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Eriksen, Camilla Bruun

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Men in/and crisis: The cultural narrative of men’s midlife crises

Camilla Bruun Eriksen

Abstract: Focusing on cultural narratives about men’s midlife crises, this article explores the more subtle forms that medicalization takes by broadening and re-orientating the concept of successful ageing away from strictly political, medical or/and sociological discussions of health and ageing and towards cultural representations of masculinity, optimization and the handling of a personal crisis. Using two examples; the British comedy Swimming with Men (2018) and the novel Doppler (2014) by Erlend Loe the article discusses the entanglement of masculinity, crisis and ageing and in doing so argues that cultural narratives about men’s midlife crises do more than merely comment on already existing understandings of ageing and should in fact be understood as important components in the ongoing medicalization of middle-aged masculinities.

Keywords: Men’s midlife crisis Masculinities Cultural narrative Successful ageing Optimization

Camilla Bruun Eriksen is an assistant professor at the University of Southern Denmark in the Department for the Study of Culture and part of the research project Medicine Man (2018–2022), funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark, exploring how everyday culture and perceptions of middle-aged men’s bodies unfold when masculinities are increasingly both mediatized and medicalized. Paying special attention to the shaping of bodies, medicalization, health and popular culture, Camilla has written on the intersections of fatness, embodiment, narrativity, power, gender and sexuality.

Introduction

Traditionally the ageing female body has been the subject of medical interventions and beauty-enhancing treatments, while the ageing male body has, until recently, escaped much regulatory intervention as well as analysis (Bordo, 2000; Rosenfeld & Faircloth, 2006). As ideals of body, health, and beauty work differently for (and often in favour of) men compared to women, ageing is a gendered process (Bordo, 2000; Edley, 2017; Sontag, 2018). The emergence of the term male menopause (Marshall, 2007: 510), however, is an example that indicates a growing interest specifically in ageing male-sexed bodies (Conrad, 2007; Marshall, 2007). Studies showing a rapidly growing increase in men’s consumption of beauty treatments and modifications in the form of rejuvenating products, medicine, and performance-enhancing sub- stances also testify to this development (Atkinson, 2008; Bordo, 2000; Conrad, 2007; Kampf, Marshall, & Petersen, 2013; Rosenfeld & Faircloth, 2006; Sandberg, 2011; Watkins, 2007). Also, this increased interest in men’s ageing bodies can be seen as an example of the ways in which ‘old’ notions of ageing – understood as a ‘natural’ and ‘ordinary life event’ – are being transformed into a potential crisis in the form of ‘biomedical issues’ in need of scientific and technological intervention and treatment (Hepworth & Featherstone, 1998; Marshall, 2006, 2007; Watkins, 2007). Described by Nikolas Rose as a common and growing “(...) obligation to be well” (2001: 17) this general increased interest in the optimization of our bodies points to a shift in the ways health has been perceived in Western societies spanning from a problem of dysfunction and illness towards a more dynamic but also clearly political process of (endless) optimization. With an eye on the intersection of knowledge and governance, Rose has offered further important insight into the creation of the modern subject and the ‘ethopolitics’ of life itself: “If discipline individualizes and normalizes, and biopower collectivizes and socializes, ethopolitics concerns itself with the self-techniques by which human beings should judge themselves and act upon themselves to make themselves better than they are” (ibid: 18). Thus, under the impression of ‘voluntariness’ a new form of governance has emerged in the 21st century compelling citizens to control, manage, and modulate their own life skills by ways of problematizing, diagnosing, and finally improving oneself in the hope of becoming a better and more original self. It is in the light of this development that we must understand the growing attention being paid to men’s health as well as the kind of cultural narratives about men’s midlife crisis that accompany it. ‘Staying healthy all
life’ has become a moral imperative with close ties to medicalization – a concept originating from sociologist literature during the 1970s describing “(...) the process by which previously nonmedical issues become defined and treated as medical problems, usually as dis-eases or disorders” (Conrad & Bergey, 2015: 105). Medical sociologist Peter Conrad, who has written extensively on men and medicalization, claims that it is crucial that we try and understand how and with what consequences: “[t]he infiltration of biomedicine into everyday life through commonly used medical treatments redefines ‘healthy’ and ‘normal’ in regard to bodily function” (2007: 26). To Conrad, it is exactly this ‘infiltration’ of biomedicine into the everyday life of most (if not all) of us, that sums up medicalization – and while I certainly agree with Conrad on this matter, I would like with this article to suggest a modification to this definition by claiming that it is not only ‘commonly used medical treatments’ that shore up the medicalized body. Instead (and with particular regard to the subject of men and masculinities), I want to suggest that medicalization is not solely the sum of specific health-related practices and medical technologies (such as Viagra and hair-loss treatments), but is also, in great part, defined by and through popular and everyday health-narratives pillared by dominant Western values such as individuality, youthfulness, and productivity. Adverts and commercials pushing for the use of and need for such technologies as Viagra and hair-loss treatment are not merely by-products of a growing health industry, but rather important and contributing components in the ongoing and never-ending process of defining ‘normal’, ‘masculinity’, and ‘healthy’ directly influencing and shaping men’s ageing bodies.

