2024

Aging on the Margins: The Older Woman as a Queer^ Subject

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The Older Woman as a Queer^ Subject

An Honors Thesis Presented by Taylor Austin
To the Department of Film Studies
Advised by Sonia Misra

Connecticut College
New London, Connecticut
May 1, 2024

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank my thesis advisor Professor Sonia Misra (and her trusty companion, Luca) for her invaluable wisdom, insight, and guidance, and her dedication to ensuring the successful completion of this project.

I'd also like to express my gratitude to the members of my Honors Committee, Professor Ross Morin and Professor Ariella Rotramel, for their time, input, and encouragement over these past several months.

Thank you to Dr. Nina Martin for encouraging my passion for Film Studies from my very first semester at Conn, and for her support stemming from the early stages of this project.

I owe many thanks to all of my peers, classmates, and friends—particularly those within the Film Studies department—who have collectively contributed to this project through thoughtful intellectual discussions both in and outside of class seminars. Special thanks to Hannah Stoever, Maggie Adolf, and Zuhah Syed for their input and support throughout this process.

I want to thank my family—particularly my parents—for unconditionally supporting me throughout this project, and for putting up with my endless nonsensical rambles as I navigated the excitements and challenges of this project. Thank you, also, to my wonderful pets (all of whom happen to be old ladies themselves!) Kali, Sassy, and Pepper, for the joy they've brought into my life.

Finally, thank you to the older women in my life and in film that have inspired me to pursue this project, and continually advocate for ways of being and aging that diverge from normative expectations.

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Abstract

Across film genre and history, the figure of the older woman has remained largely invisible. "Frail, Frumpy and Forgotten: A Report on the Movie Roles of Women of Age," a 2020 study conducted by The Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media, finds that female characters made up just 25.3% of characters over the age of 50 in the top-grossing films of 2019 within the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. All of these characters occupied minimal, supporting roles: none of the leading characters in the selected films were women over the age of 50, and the large majority of such characters were white, cis-heterosexual women.[1] In this project, I simultaneously draw from frameworks rooted in queer theory and feminist theory to analyze the figure of the aging woman. Deploying the neologism "queerness^," I work to more deeply and extensively explore her relationship to queerness as a force, and highlight the utopic, liberatory potentials that such an affiliation could afford her. I closely analyze three films: *80 for Brady*, *She Will*, and *Thank You and Goodnight*, to explore and highlight the radical power that lies in divergent, anti-normative representation.

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[1] The Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media, "Frail, Frumpy and Forgotten."

Introduction

Barbie (Greta Gerwig, 2023) was the biggest movie of 2023. Yet, for Greta Gerwig, "the heart of the movie"[1] is not America Ferrera's viral monologue, or the tear-jerking montage set to Billie Eilish's "What Was I Made For?" Rather, it is a moment that might be easy to overlook: Barbie's poignant encounter with an older woman at a bus stop.[2] Stereotypical Barbie and the older woman (identified only as "The Woman on the Bench") wait at the stop together, just after Barbie has entered the real world. Barbie glances over at the woman and observes visual signs of age for the very first time.[3] Through teary eyes, and with a bright smile, Barbie tells the woman that she is "so beautiful." With a beaming grin, the woman responds, "I know it!" Though brief, this interaction produces a rare, reflexive recognition of the film industry's pervasive obsession with youth: for just a moment, the older woman finds herself in the spotlight.

Figure 1: Barbie and "The Woman on the Bench" share a smile.

Across film genre and history, the figure of the older woman has remained largely invisible. "Frail, Frumpy and Forgotten: A Report on the Movie Roles of Women of Age," a

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[1] Hiatt, "The Brain Behind 'Barbie.'"
[2] The woman is notably portrayed by costume designer Ann Roth.
[3] The film establishes that aging does not occur in Barbie Land—Barbie has yet to encounter a woman with visible signs of aging such as wrinkles or grey hair.

2020 study conducted by The Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media, finds that female characters made up just 25.3% of characters over the age of 50 in the top-grossing films of 2019 within the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. All of these characters occupied minimal, supporting roles: none of the leading characters in the selected films were women over the age of 50, and the large majority of such characters were white, cis-heterosexual women.[4] These minor, secondary roles for older women are predominantly composed of wise, nurturing grandmother types, lacking in character depth, development, and complexity[5], and often only appear in narratives to provide support for a younger male protagonist.[6] One can easily imagine this image of the stereotypical "old lady": a short, hunched woman with permed white hair, a frumpy wardrobe consisting of pastels and floral prints, and a generally meek, innocent demeanor. As age and gender scholars Dafna Lemish and Varda Muhlbauer explain in "'Can't Have it All': Representations of Older Women in Popular Culture," these characters "are so unnoticeable that it is hard to provide examples that will be familiar…"[7] "Grandma" is so easily recognized that she serves as a sort of cinematic shorthand, coagulating aging maternal roles into an indistinguishable, anonymous trope shaped by collective cultural perceptions of aging and gender. When additional identificatory facets such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class come into play, the likelihood of *any* representation—let alone positive representation—shrinks even further. Contemporary representations of older Black women, for instance, still carry traces of the highly racist Mammy figure. Thus, mere representation alone is not enough: rather, cinematic images of aging women must confront and destabilize

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[4] The Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media, "Frail, Frumpy and Forgotten."
[5] Lemish and Muhlbauer, "Can't Have It All," 170.
[6] See Aunt May in *Spider-Man.*
[7] Lemish and Muhlbauer, "Can't Have It All," 168-170.

identity-linked stereotypes that further contribute to their oppression by the forces of ageism and misogyny.

The older woman may also serve as an antagonistic foil to a young female protagonist. The cold, calculated, commandeering Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada* embodies the trope of a lonely, career-obsessed woman, contrasting the young, well-balanced Andy, a newcomer to the fashion world. *Monster-in-Law*—as suggested by its title—constructs a narrative that revolves around the extreme measures taken by a possessive, controlling mother in an attempt to derail an upcoming wedding between her son and his new girlfriend. In the horror and thriller genres, the image of the sweet, innocent grandmother is intentionally subverted to invoke terror.[8] Many such films fit into the category of the "psycho-biddy," also referred to as "hagsploitation" or "hag horror" films.[9] This subgenre finds its roots in the psychological horror of the 1950s and 60s[10], including films such as *Sunset Boulevard*, *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, and *Hush…Hush, Sweet Charlotte*, all of which feature violent, senile older women who are often youth-obsessed. These villainous characters function as examples of what—or who— *not* to be, existing merely to aid in the central character's development, or evoke terror in the audience.

With these dominant images of the aging woman in mind, I prepare to interrogate films that complexly explore the lived experiences of older women, incorporating their differing positionalities and identities into the construction of unique, nuanced, and empowered characters. As a queer woman, media representation has been critically important to the formation of my sense of self. As I move further into adulthood, I reflect on what I have experienced, and what

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[8] See *The Visit*, *The Granny*, and *Kill Granny Kill*.
[9] Buchanan-King, "Joan Crawford: Problematizing the (Aging) Female Image."
[10] The genre is not as popular as it once was, but older women still appear as agents of terror in films such as *The Taking of Deborah Logan*, *Drag Me to Hell*, and *X*.

has yet to come: what images of aging have I been exposed to thus far? Do I resonate with any of these images? How do I understand the process of aging, particularly amidst a popular culture that values youth?

I reject the stereotypical image of the petite, polite, white-haired "little old lady," in search of something greater. If nearly every female character in mainstream cinema over the age of 60 looks and behaves like this stereotypical grandmother, what option do those of us who want to age divergently have? What about women of color? Queer women? Trans women? When older women rarely do get visibility in cinema, they are invariably upper-middle class, cis-heterosexual, and white. What remains for the aging women who find themselves outside of this select demographic? How might they conceptualize the process of aging? Though unable to satisfactorily resolve these concerns, my project aims to interrogate—and highlight—images of aging in recently released films (in the case of *80 for Brady* and *She Will*), or those that remain largely overlooked (*Thank You and Goodnight*). Which of these films exhibit a potential for tangible representational change? How do they interact with their generic predecessors? What approaches in film form, genre, and technique could be fruitful for increasing positively impactful representations? How might independent and experimental films possess a unique potential for liberatory representation? These central questions guide my investigation across disparate genres, modes of filmmaking, and intended audiences.

I commence this project at a unique time in the history of U.S. cinema, where the film industry seems to be in the early stages of a cultural shift: with the critical successes of films led by aging female protagonists—*Everything, Everywhere All At Once*, *The Woman King*, *Nomadland*, and *Nyad*, to name just a few—aging women are becoming more visible in cinema. Since 2020, Michelle Yeoh, Frances McDormand, Jamie Lee Curtis, and Yuh-jung Youn have all

achieved Academy Award wins as leading or supporting actresses. Notable nominees include Angela Bassett, Annette Bening, Glenn Close, and Judi Dench. Older women are finally in the limelight. Expanding briefly to the adjacent realm of reality television, the recent, inaugural season of *The Golden Bachelor* breaks *The Bachelor*'s youthful mold to feature twenty-two older women, all over the age of sixty, vying for the love of a seventy-one-year-old man. After the massive success of the first season, casting for *The Golden Bachelorette* is underway, which will center the romantic journey of an older woman. This level of mainstream visibility is unprecedented. We are at a critical juncture in film and media: older women are on the cusp of a cultural breakthrough.

With this cultural context in mind, I enter into ongoing theoretical discussions of aging and femininity in film studies. Drawing upon the foundational works of Sally Chivers and Josephine Dolan, both notable scholars working at the intersection of aging and womanhood in film and media, I apply existing analytical frameworks to films that have yet to be substantially analyzed in the context of aging and gender studies. Simultaneously, I draw from frameworks rooted in queer studies and queer theory, particularly the works of Cathy J. Cohen and José Muñoz. Through these dual lenses, I identify the aging woman as a queer, Othered subject, relegated to the margins of cinema. Though I am not the first to identify the aging woman's proximity to queerness—queer and gender studies scholar Linda M. Hess has written about "queering ageism"[11]—I enter this discussion with the intent to more deeply and extensively explore the aging woman's relationship to queerness, and highlight the utopic, liberatory potentials that such an affiliation could afford her. Where Hess focuses on ageism more broadly, I intentionally narrow my focus to the older woman, who, as a result of her gender and age, is

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[11] Hess, "Queering Ageism," 2021.

described as being "doubly alienated" in cinema.[12] How is the aging woman, as a subject

marginalized by multiple, interlocking systems of oppression (which, dependent on her identity,

may also include systems that oppress subjects on the basis of race, ethnicity, ability, or

sexuality) constructed across genres and modes including mainstream comedy, independent

horror, and experimental, autobiographical documentary? How might my application of queer

studies frameworks enhance the radical potential that lies in cinematic representation? How can

these frameworks be used to derive empowerment even from images that appear to be normative

or derogatory? Throughout this project, I employ an intentional, intersectional approach when

analyzing my central three films of focus. I seek to incorporate aging into broader theoretical

conversations regarding representational marginalization and identity, illuminating the ways in

which age overlaps with other systems of oppression.

In the section following this introduction, I introduce the term "queer^" to more nimbly

navigate my application of queer theory to the figure of the aging woman (specifically, my

formulation of the aging woman as a queer^ subject). In this section, I introduce many of the

scholars and works that are foundational to my later analyses of Otherness, temporality, and the

radical potential that lies in coalitive allyship.

