When Toula’s father in »My Big Fat Greek Wedding« says to his daughter (age 30) »you look so old« or when Don DeLillo’s protagonist (age 28) »feels old« in »Cosmopolis«, these young characters are attributed an age awareness that has received little attention in age studies so far. Leaving aside chronological or biological dimensions of age, this study approaches age as a metaphoric practice, suggesting that »feeling old« is not to be taken literally but metaphorically. The book examines the cultural meanings of age and aging for characters who are in their twenties and thirties and challenges often-quoted labels such as late-coming-of-age story or perpetual adolescence.

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Introduction

A young woman with gray hair, as on the cover of this book, is an odd sight. Gray hair is testament to the passing of time and caused by a waning of pigment production. It is thus often considered a marker of chronological and biological old age. In 2010, a trend emerged in the fashion industry and among British and American socialites which showed twenty-year old women in a “silver rush,” dyeing their hair gray and parading this edgy look on runways or red carpets (Hermanson 2010, La Ferla 2010).¹ According to Rose Weitz,² gray hair on young women has become a fashion statement, which “flout[s] one of fashion’s last taboos” and is comparable to the subversive, individualistic aura of piercings or tattoos (qtd. in La Ferla n. pag.). This fashion trend appears ironic in light of the concerns voiced by scholars from age and gender studies, who warn against the all-pervasive youth cult and ageism in Western cultures and its detrimental effects (particularly) on aging women. Are age scholars wrong? Has old age become fashionable? Or do young women wear gray hair precisely because they are still young? How can we understand the “silver rush” of twentiesomethings?

Researchers in age studies do not ask these particular questions because young people are typically of little concern to age scholars who start their investigations with later age stages, such as middle-age, which starts around

¹ Powdered white hair or white wigs were also fashionable in the eighteenth century, of course.
age forty (e.g. Gullette 1988). Upon a closer look, however, there are many examples that suggest a relation between young people and age awareness. Take for instance the anti-aging skin cream market. For some time, anti-aging products have no longer been restricted to consumers whose skin shows actual signs of aging. Increasingly, the cosmetics industry is advertising anti-aging products to people in their twenties as a measure of prevention and protection of their youthful looks (cf. Wright 2008, Penning 2012). Walmart, for example, released an anti-aging beauty line aimed at 8- to 12-year-olds (cf. “Retailer Launches” 2011). It seems that the relentless agenda of the youth cult not only discriminates against old(er) people but also sends out warning messages to the young.

A second example is the term delayed adulthood (also called Peter Pandemic), which has become a research field for social scientists and life course scholars who investigate the lives of people in their twenties or thirties whose lifestyles resemble those of teenagers (Côté 2000, Blatterer 2007, Arnett 2007, Settersten & Ray 2010). Here, the topic of age appears as a chronological issue of poor timing for the so-called kidults, boomerang kids, or adultescents who are stuck between childhood and adulthood (Tierney 2004, Furman 2005, Hunter 2009, Henig 2010), indicating a conflict between chronological age, an expected age-appropriate social behavior, and a person’s actual age-inappropriate conduct.

This conflict reappears in a different form in self-help books that are aimed at readers in their late twenties who seem to experience a life crisis upon turning thirty. Lia Macko’s and Kerry Rubin’s *Midlife Crisis at 30: How the Stakes Have Changed for a New Generation – And What to Do About It* (2004) is such a case in point. Similarly, Colette Petersen’s book title *30 Isn’t Old* (2007) suggests that a thirtieth birthday triggers an (age) crisis. These books insinuate that age is a conflictual topic for young people.

Age awareness is also thematized in contemporary novels. When the protagonist of Don DeLillo’s novel *Cosmopolis* (2003), Eric Packer, aged 28, compares himself to a young dancing crowd he observes during a rave, he has an epiphany: “He felt old,” the reader is told, because “[a]n era had come and gone without him” (127). In the course of the novel, DeLillo repeatedly refers to obsolescence or mortality when he describes his character’s life crisis. In the Hollywood blockbuster *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), it is also a reference to age that sparks the life crisis of 30-year-old
Toula Portokalos, who is told by her father: “You’d better get married soon. You’re starting to look ... old.” With these first lines of Joel Zwick’s romantic comedy, the movie sets the tone for a distinct sense of the finitude of time. A story unfolds in which the protagonist repeatedly struggles with her age-inappropriate situation and appearance before she symbolically rejuvenates and meets the man of her dreams.

These exemplary observations suggest that there is a conflictual relation between young people or characters and notions of age or aging. The cover picture and the “silver rush” fashion trend indicate that there might also be a playful, ironic, or resisting connotation to this age awareness. These preliminary observations raise several questions:

• Where does the apprehension of age and aging in twenty-somethings come from? How can we understand this phenomenon? What is the nature of age experiences in young people or characters? What does a phrase like “I feel old” stand for?
• What is the cultural meaning behind the seeming contradiction of chronologically young people or characters and their subjective age awareness? What does it mean to be (chronologically) young? Is there a standard or a specific age that marks people as young? If so, who determines this standard? And when does the change between ‘young’ and ‘old’ occur? Is it at 30, 35, or 40? Does aging unfold between polar opposites of young and old? Or should we rather speak of a spectrum, in which the markers of young and old are flexible and situational?
• If we keep the idea of a spectrum in mind, which function does a reference to age have in specific contexts? What does Toula’s father, for example, imply when he calls his daughter old? Do references to age have a symbolic meaning that expresses something else? Assuming that fictional works are not simply mimetic representations of a social reality but complex negotiations of cultural knowledge, what kind of meaning do fictional negotiations add to the phenomenon of age awareness in young adult characters?

