

The Ageless Romance: Sexuality and Aging in Cloud 9 and Gloria

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Abstract: Representation of aged bodies in contemporary cinema becomes the center of my paper. Through the representation of aged bodies in Gloria and Cloud 9, I attempt to explore sexual agency and how the director and the production team of these films treat its narrative of age. My paper hopes to identify aging narratives in these films and study it vis-à-vis earlier representations of aged bodies in cinema. Visual portrayal of the aged in the cinema has largely treated aged bodies as static, passive and inert without any possibilities whatsoever. My paper is a foray into the desires of bodies that have been rejected culturally and their desire to wrench back that control. My paper then attempts to unravel the (un)disciplining of age in the chosen films.

Keywords: Aging, representation, sexuality, narrative, bodies.

My paper will explore the contemporary filmic portrayal of women's aged bodies, their sexual agency and the narrative of age in primarily two films: Cloud 9 (Dresen 2008) and Gloria (Lelio 2013). It will try to identify the kind of representation that is being voiced in these films, set against the backdrop of earlier visual representations in cinema, and how these films challenge or elucidate the aging narratives that have structured media studies on gerontology in the past. Gerontologists have offered alternate readings of women and aging (Chivers 2011; Cohen-Shalev 2012; Dolan 2013; Kaplan 2010; Swinnen & Stotesbury 2012). Visual portrayal of the aged in cinema has largely focused on the "narrative of aging as decline" (Gravagne 2013, 110). Popular media is involved in the cultural struggle in aging and "plays

in making literally visible alternate ways to view and live into old age” (Gravagne 2013, 5). I will be examining the unravelling and the (un)disciplining of old age, or the lack of the same happening in the two films selected for this paper.

Aging not only threatens a woman’s identity and their sense of themselves but also their sexuality and their desires (Clarke and Korotchenko 2011). “Rituals of social comparison” involve being confronted with images of youth in popular culture that manufacture beauty as belonging to the young and, therefore, the domain of sex and desire also belonging to younger women (Gullette 2011, 117). Aging is considered unattractive and undesirable for both the sexes, but more so for women as standards of beauty are higher. Beauty is consistently associated with youth, whereas old bodies are socially and culturally perceived as undesirable and ugly (Calasanti and Slevin 2001; Clarke and Korotchenko 2011). As women continue to age in a society obsessed with physical beauty, the power of a woman decreases with her waning beauty (Lakoff and Scherr 1984). Popular media is a double-edged sword where postmenopausal women are shown as being incapable of sexual desire and also slammed for their inappropriate behaviour if interested in sex.

The assumptions about old age predominantly see the aged body as “bad, repulsive, and ugly,” which, “facilitates the construction of ‘a culture that discards old [women],’” by making them invisible and silencing them (Clarke and Korotchenko 2011, 29). Similarly, Kathleen Woodward in *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations* (1999) sees the silencing and invisibility as ageist. There is a general refusal by the media to see old women as subjects of film, thereby sexuality is almost non-existent. There is near invisibility of older women on-screen (Grogan 2017; Hajjar 1998; Vernon et al. 1990). Studies on women’s sexuality and their bodies is sparse, barring some writing (Calasanti and Slevin 2001; Clarke 2011; Lemish and Muhlbauer 2012; Muhlbauer, Chrisler, and Denmark 2014). Female desire as a subject of discussion for older women has been a subject of the

documentary *Still Doing it: The Intimate Lives of Women over 65* (Fishel 2003) and films like *Innocence* (Cox 2000), *Something's Gotta Give* (Meyers 2003), *The Mother* (Mitchell 2003), *Away from Her* (Polley 2006), *Still Mine* (McGowan 2012), *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (Madden 2012).