With this article I therefore aim to push for a broadening of the concept by suggesting that medicalization is better thought of as an assemblage, comprising not only practices, treatments, technologies, and material products, but also powerful cultural narratives of health and ageing seeping through, for example, magazine articles discussing and promoting performance-enhancing drugs and supplements; health-oriented campaigns urging men to pay their doctor a visit; cookbooks and self-help literature on subjects such as physical decline, health, and sexuality; movies, documentaries, and fictional literature about subjects such as health, death, and ageing; blogs, podcasts, and DIY guides on ‘grooming’, work-out practices, and the best (use of) fitness apps and self-tracking equipment; as well as television programmes and reality shows about (un)successful ageing, weight loss, illness, and men’s ‘pursuit of a healthier lifestyle’. The list goes on, and for this reason exactly it is important that we not only explore the ways in which medicalization permeates contemporary and common understandings of health through the use of ‘concrete’ health-related technologies, but also pay critical attention to how this happens through the circulation of different cultural texts and narratives of, for example, (successful) ageing, gender, and crisis. This article sets out to do just that by exploring the ‘grand narratives’ surrounding men’s midlife crisis found in contemporary popular culture. In doing so, I wish to explore the more subtle forms that medicalization takes by broadening and re-orientating the concept away from strictly political, medical and/or sociological discussions of health and ageing and towards cultural representations of “the ideal midlife”, optimization, and the handling of a personal crisis. In this regard, it is worth noting how a number of queer and crip theorists over the years have described how Western culture is so imbued with temporal, heteronormative, and ableist norms that following a specific and normative life span has come to simply appear ‘natural’ and ‘instinctive’. In doing so, several concepts have been coined: reproductive futurism (Edelman, 2004), straight time (Boellstorff, 2007), chrononormativity (Freeman, 2010), heterofuturity (Halberstam, 2011) and crip time (Kafer, 2013). While this article does not engage with all these different concepts, I mention them here because they all point to the temporal and narrative logics at play within the construction of an ‘ideal’ life course and hence ageing more generally – or as pointed out by Linda Hess in accordance with temporal-attentive queer scholars: “Age narratives not only shape expectations and attitudes toward ageing but also easily become self-fulfilling prophecies, especially if they are vali- dated and frequently reiterated by the culture that surrounds us.” (2019: 13). As such, narratives of ageing are products of our cultural knowledge of time and worth exploring if we want to know more about the temporal logics that structure a life.

With this article I hope to not only raise important questions about the interrelatedness of ageing, masculinity, and crisis, but also shed light on the kinds of societal anxieties, narratives, and norms surrounding the devaluation and fear of agedness that help constitute such an assemblage. In order to unfold this discussion, I will pay special attention to two examples both clearly rooted in the subject matter of men’s midlife crises; namely the British comedy Swimming with Men (2018) directed by Oliver Parker and the novel Doppler by Norwegian Erlend Loe (b. 1964), first published in 2004 and translated into English in 2012. Before getting to my examples,
I will attempt to map out how my use of three key concepts in this article – masculinity, crisis, and successful ageing – relate and (sometimes) intertwine and attach themselves to each other.

