consists of 44 segments.

I will relate the material to several different discourses about activity as a precondition for positive ageing (see next section), where discourse is understood as “a certain way of speaking about and understanding the world (or a segment of the world)” (Winther Jørgensen and Philips 2002: 7). My narrower focus on activity as a precondition for positive ageing is the result of my thematic analysis of the core material. In determining how meaning is articulated in Hall’s sense (1997), I have paid special attention to the narrative structure and the use of speech and visual images within it.

An Interdisciplinary Framework for Understanding Representations of Ageing

My study of the anti-ageist ambition behind *VeteranTV* was carried out with the help of theories and concepts taken from social psychology, social gerontology, and cultural and communication studies.

Prejudiced Communication about Elderly People

The concept of *ageism* is of fundamental importance to my study. Here, “ageism” refers to stereotyping attitudes or beliefs vis-à-vis individuals or groups based on age, or to differential or discriminating treatment due to age (see Kite and Smith Wagner 2002: 131). Ageism can take the form of *prejudiced communication*, communication in which in-groups speak about out-groups in a prejudiced or stereotyping manner (Rusher 2000: 2-3). Stereotypes are necessary in concept formation, but the more our knowledge increases, the less importance the stereotype will have (cf. Cuddy and Fiske 2002: 14). Stereotypes regarding older people may come about automatically or unconsciously, and it is thought that we are all, to some extent, guilty of such *implicit ageism* (Levy and Banaji 2002: 51). When a person is the object of excessive sympathy due to his/her age, reduced to a subordinate role as someone to be pitied or patronized (cf. Rusher 2002: 4), we are faced with *benevolent prejudice*.

The concept of *the Other* offers one possible point of departure for studies of prejudice in the representation of older people. Pickering maintains that marking out somebody as the Other activates the same mechanisms as does stereotyping: you define a person or a group in terms that are explicitly or implicitly depreciating. At the level of culture or institutions, stereotyping and othering become collective processes of judgement that feed on social myths. Their ideological function is to stabilize the “us/them” relationship (Pickering 2001: 47-50).

In a study of stereotypes of elderly people in the Danish press, Elmelund-Præstekær and Wien make use of a perspective from social psychology that is also productive in my context. They regard journalists as an in-group who work in a way that invites stereotyping of out-groups. In this case, the distribution of power between the in-group and out-groups is very unequal (2006: 51), and those whose voices are meant to be heard have no real control over how they are described. The situation is similar with respect to *VeteranTV* and its representation of older people. It is particularly interesting that these representations are created by an in-group of younger people who become, using a concept from Dahlgren (1988), “super-narrators” of the stories of older people, writing the rules of the discursive practice.

The Idea of Successful Ageing

The vigorous elderly in my core material can be said to live in *the third age*. The third age – a functional, not a chronological, concept – is the time after the end of working life during which people can largely manage on their own. Gerontologists distinguish between this period in life and the fourth age, during which people are frail and dependent on others for performing basic everyday functions (Andersson 2002: 210). The vigorous elderly in my material are people in their third age who exemplify *successful ageing*. What makes ageing successful is a question of cultural expectations. According to Torres, current Western ideas are strongly influenced by gerontology and focus on the capacity to be active and manage on your own (2001: 22-30). Katz holds that we are living in a neoliberal society that capitalizes on activity. The distinction between an active and an inactive life has gained in importance, while the dividing line between a productive and a non-productive life, paramount in earlier periods, has become less prominent (2000: 148). Gerontologists have come to stress the values of a busy, creative, healthy, and mobile life in retirement, deferring inactivity and lack of engagement to the final phases of life (Katz 2000: 138). However, people from different cultures think differently about activity and wellbeing. The individual may well be more interested in being than in doing (Torres 2001: 122-126).

Theorists of culture have argued that the emphasis on positive activity within gerontology is not without connections to the ideology of consumerism (Katz 2000: 148). Images related to consumerism tend to play down the importance of age: “the prospect of endless life has been revived through consumer images of perpetual youth and a blurring of traditional life-course boundaries” (Featherstone and Hepworth 1995: 62). Forming part of the educational discourse about older people, *VeteranTV* emphasizes age rather than minimizing its importance. Nevertheless, it is still worth investigating whether my material contains references to the consumer images of “perpetual youth”, which can, after all, be perceived as upgrading the value of older people.