Aging in popular discourse is rife with stereotypes and the concept of “‘transcending old age’ which retains the notion that old age requires ‘transcending’ in the first place” (Kaplan 2010, 33). There is a proliferation of sexist and ageist images where women are rarely shown to be independent and never presented as sexually active. Additional complexities arise when men continue to be portrayed as sexually attractive even in old age. If an older woman portrays a sexual role in a film, she is typically shown as being younger than her actual age, with a youthful appearance. For instance, Inge in *Cloud 9* retains her black tresses whereas most women in her choir group sport thin, white hair and look significantly older than her. Furthermore, the sex is always implied by the director and there’s often an avoidance of exposing the older women’s body (Bildtgard 2000; Grogan 2017). There is a tendency to “other” the aging body and its existence is seen as being separate from a younger person’s which doesn’t let our own anxieties about aging resurface.

The literal body is absent-present in a paradoxical way in films. Whereas the absence is seen in terms of a lack of leading roles for older actors, the presence is seen in how “old age is visible precisely because of the telltale marks it leaves on the surface of the body—lines, crow’s feet, sagging flesh, grey hair,”—and yet, “paradoxically, it is those visible marks which render the old person invisible,” as gerontologists have observed (Wallace 2006, 50). The invisibility of the literal body is evident in severe lack of any cinematic representation of the aged female body in various state of undress even during sex scenes. The bodies remain off screen and the sex hidden behind rosy cinematography, not unlike, what Roger Mitchell does in *The Mother* (2003). Whereas Darren’s young and virile body is shown with great cinematic prowess, May’s wrinkled and time-ravaged body is kept hidden

behind the comfort of lighting so as not to offend the eye of the viewer. The sex is usually implied and kept onscreen (*It's Complicated*, *Away from Her*) or treated in a comic manner so as to undermine even the slightest possibility of it challenging any existing norms (Something's Gotta Give). Genuine depiction of sex between people aged 50 and older still remains taboo because "elderly sexuality and romantic activity are essentially taboo for mainstream culture, possessing an intrinsic *unwatchability*" (Williams, Ylänne and Wadleigh 2007, 2).

Gloria resists taboos when it shows Gloria's time-ripened body in all its flaws and naked glory. Her body is never treated with derision or censure and neither is it differently framed than any other body in the film. From the slow gentle sounds of lovemaking between Rodolfo's and Gloria's sagging flesh to the silent scenes of self-reflection while lying supine upon her bed or sitting in a nightclub alone, *Gloria* doesn't disappoint. Gloria's intimate scenes with Rodolfo are rife with tenderness, affection and passion. The audience never forgets that these are people in their late 50's and 60's that are making love as the signifiers of age like Rodolfo's waist belt are never too far away. We get to see the sex in all its awkward glory and the steps of the courtship as and when they happen. Gloria is unabashed in her sexuality and confident enough to flirt with Rodolfo in the club and later, have a one-night stand. When that one-night stand turns into dating, she easily transitions into a woman who likes romance but isn't impractical enough to assume Rodolfo doesn't come with his own emotional baggage. She is realistic, fiercely strong and feisty as a 50-something woman who never compromises when it comes to her dignity. Even when she reaches her lowest point in the movie, she never comes off as anything but graceful yet vulnerable as a woman who doesn't hesitate to live life to the fullest.

Sebastian Leilo refuses to treat Paulina Garcia's *Gloria* as an invisible entity in her own life and her presence is evident in each and every frame of the film. The camera is never too far from being involved in Gloria's life alternating between medium shots, close ups and extreme close ups. We are

completely absorbed in Gloria's life from the very first frame where her tentative but flirtatious looks are open for a one-night stand or a romantic partner in equal measure. More often than not, Gloria comes home alone and the loneliness is evident in her relationships that are emotionally close but lack the constant companionship and neediness that she misses from her own children. The plot of the film is an oscillation between the hope and utter heartbreak as we see Gloria struggling between her feelings for Rodolfo and her own realization over his spineless character and inability to compromise her own dignity in favour of her need for a companion. *Gloria* offers a peak into the internal desires, fears and hopes of an older woman and gives voice to a counter narrative by challenging "our ideas and values with non-stereotypical images without either turning us off with the harsh realities it depicts or assuaging our fears with a picture that simply consolidates the already prevalent "mask of aging" (Gravagne 2013, 108-109).

