

***The Becoming of Age: Cinematic Visions of Mind, Body and Identity in Later Life.* Pamela H. Gravagne. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2013. Pp. 205. \$45.00 (paperback) \$29.99 (electronic).**

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In *The Becoming of Age*, Pamela H. Gravagne has produced a lively and timely conversation among theoretical inquiry, popular cinema, and cultural narratives of aging. Her premise is that film has the capacity to alter consciousness about growing older. Of course, Hollywood is particularly harsh on the aging process, filling its stories with dramatizations of decline and disability where older women are tragically betrayed by their aging bodies, while older men fare only slightly better. However, Gravagne ventures beyond these obvious stereotypes to shake up the temporal confines within which our culture subjugates older people. The first theoretical chapter argues that images *matter* because their power to represent endows them with the violence to exclude, which makes viewing films an exercise in mediating the myths and realities of aging. But how can we tell the myths from the realities? In response, Gravagne threads discussions of image, discourse, narrative, and myth with theories of essentialism and social construction to create a journey into the cultural spaces of meaning-making itself.

The five subsequent chapters tackle gender, intimacy, desire, dementia, time, and being. Each applies the ideas of contemporary theorists such as Judith Butler, Stuart Hall, Pierre Bourdieu, Mikhail Bakhtin, Elizabeth Grosz, Ian Hacking, and Karen Barad, amongst others, to the task of deconstructing cinematic experience and parsing it into finer liberating shades of ambiguity and unpredictability. However, the theoretical reviews can become weighty and break up the continuity of the argument. Theorists from one chapter do not always reappear in later chapters, while the textual shifts between the films and abstract theories create detours that cloud some of the thematic strengths of the chapters. Where Gravagne shines as a theorist is where she pursues her own formulations of postmodern criticism and argues less by way of reference to others, making clear that the originality of her book lies in relocating age at the center of critical thought.

Gravagne interprets her selected films (including animated features) in chapters Two and Three according to their potential as “counter-stories.” She chooses Clint Eastwood’s *Gran Torino* (2009) because it is about an older man and widower who reinvents himself, learning and growing anew against the decline narrative’s firewall. Yet Eastwood’s Walt does not fully produce a counter-story because he decides to die (courageously) rather than face his future frailties. This is a generous treatment of the film and of Eastwood, a producer who otherwise champions individualistic vigilantism against the supposed corruption of American traditions, often with the unapologetic use of gun violence. Likewise, Gravagne’s discussion of the film *Calendar Girls* (2003) scores good points about anti-aging culture and the social disadvantages for aging women, but the film’s “fairy-tale” ending also puts a cramp in its counter-story adventurousness. The films that illustrate Chapter Four, on “Intimacy and Distance,” such as *Something’s Gotta Give* (2003) and *Still Doing It: The Intimate Lives of*

Women Over 65 (2003) are touching portrayals of desire, romance, and vulnerability. Here Gravagne's writing is more confident and the film narratives are more detailed as examples of unresolved experiences posed at the crossroads of power and possibility.

Chapter Four's empathetic engagement with the emotional lives of older people is extended in Chapter Five on dementia, where Gravagne asks, "Is there something more to a person than the self that is no longer there when the brain with Alzheimer's becomes that person?" (143). Films that attend to this question are important because people with dementia are rarely "seen" except as residents of care facilities. Their personhood, creativity, and vitality are erased by the image of dementia as a living death. *Away from Her* (2007), *The Savages* (2007), and *Iris* (2001) are Gravagne's examples of films that both inflate fears of Alzheimer Disease and humanize it with narratives of hope and despair. Are they counter-stories? Yes and no: yes, because the films demonstrate that memory, mind, self, and identity are cultural productions contingent on historically-specific knowledges and practices; but alas, no, because such films tend to romanticize or push Alzheimer Disease back into traditional anxieties about spousal commitment, family responsibility, and the breakup of social order. These narrative contradictions leave us reflecting on our society's marginalization and isolation of impairment, disability, and loss of capacity in general.

The book's final chapter, on "Age as Becoming," turns to the work of Gilles Deleuze and his ensemble of concepts around "becoming," as a dynamic life-force that animates the spaces between image and being, representation and reality, and life and matter. Feminist philosophers Elizabeth Grosz and Rosi Braidotti have demonstrated the importance of Deleuze's ideas to understanding gendered subjectivity. However, rarely have such ideas been applied to aging and with such imagination as they are in *The Becoming of Age*. Just as life is larger than reality, so is age larger than our constructions of it. Films that narrate anti-ageist counter-stories have the power to "let us see how older people exceed the limitations imposed on them" (183). As Gravagne shows, the sensuality of Deleuze's conceptual environment around flowing porosity, non-sequential time, and the perpetual possibilities of becoming, lends itself to understanding both the magic of film and the indeterminacy of age. This is a chapter on life that sparkles with life.

The book has no separate concluding chapter, which might have been challenging for Gravagne to write given how much there is to summarize. But this is not a book that follows a conventional textual plot of "theory," "method," "examples," and "conclusion," because there are many theories, methods, examples, and conclusions. Deleuze said "that thinkers are always shooting arrows into the air, and other thinkers pick them up and shoot them in another direction." Gravagne has picked up the arrows of many thinkers and then shot them off in her own direction. Thanks to *The Becoming of Age*, we have the opportunity to do the same.