



Old enough to know better

Description

Sylvain Chomet created the animated films *Belleville Rendez-Vous* and *The Illusionist*. His earlier successful short film was called *The Old Lady and the Pigeons*. Art and entertainment often draw on the skilful manipulation of stereotypes, and their exaggeration. Skilful animators such as Chomet make their characters sufficiently recognisable and true to type, but with a twist. Thereâ??s something alien about the old lady turns out to be not so helpless, and that makes us laugh â?? if



Representations of old age are relevant to the current social climate.

Itâ??s well known that people are living longer. Populations are getting older. Older people are no longer an eccentric minority. Do the old stereotypes still apply?

A leading think tank on ageing and longevity released a report this week on how older people are coping with digital technologies. It seems that computer users are under-represented among people over the age of 70. In the survey accompanying the report, it seems that non-Internet users were less likely to say that they â??often felt lonely,â?• a negative way of asserting that access to the Internet probably provides a means of softening the effects of isolation felt by many older people. People who

use the Internet seem to be more sociable, join associations, and have a greater quality of life. The report suggested that society needs to *nudge* reluctant older people into the world of the Internet.

Here's another idea (not in the report): Older people represent a growing, talented, wise and potentially productive sector of the population. In 20 years time there will be a much larger number of people over the age of 65 who are accustomed to travel, are adept users of digital technologies and communications, and are able to harness self-help opportunities, as do many people now across the generations. People in old age will be characterised less as a dependent minority. Many of yesterday's leaders in the arts, sciences, business and politics will move into old age. Larger numbers provide an increased talent pool that will include those who can be articulate about and influence the welfare of the general population. For how much longer will we hang on to the cartoon characterisations of old age: sweet old ladies, grumpy old men, wise old sages, dotty aunts, aged eccentrics, and undereducated technophobes?

Notes

- This month the Rolling Stones performed at their 50th Anniversary Concert in the O2 Arena, London. Lead singer Mick Jagger was born in 1943.
- Other famous old people in history, fiction and legend: Methuselah; King Lear; Merlin; Gandalf; Obi-wan Kenobi; Albus Dumbledore; Granny, keeper of Tweety Pie (Warner Bros); Grampa Simpson; Carl Fredricksen (*Up*, Pixar); Miss Marple (Agatha Christie); Compo Simmonite, Norman Clegg, Cyril Blamire, Foggy Dewhurst, Seymour Uttherthwaite, and Herbert Truelove (*Last of the Summer Wine*); Abby and Martha Brewster (*Arsenic and Old Lace*); Louisa Alexandra Wilberforce (*The Ladykillers*); Statler and Waldorf (*The Muppets*); the first Dr Who; Old Man (*Logan's Run*); Violet Crawley, Countess of Grantham (*Downton Abbey*).
- Gerontocracy: See the [Economist](#) for an interesting chart of the age of national leaders relative to the average age of their populations (in February 2011). Not surprisingly, the gap is widest in countries with autocratic governments. This is another old people stereotype: dynastic, wizened, intransigent autocrats enjoying privilege and status and sucking the life from the fruits of youthful labour.
- Karl Jung identified the importance of the 'wise old man' archetype. Also see the way Joseph Campbell identified this and other archetypes in explaining characters in narrative.
- I stumbled across the following on the Internet: 'Old people tend to act in a certain way. Are they like that because that's what old people are like, or are they like that because that's what young people were like 60 years ago?' (Wakela, Simple Machines Community Forum, <http://forum.escapeartists.net/index.php?topic=4675.0>).
- Shakespeare's poem *All the World's a Stage* assumes that we all revert to childhood at the seventh 'age of man' before the end: 'Turning again towards childish treble, pipes; And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all; That ends this strange eventful history; Is second childishness and mere oblivion; Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.'
- Colleagues and I have also been researching issues of ageing and mobility in the outdoor environment, seriously.
- Sylvain Chomet returned to Edinburgh this week to receive an honorary doctorate from the University of Edinburgh. Here's what I said at the laureation: *Six years ago I stumbled across an animated feature film like no other. It involved an old lady, a crazy cyclist, a dog and a scary sea journey. The lady and the dog eventually met three retired singers who fed on limp and leggy*

dead frogs blasted from a swamp and made into soup or turned into kebabs. This was the award winning, Oscar-nominated animated film, *Belleville Rendez-Vous*, from the creative imagination of the film director and animator Sylvain Chomet, who we honour today. Sylvain is a Parisian who has worked in London, Canada and of course, Edinburgh. He worked on commercials, print comics, short films, and at Disney before producing his feature-length, hand-drawn animated films. As a consummate teller of stories, Sylvain has stories to tell about his experience in Scotland related in interviews with the Scotsman newspaper, the Guardian, the art press and on video. The Edinburgh story begins with Sylvain falling in love with the Scottish landscape, its sky and capital city. It also involves a script. The daughter of the famous French filmmaker Jacques Tati handed Sylvain a copy of a script written by her father but never produced as a film. The script involves a magician in the 1950s whose Paris audiences are dwindling as stage variety entertainment is supplanted by rock and roll. The magician is forced to travel looking for an appreciative audience. The original script called for an adventure in Prague, but luckily for us Sylvain located the odyssey in Scotland. Under Sylvain's pen, the magician arrives in Scotland's Outer Hebrides, where he is pursued by a star-struck young girl, whose life is untouched by the effects of electricity, let alone rock and roll. She believes the magician's illusions. The pair come to Edinburgh, and it's this backdrop that excites contemporary Edinburgh residents and visitors watching Sylvain's spellbinding film, *The Illusionist*. The city plays a major role in *The Illusionist*, and much of the production, involving over 30 animators, took place in the city of Edinburgh itself. It's largely in appreciation of your love-letter to our fair and only sometimes damp city that we honour you with this degree. Edinburgh, lovingly hand drawn, coloured and animated but with some digital modelling and rendering thrown in is Edinburgh for many of us in the creative sector. The graduates before us represent award-winning animators, film makers, digital media specialists, designers, sound designers, artists, architects, musicians, creators and critics. What excellent company to be among as we celebrate the human imagination, and your colourful, artful, highly skilled, musically rich and altogether wonderful contribution to the creative arts.

- Also see [Why cartoons have animals](#), [Exaggeration](#), [Mass media schedules and generation Y](#), and [Shojo manga morals](#).

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Category

1. Film and media

Tags

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2. archetypes
3. cartoons
4. exaggeration
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