These research questions touch upon two distinct disciplinary areas: (a) the cultural background and the social realities of age or aging and (b) the function and meaning of age or aging in fictional narratives, such as films or novels. The first area inspires investigations into social practices, interper-
sonal relationships, and social institutions. It asks for the cultural notions and values connected with age or aging, such as ‘youthfulness equals attractiveness.’ The second area is of interest to literary critics and film scholars who analyze the fictional negotiations of a zeitgeist.

This study approaches the phenomenon of young characters’ age awareness from the point of view of literature and film studies. Taking my cue from the early literary gerontologist Janice Sokoloff and her study The Margin That Remains (1987), I concentrate on novels because

[lliterature [...] appears to be the richest source we have for representations of aging, and for the effort to understand the contradictory and complex ways in which the human psyche’s experience of time shapes character. Such a subjective experience of time is frequently in a state of negotiation or conflict with society’s more objective and chronological measure of time. Furthermore, each century perceives time, and therefore the relation of years to ‘maturity,’ differently. (129-130)

Hence, if literature constitutes a rich source of knowledge, experiences, and negotiations, as Sokoloff claims, it makes sense to look to novels to investigate the meanings and functions of age or aging. Sokoloff examines British canonical novels from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While her pioneer study is inspiring in its approach, it needs further development and an expansion. My study attempts to update Sokoloff’s research by focusing on very recent American novels that were published in the first decade of the new millennium. In view of the observations I made on anti-aging products, delayed adulthood, and self-help books, it seems that the topic of age has assumed a new urgency in the last decade. Moreover, I would like to open up the corpus of Sokoloff’s study by integrating films into the analysis.

This cross-media approach, which is based on an extensive definition of text, appears mandatory in light of the observations made by one of the most prominent figures in the field of age studies. The age critic Margaret Morganroth Gullette examines the ways in which people are aged by culture, and, in doing so, she works with the notion of “age narratives,” which she defines as “vehicles for organizing” cultural knowledge about aging (Aged by Culture 15). According to Gullette, age narratives (or narratives of aging) are “our virtual realities” and they “make a fundamental difference to the quality of our lives, starting with our willingness or reluctance,
at any age, to grow older” (11). Gullette’s age narratives take many shapes: They can be autobiographical interviews, childhood experiences, novels, cultural myths, or visualizations used by scientists. In *Aged by Culture* (2004), Gullette gives an example of such a visual age narrative when she describes how the Boston Museum of Science (during a “Secrets of Aging” show in 2000) used photographs of children to show them how they will look as they age. “This is the way all faces age,” the title of the exhibit implied (4). The movie-like sequence of their own aging appalled the children, who learned, as Gullette argues, that they will invariably become ugly upon growing older. Gullette finds “that even without text, visual sequences always have life narratives secretively embedded in them. Such narratives declare the meaning of the passing of life time, not day by day but on a big scale” (10). The message that the children at the exhibition received was one about loss and decline.

Gullette’s age narratives also permeate films, as the analyses by Karen M. Stoddard (1983), Robert E. Yahnke (2000), Amir Cohen-Shalev (2009), and Thomas Küpper (2010) demonstrate. In Stoddard’s analysis of the representation of aged women in American popular film, she argues that

[p]opular media images relate to what a culture believes, wants to believe, and wishes to legitimize – these images are part truth, part myth, and part wishful thinking – and an examination of the evolving images allows speculation on their possible relationships to cultural needs and realities. A cycle exists in which the media give the audience what they feel the public wants […], while the public is often highly accepting of what passes before them, the psychological strength of the media form lending instant credibility to its products. (6-7)

Following Gullette’s definition of age narratives and Stoddard’s reasoning on the mutual exchange between film and culture, I understand films and novels as *fictional age narratives* or *fictional narratives*, which feed from the culture from which they emerge and simultaneously send out messages about age and aging to their viewers and readers. In order to grasp and understand these embedded messages present in fictional (age) narratives that

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3 Stoddard defines “popular media images” as “images in advertising, television and film” (6).

4 Also see page 73.
feature young adults, I suggest that a distinction between media- and genre-specific differences of film and novel is no longer necessary – even though the discrepancies regarding aesthetic and representational techniques are duly noted.

Examples that document the dissolving boundaries between genres or media forms abound. *Little Children* (2004), for instance, one of the fictional narratives I will discuss, was first a novel written by Tom Perrotta and then adapted to the screen by Todd Field two years later. *Little Children* illustrates that Perrotta’s story functions within different media forms. Similarly, Julie Powell’s cross-media success of *The Julie/Julia Project*, which started out as a blog in 2002, was then published as a novel in 2005 and eventually became a Hollywood movie in 2009, justifies an approach that leaves aside generic and genre-specific differences for the sake of understanding the cultural meanings of age and aging embedded in fictional narratives.

In order to denaturalize the cultural meanings of age and aging, Gullette calls for an inventory of the invisible practices, metaphors, narratives, and genres that shape a culture’s imaginaries of age or aging (“From Life Storytelling” 107). Gullette’s inventory is meant to “elevate subtextual matters into explicitness and contextualize spotty evidence” (107). This book would like to contribute to such an inventory by focusing on the age awareness of characters whom one would not automatically consider to be candidates for age experiences. The oddness of this phenomenon might explain why there is little theoretical research on young adults in age studies. This lack of attention to young adults, that is adults in their twenties and thirties, is unsat-

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5 Also consider the following film adaptations made or currently being made. DeLillo’s novel *Cosmopolis* was filmed in the summer of 2011 and released in 2012. Andrew Bujalski wrote a screenplay of Kunkel’s novel *Indecision* in 2007, and Noah Baumbach will be the director of Franzen’s *The Corrections*, which is currently in the casting process.

