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The mirror has two faces

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ABSTRACT
Have changing demographics, increased life expectancy and findings about gender similarities and differences, altered portrayals of older people in American feature films during the past 65 years? We identified 3,038 films made between 1929 and 1995 in which actors and actresses, nominated at least once during their lifetimes for an Oscar award, appeared when aged 60 years or older. Academy Award nominees were selected because they offered a sample of 'notable' performers and an accessible database. We selected an eight per cent random sample for a content analysis of their roles. Throughout this period, men were more likely to be depicted as vigorous, employed and involved in same-gender friendships and adventure (whether as hero or villain). Women remained either peripheral to the action or were portrayed as rich dowagers, wives/mothers, or lonely spinsters. Despite changing gender roles in later life since the 1930s and despite social and economic changes for older Americans (earlier retirement age and better health are but two examples), their film roles have remained remarkably static in age and gender stereotyping. In feature films, the mask of ageing differs by gender. Male masks veil inactivity and physical changes, while female masks reveal ageist and sexist stereotypes.

KEY WORDS – gender, ageism, sexism, stereotypes, film, mask of ageing, images of ageing, cinematic portrayals, postmodern cinematic society.

Introduction

In the 1997 Academy Award nominated film, *As Good as it Gets*, 60-year-old Jack Nicholson (the winner of the 1997 best actor award) depicts a work-at-home writer. Another 60-year-old, Shirley Knight, plays a minor role as the mother of 34-year-old actress Helen Hunt. Romantic involvement focuses on the relationship between the characters portrayed by Hunt and Nicholson rather than Knight and Nicholson. Thus the older man is portrayed as worker and romantic

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interest; the older woman as mother-in-the-background. Are these typical cinematic portrayals of the attractiveness of later life male power and the devaluation of postmenopausal women? How, over the course of the 20th century, have the movies instructed us about male and female ageing?

In this article, we are concerned with the gendered portrayal of later life in feature films. To examine current and past cinematic portraits of old age and gender roles, we focus on the films of a certain set of actors and actresses. These are actors and actresses who were nominated at least once in their lifetimes for an Academy Award and who appeared in one or more films when aged 60 or older during the 1929-1995 period. Because of the prestige usually accorded to Oscar nominees, these actors and actresses comprise a 'blue-ribbon' set of performers with a continual yet changing presence over the past 65 years. Has Hollywood accurately reflected the older population in any of these decades or has it been a fun house mirror?

Mass Appeal[1]: cinematic society

During the 20th century, the work ethic of early capitalist culture has been transformed into a consumer culture – from 'I am what hard work I do' to 'I am what I can buy'. As a postmodern consumer nation, the United States is a cinematic society:

> The postmodern is a visual, cinematic eye; it knows itself in part through the reflections that float from the camera's eye. The voyeur is the iconic, post-modern self. Adrift in a sea of symbols, we find ourselves, voyeurs all, products of the cinematic gaze. (Denzin. 1995:1)

Scholars in the humanities and social sciences have examined ageist images and stereotypes in many areas; for example:

- literature and crime fiction (Spicker *et al.* 1978; Kehl 1988; Woodward 1991; Hepworth 1993)
- magazines (Featherstone and Hepworth 1995; Roberts and Zhou 1997)
- newspapers (Gibb and Holroyd 1996)
- television and television commercials (Shinar *et al.* 1980; Bishop and Krause 1984; Cassata 1985; Powell and Williamson 1985; Davis and Davis 1986; Dail 1988; Vernon *et al.* 1990; Bell 1992; Robinson and Skill 1995a, 1995b; Riggs 1996; Roy and Harwood 1997)

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- cartoons (Polivka 1988)
- birthday cards (Demos and Jache 1981)

Paradoxically, although an ever-growing body of research on film has developed, images of older people in film have, with a few exceptions (Walsh 1989; Markson and Taylor 1993; Fisher 1992), been ignored. Yet throughout the 20th century, the medium of film has been a powerful tool to deliver both explicit and implicit messages about appropriate behaviour and attitudes. However exaggerated or false, cinematic images of older men and women both reflect and shape our idealised and existing social values about age and gender roles. They also provide rudimentary, anticipatory socialisation for our own beliefs about, and behaviour in, later life:

> Thus did the movies create the gender- and race-based cinematic eye .... The movies created emotional representations of self, sexuality, desire, intimacy, friendship, marriage, work and family. These reflective representations drew upon the ideological structures of everyday life. They created an everyday politics of emotionality and feeling that shaped real, lived emotional experiences. (Denzin 1995:15, 30)

Within the coming decade, the oldest of the baby boomers will be in their early 60s, and people aged 65 or older now comprise the most rapidly increasing segments of the American population. Not only do men and women live longer, but their physical health is better than that of their age peers 60 years ago. Living arrangements and familial roles among both older men and older women have changed during the past six decades: more widows, more surviving grandparents and great grandparents, and more people retired and living on pensions.

Accompanying these changes is the 'mask of ageing'; the consumer-based promise of a flexible, ageless identity (Featherstone and Hepworth 1989). The guarantee of such an identity is plagued by the tension between 'the awareness of an experiential difference between the physical processes of ageing, as reflected in outward appearance, and the inner or subjective "real self" which paradoxically remains young' (Hepworth 1991: 93). The mask of ageing resembles the masquerade described by Woodward: 'Both men and women "put on" youth so as not to be classified as old' (Woodward 1991: 159) – a social façade to obscure the obvious manifestations of age.[2] Elsewhere, Featherstone (1995) has argued that popular culture is characterised by two contradictory images of ageing: the elderly hero who remains youthful and fights old age through lifestyles and plastic surgery, and the dependent, helpless elderly person. To what extent have roles played by older actors and actresses shifted over the decades to reflect changes in the mask and stereotypes, fantasies, and realities of later life?

