

REVIEWS

Ageing Femininity on Screen: The Older Woman in Contemporary Cinema

Niall Richardson, I. B. Tauris, London and New York, 2019, 240 pp., hbk £69.00, ISBN 13: 9781784532802

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Niall Richardson's astute and timely book offers a refreshing and welcome 'queer' perspective to an emerging body of scholarship concerned with narrative film, stardom, gender and ageing (Chivers, 2011, Gravagne, 2013; Dolan, 2017). A concise introduction deftly locates Richardson's thinking within theories of cultural ageing and critiques of 'successful ageing', while a rehearsal of established arguments concerning mainstream cinema's consistent denigration of older women usefully establishes a backdrop for his subsequent exposition of varying 'age-affirmative' representations of femininity mobilised across a range of film genres by both female and male stars. Consistently, this book highlights the extent to which 'age-affirmative' narratives are co-opted into the processes of 'greywashing' whereby sympathetic older characters 'disguise a less pleasant political agenda' (p. 206).

The first of six substantive chapters points to the 'lady power' of genteelly independent older women depicted through heritage conventions in films like *Tea with Mussolini* (Zeffirelli 1997). While this 'age-affirmative' female figure offers resistance to masculine and/or macho control, it may also cloak 'the harsh realities of old age and the less palatable aspects of heritage sensibilities such as its unashamed celebration of imperialism and British jingoism' (p. 52). As well as foregrounding the pleasures of audience identification and participation, the following chapter further develops an account of 'age-affirmative' female characters when attention shifts to the performances and performativities of active and ageing female bodies in the musical interludes of *The Last of the Blonde Bombshells* (MacKinnon 2000) and *Quartet* (Hoffman 2012), the 'karaoke' song and dance routines of *Mamma Mia!* (Lloyd 2008), and the action choreographies of *RED* (Schwentke 2010) and *The Debt* (Madden 2010). Richardson rightly observes that the age-positive revisions to the genre and gender expectations mobilised by examples of 'action' in its broadest sense have yet to be repeated. Chapter 3 continues to unpack the age and gender intersection through the play of camp in the late-career performances of Bette Davis, Joan Rivers and Maggie Smith, with the latter renowned for acerbic one-liners that undercut the offensive 'code ageing [of] femininity as grotesque or even horrific' (p. 114). While offering a convincing argument for the potential of camp to expose the reiterated gestures of age and gender, and thereby subvert

their naturalised alignment with biological dispositions, Richardson is careful not to over-state its reach due to a reliance on media-literate viewers who recognise the double articulations of irony, as much as the reductions of a postmodern media culture that reduces strategies of social critique to meaningless semiotic playfulness.

Ranging across small and big screens, the book's remaining three chapters are variously concerned with 'the intersection of ageing with queer sexuality' and 'LGBT-identified older people' (p. 115). With the near absence of ageing lesbian representations deftly established, Chapter 4 argues that rare exceptions fail to recognise the diversity of lesbian experience. Equally, films such as *Notes on a Scandal* (Eyre 2006) and *Cloudburst* (Fitzgerald 2011) also serve to recuperate the 'ageing as decline' narrative via the former's ironic reclamation of 'the vicious, lonely, and imbalanced, old "dyke"' stereotype (p. 142) and the latter's insertion of older lesbian characters into the hetero-normative frame of the 'charming, devoted and monogamous couple' (p. 142). Richardson's focus then shifts to representations of ageing trans-femininity in the celebrated television series *Transparent* (2014–) and the movie *Transamerica* (Tucker 2005). These narratives are contextualised through a succinct account of the social and theoretical tensions over the meanings of transsexual and/or transgender identities, and subsequent struggles for transgender rights that effectively disentangled sexual and gender identities. Now, with older bodies typically coded as asexual, cinematic and televisual representations of ageing transgender women now stress 'the point that transgender is an issue of gender identification rather than sexual desire' (p. 171). Chapter 6 is initially announced as a 'cheat' (p. 173), though the legitimacy of including effeminate male characters in a book about older women and cinema is largely self-evident following the 'queering' of gender already established, though the point is thoroughly made through a litany of similarities between ageing gay men and ageing femininity that include societal pressures and media stereotypes. Developing the thread of 'age-affirmative' narratives, Richardson foregrounds challenges to polarised stereotypes of asexual or predatory older gay men in films like *Beginners* (Mills 2010), *Love is Strange* (Sachs 2014) and *Gerontophilia* (LaBruce 2013) that invite spectators to 'revise narratives of gay ageing' (p. 199). But he adds, this invitation has limits since each film culminates in death, restoring the prominence of conventionally attractive young people while any challenge to heteronormative family life is safely extinguished.

Throughout, despite tracing 'age-affirmative' narratives along the spectrum of ageing femininity, Richardson is troubled by both the proximity to enfreakment of characters for whom age is the primary source of identity, and the extent to which 'grey-affirmation cinema remains at the level of greywashing' (p. 210). Overall, this is a well-achieved book that throws a welcome and overdue 'queer' spotlight on previously neglected aspects of cinema's ageing femininity. The book is written with great clarity and is sensitive to cinematic conventions while avoiding theoretical jargon. It deserves to be read by researchers, teachers and students of ageing and/or cinema, and lends itself to reading lists for both undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

References

- Chivers S** (2011) *The Silvering Screen: Old Age and Disability in Cinema*. Toronto: Toronto University Press.
- Dolan J** (2017) *Contemporary Cinema and 'Old Age': Gender and the Silvering of Stardom*. London: Palgrave.
- Gravagne P** (2013) *The Becoming of Age: Cinematic Visions of Mind, Body and Identity in Later Life*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

* for further full references, please contact the review author.

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Better with Age – The Psychology of Successful Aging

Alan D. Castel, Oxford University Press, New York, 2019, 236 pp., hbk US \$27.95, ISBN 13: 978-0-19-027998-1

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The cover of this book features a barrel, in keeping with the worn adage that ageing is akin to the maturation process of wine (hence the title *Better with Age*), an analogy that has enjoyed remarkable longevity despite the fact that many wines do not mature well. As a general reader, you would learn a lot about the psychology of ageing from this book, and for a novice gerontologist, the deft summaries of key theories (such as Selective Optimisation and Compensation, and Socioemotional Selectivity Theory) could come in handy. The well-established finding that old age can be happier and more emotionally stable than younger ages is presented in detail and through engaging examples.

Castel admits that there is no single widely accepted definition of successful ageing, and defaults to the idea that we 'know it when we see it' (p. 4). The book is replete with examples of such 'know it when we see it' cases (accompanied by inspirational quotes), including Warren Buffett, Mick Jagger and lesser-known 'ageing heroes'. The 'models' of active and successful ageing (Timonen, 2016) that are peppered throughout the book are almost exclusively Western, with a preponderance of (white) men – especially celebrities and sports stars from the United States of America – over women among these exemplars. This begs the question whether we are learning anything other than exceptional success in earlier life tends to breed exceptionally successful old age. However, towards the end (p. 169), Castel contradictorily declares that 'almost 90% of the population can be considered successful agers', or at least – somewhat patronisingly – 'provide inspiring life stories ... for their family and future generations'.

The main messages of the book centre on the importance of attitudes, agency and self-perceptions. The key sales pitch here is that 'the attitudes one holds about aging are related to how well one actually ages' (p. 17). While such statements are tenable within the context of population-based studies, they become highly