Cloud 9 similarly questions the invisibility of the literal body prevalent in films by making visible what has long been kept hidden. Andreas Dresen doesn't use any cinematographic techniques that mask or soften the blow of his showing his viewers how 67 and 76 year olds have sex. He is utterly unconcerned about the audience and driven by his desire to show the scenes with stark realism. In essence, he doesn't treat his protagonists' bodies as old, to be kept hidden behind the veneer of soft and romanticized mise-en-scènes. The age spots, the flabby and wrinkled skin and saggy flesh is bared for everyone to see. It's a hugely ground-breaking film when foregrounded against the backdrop of the films that have preceded it for decades. Historically, sociologically and culturally the "aging female body remains a taboo" onscreen (Markson 2003, 98). The opening scene of the movie is visual resistance at its best, where without any verbal explanation the scene moves forward towards disrobing its protagonists in their twilight years without judgement. Dresen chooses to punctuate all the sex scenes not with music but with orgasmic sounds of the central characters. Explicit geriatric sex resists the cultural narrative of sex being the domain of the young and the beautiful and breaks the taboo that has plagued the film industry for decades.

The sex scenes are absolutely natural and unabashedly explicit. Dresen doesn't employ any soft lighting, filters or mood music to enhance or romanticize the scene, and instead chooses to treat the aged body realistically and lets the passionately clumsy bodies speak for themselves. He asserts the importance of viewing aging not as decline or narrative foreclosure but as unfolding in myriad ways with hundreds of possibilities for the aged being. He opens up a peephole through which we discover that the lives of the elderly aren't too different from the dreary happenings of the young. We have a 67-year old woman struggling with an extra-marital affair who is incapable of continuously lying to her husband about it as her daughter commands her to. Dresen challenges the notion that old age must necessarily be equitable to wisdom as society and culture would like us to believe. It is just as messy and problematic as life is for the young. *Cloud 9* is a classic cautionary tale replete with its own set of dialogue "I didn't want this, it just happened!" (*Cloud 9*).

The film is augmented by captivating performance by its lead actress, Ursula Werner. She takes charge of her latent sexuality and approaches her affair with recklessness and a certain amount of urgency that is unheard of in popular culture. The film challenges the male gaze and sexual agency of men when we see the world filtered through Inge's eyes and her desire evident in her gaze when she looks at Karl trying his pants in front of her. In the first scene between the lovers, the camera focuses on the view from her perspective when we take in Karl's gradual disrobing and the way it lingers in places that her eyes do. She takes in Karl's literal body and its tangibility is brought home when gazing turns into touching and stirring language of the body. As their bodies intermingle and intermesh in the brightness of the shot, the camera maintains its separation from the sexual act by never focusing too close to the sexually engaged bodies. The same camera which closes in and closes out of the shots in the starting chooses to be eerily silent and somewhat detached when it comes to sex. The shot then challenges but also creates new boundaries of acceptability levels of the nude body at the same time in the process. Dresen chooses to bathe majority of scenes between Inge

and Karl with bright light unlike cramped and isolated spaces of Inge and Werner's married life. The positive association of sex and love with the brightness of the shots is deliberate.

The male audience will not identify with Werner but with the older lover, Karl, who was able to steer Inge's affections away from Werner and engage in an affair despite his age. Popular media in general is dominated by frames that tend to "dismiss the validity of women's own sexual feelings and desires apart from men's desires for them" (Lemish and Muhlbauer 2012, 169). *Cloud 9* resists that narrative by showing us Inge rediscovering her latent sexuality and embracing it as her own. We see Inge's naked body after her tryst with Karl as she takes stock of her physical body as if to ascertain her reawakened sexuality. This scene is brutal in its honesty as she looks at the signifiers of age on her body and seems almost astonished that it remains desirable. She masturbates in the bath and the cries of her orgasm echo for the viewer as they stand witness to her sexual reawakening. Much like May, Inge embraces her evident sexuality with reluctance and then with overpowering gusto as it moves into love and attachment. Young love in old age as an impossibility is posited against her confession "I always hoped I'd fall in love again properly [before dying]" (*Cloud 9*). Her journey from passive acceptance of her dull married life towards falling in love again and rediscovering her own desire and potential for a different life is incredibly fantastic and challenging to ageist ideology.

