Coming of Age in Films

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By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD

The ambiguity of life can best be portrayed by how negative events result in mostly positive outcomes. Directing a small university department of gerontology and running a private consultancy business with few federal research projects, I was doing what I have been doing for more than 30 years. Comfortable, but mindless at the pinnacle of my self-imposed role in life. Then, suddenly, because of changes in university politics, I was reassigned and my department was dissolved. For the first time in my life I started teaching university courses. I had taught classes before but never a full semester course and never a three-course semester. From not having taught any classes to eight classes a year, more classes than anyone in the department and having the largest number of students, I was given no time to prepare or organize what I would be teaching. My tenure, sadly, prevented me from looking for employment elsewhere.

One semester in 2015, I was assigned to teach Images of Aging, as well as another new course. With only one week to prepare, I used what Jean Paul Piaget described as "Intelligence is what you use when you don't know what to do."

Every summer since 2010 I have been curating a film festival on aging in collaboration with the Museum of Photographic Arts in Balboa Park, San Diego, CA. Coming of Age was started with money a retired professor sent me—knowing only too well the predictable outcome of protesting against the university—to "take my colleagues out for a dinner, or whatever," and led to my curating and hosting the Montclair Film Festival on Aging in New Jersey.

When preparing to teach my new class on Images of Aging, which had taken my predecessor more than 25 years to develop, I decided to run my course purely on the methodology developed for reviewing films for the film festival. In effect, by using the film festival as the backdrop for the class, the students go through the process of curating a film festival. This was the budding formalization for this book. This early pragmatic start of introducing gerontology to university freshman has grown, encompassing different topics that were not initially discussed (feminism and disability advocacy.)

More than three years later, sitting in the Palermo region of Buenos Aires, Argentina, overlooking a bustling street on a sunny and mild August morning, I am yet again reminded of how negative events changed my life

for the better. Exploring how films portray aging for this book was a learning experience, a process that took me down many avenues and too many enjoyable but fruitless Internet rabbit holes. I learned how films are not only descriptive but also prescriptive. Films can and do determine the parameters of how we are expected to behave. More importantly, by understanding the underlying assumptions made in films, we can turn the prescriptive aspect of film to our benefit. In this book, I can introduce complex concepts and constructs much more easily by first referring to a clip from a film. We can also utilize film to teach us how to learn about our own aging. I hope that you, my reader, will enjoy and learn from this as much as I have. The final frontier of science will involve exploring our aging. Appreciating this complexity makes me somewhat proud and yes, there are tinges of hubris. Aging is a privilege and I savor time as a treasure that is freely given but knowing full well how detrimental it is when taken away. And I anticipate that all the negative events that will befall me in the future will similarly result in some positive outcome or two. But we shy away from negative events because they entail having to change.

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Mario Garrett
Palermo, Buenos Aires, Argentina.
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Reference

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Why Films are Important

Seen as a form of entertainment, films tell us a deeper story of how society is conceptualized—either realistically or idealistically. Whether as utopian or dystopian visions, films reflect an interpretation of society. Films can also be prescriptive, informative and overwhelmingly escapist, and we have learned that we can also learn from film. This introduction will help explain why films are important in our understanding of aging.

We live in an age-segregated world of tightly knit geographic age-pockets. We rarely interact with people of diverse ages unless our work or an extended family dictates it. Such extended families are becoming rarer. People are having fewer children—a trend evident across all industrialized countries—whether because people are staying single, couples are remaining childless, divorce rates are increasing, or just because more people are deciding to live alone. More than at any other time, younger adults today are living alone, moving in with roommates, staying with their parents, or living with their siblings. In the United States over the last 40 years, the proportion of young people living with a spouse fell from over half to just over a quarter. We are living solitary lives, resulting in fewer children.

Excluding the African continent, most industrialized countries have a fertility rate—the number of children that an average woman will have—that is not high enough to replace the existing population. Within this vastly changing social structure we are more likely to be living solely among our age peers. This "peer-ist" life creates an apartheid based on age.

As a result, we have little opportunity to experience how others age. We end up holding simplistic views—stereotypes—of people outside our age bracket. With older people, we might have both positive and negative stereotypes, but ultimately they remain stereotypes. Since fewer and fewer of us interact directly, or to any significant degree, with older adults, these

stereotypes become further entrenched. We constantly find evidence to substantiate these typecasts.

As modern society becomes more peer-driven and we interact mostly with people our own age, where we get our information about older people takes on a crucial role. Although we might come across people of all ages, ethnicities and genders, we only seem to communicate with any degree of engagement with people in our own age group.

The direct consequence of this age apartheid is that unless we are older people ourselves, we access information about older adults primarily from media and from trivial interactions we might have with older adults in public settings. Within this context, films, together with novels, are invaluable sources of information because they provide us with a complete narrative of the older person. Especially with films we get a complete, and in most cases, coherent story. From an early age we are susceptible to such coherent models of representation because our mind yearns for neatly packaged predictive information.

In our minds we have a model of the world that represents the world in its entirety as far as it affects us. Our extremely large brains serve to provide us this model. Our development as humans, from babies to children to adults, enhances and refines the structure of this model. Every day we adjust the model to make it more predictive and ostensibly closer to reality—an unachievable objective since reality is ephemeral. But we make reality conform to patterns that help us think we can predict it. Both our dreams and our waking emotions signal a need to modify and adjust this view of the world. This mental representation remains mostly unconscious. Our brains interact unconsciously most of the time and only give us consciousness in order to address some complex events.