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Method

No present single source contains enough information to give easy access to films in which men or women aged 60 years or over appear.[3] Nor are data on the types or social characteristics of roles they portray easily found. Our decision to focus specifically on Academy nominees was guided by several considerations. We wanted:

- a specific way to select films unbiased by our personal preferences, intellectual bent, or genre choices;
- to avoid the prohibitive cost and time required to identify *all* actors and actresses appearing since the sound era in a movie when aged 60 and over;
- the greater availability of birth date information for Academy Award nominees;
- a broad range of ages (60 to 80 and over);
- a variety of genres;
- diverse sizes and types of roles (from starring, to cameos and walk-ons);
- a cultural, social, and ethnic mix of actors and actresses – although Academy Award nominees are predominantly white Americans, some are non-white (*e.g.* Juanita Moore, Beah Richards, Sessue Hayakawa) and some are Europeans (*e.g.* Sir John Gielgud, Sir Alec Guinness, Marcello Mastroianni, Dame Edith Evans, Katina Paxinou, Simone Signoret).

We did not try to judge either the talent of the performers or the artistic quality of their films. We are aware that, in concentrating only on the films of nominated actors and actresses, many fine performers are excluded and that many have never been recognised by the Academy.

We collected data on birth dates and ages of all Academy Award nominees and winners of the four categories of 'best actor', 'best actress', 'best supporting actress' and 'best supporting actor' since the inception of the Oscar. Although Academy Awards were first awarded in 1929, it was not until 1936 that the best supporting categories were added, and the number of nominees for each award was set at five for each of the four acting categories. Before that time, the number of nominees for best actress and actor had varied.

Data on nominees and their birth dates were accumulated from assorted sources, including biographical and film directories, newspapers and magazines. Table 1 presents details on 212 actors and 124 actresses. During the 1929–95 period, they were each nominated at least once in their lives for Academy Awards: they comprise the universe of Oscar winners and nominees appearing in a film at the age

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TABLE 1. *Academy Award nominees when aged 60 or over by gender and age when nominated*

	Female	Male	Total
Actors/actresses			
Nominated when aged 60 or more	32	58	90
Nominated earlier in their careers	92	154	246
Total	124	212	336

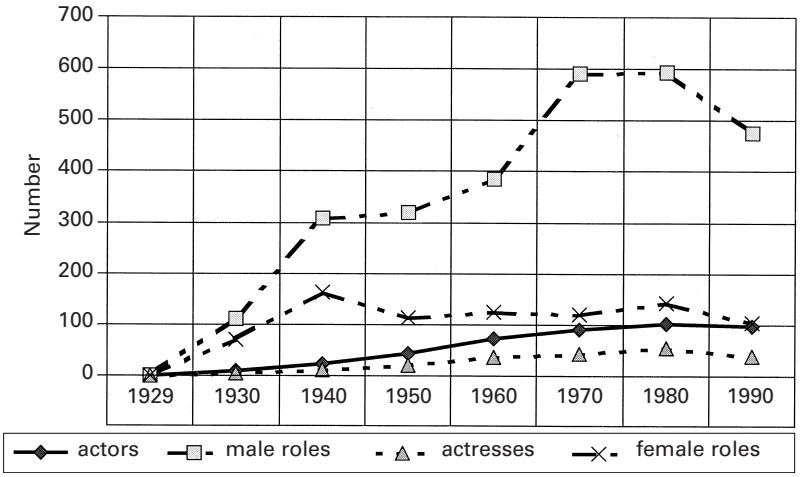


Figure 1. Number of performers and roles portrayed in 3,038 films, 1929–95 by gender.

of 60 or older. We then compiled filmographies for each of these 336 performers and identified 3,038 films, released during the 1929–95 period, in which they appeared when aged 60 or more (see Figure 1). Some of these films included two or more older actors and/or actresses and, in total, they include 3,622 such roles (2,783 male and 839 female).

The Lady Vanishes

The number of actors and actresses and the number of roles they portrayed were ascertained for each decade between 1929 and 1995 (Table 2). It is clear that actors have been in greater demand and have

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TABLE 2. *Performers and roles, by gender and decade*

	1929	1930–9	1940–9	1950–9	1960–9	1970–9	1980–9	1990–5
Male								
Actors	1	8	22	44	72	90	103	97
Roles	1	111	307	319	385	592	593	476
Female								
Actresses	0	5	12	21	37	43	54	39
Roles	0	70	164	113	125	121	142	104

portrayed more roles than have actresses – a pattern that accelerated during the 1960s without a corresponding increase in the number of available actors.

That older actresses play fewer roles than older men is perhaps not surprising. During the past three decades, a shortage of roles for women of *all* ages in American film has been noted. As actress Meryl Streep commented (in her 1990 keynote speech to the first national women's conference of the Screen Actors Guild):

> Three years ago, women were down to performing only one-third of all the roles in feature films. In 1989, that number slipped to 29 per cent … If the trend continues, by the year 2000, women will represent 13 per cent of all roles. And in 20 years, we will have been eliminated from movies entirely. (Streep 1990: 15)

It is not that older actresses are not available. For example, in 1989, the most recent year for which Screen Actors Guild data is available, 11 per cent of actresses and 9 per cent of actors were aged 60 or over (Screen Actors Guild 1991). That the lady is vanishing, despite her age, probably reflects Hollywood's backlash against the women's movement. As Cohen observed: '… men in film have retreated to their own clubhouse for a while, treating women with passive exclusion or active denigration' (Cohen 1991: 39).

