

Ageing Femininity on Screen: The Older Woman in Contemporary Cinema, by Niall Richardson. London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. Pp. 240. £62.10 (hardcover).

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Applying the lens of age, or providing what Anita Wohlmann (2014) has termed “age reading” – i.e. “a close reading of fictional (age) narratives that has its main focus on the topic of age or aging and that consults studies from other disciplines or fields in order to better understand the functions and meanings of age in the corpus of fictional narratives” (31) – has recently delivered a number of rich and thought-provoking contributions centering around the intersection of age(ing) and popular (visual) culture. Such age readings of contemporary popular culture have inspired a number of notable publications that expose the polysemic nature of cinematic and televisual production, ruminating on “traditional” norms and values regarding age and aging but at the same time challenging these and promoting visibility, diversity, and empowerment (see, for example, Dolan; Hess; Oró-Piqueras and Wohlmann; Whelehan and Gwynne).

Niall Richardson’s *Ageing Femininity on Screen: The Older Woman in Contemporary Cinema* specifically positions itself within scholarly contributions at the intersection of age, gender, and popular culture. This intersection constitutes a part of Bloomsbury Publishing’s Library of Gender and Popular Culture and places its main focus on the topic of aging femininities in Anglophone cinema and television. Acknowledging the trendy nature of the topic, the author explains that this publication has a very clear orientation, to “focus on the various aesthetic and narrative techniques of *age affirmation* strategies in cinema (and their socio-political importance) by attempting at the same time to broaden the focus to include female characters who are not identified as hetero-feminine such as lesbians and trans-identified older women” (25). As such, the book’s aim is to reflect on an inclusive understanding of femininity, not limited to the representation and the experience of the straight cis-gender woman, but instead “queering the discursive and gendered construction of age” (25).

The introductory chapter offers a solid contextualization of the publication within prevalent age(ing) discourses, sociological concepts such as “successful aging” and “third age” as well as popular culture references that work well in motivating the book’s research enquiries. Such an all-round contextualization is particularly valuable for a general readership making the first steps into the topic of age and representation – with a particular focus on cinema and television. At the same time, the more academic reader will recognize and appreciate the author’s skilful attempt to summarize and synthesize the cultural meanings of age and aging across time.

Central to Richardson’s book is the concept of “affirmation strategies,” which the author seems to understand as ways that popular culture representations challenge negative stereotypes and diversify the experience of old age by liberating it from the negatively informed “othered” status. Practically speaking, the book’s focus is on “the ways in which age affirmation is coded in genre, aesthetics, narrative strategies and actors’ performance styles” (24). Drawing on his previous work and expertise, Richardson makes an interesting parallel between age and gay affirmation cinema. He claims that, despite the uneven focus on predominantly white privileged classes, the value of such affirmation mechanisms lies in their potential to challenge negative stereotypes and to raise awareness. In this way, Richardson maintains an active critical angle on popular culture texts such as *The Queen*, *Tea with Mussolini*, *Notes on a Scandal*, *Cloudburst*, *Mamma Mia!*, *Downton Abbey*, *Transparent*, throughout the book, allowing, however, a sympathetic and optimistic disposition as to their contribution to emerge.

Although a bit slow in designating the particular focus of the book as well as specifying its theoretical and methodological coordinates, the introductory chapter smoothly leads to six analytical chapters, which are characterized by a close age-studies reading of significant cultural texts, delivered in accessible and engaging language. The first chapter is dedicated to an age-friendly cinematic genre: the heritage film. Starting with a presentation of the ideological problematics of heritage cinema, the author moves on to provide a convincing analysis of the compatibility between older bodies and heritage iconography as

well as the multilayered interpretation of this intersection. Richardson argues that, in line with the overall ideological ambiguity of the heritage genre, older femininity is also coded ambiguously: on one hand, it provides visibility and conditions for empowering and progressive representations of old age; on the other hand, it hooks onto postfeminist and colonialist discourses which fuel more conservative understandings of the genre.

The second chapter is dedicated to two cinematic genres, the musical and the action film, which are by default less accommodating to older bodies because of their prerequisite of physical competency. By focusing on recent examples of films that feature older actors in protagonistic roles, this chapter shows how contemporary cinema challenges the aforementioned genres' "assumed ageism" (57). In order to illustrate this potential, the chapter includes a detailed feminist and age reading of *Mamma Mia!* (2008), with a focus on the feminist revoicing and redancing of the famous ABBA songs (68). By extending to the genre of action films, Richardson focuses on the topic of casting older women as a way to challenge what is acceptable for an action "babe." Of particular value here is the focus on Helen Mirren as the atypical action heroine who combines sexiness, desirability, and authenticity.