Our models of the world rely on everything being just. When the world does not conform to such a view, then something terribly wrong has happened—not that our models were wrong in failing to predict the event but there was an aberration in reality. Despite the daily onslaught of news informing us otherwise, we continue to be surprised by disasters or catastrophes, thinking they are exceptions. They are not. They are exceptions only in our models of the world—the ones that we cultivate in our heads, the virtual boxes—because in our minds everything is in harmony, everything is balanced, just and constant. We hold Platonic forms, forms that are perfect and constant yet do not exist in reality. In contrast, reality is ever-changing and imperfect (indefinable). We continue to aspire to a world where we can "cure" death, "regain" youth, "fight" cancer, "save" lives, and ultimately "abolish" aging. These are illogical and delusional aspirations that we implicitly hold fast to. In this context,

one can easily see how the perfectly formed and unambiguous stories in films (and novels) contribute to our unified model; films especially because they are more accessible and popular than novels and give us a complete story. With a perfect narrative arc—a beginning, a middle and an end—a story has many of the features of how we imagine real life should be. Except that the stories we get from films are more logical and complete. In contrast, old age remains incomplete, undefined, conflicting, and ambiguous. With infirmity as our prize for winning the age lottery, and with our journey always ending in death, such a story does not make much sense. The contrast between films and reality provides ample fodder for speculating on the meaning of both.

Science still cannot explain why we age, which further amplifies why films are important. They provide a stop-gap answer, the picture of coherence for which our minds hunger. Our mental quest for perfection is fulfilled by experiencing a complete story told in an attractive visual and emotional package. More than an art form, films are a medium for gaining knowledge about the wider world. Because we relate to the characters in film, they become our avatars in our model world. Sometimes our brains create this model of the world on the basis of films that we have seen. . . there lies their great fascination and attraction for us. Films provide models that we can import. Some directors might disagree. Some would rightly argue that they are change agents, and that through their films they want to make us feel uncomfortable, face reality, and question ourselves. But even if they succeed, they only support the idea that films reflect our world and our world is reflected in films.

In 2009, Ariel Dorfman, while looking at children's films and television, made the point that films are a form of neo-colonialism, where one dominant culture superimposes its values upon children's growing beliefs. In fact, films define our culture as a society, and not just for children. We accept films as our own story.

Elaine Bapis wrote that from 1965 to 1975 "film became a culture, complete with its own beliefs about how, who, and what should dominate visual reality" (2008, p. 2). She focuses on ten seminal films that represent the important role movies play in U.S. society: *The Graduate, Alice's Restaurant, Easy Rider, Midnight Cowboy, M*A*S*H, McCabe and Mrs. Miller, Carnal Knowledge, Little Big Man, The Godfather*, and *The Godfather Part II*. In this context, film operates as a "repository… imparting the diverse ways people come to terms with the pressing concerns in everyday life" (p. 4). In 2011, Sally Chivers noted that films act as gatekeepers—not so much in formulating culture, which they do, but in determining "cultural knowledge." They define and record our

history. Robert Phillip Kolker's *A Cinema of Loneliness* (1980) expands upon how films represent culture in all its ambitions. Our ongoing fascination with film contributes to our cultural knowledge, and specifically our beliefs about aging.

It seems that everyone agrees. Films are both descriptive—explaining our culture—and prescriptive— determining how we should behave. We use films to generate stories that help us understand aging. We move from the individual experiences we have—grandpa, grandma and parents, maybe ourselves—however limited, to a more general expectation of how older people ought to behave and feel. Films help us generalize, and in so doing we gain stereotypes.

In 1976 Timothy Brubaker and Edward Powers reported that a distinction should be made between "generalized old" and "personalized old." Generalized old refers to our knowledge of older adults with whom we don't interact while personalized old refers to knowledge we gather from family or friends. Films allow us to build a model of the generalized old—an ideal gero-homunculus, an archetype in our brains of how older adults ought to behave and act. Then we go out in the world and, with the scant interaction we have with older adults, we seek evidence to support this model as a "self-fulfilling prophecy" (Thornton, 2002: p. 304). Some would further contend that such learning conforms to a hermeneutic circle. In it, the overall knowledge we have about aging helps us understand specific behaviors by older adults, which in turn helps us to generalize again. Since film audiences are getting older, film has a dual role of being prescriptive as well as descriptive. We are learning how to age.

A recent 2017 Nielsen report, which monitors TV audiences, found that older audiences watch more TV, with nearly half aged 55 years and older. TV audiences are on the decline, primarily due to younger viewers accessing more online entertainment. This decline among younger audiences changes again once they have children of their own. In addition, American audiences have become more diverse, with ethnic minorities emerging as the fastest-growing cohort. How stereotypes about aging will fare with this younger and more diverse cohort remains to be seen. Films will have to change to address this emerging clientele.