Moreover, in American film, older actresses have traditionally been less visible than younger women. Aversion to old age overall, and to older women in particular, is not unique to the film industry. During the 19th century, a distinct antipathy toward old age arose with the development of middle-class American culture:

> Victorian moralists split the last stage of life into two apparently separate, controllable parts: the 'good' age of virtue, health, self reliance, natural death, and salvation; and the 'bad' old age of sin, disease, dependency premature death, and damnation … (setting up) a historical dynamic in which popular perceptions would swing from one pole to the other. (Cole 1992: 161–162)

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By the outset of the 20th century, the medicalisation of old age and the cult of youth had begun to dominate American views of ageing. The physician, William Osler, commented on the comparative uselessness of people over the age of 40. The worthlessness of the old was repeated by Nascher, the physician who coined the term 'geriatrics': 'We realize that for all practical purposes the lives of the aged are useless, that they are often a burden to themselves, their family, and the community at large' (cited in Cole 1992: 202). Nascher enlarged on personality changes with ageing, saying that such inherent male personality traits as nobility, virility and bravery, and female characteristics such as nurturance, domesticity and passivity, blended into one homogeneous gender-less personality: an old person (cited in Haber 1983). Freud also emphasised the deformity of the ego with ageing. As Woodward has noted:

> Thus in Freudian discourse the aging body would be a sign of deformation. The aging body would represent a narcissistic wound to the ego … the preoccupation with the body, which in old age is figured in terms of incontinence and decline, is complicit with the general emphasis – if not obsession – in western culture on the appearance of the body as the dominant signifier of old age. (Woodward 1991: 10)

Older women in particular have been denigrated. 'Western dualistic thought has characteristically bifurcated women as either sexual or spiritual … perceptions applied to aging women, as well … aging women [are personified] as both "fair" and "foul", as figures of wisdom, of desire, or of danger' (Banner 1992: 60). Contemporary cultural aversion to older women reflects historical remnants when suspicion of witchcraft 'fell on every old woman with a wrinkled face' (Fraser 1984); those most likely to be condemned for witchcraft were poor older women, usually single or widowed, who had a reputation for annoying their neighbours (Demos 1982). Freudian psychoanalytic tradition echoes this distaste for post-menopausal women who are regarded as 'old, dysfunctional in sexual (reproductive) terms, a dysfunction which is written on her body in folds and wrinkles for everyone to see' (Woodward 1995: 87).

Paralleling the increased medicalisation of old age was the expansion of American business and advertising. Health, cosmetic and pharmaceutical industries, emphasizing youth, health, and slimness, developed products – from corn flakes to tonics to face creams – to ensure youthful appearances. Women were prime targets for these products, for ideals of female beauty required youthful, unwrinkled faces, and lithe figures of adolescence or early adulthood. Older women, lacking the lissomeness of early adulthood, were at the double

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jeopardy of ageism and sexism – a theme reinforced by contemporary consumer culture. The women's movement too has largely ignored older women, reflecting the ambivalence that many founders felt towards old age in general and towards their own mothers in particular. As one older woman activist has commented:

> From the beginning of this wave of the women's movement … the message has gone out to those of us over sixty that your sisterhood does not include us … You do not see us in our present lives, you do not identify with our issues, you exploit us, you patronize us, you stereotype us. Mainly you ignore us. (MacDonald 1989: 6)

Yet, as Reinharz (1986) has noted, there are unrecognised links between feminist and gerontological theories. Just as feminists reject models of gender-based division of labour as the right and proper distribution of tasks, elder advocates rebel against models of old age emphasising withdrawal from socially useful roles.

Going in Style: the roles being played

Popular stereotypes connect the visible, physical changes associated with ageing to built-in obsolescence and physical and mental decay. We were interested in finding out how basic social characteristics, such as occupation and marital status, were delineated in roles played by older actors and actresses and whether these representations had changed during the 1929–95 period. Also of interest were gender-linked portraits of sexual or romantic involvement and family involvement. To address these issues, we drew an eight per cent random sample of the 3,038 films we had identified. This sample of 252 films includes 202 (60 per cent) of the 336 Academy Award nominees appearing in a film during the 1929–95 period when aged 60 or over (see Table 3).

We viewed the sampled films and coded the 367 roles played by 202 performers on the following dimensions:

- the decade the film was released
- the genre of the film
- the marital status of the role
- occupation (including retired)
- romantic or sexual interest
- involvement with one or more family members.

Marital status was coded in four categories: single; married; separated, widowed or divorced; and unstated. In those few films in which changes in marital status occurred, the marital status predominating through most of the film was scored.

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TABLE 3. *Film genre by gender*

Genre	Female	Male	Total
		(%)	
Drama	49	32	36
Comedy	16	21	20
Action/adventure	12	16	15
Mystery/crime/suspense	8	11	10
Science fiction/horror/fantasy	7	10	9
Western	3	9	8
Musical	5	1	2
Total no. of roles (= 100%)	94	273	367
Total no. of actors/actresses	58	144	202

Occupations portrayed by actors and actresses were coded in two ways. Major US Census occupational categories were used to group major professional and technical workers, white collar or minor professional and technical workers, and service workers. To reflect the diversity of roles, the following occupations were coded separately, rather than included in census categories:

- military officers
- politicians and rulers
- protection agents (police, private detectives, spies)
- retirees
- spouse/parent
- rich with no other identifiable occupation.

