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Ageing in film

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Film represents a ‘possible world’ that cannot be assumed to reflect the reality outside the story-world without mediation. The integration of film into gerontological research therefore requires scholars who master a vocabulary with which to analyze cinematic form and style (mise-en-scène, cinematography, montage, etc.), have knowledge of film history and recognize the ideological dimensions of film so as to engage in critical readings of case studies. So far, the most extensive studies of ageing in film are *Visions of Aging* (Cohen-Shalev 2012), *The Silvering Screen* (Chivers 2011) and *The Becoming of Age* (Gravagne 2013). Anthologies such as *Staging Age* (Lipscomb and Marshall 2010) and *Aging, Performance, and Stardom* (Swinnen and Stotesbury 2012) include several essays on the topic. Overviews such as Yahnke (2010), though they do not offer critical analyses of ageing in film, indicate possible case studies.

**Representations of ageing**

The current proliferation of films about later life points to an adjustment of the under-representation of people over 60 in film compared to their proportion in the population. A purely quantitative approach however does not reflect the ways in which age ideologies are articulated through moving pictures. Films are products of industries situated in a given culture that both replicate and generate the values and norms of that culture. Hence, visual literacy is required to assess the extent to which imagery of older people moves beyond ageism towards more diverse representations. ‘Senior-friendly’ representations are not exclusive to independent cinema. Mainstream cinema can also offer a counterbalance to negative cultural assumptions about ageing.

Many contemporary films about ageing feature love stories. These seem to confirm the intertwining of the discourse of ‘successful’ ageing with (heterosexual) coupling and intercourse (cf. Katz and Marshall 2003). In their respective analyses of the British drama *The Mother* (2003) and the Hollywood-produced romantic comedy *Something’s Gotta Give* (2003), Kaplan (2010) and Wearing (2007) examine to what extent such pictures move beyond stereotypical plot-lines (e.g. May–December love stories), hyperbolical characters (e.g. the dirty old man and the withered menopausal woman) and other features characteristic of master narratives that reflect and shape age ideology within a given society. In *The Mother*, the widowed May (Anne Reid) starts an
affair with the much younger Darren (Daniel Craig), the lover of her daughter. In *Something's Gotta Give*, the writer Erica (Diane Keaton) falls in love with the cliché of the perennial playboy (Jack Nicholson), who previously dated her daughter. Although both films are careful not to reproduce negative assumptions about old age, such as the idea of later life as an asexual stage, they do revert to ageist logic, more specifically to a form of generational politics that limits the narrative possibilities of the leading characters. This results in conflicting messages and not entirely convincing endings.

In *The Mother*, the intimacy between May and Darren ensues from shared feelings of outsidership in the first three-quarters of the film. When May’s children discover the sexual nature of the relation between May and Darren, the plot takes a turn that contradicts earlier images of their heartfelt bond. Darren is revealed to be a drug addict who takes advantage of May, and the stereotype of an abusive relationship between an older woman and a much younger man is thus ultimately confirmed. The film ends with May leaving her children and family home to engage in a quest of her own. What drives the plot in *Something's Gotta Give* is the idea that the rogue has to come to terms with his age by settling down with an age-appropriate woman. As such, the character of Erica mainly serves as a narrative device to help Harry overcome his fear of older women and convert into a respectable older man. Yet, in order to bring the story to the predictable happy ending and to convey the message of generationally proper sexuality, the potentially much more fulfilling and balanced relationship between Erica and Julian (Keanu Reeves), whose only ‘fault’ is that he is some decades younger than Erica, has to be nipped in the bud.

Kaplan’s (2010) and Wearing’s (2007) readings further exemplify how the form and style of film convey ideology. Key elements of the plot are put across by aesthetic choices. The agency of the women characters, for instance, is suggested by different means to present them as speaking, acting and gazering subjects. Kaplan describes how already in the garden scene at the beginning of *The Mother* (when May’s husband is still alive and the couple has just arrived in London to visit their children), May’s awakening is implied through subjective shots and camera movement. From the garden, May watches her husband discuss cricket with Darren in the conservatory. This foretells the scenes in which May as amateur artist appropriates the male gaze by making revealing drawings of Darren’s desirable body. By contrast, the credit sequence of *Something's Gotta Give* features a succession of shots of young supermodel-like women with ‘display’ bodies. The rap song ‘Butterfly’ accompanies the shots, until the music is replaced by Harry’s misogynist voice, as if this sequence pictures his imagination. Yet, the credit sequence differs greatly from the subsequent narrative in terms of aesthetics. Harry will turn out to be an unreliable narrator who needs to adjust his objectifying gaze. Erica, conversely, is portrayed as a playwright who turns their love story into a play, thereby ultimately taking charge of the narrative.