6 The term “young adults” is defined differently in various contexts. Young-adult fiction, for instance, refers to teenage readers (cf. Halverson 20). The British “Transition to Adulthood Network” defines young adults as aged 18 to 24 (cf. <http://www.t2a.org.uk>, accessed on 13 September 2012). Other scholars, such as Robert J. Havighurst or Erik Erikson, define early or young adulthood between age 19 and 29 or between age 19 and 40. According to the *Oxford English
isfactory given that, as Gullette argues, people of all ages are aged by culture7 (cf. Aged by Culture 18, 118). Similarly, Kathleen Woodward acknowledges that “old age and middle age are part of the larger continuum of a discourse on age itself, a system of age that includes infancy, childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood“ („Introduction“ x). However, Woodward’s focus lies on old age and middle age because „at this point in time it is critical that research in cultural studies and the arts focus on the later years precisely because this time of life has been largely ignored“ (x). In establishing age studies as an interdisciplinary and international field of research, age scholars like Woodward and Gullette have produced a substantial body of theories and concepts which provide the basis for this book.

**Research Field**

Age Studies or gerontology encompasses a multi-disciplinary field, spanning medicine, biology, neuroscience, social science, cultural studies, and literature or film studies. Terminologically speaking, gerontology is the older designation for this vast area of research, coined by Elie Metchnikoff in 1904 (cf. Cole 195). Age studies was introduced in 1993 by Gullette (cf. “Creativity, Gender, Aging” 45-6). She envisions age studies as a “combination of critical gerontology and cultural studies” (cf. Cole et al. xvii). Or, in Gullette’s own words:

Age studies is my term for a large interdisciplinary zone whose practitioners are becoming increasingly aware of age as a category and increasingly skillful at using it

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7 To speak of a single American culture evokes an essentialist notion of culture. While I am very much aware of this problem and want to emphasize that I do not suggest that there is one unified American culture but rather multiple different cultures within American society, I am nevertheless using the singular form of culture in this study. On the one hand, the singular facilitates the use of Gullette’s terminology, which is central to my study. On the other hand, the social demography of the characters in my corpus is surprisingly alike: All characters (with the exception of Toula) come from white, middle-class American families.
in their very different kinds of work. The zone includes women’s studies, gender studies, literary gerontology, life-course studies in developmental psychology, sociology, family and social history, and anthropology. (“Creativity, Gender, Aging” 45)

Gullette prefers the designation age studies over literary gerontology because she sees a need to expand the field of gerontology beyond studies that consider the elderly through literature or film, positioning age studies as “an interdisciplinary study of culture” (“Age (Aging)” 11). I share Gullette’s preference for the term age studies. Even though my approach is geared towards an understanding of young characters and their age experiences in novels and film, I consider the cultural influences on age and aging vital to the analysis of my subject. By combining theories from cultural studies and age studies, the concept of age or aging becomes more fluid, more open and situational.

It is only since the 1970s that scholars of the humanities showed an interest in the topic of age or aging. Anne Wyatt-Brown considers the “Conference on Human Values and Aging” in 1975 at Case Western Reserve University as the first incentive to venture into this new field of research, which was received rather hesitantly in the academic community, given that literary gerontology not only demanded that scholars familiarize themselves with the terminologies and methodologies of other disciplines; these pioneers also had difficulties in convincing natural scientists of the value of their qualitative research findings. Nevertheless, literary gerontology gradually emerged as an avenue of research and began to explore the following areas:

(1) analyses of literary attitudes towards aging;
(2) humanistic approaches to literature and aging;
(3) psychoanalytic explorations of literary works and their authors;
(4) applications of gerontological theories about autobiography, life review, and midlife transitions; and
(5) psychoanalytically informed studies of the creative process.
   (Wyatt-Brown, “Coming of Age” 300)

8 Likewise, Woodward prefers „age studies“ over „a study of aging“ because „age studies“ is more comprehensive in scope, including the „system of age“ and thus all age groups („Introduction“ x).
In their comprehensive *Handbook of the Humanities and Aging*, Thomas Cole et al. suggest that any study of age and aging “both promotes and necessitates interdisciplinary thinking” (xii). Social sciences, demography, public policy, literary and visual representations, cultural studies, philosophy, bioethics, clinical care, theology, end-of-life-care, and multiculturalism represent only some of the vantage points used by the authors of the *Handbook*. Relevant to social scientists, physicians, policy makers, and care takers, as Cole et al. argue, research into age and aging borders on a variety of different themes, such as cultural meanings of age, intergenerational relations, philosophical and ethical concerns, religiosity and spirituality, creativity, alternative representations of age, or issues about death and dying (cf. xx). Constance Rooke lists the following recurring themes as central topics in age studies:

[i]ntergenerational conflicts, societal change, disengagement, the life review, poverty, loneliness, sexuality, body image, frailty, memory loss, illness, loss of independence, loss of friends and family, stereotypical reduction and marginalization, the motivation and behavior of caregivers, the terrors and possible benefits of institutionalization, attitudes toward religion and death. (254)

The narrative representations of older characters have inspired studies, which investigate an older character’s development in terms of a decline plot (Gullette 1997) or, in more positive terms, in the form of a “Reifungsroman” or “Vollendungsroman,” a novel of ripening or “winding up” (cf. Rooke 1992, Waxman 1990). Some studies apply psychological or psychoanalytic vantage points or use a gender perspective (e.g. Waxman 1990; Woodward 1991). Creativity in old age and the literary development of authors throughout the life course is of interest to scholars who consider aging to be a creative process that influences the “late style” of an author (e.g. Wyatt-Brown 1988).