Romantic or sexual interest, and involvement with one or more family members, were each coded 'yes' or 'no'.

Film roles encompassed a variety of film genres: the most common being drama and comedy (Table 3). Nearly half the films featuring older actresses were in the drama category: three times the proportion in the next most common, comedy. In contrast, men appeared in a wider range of genres. There were proportionately more older actresses than actors in drama and musicals.

It's a Wonderful Life

Table 4 summarises portrayals of marital status in actors' and actresses' roles. In over half the male roles, marital status is 'unstated': whether or not the character portrayed was married, single, widowed, divorced, or separated never emerges, reflecting the irrelevance of marital status

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TABLE 4. *Marital status by gender*

	Film roles, 1929–95		USA population, 1995	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Marital status:		%		
Stated	62	44	–	–
Not stated	38	56	–	–
Total (= 100%)	94	273		
Marital status when stated:		%		
Single	18	22	4	4
Married	29	39	43	76
Widowed/separated/divorced	53	39	53	20
Total (= 100%)	58	120	–	–

to the film's plot. Equal proportions of actors played characters who were either widowed, divorced or separated or married (39 per cent of those with a stated marital status). Twenty-two per cent portrayed single men. Among female roles, the proportion with an unstated marital status was not as large as for male roles (38 per cent). Widowed, divorced or separated accounted for the largest proportions of those for whom marital status was made apparent.

Changes in marital status occurring during the course of a film were also noted; these shifts took place in only four per cent of the 367 roles portrayed. For example, in a few films, the marital status of the older man changes toward the end of the film: Jack Lemmon's divorced character marries at the very end of *Grumpy Old Men*; also the finale of *Rambling Rose* depicts Robert Duvall's character as a widower in 1971, but the bulk of the action occurs in the 1930s where his relationship with his wife is integral to the plot. Other films, such as *The Greek Tycoon* and *Little Big Man*, include older men who are married at the start of the film. Subsequently they are divorced or widowed and then soon remarry. Maria Ouspenskaya, in her portrayal of the wife of a maharajah in *The Rains Came*, was initially married but shortly thereafter widowed. She then became the ruler who managed the disaster that killed her husband.

The most significant aspect in the portrayal of marital status, however, is its stability throughout the films. Whatever marital status is or is not established at the beginning of the film remains constant in 96 per cent of the roles. Although the marital status of characters varies by decade when the 'unstated' category is excluded, no significant trends over time emerged.

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Especially interesting about film characterisations of marital status is their lack of resemblance to demographic realities among this age group in the United States. Since men's life expectancy has been lower than women's for the last seven decades, and since men tend to marry women younger than themselves, most older men are married. In the 1995 US population, for example 76 per cent of older men but only 43 per cent of older women were married. Almost half (47 per cent) of all older women in 1995 were widows (see Table 4). There were five times as many widows as widowers, and divorced older persons represented only six per cent of either older men or women in 1995. Only a small but equal proportion (four per cent) of men and women were single. Compared with these demographic trends, both men and women were much more likely to be portrayed on film as never having married and proportionately fewer as married. Men, but not women, were relatively more likely to be portrayed on film as widowed, separated or divorced.

That marital status was considered irrelevant for over one-third of the female and over half of the male characterisations is particularly worthy of note, given the salience of marital status in the actual lifecourse of both men and women. Apart from the demographic realities, various studies during the past few decades have found that older men find marriage *more* satisfying and experience *fewer* negative emotions about their marital relationships, than do older women (Depner and Ingersoll-Dayton 1985; Quirouette and Gold 1992; Keith 1994). Despite popular belief, the sharing of so-called 'feminine' household tasks has been linked to later-life male marital satisfaction; feeling capable, acknowledged, and simultaneously interested in *both* household and marital roles, has been the arena of older husbands more often than of their wives (Keith 1994). In the film world, however, older men's personal relationships eschew the 'feminine' world and remain primarily rooted in the buddy and action spheres.

Rock-a-Bye Baby

It is thus not surprising that movie roles for men were less likely to contain emotional involvement with one or more family members (wife, children, grandchildren, siblings, other relatives) than women's roles. Only 33 per cent of 273 male portrayals, compared with 54 per cent of 94 female depictions, include relationships with one or more family members that are integral to the plot. Films like *Lady for a Day* (1933), *Everybody Does It* (1949), *The Unforgiven* (1960), and *A Passage to India* (1984), feature women whose attachment to a son or daughter is an important part of the movie. Other female connectedness to

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relatives, not always positive, may be with a sibling, as in *Harvey* (1950), where Josephine Hull portrays a distraught sister, or *An Unremarkable Life* (1989) in which two very different sisters (Patricia Neal and Shelley Winters) share disagreements and memories. More positive is the role played by Beulah Bondi in *Lone Star* (1952) where she is 'not only related to Andrew Jackson but also his friend'. She oversees the ailing, wheelchair-bound Jackson's plan to convince Sam Houston to back the annexation of Texas into the United States.

Movies portraying male familial relationships with one or more children or grandchildren are more likely to be characterised by ambivalence, misunderstanding or conflict, than are female. Father–child discords that may or may not be resolved, are found in films that span the decades: *Duel in the Sun* (1948), *1900* (1977), *On Golden Pond* (1981), and *Class Action* (1991). Nigel Hawthorne, as King George, is plotted against by his ne'er-do-well foppish son, the Prince of Wales (*The Madness of King George*, 1994). Through his ambition for his son, Ian Bannen in *Braveheart* (1995) destroys their relationship; he is ultimately attacked by his son for betraying the rebel Scottish cause.