***VeteranTV* as Edutainment**

VeteranTV is an educational series, a television genre seldom studied (cf. Wallengren and Wadensjö 2001: 21). However, the producers’ ambition for it to be used in university courses proved problematic, at least initially. Representatives of the universities found that not all segments could be used in an educational context, as had originally been promised. UR emphasized how difficult it is to produce good programmes that can

also be re-used for educational purposes (Lindkvist 2005). A compromise was reached whereby half the segments should be such that they could be used in the two courses mentioned earlier as so-called “objects of learning”.

The hesitation among the programme’s academic clients is understandable. Like other UR programmes, the series was also aimed at an audience outside the “classroom”. It has been said that “the proliferation of ‘infotainment’ has increasingly become the preferred form of educational television, or informational television, at the turn of the millennium” (Wallengren 2005: 27), and the choice of two well-known stand-up comedians as presenters – made very consciously, of course – guaranteed that the element of “edutainment” would always be quite prominent in *VeteranTV*. The presenters also influenced the programme in their capacities as reporters and screenwriters, and they have been very prone to underlining their roles as entertainers in their public statements.

– No, we don’t give a damn about statistics and diagrams and we make a programme that people will like to watch. After all, the UR logo doesn’t scrape together viewers automatically, so it’s all about making a programme about older people that’s entertaining. (Kronbrink 2005)

VeteranTV does not aim to mediate a very specific body of knowledge, nor are the presenter-reporters experts or teachers. They function more as guides in a narrative, assuming the roles of the young ones in encounters with “them”, older people, where the real source of knowledge is constituted by the real-life case with which we are confronted as viewers. The relative lack of a pedagogical perspective in the instalments themselves means that *VeteranTV* resembles the type of programmes Wallengren calls “pedagogical reports” in her analysis of the formats of UR programmes (Wallengren 2005: 99-101).

Episodes from the Programme: The Images of Vigorous Elderly and the Focus on Achievement

I will now take a closer look at the contents of *VeteranTV*, focusing on certain segments involving the two presenter-reporters who are particularly relevant to the portrayal of vigorous elderly people.

In *VeteranTV*, older people are likely to be positioned, or to position themselves, within discourses where physical activity, usefulness or productivity, learning or experiences or other types of activity are central themes. Interestingly enough, there are no cases in my material where subject positions are offered to healthy but inactive persons. This means that the focus on achievement, so characteristic of our society, is allowed to determine the image of successful retirement. Considerations of space necessitate my concentrating on a restricted number of discourses and on a limited number of examples of how elderly people are positioned within them. However, the examples adduced below are representative of the whole core material with respect to how age and successful ageing are framed by means of meaning-creating narrative patterns.

Elite Sporting Activity on a Downward Slope

Even active elderly people are easily perceived in terms of their limitations. As Jönsson points out, even “in the description of vigorous elderly, decay is often present as

a background, you are vigorous ‘in spite of’ your age, activities that do not normally arouse media interest are presented with the slant ‘look, he can do it’ (Jönson 2009:14). Segments of that type occur relatively frequently in *VeteranTV*, especially concerning physical activity. When the examples concern winners of European or World Championships for veterans, it becomes particularly interesting to ask whether the subjects are portrayed as athletes or as elderly.

The first segment on this topic was “Sweden’s only world-class sprinter” (Kunskapskanalen 2005 7 September). The title seems to promise a reportage about a prominent athlete, but deviations from a traditional portrait of that kind are already perceptible in the introduction to the segment. On his way to the encounter, the presenter-reporter looks into the camera and presents the veteran sprinter by means of a simple rhymed verse, “89 år och ännu aktiv som väldigt få/ och det är här hos honom jag nu skall knacka på” (approximately: “89 years old and still going strong./ I’ll knock on his door and see if he comes along.”) Another deviation from normal reports about sporting achievements is the superimposed music. Before we see the protagonist win the European championship 60-metre sprint for men over 85, we see him warm up to a soundtrack of hard rock (standing on his head, etc.). Superimposed music is often used in *VeteranTV*; as here, it frequently connotes youthfulness. The music is contrapuntal in the sense that it negates the visual content and creates a distance (cf. Drotner 2000: 230), thereby inviting the viewer to make an ironic interpretation. The effect is also, of course, one of viewer-friendly edutainment.