Old is Negative

We take the term old as a negative. Australian researcher Mary Cruikshank, in her 2013 book, observes that "we learn to be old partly in response to the ways we are treated" (p. 2). But it is much more than a response to how others treat us. We internalize stereotypes; we begin to

own them for ourselves. Our narrative arc, our internal story, although influenced by others around us, remains ultimately our story. Simone de Beauvoir calls how we internalize these stereotypes as the "threshold of old age" (de Beauvoir 1972: p. 324). We incorporate how others see us as an experience of self-alienation, which she expresses with the metaphor "the Other within" (de Beauvoir 1972: p. 327). We become our own worst enemies by accepting a negative view of who we are then owning it. We subscribe to the negative aspects of ourselves.

Such negative stereotypes seldom exist in the Blue Zones—small communities around the world where groups of 10-30 people live past 100 years of age. These centenarians live some 20 years longer than the average person, nearly a quarter of a lifetime more. Negative stereotypes of older age are not evident in these communities.

Although stereotypes exist for everyone—race, gender, sexual preference, size, height, intelligence, and even geographic residence—older adult stereotypes impact us faster than these other stereotypes. Aging stereotypes can happen overnight. As a result, we have little time to develop resilience to them. You become an "old person" after someone empathically offers you their seat on a bus or train, or they talk over you, or you are simply ignored. You acquiesce at your peril. Although stereotypes—in addition to the many physical and social changes associated with aging—exert negative influences, individuals also exercise "agency" (Bandura, 1982). You are at the center of your own life stage and you can negotiate these stereotypes.

Canadian Richard Elbach from the University of Waterloo and his colleagues explain how older people internalize negative stereotypes. In one study, the authors asked older adults to read text that had intentionally small type and low contrast. Some participants were told that the lack of clarity was due to a photocopying problem while the rest received no explanation. After this exercise, the participants were asked how old they felt. Older adults who had not received an explanation reported feeling ten years older than the participants who had received an external explanation for the blurred image. In addition to feeling old, they also associated their feeling with being psychologically rigid. By accepting the term "old," we accept a collection of other negative stereotypes. "Old" comes with its own baggage.

Thomas Hess and his colleagues from North Carolina State University in Raleigh explored how stereotypes create a world of negative memes—a text message that spreads rapidly among Internet users—which acts as a self-fulfilling prophesy. One meme faults older adults as having diminished memories. When older adults encounter a negative stereotype about their

declining sharpness, a cascade of other negative consequences follows. Their memory performance decreases, they rate their health as being worse than others and they feel lonelier—just because they are exposed to one negative stereotype. Negative stereotypes in the environment result in negative self-evaluations. Stereotypes play a significant self-fulfilling role in diagnosis as well. Physicians who had been primed about the connection between memory loss and dementia—and it is now everywhere in the media—diagnosed 70% of their older adult patients who reported having memory problems as having dementia compared to only 14% when physicians were not primed. Again, a cascade of consequences ensues. The diagnosis, by itself, changes memory because older adults internalize and conform to the stereotype. Other people's words change our behavior and become our reality. We are truly permeable social beings.

A diagnosis is not a neutral piece of information. It profoundly affects the lives of patients by changing the expectation of their behavior and, as importantly, how other people are expected to behave towards them. David Rothschild, one of a series of researchers, called into question the role that social context has in diminishing the capacity of older adults. Expectations built from stereotypes play a significant role in how older adults behave.

The stereotype does not have to be transmitted negatively in order to influence behavior. Even aiding a person who is completing a puzzle—implicitly suggesting that they need help—results in decreased performance over time. In contrast, those older adults who were only provided with verbal encouragement showed increased performance over time. The message is clear: Don't let others patronize, however well-meaning. Although reaching an older age is a privilege—it is usually associated with being happier, wealthier, more educated, and healthier—films tend to associate older age mainly with negative consequences.

Films characteristically portray aging as negative. Although some exceptional films go against this trend, they are outliers, not the norm. Even the portrayal of positive stereotypes of older age remains firmly stereotypical—simplified and therefore misleading. Stereotypes, whether positive or negative, are simplified short cuts applied to predict behavior. They are memes that we share in social contexts to help constrain people, either negatively or positively, in their behaviors.

Internalizing Stereotypes

The importance of social context in determining behavior can best be seen in a nursing home study. When nurses rewarded residents for being

reliant upon them—by praising them for accepting help and discouraging them from undertaking tasks independently—the residents became more dependent even if they were initially independent. The work of the late German psychologist Paul Baltes had a radical impact in this area. Baltes, more than anyone else, aimed to expose how older adults negotiate with their environment. However, negotiating can have negative repercussions as well if the patient eventually conforms to others' expectations.

There seem to be no absolutes. Being agents of our own destinies, we are responsible for how we negotiate the spaces between different actors. The argument does not minimize the role of biology but instead elevates our understanding that social context, especially stereotypes and diagnoses, moderates both our experience and expression of aging. Films are an excellent source of stereotypes that moderate and mediate our behavior as we age.

We can elucidate gerontological concepts and interpretations of older age through film, as trailblazer Robert Yahnke did three decades ago. But by going further than case studies, films can act as metaphors—in this case, the content or story of the film rather than the actors or the method and genre of films—to introduce some scientific concepts used to explain aging. As such, we then become guilty ourselves of using films as ideal stereotypes, cultural icons and film standards, but for good reasons. The narratives in films can help elucidate a more complex understanding of aging.