In the first chapter, titled "Defining the 'Grandmom-Com': Comedy and the Aging

Woman in *80 for Brady*," I outline the normative role of the older woman in the mainstream

comedy, comparing it to the representations in the recent film *80 for Brady*, which centers

around the adventures of four older women as they embark on a journey to the Super Bowl. I

also establish the neologism "grandmom-com," to more pointedly identify and categorize an

emerging subgenre of comedy films that center an aging female lead and target an aging female

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[12] Jing & Yuan, "Aging, Gender and Self-construction," 86.

audience. After an extensive analysis of the film's comedy and characterization, I more deeply

uncover and interrogate its underlying ideologies and biases.

In the second chapter, "Aging, Abjection, and Atemporality in *She Will*," I provide a brief

outline of the history of the aging woman in the horror film, before focusing my analysis on the

recent independent horror film *She Will*, which follows an aging actress as she recovers from a

mastectomy at a remote retreat with a supernatural history. In this chapter, I also discuss the

influence of the abject on feminine subjects in horror films, and establish a connection between

abjection, Otherness, and queer^ subjects. I introduce Gilles Deleuze's nonlinear rendering of

temporality to more closely analyze the film's nonlinear constructions of time, and propose the

potential liberatory possibilities of temporality outside of normative chronology.

In the final chapter, "*Thank You and Goodnight*: Queerness, Affect, and the Aging

Woman," I analyze Jan Oxenberg's aforementioned experimental documentary, which illustrates

her personal grieving process after the death of her grandmother. Incorporating elements of the

whimsical and the surreal, Oxenberg constructs a film that paints a vivid portrait of her late

grandmother, incorporating emotion and affect in such a way that challenges the normative

logical frameworks of traditional documentary. I employ a Deleuzian model of temporality once

again to explore the powerful potentialities Oxenberg creates through her non-linear assembly of

the film.

In the conclusion, I acknowledge the narrow scope of this project, and address the

representative progress that has yet to be made for older women of color, queer women, trans

women, and poor women. I illuminate the potentiality and emphasize the radicality of creating

divergent images of aging, and highlight the tangible impacts of representation on our personal

conceptions of age and aging, particularly for individuals that have historically experienced

systemic marginalization and oppression. I ultimately end feeling hopeful of the radical potential

that cinema offers.

Queer^

Throughout this project, the term "queer" will be used in two distinct ways. Firstly, I introduce the neologism "queer^" (denoted with a caret, as in queer^ or queerness^) with the intent of clarifying my varying uses of the term "queer," without sacrificing the complexity, fluidity, and illegibility of queerness^ as a theoretical concept. When denoted with a caret (as in queer^ or queerness^), the terms refer to the ideological construction of queerness as a divergent Other, a destabilizing force or entity that holds the radical potential to challenge normativity and hegemonic logics. This definition of queer^ builds upon Cathy J. Cohen's foundational work in "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics," in which Cohen speaks to the coalitive, unifying potential of queerness^, which unites not only queer individuals, but all individuals who face systemic oppression, across multiple embodiments of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, ability, and class. Speaking to the radical potential of queerness, Cohen asserts, "...if there is any truly radical potential to be found in the idea of queerness…it would seem to be located in its ability to create a space in opposition to dominant norms, a space where transformational political work can begin."[1] Queer^ adds the caret as a visual indicator of this definition, making clear its dedication to an embodiment of radical, unpredictable, and transformative political and representational potential.

In my use of the caret, I draw from the use of the asterisk in "trans*," employed within the broader lexicon of queer studies to broadly encapsulate a vast spectrum of trans* identities, genders, and experiences. Just as trans* serves as a sort of shorthand for evoking theoretical applications of transness, I create queer^ out of an urge to more simply mobilize Cohen's theoretical use of queerness, effectively separating it from its homonymic counterpart more firmly rooted in an understanding of personal identity. Like the asterisk, my use of the caret also

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[1] Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," 438.

intends to create space for the inevitable fluctuation of the term's meanings and associations. In embracing this fluidity, I reject any constructions of queerness^ as fixed or monolithic; its dynamism and illegibility are integral to its radical potential.

Queer^ also takes significant inspiration from Judith Butler's writings in "Critically Queer." She describes the term "queer" as a "site of collective contestation," imbuing the word with a quality of complexity that makes it impossible to singularly define or understand.[2] I apply this same reasoning to queer^: its opaque quality protects it from ossification and ensures its enduring radicality. So long as queer^ holds space for conflict, dialogue, and dissent, its meaning may remain in an ever-present state of flux, adapting to continual shifts in culture, consciousness, and understanding. In this sense, its opacity is the enabler of its multiple, radically disruptive meanings, as well as its perpetuity.

Lee Edelman's *No Future* proposes a wholly pessimistic understanding of queerness as a force of sheer negativity, closely associated with death, destruction, and disruption.[3] Yet, rather than employ this definition of the term, I align queerness^ most closely with José Muñoz's renderings. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz pushes back against Edelman's assertions, arguing that "Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world."[4] Whereas Edelman embraces a highly negative, threatening, and destructive construction of queerness, Muñoz opts for an understanding of queerness as a productive force, which holds the potential to create utopic futures that we have yet to see or even imagine. Muñoz prompts us to consider that a future is not equitably guaranteed for everyone: queer and trans people of color are particularly at risk of having their futures violently taken away from them as a result of the repeated systemic oppression and abuse

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[2] Butler, "Critically Queer," 19.
[3] Edelman, "No Future." 113-114; 134.
[4] Muñoz, "Cruising Utopia," 1.

they face. If one cannot feasibly imagine a future for themselves, how can they reject it? Muñoz

challenges the privilege of rejection that underlies Edelman's work, exposing the dominant

logics that entwine themselves within the text. I embrace this complexity introduced by Muñoz.

Just as queerness^ holds the power to destroy, it also holds the power to create. I aim to define

queerness^ as a complex, contradictory force, not restricted to strictly negative or positive

outcomes, but able to freely fluctuate between disparate poles, or perhaps even embody them

simultaneously.

Edelman also employs a largely normative, linear understanding of temporality rooted in

a probability that is wholly dependent on the occurrence of past events. Muñoz draws instead

from a nonlinear, Deleuzian understanding of temporality, in which the past is not a guaranteed

determinant of the future. Muñoz explains, "I think of queerness as a temporal arrangement in

which the past is a field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a

new futurity."[5] Rather than confining the potential of the future to the tangible occurrences of the

past, Muñoz calls us to think beyond our current knowledge and understanding, reaching toward

a future that may not yet exist. Muñoz's assertion that "Queerness is not yet here" further

informs the quality of instability and uncertainty that is central to queerness^.[6] Queerness^ thus

foundationally follows the works of Cohen, Butler, and Muñoz, embracing the complexity of

queerness^ as an opaque, destructive-yet-productive force that is not yet here. Unconstrained by

a necessity for legibility, singularity, or staticity, queerness^ holds the power to fluctuate and

adapt over time; it will never have a true, fixed definition, but rather a set of evolving qualities.

The caret primarily serves to symbolically evoke the metaphor of the mathematical

exponent. "Queer" (or "queerness") serves as the exponential base, while the caret represents the

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[5] Muñoz, "Cruising Utopia," 16.
[6] Muñoz, "Cruising Utopia," 1.

undefined power to which "queer" is multiplied. The powerful, generative, yet unpredictable nature of queerness^ is thus most aptly represented by the indeterminate caret, rather than a defined or discreet number (for instance, queerness^2). The unfixed quality of the caret also speaks to queerness^'s irrationality. It cannot be easily defined or understood, nor does it have a permanent, fixed meaning. The caret acts as a momentary place-holder for what is to come—it points to a future evolution, a future iteration of the force of queerness^ that has yet to materialize. Queerness^ holds space for the future, refusing to fix itself in the ever-expanding past.

Secondarily, the caret alludes to queerness^'s abstract, ever-changing, and illegible character. In addition to serving as a stand-in for an unknown numerical power, the caret also, in a linguistic context, implies the presence of a word or character that was initially missing, and was noted above the original line of writing in retrospect, as a sort of addition or correction. The caret, examined in this context, hints at work left unfinished — it is not, and will never be, fully defined, stable, or static.

In an attempt to illustrate the raw, illegible, and unpredictable potentiality inherent to queerness^, I evoke a hypothetical analogy. A writer jots down notes on a piece of paper, but notices they've accidentally omitted a word upon reaching the end of a sentence. To remediate their error, they sketch a small caret between the two words that would bookend the missing term. Their hand lightly hovers above the caret as they consider their word choices, preparing to write. Queerness^ exists in this brief moment of hesitation, lingering, reflecting. During this minute pause, the writer holds the power to write *anything*. They may hold a (sub)conscious expectation or assumption of what is to be written, based on the context of the sentence surrounding the caret. But what if this expectation was subverted? The caret, and the space that it

holds, inherently creates a space for potentiality to thrive. I want to conceptualize queerness^ in this same way: the use of the caret indicates a forthcoming, the impending presence of a force or shift that is not yet known. Queerness^, with its caret pointing toward a blank space, thus also visually represents the radical, destabilizing potentialities that the neologism references.

Throughout this thesis, I apply queerness^ to my varying analyses of representations of aging women. The aging woman, as a subject that is multiply marginalized, shares the experience of systemic oppression with other queer^ subjects, as defined by Cohen. By evoking queerness^ in this context, I intend to point to the potential for coalitive power that lies in allyships between the aging woman and other marginalized subjects, and connects her to interlocking systems of oppression. These subjects, Othered and alienated by dominant, hegemonic logics, are unified by their exclusion. With age frequently left out of discussions of intersectionality, I aim to highlight the aging woman's potential contributions to a radical coalitive union. Regarding Muñoz's contributions to my understanding of queerness^, two out of the three films of focus eschew chronology and linearity to embrace an atypical, Deleuzian rendering of temporality. For these two films, the complex generative/destructive/radical potential of queerness^ is invoked, reflecting both the power of Cohen's coalitive work *and* the potential for disruption and liberation that lies in the destabilization of normative temporalities.

Once more, I want to recognize the variability inherent to these concepts. The meaning of queer^, for instance, may very well differ from the meaning of queerness^, as a result of the addition of the suffix. Each of the terms is yet to be fully understood or developed; even as I attempt to define them, they retain an opacity that augments their enigmatic quality. Thus, I introduce this neologism as a perpetual work in progress, and acknowledge the necessity of continued collaborative analysis, development, and reevaluation.

In the chapters following this introductory section, when denoted without the caret (as in queer or queerness), the term will refer to the construction of queerness as an identificatory label or category, rooted in non-heterosexual sexualities. Though the majority of my analyses center around queerness as a theoretical—rather than literal—concept, some films are embedded with a pertinent queer subtext, overtly feature queer subjects, or are simply the work of a queer filmmaker. To avoid confusion, and streamline my analytical process, I lay out these distinct definitions in advance.