The sprinters’ times are shown on a display, but nothing is said about what level of athletic achievement they represent. The spoken discourse is all about high age in relation to capacity. Clips of the veteran champion’s answers to questions concerning what sport meant to him are interspersed between shots from the activities. He answers that he has taken more pleasure in life, and probably prolonged it by a few years. Asked whether his ageing affects him as an athlete, he answers: “Yes, since you’re getting worse and worse you have to wonder. How will it turn out today?” In his answer, the man ascribes to himself the identity of an athlete on a downward slope. Veteran athletes are portrayed, here and in other segments, as people who keep up their habitual physical activities but under changed conditions. The same perspective is adopted in “In the world of the pensioners with Özz Nüjen”, where the encounter between young and old has a norm-breaking twist because the young person is physically less able than the older persons.

Contrary to certain stereotypes, the veteran athletes are described as competent despite their advanced age. However, their sporting world holds no interest either for the programme, or for Swedish public service television (SVT) at large: championships for veterans are never broadcast, no matter how prestigious (WC; EC). One reason may be that the broadcasting company guidelines do not single out older people for special attention. Conversely, people with a functional disorder belong to a prioritized category, and SVT, for example, is paying increased attention to the Paralympic Games.

Segments about physically active elderly, such as those discussed above, can be found on UR’s website for courses about health and ageing. Such segments function well in an educational context, as they reflect the predominant gerontological view of successful ageing as a process that presupposes an ability in older people to adjust individual goals in the light of ongoing losses in order to achieve mental well-being (Torres 2001: 25-26). It is easy to understand why the achievements of the veteran athletes may become integrated into an educational discourse about age and ability, rather than one

about athletic achievement. However, a richer sports context would have strengthened the equality perspective.

Look, They Can't Do It!

Far from all segments of *VeteranTV* were chosen as objects of learning. None was selected from the series "Superstars", for example, despite the fact that the series concerns diminishing physical capacity, a theme that is often dominant in narratives of ageing (Krekula 2006:203). "Superstars" was based on the idea of letting the participants – top-class competitors in sports contests for veterans – compete in "branches" where age palpably affects ability. The sporting abilities of the superstars are referred to only in the vignettes. The champions' contests are naturally meant to be entertaining, but the ambition is also to "teach" the viewers something about ageing and to put preconceived ideas about the abilities of older people to the test. The presenter-reporter assumes the role of competition leader and physical training master. For example, participants compete in threading a needle as quickly as possible. After the competitors have warmed up in the gymnasium – which is somewhat comical, because the competition will not require much use of muscle strength – the shakiness of the participants' hands, increasing with age, is being tested (SVT 1 UR 2 November 2008). Age is thus articulated as a problem, as we see the participants struggle with the exercise to the sound of "Working nine to five", music that becomes an ironic comment on their achievements.

In the discussion on how to evaluate images of older people in the mass media, it has been suggested that older people are at risk of appearing infantile if they fail in an assignment, thus serving to confirm stereotypes of problematic old age (Nilsson and Jönson 2009:101). "Superstars" consciously invokes the stereotypes, but that fact is counterbalanced by our knowledge that the participants overachieve in other areas, and by the humorous framing. Humour can undermine viewers' preconceptions and facilitate cross-cultural understanding (Berglund and Ljuslinder 1999:157-158). This may be true, but it does not happen in "Superstars", which hardly questions standard ideas about older people.

In the segments featuring veteran athletes, the presenter-reporters are more than reporters; they function as coaches, competitors, and instructors in the programme's endeavours to realize humour and empathy in encounters between the two age groups. Closeness is created, but youth tends to imply higher rank. The young reporters wipe someone's sweaty forehead, give a hug, kiss (or are kissed) on the cheek, and so on. This might be said to expose older people to excessive sympathy, to benevolent prejudice: if a sports journalist were to hug or kiss a practitioner, we would perceive that as violating the implicit norms of interaction between the categories. However, such gestures are frequent in infotainment focussing on lifestyle and human relationships, a category into which *VeteranTV* fits rather well. In a programme such as *Supernanny*, for example, the participants are positioned as inferior and pitied and are rewarded with encouraging hugs from the presenter for their attempts to improve their performance in the parental role.