Perhaps lending credence to the Oedipal hypothesis, male relationships with daughters are portrayed more positively than those with sons: *Pride and Prejudice* (1940), *The Paradine Case* (1948), *Doctor Zhivago* (1965). Dramatic exceptions exist, however. For example, John Huston in *Chinatown* (1974) portrays a father whose incestuous relationship with his daughter results in a granddaughter who is simultaneously his daughter. Other father-child attachments are comedic, such as Stanley Holloway, the father of Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady* (1964), and Burgess Meredith as the sometimes salacious father of Jack Lemmon in *Grumpy Old Men* (1993).

Foolin' Around

Few films portray either men or women as romantically interested or sexually involved. Only 18 per cent of the male and 17 per cent of the female portrayals were involved in romantic or sexual scenarios. Films do not differ by decade. Actors were, however, more likely to appear in roles where women are either extraneous to the plot or are portrayed as unromantic or asexual females. When present, male sexual interest encompasses a wide range: rivalry between two men (Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau in *Grumpy Old Men*, 1993) one of whom is successful in winning his love as wife; voyeuristic (Paul Newman in *Mr. and Mrs. Bridge*, 1990); or ambiguous but suggestive (Kirk Douglas in *Greedy*, 1994).

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TABLE 5. *Primary occupational identity by gender*

Occupations	Female	Male
	%	
Major professionals	9	33
White collar	9	8
Service	5	6
Rich only	27	6
Retired	2	7
Military	0	6
Protection	3	11
Religious	1	4
Politicians, rulers	5	10
Criminal	4	2
Spouse/parent only	24	0
Other	2	0
Not stated	9	7
Totals (= 100%)	94	273

Actresses were more likely to portray spinsters, matrons or mothers. When not rendered irrelevant, women's romance or sexuality followed the 'bad girl/good girl' motif. As an ageing 'bad girl' there is Marthy, an alcoholic prostitute, deluded but with a heart of gold (Marie Dressler in *Anna Christie*, 1930). There is also the 'Queen of Tarts', Adriana, wife of King the Moon (Valentina Cortese in *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, 1989). She exemplifies both female insatiable sexuality and the mind-body split, as her head flirts with the Baron while her body has intercourse with her husband. As (old) 'good girls', two friends (Ann Sothern and Lillian Gish) form a potential love triangle with the same man (*The Whales of August*, 1987). A notable exception to the 'good-bad' motif is Maude, 80 on her next birthday (Ruth Gordon in *Harold and Maude*, 1970), whose romance with the suicidal, adolescent Harold shows him the meaning of life and love. That she ends the relationship by committing suicide, however, raises another gender issue: would a story featuring an 80-year-old man in love with an adolescent woman end with his suicide? Probably not, as May-December relationships, such as 73-year-old actor Tony Curtis's 1998 real-life marriage to a 28-year-old woman, at best raised eyebrows when reported in *People* magazine!

Money, Women, and Guns

That action remains a salient theme in male film portrayals is illustrated by an examination of occupations. Table 5 summarises the film role occupations of the 212 actors: major professionals, such as

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business executives, lawyers and physicians, account for one-third of the occupations portrayed by male actors. Eleven per cent were 'protection workers' (police, private detective or spy), another 10 per cent politicians or rulers; and eight per cent white collar workers. Military officers, rich men with no identifiable occupation, and service workers, each accounted for six to seven per cent, and four per cent were priests or other clergy. Seven per cent of the roles depicted retirees, and two per cent were engaged in illegal occupations (*e.g.* gamblers or murderers). About seven per cent had no identifiable film occupation or portrayed mythic figures. Clearly, most of these film portrayals provide images that encourage audience fantasies about the higher status and power of older men, and champion the belief that old men are not very different from 35-year-olds.

In sharp contrast are the occupational roles portrayed by females: two in three depict women not in the labour force. Unlike the men, the most frequent film 'occupation' for women was being rich – 27 per cent – most often as society matron, and 24 per cent were spouses or parents not in the labour force – classifications completely absent among male roles. Major professionals and white collar occupations accounted for nine per cent each; service (governess, housekeeper, maid), politicians or rulers, and illegal occupations (prostitute, a fortune teller, etc.) about one in 20 each. No occupation could be identified in the films for one in 12 of the actresses. Only one in 50 portrayed retirees.

A by-decade analysis of roles, whether portrayed by actors or actresses, showed only minor fluctuations. Excepting the 1940s and 1950s, 'major professional' accounted for the largest number of male roles in every decade (32 per cent to 38 per cent of all occupations). During the 1940s, actors portrayed three occupational roles with equal frequency: 'major professional', 'white collar' and 'service' (each accounting for 17 per cent). In the 1950s 'white collar' occupations dominated. By the 1960s, reflecting American concerns with the Cold War, espionage and crime, roles classifying men as spies, secret agents and private detectives, emerged; protective agents accounted for 10 per cent to 16 per cent of all male occupations in films during the 1960–1995 period.

Although roles in which males were retired began to appear in films of the 1940s, such portrayals remained rare. Rather, old age among men was highlighted as an extension of midlife. Male roles emphasised productive, task-oriented activity, whether as a business tycoon (Lionel Barrymore in *Test Pilot*, 1938), a criminal (Robert Mitchum in *Agency*, 1981), a liquor salesman/pool shark (Paul Newman in *The Color of*

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Money, 1986), or an ex-CIA agent currently a member of a private security team (Sidney Poitier in *Sneakers*, 1992). These are portrayals of men who, by refusing to grow old, also refuse to be devalued for their reduced capacity for production in the formal economy.

