

## Technologies of Age<sup>1</sup>: The Intersection of Feminist Film Theory and Aging Studies

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**Abstract.** Aging studies is a relatively new discipline, and its intersection with feminist film theory can lead to fundamental methodological and theoretical rethinking of the notion of cinema as a powerful technology of age. This essay provides an account of the ageism that permeates Western societies vis-à-vis the place of aging and gender in visual culture. In light of contemporary feminist conceptualizations of aging and aging narratives, this essay aims to propose possible new directions that cinema and feminist film theory can take as part of a new epistemological framework. It also explores new theoretical paradigms from an intersectional perspective aimed at deconstructing ageism in the film industry. Finally, by focusing on female aging narratives in several non-mainstream film productions, this essay advocates moving away from the binary approach of aging as either decline or success, and it suggests new, affirmative ways of looking at aging bodies, and of understanding old age.

**Keywords:** cinema; age; gender; ageism; aging; feminism

### [es] Tecnologías de la edad: La intersección entre teoría filmica feminista y estudios etarios

**Resumen.** Los estudios sobre el envejecimiento son una disciplina relativamente nueva cuya intersección con la teoría filmica feminista puede conducir a importantes replanteamientos metodológicos y teóricos, siendo uno fundamental: la concepción del cine como una poderosa tecnología de la edad. Este ensayo ofrece un panorama del etarismo que ha impregnado las sociedades occidentales con relación al lugar que tanto el envejecimiento como las cuestiones de género han ocupado en la cultura visual. A la luz de planteamientos feministas contemporáneos sobre el envejecimiento y las narrativas del envejecimiento, este ensayo tiene por objeto proponer posibles nuevas direcciones que el cine y la teoría filmica feminista pueden tomar como parte de un nuevo marco epistemológico. De la misma manera, también explora nuevos paradigmas teóricos a través de perspectivas interseccionales para deconstruir el etarismo de la industria cinematográfica. Finalmente, al centrarse en narrativas sobre el envejecimiento femenino en producciones cinematográficas no hegemónicas, este ensayo propone alejarse de los planteamientos binarios de decadencia/éxito, y sugiere formas afirmativas de mirar los cuerpos que envejecen y de comprender el envejecimiento.

**Palabras clave:** cine; edad; género; etarismo; envejecer; feminismo

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*“Lasciami tutte le rughe, non me ne togliere nemmeno una.  
Ci ho messo una vita a farmele venire<sup>4</sup>”  
(Anna Magnani)*

## 1. Introduction

Cinema, among other forms of popular culture, has contributed to Western hegemonic discourses that portray later life as a time of decrepitude, poor health, mental decay, dependency, loss of sexual vigor, social isolation, passivity, vulnerability, lack of physical attractiveness, unproductiveness, and poverty (Cole et al., 1993). By inscribing older people on screen through narratives of decline and making their experience unappealing, or invisible<sup>5</sup>, cinema has reinforced ageism. The default spectator in mainstream<sup>6</sup> productions is positioned as “younger and thus superior” and bound to “sentimental compassion” (Woodward, 2006, 164); such compassion towards aging people emerges from –and at the same time reinforces– dominant conceptions of aging and old age as loss.

Audiovisual culture capitalizes on the representation of young, white, sexually active straight men. However, with a large proportion of the film audience growing older alongside the movie stars of their generation, the cinema of the global North has seen many older actors playing major roles in recent productions. The simultaneous “silvering” of the audience and of the celebrities has resulted in a noticeable surge of films and TV series presenting aging and old age as their central subject. Yet, by showing a clear preference towards older male characters in active leading roles, the entertainment industry marks, asymmetrically, the way male actors and female actors age. Ageism is gendered. As Susan Sontag had already observed almost fifty years ago, aging “is the social convention that enhances a man but progressively destroys a woman” (1972, 29). While older male actors continue to find parts that depict them as sexually appealing and, in general, their age is made invisible and irrelevant by the plot, their much younger female counterparts are essential instruments to substantiate their desirability. In this context, older women are less visible and erotically uninteresting. When aging women –as well as LGBTQI+ subjects, racial minorities, and people with disabilities– star in Hollywood films, their deficits (in terms of health, sexuality, intellectual capacity, and agency) are generally highlighted, exacerbated, and stereotyped through what we would call, drawing from Teresa de Lauretis, the “technologies of age.” For the Italian feminist, Foucault’s claim that sexuality is a primary technology of power skirted of gender implications<sup>7</sup>, since gender, as well as sex, is the product of institutional discourses and social technologies. On the grounds that doing age theory changes theory, as Margaret Gullette has eloquently demonstrated (2004), we argue that like sex and gender, age is the product of social technologies. Cinema is emerging as an important area of study in regard to aging because it is one of the most powerful technologies of age, the essential medium for the hegemony of the youthful male gaze.

Feminist theory sprang mainly from the college student population, that is, from an ever-young group with little interest in issues concerning women of another generation (Woodward, 1991)<sup>8</sup>. Only recently has feminist theory shown a preoccupation with aging matters. Aging studies is a relatively new discipline, and its intersection with feminist film theory can lead to significant restatements and fundamental rethinking of the premises as well as of the application of the latter. In this essay we aim to propose new approaches to cinema and to feminist film theory in particular, in light of contemporary feminist conceptualizations of aging and aging narratives. We start by providing an account of the ageist discourses that have permeated Western societies and their political, social, and cultural spheres/narratives. Next, we discuss the place aging and gender have occupied in aging visual studies and propose possible new, affirmative ways of looking at the aging body. Then, without any pretense of being exhaustive, we focus on the counter-narrative character of female aging in cinema of the South. Finally, we suggest new theoretical approaches aimed at deconstructing cinema as a powerful technology of age.