Acclaimed feminist authors also became interested in the topics of age and aging and published pertinent studies, such as Simone de Beauvoir’s *La Vieillesse* (1970), Susan Sontag’s essay “The Double Standard of Aging” (1972), Germaine Greer’s *The Change: Women, Aging and the Menopause* (1993), or Betty Friedan’s *The Fountain of Age* (1993). These studies focus on the youth cult and its social, psychological, and individual consequences
for women. Second-Wave Feminism, just as theories of multiculturalism or post-structuralism, contributed significantly to the field of age studies with theories and approaches regarding “cultural differences, notions of representation, displacement, diaspora, models of margin-center[, or] hegemony-difference relations” (Kunow “The Coming of Age” 304).

Scholars of American literature and culture have also focused on the topic of age and aging and found age studies to be an intriguing lens through which to view American novels and films. Roberta Maierhofer suggests, for instance, that we consider female aging a paradigm of American culture because, as she maintains, aging puts questions of personal identity into the center of attention and forces individuals to negotiate possibilities and constraints in terms of social structures and individual experiences (cf. 17, 35). According to Maierhofer, the topic of aging as a vantage point of American literature is particularly conducive to themes that are often treated in American literature, such as individuality, personal identity, difference, race, class or gender (cf. 35). In like manner, Kunow suggests that we consider age and aging central themes in American culture. A complex treatment of the topic of age or aging might challenge “the ‘monogenerational myth’ of U.S.-America” and thus of a nation that conceptualizes itself as “forever young” (Kunow, “Chronologically Gifted” 26).

Most age scholars disregard the possibility that young adults might have age experiences and use this age group as a mere reference group in their studies on midlife or old age. 9 This observation is particularly true for empirical studies by scholars with a medical, neurological, or psychological background who assume that age experiences originate exclusively in material, biological, and physical changes of the body or brain (e.g. Anguera et

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9 The studies by Sinikka Aapola, Janice Sokoloff, and Lisa Niles are an exception to the rule. Aapola is one of the few sociologists who applies gerontological research to the phase of youth. The literary scholar Sokoloff focuses on the representations of aging across a character’s life course, and Niles analyzes the nineteenth century novel Armadale by Wilkie Collins and discusses the relations between cosmetics and a 35-year-old criminal woman whose age is experienced as a threat.
As a consequence, since young adults have young bodies, it is assumed that they do not have age experiences. Therefore, Phoenix et al. contend that there is almost no systematic research on the aging experiences of young adults and that “to date we have little comprehension of the ways in which growing older may be anticipated by young people” (“Young Athletic” 110). Thus, according to the Finnish sociologist Sinikka Aapola, a chronological approach to age is “unidimensional” and must be expanded with other dimensions in order to acknowledge the multi-faceted discourses of age (296, 299).

In my attempt to open up the field of age studies to younger people or characters, Gullette’s work is central. On the one hand, Gullette herself has expanded the scope of age studies towards midlife and has thus examined an age group that was previously ignored in earlier research on age or aging.

In doing so, Gullette has started to establish a critical field of age studies that “should be as comfortable dealing with ‘the midlife’ as with ‘youth’ or ‘old age’” and thus should engage in research that tries to understand age “across the life course” (“Age Studies as Cultural Studies” 217-8; original emphasis). On the other hand, Gullette has introduced and coined several terms, from which I have taken a cue for the terminology I apply in this book. In conceptualizing the intricate and often invisible ways in which people are aged by culture, Gullette was inspirational for what I call aged young adults. This term designates characters in their twenties and thirties who have internalized the cultural meanings of age or aging (also see pages 74-5). Similarly, when I speak of cultural imaginaries about age and aging, Gullette provided a terminological point of departure with her concept of life course imaginaries (cf. “From Life Storytelling” 102), which helped me to frame cultural imaginaries associated with age and aging as a body of knowledge about what it means to grow old(er) in a particular cultural context. A more detailed definition of these terms will follow in the next chapter (see pages 72-3).

10 The study by Anguera et al. actually demonstrates that cognitive impairment due to old age is a not a one-way street as the capacity to multitask of elderly participants could be improved with training.

11 Consider, for instance, Gullette’s studies Safe at Last in the Middle Years: The Invention of the Midlife Progress Novel (1988) or Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife (1997).
There are further age scholars who have laid the groundwork for the approach used in this study. A handful of sociologists have conducted qualitative interviews with high school students and twenty-somethings and found empirical evidence that confirms my observations on the importance of age in the lives of young adults (cf. Rambo 1992, Aapola 2002, Phoenix & Sparkes 2005, Wainwright & Turner 2006). These studies undermine the simplistic union of body and mind, which presupposes that only an old body can cause age awareness or feelings of being old. The researchers found that the respondents (who are students, athletes, ballet dancers, and table dancers) rely on a youthful, strong, and attractive body. Their feelings of being aged or old have, however, emerged from quite different situations.