Based on 2011 data, U.S. creative industries, led by Hollywood's $504 billion economic activity, represent at least 3.2% of U.S. goods and services. At the same time, the industry employs just under a third of a million workers. First and foremost, the movie industry business consists of selling its products. James Monaco, a movie business insider, critic and educator, talks about the three types of products that Hollywood sells—the actor, the story and the technique. Sometimes this is done together, other times individually. This analysis focuses exclusively on content as it relates to older adults. In order not to detract from the narrative, actors are rarely discussed unless the actor's age is relevant. Also, technique and form will be overlooked, allowing the analysis to focus on the narrative of the film.

Many excellent books and documentaries exist on the broad topic of films. The 15-hour documentary series *The Story of Film: An Odyssey,* directed and narrated by Mark Cousins, based on his 2004 book of the same title, offers perhaps the penultimate review of how films influence society as a whole. Other excellent reviews have been written from a similar perspective. These critical analyses also tend to explore the

perspective of what the director implied or intended. The current analysis will not follow this approach—trying to get into the mind of the director to see what he wanted to convey—but rather will use the narrative of films as the backdrop for discussing concepts that affect older adults.

Each film promotes a unique story, and together films contribute to the telling of a bigger story than the ones they convey individually. In the aggregate, they tell a different and more complete story about aging than individual films do. By focusing exclusively on gerontological theories, this perspective provides a unique interpretation of films.

Academic interest in film and aging grew in the late 1980s and has now evolved into a thriving discourse. Gerontology has borrowed extensively from theoretical work on feminism and, more recently, from disability studies. Gerontology remains a magpie discipline, borrowing concepts from other fields of study.

Gerontology

Discussions on aging are often preceded by the word "new." Although individual aging is new to each of us, as a society we have been analyzing and cogitating on aging from the earliest civilizations. The earliest known recorded writings are the tablets of the Epic of Gilgamesh from the Sumerian period (c. 2150-1400 BC). In these tablets—themselves written about an earlier period that we know nothing about—the protagonist Gilgamesh, the King of Uruk, goes in search of immortality so he can bring his friend Enkidu back from the dead. At the end of a perilous journey—where he attains and loses the secret of immortality—the great king learns to accept that aging is a part of life and the only way to conquer age is to enjoy life to the fullest. The earliest record of civilization was centered on the concern of aging, and we have not stopped exploring what aging means since then.

The Russian immunologist Ilya Ilyich Metchnikoff named the discipline gerontology in 1903. Initially, academic interest in gerontology was purely biological—partly because stereotypes saw aging as little more than a physical diminishment. At the time, Sigmund Freud indicated that "… near or above the fifties the elasticity of the mental processes, on which treatment depends, is as a rule lacking—old people are no longer educable…" (1905, p. 264). He characterized aging as nothing more than mental and physical deterioration. But by mid-century, this explanation no longer captured the diversity of aging in the real world.

By 1942, Leonard Cottrell, a proponent of role theory, was already proposing that people hold a variety of roles and relationships throughout

their lives, such as a spouse, parent, sibling, employee, and friend. In older age some roles change while others remain, he explained. Roles determine our self-concepts and our self-image. Although age alters roles, norms, standards, and expectations, some roles remain constant (e.g., father/mother).

The importance of role theory influenced feminism rather than gerontology at the time. Eventually feminism then came to influence and contribute to gerontological theory.

Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 work *The Second Sex* gave impetus to both feminism and gerontology. In 1970, at the age of 72, de Beauvoir wrote *The Coming of Age*. In it she raged at how society discards older adults. Expressing the outrage that many other feminists would later emulate, de Beauvoir talks about how after suffering sexism, ageism was both unexpected and just as bad. Using examples of famous artists to illustrate the productivity of older adults, de Beauvoir lamented how society nevertheless denigrates older adults. The parallels are unmistakably similar between the ideas nurtured in the second wave of feminism—where Beauvoir outlines the ways in which women are perceived as "other" in a patriarchal society, second to men—and how older adults become the "other," second to younger people.

The renowned feminist Betty Friedan also made this transition in her older age, from discussing feminism to ageism. Friedan at 72—the same age as de Beauvoir when she wrote her aging opus—turned her attention to aging by publishing *On the Myth and the Mystique of Aging* in 1993. She particularly highlighted role captivity, based on the earlier work of role theory by Leonard Cottrell. Arguing that through vague threats many women are dissuaded from taking an alternative role to mother/wife, a "chalice of ownership," by their husbands, Friedan maintains that this lack of freedom that restricts women from switching roles results in depression and frustration. Socially assigned, rigid roles lead to psychological discomfort. The theoretical parallels have translated to the current sociology of aging. The rigid roles assigned to older adults might similarly result in depression and frustration.

In the United States, *The Coming of Age* was quickly followed by the 1976 Pulitzer-winning book by Robert Butler *Why Survive? Being Old in America*. Both of these early books paint a dystopian and depressing view of aging in contemporary society, blaming society for abandoning older adults in favor of youth.

Despite these depictions of modern societies, the reality remains that some older people thrive in such societies. The majority of the richest people on earth are older adults, who hold more power than any other age group.