The sexual reawakening of both May and Erica is suggested by changes in their clothing style—a narrative element of the mise-en-scène. May gradually exchanges her plain look for a more flattering and colourful one. Close-ups suggest that her wrinkles have almost disappeared. In a similar vein, Harry literally snips away Erica’s turtleneck right before having intercourse, which symbolizes her transformation from a sex-deprived divorcee into a lustful older woman. From this moment onwards, V-necks and pastels replace her beige, high-fitting shirts. Simultaneously, Erica’s daughter Erin takes on her mother’s maternal look, emphasizing the continuity between them. Erica and Erin swap men, but it is emphasized that a heart attack prevents Harry from having intercourse with the daughter. In the most notorious scene of the film, Harry inadvertently catches sight of a nude Erica, thereby mirroring the opening scene in which Erin strips before him. On seeing Erica’s body, Harry reacts with distress only to realize later that her body is not so different from the younger women’s bodies he is so familiar with. Wearing interprets
this scene as evidence of the more progressive ideological work of the film, namely rehabilitating the older woman’s body into visibility and sexual activity.

Films about dementia

If we have late-life romances at one end of the film spectrum, on the other we find plots propelled by the impact of dementia on individual lives. The proliferation of films about dementia shows how the disease now epitomizes fear of old age. In so-called ‘hyper-cognitive’ cultures (Post 1995), dementia is seen as a particularly frightful illness because it violates the disposition of autonomy, productivity and development that defines what it means to be human. The Cartesian model, designating the mind as the locus of personhood, has led to the stigmatization of people with dementia as ‘non-people’. For this reason, it is particularly relevant to examine how film not only mirrors and reinforces the fear of ageing into cognitive decline, but also offers alternatives to the predominant negative discourses, for instance by drawing attention to elements sustaining the personhood of people with dementia.

Scholars have argued that films about dementia tend to revert to tropes (e.g. Wulff 2008). A first trope is the focus on the caregiver. Film viewers are rarely invited to see through the eyes of the person with dementia, for instance by means of internal focalization, in order to get a glimpse of their inner self. This implies that the process of identification is primarily directed towards the caregiver and his or her burden. Gullette (2014) claims that the praise for Amour (2012) results from the viewers’ identification with the husband who, in almost total isolation, takes care of his wife through her final days. Sympathy for the devoted partner seems to make the audience uncritically accept the ending of the narrative in which social death is paired with murder (the husband smothers his wife with a pillow).

A second trope is to opt for a person diagnosed with dementia who is known to the public as someone exceptional, making the impact of the illness seem especially cruel. The latest example is the portrayal of Margaret Thatcher in The Iron Lady (2011), one of the few films that highlight the perspective of the person with dementia (Wearing 2013). In the opening sequence, the viewer sees Mrs Thatcher having breakfast with her husband, only to realize that his presence is a figment of her imagination. At the end, however, the film denies its own evocation of dementia as an embodied state of disorientation by making the protagonist banish her husband from her life and, in doing so, take charge of her own mind again. This ambiguous ending signifies simultaneously the questionable idea that one can discipline one’s body into being healthy and that Mrs Thatcher has entered a new phase of the illness in which she no longer remembers her husband.

A third popular trope is the flashback that contrasts the younger with the older self, played by different actors and actresses. This results in the preference for the past self over the present one, and makes it difficult to imagine meaningful exchanges in the here and now. The Notebook (2004), in which a husband patiently reads from his wife’s diary, hoping to activate her memory of their exceptional love story, is a popular rendering of this nostalgia for an idealized past.

Beyond these and other tropes, there is great genre variety in dementia representations; and the cultural contexts in which films about dementia are produced differ significantly. Even films about dementia that seem rather formulaic in structure and scope can be read against the grain. Critical scrutiny of the complex cinematographic ways by which spectators are positioned and of the tension between their aesthetical and ethical involvement in the picture can illuminate the impact of film on popular views of dementia. In this respect, Swinnen (2013) calls attention to dementia documentaries. Because documentaries show real people with dementia rather than actors performing cognitive decline, their informative value is often taken for granted.
Nonetheless, documentaries are also subject to directorial choices during filming and montage. As such, they do not necessarily come closer to the ‘truth’ of dementia experiences than does fiction film.