Cassandra Phoenix and Andrew C. Sparkes find in their study on young athletes that “gerontophobic images” play a major role in people’s imaginations of their future selves (117). There also seems to be a discrepancy between looking old and feeling old, as ballet dancers (or other top athletes) are considered (or can start to feel) old in their mid-twenties. One of the dancers who Steven P. Wainwright and Bryan S. Turner interviewed admits:

25 is the verge of getting old. It sounds awful but it’s true. You can take your pension at 35. [...] But your body does change as you get older. What I’ve noticed, even at 24, 25, is that I can still do anything I always could but just not as easily. I’d have to warm up a bit more, or I’d have to think about it. Before I’d just do something without thinking. I can still do it, but it just hurts to do it. It’s not like agony, but it hurts. (245)

Wainwright and Turner summarize that, “[i]n the social world of ballet, as in many athletic sports, a thirty-year old is perceived as ‘old’” (245). Wainwright and Turner challenge simplistic constructivist views of aging: Instead of assuming that age is only dependent on an aging body or only a social construct, they advocate an ‘intermediate constructionist stance [which] contends that the body is socially moderated, not simply invented by society” (245). The ballet dancers are considered old because their bodies have become old (in terms of less efficient) in comparison to younger, more flexible or resilient bodies.
Carol Rambo’s study on table dancers substantiates the importance of the socio-cultural context on the meaning of age or aging for younger people. In the world of table dance, aging is significant regarding the ideal of an attractive, youthful body. The peak of perceived youthfulness – which is around age 26 for ballet dancers (cf. Wainwright and Turner, 246) – occurs even earlier in the careers of table dancers. Rambo finds that the average age of dancers is 19 or 20 (cf. 307). Table dancers in their mid-twenties are considered old for two reasons: On the one hand, the customers in strip bars are often very young and are looking for women who are younger than themselves (cf. 307); on the other hand, Rambo remarks that, with aging, table dancers are considered less desirable (because they might get heavier, for example) which negatively affects their sexual appeal (cf. 313). Hence, regardless of how chronologically young table dancers might be, they can be considered old at an early age (cf. 315). Therefore, for dancers, “the definition of old is both bodily and socially contingent” (308). Even though Rambo’s study is problematic in some aspects,12 her research is crucial because she shows that feeling or being old is situational. Hence, age or aging in young adults is subjectively experienced, culturally shaped, and socially moderated. But it also has a biological or physical dimension. Consequently, the meanings connected with age or aging – such as loss of attractiveness, employability, loss of physical resilience, or pain – are highly contingent.

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12 Rambo’s observations on the working conditions of table dancer seem to uncritically reproduce stereotypical notions of aging as decline. Rambo observes, for instance: „While she [the ‘older’ table dancer] still may be an adept dancer, her body loses appeal as a sexual object. Sustaining the resources she formerly possessed – youth and beauty – becomes strained and in the eyes of customers has diminished sexual utility, that is, a form of aging“ (309). Similarly questionable is Rambo’s terminology in this respect. In speaking of „managed utility,“ she evokes a sense of agency and active managing on the side of the aging table dancers, which I find problematic. After all, Rambo’s descriptions of the work options for older table dancers illustrate that the dancers’ strategy of „carving out a niche“ is invariably connected with a loss of status and harsher working conditions. These ‘managing’ women seem to have no alternative to this downward spiral because “no one just quits” (311-2, 315).
Aapola maintains in her analysis of 88 autobiographical essays written by fifteen- and sixteen-year-old students that one of the dimensions or discourses of age is symbolic age, which “refers to expectations attached to various life-phases regarding a person’s appropriate behavior, skills and dress styles” (307). A particular age, adulthood in the case of Aapola’s teenagers, is thus associated with symbolic meaning, such as “freedom of movement,” “autonomy,” “independence,” or “agency,” all of which are indicative of the social status of a young person (308). Which other meanings of age or aging become apparent through age experiences?

The decline narrative that is imagined as a universal trajectory of the aging process (Gullette 1997, 2004, 2011), for instance, represents a prejudiced (or ageist) cultural concept of what it means to age because it suggests that growing into old age inevitably entails a loss of health, vitality, social power, beauty, or sexuality. Such a cultural imaginary about age and aging can result in young people’s feelings of repulsion and fear when they think about growing older (Phoenix & Sparkes 2006, Gullette 2011). Generally speaking, age scholars critically observe that old age – in Western cultures at least – predominantly involves unfavorable, stereotypical, and even discriminatory images and narratives.

The field of age studies provides important concepts for investigating how cultural imaginaries about age and aging are used in social interaction. Kathleen Woodward’s concept of age as a movable marker is crucial in this respect (Aging and Its Discontents 6). According to Woodward, individuals develop different “age-selves” over time between which they oscillate (cf. “Performing Age” 166, 173). Simon Biggs considers age as a signifier, which can be applied as desired or as necessary (cf. “Age” 48). Susan Sontag’s concept of age as a movable, recurring doom also turns out to be highly significant in an analysis of contemporary young adult characters (cf. “The Double Standard” 32-33). Claiming that aging is “a crisis of the imagination rather than ‘real life,’” Sontag’s feminist analysis expands the idea of age experiences and age crises beyond the realm of the body and its biological contingency (33). The subjective and cultural dimensions of age imaginaries thus take center stage. And, eventually, since age or aging is not only experienced by the individual but also observed by others, ascriptions of being young or old also influence a person’s age awareness because ascriptions imply value judgments and expectations. Therefore, Cheryl Laz claims that age is a performative social practice and thus actively and inter-
actively constituted. The cultural meanings upon which people “act their age” or are “doing age” remain invisible, however, and it is the aim of this study to render them visible.