Defining the "Grandmom-Com": Comedy and the Aging Woman in *80 for Brady*

The aging woman is at her most visible in the comedy, typically occupying supporting or secondary roles. But, this limited visibility comes with an expense: she is often written to embody reductive stereotypes or hyperbolize common cultural perceptions, providing comedic relief in a highly self-deprecating manner. Most often, she embodies the stereotypical white, cis-heterosexual grandmother: a sweet, nurturing figure, firmly dedicated to the overall wellness and happiness of her grandchildren (sometimes to the point of hyperbole). Thus, the loving, innocent grandmother is highly averse to any kind of normatively dangerous, risky, or deviant behaviors, often taking offense to drinking, drug use, and sex. She is excessively pure, sheltered, and prudish, her general naivety displayed through her illiteracy surrounding popular culture and the trends, phrases, and behaviors of younger generations. Yet, when an aging woman diverges from this saintly stereotype, her "inappropriate" behavior may also evoke humor—perhaps she wears garish makeup to create the illusion of youth, swears like a sailor, or confidently flirts with every younger man she sees. Dr. Susan Liddy, president of Women in Film and Television International and feminist screen industries scholar, expands on this use of humor to undercut the discomfort produced by a rejection of normative, culturally accepted behaviors, observing, "...comedy tends to be the genre in which older female characters are represented as sexually active and in leading roles, suggesting that mature female sexuality can be rendered more palatable when couched in comedic terms."[1] Though comedy allows for more flexibility in the characterization of aging women, her expressions of desire or sexuality are generally deemed inappropriate or misguided, as indicated by visible disgust or protest from other characters (most often those younger than her). These reactions, arising from a youthful perspective, as a form of

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[1] Liddy, "Older Women and Sexuality," 170.

punishment: Grandma is behind the times, so to speak, and must be shamed or embarrassed for her lack of cultural literacy.

Comedic representations of the aging woman may vary considerably depending on her unique identity and positionality. Race, in particular, strongly influences the ways in which women find themselves represented. Aging Black female characters, for instance, tend to be reprimanded much more harshly for any expressions of sexuality because of the lasting resonances of the racist "mammy" stereotype, which constructs older black women as asexual nurturing maternal figures.[2] The mammy appears today in characters like Tyler Perry's Madea,

Figure 2: Tyler Perry as Madea in *Madea's Family Reunion*

whose full-bodied physique, brightly colored muumuus, and exaggerated southern drawl manifest as contemporary symbols of maternity and spunk.[3] The elder Latina woman faces a different problem: she is excessively sexualized—even in her older age—as a result of pervasive stereotypes surrounding Latina hypersexuality.[4] Across these brief examples, hyperbole is critical to the construction of harmful archetypes: stereotyped traits and characteristics function as the defining qualities of what comprises an older woman.

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[2] Collins, "Mammies, Matriarchs," 72-74.
[3] Morse, "Madea Sensation," 336-337.
[4] Beltrán, "Crossing Over the Latina Body," 132.

Though Liddy's work speaks largely to these representations of sexuality, I argue that the figure of the aging woman is "rendered more palatable" *as a whole* when staunchly located in the realm of comedy. In this generic space, she is permitted to violate norms, expectations, and stereotypes, so long as her boundary-crossing behavior evokes comedic relief, and positions her as the embarrassing object of derision. In *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, Noël Carroll outlines the ideological purpose of comedy, explaining that "Humour…is primarily a source of social information about the norms that govern the cultures that we inhabit…Humour, and the comic amusement that attends it, alerts us to the relevant social norms and serves to reinforce them."[5] Whether through stereotype, caricature, or norm violation, comedy most often highlights the aging woman's aberrant behavior.

As a lead protagonist, the aging woman has recently found the most mainstream success and visibility in the subgenre of the romantic comedy. A pair of Nancy Meyers films provide two well-known examples: *Something's Gotta Give* (2003) and *It's Complicated* (2009). Both films explore a heterosexual romance in mid-to-later life, essentially reworking the form and style of the romantic comedy to suit an older demographic.[6] Though these films crucially extend the representational domain of the romantic comedy to be inclusive of older leads, rejecting dominant perceptions of asexuality in aging women,[7] they fail to diverge from the conventional mold of the romantic comedy, which almost always results in the leading woman relinquishing her independent, empowered lifestyle for a committed heterosexual relationship.[8] This disempowering formula largely limits the romantic comedy's potential for feminist readings,

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[5] Carroll, "Humour," 76.
[6] Lemish and Muhlbauer, "'Can't Have it All,'" 168.
[7] Liddy, "Older Women and Sexuality," 169.
[8] Mortimer, "The Heroine," 30.

constraining the leading woman—regardless of her age—to the role of a passive partner or housewife, trapped in the oppressive framework of heteropatriarchy.

Fifteen to twenty years after the release of Meyers' films, however, we can begin to observe a shift in the aging woman's representation in the romantic comedy (and its tangential offshoots). She is a strong, empowered protagonist, possessing personal dreams, desires, fears, and needs that pre-date her romantic relationship(s), and remain markedly separate from the desires of her love interest. Though romance is still present, it no longer dominates the narrative: it is instead relegated to subplots, side characters, or subtext. Romance is no longer the magical "fix" to all her life's problems. To more precisely label this distinct subcategory of this mature comedy hybrid, I introduce the term "grandmom-com." Rather than primarily structuring its narrative around an older woman's heterosexual romantic relationship, the grandmom-com uses a familiar blend of comedy and romantic comedy conventions to highlight homosocial relationships—most often among a group of women in their seventies or eighties—that are emotionally significant to the protagonist's life, personal goals, and narrative arc. This prioritization of friendship in later life reflects Sally Chivers' notion of "the seriatim self," which she borrows from philosopher Hilde Lindemann's term "living life seriatim."[9] Chivers describes the seriatim self as one who "may value a series of connections to other people rather than prizing the progress of life…"[10] This seriatim mindset renounces a model of living that positions mid-life career achievement as the crowning pinnacle of one's life, and later-life as an uneventful denouement,[11] challenging the capitalist logics that undergird dominant conceptions of living. Perhaps, the emergence of these friendship-focused grandmom-coms could point to a larger shift toward alternative film phenomenologies that diverge from labor-focused capitalist ideologies.

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[9] Chivers, "'Living Life Seriatim,'" 81.
[10] Chivers, "Living Life Seriatim," 81.
[11] Chivers, "Living Life Seriatim," 81.

In the grandmom-com, the leading protagonist, surrounded by her friend group, is typically contentedly single, divorced, widowed, or in a stable, unchanging relationship—her romantic life is not the central focus of her story. The woman is most often spurred into action by the sudden emergence of a strong desire to achieve a major dream or goal. This aspiration may be brand-new, or it may resemble a forgotten (or repressed) ambition from her adolescence or early adulthood. This desire might emerge after receiving a life-altering diagnosis, reaching a major life milestone, experiencing a significant shift in lifestyle or environment (for instance, moving into a retirement community), or, perhaps as a result of these life events, deep reflection regarding the ephemerality of life, and the inevitability of aging and death. Often, there is a desire to complete a goal or realize a dream *before it is too late*. Though the tone of such films is generally light, their narratives may be tinged with looming fears of death, aging, and loss. Aspiration, evoked by a fear of loss or incompletion, propels the protagonist forward. Surrounded and supported by a cohort of aging cis-women, she sets off to achieve her aspiration, and sometimes, happens to find romance along the way. Most often, however, the romantic subplot follows the love life of one of her close friends. This notable de-centering of romance as the protagonist's central desire affords her increased individual agency and allows for more complex explorations of the fears, desires, and ruminations that coalesce to form the psychological experience of aging. Despite this increased depth, these films retain the familiar formal elements associated with mainstream comedy/romantic comedy, including a linear three-act narrative, continuity editing, a lighthearted tone, and—perhaps most importantly—a happy ending.

A collection of recent comedy films, released within the last ten years, reflect this divergence from the conventional form of the romantic comedy. However, it must be noted that

the vast majority of these films are, like most mainstream rom-coms, overwhelmingly white, cis-heterosexual, and upper-middle class. *Book Club* (Bill Holderman, 2018) and *Book Club: The Next Chapter* (Bill Holderman, 2023), *Moving On* (Paul Weitz, 2023), *Poms* (Zara Hayes, 2019), and *Wild Oats* (Andy Tennant, 2016) each prioritize and uplift platonic bonds within the narrative. Though each of these films uniquely contends with romance, none subjugate the central friendship(s) to a romantic connection. Despite the lighthearted nature of these comedies, the protagonists still possess the emotional depth to grapple with heavier concerns surrounding aging, sickness, widowhood, loss, regret, and mortality. By decentering the conventional heterosexual romance, amplifying the individual agency of the aging woman, and maintaining a narrative structure and form that is comprehensible, accessible, and familiar to mainstream viewers, the grandmom-com bends the boundaries of the classic comedy to produce representations that gently challenge dominant conceptions of mature womanhood.

For the purpose of brevity, I will narrow my focus to an analysis of *80 for Brady* (Kyle Marvin, 2023), which, though far from revolutionary, I believe is the most potent iteration of the grandmom-com as of yet, in its embrace of a seriatim lifestyle and a semi-reflexive comedic approach. The film embraces standard narrative and formal conventions, assuming the appearance of a typical mainstream comedy, but ultimately attempts to reject dominant forms of humor rooted in ageism and misogyny. *80 for Brady* follows the story of four best friends—each of them women in their 70s or 80s—as they try to make it to Super Bowl LI (2017) to cheer on the New England Patriots, and their favorite player, Tom Brady. The film is notably inspired by a true story, but its plot and character archetypes are heavily fictionalized. Lou (Lily Tomlin), described by her friends as the "quarterback of the group," first started watching Patriots games while undergoing intensive chemotherapy to treat cancer. Fifteen years and four Super Bowl

wins later, Lou is healthy, and the women still gather weekly to watch the games. Lou, deeply inspired by Brady's underdog story, is the superfan of the group: her mantle is adorned with a variety of Brady bobbleheads and memorabilia, and she fervently advocates for the group's adventure to the big game. Motivating this urgency is also her looming fear of a cancer recurrence. At the beginning of the film, Lou ignores multiple calls from her doctors regarding recent blood test results. Assuming the results will deliver bad news, she avoids checking them until after the Super Bowl; she fears they "could ruin this for everyone." The results ultimately come back negative, ensuring a clean bill of health for Lou, but the uncertainty she feels amidst her trip of a lifetime drives much of her action throughout the film.

Lou's deep care for her friends—and, reciprocally, their love and concern for each other—lies at the heart of the narrative. Though Lou's motivations foundationally drive the narrative, the film's leading cast functions as an ensemble: each woman has distinct quirks, and undergoes a unique journey of personal growth amid the larger, friendship-focused narrative arc. Trish (Jane Fonda), Lou's closest friend, is bubbly and vivacious. Her ever-rotating medley of fashionable outfits, carefully contoured makeup looks, and perfectly coiffed hairstyles distinguish her from her larger friend group, and challenge depictions of the older woman rooted in frumpiness. Trish's vivid persona, however, has made it incredibly different for her to find genuine romantic connections. Trish finds herself bouncing between short-lived romantic flings and longs for a fulfilling romantic connection stemming from more than just a superficial interest in her appearance. Constantly dreaming of finding love, she's found success writing Patriots fan fiction (referred to by Betty as "Gronk erotica"), using Patriots tight end Rob Gronkowski as her muse. After hitting it off with former NFL player Dan O'Callahan at the Super Bowl, Trish

expresses her concerns over "moving too quickly," which Dan alleviates, breaking the cycle of her dysfunctional relationships.