**Film and the performativity of age**

Age is performative in that everyone ‘performs the actions associated with a chronological age minute by minute, and that the repetition of these performances creates a so-called reality of age both for the subject and those who interact with the subject’ (Lipscomb and Marshall 2010: 2). This implies that ageing does not ‘happen to us’ but is something we actively engage in or ‘do’. Age performances are potential sites of transformation and subversion because, both on and off stage, one can escape normative behavioural scripts by ‘failing’ to act ones’ age. For older people this involves disrupting expectations dictated by the master narrative of decline. Film is a medium particularly suited to facilitate study of the performativity of age because it potentially creates a field of tension between the age of the character performed and the ‘default body’ of the actor, which is the visible manifestation of their selfhood at a given moment or the embodied identity in culture over time (Gullette 2004: 161). Professional actors can be cast to act younger or older. An interesting example is *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008) in which the main character is born with the physical characteristics of an old man (Port 2012). In the course of the narrative, he moves through the different stages of development while bodily ageing in reverse—becoming physically younger rather than older. This raises the question of what it might be like to simultaneously grow up and grow young.

A first challenge of the film adaptation is to portray Benjamin’s unconventional development in a plausible way. Instead of selecting different actors to play sequential selves, the director decided to suggest continuity by stretching the age credibility of Benjamin (Brad Pitt) through visual effects (Seymour 2009). In the first 52 minutes of the film, digitally manipulated head shots of Pitt are paired with various body actors. Viewers may not ‘buy’ this solution because the star persona of Pitt, a quintessentially good-looking man, works against the animations of him as prematurely aged. When the ‘real’ Pitt comes into view, he is aged visibly by means of cosmetic and makeup tricks until he develops into the Pitt whose vigour viewers are familiar with. In the last stages of Benjamin’s life (the last film scenes), various child actors finally replace the star.

A second challenge is radically to think through what it means when behaviour corresponds with one’s chronological age but not with one’s physique. It becomes especially clear that Benjamin’s fate complicates his life course when it is contrasted with the ‘normal’ development of his love interest Daisy (Cate Blanchett). Intimate scenes are poignant in this respect. For instance, when both characters are in their teens, they meet in a homemade tent in the living room at night. The innocence of the scene is disrupted by a co-resident who finds it outrageous that an old man (in fact, a boy who looks like an old man) spends the night with a girl. Accordingly, when they are both presumably in their fifties, Daisy feels uncomfortable having sex with Benjamin because she is middle aged and he looks like a young adolescent. It follows that the film can help viewers better understand how, in a naturalized life course, stages of life are connected to certain age performances that are inherently corporeal. We can compare this with the generational politics of 50-plus romances discussed earlier.

The idea of personhood as the conglomerate of performances over time facilitates the analysis of how different identity categories such as age and gender intersect. King (2010) has demonstrated that the figure of the cop in action films released from 1967 onwards personifies the irreconcilability of masculinity and ageing scripts. Hegemonic masculinity scripts are connected to physical strength, sexual prowess and power. Contrarily, later life is delineated as
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the period wherein all these traits are in decline. This puts older men at risk of being ‘othered’, prompting them to resort to strategies to keep ageing at a distance. In cop action films, normative masculinity scripts are enacted by the protagonist who works on the street to enforce law and restore social order. Policing requires physical aggression ranging from firing weapons to racing cars, and is portrayed as particularly masculine. Consequently, to the action cop figure, retirement only becomes a serious option when masculinity can be reaffirmed in ways other than violent conflict, ideally (and predictably) by a love story with a much younger woman. King is convinced that the figure of the ageing cop corresponds with the figure of the ageing male star whose career needs to be maintained in an industry that is primarily concerned with selling pictures.

Ageing stars in visual culture

Researchers (e.g. Addison 2006) have described the youth-oriented disposition of the Hollywood industry in terms of writing and casting, which makes professional longevity for film stars difficult to achieve. This is especially true for female stars whose careers rely on genres that emphasize beauty and sexuality. The classic example is Gloria Swanson who was about 50 years old and considered a ‘has-been’ star when she featured in Sunset Boulevard (1951) (Chivers 2011). The film focuses on the main character Norma Desmond’s hopes of making a comeback, which fails because her physique and acting style have aged visibly. Little distance was perceived between Swanson’s on- and off-screen personae, which forced her to re-enact the Norma Desmond role for the rest of her career. Despite the tendencies of the Hollywood industry to prevent female stars from extending their careers into the later stages of their lives, some actresses manage to work well into their 60s and beyond. This professional longevity seems connected to these women’s lasting ability to look and act young. Consequently (and ironically), their visibility on the silver screen promotes disciplinary practices such as Botox, plastic surgery, heavy exercise and dieting among older women in an attempt to mitigate the cultural forces that render their bodies invisible (Woodward 2006, Dolan 2013).