One of a handful of theories that explain this phenomenon does not come from role theory but from a disciple of Freud's. As early as 1959, Erik Homburger Erikson developed the first personality theory that extended to old age. Erikson based his theory on the idea that the ego—our sense of self—is a positive driving force in how we develop and maintain our identity; one that we continue to develop into later years. A lack of identity leads to lack of direction and non-productivity. He was the first to coin the term "identity crisis." In the final two stages of personality and ego development, Erikson identified generativity vs. stagnation, and later in life, ego integrity vs. despair. Between 40 and 65 years, adulthood is characterized by a struggle between being productive and engaged—generativity—or being unproductive and feeling anger, hurt and self-absorption—stagnation. In later life, 65 years and older, we are split between contemplating having achieved a successful life—ego integrity—and feeling guilt about the past and failure in accomplishing life's goals—despair.

Such a theory—seeing human aging as a conflict between accomplishment and failure—attracts film critics. Amir Cohen-Shalev applied this critical thinking to describe in great detail Ingmar Bergman's films *Wild Strawberries* and *Saraband*. In *Wild Strawberries*, for example, the protagonist had to choose between two evaluations of his life. One interpretation ended in despair while another ended in ego integration, depending on how the protagonist, a retired professor, evaluated his life and the decisions he made at the present time.

Such stage theories argue that we develop in stages. Each stage determines the trajectory of our development. One of the main proponents of this line of thought is the developmental psychologist Jean Piaget. He used a very technical and inaccurate term—genetic epistemology—to explain that we can only learn (epistemology) when we are ready and have the capacity to learn (genetic). In his stage theory, however, unlike Erikson, Piaget stops at adolescence with the formal operational thought stage. At this stage we learn to think in abstract terms, including language and mathematics. Like Freud, he did not believe that older adults continue to develop, despite evidence to the contrary (See Chapter 6).

In this context, when Erikson's theory was first presented in 1959, it was largely ignored in the humanities. Academicians were more concerned with addressing the practical problems that aging brings. These pragmatic concerns created two polarizing schools of thought.

The theory of disengagement, developed by Elaine Cumming and Warren Earl Henry in their 1961 book *Growing Old*, posited a mutual separation of older adults from society at large. The dual separation

involves both older adults distancing themselves from society and society in turn pushing them away. Robert Havighurst, and later Bernice Neugarten, challenged this view in 1961 by arguing for activity theory. This competing theory states that old age is no different from middle age, and staying engaged contributes to successful aging. Older people can stay engaged in society. Then, in 1968, Robert Atchley further developed the idea that there is continuity in life, as described in his 1989 book *A Continuity Theory of Normal Aging.* The upshot is that despite the forces working against older adults to stay engaged in society—such as stereotypes—individuals have agency and control over whether to accept such pushbacks.

Accepting the idea that small incremental changes occur as we age does not necessarily mean that these changes transform the individual into another entity. To this day, despite the negative response that the disengagement theory still attracts, it cannot be denied that society or the community at large attempts to snub older adults while older adults themselves internalize this rejection and by their own volition protect their privacy by restricting their social participation.

Disengagement theory can also be seen in the writings of de Beauvoir and Butler. Undeniable change occurs in how people and society in general treat older adults. And older adults similarly change their behavior as they age, as many films portray. We negotiate a trajectory of how we are to behave.

Many other theories compete to explain aging. In contrast, the biologist/gerontologist Leonard Hayflick once bemoaned their existence. According to Hayflick aging is simply cell disorder, but such a definition over-simplifies aging. Although death is ultimately biological, aging itself involves more than biology—a whole social life exists in-between. Biology cannot explain that existence.

As social beings, we age in a social environment. Our biological body does not define the extent of our existence, although others judge people on the basis of their biology (gender, disability, skin color, and age). This social aspect has resulted in theories that focus on particular social aspects of aging. The still-evolving psychological theories related to learning theories—cognitive; ecological and systems; and the latest, lifespan—all aim to explain the myriad social changes that older adults experience, exhibit and perform. These complement biological theories.

The problem rests with the awareness that we cannot understand all of aging from an experiential perspective and that we need to study it as a discipline. You cannot learn about cancer from experiencing cancer or talking to cancer victims. You have to appreciate that great variance exists

among older adults. In fact, one of the distinguishing features of getting old is that no two people experience aging the same way. As we age as a group we become more varied. By recognizing this fact, we come to understand both the frailty and the strengths of older adults. This variance also brings ambiguity. Older adults are frail and weak as well as thriving and engaging. This diversity makes aging special. Where we can find exceptionally vigorous older adults we can also find weak older adults.

This is where films come in. They reduce and, in most cases, eliminate the uncertainty. As Pamela Gravagne has argued, the ambiguity of aging is eliminated in film in order to give the audience a more unified story, even though aging means "constantly becoming different" (p. 12).

How films represent this diversity of theories has been explored in gerontology. Three main approaches exist for this type of analysis. The first involves a listing of films on aging, perhaps organized by theme. Robert Yahnke initiated these "case studies" of films. The second is a more interpretative analysis, looking at the intentions of the director in making the film. Most of the new constructive analyses follow this interesting line of theoretical applications, including feminist and psychoanalytic interpretations in the works of Amir Cohen-Shalev, Pamela Gravagne, Timothy Shay, and Nancy McVittie. By applying theory they explain the dynamics of film symbolism and its projected underlying power structure. We can follow the narrative arc of a film and compare this with theories of aging. By comparing the story with what we know about aging, identifying what matches and what doesn't, we gain a better understanding of our assumptions about aging. This allows us to separate fact from fiction—perhaps providing us with better tools that enable us to be more discerning in our scientific approach to understanding aging. Films can play an important role in highlighting the science of aging, and they are an excellent introduction to gerontology. This type of analysis fills a gap by making discussion accessible and interesting while introducing a gerontological interpretation of films depicting aging.