Maura (Rita Moreno) is spunky, sassy, and spry. Her antics throughout the film—whether it be playing celebrity poker with Guy Fieri and Marshawn Lynch or her attempt to barrel past a security guard nearly twice her height—cement her as the film's comedic lead. Maura's playfulness masks her continuing grief as a result of the death of her longtime husband, Francisco. Still processing her heartbreak a year after his passing, Maura struggles to navigate her life as a single woman. Despite no longer wanting to live in a retirement home, Maura remains in the facility selected by her late husband, perhaps in an attempt to hold onto his memory. Over the course of the film, Maura forms a strong bond with a fellow resident and widower, Mickey (Glynn Turman), and begins to find joy in life once again. Toward the end of the film, Maura tells Mickey she is moving back home—but he is welcome to visit her any time he likes.

Finally, Betty (Sally Field) is hailed as the "responsible" friend: she thinks deeply and sensibly, and is incredibly smart, analytical, and reliable. Recently retired from her lifelong career as a math professor at MIT, she longs to take a break from the stress of academia. Her husband, Mark, still working as a professor, relies on her heavily for help with his research and writing. Lacking confidence in himself, he constantly needs reassurance from Betty, which drains her mentally and emotionally. All Betty wants is to find herself again and, on her journey to the Super Bowl, she finally prioritizes her own wants and needs, rather than her husband's. Shortly before the game begins, Mark calls to ask if Betty has read the latest draft of his paper. Betty finally has the confidence to explain that though his work may be the most important thing to *him*, it is not so important to her. She explains, "I'm just saying just because I can solve a

problem does not mean I should have to." Mark recognizes his mistake and apologizes, and

Betty finds a harmonious balance between her personal and home lives.

Immediately after the initial introduction to Lou, Trish, Maura, and Betty, *80 for Brady* attempts to connect with its desired audience through a 70s-styled opening credit sequence, set to the 1981 hit "Get Down On It" by Kool & The Gang. The early invocation of a 1970s visual and aural aesthetic specifically targets women aged 60 or older, who would have experienced their early adulthood in the 70s and 80s, and likely have fond memories attached to the popular songs
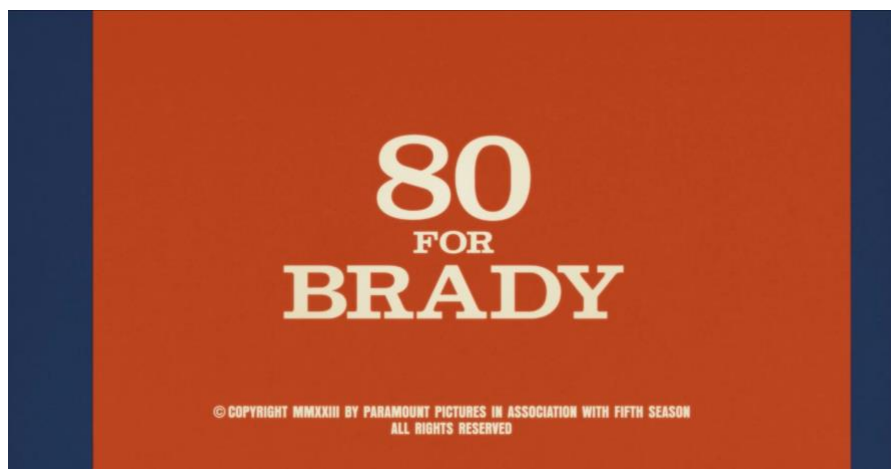
Figure 3: 70s-styled *80 for Brady* title card

of the time. Throughout the rest of the film, additional disco and rock tracks from the late 70s and early 80s are featured, including "It's My House" by Diana Ross and "The Warrior" by Scandal (ft. Patty Smyth). An original song, titled "Gonna Be You," was also written for the film, and performed by Dolly Parton, Belinda Carlisle, Cyndi Lauper, Gloria Estefan, and Debbie Harry, all of whom are in their 60s, 70s, or 80s. A music video accompanying the song features clips from *80 for Brady* alongside shots of Parton, Carlisle, Lauper, Estefan, and Harry wearing matching bedazzled Brady jerseys. As a marketing material, this video also strives to attract an older female audience familiar with the popular culture of the 70s and 80s.

The duo of Fonda and Tomlin, in particular, strongly correlates with an aging female demographic: *80 for Brady* is just one of several film and television collaborations between them. The pair have also starred alongside Dolly Parton in the feminist workplace comedy *9 to 5* (Colin Higgins, 1980), comedically addressed the realities of aging in *Grace and Frankie* (Marta Kauffman and Howard J. Morris, 2015-2022), and repaired a long-frayed friendship in *Moving On*. Through these recurring co-starring roles, and their decades-long, off-screen friendship, Tomlin and Fonda have developed a rapport that attracts audiences—particularly those who have grown up alongside them since the early 1980s.[12] Sally Field and Rita Moreno complete the group, drawing in audiences that may be familiar with Field's work in *Steel Magnolias*[13] and *Norma Rae*, and Rita Moreno's[14] in *West Side Story* and *Singin' in the Rain*.

In the film's first scene, after the Patriots successfully advance to the Super Bowl, the women see an advertisement for a local contest to win free Super Bowl tickets. Whichever Patriots fan calls in to a local radio show with the best backstory to their fandom will win four free tickets to the game. Lou, invigorated by the opportunity to realize her dream of attending the Super Bowl, ardently convinces her friends to enter the competition, insisting that they all "experience a Super Bowl, because this might be [their] last chance." Trish sarcastically retorts, "God, that's morbid," to which Maura frankly replies, "Well, we work with what we've got." This brief exchange exemplifies the tone of the humor present throughout the film. Blending bluntness and honesty with an appeal to relatable humor, the joke recognizes that the women are aging, but does not use their age *as* the crux of the joke. Rather, the complexity embedded into the exchange is acknowledged: only superficially masked by the humor of the moment, Lou,

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[12] Jerslev, "'A real show,'" 188; 192-193
[13] Dolly Parton also appeared in *Steel Magnolias* alongside Sally Field.
[14] Interestingly, Moreno starred as Violet Newstead in the television spinoff of *9 to 5* (Micheal S. Baser and Kim Weiskopf, 1982-3), filling the role held by Tomlin in the original film.

Trish, and Maura's remarks hint at deeper fears of death and loss, particularly pertinent to an elder audience. Throughout the film, the style of humor continues to be age-specific, but not discriminatory or disparaging.

As aforementioned, humor has traditionally served to highlight aversions from cultural norms. When applied to films centering aging women, their visible divergence from youth's cultural values, symbols, and indicators may be discomforting to younger characters, causing the women (and their "inappropriate" behaviors) to become the Othered subjects of mean-spirited ridicule. Carroll outlines the function of comedy as a mechanism of Othering:

> Humour, in short, is involved in the construction (or, more aptly, the permanent reconstruction) and maintenance of what we might call an *Us*—the *us* that abides by the pertinent norms. But where there is an *us*, there is typically also a *Them*, against whom the rest of us define ourselves.[15]

Humor may be weaponized to establish and reinforce difference and distance. In a normative comedy, younger characters, in unison with a general audience, laugh at the gaffes of the older woman. Thus, the aging woman's position as a figure located in opposition to youth culture has placed her in a vulnerable position in mainstream comedy, in which she repeatedly faces the threats of marginalization and Otherness. In normative comedies, through this Othering process, the aging woman becomes the "*Them*" against whom the audience comes to define itself. When films intentionally target themselves toward an aging female audience, the frequency and severity of this Othering is reduced. Such films may encourage their geriatric audiences to laugh along *with* the aged characters, rather than *at* them. Rather than contribute to the pathologization of aging by denigrating its visible signs and symptoms (such as wrinkles, decreased mobility and ability, or grey hair)[16], *80 for Brady*, cognizant of its audience, moves in a different comedic direction, which attempts to embrace, rather than reject, the qualities of its aged audience.

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[15] Carroll, "Humour," 77.
[16] Dolan, "Smoothing the Wrinkles," 3-4.

The film initially demonstrates this shift in comedic strategy when the women attend the NFL Experience the day before the Super Bowl, Lou decides to try her luck at a football-throwing competition. As Lou prepares to enter the contest, a young, male Falcons fan remarks, "Oh–I thought you were waiting on your grandson." Lou takes his jab in stride, assuring him that "Nope, [she's] here to play." Right before the two compete head-to-head, the fan snidely says, "Well, good luck Nana, I don't want you to break anything." Yet, embracing reflexivity once again, the film spins his ageist (and perhaps misogynistic) assumptions against him. The Falcons fan throws the ball as hard as he can, but fails to have the accuracy needed to hit the targets. Lou, though not as strong, is far more accurate, and easily wins the competition's top prize: a Brady jersey. This scene serves to set up common, ageist assumptions about ability, then tear them down, as Lou uses her perceived "weaknesses" (i.e. a lack of arm strength) to subvert the expectations of her overconfident opponent. During this sequence, close-ups of Lou's determined expressions encourage spectatorial identification. Formally and comedically, we are encouraged to align with Lou's perspective.

Lou's victory becomes even more representationally significant when considering the hypermasculine quality of her surroundings. Filled with physical football challenges, the NFL Experience implicitly praises the power of the young, strong—and thus, masculine—body. Yet, in the throwing competition, the Falcons fan's raw strength fails to defeat Lou's precision. The comedy of this moment thus results from the embarrassment of the Falcons fan, rather than from Lou's anticipated failure. Maura, relentlessly heckling the fan, further humiliates him, punishing him for underestimating Lou. In a more normative comedy, this type of sequence might be spun to reinforce a style of humor that effectively Others Lou, and reinforces the stereotypical assumptions of the overconfident fan. But, in this instance, Lou's football-throwing skills and

Maura's comedic jeers subvert expectations of how a woman of their age—a "Nana," as the Falcons fan suggests—would behave. This scene exemplifies the film's approach to humor: the normative assumptions held by the supporting diegetic characters are challenged, resulting in their humiliation as their biases are exposed and undercut. Lou powerfully subverts expectations during the contest, easily defeating the Falcons fan. As a punishment, she forces him to swap his Falcons attire for a Brady jersey. Later, the film briefly cuts back to the competition, where Lou

Figure 4: Lou participates in the throwing competition as Maura counts her winnings continues to dominate. Another young, male Falcons fan reluctantly tosses his jersey into a growing pile of Falcons apparel. Maura celebrates, holding a large stack of cash—her well-earned payout from betting on Lou.

Soon after Lou's victory, Betty easily wins a hot wings challenge, hosted by celebrity chef Guy Fieri. Betty's competitors are almost entirely young men, again highlighting her divergence from a largely hypermasculine environment. A series of close-up shots depict young male contestants struggling to handle the heat of the wings, dousing themselves in water and milk to ease the pain of the intense spice. These shots are comically juxtaposed with close-ups of Betty effortlessly devouring the wings—her superiority is clearly established both visually and dialogically. After she wins the competition, Guy asks about her spice tolerance, and she replies

frankly, "Unless it has extreme flavor I can't taste anything anymore." Combining the honest, age-specific humor from the film's introductory scene and the repeated subversion of normative assumptions in the male-dominated space of football fandom, the film cements its comedic style, ensuring its aged audience that they are being laughed *with*, not *at*. Betty's loss of taste, as another symptom of aging widely considered to be negative, is employed as if it is a superpower; a unique and impressive ability that distinguishes her from the rest of the more conventional competitors. Agedness is still an exception in the diegetic world, but not always a poor one: rather, its unique symptoms, at times, endow the central characters with the agency to challenge assumptions and expectations rooted in normative ageist logics.

