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Timothy Shary and Nancy McVitte, *Fade to Gray: Aging in American Cinema*, University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas, 2016, 271 pp., pbk US \$29.95, ISBN 13: 978-1-4773-1063-2.

In this comprehensive and accessible book, authors Shary and McVitte analyse representations of older adults in American cinema from the silent movie era of the 1890s to contemporary films of today. Taking hundreds of films into consideration and offering extended analyses of dozens of them, they aim to

chronicle an analytical history of elder characters in movies by identifying the changing representations of aging, considering how the aged have been visually portrayed and dramatically performed, and, most of all, looking at how they have been shown to embrace or endure experiences associated with longer life. (pp. 1–2)

The authors acknowledge up-front that the profit-making prioritisation of the film industry necessarily shapes representations of older adults in conflicting ways, offering aspirational visions of idealised older age as well as over-emphasising dramatic problems or travails associated with age and ageing. Realistic or authentic representations are not wholly absent but rather notable in cinematic history. The authors further acknowledge the arbitrariness of what constitutes ‘old’, drawing on gerontological scholarship in their decision to focus on actors and/or characters who appear to be 60 years of age and older.

The book succeeds admirably in its goal to offer both a *social* history and a *media* history. Adopting an approach that ‘examines widespread social attitudes by explicating individual films’ (p. 6), Shary and McVitte effectively situate their analyses within ongoing socio-historical trends. Following the Introduction, each subsequent chapter opens with a brief sociological analysis of real-world events impacting older adults in a particular historical era (e.g. pre-war, post-war, 1960s, 2000s, etc.), followed by thematic textual analysis of films of that era. Take, for example, Chapter Four, which focuses on ‘elder odyssey’ (road trip) movies of the post-Second World War era, situating analysis in the rapid expansion of automobiles and television sets, as well as the geographic expansion of the interstate highway system that allowed Americans to capitalise on ‘the spirit of exploratory independence that the roads afforded’ (p. 106). For older adults, in particular, these social changes allowed visits to relatives who had moved far away or nostalgic trips back to the homes of their youth. Cinematically, elder odyssey movies situated road trips as the protagonist’s last quest before dying and offered three main thematic approaches: (a) a family trip; (b) ‘one last job’ stories; and (c) ‘pursuit’ plots (p. 107), particularly career criminals seeking one last hurrah (p. 132). Chapter Four then proceeds to offer a detailed analysis of each of these core themes.

Similarly, the final substantive chapter (Chapter Six) focuses on elder death, situating film analysis in significant sociological trends in the US

death industry over the course of the 20th century, ranging from early 20th-century familiarity with death as an up-close community event, to the well-documented institutionalisation (and thus isolation) of death in the mid-20th century, and to the emergence of hospice, assisted living and the 'death with dignity' movement in the late 20th century. The authors identify 'three filmic modes of depicting geriatric death' that combine to 'indicate the cultural resistance to and insecurities about the death and dying of the aged' (p. 174). Core themes identified include dramatic death, death with dignity, and the denial of death (drawing on Ernest Becker's Pulitzer Prize-winning book of that title; Becker 1973). Again, detailed analysis of each core theme comprises the remainder of the chapter.

*Fade to Gray* is a thoroughly enjoyable read with multiple strengths. It is well-organised and written in an engaging style appropriate for both academic audiences and a more generalised readership. It is extraordinarily comprehensive, covering literally hundreds of films and offering a coherent discussion throughout. It is well-situated within cinematic, industrial, sociological and historical scholarship, identifying real-world bases for the emergence of cinematic foci and themes. It offers discussion of outlier examples, which helps convince readers of the rigour of the analyses. Finally, it is largely non-judgemental. The authors are clear that an aesthetic analysis is not their primary objective though they do offer personal and somewhat breezy observations at times, most often when they dislike a film (admitting 'critical contempt' for some; p. 201). For me personally, the only drawback of the book is that chapter organisation is repetitive – each offers a socio-historical snapshot, identification of two or three core themes, passing reference to dozens of films, and sustained discussion of a handful. This is a minor critique indeed, perhaps relevant only if one planned to binge-read the book. Otherwise, it is an effective strategy for marshalling such an expansive data-set and should not prove a barrier to most readers.

## Reference

Becker, E. 1973. *The Denial of Death*. Simon & Schuster, New York.

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