**Approaching Aged Young Adults**

Departing from the abovementioned theoretical and methodological concepts on age and aging, which I will discuss in more depth in the next chapter, this study hypothesizes that the cultural imaginaries associated with age or aging circulate in fictional narratives but are often unnoticed, invisible, or naturalized. When a character’s age is mentioned in a novel or film, a reader or viewer tends to consider this information as a simple, descriptive feature with no further meaning or function. A closer look into the fictional narratives of this study will reveal, however, that the mentioning of a character’s age often has a metaphoric function. Thus, when we are informed about a character’s age, we are not dealing with a simple description of a chronological fact but with a metaphor that points to a more complex meaning. Therefore, a character like Toula Portokalos in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is not actually old in a chronological or biological sense. Rather, her father’s ascription of Toula’s old looks marks her as deviant from what he expects to be normal and appropriate for a woman her age. Hence, when Toula’s father uses references to age, he actually talks about something else, such as female roles, ‘normal’ life courses, and Toula’s nonconformity to his expectations. He also seems to reprimand his daughter for her status, which indicates a disciplinary function that references to age involve. Moreover, it is conspicuous that references to age typically coincide with conflictual moments or life crises and that they are common in the beginning of a plot, when a crisis triggers the ensuing action, which suggests that references to age also have a function within the plot structure.

I understand *references to age* as any kind of evocation that refers to a character’s age, to a character’s feelings regarding his or her age (e.g. feeling old), or to a description of a character’s appearance or conduct that is framed in terms of age (e.g. behaving childishly). Age or aging do not constitute the dominant or obvious themes in the fictional narratives. They are rather smaller textual, dialogical, or visual elements, which recur throughout the narratives. In this sense, I will suggest that we consider such age references to be *metaphoric practices*, borrowing the term from Susan Son-
tag’s analysis of cancer and AIDS metaphors (cf. *Illness as Metaphor* 92). The metaphoric practice of age does not take references to age literally but metaphorically. Age references thus insinuate feelings or associations that may but need not be linked with age or aging.

The normative framework that surfaces in age metaphors manifests itself in the characters’ sensitivities regarding social position, achievements, or timing and finds expression in a range of ‘symptoms,’ such as a sense of failure, depression, or apathy. Moreover, references to a character’s age seem to work within binaries of young and old, good or bad, successful or unsuccessful, healthy or sick. Despite these rigid binaries and in accordance with Woodward’s concept of age as a movable marker, the functions and meanings of age or aging are flexible and thus operate within a spectrum. With a focus on the textual and visual strategies and devices used by authors and filmmakers when they evoke age or aging, this study examines the multiple and situational functions and meanings of age metaphors.

**Age Readings**

I selected seven fictional narratives that feature young adult characters in their twenties and thirties who have a conflictual relationship to their age. This conflict either surfaces in the form of age-inappropriate behavior or in a crisis that is somehow connected to age. I used the following selection criteria to establish a well-balanced variety of narratives that are comparable: The narratives all feature characters in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties as central characters.\(^{13}\) More specifically, the characters’ ages range from 28 to 35. The plots describe a conflict, discomfort, or crisis of the central characters, which is linked repeatedly to age, age-related behavior, or a sense of temporality. I decided to focus on novels and films – and not on television series, short stories, poetry, or songs for example – because nov-

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13 The character of Denise Lambert in Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* constitutes an exception because she is not a central character. I decided to include *The Corrections* into my corpus because of the novel’s particular metaphoric use of age and because the topic of age pervades the characterization of Denise Lambert’s parents and her older brother Gary.
els and films have a similar narrative structure.\textsuperscript{14} For reasons of comparability, I also chose very contemporary films and novels, which were published or released in the United States within a time period of ten years (between 2001 and 2011). Therefore, all of the fictional narratives are written or directed by Americans in an American context. Only the British director Sam Mendes is an exception to the rule (\textit{Away We Go}). \textit{My Big Fat Greek Wedding} is set in an intercultural, Greek-American context and was written by a Canadian-American, Nia Vardalos. The film is set in Chicago.

The resulting corpus of fictional narratives comprises three films – \textit{My Big Fat Greek Wedding} (2002), \textit{Away We Go} (2009), and \textit{The Future} (2011) – and four novels – Jonathan Franzen’s \textit{The Corrections} (2001), Don DeLillo’s \textit{Cosmopolis} (2003), Tom Perrotta’s \textit{Little Children} (2004), and Benjamin Kunkel’s \textit{Indecision} (2005). This corpus represents a balanced selection on several levels. The narratives are set across the North American continent – three take place on the East coast (\textit{Indecision, Cosmopolis, Little Children}), two are set in the Midwest (\textit{The Corrections, My Big Fat Greek Wedding}), and one movie is set on the West Coast (\textit{The Future}). \textit{Away We Go} is a road movie and features the West (Arizona), Midwest (Wisconsin), Canada (Toronto), and the South (Florida). The fictional narratives include small independent productions (e.g. \textit{The Future}) and blockbusters (e.g. \textit{My Big Fat Greek Wedding}) as well as debut novels (e.g. Kunkel’s \textit{Indecision}) and novels by well-established authors (e.g. DeLillo’s \textit{Cosmopolis}). Some of the fictional narratives were highly praised and awarded several prizes (e.g. \textit{The Corrections}), while others received critical reviews (e.g. \textit{Away We Go, Cosmopolis}). Since this study does not pursue a particular focus on gender,\textsuperscript{15} the protagonists’ gender is equally distributed

\textsuperscript{14} When I speak of a similar narrative structure, I mean that the story is typically told within 90 minutes or within a finite amount of pages. The stories do not have the open structure of a television series, yet they allow enough time for character development. In this sense, novels and films are easier to compare than a feature film would be with a short story or a novel with a television series.