Throughout the 1929–95 period, 'rich' and 'spouse/parent' were the largest groups for female roles. Although the typical career trajectory for American older women during this period was that of wife/mother, punctuated by sporadic periods of paid employment, few women were (or are) elderly, wealthy matrons! Indeed, federal government statistics show that old women are more likely to live in poverty than any other age group. The archetypal cinematic rich older woman, who may or may not be a mother, is also a figure of fun. She may be caricatured as domineering, aggressive and interfering, like affluent society matron Mrs. Blair (Lucile Watson) in *Everybody Does It* (1949), or oppressive widow/mother Joan Plowright in the 1994 film, *Widow's Peak*. Alternatively, the wealthy woman is anserine, like spinster Dame May Whitty in *Gaslight* (1944) or mother-of-the-groom Billie Burke in *Father of the Bride* (1950). Kinder portrayals offer ageist comic relief, such as Aunt Willey (Ethel Barrymore in *Night Song*, 1947) who describes herself as 'a wise old ogre … I'm an old woman with one foot in the grave … I forget what happens after midnight'.

Wives and mothers were alternatively compassionate or ineffectual. Screen wives/mothers include the prototypical 'good' mother, such as Ma Joad (Jane Darwell) whose driving concern throughout the film *Grapes of Wrath* (1940) is keeping the family together in a time of crisis, and Ma Donahue (Jane Darwell in *All Through the Night*, 1942), the strong powerful mother who sees only good in her gangster/gambler son (Humphrey Bogart) and whose intuitions provide the blueprint for him and his gang to foil a fiendish Nazi plot. The role played by Katharine Hepburn in *On Golden Pond* (1981) embodies the compassionate wife/sensible mother, not only caring for an ailing husband but resolving long-standing father-daughter tensions. Among the ineffectual were those at the mercy of another family member, such as an unkind husband (Ethel Barrymore in *The Paradine Case*, 1948), a husband with a roving eye (*Mr. and Mrs. Bridge*, 1990), or a weak son and greedy, neglectful daughter-in-law (Geraldine Page in *Trip to Bountiful*, 1985).

In the real world however, since 1930, major changes in the occupational profiles and retirement status of older Americans – especially men – have occurred. With the arrival of Social Security legislation in 1935, increasing proportions of older people could retire on a pension. Labour force participation of older men decreased

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steadily. According to U.S. Census statistics, by 1960, two in three men and nine in ten women aged 65 or over, were neither employed nor looking for work. Men aged 65 and over comprised only one in 20 males of all ages in the labour force; their female counterparts accounted for fewer than one in 20 women. By 1990, the proportions of older people in the labour force were even smaller, with almost equal proportions of men (2.9 per cent) and women (2.6 per cent) aged 65 and over in the labour force. Mean age at retirement in the United States is now 62 years.

Two other forms of work are not reported in official statistics for either older men and women. These are part-time employment in the 'underground economy', where employees are paid in cash both without Social Security and income tax reporting and payment; and unpaid work as volunteers. In the films viewed, men and women rarely engaged in either of these two alternative activities.

The Big Picture: Discussion

Lyman has proposed that Hollywood films developed role models for men based on the story of the ancient Greek hero, Theseus. In this:

> … the true traits of masculinity are expressed, forged, and tested when men essay the roles of wanderers, adventurers, or marginal misfits … these makers of masculinity act alone, in the company of other like-minded men, or with a single male companion who is equally dedicated to the unsettled and unmarried life. (Lyman 1990:4)

Only around one third of male film roles depict men who had ever been married or who were involved with one or more family members and, in contrast, nine in ten were actively employed; this suggests that the Theseus motif has persisted for older men over the decades. This myth is the archetypal masculine role hallmarked by mastery and power. Work, whether as scoundrel or sage, defines boundaries for both these attributes (O'Neil 1982; Solomon and Szwabo 1994). Retirement challenges the traditional masculine role, for men relinquish their instrumentality in the world of work that has been a primary source of their potency. They move into the more traditionally feminine realms of home and family. As Solomon and Szwabo (1994:54) have suggested, 'because success in American society is often defined by the external products of actions (material and symbolic), older men are less able to demonstrate these actions to any significant degree'. Male dominance and hence their 'masculinity' is diminished. Although older men may

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indeed be redundant in terms of paid work, their higher governmental and private pensions enable them to command more control over goods and resources and thus convey more post-retirement power than older women (Hearn 1995).

Even in death, the majority of older men's roles, whether engaged in dramatic, daredevil or depraved deeds, are action-oriented. Although 38 of the films include an older actor whose character perished, death was likely to occur because of adventitious events. In 27 of the 38 movies, the male character was killed by enemies (*Fort Apache*, 1948; *How the West Was Won*, 1962; *Network*, 1976; *Demolition Man*, 1993), or in other external incidents such as bombing (*Mrs. Miniver*, 1942) or natural disaster (*The Rains Came*, 1939). In four films, the character either committed suicide (*State of the Union*, 1948; *1900*, 1977) or had a fatal accident caused by his own actions (*Sylvia Scarlett*, 1935; *Foreign Correspondent*, 1940). Although heart attacks, cancer and other causes of death (*Going in Style*, 1979; *Wrestling Ernest Hemingway*, 1993) and even senility (*Folks*! 1992) may strike, these are infrequent circumstances. Fake deaths to foil enemies happen (*The Freshman*, 1990), and angelic transformation after accidental death is also possible (*Beyond Tomorrow*, 1940).