Films on Aging

Following his success as the media critic for *The Gerontologist*, in 1988 Robert Yahnke published a catalogue of 45 age-related films (with an additional 49 recommended films) released between 1964 and 1985: *The Great Circle of Life: A Resource Guide to Films on Aging*. The five chapters were designed as teaching aids, focusing on different aspects of aging: Symbolic Statements, Portraits of Aging, Intergenerational Relationships, Responses to Loss, and Life Review. Yahnke followed this

in 2005 by writing about aging heroes and the depiction of loss in old age in feature-length films. In his review, Yahnke highlighted the three attributes of aging in film: 1) serving as role models and mentors for the young; 2) resolving mid-life crises for the middle-aged; and 3) maintaining community values. We can easily see these roles enacted in films. They are stereotypes that we hold of older adults and have been promoted in film.

The most critical appraisal of films on aging has come from a feminist perspective—a relationship which continues to this day. This perspective emerged in the 1974 work of two early forerunners in the field, Marjorie Rosen's *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies, and the American Dream* and Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*. These seminal works established a solid theoretical base for analyzing how films portray women, including aging women. They focused on symbolism and power dynamics to explore the propagation of roles assigned to women. Karem Stoddard's 1983 book *Saints and Shrews: Women and Aging in American Popular Film* was followed in 1989 by Andrea Walsh's *Life Isn't Yet Over: Older Heroines in American Popular Cinema of the 1930s and 1970s/80s*. These analyses focus on the underlying power of youth and masculinity to undermine the role of women, in particular aging women in film.

Then, in quick succession, two books on feminism and aging—one in 1991 by Susan Ferguson *The Old Maid Stereotype in American Film, 1938 to 1965* then, in 1992, Bradley Fisher published *Exploring Ageist Stereotypes Through Commercial Motion Pictures*. Fisher's book was followed by Merry Perry's *Animated Gerontophobia: Ageism, Sexism, and the Disney Villainess* in 1999. In 2000, Elizabeth Markson and Carol Taylor identified 3,038 films in which actors were nominated for an Oscar. Men were more likely to be depicted as vigorous, employed and involved in same-gender friendships and adventure (whether as heroes or villains). Women, in contrast, were portrayed as either peripheral to the action or as rich wealthy widows, wives/mothers, or lonely spinsters—their status determined by the social standing of their male partner. Positive stereotypes do not necessarily mean positive for older adults. The role of stereotypes makes us believe in constancy. We can pigeonhole and predict people's behavior. These works were followed in 2009 by Tom Robinson's content analysis of 60 movies, which highlighted the early stereotypes young children were exposed to through animated Disney films.

Critical appraisals of films started to expose dynamic themes that supported existing negative stereotypes of women and older adults that pigeonhole and crystalize unfavorable views that then restrict the

opportunities of both classes to self-actualize. These critical analyses established the study of aging in films firmly within women's studies as primarily feminist critical studies.

In 2010 Amelia DeFalco produced *Uncanny Subjects: Aging in Contemporary Narrative,* which takes a cultural perspective. DeFalco analyzes age as the narrative movement of our lives. We understand our lives as narrative trajectories through consistent themes. Such reflections, presented in a coherent story, gain more importance with age. Using a range of contemporary fictional novels and film, she explores how these narratives are represented and exposes how films portray the aging narrative. This analysis breaks from a purely feminist interpretation and establishes aging as having its own peculiar way of being represented. To differentiate from sexism, DeFalco uses the word "uncanny" to describe aging as a psychological experience of something "strangely familiar" (aging) rather than simply mysterious (gender). Reflecting Sigmund Freud's use of the word in his 1919 essay *Das Unheimliche*, DeFalco compares how stories of aging concur or disagree with postmodernist theories, especially feminism, and as a result establishes aging as a valid topic in its own right. Aging gained a central role in film analyses, which attracted other theoretical inputs. As feminism formed the backbone of aging theories in film—through the works of Marjorie Rosen, Molly Haskell, Karem Stoddard, Andrea Walsh, Susan Ferguson, Merry Perry, Elizabeth Markson, and Carol Taylor—gerontologists looked further afield and were influenced by other theories, especially disability studies.

Disability Studies

We see the effect of disability in older age mainly in how we interact and portray with people living with dementia. From a stance of personhood championed by Tom Kitwood, we are evolving toward a more protective role for frail older adults. In a world where we see cognition—how we think and make decisions—as the ultimate representation of who we are, we need a stronger system to protect people living with dementia. And studies on disability are showing how such protection can be implemented. Disability advocacy pushed dementia research into the political arena through the concept of citizenship—the idea that all individuals have rights that go beyond personhood. In 2007, British Ruth Bartlett and Canadian Deborah O'Connor argued that although "the idea that people with dementia have rights has long been 'recognized,' the idea of citizenship where those rights are enforced has rarely, if ever, been explicitly applied to people living with dementia."

Citizenship can be applied to promote the status of discriminated groups. However, the concept of citizenship assumes that the individual has the capacity to exercise their rights and honor their responsibilities. Such assumptions are not obvious among people with severe dementia. And there is the rub.