Both the women and the characters who surround them possess an acute, semi-reflexive knowledge of the ways in which age and ageism affect the women's thoughts, beliefs, and experiences. When the women arrive at a star-studded party the night before the Super Bowl, Betty asks her friends, "Are we gonna be the oldest people here?" Trish replies, "Betty, don't reinforce stereotypes." This overt recognition of a common cultural stereotype directly engages with the ageism that is so commonly ingrained into the subtext of mainstream cinema. Through exchanges like this, the film challenges internalized assumptions held by both its characters and its potential audiences. Later on in the night, Maura, feeling the effects of three high-dosage edibles gifted to her by a young partygoer, stumbles into a lavish game room, in which Guy Fieri—and several other celebrities—are playing charity poker. Maura joins their game and quickly befriends Gugu (Billy Porter), a famous choreographer who coordinated the upcoming Super Bowl's halftime performance. Thanks to her expert gambling skills, Maura easily wins the match and donates her winnings to Gugu's charity of choice. This friendship between Gugu and Maura is what ultimately allows the four women to make it into the Super Bowl: after attempting

to enter the game with Lou's tickets, the women are devastated to find out that Lou was scammed and the tickets are invalid. As they desperately attempt to get into the game, Gugu arrives with his dancers for the halftime show. Recognizing Maura, he invites the women to pose as his dancers so they can sneak into the game with him. When Lou, Trish, Maura, and Betty try to enter with Gugu and his dancers—all of whom are noticeably younger than the women—a security guard remarks that "they don't look like dancers," to which Gugu replies, "Well that's ageist. Isn't it?" After a short but spirited dance performance, the security guard allows them to enter the game. Gugu's comment again represents the film's uncommon, almost meta-awareness of the ageist logics that are firmly rooted within the history of film and broader society. The utterance of "ageism," alone, particularly in a film of this scale and in this genre, far surpasses the reflexivity found in most early iterations of the mature female comedy. Thus, these comedic moments function almost as a form of social commentary, subtly referencing preceding cultural failures to recognize or considerably address issues of ageism and misogyny in representations of older women.

Within this highly conventional form and framework of the contemporary comedy, *80 for Brady* periodically opts for a comedic approach rooted in unreality, hinting at the potentialities that may emerge when the current (oppressive) conditions of reality are rejected or confronted. Shortly after Lou hears about the contest to win free Super Bowl tickets, she gazes at her lineup of Tom Brady bobbleheads, and rhetorically asks, "Oh, what do I do, Tom? What do I do?" The bobblehead, with a sly wink, whispers "Let's go." Fearing she has no chance to win the contest, Lou decides in the moment to sell her car, and use the money to buy tickets herself. Later, when Lou prepares for the football-throwing competition, Brady speaks to her through a nearby television monitor to give her some tips. This odd, psychic connection between the pair becomes

increasingly important as the film progresses. In the third quarter of the Super Bowl, when the Patriots are down 25 points to the Falcons, the women decide to take action. As they sneak into the team coordinators' box, Betty insists that the defensive coordinator call for "Cover 1," citing her deep statistical understanding of defensive plays. After the call results in a successful sack, the coordinator asks Betty for more help, while Lou gets on the offensive coordinator's headset to speak directly to Brady. Brady gazes up to Lou in the coordinators' box as she tells him about her battle with cancer, and the inspiration that Brady and the Patriots have provided her with for over fifteen years. In turn, she provides him with some much-needed inspiration, insisting, "You're Tom Brady. You have to come back. That's what you do best…you fight and you never give up. So I'm not giving up either…Now go out there and win." Brady, roused by Lou's speech, nods firmly, then fires up his teammates on the sideline. An action-packed montage, composed of archival footage from Super Bowl LI and punctuated with close-ups of the women's elated celebrations, demonstrates the Patriots' miraculous comeback and eventual victory over the Falcons in overtime. After the game-winning touchdown, the women jump and yell with excitement, and Betty exclaims, "Lou, you did it!", to which she responds, "No, *we* did it!" This moment illustrates the strength of the friendship between the women, as well as the growth (both individual and interpersonal) that they have all undergone throughout their journey. Together, despite a slew of hardships and obstacles, they achieved their dream of watching the Patriots win another Super Bowl.

After taking a moment to relish in the confetti-filled post-game celebrations, the women are led by a security guard to the locker room, where Lou shares an emotional moment with Tom Brady. He praises her toughness and resilience, earnestly thanking her for sharing her inspiring story. This exchange adds an unexpected element of reciprocity to their dynamic, challenging the

presumed power dynamic between Brady, a superstar football player, and Lou, a regular Patriots fan. Brady's words further empower Lou, highlighting her strength and elevating her agential importance within the greater diegetic world. With Lou's pep-talk and Betty's expert play-calling implied to be the motivating factors behind the Patriots' late-game comeback, the women, through an unexpected fictional twist on the miraculous real-life comeback, possess a heightened sense of agency and empowerment. In this alternate, fictitious rendering of events, the Patriots could not have won the Super Bowl without the help of some of their most dedicated, but also unassuming fans: four women in their 70s, 80s, and 90s. Considering the traditionally hypermasculine environment of football viewership, this implication carries strong representational significance. In *80 for Brady*'s diegetic world, aging women are integral to an iconic moment in football history. This recognition starkly contrasts with the typical conditions of invisibility and obscurity that shroud older women in cinema and society. *80 for Brady*, in this sense, is in disjunction with reality in a way that is powerfully illustrative of the potentiality for another world, which disrupts the sexist and ageist logics that undergird society (and more pointedly, sports fandom).

Despite this embrace of an alternate representational reality, *80 for Brady* ultimately fails to substantially dislodge the entrenched hegemonic logics that dictate both the fictional and actual social worlds. Although in this diegetic world, it is normal for older women to easily win football-throwing contests, effortlessly devour the world's spiciest hot wings, write massively popular fan fiction novellas, and endlessly win big on sports bets and gambling, beyond the rejection of common norms surrounding the behavior of aging women, the film does not more deeply interrogate the complex, overlapping ideologies that surround the representation of these women in the cinematic medium. The film may be uniquely reflexively in its approach to

comedy, but, it blatantly fails to address the adjacent and overlapping representational issues dependent on a subject's race and/or ethnicity.

As mentioned at the start of this chapter, *80 for Brady*, like the vast majority of comedies starring older women, is overwhelmingly white; though it attempts to resist ageist and misogynist undercurrents in its use of humor, it fails to substantively challenge any of the number of oppressive forces or logics that intersect with these identities. Three out of the four leading women are white, and all of them are cisgender, heterosexual, and upper-middle class. Maura is the only non-white lead, yet the viewer is given no insight into how her experience of the diegetic world may differ from that of Lou, Trish, and Betty. The film does not reflect the additional complexities that differences in race and ethnicity contribute to the process of aging as a woman. Moreno's ethnicity is almost entirely overlooked: other than a brief mention of Maura's last name (Martinez) the film does not acknowledge her identity as an aging woman of color, nor as a Latina. Unfortunately, the film squanders the opportunity to explore the complexities of aging at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities. Instead, Lou, Trish, and Betty's characters, paired with Maura's questionable characterization, simply reinforce and uphold images of normative whiteness.

Maura's raunchy behavior and sassy, sarcastic attitude classically align her with the role of the group's comedic lead, but also with harmful, racialized stereotypes rooted in misconceptions of Latina hypersexuality. Out of all of the women, she is the most eager to participate in illicit activities like gambling and sports betting, and is consistently shown flirting with much younger men. This flirtatious behavior is quite surprising, considering her intense grief over the loss of her late husband, which the viewer learns of as soon as they are introduced to her. Gradually, as Maura and Mickey grow closer, she becomes more capable of navigating the

difficulties of grief and spousal loss. Yet, the strength of her new connection with Mickey, paired with the intensity of her enduring grief, makes one wonder: why would she suddenly become flirtatious on the Super Bowl trip? Why is she, a mourning widow, the woman to most explicitly express her romantic and sexual desires, even though her grief is demonstrated to be a significant struggle in her personal life? In the film's opening scene, Trish's mention of a past divorce causes Maura to break down and cry, because she thinks of Francisco. What happens to this overwhelming emotion once Maura and the women set off on their journey? In a brief conversation with Lou the night they arrive in Houston, Maura expresses how much she misses her husband. Yet, after this point, any mentions of Francisco become much more scarce.

Once Maura enters this new mindset of flirtation, her raunchy behavior is played for comedic effect; she effectively falls into what I call the stereotype of the "naughty nana." The naughty nana is an older woman whose overt expressions of desire and sexuality, or other socially "inappropriate" behaviors, are exploited as a source of humor. The naughty nana essentially exemplifies the norm-reinforcing, Othering function of comedy that Carroll outlines; when an older woman fails to "act her age," her behaviors are hyperbolized and played for comedic effect. This form of comedic embarrassment, as Carroll explains, positions the older woman as the aberrant Other against whom the audience can compare themselves. Within the diegetic world, Maura also becomes the Other against which Lou, Betty, and Trish—and their whiteness—can be compared. Maura's characterization merely reinforces the highly problematic stereotype of the fiery, hypersexual Latina.[17] Though Trish is known for her short-lived romantic flings, she does not openly express desire or lust in the same way as Maura. During an early conversation with Lou, Trish expresses her desire for a true, deep love, and articulates her frustration with surface-level flirtation that fails to move in the direction of serious commitment.

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[17] Beltrán, "Crossing Over the Latina Body," 132.

Betty also comments on Trish's reputation for "fall[ing] in love faster than any other human on Earth." Trish's romantic desires are repeatedly associated with *love*, while Maura's flirtations (outside of her relationship with Mickey) simply reflect *lust*. For instance, Maura's brief interaction with Edelman in the locker room is hyperbolically sensual—gazing into his eyes, she slowly caresses his beard, and whispers, "I want to shave you." Edelman responds with an

Figure 5: Maura flirts with Julian Edelman

awkward "Yeah," which ends their interaction. Perhaps, this moment—and her other moments of flirtation—are intended to show a shift in Maura's ability to come to terms with her grief. However, the ambiguity of her desire and motivations muddles her characterization, reducing what could be a significant personal arc to an exaggerated expression of later-life sexuality.

Maura's constant proximity to (and yet Lou, Trish, and Betty's simultaneous distance from) other characters of color must also be addressed. In an early scene, Maura somberly gazes at a photo of her with her late husband, who appears to be a man of color. This would not be so uncommon if any of the other women were in interracial relationships, or had flings with characters that were not white. However, Maura is repeatedly the only woman shown to express romantic interest in non-white men. Her romantic relationship with Mickey, a Black man, begins

to establish a repeating pattern—unlike her white friends, she does not seem to date white men. Maura's friendship with Gugu further contributes to this strange pattern. Though Lou, Trish, and Betty also know Francisco, Mickey, and Gugu, any interactions with them are a direct result of their relationship with Maura. Maura acts as a sort of mediator between the three white women and the supporting cast of characters of color that they peripherally interact with. Essentially, Maura is almost segmented from the rest of the group, despite the relative erasure of Moreno's identity as a Puerto Rican woman. Even though Maura's ethnicity is wholly ignored by the film's text, her scripted actions and behaviors still implicitly reproduce harmful, racialized stereotypes.