Even physical disability rarely lessens male mastery. Male age-associated isolation and incontinence can be overcome by a placebo (*Mr. North*, 1988). Older men may remain powerful despite being crippled (Lionel Barrymore in *It's a Wonderful Life*, 1946) or make a full recovery from wounds (*Hellfighters*, 1968). Conversely, maladies may be feigned to lull others into believing the older man is weak and to expose the cupidity of relatives (*Greedy*, 1994). Only occasionally do age-associated physical changes lessen the male ability to maintain instrumentality.

Female film roles, too, emphasise the continuity of archetypal 'feminine' activities, whether as spinster, wife, mother, sister or other family member. In every film decade, when older women are depicted as powerful, it is most often within a family context. They are good, bad, or foolish wives, mothers and mother-surrogates (*The Yearling*, 1946; *Friendly Persuasion*, 1956; *Inside Daisy Clover*, 1965; *Terror in the Wax Museum*, 1973). There are also older women as almost invisible housemaids (*Experiment Perilous*, 1944), nosy neighbours (*That Darn Cat*, 1965) and malefactors, whether a spy (*From Russia with Love*, 1963), an authoritative, unaffectionate housekeeper (*The Secret Garden*, 1949), or a powerful career woman who commits murder to defend her reputation and subsequently kills herself when her crime is detected (*Appointment with Death*, 1988).

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As noted earlier, rich older women abound, including such diverse portrayals as caricatures of society matrons (*Bringing Up Baby*, 1938; *Everybody Does It*, 1949), a mentally deranged countess (*Conquest*, 1937), a maharanee who assumes the role of leader after her husband's death but abdicates in favour of a young physician (*The Rains Came*, 1939), and a dowager empress (*55 Days at Peking*, 1963). For such women, wealth and inherited power convey influence.

A major exception to the stereotypical patterning of older women is in the science fiction film *The Rocket Man* (1954). Not only does the older actress (Spring Byington) play a career woman and powerful community leader, she is also a good mother, befriender of orphans and criminals, wise woman, counsellor and friend. She becomes romantically involved, but rejects her suitor, saying: 'I was married to a fine man and he died. I've had my fill of marriage.'

Powerful women who are neither matrons, miscreants, nor manipulators, may nonetheless require rescue by younger people. For example, in the film *Grand Old Girl* (1935), May Robson portrays Laura Bayles, a spinster school head. When she opposes a gambling den frequented by her students (who have nicknamed her 'Old Gunpowder'), a male town notable calls for her firing, saying 'and I for one call for the dismissal of this senile, meddling old woman!' She is left without a pension. Eligibility requires 40 years of employment: 'I've only been in 38. I'm too young'. The President of the United States (and one of her former students), on hearing of her dismissal, comes to town and delivers a speech from the school steps. He heralds both his former teacher – 'I thank you for whatever success may be mine' – and teachers in general as 'those silent heroes who have devoted themselves to our youth – second only to American Motherhood'. A much later film portrays an older woman (Jessica Tandy) in a nursing home (*Fried Green Tomatoes*, 1991). Through reminiscences of her own spirited youth, she stimulates an unhappy middle-aged woman, downcast by menopause and trapped in her marriage, to deal effectively with midlife changes and to restructure her relationship with her husband. The film ends when the older woman goes to live with her younger friend and family. Like Laura Bayles, she is thus rescued from possible loneliness and uncertain future by a younger person.

Such female portrayals clearly differ from comparable roles for older men. In the film *Greedy*, for example, Kirk Douglas portrays a wheelchair-bound rich man whose relatives plot ways to get his wealth. His nephew, who initially schemed to inherit his money, reconsiders after Douglas's character declares that he has suddenly become destitute and plans to give the old man a home. The film ends when the

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uncle, refusing his nephew's offer, reveals that he only feigned disability and poverty to test his relatives. Springing from his wheelchair, he whisks his nephew away to live with him in his mansion. The playful manipulation of the mask of old age is flung aside to reveal a far more youthful self.

The cinematic male mask of ageing thus differs sharply from the female mask (Hepworth 1995). Male movie masks primarily deny physical ageing or diminished dominance; the ever-young interior subjective becomes (or strives to become) the exterior. Female masks focus more on exterior physical changes associated with ageing and sometimes exaggerate them. Bette Davis portrays a rich, blind and cantankerous old woman who may be going senile (*The Whales of August*, 1987), Jessica Tandy a rich, opinionated, and stingy old woman who eventually enters a nursing home (*Driving Miss Daisy*, 1989), and Geraldine Page a helpless old woman who has a seizure and is exploited by her daughter-in-law (*The Trip to Bountiful*, 1985). Older women may be diabetic (*Warning Shot*, 1967), become unconscious while on holiday and subsequently die (*Avalon*, 1990), or need to be wheeled onto a train by a maid (*Murder on the Orient Express*, 1974). Or they may simply die off screen (*A Passage to India*, 1984; *Honeymoon in Vegas*, 1992).