To get around this conundrum, the concept of "intimate citizenship" has been put forward, citizenship mediated by family and caregivers. But such membership does not address institutional discrimination. Clive Baldwin from the Bradford Dementia Group would argue that people with dementia still have a story to tell. More importantly, they might influence the stories of those who interact with them. In lieu of having an independent advocacy organization to lobby on behalf of people living with dementia, reliance on caregivers remains. That could be an issue if the relationship between the caregiver and the care recipient is fraught with problems.

We discriminate against people with dementia by restricting treatment for other medical problems they might have. For example, we deny hip replacements or surgery for non-life-threatening issues. We have laws that, rightly, restrict the ability for people living with dementia to drive and conduct business. An individual's mental capacity determines their legal status. This status determines what rights a person has. Although these laws are justified because they protect others in society, there remain other forms of discrimination inherent in a society, based on our power to make decisions on behalf of someone. We have inherited "cognitive citizenship."

In her 2004 PhD thesis, Petula Mary Brannelly reported that clinicians' personal values rather than policy or legislation resulted in one in ten people living with dementia being detained against their will. This ultimately results in negative outcomes for the patients. Ruth Bartlett devoted much of her research to defining citizenship in dementia care. She followed 16 dementia activists campaigning for social change. Although campaigning can be energizing and reaffirming, there were also drawbacks. Other than fatigue due to their dementia, the activists reported oppression related to how they were expected to behave. Bartlett comments that the struggle for citizenship has only just begun for people living with dementia, and there remains a missing piece. She recently examined dementia-friendly communities, where citizenship is perhaps most clearly enacted. But again, in disability, the concept of "equal but separate" remains an issue. Citizenship needs to occur in public social spaces. Harking back to feminist theory, redistribution of power remains a central mitigating recommendation.

Susan Behuniak discusses the many definitions of power, how persons living with dementia have been treated in the past and, more importantly, how they need to be treated in the future. As long as cognition determines legal status, we remain reliant on denigrating mental health to a lower status. Whether an individual has mental capacity or not determines whether a person has legal rights. Re-imagining the person living with dementia as a citizen with protected rights that they themselves can realize has become a political push coming from people living with dementia themselves.

Initially, through the medical interpretation, a person with dementia was simply a demented "patient." Then, through the influence of British philosopher Tom Kitwood, we came to see a "person" together with an "embodied self." Now, with advocacy for expanded legal rights, we see people with dementia as "citizens." The problem with citizenship is that people interpret the law as requiring competency and capacity. But this is not accurate. We have laws that protect fetuses, children, animals, and even trees. Eventually, the goal is to see a person with dementia as a "vulnerable person" who has both rights and protections. We have arrived at a time when organizations and caregivers/family are supporting the individual to ensure that laws to protect these rights are not being ignored. Organizations will have to transform their actions and advocacy from promoting a cure to promoting care. This is already happening. In the United States, the Alzheimer's Association has experienced this move from cure to care. Some local agencies concerned about care divorced themselves from the national organizations that remained concerned with research and "finding a cure." Care is where innovation will emerge. The citizenship of vulnerable persons will be the next frontier in care for people living with dementia. This new direction will follow in the political footsteps of disability research.

The same person-centric influences can also be seen in film. In 2011 Sally Chivers wrote *The Silvering Screen: Old Age and Disability in Cinema*, an ambitious book that attempts to explain that although more films are representing aging, there remains a distortion by representing aging as dramatized loss. Chivers argues that our negative views of aging represent our cultural and economic anxieties about an aging world.

Theoretically we still remain within the post-modernist frame of reference—as do theories that relate to disability, feminism, gay/lesbian studies, humanities, sociology, and class/race studies—and the gerontological aspect remains under-represented. In the end, most of the analyses focus on the triple threat of being older, female and disabled. As Chivers argues, "cognitive disability symbolizes the overall horror that is assumed to be

part of the aging process" (p. 73). But there are aspects of aging that are unrelated to disability and indeed to feminism. For now, however, the primary momentum has been established through this theoretical prism.

By 2014, Deborah Jermyn had edited *Female Celebrity and Ageing* to continue the impressive repertoire of books that combine feminist theory with aging and films. Such "methodological pluralism" (Weiland, 1989: p. 194) promotes a better understanding of how films comprise an integral aspect of our view of aging and how this view determines its limits. Although literary gerontology (Wyatt-Brown, 1990) is still in its infancy, it evidences a growing sophistication in how researchers interpret creative works to gain a better understanding of aging. The concept, from descriptive studies to more analytical approaches, espouses a much broader cultural system of defining roles and assigning meaning to those roles. Wyatt-Brown rightly cautions researchers to be careful of gerontological theories that trivialize death anxiety. These may rely exclusively on psychoanalytic theory, ignoring or diminishing the feminist perspective and diluting the concept of creativity. She warns researchers not to simplify aging.

The last decade has seen a particular emphasis in the literature to consolidate these different and disparate theories and analyses; in particular, the 2008 work of Amir Cohen-Shalev, *Visions of Aging: Images of the Elderly in Film*; the 2013 work of Pamela Gravagne, *The Becoming of Age: Cinematic Visions of Mind, Body and Identity in Later Life*; Norma Jones and Bob Batchelor's 2015 *Aging Heroes: Growing Old in Popular Culture*; and, more recently, with the most comprehensive listing of films, the 2016 book by Timothy Shay and Nancy McVittie, *Fade to Gray: Aging in American Cinema*. These recent publications have elevated the analyses and extended the breadth of films covered.