Active, but of What Use?

The discursive practice of *VeteranTV* favours the view that it is positive when elderly people keep themselves occupied, a view that is predominant in our society. Katz maintains that the craze for activity "has become a panacea for the political woes of the

declining welfare state and its management of so-called risky populations” (2000: 147). It is interesting, however, that the narratives also establish a slightly critical attitude towards activity when the question of productivity is raised. When the young presenter-reporters meet older people, they often find that there is a threat that the abilities of the pensioners will diminish or vanish. Our social behaviour is informed by stereotypes that guide us in our search for information (Cuddy and Fiske 2002:4), and you could say that when the two presenters test the pensioners’ capability and usefulness, they start from stereotypes of older people as useless and incompetent. In “Senior Detectives” (SVT 1 UR 30 September 2007), the presenter-reporter accompanies two pensioners who assist the police as volunteers, and the segment illustrates how *VeteranTV* can make the question of age and capacity a governing factor in a narrative. Initially, the presenter-reporter complains about how incredibly slowly the pensioner is driving on his way to his assignment, which is to look for abandoned cars. Through his way of interacting with the pensioner, the presenter-reporter favours the interpretation that elderly people do not drive in a normal manner. The conversation in the car gets on to the question of how useful elderly people really are out on patrol, and the pensioners “confess” that age has affected them negatively. “What we see and hear we perceive less clearly than younger people do.” The answer, which meets expectations concerning older people’s reduced ability, could be called a case of self-stereotyping – not uncommon among older people (cf. Levy and Banaji 2002: 62).

The pensioners’ nightly patrolling of the underground is openly questioned. The presenter-reporter asks the police officer in charge: “But isn’t there a danger when the police send out elderly people. Sverker, he’ll soon be 86, damn it. To let him out at night to look out for youngsters.” The police officer replies: “It’s important that everybody gets involved. Volunteers are good.” The discursive practice thereby not only negotiates the presenter-reporter’s personal attitudes towards older people, but tests them against the norms of society. When the presenter-reporter, at the end of the segment, asks the pensioners how they rate the night’s performance they answer: “It feels like we were a bit useful.” However, we viewers may wonder how they have been useful, because we have not been shown any actual achievement. The superimposed music – asynchronous, alluding to action movies – once again functions as an ironic comment on the performance of older people.

A stereotype can be reproduced or, as Pickering points out, erased by “counterbalancing information” (2001: 15). In the reportage just discussed, the old men perform the role of useful citizens, but the discourse is ambiguous. The stereotype of older people as useless is not cultivated, but there is an air of ambivalence: the volunteers’ view of themselves as useful is not straightforwardly contradicted. The segment does not really stereotype or other the senior detectives.

Negotiating One’s Age

It can be said that no participant in *VeteranTV* above 65 years of age is able to avoid age coding; that is, their actions and characteristics are portrayed as being related to a certain age (cf. Krekula 2006: 171). Either the designation “pensioner” is used in their name vignette, or their age, or age-related identities are somehow established during the ensuing events and discussions. Within the educational discourse represented by

VeteranTV, the mention of age and the property of being a “pensioner” become, in fact, unavoidable: this is the age category that the audience is supposed to learn about or reflect on.

Chronological age helps sort us into various social categories, but it also functions as a symbol (see Mead, in Krekula 2006: 218). In the series “Özz makes your dreams come true”, the segments first present the viewer with a letter and in a voice-over the presenter-reporter reads out a wish. The letter-writers conceive of themselves in terms of age: “Here reports a ‘sprightly old man’ of eighty plus who has had a pipe dream for seventy years to lever a plane himself before another possible ascension.” (Kunskapskanalen 20 October 2005)

The letter-writers emphasize that the time for wishes will soon be over. How old they are seems to be of less importance: “Although I’m 67, I never stop dreaming. Some dreams I’ve had for a long time. And there is no time to lose now” (Kunskapskanalen 5 October 2005). The number “67” can be said to function symbolically and to offer a sufficient explanation for the time constraint (cf. Krekula 2006: 218). Encouraged by genre conventions, seemingly healthy and vital people identify themselves, after retirement, in terms of age.