\textsuperscript{15} Gender and age are closely related, of course. In \textit{The Corrections} and in \textit{The Future}, for instance, age figures as a problematic topic for the female characters when it comes to pregnancy and fertility. For reasons of conciseness, this study does not fan out the complexities of age for women and men. Moreover, Susan
with five female characters (Verona, Toula, Sarah, Denise, Sophie) and five male characters (Burt, Todd, Dwight, Eric, Jason).

As I have noted earlier, the age crises of young adult characters have not been discussed from a cultural age studies perspective so far. Life crises of young adults, however, have interested scholars from various disciplines. Sociologists and journalists have thematized the quarter-life crisis and have tried to define new generations of Millennials or Generation Y. The figure of the perpetual adolescent or delayed adult has been theorized by developmental psychologists and sociologists. And, of course, for literary scholars, the genre of the Bildungsroman imposes itself as an expectable point of departure for investigating typical crises of young characters. Aged Young Adults does not aim at a generational portrait nor does it try to inscribe itself within the genre of the (late-) coming-of-age story. On the contrary, this study asks whether these approaches and labels might actually oversimplify or misunderstand the meanings and functions of age awareness in contemporary fictional narratives. After all, one might wonder how fitting it is to speak of coming of age when a character feels old or is considered to look old: Such an ascription implies that the character has already matured and is about to transition into (symbolic) old age.

A note on the methodology of this study, the age reading. Following Stoddard’s claim on the reciprocal relationship between film and its audience, I assume that fictional narratives respond to the socio-cultural environment from which they emerge and, conversely, they incorporate cultural knowledge about narrative genres or conventions, life crises, generations, and transitions into adulthood. Instead of reading the fictional narratives through either a purely literary or a purely socio-cultural lens, I will try to juxtapose these perspectives and their ensuing topics, explanatory models, and narrative conventions in order to find out how the novels and films negotiate public discourses and narrative conventions but also how they criticize, satirize, transform, or dismiss them. This juxtaposition is based on the assumption that novels and films are rarely direct mirrors of a social reality.

Sontag, for example, concedes in “The Double Standard of Aging” that her argument regarding age or aging is applicable to both genders, though in different ways and with different consequences. For a more gendered approach to fictional narratives dealing with female young adults, see my article “Junge Altersbilder in den Medien” (2013).
While they incorporate and respond to a social reality and a recognizable cultural context, novels and films create their own fictional universes and semantic associations. A juxtaposition of fictional and sociological approaches unveils the creative usage and intrinsic value of metaphors of age or aging in fiction and clarifies whether or not the use of age in fictional narratives is realistic, exaggerated or even distorted. Taking my cue from Woodward’s example in Aging and Its Discontents (1991), in which she juxtaposes Freudian concepts with twentieth-century American fiction, an age reading is a close reading of fictional (age) narratives that has its main focus on the topic of age or aging and that consults studies from other disciplines or fields in order to better understand the functions and meanings of age in the corpus of fictional narratives. An age reading thus suggests a dialogic structure, in which fictional narratives and pertinent scientific studies respond to each other and pose new questions, which are passed along to the next chapter, fictional narrative, or study.

The Structure of an Age Reading: Chapter Organization

Ensuing from the methodological approach of an age reading, the organization of this study reflects a dialogic nature. In the following chapters, I will first establish the theoretical background and work out the method of an age reading from an in-depth discussion of existing theories and concepts. It will become clear how my approach positions itself within the research field of age studies (Chapter 1.1). I will then define the concept of age as a metaphoric practice (Chapter 1.2) and the method of an age reading (Chapter 1.3). My Big Fat Greek Wedding will serve as an entry door into my analysis. This movie is particularly well-suited as a departure point because it appears as an innocuous romantic comedy. Even though it starts out with an obvious reference to the protagonist’s age and her conflictual relation to age, most viewers will focus on the apparent themes of love, self-realization, and intercultural relationships. The movie’s invisible messages about age and aging, however, as I will show in Chapter 2.1, are very problematic because of the ageist, i.e. age-discriminatory agenda of the film.

My age reading of My Big Fat Greek Wedding raises several questions: How do age scholars conceptualize age discrimination? What are the meanings of being old in Western cultures? And how can ageism be a disciplinary strategy or mechanism of control? In Chapter 2.2, I will elaborate on
these questions by discussing how, according to gerontological research, age and aging constitute a moral enterprise and how old age is predominantly perceived as a social problem. It will become clear that age is often envisioned as a binary of young and old. The meanings associated with age are therefore binary as well. Youth is stereotypically linked with health, productivity, resilience, or attractiveness while old age is generally imagined as the loss of all such qualities. Within such a binary logic, control mechanisms and disciplinary practices have emerged that label old, unproductive people as losers. The workings of these mechanisms can be observed in the characters of Sam Mendes’ movie *Away We Go* (Chapter 2.3).