The intertwining of masculinity and successful ageing

Raewyn Connell, in her highly influential work spanning several decades, has theorized masculinity as the product of social practices that normalize male privilege as entitlement (1995, 2002, 2012; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Thus, central to her theories on masculinities is the concept of hegemony, which refers to the type of masculinity that is most culturally dominant at any given time, and in order to be sustained requires the policing of men as well as the exclusion or discrediting of women, working through mechanisms ranging from the global to the local, e.g. “(...) the discrediting of ‘soft’ options in the ‘hard’ world of international relations, security threats, and war (...), to homophobic assaults and murders (...), all the way to the teasing of boys in school for ‘sissiness’” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). On this point, Anna Hickey-Moody and Timothy Laurie helpfully sum up Connell’s conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity as “(...) a descriptor of a psycho-social and material power relationship that produces one class of masculinity within a typology of genders” (2015: 141). In other words, numerous masculinities exist at any given time and are not equivalent to ‘men’ – rather they concern the position of men in a gender order and can (at least potentially) be taken up by anyone. As such, it is crucial to remember that masculinities are not reserved male-sexed bodies, but are negotiated, fluid, and dynamic positions deriving from a variety of positions established in structural and hierarchical relation to each other as well as to other positions such as women and femininity (Connell, 1995, see also Halberstam, 1998). Thus, according to Connell, neither the superiority nor the nature of hegemonic masculinity should be thought of as fixed matter, but rather as constantly produced and reproduced in and through social practices shaped and formed by societal changes. Furthermore, as men do not constitute a homogeneous and internally coherent group of people, other masculinities (e.g. gay and trans men) are themselves subordinated and marginalized by practices of hegemonic masculinity and related in various ways to the overall logic of the subordination of femininity to masculinity. In this way men’s (and women’s) relation to hegemonic masculinity can change from situation to situation and over time – something an attentiveness to ageing can bring attention to through, for example, the study of how the cultural privileging of youth most often happens at the expense of old age (Gilleard & Higgs, 2013). With ageing often represented to men, and upheld by consumer culture, as a form of ‘bodily crisis’ in need of intervention, hegemonic masculinity, due to its close proximity to and valuing of masculine ideals like youthful bodies, physical strength, productivity, and self-reliance, can be said to reinforce ageism. Additionally, with anti-ageing products, services, and technologies as examples of and solutions to this bodily crisis, men’s understandings of not just ageing but also temporality more broadly is affected by their own efforts and abilities to “stop time”. A growing body of literature in the field of cultural gerontology has shown how ageing, especially for men through associations of frailty, dependency, and asexuality, is often equated with the loss of social capital and gender (For an overview see e.g. Twigg & Martin, 2015). An example of this is a study concerned with representations of ageing masculinities in men’s magazines which found that, although portrayals of ageing masculinities have grown more positive since the 1990s – when advertisements either tended to overlook older men altogether or depict them as weak, sick, and helpless – their ‘relative infrequency’ and ‘unattainability’ suggest that being an ageing man was ‘acceptable’ only when he was able to forestall frailty and thus remain in the Third Age (Clarke, Bennett, & Liu, 2014).

This brings us to the concept of ‘successful ageing’ coined by John Wallis Rowe and Robert Kahn in their highly influential article “Human Aging: Usual and Successful” from 1987.¹ In later works, Rowe and Kahn clarified that successful ageing involves the overlapping combination of three main factors: firstly, being free of disability or disease; secondly, having high cognitive and physical abilities; and thirdly, interacting with others in meaningful ways (1997). With widespread concerns over ageing populations and the predicted rise in societal

¹ While the history of this concept is beyond the scope of this article, I can recommend reading the overview given by Martin et al. (2015) and Bålow and Söderqvist (2014). See list of literature.
costs, the concept of successful ageing (along with similar concepts such as ‘healthy’ ageing, ‘vital’ ageing, ‘active’ ageing and ‘positive’ ageing) has attracted much political attention. Favoured as a rationale to reduce financial spending and holding the promise that “(...) later life can be a time of sustained health and vitality where older people contribute to society rather than merely a time of ill health and dependency” (Martin et al., 2015: 15), successful ageing has become a high-priority research perspective and political issue. Critics, however, have warned against turning what is possible (for some) into a benchmark (for all), as to do so would mean that sickness and dependency end up constituting a ‘failure’ in ageing, further helping to individualize the responsibility for retaining independence in later life (Glass, 2003; Martinson & Minkler, 2006). Hence, the failure to live up to the ideals of such a concept can lead to the medicalization of ‘underperformance’, thereby opening up the ageing body to (further) monitoring and surveillance as well as various preventive treatments and bodily interventions (Katz, 2000; Marshall, 2006, 2007; Sandberg, 2011). Lastly, critics rooted in feminist theory have also pointed out, that successful ageing has clear gendered connotations in that: “(...) the dull decline discourses on ageing are often linked to femininity through an emphasis on (embodied) frailty, dependency, and passivity, [while] positive ageing discourses are notably masculinist through stressing productivity, autonomy, activity, and control” (Potts, Grace, Vares, & Gavey, 2006; Sandberg, 2015: 25, 2011). As such, successful ageing – as we shall see – is a performative and gendered doing heavily imbued with Western masculinist ideals of productivity, vitality, independence, and ability (Katz, 2000; Katz & Marshall, 2003; Marshall & Katz, 2002; Rozanova, 2010; Sandberg, 2015), and while mostly used to describe and discuss the impact of different factors on attempts to remain independent and healthy in later life, successful ageing is also a good example of how temporal norms help shape our understandings of what the ‘ideal’ embodiment of old age looks and feels like.