<sup>4</sup> “Please don’t retouch my wrinkles. It took me ages to earn them.”

<sup>5</sup> Rich states that “Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language—this will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable” (1980, 199).

<sup>6</sup> We use the term “cinema of the South” as a synonym for “non-mainstream” film productions, a concept elaborated by Alberto Elena, founding curator of the festival Cines del Sur of Granada. For Elena, cinema of the South uses “the geopolitical parameter that sets the cultural production of northern countries—the axis of today’s globalized world—against those that are from countries located in the periphery of the system” (Elena, 2014, 10-11).

<sup>7</sup> De Lauretis argues that Foucault does not understand sexuality as gendered, that is, “as having a male form and a female form, but is taken to be one and the same for all—and consequently male” (1987, 14).

<sup>8</sup> Ageism activist Barbara Macdonald (1986) attacked feminists in the mid-eighties for not acknowledging the relevance of age discrimination for Women’s Studies.

## 2. Aging and Ageism in Western Societies

As many demographic reports have made explicit, the world's population aged 60 and older is growing rapidly, thus bringing to the fore a number of crucial political, social, and economic issues. Aging is generally conceived as a particular period of life determined by normative expectations based on age cycles that are institutionalized through socio-political, cultural, and economic structures: infant, toddler, child, adolescent, young adult, adult, older adult, and so on. These cycles are regulated by issues such as productivity or decline in physical, economic, and social terms (Grenier, Griffin, and McGrath, 2016). Therefore, age conceptualizations, as critical gerontology has underscored, are socio-politically, and culturally constructed, as Simone de Beauvoir highlighted five decades ago in her pioneer work on aging studies, *The Coming of Age* (1972).

In her book, de Beauvoir exposed the reality of a society that even in the seventies, as a result of the so-called "baby boom" of the post-war era, was growing old, and was stigmatized and marginalized by the capitalist system of production. For de Beauvoir, whereas men and women were considered equally burdensome on state finances when they grew older, the marginalization of the latter was greater because older women crossed two lines: like men, they ceased to be productive and thus useful for capitalism, but, unlike men, being postmenopausal they no longer fulfilled their reproductive role and became useless also for patriarchal society. Older women thus suffered from a double exclusion and disempowerment: they were discriminated against by capitalist and patriarchal systems. Furthermore, in order to avoid the danger of a faulty universalization, de Beauvoir transcended hegemonic perspectives and ended her study with a transcultural analysis that led to her book's greatest contribution: she argued that the perception of old age took many forms worldwide, and older people were considered wise, childish, or senile, depending on which culture. As we will indicate below, such a diversity emerges in film representations of aging and old age across cultures.

"Ageism," a term coined by Robert Butler in 1969, is the "systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old," by means of the creation and dissemination of cultural narratives that homogenize aging and old age as decline and loss (1975, 12). The stigmatization of old age drives people to a constant attempt to mask, disguise, or hide the signs of aging in the body (Gullette, 1997; Woodward, 1991), which has been considered the text in which age is recorded and presented (Cruikshank 2008), hence the need to erase its traces. The "age mask" (McHugh 2003, 169) positions people in relation to the youthful identity behind the embodiment of age, and therefore it forces us to believe that the aged body hides an eternal, ageless mind/subjectivity.

### 2.1. Decline narratives and successful aging

In *Declining to Decline* (1997), Gullette argues that the older body is shaped both by culture and by social conventions. Capitalist neoliberal hegemonic discourses fabricate a negative notion of aging that attaches to the body visible indicators, signs of decay and decline that are socially perceived and conceived as negative and needing to be hidden and erased. Shame is linked to looking old or being reluctant to look young. From the very early stages of life, the body is subjected to a constant self-scrutiny (Twigg, 2004, 61), which in turn generates the expansion of cosmetic surgery not only for aging people but for young ones as well. For Sally Chivers (2011), it is within this context that physical activity (gyms), sexual activity (Viagra), tourism, leisure, cosmetics, plastic surgery, etc., become elements that support and promote both healthy aging and the conception of old age as a space for consumption.

While the medical and pharmaceutical sciences have taken over the care of the body with the aim of rejuvenating it, the commercialization of youth affects all technologies of age: social relations and norms, the workplace, the sphere of education, and the cultural industries are constantly inscribing negative meanings to the aged body. In this context, given the extraordinary power of the image, the audiovisual industry has become the bellwether of ageism. So-called successful aging, fostered by the diversity of market opportunities and by the neoliberal imperative to maintain the body as young and sexually active, is nothing more than the other side of the same coin: in both cases, aging is perceived as the terrible end of life, and as such it has to be postponed.

The current growth of dementia in all its forms among the aging population has created a sort of paradoxical social and cultural discourse around the relation of the mind and the body with regard to aging: whereas the signs of aging can be erased from the body thanks to cosmetic surgery, and the powerful pharmaceutical industry has taken care of treating sexual "dysfunctions," the effects of aging on the mind cannot be surgically eliminated. In this respect, Zeilig (2013) has studied the cultural metaphors created around dementia and offers proof on how cultural texts have portrayed dementia either as an epidemic, a tsunami, or a war. The continuous use of these metaphors generates fear and stigma, which lead to discrimination against those living with the disease. One of the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease, the most common type of dementia, is a gradual loss of memory and of linguistic ability. However, the gradual progression of the disease is usually misrepresented and presented as something very sudden, thus depriving the person living with dementia of any basic human identity (Medina, 2018). Loss of memory and loss of linguistic ability are equivalent, in a society that empha-

sizes the division between mind and body, to the disappearance of identity and personhood, thus resulting in the flourishing of metaphors such as “zombies” or “the living dead” (Behuniak, 2010).

