Visions of Aging in U.S. Cinema

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The U.S. population is aging faster than at any other time in its 200-year history. According to the latest statistics, there were 40.3 million Americans over the age of 65 on April 1, 2010. This represents an increase of 5.3% of the 35 million in 2000 (U.S. Census 2010). The population aged 65 and older increased by 15.1% between 2000 and 2010 compared to 9.7% increase in the total U.S. population (idem.). Seniors now account for 13% of the total U.S. population, compared to 12.4% in 2000 (Ortman et alt. 2014). The 65 + population is expected to rise to 83.7 million in 2050, almost double the 43.1 million of 2012. This is explained by the number of aging baby boomers, individuals born in the United States between mid-1946 and mid-1964, who turned 65 in 2011 (Colby and Ortman 2014).

The consequences of this aging phenomenon can already be seen in all areas of American life, such as culture, of which the cinema is an integral part. In the first decades of the 20th century, Hollywood symbolized eternal youth and glamour, before they referred to a teenage audience, especially in the 1960s; it was later overtaken by age in this century: the age of its mainstream audiences, directors, actors and themes (Dirks 2014).

A Few Grumpy Old People

The film industry has always found a way to address the problem of aging and older people. For a long time, the question was essentially circumvented in two ways. One was through the use of farce, with horrible old villains like in *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1944) by Frank Capra and Donald Petrie's detestable *Grumpy Old Men* (1993). The other was by presenting gallant figures philosophizing about death like the characters in Akira Kurosawa's *To Live* (1952), Hal Ashby's *Harold and Maude* (1972) and Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (1957). Sometimes, as in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* (1962) by Robert Aldrich or *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) by Billy Wilder, aging is the cause of horror. In most cases, older characters have simply been relegated to the edge of the main action and thus to the edge of life (Cox 2012).

In 2005, a University of Arizona Professor of Communication and ex-Director of the Graduate Program in Gerontology, Jake Hardwood, analyzed the prominence of different age groups in 88 of the most successful films up to that time and matched it with their percentage in the general population. 30-somethings were strongly represented and the 40-somethings were well represented, however, 50-somethings were considerably under-represented and only a handful of 60+ were represented in these films (Hardwood 2005:154).

After being marginalized and given less screen time, older characters were most often pigeonholed with negative predictable results. There were a couple of friendly old grandmothers in the history of U.S. cinema, but typically the aged were typecast as "ineffective, grumpy, behind the times, depressed, lonely, slow-witted, sickly, whining, rude, miserly, and hard-of-hearing, ugly, interfering, heartless, intransigent, doddering, mentorish, frisky or profane " (Duralde 2009).

The Silvering Screen

But now we are beginning to see some changes. Old age is appearing in all kinds of films and, with the current demographic trends, this genre seems will prevail for a while. Recently, Robert Schentke's *Red* (2010) –short for "retired, extremely dangerous"– and Dean Parisot's *Red 2* (2013)

starred Bruce Willis putting back together a team of aged black-ops operatives to relive their old-time glory. Sylvester Stallone's *The Expendables* (2010), Simon West's *The Expendables 2* (2012) and Patrick Hughes' *The Expendables 3* (2014) brought action actors from the 1980s to fight less famous villains. Alas, these attempts did not placate critics. Films like these and others that show aged super macho types were criticized for proposing that the aged should continue to follow the behavior of the young in latter years. This was an unreasonable expectation for the majority of the aged, and thus, it was argued, it would only disgraced them even more (Cox 2014).

But films like Richard Eyre's *Iris* (2001), the factual account of the love, from their school-days to her struggle with Alzheimer's disease, between Irish-born British author and philosopher Iris Murdoch and her husband John Bayley; Sarah Polley's *Away from Her* (2006), the story of a man who struggles with the institutionalization of his wife who suffers from Alzheimer's and falls in love with another patient in the mental institution; Yaron Zilberman's *A Late Quartet* (2012) about a cello-player dealing with Parkinson's disease; and Phyllida Lloyd's *The Iron Lady* (2011), about the last years of Margaret Thatcher; dealt with the consequences of illness in old age. They were very understanding and compassionate depictions, but still they did not receive high marks from critics. Some contended that the afflictions depicted and their consequences were sterilized and thus did not show the full-blown reality of the sufferers. Others had an opposite complaint.

The Aged as True Human Beings

Trent University Professor of Canadian Studies Sally Chivers, in contrast, objected in her book *The Silvering Screen: Old Age and Disability in Films,* to movies that "rely on illness or disability narratives to convey the social burden of growing old", presenting old age as an illness (Chivers 2011:8). What films should be presenting, she challenged, is "the idea that an old person has value that exceeds the value attached to young appearance" (ibid.:33).