A little context: cultural narratives of (ageing) masculinity in/ and crisis

Gloomy stories of masculinity-in-crisis have long ago found their way into a wide variety of (con)texts, from tabloid magazines to scholarly articles on the histories of masculinities – a fact Sally Robinson draws attention to in Marked Men: “From the late sixties to the present, dominant masculinity appears to have suffered one crisis after another” (2000: 5). She lists several examples, the two most well-known perhaps being the widespread call to ‘rethink masculinity’ in the wake of the women’s movement in the 1960s, and the later rise of the new men’s movement in the 1980s (ibid.). According to Robinson: “Each of these moments comes clothed in the language of crisis, and the texts produced out of that crisis use a vocabulary of pain and urgency to dwell on, manage, and/or heal the threats to a normativity continuously under siege” (Ibid). Skeptics of the kind of crisis-narrative popularly used and put forward by men’s rights organizations claim that, rather than help highlight and expose legitimate and current problems facing men, it is being used to advocate a return to more conservative gender roles, (re)securing men’s power to the disadvantage of women (Kimmel, 2005, 2017). Thus, as pointed out by Lynne Segal, a problematic effect of the crisis-narrative is that while male gender issues are consequently packaged as boys losing out to girls, far more significant contrasts between different groups of men are overlooked and disregarded (2007: xx).

A recent example that has once again ignited the ongoing discussion of masculinity-in-crisis(-or-not) is the 2019 Gillette advert entitled We Believe. The Best Men Can Be (Gillette, 2019), made in response to and in support of the #MeToo movement. With a strong emphasis on anti-bullying, the advert encourages men to hold other men accountable for their actions, to hold each other to a higher set of moral and social standards, and to speak up when they witness discrimination against women. Critics have called the advert an attack on masculinity because it supposedly frames ‘traditionally masculine’ men as aggressive viola- tors,2 whilst supporters of the advert have

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praised it for drawing attention to gendered stereotypes and ‘toxic masculinity’. Regardless of the difference in meanings ascribed to the campaign by commentators and the like, the Gillette advert is in fact a good example of how the masculinity-in-crisis narrative has become closely interlaced with a growing attention being paid to middle-aged men’s health in recent years. As one commentator on Twitter noted in reference to Pierce Morgan’s disapproval of the advert: “The same obsession with ‘masculine’ stoicism and the ‘stiff upper lip’ [that Morgan represents] makes men more likely to die from cancer and is a factor in why men under 45 have the highest rate of suicide” (Bishop, 2019). Studies on men’s health and well-being undertaken by World Health Organization (WHO) validate this widespread notion that men are more reluctant than women to seek help for both physical and mental illness (WHO, 2018). According to WHO, men’s ‘risk-taking behaviours’ and ‘under-use’ of health services are consistent across many countries and are linked to socioeconomic factors as well as to norms around masculinities and hegemonic ideals (Ibid.). The worldwide organization in support for men’s health, Movember, is in agreement with WHO and simultaneously stresses the urgency for action: “Our fathers, partners, brothers and friends face a health crisis that isn’t being talked about. Men are dying too young. We can’t afford to stay silent” (Movember, 2019). By at least discursively establishing a crisis in men’s health Movember is urging men, especially those above the age of 45, to make frequent health-visits to the doctor. Thus, notions of masculinity and crisis often attach themselves to discourse surrounding men’s ‘unsuccessful’ handling of their own health and ageing with the fast-expanding body of literature on ‘male menopause’ as a good example. With titles such as Testosterone Resistance: Fighting for the Men’s Health Hormone (Carruthers, 2016) and Andro-pause: The Complete Male Menopause Guide. Discover the Shocking Truth about Low Testosterone (Howard, 2014), men are warned that growing old presents a potential health crisis and a threat to their sense of masculinity and are therefore encouraged to take action in order to avoid a looming crisis.

In more mainstream popular culture, men’s midlife struggles are easy to spot: some kind of eye-opening event sets in motion a series of actions leading the protagonist to question his life choices, often resulting in him leaving his (unloving) wife (and potentially his whole family) for a younger woman, not forgetting the (red) sports car usually somewhere in the mix. The narrative, then, is a straight one, both in the sense that it most often follows a straightforward chrononormative timeline and that it almost always has a heterosexual (and additionally white and cis-gendered male) protagonist at its center. A textbook example of this narrative, which has also gained near-cult status, is the drama American Beauty (1999) starring Kevin Spacey as Lester Burnham, a 42-year-old advertising executive who, after meeting his daughter’s high school cheerleading friend, decides to relive his 20s. Other movie classics depicting men’s midlife crises include: The Full Monty (1997), Crazy Stupid Love (2011), Sideways (2004), Lost in Translation (2003), and Love Actually (2003), while more recent examples include movies like Midlife Crisis (2018) and Swimming with Men (2018). Men’s midlife crises are also portrayed and examined in TV shows such as Breaking Bad (2008–2013), Californication (2007–2014), and Modern Family (2009–2019), as well as in literature, such as in the best-selling novels Freedom (2010) by Jonathan Franzen and The Death of Bunny Monroe (2009) by Nick Cave.