The shock of seeing two aged bodies going skinny dipping in the lake is enough to throw any stereotypical ideas about the aged body out of the window (*Cloud 9*). Karl brings a sense of abandonment and carelessness about the body that is attractive to Inge's sheltered and monotonous routine. He takes Inge for cycling, running, skinny dipping, dancing; all things that reassert his young looks and his interests in activities generally considered pursuit of the young. Is Dresen, by engaging Karl in such hobbies, playing into the same ageist notions of "aging positively" with its emphasis of keeping the body physically young as long as possible? Karl could be read in

direct contrast to Werner who is not seduced by the “positive aging” campaign. On the other hand, it could also be read as his desire to stay physically fit and involved in things that get his blood racing. Werner has to be cared for by Inge which suggests an inevitable physical decline of the body and his own anxiety about his age when he later exclaims after a visit to his father “If I ever end up like my father, you can shoot me in the woods” (*Cloud 9*). Werner is strongly gerontophobic whereas Karl accepts his body’s shortcomings. It is the gerontophobic readings of the text that Dresen is resisting so strongly in the film.

The sex is passionate, tender and filled with humour and laughter in both the films. It is the women who take the first step into reaffirming their sexual identity. Inge seduces Karl after his effective attempts to garner her attention during one of their altering sessions. Gloria on the other hand tentatively joins others on the dance floor introducing herself to a potential partner, dancing with men and flirting with Rodolfo. She isn’t the observer to her own life but rather someone who is continuously engaged in its many workings. She is an independent middle-class woman who wants to be needed by her equally independent children and has a social life to rival any young person’s. Gloria transforms from a story about a woman’s search for love to turning into a story of growth and self-transformation. It is Gloria’s unflinching belief in herself to overcome any problems that resists the stereotypical reading of a woman in her 50’s.

Gloria’s age isn’t a barrier to her choices and decisions in life. She doesn’t delude herself and the audience into thinking she isn’t lonely. She resonates with viewers as her state of loneliness is supremely relatable when Rodolfo asks her during their first meeting “Are you always this happy?,” and she replies, “No, some mornings I’m not ... and sometimes not in the afternoons as well” (Gloria). The loneliness due to her single state is evident in her empty apartment, her desire to be needed as a woman, a mother and a grandmother. Even when we see her cooing to her grandson and crying over her daughter leaving the country we never forget that she is a sexual creature

and coded as one. She desires romance and sex and tries her hardest not to compromise on either when she meets a potential partner like Rodolfo. Even when Rodolfo abandons her on their getaway vacation, she refuses to wallow in self-pity and instead goes on a solo adventure of gambling, drinking and smoking. It never turns into a cautionary tale even when she is abandoned on the beach by her partying friends with no wallet and shoes. The audience joins in her petty revenge against Rodolfo and we laugh right alongside her.

Unlike *Gloria*, Inge is more of a passive observer in her own life but for once she's going to "put herself first" rather than making her desires not an "issue" anymore (*Cloud 9*). Inge indulges in reckless activities like skinny dipping and outdoor sex that are a part and parcel of her relationship with Karl. Karl is like a quintessential younger lover who is technically older than her husband but is portrayed in a younger light. He brings excitement and something spectacularly new to Inge's dull life which was earlier filled with occasional train rides to nowhere with her husband and a drab routine perfected over decades.