Age-related identities are seldom negotiated face to face in the reports. In 2008, *VeteranTV* takes a new approach by recording certain segments in front of a live audience in a specific environment. The presenter-reporters interview well-known figures, making the ascription of age more open for negotiation. Thus a guest jokingly describes his own age as variable (SVT 1 UR 9 September 2008).

Presenter-reporter: What do you relate yourself to? What age group?

Guest: All of them.

P: Bloody pathetic answer.

G: Like the people I’m with. Now I’m in the same age group as you.

Bearing in mind the educational starting-point, the presenter-reporters want to focus on life as a “65-pluser”, but the guests do not want to be put into that category and view their identity differently. It is also easier for people with a higher status, like the guests, to reject the stereotypes and have their own identity claims accepted (Krekula 2006: 173).

As we have seen, successful ageing tends to be understood, in our modern culture, as a form of active and youthful existence, characterized by extensive consumption (Featherstone and Hepworth 1995: 46). For example, commercial culture, where words such as old, pensioner, et cetera, tend to be avoided and replaced with different kinds of paraphrases, often seems to deny the relevance of ageing (Lövgren 2009: 129). Within the educational discourse of *VeteranTV*, however, the vigorous elderly are hardly positioned as youthful young olds, with one interesting exception: in the vignette of *VeteranTV*, made by an external production company, short clips from an evening dance show men and women dancing, women in a group laughing together or applying fresh lipstick, men hanging out at the bar, et cetera. In the opening scene we see active, well-groomed, vigorous, white older men and women in a colourful disco environment. The asynchronous pop-like music and the editing – inspired by music videos with 21 cuts in 45 seconds – have the effect of producing a kind of double take on the individuals. We can see them as authentically old, but also as relatively youthful because of the effects of the music and the editing. The message conveyed by these scenes harmonizes

well with the explicit intention behind the programme to upgrade older people and view them as people just like us. At the same time, the opening images of the programme automatically exclude those elderly who are dependent on others, or who suffer from diminished capacities.

Concluding Remarks on the Anti-ageist Ambitions of VeteranTV

I will conclude by discussing the aspiration of *VeteranTV* to be anti-ageist, to improve the image of older people and to demonstrate that old people are just like us (that is, us in the norm-setting middle age). In that context, I will also raise the question of whether ageism is in fact reflected in my core material.

Like or Unlike us Middle-aged People?

My analyses show that the idea that older people are not *different* is asserted at a very general level. Older people are like everyone else because they like being active, setting up new goals, feeling useful, et cetera. However, in the scenes and narratives of the concrete segments, no real attempt is made to erase age boundaries or abstain from using age markers. For example, a special meaning is attached to the fact that it is an old person who is doing voluntary work. Will s/he be able to manage? How long will s/he be able to keep this up? The fundamental attitude towards older people can be said to be positive, but the fact that older people are active is always commented on. The focus on a specific social age is reinforced by the fact that *VeteranTV* forms part of an educational discourse and has been assigned the task of informing us about those above 65 years of age. We are supposed to “learn” about the characteristics of the pensioners, and one means of achieving this is to relate older people to those in other social categories and age groups. Choosing a specific category as the point of departure is known to carry with it the establishment of traits that distinguish the category from others and to emphasize similarities within the chosen category.

When *VeteranTV* attempts to underline similarities between older people and others, it seems to lead to the paradox described by Karin Ljuslinder in her study of the discourse in SVT about the functionally disabled. People with a functional disability are not described as being self-evidently normal; instead, their normality is foregrounded, overemphasized, and nominated in the discursive practice. These emphatic exhibitions of normality make the functionally disabled appear not normal but deviant (Ljuslinder 2002:100). In a similar manner, *VeteranTV* ostensibly wishes to show that older people are like everybody else, but the logic of the medium distinguishes them as being elderly, even when they display the usefulness and independence required by the normative lifestyle. In accordance with media logic, the exhibiting of older people focuses on the unique and spectacular – “look, they can do it” – but also results in an examination of whether older people really measure up. Normally, two roles are ascribed to them simultaneously: you are a pensioner, but also a carpenter/student/father of small children. Your role as a pensioner is taken for granted, but the dramaturgic constructions around your other role are bound to make that role appear questionable.