In order to overcome the binary approach to aging as either decline or success, Linn Sandberg (2013) claims a theoretical space that recognizes the material specificities of the older body by proposing the concept of “affirmative aging.” On the one hand, affirmative aging brings the focus back to the body—a body that had lost centrality in Gullette’s argument that we age by culture; on the other hand, it departs from the heteronormative male-centric discourse that envisioned success as the ability to maintain the erectile power for penile-vaginal penetration. Drawing from Grosz and Braidotti’s corpo-materialism and theories of difference, Sandberg argues that affirmative aging reveals the continuous production of difference: it’s not anchored in positivism or success, but in the recognition that aging entails becoming different: “the changes in the ageing body could [...] provide radical ways of rethinking gender, embodiment and sexuality” (2013, 15). Following this line of thought, and elaborating on queer and on disability studies, Sandberg and Marshall (2017) expand the critique of successful aging to further question the assumptions of heteronormativity. As we shall discuss in the next section, this questioning is essential for establishing a more inclusive and intersectional approach to aging and sexuality.

### 3. Visual Aging Studies

In the past few years, feminist film theory and aging studies have found a fruitful interdisciplinary space from which to examine and rethink major conceptual premises. These new theoretical approaches aim to unveil how visual representations stigmatize old age (of women in particular) as decline by constantly depicting it in contrast to the vitality and plenitude of youth.

As we will propose in this section, at least four situations require scrutiny and investigation: the absence of (older) women in decision-making positions in the film industry; the age discrimination against female actors that prevents them from sustaining their career once they turn 40 (or even sooner); the invisibility of older female characters, or their stereotypical representation; and the depiction of older people in mainstream cinema vis-à-vis that of alternative film productions of the global South.

#### 3.1. Aging Behind the Camera

As it has been broadly documented, the film industry keeps women of any age in a state of subordination<sup>9</sup>. Their role in executive areas is still very limited, being relegated to historically feminine departments (such as costume design and makeup), or to the field of acting, still characterized by an alarming wage disparity. In this context, ageism is prevailing. Recent data has revealed that in Hollywood women are reaching positions with decision-making power (directors, producers, scriptwriters, film critics, etc.) later in life (in their 30s, while men arrive in their 20s) but only manage to stay in these roles for a shorter time, and they are rarely acknowledged by film critics or film scholars. Cohen-Shalev (2012) argues that older filmmakers are capable of offering more positive representations of aging and old age. However, the inclusion of only one female filmmaker in his study mirrors their invisibility as both creators and characters.

The shorter lifespan of women in decision-making positions goes hand-in-hand with the symbolic violence towards female models—the “mothers” and “grandmothers” of the history of cinema. Women film pioneers are victims of the violent tradition that systematically discriminates against female production, erasing it from the canon and hence from festivals, exhibitions, manuals, textbooks, and so on. Their works have disappeared or have fallen into oblivion, and only in recent times has there been an attempt to reverse this phenomenon. This absence of models and referents is the cause of the so-called “anxiety of authorship” theorized by Gilbert and Gubar in the field of literature. Each generation of women has had to reinvent itself due to the lack of a female tradition—the absence of a “gynealogy” (Zecchi, 2014).

#### 3.2 Aging in Front of the Camera

Ageism is even more evident in the field of acting, which is dominated by an alarming age/gender discrepancy. Only 11 of the 100 highest grossing films of the last decade in Hollywood have featured women over 45 as protagonists or co-protagonists, compared to 30 films featuring male protagonists of that age. As a general rule, very few roles are reserved for “mature” female actors. Those who have been idolized when they offered the camera a glamorous body either disappear when they reach maturity, or, if they are lucky, continue to work in secondary roles and under no circumstances do take their clothes off. At present, the cosmetic and pharmaceutical industries have managed to postpone the age at which women cease to be objects of

<sup>9</sup> This discrimination is directly proportional to the power of the industry. While Hollywood is the largest representative of this discrimination, women’s presence increases in countries where cinema functions with lower budgets and in “art house” films.



visual pleasure, but the underlying situation remains unchanged, since the concept of age concerns cultural factors rather than biological factors, as Gullette has shown. Moreover, these factors are strictly conditioned by gender issues, since it goes without saying that the patriarchal epistemological system assigns the “mature” man a different experience. According to Judith Gardiner, men and women age asymmetrically, given that women are valued primarily for their physical appearance and sexual attractiveness. While men enjoy a longer heyday, “women climb the slope of social desirability more swiftly and are more rapidly thrown from its peak” (Gardiner, 2002, 98).

A 2015 study conducted by *Time* magazine on the top 5,000 grossing movies since the beginning of Hollywood cinema reveals that male actors’ careers peak at the age of 46, while women reach their professional pinnacles at age 30, and that the age gap between sexes is widening every year. In Hollywood, some veteran actors (interpreted by de-aged<sup>10</sup> men such as George Clooney, Harrison Ford, Warren Beatty, Liam Neeson, Tom Cruise, or Clint Eastwood, just to mention a few) are often paired with female partners half their age or even younger. Such an age discrepancy is not addressed, let alone problematized by the story. The recent film *The Mule* (2018), directed and interpreted by octogenarian Clint Eastwood, provides a good –if not extreme– evidence of this situation. In this film, an 80-something-year-old heavy drinker decides to work as a drug mule with the main purpose of making easy money. His masculinity is constantly highlighted and celebrated by accentuating his sexual appeal and flirting abilities, and even by depicting him in a sexual relationship with three very young and sexually objectified prostitutes working for the Mexican drug cartel’s capo. His triumphant appearance the morning after perfectly summarizes the preponderance of hegemonic discourses of male sexuality and masculinity, even in old age.