The third chapter moves away from a focus on genres and becomes involved with specific coding and performance strategies: age camp and age drag. By introducing us to the notion of camp both as performance and as a reading approach, the author explains how age camp and age drag, when embodied by aging women on screen, can be considered age affirmation strategies. Here, the reader can find a valuable analysis of Joan Rivers' campy performance style as well as a thorough dissection of the acting style of Maggie Smith, which Richardson characterizes as age drag "rendering 'old-lady-ness' a type of performance spectacle" (106).

The next three chapters consider the intersection of aging with queer sexuality and discuss the representation of LGBT-identified older people in contemporary film and television, thus addressing the main blind spot about which the author informed us in the introduction. More specifically, chapter four considers the representation of the older lesbian in contemporary

cinematic work. According to Richardson, this chapter builds on the prolific work produced by scholars such as Jane Traies and Eva Krainitzki focusing on aging lesbian culture and representation, the importance of which is put forward by Richardson's description of older lesbians can be described as a "triple invisible minority" (116). By presenting extensive queer/age readings of *Notes on a Scandal* (2006) and *Cloudburst* (2011), the author showcases how examples of contemporary Anglophone cinema challenge the lonely, embittered "old dyke" stereotype (117). The meticulous unpacking of the acting style of Judi Dench deserves special mention here, as Richardson adeptly synthesizes the elements that inform how she performs age, namely her ability to construct likeable characters, her plainness, and her "boyish" youthfulness.

The chapter that follows examines trans-femininity. Of particular interest here is the focus on the TV series *Transparent* (2014-2019), an important cultural moment for trans visibility, and the argument that the presence of older trans bodies not only diversifies the aging experience and provides an alternative iconography to the hard binary of passing/non-passing, but also functions as a platform for the renegotiation of tensions between radical feminism and trans activism.

Chapter six interrogates the stereotype of the "old queen," by considering femininity as embodied and performed by gay-coded characters. As Richardson jokingly admits, this chapter can be read as "cheating" because of its focus on older gay men. However, its presence is justified by revealing the similar trajectory that older gay men and older heterosexual women share in terms of how they are represented in the media. By discussing films that go beyond a focus on "coming out," representing aging through the dominant lenses of loneliness or threat, Richardson weighs whether older gay bodies on screen that do not necessarily embody the successful aging model get enough credit. The book concludes with a final chapter that reflects on the power of the aforementioned representations and their impact on the current sociopolitical climate, namely the debates around ageism and gerontophobia, but also misogyny and racism.

All in all, the book constitutes a relevant and valuable contribution to questions of gender and age embedded as they are in contemporary popular culture. As Richardson is admittedly focusing on unpacking visual strategies, the reader should not expect grand theoretical contributions. Instead, the book delivers strong close readings of case studies organized in compact chapters that should be read as telling and valuable mini-case studies; these, independently and in combination, reveal how older bodies, characters, and actors inform and enrich how we could understand aging, especially in its intersection with gender and sexuality. Characteristic examples include the analysis of the ABBA songs in *Mamma Mia!* as well as the acting style and stardom of Helen Mirren, Judi Dench, and Maggie Smith. In addition, the book makes a convincing case for the importance of studying aging femininities instead of aging women, thus embracing a more inclusive understanding of “femininity” and emphasizing LGBTQ+ dimensions.

What the book perhaps suffers from is an unapologetic focus on Anglophone and white-dominated popular culture texts and representations. The author appears somewhat conscious of this shortcoming, occasionally activating race and ethnicity (and class) as additional critical lenses. However, it could be argued that the book could have benefitted from more concrete motivation regarding the empirical focus on specific cases; this would then have helped the reader to better understand the status of the findings on a broader level. We know by now that the study of age in popular culture is a prolific path that deserves (and has received) immense scholarly interest. Indeed, as Richardson himself mentions in the introduction, aging is something that affects everybody, and representations do matter. However, future work should not be tempted to just “ride the wave”; instead, it is crucial that age scholars continuously reflect on questions of the universality of the experience of aging, and as such consider and even challenge the conditions that once again prioritize the study of “white” representations and experiences.

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