Burt and Verona consider themselves losers because they are of a certain age (33 and 34) and have not achieved what they expected to have achieved. In *Away We Go*, ‘feeling old’ functions as a form of self-marginalization and as a concession of being unsuccessful and a failure. This crisis triggers the characters’ journey in the movie, which is accompanied by references to age and an acute sense of temporality or timing. The male protagonist Burt is repeatedly described as a perpetual adolescent and thus as someone who is stuck in the transition between two age stages and who does not behave appropriately for his age.

The term ‘perpetual adolescent’ feeds from a phenomenon that is profusely discussed by developmental psychologists and life course sociologists who wonder: Why do so many adults in their twenties and thirties behave like teenagers? What is the larger socio-cultural context of the perpetual adolescent? What is delayed adulthood symptomatic of? And what are the theoretical repercussions of kidults or adultescents on the definition and meaning of life stages? As sociologists and psychologists have shown, the perpetual adolescent is symptomatic of a particular cultural and economic context, in which the meanings of life stages and moralities associated with adult behavior have become fluid and unstable (Chapter 3.1). In *Little Children*, we can see how the figure of the perpetual adolescent is used to undermine the norms and moralities of a smug, white, middle-class suburban community, in which Todd, the protagonist, longs for his earlier life as a teenager (Chapter 3.2). In the novel, age-inappropriate behavior is metaphorically linked with inappropriate relationships and improper sexual desire. By blurring the boundaries between morally correct and incorrect behavior, the metaphoric practices of age used in *Little Children* challenge the norms and meanings of transgressions.
Norms and expectations also shape the background against which life course imaginaries project predictable patterns of living through time. Life course theorists have conceptualized what (allegedly) standard or default life courses look like and examined the often quite visual trajectories associated with living through time (Chapter 3.3). The consequences of non-conformity with the default version can become a pungent device of social control and devaluation. Denise Lambert, the youngest daughter in Jonathan Franzen’s fictitious family in *The Corrections*, experiences the powerful consequences of her transgressions in terms of timing and age-appropriate behavior (Chapter 3.4). Denise has a tendency to date much older men, which profoundly upsets her family and which functions as an indicator of a deeply conflicted personality and family. Age and mental health, that is depression, coalesce in Franzen’s fictional universe on several interconnected levels.

What is the nature of this semantic connection between age and mental health? Do references to depression imply mechanisms of control and marginalization similar to the cultural imaginaries associated with age or aging? Why does Franzen evoke economy when he speaks about depression? Like age metaphors, mental health is, as suggested in Chapter 4.1, an interesting gauge in terms of ascertaining conformity or non-conformity to the expectations of a particular culture. The normative background against which mental conditions are categorized as healthy or unhealthy is informed by the compliance of an individual with values, such as self-responsibility, self-observation, agency, and entrepreneurialism. These values also surface in the studies of age scholars who critically discuss the dogma of positive aging. Hence, there seem to be semantic and functional similarities between depression and old age or aging.

In *Indecision*, Benjamin Kunkel negotiates this association (Chapter 4.2). His protagonist Dwight Wilmerding is introduced as a character who has failed on several dimensions: He is aimless, (soon) unemployed and homeless, financially dependent on his father, and he suffers from a mental disability, abulia, which means that he is unable to make decisions. Dwight associates his many problems with his age. Instead of reading Dwight Wilmerding as a perpetual adolescent, I will focus on how Kunkel uses irony and satire to mock the pharmaceutical industry as well as academic discourses that try to explain contemporary American culture through consumer cycles or entrepreneurial concepts of the self.
Economic thought patterns, as some philosophers and age critics contend, are applicable to life cycles, lifestyles, youthfulness as symbolic capital, and concepts of the self (Chapter 4.3). Like Kunkel, Don DeLillo portrays the consequences of this coalescence of economy and life cycles (Chapter 4.4). But in his novel *Cosmopolis*, he casts an entirely different tone over the story of his protagonist Eric Packer. It is a bleak and lethal atmosphere, in which Eric, aged 28, senses that his time is up. Not only does he surmise the imminence of his own death, he also sees himself and the world around him become obsolete.

Miranda July creates an alternative response to the entanglements of age and aging, consumer culture, life course imaginaries, and living in contemporary American culture (Chapter 5). Her fictional characters Sophie and Jason in *The Future* as well as her semi-autobiographical account *It Chooses You* portray aged young adults who have internalized the meanings of age and aging and who struggle to come to terms with the consequences. By combining fictional and non-fictional approaches, July offers an optimistic and creative alternative to the stereotypical cultural imaginaries of age and aging. July’s recent work completes the previous age readings because it widens the scope of age readings considerably. *The Future* blends fictional and (auto)biographical as well as magical and realistic elements and provides a transition into my conclusion, in which I suggest that the metaphoric practice of age is not only a device in fictional narratives but, coming back to Gullette’s concept of age narratives, imbues all kinds of narratives.

Following Carol Rambo, I agree that the “separation of aging from old age” may “add an important dimension to formulating a general processual approach to aging as an experience across the life course” (308). After all, as Sara Munson Deats and Lagretta Tallent Lenker remind us:

> From birth to death we all age, and from womb to tomb our chronological progress is obsessively and meticulously recorded: on our driver’s licenses, on our passports, in the newspapers (if we are unfortunate enough to be celebrities), on the end papers of our books, and at our birthday parties. (9)

In bringing together and elaborating on the few isolated attempts to study younger age groups from an age perspective, this study suggests that the in-
clusion of *aged young adults* is a necessary next step in the field of age studies.