However, as Zecchi has illustrated (2017, 2019), when the reverse occurs, and older women romance younger men, the age gap plays a central role in the narrative and is often magnified and treated as pathology or immorality, as in *The Graduate* (dir. Mike Nichols, 1967), *The Mother* (dir. Roger Mitchell, 2004), or *Ladies in Lavender* (dir. Charles Dance, 2004). The Agent 007 film series is a good example of how deeply ingrained and normalized this trend is, and not only in Hollywood<sup>11</sup>. Since his first appearance in *Dr. No* (dir. Terence Young, 1962), the British spy James Bond has aged and de-aged according to the different actors who embodied him: he was 58 when Roger Moore interpreted him in *A View to Kill* (dir. John Glen, 1985), 49 with Pierce Brosnan in *Die Another Day* (dir. Lee Tamahori, 2002), and he will be 52 with Daniel Craig in *Bond No Time To Die* (dir. Cari Joji Fukunaga, 2020). Throughout his twenty-five films, Agent 007 has interacted romantically with numerous “Bond girls,” often two or sometimes even three decades younger than him. The character played by the 50-year-old Italian star Monica Bellucci in *Spectre* (dir. Sam Mendes, 2015) became his oldest love interest. The fact that 007 could be attracted to a woman of a “certain age” was broadly reviewed by the critics as a positive reversal of the sexist age gap and applauded as evidence that mature women could finally play strong and sexy roles in European film production. However, Bellucci’s very limited screen presence and her rather degrading role in *Spectre* proved quite the opposite. Despite all the publicity that proclaimed the contrary, *Spectre* maintained the sexist norm. The fate of the Italian beauty –an object disposed after a one-night stand by the womanizer– is similar to that of many other characters in hegemonic audiovisual productions who dare to think romantically about younger men. Their desire is condemned and/or pathologized.

If Bellucci’s character is depicted as a dependent and needy woman, in *The Graduate* (dir. Mike Nichols), the sexually unsatisfied Mrs. Robinson, interpreted by 36-year-old Anne Bancroft, is presented as an immoral and dissolute seductress who takes advantage of the innocence and inexperience of a man young enough to be her son. Like Bellucci, who is only three years older than Craig, Bancroft is only six years older than Dustin Hoffman, who plays the graduate.

### 3.3. Aging and Misrepresentation

In their historicized overview of the representation of old age in Hollywood cinema from the silent era to the present, Timothy Shary and Nancy McVittie (2016) argue that depictions of older people are scarce and have been quite inconsistent due to the different social factors that have pressed the industry across the years. However, “all these representations have influenced and reinforced social ideas around older people” (2016, 6). Cinema has alternated idealizations of old age with tragic depiction vis-à-vis the unsteady social issues surrounding aging and old age in American society (generational conflicts, or cultural anxieties about aging women); and, in turn, film representations of old age have influenced societal perceptions of it. For instance, in the 1950s, Hollywood realized that a big part of the film audience was aging and needed to identify with the stories told on screen. This originated a new trend of sexually explicit “adult films.” Conversely, works such as *Sunset Boulevard* (dir. Billy Wilder, 1950) and *All About Eve* (dir. Joseph Mankiewicz, 1950) reflected cultural

<sup>10</sup> We are using the adjective “de-aged” ironically, in its broad sense: on the one hand, a character can be “de-aged” by using cosmetic surgery *The Irishman*; on the other hand, special “de-aging” software can be employed to rejuvenate the actors (e.g. Al Pacino, Robert De Niro and Joe Pesci in Scorsese’s *The Irishman* (2019)).

<sup>11</sup> The use of the term “silver fox” refers “to grey or white-haired actors in their fifties and older who are considered to be attractive” (Oró-Piqueras, 2019).

anxieties about aging in female characters—and actors (Gloria Swanson and Bette Davis). Similarly, from the late 1950s and 60s, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (dir. Robert Aldrich, 1962) or *Rosemary's Baby* (dir. Roman Polanski, 1968) are good examples of how older female characters are inscribed within the melodramatic paradigm of the castrating woman and/or the mad (older) woman in the attic, and they are exploited for both comedic and/or horrific effect<sup>12</sup>.

In commercial cinema, older people—and particularly older women—are rarely granted screen presence, and their sexuality is either “unwatchable” (Thomas Waltz 2002), or misrepresented. In the rare instances in which older women are instrumental to the plot and their sexuality is acknowledged, they are represented as the subject of desire towards much younger men, in films like *American Gigolo* (dir. Paul Schrader, 1980), *The Mother* (dir. Roger Mitchell, 2004), *The Rebound* (dir. Bart Freundlich, 2009), *Pride* (dir. Matthew Warchus, 2014), *The Boy Next Door* (dir. Rob Cohen, 2015) or, maybe the most representative of all, in *The Graduate* (1967). In this film, Mrs. Robinson’s tiger—and leopard—print wardrobe (from her lingerie to her coats and hats) is an ironic commentary on her predatory (that is, cougar-like) attributes. While focusing on the young and successful men the “cougars” are attracted to, these films reinforce all possible stereotypes linked to overly sexualized older women: they are obsessive, nymphomaniac, selfish, adulterous, bad mothers, and so forth, but above all they are dangerous, since they often cause the young men to be falsely accused of murder or rape, or/ and they end up by destroying their own family.