A common trait in these narratives is the ‘ridiculousness’ of the middle-aged man’s attempts to overcome his experience of crisis (or even trauma) by ‘regaining his youth’ through ‘age-inappropriate’ ac-tivities like, in the case of Lester Burnham, mild bodybuilding and drug use. Thus, when middle-aged men in popular culture appear to be in crisis, it is often because they are being portrayed as stepping ‘out of line’ with highly regulatory and normative notions of what midlife masculinities ‘should’ look like. Such efforts are often portrayed using humor and sarcasm, reducing the protagonist to a somewhat pathetic and sad character or a comic figure out of touch with reality – a fact he is seldom able to acknowledge himself, but which is obvious only to the viewer or reader ‘in on the joke’ (which, of course, only makes him seem even more pathetic). Within popular culture then, a man having a midlife crisis is someone who is ‘kidding themselves’. An example of this is the popularity of the hashtag #MAMIL (an acronym standing for Middle-Aged Men in Lycra) used to describe middle-aged men who ride expensive racing bicycles for leisure while wearing tight-fitting endurance and performance-enhancing sportswear and carrying (a lot of) body-monitoring technology. The hashtag has also spawned the documentary MAMIL (2017), which, according to the plot summary written by one of the movie’s directors, Nickolas Bird,

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portrays a group of “(...) white-collar professionals with responsible jobs, families and mortgages [who during the weekend] transform into Lyca-clad super heroes; road warriors on expensive carbon framed bikes travelling in packs and competing with other males for dominance in the group”. While the documentary is in fact (at least mostly) a reparative and acknowledging story of the life of MAMILs, the acronym has more generally been used on social media to poke fun at middle-aged men’s bodies and self-image, their choice of leisure activities, as well as their efforts to handle (what is perceived by spectators using the hashtag as) a personal crisis. Thus, when it comes to men’s midlife crises in popular culture, a highly normative narrative is very often already in place and while there are certainly exceptions, portrayals of middle-aged men experiencing a personal crisis tend to draw on this, in fact so much so, that crises that differ from this script are hardly even recognizable as such, but are rather perceived as, for example, laziness and general boredom (e.g. Norm from Cheers (1982–1993)) or as mental illness (The Beaver 2011). With particular reference to such a script and the tools used to tell it, I will now focus on my two chosen examples, starting with the British comedy Swimming with Men.

Swimming with Men: fighting meaninglessness in the pool

Based loosely on the documentary Men Who Swim (2010), Swimming with Men is centered around accountant, Eric (Rob Brydon), who is suffering from a mid-life crisis but finds new meaning in his life as part of an all-male, middle-aged, amateur synchronized swimming team. In an effort to win back the respect of his wife and son, Eric decides together with his teammates to train for and participate in the synchronized swimming world championships, which they have surprisingly qualified for.

The first part of the movie portrays the dullness of Eric’s life using what we could call classic dramaturgic techniques, such as repetition (e.g. slightly different versions of the same scene showing Eric arriving at work and walking through an open office landscape where no one looks up or hardly even notices him) and visual clichés (e.g. the uneventful nature of time passing Eric by depicted through the faster and faster removal of pages in a calendar). To the backdrop of melancholic and tedious music, Eric is seen walking down a heavily crowded street on his way to work. As Eric’s life becomes more and more chaotic, Eric starts moving down the street in slow motion while everyone else is moving at double speed, creating the sense that Eric is out of sync with others and going nowhere, stuck in the middle of an ocean of grey suits and unfamiliar faces. In contrast, Eric’s wife is portrayed as leading a busy and fulfilling life as a newly elected city council member surrounded by men, whom Eric suspect are sexually interested in her. Eric’s son, Billy, is a stereotypical teenager, utterly unimpressed with his father and somewhat disrespectful to everyone.

Quickly following the introductory portrayal of a sad and lonely Eric we witness his life unravel: After a night of heavy drinking and fighting with his wife, but before joining the synchronized swimming team, Eric throws himself in the deep end of the pool but is pulled to the surface by his future teammates. The next night they take him out for a drink and invite him to join them, while stressing that the team they have formed is not just any club. It is an idea. A protest: “Against the end of dreams” one tells Eric. “Against the meaninglessness of life” another informs him. “Against who we have become...” the oldest member of the group states. “And the rising price of lager!” chips in a fourth. The teammates explain that they feel a certain kinship with Eric after having seen him intoxicated at the bar the night before: “A man in his 20s doing that is probably having fun, but I mean, a man in his 40s? He is in some trouble.” The men not only hint that they too have experienced personal hurdles, but also that being drunk in your 40s for ‘no good reason’ is a sign of a midlife crisis that (equally) can and should be managed. An important moral of the movie is that a midlife crisis can be overcome (or avoided all together) if ageing more generally is done ‘competently’ and in the case of Swimming with Men, competent specifically means ‘without fear’ (of life’s meaninglessness). Towards the end of the movie, Eric reflects upon his crisis when he tells his teammates: “It was me... I was running away from [my wife]. I was running away from my son. Running away from everything. I know now that it was fear. Fear of getting older, fear of failure. But you guys showed me how to stop running”. What Eric has learned and what the movie puts forward is that the key to restoring a shattered and confused self after experiencing a life crisis (following the dire realization that life holds no promises) is to stop running away from what feels scary and simply embrace the chaos and the fact that life in general – and mid-life in particular – is

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meaningless. Interestingly, we never really learn what has made Eric ‘run away’ and hence why he has become so unhappy with his life. He just is. As we never fully understand what brought this life-crisis of dullness about for Eric, the focal point of the narrative becomes the handling of a personal crisis, rather than the crisis itself and its particular properties. Less invested in the origins of his mid-life crisis, viewers rather find out if Eric ‘syncs or swims’ (as the movie’s tagline puts it), than learn why Eric started ‘running away’ in the first place.