The selection of Patriots players featured in the post-game celebrations further reflects the film's subtextual adulation of normative whiteness. Tom Brady, Julian Edelman, Rob Gronkowski, and Danny Amendola—all of whom are white men—appear in the locker room at the end of the film. Yet, the Patriots' star running back James White, a Black man, is absent from the film, despite his impressive three-touchdown performance, and his game-winning touchdown in overtime. Star linebacker Dont'a Hightower, also a Black man, is absent as well, despite having recorded several pivotal plays, including a late-game strip-sack against the Falcons offense that set up a crucial score for the Patriots.[18] White and Hightower's highlights were heavily featured in the film's montage of archival game footage, and yet, both players are entirely missing from the post-game narrative. This recurrent thread of exclusion and separation, paired with the problematic, superficial nature of Maura's representation, highlights the overall failure of the film to substantively create and cultivate intentional, inclusive representation. A clear progression in representation from earlier iterations of the aging female comedy can be identified, but the film fails to meaningfully represent overlapping facets of marginalized identity beyond the simple intersection of gender and age.

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[18] New England Patriots, "Super Bowl LI."

Although *80 for Brady* falls short of a truly revolutionary or liberatory shift away from the oppressive norms and logics that closely follow aging female representation, its attempt to implement a meta-reflexive style of anti-ageist comedy indicates a significant shift in the language and ideology of the mainstream. The film was created with an aged audience in mind, and its humor largely reflects that. Rather than insulting, embarrassing, and Othering the leading women, the film subverts expectations, instead critiquing the oppressive expressions of masculinity that perpetually surround them. However, Maura is not afforded this same privilege: her over-the-top, frisky behavior serves as the primary exception to the film's rejection of normatively Othering humor. As encouraging as it may seem, the type of narrative empowerment highlighted in *80 for Brady* must be extended fairly to *all* kinds of aging women in order to substantially displace the overarching systems and ideologies that perpetuate interconnecting elements of hegemonic oppression. True liberation is not achieved unless all marginalized subjects are free from systemic and representational oppression. Placing aging women at the center of comedic fiction is essential, but beyond simply pandering to an older audience, filmmakers must move beyond the same white, cis-heterosexual, upper/middle-class narratives that fail to comprehensively address the overlapping ramifications of aging and ageism on interlocking facets of an older woman's identity. *80 for Brady* is a rarity in that it centers most of its narrative around platonic love and personal growth. What might it look like to apply this same uncommon spotlight of empowerment to films with a more representative ensemble of women? How effective is the conventional mainstream comedy in interrogating and destabilizing hegemonic norms? Though the comedy is traditionally intended to be entertainment for the spectator, recent films, such as *Barbie*, have worked to combine humor with a soft ideological critique. Should this more reflexive approach to comedy become more common within the

subgenre of the grandmom-com, it may provide a crucial opportunity to educate and inform mainstream audiences about the harms of representational ageism, especially when entwined with multiply-marginalized subject positions.

Aging, Abjection, and Atemporality in *She Will*

Within (and adjacent to) the horror genre, the older woman has long embodied the figure of the evil, monstrous outcast. Classic horror villains, such as the witch and hag, find their roots in the physical appearance of an aged woman: bony, gray-haired, and deeply wrinkled, they teeter on the verge of death, hyperbolically illustrative of the physical symptoms of aging. Crooked or missing teeth, a conspicuously protruding nose, large warts, and a thin, bony frame are foundational physical attributes of the elderly female witch. This heavily exaggerated representation of an aged appearance blatantly contrasts with youthful, normative beauty standards. Across a wider array of film genres, when aging women are (rarely) afforded significant cinematic representation, they are often held to a standard of "successful aging," which Josephine Dolan, borrowing the term from discourses of cultural gerontology, describes as a naturalized, hegemonic discourse that mandates that the aging body be physically fit, the mind be sharp and "young," and, for women, the face and body to be "youthif[ied]" and wrinkle-free.[1] Successful aging constructs older age as a mere extension of youth, rather than a distinct life stage. For aging women especially, beauty and femininity are equated with youthfulness; thus, women must maintain an ageless appearance (most often aided by cosmetic procedures) in order to remain visible, desirable, and comprehensible to the male gaze. Dolan later identifies the body of the aging woman star as a symbol imbued with the "cultural anxieties" surrounding aging, the deterioration of physical and mental ability, and death.[2] This invocation of repressed societal anxieties reflects the primary function of the abject and the Other in horror cinema.

Drawing from Julia Kristeva's work with abjection and femininity in the horror genre, Barbara Creed outlines the figure of the monstrous feminine as a site of border-crossing and

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[1] Dolan, "Smoothing the Wrinkles," 3-4.
[2] Dolan, "Smoothing the Wrinkles," 7.

abjection, alongside the human corpse and bodily wastes. Creed argues that horror films deliberately orchestrate encounters with the abject to symbolically confront, then later eject, the abject and the anxieties that it symbolizes, effectively "redraw[ing] the boundaries between the human and nonhuman."[3] Abjection, according to Kristeva, is a disruptive force, which, not unlike queerness^, holds the power to disturb "identity, system, [and] order."[4] Thus, there is a radical power that lies in the abject. Constructions of femininity as monstrous and horror-inducing may be rejected—or harnessed—to challenge systems and logics that denigrate the natural processes of aging.

Dolan's work with successful aging, like Creed's discussions of abjection and the monstrous feminine, also brings the spectator (or society, more broadly) into a confrontation with repressed fears about aging, illness, and mortality. Physical signs of aging (wrinkles, gray hair, etc.) are symbolic of the degradation of the human body, and the anxieties surrounding death and mortality that inextricably arrive with it. The older female subject, much like the abject, conventionally exists to be feared, confronted, and then dismissed. When an older woman fails to age "successfully," or refuses to conform to youthful standards of normative beauty, she risks such a symbolic "ejection," slipping out of public acclaim and into invisibility and obsolescence. Once a woman is no longer conventionally attractive or desirable to the masculine look, she may face public ridicule for displaying visible signs of aging, or become entirely invisible.[5] Within Dolan's framework of successful aging, these signifiers of age mark the Otherness, monstrosity, and abjection associated with aging womanhood, and its close proximity to death. These symbolic, looming anxieties align the aging female star with the monstrous villain; she is to be feared, not identified with. Thus, despite the prevalence of archetypes such as Final Girl within

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[3] Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous Feminine," 48.
[4] Kristeva, "Powers of Horror," 4.
[5] Dolan, "Smoothing the Wrinkles," 8.

the horror genre, the older woman rarely finds herself in a central position of heroism.[6] A few

exceptions to this pattern of representation still exist, however. For instance, one can trace the

filmic evolution of Laurie Strode over nearly fifty years, from teenaged Final Girl in *Halloween*

to heroic grandmother in *Halloween Ends*. Aside from the well-known *Halloween* sequels, a

small collection of independent horror films centered around aging women (or issues of age and

aging) has emerged, eschewing the youthful bend of the typical horror narrative and its Final Girl

archetype. A few notable, recent examples include *Relic*, *The Manor*, and *Winchester*, all of

which highlight older women as leads or co-leads, and originate from independent studios.

For this chapter, I narrow my focus to *She Will* (Charlotte Colbert, 2022), arguably the

most thematically and formally subversive of this handful of independent films. *She Will* follows

Veronica Ghent, an aging film actress who, while recovering from a double mastectomy at a

remote forest retreat, must reckon with the traumas of being abused and groomed as a young

child actor. The narrative heavily favors Veronica's subjectivity, placing emphasis on her

recurrent flashbacks and recollections of her abuse. Simultaneously, she processes the physical

and psychological ramifications of her mastectomy, as she grapples with her performances and

projections of femininity and womanhood. The female body is explored as both a site of

abjection and empowerment as Veronica adapts to her new appearance. Over the course of the

film, nonlinear conceptions of time, paired with dream-like aesthetics, blur the boundaries that

divide Veronica's imagination from reality, and past from present, disrupting the conventional,

chronological flow of time and empowering Veronica to move through space and time at will,

unbound by the usual laws of physical and temporal continuity.

Returning to Sally Chivers' work on the seriatim self, this rejection of a relentless, linear

chronology destabilizes the dominant, structuring power of chrononormativity, which, as

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[6] Dolan, "Smoothing the Wrinkles," 8.

described by Elizabeth Freeman, uses time to "organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity."[7] The aging woman, as a post-reproductive subject, has thus lost her chrononormative value in a progenitive sense. She may also be a retiree, at which point she ceases to contribute physical labor to a broader capitalist culture of productivity. Veronica's mainstream marketability (or lack thereof) as an older actress also renders her a relatively unfruitful subject, resistant to the chrononormative push toward perpetual productivity. Rather than prioritize this material productivity, a seriatim lifestyle—with its emphasis on friendship and interpersonal connection—threatens the logics of capitalism that underlie oppressive systems.[8] Though Chivers focuses specifically on friendships between older women, her exploration of later-life friendship also applies to the emotional bond formed between Veronica and Desi, her young caretaker. Veronica, as an older woman, and Desi, as an androgynous Black woman, find themselves outside of dominant constructions of normativity and thus are more vulnerable to Othering, exclusion, and systemic harm. In this sense, they are both queer^ subjects—unified by their marginalization, they find strength and power in their relationship with each other. Embracing the destabilizing queer^ power that is inherent to atemporality, abjection, and coalitive allyship, *She Will* ultimately empowers its aging female protagonist, affording her the rare agency to reckon with her traumas, overpower her abuser, and ultimately break free from the normative systems and cycles of oppression that previously bound her to an existence mired in invisibility and obsolescence.

Veronica's identity as an older actress immediately positions her within Dolan's framework of successful aging—and, more broadly, as a queer^ subject—as she quickly realizes she is on the cusp of abjection and invisibility. In the film's opening sequence, a montage of

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[7] Freeman, "Introduction: Queer and Not Now," 3.
[8] Chivers, "Living Life Seriatim," 81-82.

abstracted close-ups of a surgery introduces the viewer to Veronica and her visual perspective. The montage opens with an extreme close-up of Veronica's eye, illuminated by bright, overhead surgical lights. As her eye darts around frantically, a heavily blurred, almost kaleidoscopic shot of the lights mimics her optical point of view. The clatter of surgical tools and steady beeps of vital monitors create an immersive soundscape that further links the viewer to Veronica's subjectivity. Intercut with these images of surgery are extreme close-ups—also heavily blurred or obscured at times—of Veronica carefully applying mascara, lipstick, and blush.

Much warmer in tone than the sterile blue-green cast of the operating room, these shots closely resemble the clichéd cinematic beauty routine montage, which typically highlights a (young) woman's most conventionally feminine features through visual fragmentation. As a woman applies makeup or carries out her daily beauty routine, the camera follows her actions in close-up or extreme close-up, focusing particularly on her eyes and lips. Such a sequence, employed in films like *13 Going on 30* and *The Devil Wears Prada*, might include close-ups on glossy lips, mascara-coated eyelashes, or sharply applied eyeliner. In *She Will*, the decision to intercut the warm beauty shots with the cold surgical room creates an opening beauty montage that is highly reflexive and unconventional. Though Veronica's surgery is shortly revealed to be a double mastectomy—rather than a cosmetic procedure—the visual associations between surgery and cosmetic enhancement initially imply Veronica's adoption of anti-aging measures to preserve a youthful appearance. Most notably, shots of a scalpel slicing open skin and drawing blood are visually paralleled with Veronica's application of a deep red lipstick, strongly associating her cosmetic appearance with surgical enhancement. Yet, the film's overt association of beauty with surgery destabilizes the illusion of effortless beauty, illuminating instead the constructedness of Veronica's feminine appearance. The extreme close-ups also highlight Veronica's aged

features—her wrinkles are not hidden, smoothed, or edited, nor is her appearance altered to look artificially youthful. These small details starkly distinguish the opening sequence from a traditional, over-glamorized beauty montage; the film reflexively acknowledges Veronica's complicated relationship with hegemonic beauty standards as a result of her gender and age, rather than attempting to construct the facade of a youthful appearance.