If they are not overly sexualized, and their sexuality is not presented as wrong, out of place, and punishable, older women’s (hetero)sexual desire is linked to their past and to their memories, and it exists only in their flashbacks (such as in James Cameron’s *Titanic*, 1997); or it is absent, or inscribed as the abject, in films about dementia (such as *Iris* (dir. Richard Eyre, 2001) or *Still Alice* (dir. Richard Glatzer, 2014)). Medina’s (2018) study of the representation of dementia highlights how cinema has been one of the most popular platforms for presenting dementia as the object to fear when getting old. *On Golden Pond* (dir. Mark Rydell, 1981) was the first fictional feature film to talk about dementia in the United States, followed by *Do You Remember Love?* (dir. Jeff Bleckner, 1985). Since then, the first two decades of the twenty-first century have witnessed a significant number of features in which Alzheimer’s disease is the main topic, including films from North America and the United Kingdom such as *Iris* (2001), *The Notebook* (dir. Nick Cassavetes, 2004), *Away from Her* (dir. Sarah Polley, 2004), *The Savages* (dir. Tamara Jenkins, 2007), *The Iron Lady* (dir. Phyllida Lloyd, 2011), *Still Mine* (dir. Michael McGowan, 2012), *Robot and Frank* (dir. Jake Schreier, 2012), *Still Alice* (2015), and *Amour* (dir. Michael Haneke, 2012), among others. The tragic tone of these works, usually narrated from the perspective of a family member or the caregiver, seeks to get the spectator’s sympathetic response towards the hardships faced by those living with the person with Alzheimer’s disease (Swinnen, 2012, 314). It is important to stress that, in most of these films, dementia mainly affects women, thus visually gendering it and reinforcing the discrimination and stereotyping of women. Through the trope of dementia, unsuccessful aging is linked to women who are unable to socially perform either with the body or the mind and therefore are depicted as zombies with a vacant stare.

However, there is an important body of films from the global South offering a depiction of aging and dementia beyond the young/old and/or the memory/forgetting divide. The analysis of these films by Cohen-Shalev and Marcus (2011) and Medina (2018) reveal other perceptions and representations of dementia that dwell not on negative aspects but rather on the use of the trope of dementia/Alzheimer’s disease (AD) for exploring important national cultural, social, political, gender, religious, and ethnic issues. Consequently, these films approach AD from a rich variety of perspectives, highlighting different experiences of the disease and diverse ways of aesthetically presenting it. Among these non-mainstream fictional films from across the South we can find *The Memory of a Killer* (dir. Erik Van Looy, 2003), *Black* (dir. Sanjay Leela Bhansali, 2005), *Welcome to Verona* (dir. Suzanne Osten, 2006), *Cortex* (dir. Nicolas Boukhrief, 2008), *Amanecer de un sueño* (dir. Freddy Mas Franqueza, 2008), *Gatos viejos* (dir. Pedro Peirano and Sebastián Silva, 2010), *Las buenas hierbas* (dir. María Novaro, 2010), *Poetry* (dir. Lee Chang-Dong, 2010), *Pandora’s Box* (dir. Yesim Ustaoglu, 2011), *A Separation* (dir. Asghar Farhadi, 2011), and *Arrugas* (dir. Ignacio Ferreras, 2012). Although there is a clear gendering of dementia, it cannot be characterized as a discriminatory or stigmatizing one. On the contrary, many of these films employ the trope of dementia to bring to the fore important feminist matters related to ecofeminism, nationhood, motherhood, matrophobia, and so forth. It is also key to underscore that most of the European non-mainstream films depict male characters with dementia mirroring the James Bond paradigm, but in old age: they are “professionally” and sexually active.

The recent trend of comedies starring casts of veteran actors is only an apparent alternative to this status quo of gender/age inequality and obsession with youth and successful aging: TV series such as *Grace and Frankie* (2015), featuring the forever-young Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin; romantic comedies about problems of sexual intimacy like *Hope Springs* (dir. David Frankel, 2012) with Meryl Streep and Tommy Lee Jones, or *It’s Complicated* (dir. Nancy Meyers, 2009), also starring Streep this time with Alec Baldwin; or action films such

<sup>12</sup> The international success of Gianni di Gregorio’s Italian comedies *Pranzo di ferragosto* (2008) and *Gianni e le donne* (2011) is enough evidence that these paradigms are still very much alive nowadays.

as *Just Getting Started* (dir. Ron Shelton, 2017), with (again) Tommy Lee Jones, Morgan Freeman, and Rene Russo; the *Bucket List* (dir. Rob Reiner, 2007), with Jack Nicholson and (once more) Morgan Freeman; *Red* (dir. Robert Schwentke, 2010) and its sequel *Red 2* (dir. Dean Parisot, 2013), both starring Bruce Willis, John Malkovich, Helen Mirren, and (once more) Morgan Freeman, who represent aging but still very active retirees. These productions build on the heteronormative tradition started by their testosterone-driven predecessor, *Grumpy Old Men* (dir. Donal Petrie, 1993). Age is a central topic, and age-related goofiness often becomes the origin of the comedy puns. However, the exceptionality of the characters' lifestyle and actions do not challenge the dominant narrative of decline, but rather celebrate the ability of the old characters to maintain a youthful body and independent existence as well as to satisfy their (hetero)sexual desire. Old age is still inscribed as an undesirable stage of human life that the protagonists manage to avert thanks to their unrealistic bravery (in the case of action films) or their wealthy financial status (in romantic comedies).

