

***Fade to Gray: Aging in American Cinema*, by Timothy Shary and Nancy McVittie. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016. Pp 288. \$90.00 (hardcover); \$29.95 (paperback and electronic).**

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Cinema enjoys robust attention within the growing realm of age/ing studies, but broader scholarly attention to the depiction of older adults in cinema and popular culture has yet to truly flourish. *In Fade to Gray: Aging in American Cinema*, Timothy Shary and Nancy McVittie come from film history to make a welcome foray into critical considerations of older age in cinema. Their detailed study of the recurrence of older characters in Hollywood cinema will appeal to the cadre of scholars interested in how aging appears in cinema and popular culture. It will also demonstrate that age is a viable and integral category of analysis to an audience not yet familiar with age/ing studies

As well as a compelling part of visual culture, aging, for the authors, is social and political. They explicitly set aside broader age/ing studies approaches in order to delve deeply into textual and cultural analysis of filmic artefacts selected for their topicality. That said, the authors consider Hollywood films to be a gauge of normative standards of an era, so that their analysis of elder plots contributes to more thorough understandings of how people in the United States have understood aging since the early 20th century. Shary and McVittie struggle with how to define “old” and “aging” in relation to Hollywood, pointing to the perceived price of recently increased longevity in the US, and turning to labor and social security statistics, settling on sixty and older as a general benchmark for their study.

Noting that the US film industry is now older than any living person, the authors consider its durability in relation to its portrayal of older characters, enumerating the plots in which they are most likely to appear and showing that it is by no means new for Hollywood to portray late life. Practical constraints, including the sheer number of films to consider as well as the limited availability of such films for viewing, have led to

their selection from among thousands of over 300 films, mostly made after the mid-1940s. The choices offer an impressively comprehensive if not exhaustive study, with some nuggets to be found for scholars thinking thematically about aging in cinema. Two filmographies offered in appendices, one arranged by decade and one by thematic subject, generously provide clear avenues for future scholarship on aging in cinema.

Nodding to Hollywood's propensity for fantasy, though they note some spurious portrayals that they consider to be harmful roles for older actors, Shary and McVittie explore idealized visions of what they call "elders" as portrayed in US mainstream cinema. Striving not to use a taxonomic approach that often comes out of character-based criticism, their thematic overview proceeds more or less chronologically. The authors claim an evolution in the depiction of elder characters, which they trace by thinking on the macro level about the cinematic category of "older age" and on the micro level about individual filmic examples.

The first focused chapter looks at how elders are represented in relation to family and community from silent cinema to World War II. They concentrate on intergenerational conflict, a topic familiar to contemporary age/ing studies, pinpointing categories of "popular elder representation" in 1930s Hollywood: "saintly mothers," "out-of-touch millionaires," and "admirable pillars of the community." Their historicized glance is most interesting when it considers an earlier period of austerity as depicted through elder characters unexpectedly falling upon hard financial times. The chapter features an extended look at the films of Frank Capra, drawing attention to the vitality of older characters depicted in his work. The authors argue that Capra's investment in what today might be called "active aging" dated quickly in the postwar era.

In the wonderfully titled chapter "The Sensational Specter of Aging," Shary and McVittie begin to consider the economics of cinema beyond its depictions of economic straits in an exploration of "adult films" of the 1940s and 1950s. Not the blue movies associated with the term "adult film" nowadays, the adult films of the 1940s and 1950s were decidedly

mature in their content and appeal without being pornographic. The skewing of cinema to a youthful audience had led to revenue losses that had to be addressed, such that deliberate efforts had to be made to draw in viewers as young as over thirty. In this era of progress, attempts to increase audience share led to “adultsploitation,” which at times explodes into “agesploitation.” The authors offer an extended discussion of 1950s melodrama to exemplify the ageist tendencies of mid-twentieth-century Hollywood. Melodrama’s excesses of course lend themselves to camp, and that campiness takes on a particular hue when associated with old age. Explaining these exaggerations leads to the book’s greatest contribution, taken up in later chapters: the concept of “elder kitsch.”

In chapter three, Shary and McVittie outline a shift to niche audience targeting with its associated effects on roles for elders and portrayals of older characters. Considering genre as “a window into anxieties about aging,” they show how the horror and comedy genres transform through a reliance on elder characters in the 1960s. They note how monstrosity turns inward in a set of “psycho biddy” horror films, including *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* and other Bette Davis and Joan Crawford appearances, that magnify fears of aging femininity. In a comparison with how horror spawns the psycho biddy, Shary and McVittie explain how comedy lends itself to the trope of elder kitsch. By elder kitsch, they do not intend to conjure up the Hummel figurines that figure prominently and satirically in films such as *About Schmidt*, nor do they mean the doilies and plastic flowers often associated with seniors’ decor. They refer instead to elders as the continual butt of self-conscious jokes, as was often the case on 1960s TV when older stars such as Mae West, Vincent Price, Ethel Merman, and Tallulah Bankhead appeared as campy guests. Tracing this through the subsequent decades, they show how George Burns’s dry quips are taken up by Estelle Getty on *The Golden Girls*, and how an older actor reprising an earlier persona—especially Betty White—has become a disturbingly reliable path to guaranteed if questionable humorous success.

The chapters that follow continue the historical trajectory but are more thematic. A chapter on the “Elder Odyssey” notes the long history of quest films featuring older characters that have received considerable age/ing studies attention recently. Here the authors give some attention to casting that would be welcome in other sections of the book. A subsequent chapter on “Old Romance” details late life romantic love and elder sexuality in Hollywood film, with attention to the May-December plot as arising from literary fictions. A final content chapter, predictably focused on “Elder Death,” laments the deceptiveness of its typical narration. The book’s conclusion pinpoints how Hollywood misses the potency of older generations by focusing too much on their economic impact, and the authors hope for better in the future.

Throughout, more attention to older directors and other film workers would add to the already impressive robustness of the study. Especially given the significance of selected films that are adapted from written fiction, the book raises unanswered questions about how film differs from literature in its attention to elderly characters, if not through technology, aesthetics, film techniques, and its collaborative production. The few included discussions of casting are compelling and more would have been appreciated. For example, the book opens with a fascinating discussion of Anthony Hopkins’s 2014 role as “arguably the oldest historical figure to ever appear in movies, Methuselah” (xi), but the authors do not fully delve into what it means for Hopkins to play the biblical role in his late seventies. While this signals from the outset their overall focus on protagonists and characters, it also calls attention to how their micro and macro level foci could benefit from a meso level look at the Hollywood film industry and the youthfulness of its collaborative productions behind and in front of the cameras. Perhaps that will be a next direction from two fine scholars, who I can only hope will keep their attention on the latter end of the age spectrum as they continue their film and popular culture scholarship.