Furthermore, to feel sad, angry, and depressed is portrayed as un-becoming and unfitting for an ageing man who ought to be in control of not only his emotions but also the course of his life. Eric’s drinking and lashing out at his surroundings makes him appear fragile and emotional – even childish at times – and consequently, Eric appears out of tune with age-appropriate norms of temporality as well as masculinity. In this way, and very much in accordance with the grand narrative of men’s midlife crisis, (self)respect and pride are key to mental health and general happiness, but also to a ‘regained’ sense of masculinity and direction in life.

In Swimming with Men, Eric’s successful mastering of his midlife crisis is told through the final scene of the movie, in which Eric takes charge of himself by finding the courage to show up in his swimming gear in front of the town hall to demonstrate his love for his wife in the form of an onshore synchronized swimming routine with his teammates. While this gesture is undoubtedly portrayed as both funny and somewhat ‘under-mining’ in the sense that it makes Eric appear both silly and not very attuned to hegemonic and traditional ideals of masculinity, it also cements Eric as a character who ‘finally’ successfully embodies masculine virtues of action, determination, and power. This is underlined by Eric’s newfound sense of self-confidence daring him to hit his wife’s admirer in the face when he tries to remove Eric from the premises of the town hall. Being a mainstream feel-good comedy, it is perhaps not surprising that Eric’s wife is in fact so touched by this gesture of courage (daring to be silly) and physical dominance that she decides to kiss and embrace Eric as a sign of forgiveness. By finally ‘taking charge’ of his own life, Eric is once again found attractive by his wife, and the reward for becoming fearless in the face of meaninglessness is ultimately portrayed as (the continuation of) heterosexual love and desire. Luckily for Eric, this also prompts the respect of his son, Billy, and in this way, norms of hegemonic masculinity and mid-life temporality is in conclusion secured as well as restored.

The Doppler effect: escaping meaning in the forest

In complete contrast to the plot of Swimming with Men, the novel Doppler is about a man trying to distance himself as much as possible from his family and friends. Andreas Doppler, the novel’s protagonist, is a ‘modern man’ having a midlife crisis over being just that. This is the case because, according to Andreas, modern life comes with a draining obligation to be ‘nice’. A nice student, a nice colleague, a nice husband, a nice house owner. Being nice, however, is not only a matter of being good and liked but also about being recognized by others as competent, resourceful and dutiful: “I had been wading up to my neck in all this niceness for years. I woke up to it, went to sleep with it. I breathed niceness and slowly it was killing me. That’s how it was, I tell myself. God forbid that my children should become nice like me” (Loe, 2012: 36). One day, following the death of his father, Andreas falls off his bike in the middle of the forest. The accident prompts Andreas to abandon his home in Oslo along with his job, wife, and children in order to live a solitary life in the forest accompanied only by an elk calf, whom he names Bongo. Throughout the novel and its two sequels (Loe, 2005, 2015), Andreas struggles to rid himself of being nice and competent. By instead striving to embody traditional masculine virtues of freedom and independence, Andreas hopes to leave behind what he sees as an emerging moral imperative of personal growth and self-development. As such, the story of Doppler is also a modern version of the bildungsroman, which, in the case of Andreas, means leaving behind the highly feminine-connotated ‘nanny state’ in order to become his own man – someone who lives of the land and is highly self-resourceful.

Before finally coming to terms with his decision to take to the forest, Andreas – much like Eric – cannot really identify the reasons for his crisis:

In recent years I had gradually distanced myself more and more from the people around me. I had lost interest in my work and also to some extent in my home. My wife had commented on
As it later turns out, Andreas prefers the forest because he just doesn’t like people and the remainder of the book is therefore centered around his efforts to be left alone. Unlike the story of Eric, readers are actually given an exact starting point and reason for Andreas’ crisis, namely the bike accident following the death of his father. However, we never really learn much more, because Andreas (after making an especially competent analogy between the life and death of his father and the famous Schrödinger-cat paradox\(^5\)) concludes that ‘niceness’ has in fact become a disease that he needs to rid himself of. For this reason, Andreas decides to restrain himself (and hence the reader) from gaining a deeper understanding of his life-crisis by thinking too much about it, and the focal point of Doppler – just like in Swimming with Men – becomes about the more or less successful handling of a personal crisis instead of its ontology or origins.