### 3.4. Beyond Heteronormativity

If later life intercourse is represented, Hollywood productions are generally blind to race and tend to be heteronormative. Films that include older gay characters, such as *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (dir. John Madden, 2011), or *80 Egunean* (dir. Jon Garaño and José María Goenaga, 2010), hide their sexual activity. Following Gullette's discussion on aging and sexuality, Jane Gallop's book *Sexuality, Disability and Aging* (2019) opens up a new theoretical dimension in the exploration of aging and sexuality from the perspectives of queer and crip theories. This approach proves to be very pertinent because it not only reclaims sexuality in old age, but also remodels and redefines it. On the one hand, Gallop proposes that in old age men and women free themselves from the regulated reproductive sexuality, thus displacing intercourse and orgasm as the (hetero)normative sexuality. On the other hand, she perceives this liberation as a change in temporality, thanks to which a more pleasurable and fun sexual activity linked to youth (pre-reproductive sexuality) can be experienced. In this sense, the erasure of penetration and orgasm as the main goal of sexual activity within the paradigm of reproduction allows for other non-heteronormative sexual pleasures and for the cessation of the discourse of decline.

## 4. Representation of Female Aging in Non-Mainstream Productions

While most of the scholarly work on aging has been restricted to hegemonic spaces –middle– and upper-class white and heterosexual experiences– of the global North, “other” realities are receiving progressively more attention, and current research on the topic aims to offer different gender-inclusive and cross-cultural accounts of the technologies of age.

Age and aging issues become increasingly central in women filmmakers' production as they get older. Filmmakers such as, for example, Agnès Varda, Chantal Akerman, Josefina Molina, Isabel Coixet, Pilar Miró, Claire Denise, María Novaro, Francesca Archibugi, and Ann Hui, among others, offer indispensable perspectives to help make aging women visible. The argument is so obvious that it sounds tautological: if there were more women making movies, there would be more leading roles for women, and as these directors aged, there would be more leading roles for older women. However, it is also true that the new generation of women filmmakers is becoming increasingly more interested in older female characters. Young directors such as Neus Ballús and Celia Rico in Spain; Mariana Chenillo, Catalina Aguilar Mastretta, Natalia Beristain in Mexico; Deniz Akçay in Turkey; Alankrita Shrivastava in India; Sarah Polley in Canada; and indie filmmakers, such as Chinese American Lulu Wang, Nigerian American Chinonye Chukwu, just to mention a few, are giving shape to complex older female characters that deconstruct ageist stereotypes.

We can identify at least four different approaches to the representation of older women's sexuality among non-Hollywood productions: glamorization, graphic portrayal of old age, haptic visuality, and a new focus on disinhibition.

### 4.1. Gazing at the Aging Woman Body: Glamorization

A first group of films, such as the Spanish film *Vámonos Bárbara* (dir. Cecilia Bartolomé, 1978) or the Chilean film *Gloria* (dir. Sebastián Lelio, 2013) focus on and glamorize (heterosexual) older women, who are otherwise made invisible and unglamorous by Hollywood cinema, by adopting those same strategies used by hegemonic film discourse to represent (heterosexual) younger women. In an attempt to present age (or, rather, to hide it) as an irrelevant element that is not addressed by the plot, the older female body is fetishized, portrayed intentionally as a glamorous object for the male gaze, exposed as a spectacle of to-be-looked-at-ness in commercial cinema (to use Mulvey's coinage). The heterosexual aging female leading character is aroused exclusively through vaginal penetration and quickly reaches a perfectly timed simultaneous orgasm with her male partner. The only apparent subversive element –that is, the only striking difference between commercial



cinema and this imaginary— is the age of the female protagonist. Such an exhibition has at least two functions: first, by making use of mainstream discourses and eroticizing the older female body, these films subvert traditional modes of representation that conventionally keep the mature woman out of sight and suggest that nothing changes a woman's sex life after she has turned 50, 60, or even older. Second, they offer a comment on the pleasure of such a display—the aging body as the site of *jouissance* and narcissism. This spectacle corresponds only apparently to the parameters of commercial cinema denounced by Laura Mulvey, since its objective is precisely that of giving visibility to the traditionally invisible woman. Active scopophilia—male voyeurism—is displaced into passive scopophilia—feminine narcissism, a pleasure of being-looked-at that could empower women's spectatorial gaze (Zecchi, 2017, 2019).

#### 4.2. Graphic Portrayal of Old Age

A completely different approach to the representation of sexuality in midlife and beyond is found in another group of films that depict the older body graphically, without concealing its age, with all its "defects." In diverse national productions such as *La cama* (dir. Mónica Lairana, 2018), *La vida empieza hoy* (dir. Laura Mañá, 2010), *Wolke 9* (dir. Andreas Dresen, 2008), *Mejor que nunca* (dir. Dolores Payás, 2008), or the short film *Magnolia* (dir. Diana Montenegro, 2012), contrary to its treatment in commercial cinema, such an imperfect body is not the object of scorn, but rather the site of a new pleasure. If middle and old age mean, according to patriarchal scientific discourse, the loss of sex appeal, and if menopause marks the "beginning of the end" in these audiovisual productions, they represent, as Anna Freixas puts it, the beginning of a "more to come tomorrow": "Despite the accumulation of factors that seem to prevent female pleasure, numerous studies claim that women's sexuality improves from midlife onwards. In fact, some women experience an increase in their sexual activity" (2012, 119). Regardless of the fact that these films challenge the status quo in forms that are still strictly anchored to a heteronormative imaginary, they envision a female eroticism that often dispenses with men and the erect phallus. Juanita's gigantic strawberry-shaped dildo in *La vida empieza hoy* is an irreverent substitute for a penis. The protagonists are seen to enjoy sex after menopause through intercourse but also through masturbation. As octogenarian sex educator Betty Dodson once explained in her provocative best-seller *Sex for One* (1974), masturbation is a safe and liberating tool, a "primary form of sexual expression" (1996, 8) that overcomes, in Rachel Maines' words, the "relative inefficiency of penetration as a means of producing female orgasm, [and] conflicts at a visceral level with the androcentric paradigm" (1999, xiii). The challenge proposed by these films is twofold. The protagonists enjoy sex after menopause, and they do it through masturbation, the most extreme manifestation of the separation of sex from procreation. These films attempt to counterbalance the inequity of cultural norms by stressing that biology has in fact favored women, who do not need an erection for intercourse and whose age is never an impediment to reaching an orgasm, with or without the need for a penis (Zecchi, 2017). They also suggest that orgasm is not the *sine qua non* of sex. According to Gullette, "many people learn long before old age that sex is far more than orgasm: it's romance, intimate touch, and visual, olfactory, and oral pleasures" (2011, 142).

