

Contemporary Cinema and "Old Age": Gender and the Silvering of Stardom, by Josephine Dolan. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Pp. 258. \$114.55 (hardcover); \$109.15 (electronic).

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An editorial entitled “The Last Acceptable Prejudice? Age Bias in the Workplace Is Alive and Well—and on the Rise” in the October/November 2018 issue of *AARP The Magazine* quotes Victoria Lipnic, acting chairperson of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, as saying that she is shocked by the stories of age bias she has heard—by the “horror and sarcasm about aging that we would find repulsive about race and gender.” Yet, had Lipnic been familiar with the arguments Josephine Dolan makes about the ways in which “old age” is constructed “at its intersection with the cinematic triad of audience/stardom/narrative,” (1) it is doubtful that either shock at the pervasiveness of age bias or disassociation of the horror of ageism from that of racism and sexism would have characterized Lipnic’s reaction. For Dolan’s well-researched book makes explicit many of the connections and issues raised by this triad as she reveals how “a globalized film industry dominated by Hollywood based corporations” (11) exploits the dual meanings of “‘silvering’—profit and the signs of ageing” (1) in order to maintain their “specific systems of profit, meaning and power” (247).

Structured around the three strands of the audience/stardom/narrative triad, Dolan’s first chapter traces the evolution of our understanding of old age from a “direct reflection of a fixed, coherent and fully knowable reality” (10) to an unstable category “constituted through the operation of discourse and power, rather than biological changes and/or the passage of chronological time” (3). Drawing on the work of leading age-studies scholars, she points out the permeable boundary between on- and off-screen realities, both in the economic and the semiotic spheres. Chapter two expands on the connections between these realities by examining the growth of the silver audience and the resultant “*silvering* of film industry profits” (35) by exploring the connections between cinema and other circuits of consumption, from the promotion of spin-off

products to the marketing of “tourist utopias” (53). Yet, Dolan notes, the mobilization of consumer desire in films about aging continues to be structured around a standard of feminine “chronological decorum” (60) which has no masculine counterpart and which ironically “effaces old age and older people” (60) from both the products and the promotion of tourist destinations based on these films.

Chapter three further develops ideas of the screen/consumer dynamic by first looking at the “economic and regulatory regimes of gender and late-style” as constituted through images of celebrities (20). Dolan concludes that both film and fashion regulate older bodies through clothing by demanding that older women dress neither too young nor too old but simultaneously make their bodies visible and conceal the signs of age marked upon them, while older men are allowed to dress in ways that signify “a mature continuity unaffected by life stages” (20). She next inspects the ways in which film continues to promote stereotypes of women’s cognitive inferiority through both the minimization of their intellectual achievements past age four, and by the feminization of contemporary cinematic dementia stories (21). In chapter four, Dolan continues her discussion of the performative nature of gender and old age by revealing how the ideological work of stars’ bodies is to make “discursively produced social categories” seem to be “natural” (121). She argues that performances by male silvered stars whose careers exceed usual retirement ages normalize a “deferred retirement” unavailable to most ordinary people, that late fatherhood signifies a youthful masculinity “that never goes away” (141), and that humorous “homosocial banter shores the old age by-pass of masculinity” by continuing to privilege the masculine gaze (158). In the end, the gender binary that pathologizes aging femininity and erases aging masculinity remains sacrosanct (244).

In chapter five, Dolan explains how genres create “specific systems of expectation” (173) and belief that “place limits on the kinds of representations we see” (174). By shaping what is plausible in a specific genre, these expectations exclude hard looks at old age, poverty, and the “pernicious reinstatement of white male privilege” (193). With genres common to

depictions of “old age,” Dolan contends, repetition, familiar tropes, even elder kitsch are “all mechanisms where nothing changes” in the intersection of “old age” with the “cultural verisimilitude of gender, race and sexual orientation” (194). Chapter six extends the concern of chapters two through five with the third-age imaginary to representations of the fourth age, a time that “renders the entire body as abject” (209). Dolan contends that masculine abjection is often portrayed through erectile dysfunction and feminine abjection through cognitive loss (211). Yet older stars themselves are protected from the contamination of abjection by being acclaimed for “uglying up” through prosthetic technologies such as “costume, make-up and CGI technologies” (23). She closes with a reminder that the Hollywood conglomerate remains a patriarchal capitalist institution that profits both ideologically and economically from management of threats posed by subversions of the abjection believed to come with age (232).

Dolan’s initial question: “How and to what purpose is ‘old age’ constituted in the Hollywood conglomerate’s cinematic triad?” (1) is clearly answered in chapter seven. She concludes that the Hollywood conglomerate increasingly deploys old age “as the guarantee of the body’s biological status” and largely colludes in making age identity an essential product “of nature rather than of discourse and ideology” (246). Her conclusion is supported by an extensive screenography and list of references at the end of each chapter and by numerous in-depth discussions that illustrate her arguments. In her last pages, Dolan wisely urges us all to be alert to the way in which divisive and corrosive stereotypes, styles, and tropes are deployed to sell films, endorse products, and tell stories (246) in ways “that exacerbate existing inequalities and privileges” (8). She ends by exhorting those of us in the field of age studies to expand on her research in ways that challenge the mainstream movie industry to depict more of “the diversity and richness of lived experience” in old age (245), to tell stories that not only value the silver of profits but that profit the silver of age. Stories in which someone like Victoria Lipnic, as the last sentence of the *AARP* editorial advocates, would see older people “judged on their merits rather than their age.”

Dolan's book does a masterful job of providing evidence to support the claim that the Hollywood conglomerate is both unable and unwilling to provide cultural representations of old age that may be "troubling, uncomfortable and possibly confrontational" (246). Yet, a richer understanding of the ways in which old age is represented and of how these representations matter might be obtained by reading this book in conjunction with others such as Sally Chivers' *The Silvering Screen* (2011) which examines the cinematic link between disability and old age, *Visions of Aging* (2012) by Amir Cohen-Shalev who scrutinizes how the experience of aging can transform how a director represents old age, or *The Becoming of Age* (2013) by Pamela Gravagne where the struggle between the representation and the reality of aging is seen as central to how we give meaning to our own experience of aging. Together, these books offer a solid introduction to what Dolan calls this emerging field of scholarship, one that may allow us to see how the discursive underpinnings of old age, whether about decline and burdensomeness or activity and success, will eventually touch us all.