That both these storylines with so little insights into the ontology of a crisis still seem coherent and tellable is only possible because the grand narrative of men’s midlife crisis is so well-established that Doppler and Swimming with Men, by simply tapping into this narrative, can leave it to the reader and viewer to fill in the blanks themselves. What is apparently to be learned from the two narratives is about taking control of the situation – about ‘managing oneself and being responsible for one’s own life situation. Even for Andreas, who refuses to live life according to ‘society’s rules’, the goal is to reclaim and fulfill one’s life in an individual and hence, meaningful way. In this regard, it is perhaps worth noting that Doppler by readers has been interpreted in two very different ways; either as a tribute to Andreas for taking a stand against growing consumerism and neoliberal values such as the demand for growth, productivity, and self-optimization, or as a critique of the ‘modern man’ who selfishly puts himself and his own needs first and thereby evades his traditional breadwinning responsibilities towards his family. Either way, Andreas finds that he is no longer interested in what society has to offer him and strives to become entirely independent and self-reliant, but ultimately struggles to fully embody such ideals and consequently develops a close relationship to the elk calf, Bongo, in whom he confides over board games in their shared tent. Additionally, Andreas finds that he simply cannot live without certain ‘modern inventions’ such as skimmed milk and so he starts trading elk meat with a supermarket employee as well as stealing in order to gain access to certain amenities. In doing so, the image of Andreas as a completely self-sufficient and independent ‘lone wolf’ is heavily undermined, making him appear ridiculous to the reader, as is so often the case with popular narratives of men’s midlife crises. Thus, the reader is not encouraged to fully identify with Andreas, but rather to pity him and laugh at his attempts at embodying hegemonic masculinity ideals.

Reduced to a “funny failure, Andreas, ironically and definitely un-intentionally, ends up inspiring several of the people with whom he briefly comes into contact with while living in the forest. One of them is ‘the reactionary’, Bosse, who also decides to leave his old life behind and set up camp near Andreas and Bongo. Andreas, who is not at all thrilled by Bosse’s company, refuses to be a mentor to Bosse, most probably because Bosse – unlike Andreas – seems to consider his time in the forest as a great learning opportunity for self-growth. Strongly opposed to what he defines as a growing demand for ‘competence everywhere’, Andreas is therefore not at all displeased when Bosse fails miserably at ‘unwinding’ once he is permanently living in the recreational wonderland of the forest. Behind his efforts to distance himself from other people, Andreas’ reasoning seems to be that if left utterly alone and in absolute control of his own life, societal and ‘deluded’ obligations to act ‘competent’ in every aspect of life will cease to haunt him. As such, Bosse’s presence in the forest only helps to amplify Andreas’ aversion to the kind of activities that ‘competent people’ engage in in order to in-crease and support modern and successful ageing-inspired goals of ‘healthy personal growth’ and ‘social and human capital’. Paradoxically, but evidently not obvious to Andreas, such activities are constituted by the same kind of traditional masculine ideals of power, agency, ability, and self-assertiveness that Andreas seeks to embody in order to become an independent and self-reliant lone wolf. Ironically then, Andreas is in the end not portrayed as someone who is ultimately set free by his efforts. Rather, he ends up embodying the exact kind of logics and

\(^5\) For an explanation of the paradox see e.g.: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schr%C3%B6dinger%27s_cat (Accessed March 9th, 2021).
ideals of personal autonomy and self-reliance that shape modern strategies of successful ageing and practices of self-optimization that he hates so much and seeks to evade.

As outlined earlier in more detail, successful ageing has been defined as the process of growing older without (or with a minimum of) negative experiences of ill health and disabilities, while simultaneously having high cognitive and physical abilities, as well as meaningful interactions with others (Rowe & Kahn, 1987). Rather than a concept ‘merely’ fit for analysis and discussions of later life, I would like to use the remaining part of this article to consider the concept of successful ageing as an analytic lens, bringing to the forefront notions of idealized forms of masculinity and medicalization.

The role of the bread winner: on a mission in a time of successful ageing

As a starting point, it is important to note how both Andreas and Eric are each in their own way portrayed as being ‘on a mission’ rather than as experiencing a crisis. Eric and his friends are not just members of a club, they have formed a protest. Andreas, too, is on a mission and ends the first part of his own story by declaring that he, his son, and Bongo are on a ‘military campaign’ and will travel further east and into the forest: “We are soldiers and we’re going to fight to the last man. Against smartness. Against stupidity. Because it’s a war out there. A war.” (Loe, 2012: 168–169). Although both are on a mission to get a better grip on life, Andreas and Eric take very different approaches to solving their midlife crises.