#### 4.3. Haptic Visibility

A third group of films produce scenes that evoke a tactile eroticism centering on the mature female body as an escape from the prominently heterosexual visual economy of commercial cinema. These films dispense with the phallogentric and heteronormative paradigm of pleasure and challenge the myth that identifies sexuality with genitility by presenting "affirmative aging bodies," that is, bodies that "aim to acknowledge the material specificities of the aging body [...] in terms of difference, but without understanding it as a body marked by decline, lack or negation" (Sandberg 2013,12). Unlike Luce Irigaray (1985), who argued that women's eroticism is infused with tactility, Laura Marks (2000, 2002) believes that resorting to touch is not an inherently feminine tendency, but rather a feminist strategy. By challenging "androgynization," that is, by confronting the claim of the "same experience of material conditions for both genders" (de Lauretis, 1987, 11), and by defying heteronormativity, these films present a mature female eroticism that can be called, in Carla Lonzi's words (1974), "clitoral sexuality". As Zecchi (2017, 2019) has indicated, these films suggest that women's sexual desire does not have to rely on the erect penis or on vaginal penetration—thus also defying the Freudian conception that clitoral pleasure is a sign of immaturity. From a formal point of view, these films present (homo)erotically charged haptic images as alternatives to traditional scopophilia. Tactile pleasure (the pleasure of touching, and of being touched) replaces visual pleasure.

#### 4.4. A New Disinhibition

In a fourth group of films, Alzheimer's disease (AD) and memory loss allow the protagonists a new disinhibition. In particular, in *Away from Her* (2007), a woman with AD manifests disregard for conventions and lack of restraints and starts an adulterous relationship with a patient in the same nursing home, thus leaving



her unfaithful husband with the doubt that she is taking revenge against him, by faking –or exaggerating– the symptoms of her disease. In *Poetry* (2008), as Raquel Medina (2018) has noted, sexuality still plays an active role in old age and for disabled people. Whereas Kang is a disabled old man with almost no mobility after suffering a stroke, Mija is a 66-year-old woman whose AD will gradually show its effects. Mija and Kang represent, respectively, two types of disability culturally associated with old age: mind (forgetting) and body (paralysis). Society's denial of the desire of older disabled people strengthens discrimination against them, but as Tobin Siebers (2010) has explained, disability is central to modern art, thus redefining aesthetical concepts such as pleasure and disgust, or beauty and the sublime. In this sense, the sex scene in *Poetry* affirms and intends to communicate to the viewer the existence of aged and disabled bodies that can be presented for their beauty instead of being concealed.

## 5. Toward New Theoretical Approaches

A reexamination of feminist film theory, in light of age studies, is opening new theoretical paths and forging new concepts and critical practices. The last few years have seen the appearance of an array of new approaches aimed at deconstructing the technologies of age through the exploration and embracing of alternative conceptualizations of the gaze. These works outline essential strategies for questioning the hegemonic youthful eye, and for achieving, through alternative ways of looking, the elimination of ageist representation.

### 5.1. The Holding Gaze

While Laura Mulvey's criticism of the male gaze (1975) was immediately questioned for its heteronormativity and color blindness, nothing was said about its limitations for age issues. On the one hand, it did not take into consideration the subversive potential (addressed above) of the representation of an older female body as the erotically charged object of heterosexual male scopophilia. On the other, it stopped short of revealing that the phallogocentric gaze of the bearer of the look in classic cinema was in fact phallogocentric. In "Performing Age, Performing Gender" (2006), Woodward elaborates on the concept of the "youthful structure of the look," she first introduced in "Youthfulness as a Masquerade" (1989). For Woodward, the gaze is culturally charged with negative predetermined notions of old age as decline because the spectator is positioned as younger and thus constructed as superior, unless the non-normative text invites the spectator to feel otherwise. Thus the youthful structure of the look is "the culturally induced tendency to degrade and reduce an older person to the prejudicial category of old age, [...] where youth is valued at virtually all costs over age and where age is largely deemed a matter for comedy or sentimental compassion" (2006, 164). Along these lines, Aagje Swinnen (2018) forges the concept of the "holding gaze," an intercorporeal –and potentially affective– way of staring in photography and/or (documentary) film. In her analysis of Van Gelder's photo book *Mumbling Beauty: Louise Bourgeois*, Swinnen argues that "photographs of abject bodies have the potential to return the gaze being cast on them and make their 'voice' heard" (132). Characterized by its ethical dimension, the "holding gaze" brings to the fore the vulnerability of the body and the mortality of the subject while also freeing the viewer from fear and prejudice.