In the latest contribution to this growing interest, with *Fade to Gray,* Timothy Shary and Nancy McVittie, both experts on film, focused on how aging is represented in film by describing films with older adult characters. With some 500 films chronicled, where at least one of the central characters portrayed was an older adult, this book has established itself as the most detailed and comprehensive analysis of aging in film. The authors' knowledge of their subject matter, as film and communication experts (their earlier work focused on youth in cinema), provides a much-needed categorization of films and their relevance to the portrayal of aging characters. Comprehensive in its approach, the book exposes trends other than the conventional analysis that older age is portrayed stereotypically. *Fade to Gray* has established itself as a comprehensive compendium of films relating to aging.

This book, *Coming of Age in Films*, builds on this compendium. Although Timothy Shary and Nancy McVittie write as film experts, *Coming of Age in Films* approach—a theoretical aging focus—uses film to support gerontological concepts, as the springboard to discuss scientific concepts rather than analyze films from a predominantly post-modernist and feminist perspective (Gravagne) or a psycho-analytical perspective (Cohen-Shalev). Instead of reading more into films, this approach utilizes the narrative of the film—that essential element that people take from watching the film. *Coming of Age in Films* utilizes this narrative to explain the belief system about aging portrayed by the film and then to place this stereotype in context of gerontological theories. The emphasis is on gerontology rather than film theory or philosophy. Linda Ello's *Older Adult Issues and Experiences Through the Stories of Images of Film* (2007) argues that films have a role in introducing complex concepts and constructs into gerontology.

Because aging is an individual experience—no two people ever age the same way or at the same rate—we form our knowledge of aging by combining different external sources. Each source of information contributes to a coherent portrayal of older age as a mental framework—one that we confirm through personal real-life experiences. In our daily interaction we try to validate and affirm this model rather than contradict it. In this interpretation, films are integral to our beliefs of how and why we get older. This information not only provides a visual backdrop to our understanding of what it means to get old but also serves as a reference point. Our mind is sustained by forming abstract concepts about older age, which we then use to judge others and ourselves.

We judge our bodies in relation to the perfect ones that are portrayed on the screen—and at the same time we emulate older people being less competent, inactive, dim, ugly, and ill. Such negative reference points are more pronounced for older women. Topics that are deemed inappropriate (sex among older adults) are overlooked completely, turned into a comedic ploy or portrayed as aberrant and dangerous.

Other aspects, however, remain missing and overlooked in these analytical studies. The disparity between depictions of being older in film and reality and how films influence the way older people behave are not addressed.

By understanding the narrative of a film, we come to understand the assumptions the film makes about older adults. In their aim to entertain, films build upon more subtle assumptions than stereotypes. An interesting study that explored this approach focused on legal issues. Israel Doron from Haifa University highlights that even when a particular story hinges

on legal assumptions, these remain undefined. Without making them, the film's narrative cannot be understood. For example, in *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989), the female protagonist is legally prevented from driving. In *Waking Ned Devine* (1998), the two protagonists interpret the law in order to collect a dead man's winnings. In *The Straight Story* (1999), the law is assumed to protect individual autonomy. *On Golden Pond* (1981) relies on the legal obligations between grandparents and their grandchildren. In *Iris* (2016), despite interactions with social services, the absence of any legal structure for people with dementia and their caregivers becomes very apparent. Doron talks about the legal conflict between autonomy and paternalism, and highlights why these films are important.

> All of the films describe concrete dilemmas and situations, many of which are relevant for older people the world over, such as the ability to drive, avoid financial abuse, provide informal long-term care, shape the relations with children and grandchildren, and the desire to preserve one's autonomy even when ill and weak. (p. 251)

These assumptions are insidious, and they are more pervasive and less distinct than stereotypes. We subscribe to them because we want people to behave in a predictable way. These assumptions about the narrative of the film are subliminal messages being transmitted. In this regard, the film might provide a good jumping board from which to discuss these relevant issues.

In this sense, this approach mirrors that of the Parisian philosopher Gilles Deleuze, who in his prolific philosophical critiques also looked at how philosophy and cinema intersect. His two books, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1986) and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1989), use film to explain contemporary social changes. Perhaps each film's story helps to define the larger story of the experience of aging waiting for us.

Conclusion to Why Films are Important

In age-segregated modern societies, we get most of our information about growing old from films and literature. Films, however, offer a more accessible form of storytelling. Through animation, we are exposed from an early age to what getting older means. But films also present a simplified view of aging. We then, unfortunately, internalize these stereotypes and make them our own. An increasing number of studies have attempted to clarify the impact films have on aging. Seemingly disparate theories, such as feminism and disability, have contributed to our understanding of how stereotypes influence our aging process.

How films portray aging builds on this knowledge and provides a new insight by applying current gerontological science to the image of aging that films are providing. By readdressing this focus on aging theories—as diverse as biology and psychology—this analysis uses films as a method of introducing theoretical concepts about aging. It evidences a growing interest in using films as pedagogic tools. These become tools for educating ourselves and others on what it means to age. *Coming of Age in Films* hopefully will start this conversation about the meaning of aging.

Cut! That's a wrap