Some films are addressing Chiver's challenge and are especially sensitive to aging issues such as John Madden's seniors' comedy *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2012); David Fincher's imaginary drama *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008); David Lynch's *The True Story* (1999) about an aged man who makes a long journey by tractor to reconcile with his ailing brother; the intergenerational friendship film *Mrs. Palfrey at the Claremont* (2005) by Dan Ireland, and Roger Michell's *Venus* (2006); Curtis Hanson's *In Her Shoes* (2005), based on the novel by Jennifer Wiener about old-age wisdom; *Love in the Time of Cholera* (2007) by Mike Newell based on Gabriel García Márquez's novel about a man who devotes much of his adult life trying to heal his broken heart of a young love; the Cohen brothers' police drama *No Country for Old Men* (2007); the spy drama *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (2011) by Thomas Alfredson, Alexander Payne's *The Descendants* (2011) about an aged real-estate salesmen who attempts to mend his relationship with his two estranged daughters after his wife is mortally hurt in a boating accident; the political drama *The Ides of March* (2011) by George Clooney; Michel Hazanavicius' five Oscar-winning romantic comedy *The Artist* (2011); and the debut of Dustin Hoffman as director, *Quartet* (2012), with a group of opera singers from a nursing home.

The silvering screen has also witness the surprising reappearance of great American directors like Monte Hellman (82), William Friedkin (78), Francis Ford Coppola (75), and Terrence Malick (70) who have produced some of their best works at retirement age (Cox 2014). Clint Eastwood directed two of his best films, *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006) and *Flags of Our Fathers (2006),* at the ripe-old-age of 76.

Clearly the subject of aging and the aged has won way in the film industry and the

financial returns confirm this. Ticket sales for the $175 million, two Academy Award winner *Up* reached $731,342,744, an approximately 9 million in earnings; $133, 432.856 ticket sales for the $15 million *The Artist;* $171,627,166 for the $25 million *No Country for Old Men;* $83,073,883 for the $35 million *In Her Shoes;* $333,932,083 for the $150 million *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button;* $7,261,490 for the $3,000,000 *Venus,* and the $10 million *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* reached $136,836,156 in ticket sales (IMDB 2014*).*

Although these financial rewards do not tell the whole story, they can illumine the situation. In 2006, more senior citizens per month were going to the cinema (13%) than in 1995 (10%), whereas it is the reverse for all other age groups –26% in 2006 vs. 31% in 1995 (Allen & Kohut, 2006). However, in a survey in 1995, 73% of the aged said they prefer watching movies at home, while only 69% of adults said the same (idem). In 2006, the percentage for both seniors and adults had risen to 75% according to the Pew Research Center (ibid.). These results of the Pew survey on the declining theater numbers support those of the Motion Picture Association of America that reported a decrease in income since the mid-1990s. The maximum number of admissions occurred in 2002 (1.4 million) and decreased in 2005 (1.5 billion), the lowest rate since 1997 (idem.). Still older viewers are rescuing the cinema since they are flocking to theatres more than any other age group.

Although seniors are saving the silver screen, they don't necessarily want special effects-laden films or films focused on age: "They want big characters, grown-up dramas and tales of late-blooming love" (Cox 2012). Titles as different as Phyllida Lloyd's *Mamma Mia!* (2008); Stephen Frears' *The Queen* (2006); Nancy Meyer's *It's Complicated* (2009); Ryan Murphy's *Eat Pray Love* (2010); *Up in the Air* (2009) by Jason Reitman; *The Fighter* (2010) by David O. Russell; Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010); and *The King's Speech* by Tom Hooper (2010), have been quite popular with older viewers. According to some Hollywood insiders, about 1/3 of upcoming movies have senior citizens in mind (idem).

However, all of this does not clarify what the U.S. cinema is saying about the aged and aging or society's changing perceptions on the topic. Do films truthfully reflect developments in society? This is not an easy question to answer. "Films are like a big magnifying glass. Half the old people on the screen are in institutions, whereas in reality the figure is only 3%. The cinema dwells at length on problems such as dependency, sickness and disability. Alzheimer's has become a generic term for broader symptoms related to aging and reflects a new collective fear" (Mandelbaum 2013).

Anti-Ageist Counter-Stories

In her 2013 book *The Becoming of Age: Cinematic Visions of Mind, Body and Identity in Later Life,* Age & Gender Studies Professor at the University of New Mexico and elderly employment opportunities advocate Pamela H. Gravagne argues that the cinema has the ability to change our understanding of the aging process. Obviously, Hollywood is especially ruthless on anything related to this topic, with production of stories of deterioration and incapacity in which aged women are betrayed tragically by their maturing bodies, while aged men do just a little better. Nonetheless, Gravagne moves past these humiliating labels to break the time-based chains that oppress the aged. In her first chapter, Gravagne claims that images are important because their potential to symbolize also gives them the potential to exclude, making movie viewing a process of discerning the myths from the realities of getting old. However, how can we discern the myths from the realities? Gravagne responds by discussing images, narratives, stories and myths, as well as theories of essentialism and social construction processes to arrive at the meaning-making process itself. She concludes by stating, "films that narrate anti-ageist counter-stories have the power to let us see

how older people exceed the limitations imposed on them" (2013:183).