*El Sr Liberto y los pequeños placeres* (dir. Ana Serret, 2018) displays a good example of the "holding gaze." This documentary film presents the daily life of Liberto, an octogenarian living with Alzheimer's disease, and his family. Ana Serret articulates her cinematographic discourse around five features: long shots, shifts between extreme close ups and group shots, a fixed camera, direct cuts, and diegetic sound only. All of these features are consistently and coherently organized to make the viewer experience life through Liberto's subjectivity and thus through his eyes. Liberto's vulnerability and mortality are not only normalized within the routine of the family but the viewer is prompted to experience the holding gaze of the person living with dementia. As viewers, we 'experience' his recollection of past memories, his enjoyment of listening to classical music, and his love of caressing and kissing (Medina, 2020).

### 5.2. Disembodied Voice and Haptic Visuality

These new theoretical approaches to the representation of old age go beyond the revision of gaze theory. The aural equivalent of Mulvey's visual pleasure, Kaja Silverman's *The Acoustic Mirror* (1988), denounces the inability of female characters to disassociate their voice from their body in hegemonic cinema. For Silverman, the female voice is always embodied. Yet, what if such a voice belongs to an older body? Silverman's argument would offer new insights, if older women's disembodied voices –for instance, Ellen's narration in *Wuthering Heights* (dir. William Wyler, 1939) or Rose's flashback in *Titanic* (1997)– were to be taken into consideration.

Laura Marks' concept of "haptic visuality" (2000) can also be particularly useful for the analysis of the silvering screen, especially for non-mainstream alternative productions, in which the prioritization of the evocation of touching, smelling, and tasting –that is, of the proximal senses over the at times more distant senses

of looking and hearing— triggers pure memories and produces meaning. In tactile works, such as *Measure of Distance* (dir. Mona Hatoum, 1988), *Wolke 9* (dir. Andreas Dresen, 2008), *Magnolia* (dir. Diana Montenegro, 2012), or *The Gleaners and I* (Agnès Varda, 2000) —hapticity is evoked by certain formal strategies to represent the aging body (extreme close-ups and long duration shots; video imagery, photographs in isolation or in combination) and by affective imagery that triggers multi-sensorial experiences (caressing, smelling, hearing, and tasting). Furthermore, the act of haptic contemplation strategically foregrounds the materiality of the image and therefore deconstructs both the representational nature of the image and the chronological time ascribed to narrative cinema. In this sense, Agnès Varda's "project" of panning across the surface of her hand in *The Gleaners and I* is particularly illustrative of Marks' "non-visual knowledge." While gliding with her lens into an extreme closeup of the mysterious intricacies of her wrinkled skin, we hear her words: "With one hand I film my other hand. [...] I find it extraordinary [...] I feel like a beast that I don't know." In turn, her hand is covering a self-portrait of Rembrandt, one that, as Imma Merino (2019) has illustrated, reused a canvas on which he had previously painted the image of a woman. Varda's project is the result of a symbolical superimposition: the image of a young man (the author) that covered the image of a woman (the object) is in turn covered by a new layer: the old skin of the aging filmmaker's hand. Is her project an intent to counter the young-male hegemony (as a symbol of the dominant epistemology) by setting a new "old" mode of thinking—a new form of cinematic thought?

Furthermore, haptic perception places the aging subject out of objective temporality. That is, it does not associate later life with decline as the normative gaze does. The recent production of creative documentaries ("documental de creación") of the University Pompeu Fabra of Barcelona —films such as *La plaga* (dir. Neus Ballús, 2013), *Penèlope* (Eva Vila, 2018), *Con el viento* (Meritxell Colell, 2018) among others— offer a clear example of such an atemporality. For Celia Sainz, this corpus invites spectators to engage with a non-productive present that challenges the teleological lineal time of capitalism: "the reiterative actions of the characters allow us to linger in the present, instead of constantly wondering what will happen next. The characters depicted, the spaces shown, and their slow and contemplative rhythm, encourage us to imagine modalities of time outside the hegemonic temporality" (Sainz, 2020). In these haptic representations, the concept of time as such is eradicated: the passing of time disappears, and its duration stands. In this context, the theoretical path opened by the intersection of age with disability studies and feminism has produced fruitful insights. For Joshua St. Pierre "the disabled speaking body" is at odds with an objective chronological marker, constituted by the hegemonic "straight-masculine" time, that is "a future-directed linearity abstracted from the flux of bodily time" (2015, 50). On the contrary, lived time is defined by its fluidity and duration (57), which is directly linked to the timelessness of the "haptic gaze" and subsequently eradicates any sign of age/aging and, with it, binaries such as male/female, young/old, beautiful/ugly, pleasure/disgust, or able/disable.

## 6. Conclusions

To summarize, the role of cinema as a technology of age in the pervasion of ageism in dominant cultural discourses cannot be underestimated. However, cinema also has the responsibility to expose ageism and empower old age. As we have seen in these pages, the seventh art can reclaim old age through its realistic representation or through atemporal sensorial evocations; it has the ability to present a plethora of different perspectives and about how to look at older bodies, about how to conceive sexuality and sex in later life; it can give visibility to intersectional perspectives that make us reach new understandings and insights about the diversity of the aging experience; it can teach us that phallic penetration is not relevant to achieve pleasure; it can show us the poetry of disabled old bodies; it can displace, and erase, the phalloyouthcentric gaze and make us stare through new ways of looking, such as the holding gaze, or the haptic gaze; it can deconstruct the abject and make it worthy; and it can challenge chronological order and stop time.

Cinema is gradually "silvering" in terms of audience, stars, and stories narrated. Born 125 years ago, cinema is older than any living spectator or actor. During its long life, it has gone through ups and downs. It was considered dead long ago but found new ways to reinvent itself. For Sally Chivers, one day the silvering screen "will fade to black, either by disappearing, or by, at last, telling stories of other aging bodies" (2011, 148). Or, perhaps, it will embrace Varda's project and will dissolve itself in the extreme close-up of its own old skin.

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