A film that illustrates the tension between the desire to stay young and the punishment for resorting to drastic smoothing and lifting procedures is Death Becomes Her (1992) (Sobchack 1999, Tincknell 2012). It brings the story of Madeline Ashton (Meryl Streep) and Helen Sharp (Goldie Hawn) who go to extreme lengths to turn themselves into younger, more attractive versions of themselves to compete for the love of their ex-husband. A magical potion grants them rejuvenation as well as eternal life. This implies that Madeline and Helen, who inflict violent assaults on each other, causing significant injuries, are forced forever to obsess over their disintegrating bodies. Comic effects in this film build entirely on the exposure of the two ‘monstrous’ women who refuse to act their age. Tincknell (2012) argues that the extensive use of special effects in Death Becomes Her prevents Hawn’s image of attractive, youthful star from being jeopardized by her incarnation of a woman beyond desirability. Hawn will never be read as the character Helen because she manages to successfully negotiate her association with the youth- and counter-culture of the 1960s as well as with the role of dumb blond bombshell who disrupts but never really challenges power structures.

European cinema is almost as reluctant as Hollywood to grant significant roles to older characters (Beugnet 2006). Stars such as Catherine Deneuve (now 70 years old) only retain their status of beauty icon by appearing quasi ageless. An exception is Simone Signoret, icon of French womanhood, who continued to take up roles once her stunning beauty had been lost. Leahy (2006) explains how the actress was able to turn the changes of her physique to her professional advantage. Signoret’s body was never the focus of her films but functioned as a vehicle to convey
strong women characters. In her early femme fatale roles, she already played women who appropriated the male gaze rather than embodied the enigmatic sexuality characteristic of the film noir genre. By the 1970s, when her signature image of woman who asserts her subjectivity had become fully accepted, Signoret continued to accept roles that provide women characters with agency, resisting stereotypes of passive older women, such as grandmother or lonely spinster.

Turning back to the genre of late-life romances, the question arises whether the increased visibility of older characters also implies older sexual bodies, and how aesthetic limits of their acceptability are demarcated. An interesting case in this respect is the German film *Wolke 9* in which the housewife Inge (Ursula Werner) leaves her marriage because she falls in love with another man (Marshall and Swinnen 2014). On the one hand, the film unveils time’s inscription on sexual bodies. Medium shots and close-ups of Inge disclose her breasts, bottom and even pubic hair. The actress has a mature body type that departs significantly from the seemingly ageless body of Diane Keaton revealed in *Something’s Gotta Give*. Inge’s older lover Karl (Horst Westphal) is also shown in full frontal nudity; extreme close-ups bring his body even more explicitly into view during sex scenes than hers. On the other hand, viewers’ perceptions are blurred through backlighting, overexposure and filters, and the clever positioning of curtains and bedding. The focus moves from the visual to the auditory by emphasizing the heavy breathing and sighs of especially the woman character. The European public highly appreciated the more realist style of *Wolke 9*’s portrayal of late-life sexuality. This decrease in fear of ageing bodies may foretell more changes in their filmic visibility.

**Conclusion**

This overview shows how film does ‘cultural work’, how it negotiates the often contradictory meanings of ageing and later life that shape our specific historical moment. For this reason, the analysis of ageing in film cannot convincingly be limited to an account of characters and events to merely illustrate theories of ageing. State-of-the-art research into ageing in film has given us a better understanding of the way age ideologies operate in film and their relation to particular genres, the relevance of conceptualizations of age as a performative for the study of performance in film, the growing acceptance of older bodies in visual aesthetics, and the relation between star personae and the (dis)continuation of careers. These approaches to ageing in film are obviously not exhaustive and develop over time. Most scholars who have published on ageing in film have roots in the humanities, and they tend to excel in dealing with the particularity and complexity of pictures. Relating their findings to the larger challenges of population ageing, and translating them into practice, remains a difficult undertaking.

Finally, we share ideas about future directions in this field of study. First, filmmakers can remain creative in later life, an example being Manoel Oliveira, born in 1908 and probably the only director whose career spanned the period from the silent era to the digital age. Cohen-Shalev (2012) calls for scholarship on late-life creativity in cinema and points to the intricate relation between changes over time in the individual style of an artist and developments in the art of filmmaking due to technological enhancements. Second, the film industry increasingly interacts with viewers in every stage of the filmmaking process to generate a more tailored supply of entertainment experiences. As older people become more adept social media users, they might exchange ideas, preferences and stories in their own critical, virtual communities. This will potentially educate the primarily youth-oriented film industry into adopting more diversified images of later life. Changes in the relation between producers and new senior consumer markets could become an interesting field of inquiry. Third, as people in long-term care often spend many hours in front of the television, researchers should scrutinize the impact of this occupation...
on their wellbeing. How can film (and moving images in general) improve care? A pilot study (Hendriks, Hendrikx, Kamphof and Swinnen 2013) of the responses to film of people in the later stages of dementia and their degree of immersion in the visual world showed that film is capable of inviting verbal exchanges between residents as well as inspiring caregivers to introduce topics of conversation beyond basic needs and care routines. As to the prominence and promise of the study of film in cultural gerontology, we can only imagine a productive future.

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**Filmography**