Veronica's voiceover throughout this opening sequence also alludes to her complex interactions with normative beauty and its youthful standards. She explains, "It's become my ritual. Putting the layers on. Every mask has a function…This mask is about preservation." After this opening montage, the film provides more context to Veronica's surgery, revealing that it was not cosmetic, but critical to her physical health. Though the "mask" of preservation refers most obviously to her use of makeup (and perhaps cosmetic surgeries) to maintain a youthful appearance, it can also, in retrospect, be connected to her decision to undergo a double mastectomy. As a potentially life-saving procedure, a mastectomy serves as a type of bodily preservation, which allows for prolonged physical health and well-being, another critical component of successful aging. The opening montage concludes with a medium close-up of Veronica's face, freshly adorned with makeup. The next shot is much wider, capturing Veronica's profile from behind. During this shot, the intense ticking of a clock gradually gets louder and more rapid, until it wholly overwhelms the soundscape. As the ticking intensifies, Veronica cowers and sighs anxiously, her back still turned to the camera. Her closed-off posturing in this moment, paired with the intense ticking of the clock, hints at her own anxieties about aging, particularly as a notable figure in the public eye.

This introductory sequence immediately indexes Veronica within a society that cruelly criticizes women for the natural changes that come with age. Veronica's vulnerability in these

scenes also provides the viewer access to her subjectivity and interiority, quickly establishing her as a protagonist to sympathize and/or identify with. The film's use of subjective, point-of-view shots (especially in early, expository moments) strengthens the bond between Veronica and the viewer, as her vision momentarily becomes the vision of the camera. Subjective and restricted narration are used throughout the film to reinforce this identificatory bond and increase the viewer's sympathy for Veronica despite her initial stubbornness and coldness. Another notable use of subjective camera positioning occurs when Veronica first arrives at the retreat and is immediately surrounded by the rest of the guests, who all recognize her from the film "Navajo Frontier," which launched her to fame as a young child actress. As the residents begin to surround her, the film cuts between wide shots of the forming crowd and shaky, blurred shots from Veronica's visual perspective. The closer a person gets to Veronica, the more warped and blurred their face becomes, visually replicating her anxiety as she is overwhelmed by the attention of the guests. Veronica eventually becomes entirely surrounded by the crowd, and as they all attempt to vie for her attention, their voices overlap, becoming wholly unintelligible. Beyond merely reproducing Veronica's positional gaze, these audiovisual interruptions replicate the physiological sensations attached to the intense affects experienced while aging in the public eye. The spectator is proximally aligned with Veronica's gaze, but also gains a deep, intimate insight into the anxieties intrinsic to existing (and visibly aging) in the public eye. This moment attempts to forge a connection between subject and spectator stronger than mere visual identification.

As Veronica removes herself from the chaos of the crowd, her gaze lands on a tabloid magazine with the kitschy caption "Shocking Change!", alongside a "then" and "now" comparison of her as a young teen in 1969, and her in the present day. The "then" photo is a

posed glamor shot, while the "now" photo is an unstaged paparazzi photo, capturing Veronica in an intrusive moment of vulnerable unawareness. This phenomenon of skewing the natural aging process to become a point of juicy gossip reflects a topic heavily covered in Dolan's essay: the paparazzi image as a "natural" or "truthful" assessment of an aging star's appearance. The delicate preservation of a facade of youth may be employed as a valuative measure for (or against) aging female stars. If they fail to look appropriately youthful, they may face harsh criticism and critique. Drawing from Vivian Sobchack's work on the ability of technology to artificially erase wrinkles, folds, and skin blemishes that indicate an aging body, Dolan highlights the power of the raw, unaltered paparazzi image to "[reveal] the signs of letting go…the signs of maintenance…or signs of surgery."[9] The paparazzi photo of Veronica aims to critique her visible, natural signs of aging, like grey hair and wrinkles, or expose her reliance on surgical procedures to maintain a youthful appearance. Veronica's photo likely intends to reveal "the signs of letting go"; juxtaposed with her younger self, an unsympathetic reader notices the effects of time on her features. In a society that equates youth with beauty, the natural process of aging becomes terrifying, shocking, and perhaps even abject. For the young consumers of the magazine—and similarly, the younger guests at Veronica's retreat—the visibility of her aging is a reminder of their inevitable fate, as time relentlessly marches on. Thus, from the perspective of a young fan, reader, or viewer, Veronica (and other aging actresses in the public eye) assumes the position of an abject Other, a monstrous figure to compare oneself to in order to reassert one's own youth, and thus, one's normative beauty. Veronica's aged body mediates societal fears surrounding aging and mortality, effectively serving as a vessel for the repressed anxieties of broader society. Yet, critically, by aligning itself visually and affectively with Veronica, *She Will* refuses to

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[9] Dolan, "Smoothing the Wrinkles," 4-5.

admonish its central protagonist, instead using her unjust ostracization as a catalyst for her revenge against her abuser.

Immediately after Veronica glances at the tabloid, the film returns to an earlier shot of her sitting in front of a mirror, applying makeup. A news broadcast in the background announces a reboot of "Navajo Frontier," with a young star set to replace Veronica's role. Eric Hathbourne, the film's celebrated director, is due to receive a knighthood "for his services to film and TV," and, unlike Veronica, will return for the reboot. Veronica is visibly shaken by the news segment, due to her long-held traumas rooted in Eric's abuse during the filming of the original movie. The details of her trauma and abuse initially remain vague to the viewer, only appearing in abstracted, distorted montages that punctuate Veronica's recurring visions.

Veronica's first vision occurs soon after the news broadcast concludes. During a heavy thunderstorm, Veronica approaches the window of the cabin bedroom and glances out into the night, observing the reflection of her face in the glass. As she touches her hand to the window, a bolt of lightning flashes and briefly reveals a vision of her younger self, followed by a menacing vision of Eric's piercing eyes. A final flash reveals a young Veronica standing in a field as a young Eric lurks behind her. Just as the opening montage sequence was abstracted by kaleidoscopic effects and soft focus, this brief vision is overlaid with the foggy cyan undertones of the rainy outdoor landscape. Not long after this initial sequence, Veronica takes a bath, during which we encounter another distorted montage of flashbacks and visions. Distorted images of a young Eric and Veronica are interspersed among slow-motion footage of underwater caverns and sprawling faults on the ocean floor. In one clip, a younger Veronica, captured in close-up, stares vacantly into the distance, her face covered in blood and bruises. Bubbling water, garbled speech, shaky breathing, and indistinct whispers overwhelm the soundscape, augmenting the

disturbing, disorienting quality of the montage. Toward the end of the sequence, we hear Eric's voice whisper, "Would you do anything?" followed by a shot of Eric in the present day. A rapid flurry of images of Veronica—paired with abstracted images of eyes, mouths, and other indistinguishable features in close-up—flash across the screen. Muffled screams echo through the soundscape, and the montage concludes with a cut back to Veronica in the present day, who yells in fear as she jolts up out of the water. This sequence, much like the preceding vision, subtly introduces Veronica's trauma through repetitive imagery and sound, before it is explicitly addressed in dialogue. These visions progressively become more intense, immersive, and detailed over the course of the film, at times also tapping into Veronica's anxieties surrounding her perception of—and relationship to—her aging and changing body.

Considering the film's ties to the horror genre, Barbara Creed's discussion of the abject and the monstrous feminine becomes highly relevant when exploring these visions. Creed describes the body as "the ultimate in abjection," noting that "The body protects itself from bodily wastes such as feces, blood, urine, and pus by ejecting these substances just as it expels food that, for whatever reason, the subject finds loathsome."[10] Blood (most notably present in the context of Veronica's surgery) remains a constant in Veronica's visions, connecting her surgery and subsequent recovery to feelings of abjection, discomfort, unfamiliarity, and Otherness. Further, post-mastectomy, Veronica is missing a part of her anatomy that is often deemed essential to femininity; her body becomes unfamiliar and frightening to her (and perhaps even to others) without its primary symbol of normative womanhood.

Abject substances are also an integral element of the film's dark, supernatural forest landscape. Throughout the film, nature is paralleled with the human body; in the various montages and dream-like sequences, parallel imagery is utilized to draw visual associations

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[10] Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine," 38.

between Veronica's body and the terrain of the landscape. In many of the memory-vision montages, incisions and slices made by surgical scalpels are paralleled with overhead views of a lush landscape, scarred by the barren beds of dried-up rivers. Early in the film, establishing shots show winding roads cutting through areas of dense forest, similarly constructing a type of

Figure 6: The barren landscape of the remote forest
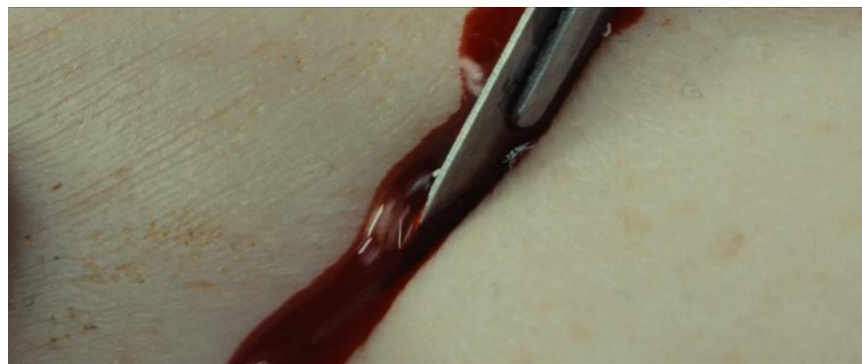
Figure 7: A surgical scalpel slicing into skin

scar-like imagery. These recurring images are closely linked to Veronica's surgical scars, which similarly run across her chest at irregular sizes and orientations. Thus, if nature is constructed as a type of body, it must also have (and expel) unwanted abject substances. The film represents these fluids as a dark inky liquid, and a black, muddy sludge, both of which seem to be under Veronica's control, and are able to be summoned at will.

The dark liquid invades Veronica's bath on her first night at the remote cabin, and the sludge repeatedly creeps throughout the forest and onto the cabin floors. These odd substances

seem to most often materialize before and during Veronica's visions. As the nightly visions progress, Veronica inexplicably levitates out of bed, and gains the ability to astrally project her body to an entirely different place in space and time. Most often, Veronica materializes in Eric's location, her presence visually signified by the use of sweeping, disembodied camera movements with heavily canted angles. During Eric's appearance on a live late-night show, Veronica's presence is seen and felt by Eric, but seemingly no one else. During the interview, the host brings up Eric's proclivity for controversy, and confronts him for his "inappropriate and unlawful" relationship with Veronica when she was just 13 years old. Eric defensively exclaims that "it was a completely different era." When Veronica—visibly watching from behind the scenes—hears this, the camera locks onto her steely gaze, directed at Eric's glass of water. A drop of the dark, abject liquid falls into his glass, seemingly at Veronica's command. When Eric takes a sip of the water moments later, he vomits. Veronica harnesses the power of the earthly abject to evoke the expulsion of a human abject substance, reflecting the scope and strength of her newly-discovered supernatural power, and reinforcing its ties to abjection.