Elderly people have frequently been associated with a childlike state and Werner resorts to the same scathing attack on Inge when he says, "you're behaving like a child. Have you gone senile?" and goes as far as, "Aren't you ashamed, at your age?" (*Cloud 9*) He has internalized the very same attitudes which the film so vehemently fights against. The agelessness of romance is most evident when Inge finally bursts out and says "What does it matter if I am 16, 60 or 80?" (*Cloud 9*). Age is not a barrier to romance which ageist attitudes consistently try to deny. There is potential to fall in love at any age and *Cloud 9* resists the narrative of the aged body as "an object that is unworthy of romantic advances" (Gravagne 2013, 103). Instead, the film posits Inge as a subject who is resisting the predominant narrative that continuously tries to devalue her worth. On a similar note, Rodolfo verbalizes the very same anxieties that Werner attacks Inge with, when he replies to *Gloria* about his desire to hide his affair from his family, knowing that his daughter's opinions would be "You have a girlfriend! You silly old

man! How could you even think of dating at your age?... They'd make fun of me" (*Gloria*, emphasis mine).

Gloria's zest for life translates easily into her desire to experience as much of it as possible. In Rodolfo's park she shoots paintballs and bungee jumps with a smile on her face. These acts of severe transgression challenge the conventions of age-appropriate behaviour in the media. Gloria smokes, drinks and takes part in dinners that turn politically heavy in a beat. Throughout the course of the film, we see her enthusiastically dancing and involved in the social and cultural milieu of Chile. She doesn't even hesitate to experiment with her neighbour's marijuana when it mistakenly ends up at her door. She is as wild and free as the sentimental pop songs she is fond of singing along to, when driving to work. The background score to the film comments and sometimes offers insight into many scenes in the film almost making it a character in its own right. Massiel's "Eres" (You are) and Paloma San Basilio's "Libre" are just few of the songs that situate Gloria's current life with the adventures she consistently undertakes to enjoy it. The film comes full circle and locates Gloria in the position of potentiality and hope where she starts alone and ends up alone by the end of the film; the only difference being that in the closing scene she refuses a dance partner and instead chooses to dance to her own rhythm, unconcerned about the larger world in general. She dances to Umberto Tozzi's original "Gloria" in the closing scene with hands thrown up in the air in abandonment and ecstasy instead of the depressive version of Laura Branigan. She is a woman undeterred by romantic heartbreak or her loneliness, and instead, chooses to take control of her life story at every step of the way.

Cloud 9 and *Gloria* disrupt representations by showing us the other side of old age. Gloria and Inge both challenge the ageist and sexist notions about the aging female body. These women are disrupting earlier narratives of ageism by outlining a different perspective to view old age. They reassert control and refuse to be mere participants and a second chance at intimacy and love is not passed over due to taboos and conventions. These films were

responsible for challenging me to observe the world through their eyes and to feel the world filtered through their reactions to it. I rode alongside Gloria riding a merry-go-round on the day she is jilted by her lover and I laughed alongside Inge when she laughs over a joke with Karl. Leilo and Dresen have exposed the inner workings of these women's lives that have not been particularly explored before, in such detail. The audience can confront their own fears and anxieties about old age, and in the process, discover that old age isn't all that it is projected out to be.

Scholars of gerontology need to confront and resist prevalent and ageist attitudes and narratives towards aging and sexuality in the popular media to further their goal of bringing the larger public to acknowledge their unconscious behaviour. It is in the process of resisting expected behaviour and assumptions of the aged public that an attempt to bridge the gap between elderly and their young counterparts can happen. It is with the acknowledgement of biases and stereotypes that one can begin to eventually move away from the same to reach a fuller understanding of age and sexuality. *Cloud 9* and *Gloria* offered counter narratives to the ageist and stereotypical portrayals of the elderly in the media and resisted the invisibility of geriatric sex. By bringing the sexuality of the protagonists onto the silver screen, these films did much to acknowledge the desires of women in their twilight years and to reopen the chapter of love that is socially and culturally expected to be closed by a certain age. By resisting limitations in popular media, these films will serve as precursors of many such explorations of geriatric sex in the future.

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