Two recent books –Amir Cohen-Shalev's *Visions of Aging: Images of the Elderly in Film* (2012), and *Aging, Performance, and Stardom: Doing Age on the Stage of Consumerist Culture* (2012) edited by Aagje Swinnen and John A Stotesbury– contend that Hollywood is more than likely to represent aging and the aged in accordance with a midlife perception of age and gender that excludes the lived reality of getting old. However, as these authors also contend, the current filmic representations of the aging process have the potential to transform these midlife perceptions by defying the age-appropriate behavior conventions and thus building bridges between the realities of the aging process and social beliefs. The challenging potential of such representations is, Swinnen argues, "both a perilous and a promising enterprise –perilous owing to the risk of incurring the ageist and hurtful laughter and disdain often aimed at the old who defy stereotypical expectations, yet promising on account of the possibility that such unexpected, age-defying performances may help deconstruct age-based prejudice" (Swinnen 2012:8).

Cohen-Shalev's book provides several examples of defiance and ingenuity in the twilight years, especially in movies that focus on the disruption of the status quo. His chapter on Peter Hall's *She's Been Away* (1991), a made-for-TV film about a woman who was in a mental institution for 60 years for not conforming to the 1920s sexual mores and patriarchal authority and who is finally released to the custody of her relatives. At the beginning she is distant from her grand-nephew and his family, but she soon finds herself standing up to the repressive, cold, and controlling husband of her free-spirited niece, and in doing so, she regains her sense of purpose and self-identity she feared she had lost (Cohen-Shalev 2012:39-51). Following on the same theme, the very age-conscious director Paul Cox's *A Woman's Tale* (1991) is judged by Cohen- Shalev to challenge the behavioral expectations that society imposes on the elderly (Cohen-Shalev 2012:52-63). *A Woman's Tale* is an inspiring and close look at the last days of Martha, an aged cancer victim. The movie is even more pertinent as it was written specifically for Sheila Florance (1916-1991), who portrays Martha, who was dying of cancer at the time of filming and is basically a testament to her living in the present. Cohen-Shalev argues that films like these, in which the characters refuse to be defined or their present controlled by their past, is not a denial of the aging process but a witness to the struggle of the elderly to live according to their own terms and as active subjects despite the specter of death looming not far behind and society's current expectations of how they should behave in the latter years (Cohen-Shalev 2012:52-63).

Conclusion

Although the cinema is ageing, it is still thriving and looking forward to many more years of existence; and filmmakers are "aging" with it, from the robust young American directors tackling the questions of aging like Aaron Naar and Seth Cuddenback in their dramatic film *Fades with Age* (2008), which explores the difficulties of aging in a fast-paced, modern America; to the oldest working American director, Clint Eastwood, who at 84 just directed the *Jersey Boys* (2014).

Despite the recent increase in the volume of films addressing the topic of aging or the aged, nearly all of mainstream movies tend to supply a misleading, far-fetched, and demeaning image of old age. Cohen-Shalev blames a considerable amount of these misconceptions, as stated above, on the preeminence in the film industry of a middle age view on the aging process (Cohen-Shalev 2012: 1-2, 14). Because of this, most characterizations of getting old are cleansed from anything that might disturb middle-age viewers and inflame their fears concerning the painful psychosocial realities of the aging process. However, if we truly want to enter

into this reality and understand it, only advance years, argues Cohen-Shalev, can provide directors and actors with an irreplaceable understanding of life in what he terms "old age style" or "late style" –"a style that is characterized by an ambivalence and ambiguity that resists the linearity and closure typical to works by younger artists" (Cohen-Shalev 2012:132).

Almost three decades ago, the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) claimed in his notion of cinema and philosophy that there is no distinction between reality and representation, life and art (Deleuze)[1] Artistic representations, as well as the theories we build to elucidate them, posses the power to reform perspectives to build a new reality. The aged's stereotypical behavior as well as their rebellion against these expectations in the U.S. cinema are not meant to be understood as useless efforts to regain a long-lost youth, but as a battle for a new way of being as well as a new truth. These films represent efforts to endow aging with full humanity despite the irreconcilability of one's longing to live forever and the inescapable terminal outcome of aging. Nevertheless, as Cohen-Shalev points out in his last chapter of *Visions of Aging* and Swinnen postulates at the beginning of his *Aging, Performance, and Stardom,* humor could be the best, and often times the only, real answer to this existential dilemma (Cohen-Shalev 2012: 117 -126; Swinnen 2012:7-12). Humor can help disrupt the entire idea of acting one's age, reveal the theatrical aspects of this presupposition, as well as expose the biases that hold it in place. In conclusion, as Cohen-Shalev argued above, only by personally experiencing the aging process itself can American directors and actors bridge the gap between the reality and the representation of aging and the aged. When this happens, as these authors claim, the battle for less terrifying and more accurate representations of the aging process could very well enjoy the last laugh.

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NOTE:

[1] See *Cinéma I: L'image-mouvement* (1983). Trans. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1986) and *Cinéma II: L'image-temps* (1985). Trans. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1989).