The film mirror of ageing reflects two faces. The male face shows the social fiction that, with a few exceptions, men can stay physically young despite their age, belying the notion of uselessness or powerless disability. Inactivity is veiled and physical changes disguised or denied, and few physical changes occur to disrupt the Theseus myth. Biggs (1993) has suggested that old age can be used to help younger men to maintain a positive self-image by contrasting it with the less positive view of elders. In contrast, film portrayals of elder men promise viewers a dynamic old age where the inner self, social interactions, and outer body are congruent, untouched by the passage of years. The ageing body as one of physical decline is denied, and the 'summer wine formula' of make-me-forever-young is maintained (Martin 1990). Nevertheless, as Martin points out, summer wine is unlikely to last. As an image of ageing, however, this formula heralds the belief that younger men themselves are likely to be impervious to age-related decrements, for men aged 70 or 80 are portrayed as being not very different from men aged 35 years. The staying power of make-me-forever-young imagery was well exemplified in real life when Jack Palance, at the age of 73, did one-arm push-ups upon receiving the 1991 Oscar for best supporting actor.

The female face reflected in the mirror is less flattering. Older women are stripped of the mask of 'a flexible, ageless identity'. Rather, they

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are more likely to embody ageist stereotypes, mirroring the still persistent cultural belief that a woman's essence lies in her youthfulness – itself a symbol of her procreative potential. Unlike Agatha Christie's indefatigable Miss Marple, whose grandmotherly appearance disguises a keen intellect, the vast majority of older women in films project images of decline. Even the youthful exterior of Ruth Gordon's Maude conceals the despair of '80 is long enough' (*Harold and Maude*, 1980). No longer objects of sexual or romantic desire, female power in old age appears to depend on their ability to either manipulate or retain goods and resources or their family status as wives, mothers, and other relatives. Very few glimpses of a constant inner youthful self are caught; the most notable exception being Lillian Gish who, in her 90s, portrayed a loving, still romantic, woman despite an obviously elderly physiognomy (*The Whales of August*, 1987).

Regardless of the decade, films convey the message that the power and the success of men is likely to continue uninterrupted into old age, unaffected by physical decrements that might alter their ability to manifest action-based, task-oriented 'masculine' behaviours. Like Peter Pan, they remain youthful to the end – unless they are among the very few unlucky ones. In contrast, Wendy-like, females grow up – and grow old – often to become tedious, timid or termagant. Actors may choose among the many masks identified by Hepworth (1995): artful trickery and playfulness (Kirk Douglas in *Greedy*), daring (John Wayne in *The Green Berets*, 1968), sincerity (Henry Travers in *Dark Victory*, 1939), sinister manipulation (Charles Boyer and Oscar Homolka in *The Madwoman of Chaillot*, 1964), authenticity (Ian Holm in *The Madness of King George*, 1994) and, occasionally, intimations of mortality (Clifton Webb in *Three Coins in the Fountain*, 1954, and Henry Fonda in *On Golden Pond*, 1981).

Men's fear of old age is quieted by the potency of male portrayals; rather, apprehensions about physical and mental decline are projected onto actresses who depict harridans, helpmeets, or hellions – caricatures of old age. As products of the cinematic gaze on ageing, both male and female viewers gain a myopic impression of later life where the possibilities for male self expression are limited to instrumentality. The masks worn have a fixed quality, 'welded to consciousness so completely that one becomes unaware of the potential avenues and even that one is wearing a mask at all' (Biggs 1997: 561). While old age is veiled by eternally youthful male cinematic masks, these same masks can smother opportunities for later life expressivity – of 'refusing more thrusting, driving and pushing … [turning one's] back on more patriarchal pressure and start to put energy, in a different collaborative

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way into "changing men" issues at both a personal and social level' (Jackson 1990; quoted in Hearn 1995: 106).

In his 1934 poem *Provide, Provide*, Robert Frost aptly summed up the female mask of ageing as portrayed in 65 years of feature film.[4] That there are fewer (but even more fixed) masks that older actresses may don, reflects not only the scarcity of available film roles for females but also the narrower range of behaviours considered cinematically appropriate for ageing women. Clearly the message conveyed about older women in film throughout the past 65 years, is that the place for both good and bad women is properly in the home and, if they are 'good' women, as either carers of others or shadow background figures. The suggestion that 'it is the time for many of us to invent ourselves consciously and critically as older women, making the face we want for ourselves to the best of our abilities' (Woodward 1995: 90), seems particularly apt for future cinematic portrayals.

NOTES

1 With the exception of the introductory heading, all headings are actual film titles in which one or more performers in this study appeared when 60 years of age or older.

2 Various concepts are relevant to this analysis: the mask of ageing (Featherstone and Hepworth 1989; Featherstone 1995; Hepworth 1991, 1993, 1995), masquerade (Woodward 1991, 1995) and persona (Jung 1967, 1972; Biggs 1993, 1997). We have chosen to use the concept of mask as more appropriate to cinematic portrayals.

3 Although excellent filmographies exist (*e.g.* the *American Film Institute Catalogues* and *The Motion Picture Guide*, and several personal computer databases), none is definitive. To date, only two filmographies have been complied of older actors and actresses. In one, an appendix to Stoddard (1983), one of the very few volumes devoted to older women in film, the listing is idiosyncratic and the definition of 'an older woman' indeterminate. Hollenshead *et al.* (1977) contains a short chapter on films highlighting older women but only four of the 56 listed are feature length films. There is no information or analysis of the social characteristics or connotations of the roles portrayed by older actresses.

4 In his poem 'Provide, provide', Robert Frost begins with a cleaner ('the witch … the withered hag') who 'was once the beauty Abishag, the picture pride of Hollywood' (Frost 1934: 506). In Kings I of the Bible, Abishag, a beautiful young women, is brought to lie with the aged King David so that he may 'get heat'. Frost urges the 'picture prides' of 1934 to die early or to acquire power ('Provide, provide!') such that 'nobody can call you crone'.

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