Judging by statements from the creators of the programmes, *VeteranTV* wanted to achieve so-called transcoding. That aspiration cannot be said to have been realized in

any clear and consistent manner. As we have seen, a perspective of “in spite of everything” manifests itself surprisingly often: you are vigorous in spite of your age, and the problems of old age are lurking round the corner. A culturally entrenched idea makes its presence felt in the background. The idea of separate phases of life often comes to the fore in the encounters between the reporters and the vigorous elderly. The younger adopt a perspective from the outside, according to which the older are undeniably older and on a downward slope, even though some of them are certainly still active and may have a good deal of fun.

Levy and Banaji maintain that when an in-group makes others into “them”, these others are often perceived as somehow threatening. This is true of religious, racial and ethnic groups, but not older people. However the researchers maintain that there is a wide acceptance of negative feelings and beliefs about older people (2002:50). My material expresses no negativity towards older people and certainly no strong othering, but overall older people are clearly regarded from a perspective of difference, despite all the conscious ambitions to achieve the contrary.

Can Ageism be Found in the Core Material?

Today, a considerable number of images are produced that run counter to the ideas of old age as a time of gradual loss and decay. Researchers remind us that these counter-images should also be assessed with a critical eye. It is important, however, to distinguish between attitudes towards old age as a problematic phase in life and attitudes towards older people (Andersson 2002:106). Depending on how older people are portrayed, even positive representations can be problematic. If ageism is defined as discrimination or dissemination of stereotyped representations based on the age of the individual, are there traces of ageism in *VeteranTV*?

If by “discrimination” one means a form of special treatment that is *abusive*, *VeteranTV* can hardly be said to practise discrimination against older people. De facto, the programme adopts a perspective that underlines the distinctiveness of older people – there are segments called “In the world of the pensioners” and one about *senior* detectives; participants are presented as “pensioners” instead of, for example, “former nurse/engine driver”; questions about age are asked – but I cannot see this as an abusive form of special treatment. UR has also allowed younger people to function as the supernarrators of older people, which inevitably introduces the binary opposites of younger and older, but I do not regard that as abusive either. It is true that the programme establishes an outside perspective, where older people rarely have the privilege of interpretation associated with authorship, but even in that respect I cannot find that any absolute norm is being violated.

At the textual level, one can find statements related to age that may be felt to be depreciatory, for example, in situations where the presenter-reporter reacts to some older person’s behaviour or gives verbal feedback. One can glimpse so-called benevolent prejudice, a view of older people as a group of suitable recipients of empathetic gestures and actions, which can come across as a form of implicit ageism.

Birgitta Odén (2004) suggested that ageism does not as yet exist in Sweden as a discrete problem. According to her, the official report *Senior 2005* did not provide any evidence that would prove that attitudes towards older people in Sweden are dominated by discrimination with respect to age. She criticizes the concept of age-

ism for offering “a fuzzy framework from social psychology” as far as the image of older people and their situation is concerned. In my core study of the representations of vigorous pensioners in their encounters with the presenter-reporters in *VeteranTV*, abusive references to older people have by no means been prominent, nor have stereotyped, one-dimensional portrayals. These findings are unsurprising and probably uncontroversial: it would have been remarkable if an educational programme made by public-service television had accommodated clearly discriminative discourses about older people, thus disproving Odén’s convictions. However, there are other ways of applying the concept (Krekula, Närvänen and Näsman 2005), where ageism does not necessarily have to be abusive “but can be used as a concept referring to age-based typification which may have discrimination as a consequence. All such typification as social categorization based on specific age or life phase is, in that sense, ageist” (Närvänen 2009: 27). If one employs this definition, *VeteranTV* is ageist in its very conception, simply because the idea behind the programme is to show us more or less cool characters who are all over 65. I find it difficult, however, to argue for such a conclusion. The images of ageing in my core material largely reflect, in an undemanding way, the predominant understanding of successful ageing as an independent and active life adapted to one’s capacities.

Over the years, several SVT programmes have been conceived specifically for older people. At present (2012), however, SVT’s strategy appears to be to approach themes related to ageing in programmes that are not specifically designed for older people, but do attract a large elderly audience. In that way, SVT avoids the sensitive issue of broadcasting programmes describing older persons as a special category of people.

Note

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