Despite a don’t ask, don’t tell policy that prescribes Eric to check his personal problems at the door before entering the pool, he finds solace and understanding in a community of like-minded men. Andreas, on the other hand, wants to be an island. While he strives to achieve this by seeking solitude, Eric, in accordance with positive strategies of successful ageing, takes up a range of ‘healthy’ activities such as exercising, socializing, and therapeutically ‘working on himself’. In doing so, Eric is portrayed as contributing to his community by being a role model to his teammates and, as a result, he ultimately gains control over his life and overcomes his crisis. Conversely, Andreas refuses to be competent and to take any further part in modern practices of self-optimization and successful ageing, which – at least on the surface – makes the story of Doppler a tale of resistance and subversion. However, escaping a growing obligation to be well in a time of successful ageing (even within popular culture) is no easy task and before taking to the forest, Andreas has managed to control and modulate his own life skills with great success. His new life in solitude is described as an attempt to escape an imperative and societal call for self-optimization and care, but as Andreas’s hope of becoming a more ‘original Self’ seems unaltered throughout the novel, subversion is not a theme that runs deep in the story of Doppler. Eric, on the other hand, could be a poster boy for the kinds of self-techniques of good government that Andreas strives to dodge: Eric’s crisis has to do with his sense of being ‘out of touch’, with the rest of the world rushing him by, making him feel old and useless – but by taking up healthy activities like sharing his feelings and socializing with other men, Eric slowly but victoriously emerges into a successfully self-governing and modern ageing man, who is no longer in risk of growing old in accordance with ageist and negative stereotypes of an ‘old grumpy man’. According to Eric, this is the case because he stops being afraid of life’s meaninglessness. While this fear is concrete and fundamental to Eric, and in fact the entire plot of Swimming with Men, it takes a more subtle form in the case of Doppler. An example is that several (if not most) men within the Doppler-universe, including Andreas himself, are struggling to make sense of their relationship with their absent fathers. They feel abandoned and left behind to fend for themselves without any words of wisdom to live by. Consequently, finding one’s place in the world is portrayed as difficult, especially within a society that no longer provides men with clear social rules, boundaries, or even privileges. This is also portrayed as challenging for Eric, who struggles to find his place in a changing social world that for him holds both a snarky teenage son who does not automatically respect him, and a wife who has advanced in the political world and in this regard, is more ‘powerful’ than he. What is the point of life for a breadwinner without anyone to provide for, the two narratives seem to ask its audience? What are men to make of all this, if male privileges of independence and decision-making no longer prevail and hence nothing in life seems to be given in advance anymore? While these questions are not ultimately answered, they do to some extent legitimize the two men’s ‘right’ to a personal crisis via the ever-scary grand narrative of masculinity-in-crisis – though it seems that a crisis experienced by a man, even an existential one, still goes down easier with an audience when it comes wrapped in humor. Perhaps therefore,
representations of men who deviate from mainstream and normative notions of ideal mid-life masculinity are easily and very often reduced to funny but also highly problematic outsiders. By embodying and expressing several of the anxieties that run deep in Western societies, such as fear of decay, loss of control, as well as qualities often associated with femininity like that of vulnerability and precarity, men’s mental health is not only reduced to a laughing matter but also made into a deeply disturbing and problematic matter in need of containment and fixing. In conclusion, this raises another important question: If men in crises are mostly represented as comical and ridiculous figures, how can an audience be expected to take seriously the kind of problems and issues facing men outside of popular culture? In this regard, it might be important to remember that men’s help-seeking behaviours are generally deemed poor in comparison to women’s, and while this is most often (and probably rightfully so) explained as a problem deriving from traditional and hegemonic masculinity norms (preventing men from sharing personal concerns and worries about their health), it is important that we further investigate the contributing effects of highly popular cultural narratives that portray men’s experiences of a personal crisis as pathetic, silly, and funny.

Closing remarks and further perspectives

By drawing attention to the entangled relations between idealized masculinity, narratives of crisis, and successful ageing my analysis has shown that, while the stories of Doppler and Swimming with Men are not unambiguous texts that clearly relate to and map out issues of medicalization, they do raise important questions about the complex and knotty relationship between time and ageing as well as concerns over the dire mental health of many men. Thus, in the case of Doppler and Swimming with Men, masculinity, crisis, and successful ageing are heavily intertwined doings, and while the stories of Eric and Andreas might not apply us with much insight into the inner workings of a personal crisis, cultural narratives of men’s midlife crises that describe men’s efforts to sustain their mental health and vitality do speak volumes about the devaluation that comes with ageing. For this reason, traces of successful ageing and medicalization require further explorations if we want to make sense of the equally entangled relationship between cultural narratives of men’s midlife crises and broader societal anxieties in connection with fear of ageing. A way of doing this is to continue the line of thought I have introduced in this article; namely that medicalization is more than specific health-related practices and medical technologies, but an assemblage also including cultural narratives about men’s midlife struggles in need of deconstruction and thought.

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