> Creed also discusses borders and boundaries in relation to the abject, explaining:

> …there is, of course, a sense in which the concept of a border is central to the construction of the monstrous in the horror film; that which crosses or threatens to cross the 'border' is abject. Although the specific nature of the border changes from film to film, the function of the monstrous remains the same: to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability.[11]

Veronica's body—lacking a major signifier of her gender identity—is also rendered abject by its ability to blur and cross the borders of the hegemonic gender binary. Veronica herself openly reflects on the constraints of gender presentation in relation to age: in a conversation with Desi, she comments, "Odd, how androgyny is so attractive in the young. So repugnant to the old." Veronica's categorization of elder androgyny as "repugnant" reflects her own anxieties and

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[11] Creed, "The Monstrous Feminine," 80.

insecurities surrounding her aging body, made newly androgynous by her lack of breasts. Thus, the nature of the border in *She Will* lies at the intersection of age and the hegemonic gender binary; Veronica's aging, androgynous body threatens essentialist notions of womanhood and femininity, rendering her (from the perspective of a normative society) an abject, monstrous Other. Veronica internalizes this feeling of monstrosity for much of the film, cringing at her bandaged chest and using prosthetic breasts to assume a normatively feminine appearance.

Yet, emboldened by her burgeoning supernatural abilities, Veronica gradually embraces the liberatory—and perhaps even queer^—power of the Other. When her bandages finally come off, she stands in front of a full-length mirror, wearing a silky red dress pulled down to her waist. Examining her chest, now marked with jagged scars, Veronica views her new body in full for the

Figure 8: Veronica views her scarred chest in the mirror

first time. Intercut with this scene are shots of the other retreat guests celebrating Ullachaidhean, which Tirador describes as "The burning of the witch. The victory of reason against the demonic." These interlinking images, accompanied by a rhythmic, timeless incantation in the soundtrack, parallel Veronica with the witch, another variation of the monstrous Other.

Veronica's recurring visions also frequently include images of witches being brutally tortured—several times she even finds herself in the position of an accused witch, chained to a tree with a metal restraint covering her face. Moments before she first gazes at her reflection in the mirror, Veronica looks over an assortment of cards from her tarot deck, further linking her to the magical figure of the witch and distancing her from the rest of the guests. As they gather around a large bonfire, Veronica sits peacefully on her bed, her red dress now covering her chest. Her prosthetics are notably absent; rather than conforming to hegemonic beauty ideals, she embraces her body's Otherness—and the repressed anxieties it represents—in its entirety.

Another dream-like montage sequence punctuates this scene, first showing Veronica chained in the restraints of the ancient witches, then standing in front of a large bonfire, and finally followed by an extreme close-up of her eyes, illuminated by the nearby flames. Veronica's embrace of her Otherness—of the figure of the ostracized witch—gives her immense power; she wields her monstrosity, no longer letting it consume and control her. Even outside of the film's supernatural context, Veronica, as an aging woman, is inherently relegated to the position of Other. Dafna Lemish & Varda Muhlbauer explain, "Older women are framed as an 'other' (i.e., marginal, defective, abnormal), and this form of 'symbolic annihilation' (Tuchman, Daniels, & Banet, 1978) serves as a rationalization for excluding them from everyday life."[12] Thus, Veronica's embrace of a supernatural Otherness also reflects her empowerment as a result of her identity as an aging woman. By embracing the liberatory potential of societally constructed Otherness, Veronica finds peace and empowerment as she fights for retribution and revenge.

During Veronica's climactic vision/astral projection, a levitating, canted camera shakily approaches Eric as he watches his botched television interview. Veronica begins to hover above the bed, intensifying the strength of the aforementioned bonfire until the remaining guests are

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[12] Lemish & Muhlbauer, "'Can't Have it All,'" 168.

smoked out. The disembodied camera continues to follow Eric as he paces around his house. Veronica's projection, dressed in a velvety red outfit, stares directly into the camera as she watches him from an upper balcony. As the camera glides toward Eric, the abject black sludge simultaneously creeps across the forest floor. Veronica's projection then materializes directly in front of Eric, staring directly into his eyes. As the two begin to speak, Veronica's younger self appears behind Eric, further destabilizing the boundaries between the past and the present. Veronica—in this vision, at least—simultaneously exists as her old (current) and young (past) self. Veronica seems to have full control over Eric's perception of reality during this sequence; she can fluctuate between visible and invisible at will, and relentlessly follows him anywhere that he goes. When he angrily swings a glass at her head, Veronica's projection transforms into a cloud of soot—diegetically referred to as "witch feathers"—which flies in circles around Eric, forcing him to retreat. Her younger self returns to the room once again, calmly walking toward Eric with the cloud of witch feathers swirling powerfully around her. Finally, the feathers swarm around Eric, propelling him over the edge of a towering staircase, where he falls to a bloody death. When the vision concludes, witch feathers float down to cover Veronica, lying, exhausted, on the cabin bed.

As the frequency and intensity of Veronica's visions increase, and she gains the ability to astral project, the borders between real and imaginary and past and present become increasingly unstable. All of Veronica's visions and projections manifest as a hybrid of her past memories and traumas, in combination with images of the accused witches from the past, and images of the living forest. The unique atemporal tendency of these sequences—to exist outside of a linear, quantifiable space-time—strongly reflects Gilles Deleuze's conceptions of the non-chronological time-image, outlined in his book *Cinema II*. Deleuze notes the post-World War II shift from the

movement-image—heavily rooted in chronology, cause and effect linkage, and continuity editing—to the time-image, which is freed from a model of relentless linear progression. Deleuze theorizes that the time-image arose in response to the need for a global existential reckoning after the brutality, trauma, and tragedy of WWII and the Holocaust.[13] Rigid cause and effect logics were subordinated to the force of pure affect, resulting in the disintegration of the logical movement-image and the rise of the contemplative, nebulous time-image. The time-image allows the filmmaker to represent time in its purest state: unbound from the continuity of invented clock time. The time-image replicates the subjective, variable human experience of time. For instance, time seems to pass quickly in some moments, but very slowly in others, making it impossible to definitively quantify. Deleuze explains, "in modern cinema…the time-image is no longer empirical, nor metaphysical; it is 'transcendental' in the sense that Kant gives this word: time is out of joint and presents itself in the pure state."[14] Veronica's visions and projections thus strongly align with the "out of joint" nature of the time-image; the complex flurries of past memories and present images are highly atemporal, and thus indiscernible under normative conceptions of linear time. This eschewal of chrononormativity affirms the film's commitment to the broader disruption of normativity, and the oppressive systems and structures that keep it in place.

The perpetual resonances of Veronica's childhood traumas in the present day correlate neatly with Deleuze's "sheets of past" model for conceptualizing time and memory. Deleuze theorizes that the present moment (the "Actual" or "Actuality") is always influenced by one's personal reservoir of memory (the "Virtual" or "Virtuality").[15] The Actual is tangible, and is always influenced by the Virtual, which can be accessed at any present moment. The Virtual is

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[13] Deleuze, "Cinema II," xi.
[14] Deleuze, "Cinema II," 271.
[15] Deleuze, "Cinema II," 68-69.

composed entirely of sheets of past, all of which were once Actualities. Deleuze visualizes these

sheets arranged in an inverted cone, varying in tangibility depending on their proximity to the

point of the cone, which represents the singular Actual/present.[16] The sheets do not arrange

themselves in chronological order, but rather in order of their influence on the Actual; thus, the

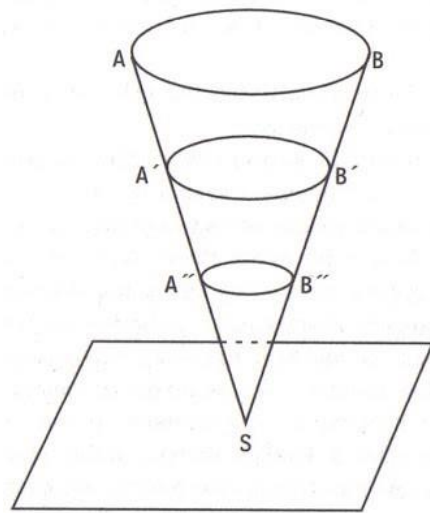arrangement of Virtuality itself also diverges from a linear conception of time.[17]

Figure 9: Deleuze's visualization of Virtuality and sheets of past, from *Cinema II*

D.N. Rodowick elaborates on Deleuze's conceptions of memory and the time-image,

clarifying some of his more ambiguous statements. In "Time and Memory, Orders and Powers,"

Rodowick explains, "...the present will coexist with the past that it will be, and the past will be

indiscernible from the present it has been."[18] By conceptualizing the Actual and the Virtual as

equally tangible and consequential, and thus essentially interchangeable, Deleuze challenges

dominant models of time that privilege the present. In cinema, this interchangeable quality of the

Actual and the Virtual might manifest in a lack of formal or visual distinction between moments

of the past and moments in the present. Whereas classical Hollywood cinema uses formal clues

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[16] Deleuze, "Cinema II," 294.
[17] Deleuze, "Cinema II," xii.
[18] Rodowick, "Time and Memory," 82.

to neatly separate past and present, the experimental, fluid formal structure of *She Will* allows for more disorienting renderings of time, where the past and present become visually and narratively indistinguishable. Its various montage and vision sequences, for instance, have a quality of being outside of quantifiable time; Veronica, in multiple ages and physical forms, occupies multiple times and places simultaneously. She thus possesses the power to transcend the oppressive logics of the reality in which she exists. The more Veronica embraces these supernatural powers over the course of the film, the more she transgresses normative boundaries and embraces the radical potential of the Other. Within the horror genre, the Other is most often shunned or expelled, defeated by a force that reasserts stability and normativity in the diegetic world.[19] Yet, in *She Will*, the power of the Other is embraced, rather than shunned, compounding the film's radicality.

Eric's climactic death scene reflects Deleuze's conceptualization of the concurrent existence of Actuality and Virtuality and symbolizes Veronica's ultimate embrace of Otherness. Veronica exists in multiple forms during her final encounter with her abuser: she projects a version of her current, older self (based in the Actual), as well as one of her many past selves (derived from a specific sheet of Virtuality). In the moment where the Actual (current) Veronica and a Virtual (adolescent) Veronica share the screen, their visible, tangible coexistence perfectly reflects Deleuze's theory. Just as Veronica's childhood trauma and abuse have shaped the trajectory of her entire life and career, the Virtual will always have unavoidable, perpetual resonances that influence each and every passing Actuality. No matter her age, Veronica will never be truly extricated from her adolescent self.

Applying this theory of past and present coexistence to the conceptualization of age opens up radical possibilities for the perception and representation of aging subjectivities. Instead of applying age to an irreversible linear timeline, in which a subject only grows older,

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[19] Vera Dika, "The Stalker Film," 99.

and more distanced from their younger selves, one can conceptualize age as fluid and unbound by chronology. Just as one simultaneously exists in the Actual and the Virtual, one is also simultaneously old and young. Before Eric's death, (Actual) Veronica has another encounter with one of her Virtual (adolescent) selves. Actual Veronica treads through a foggy field, and upon reaching her Virtual self, kneels down and gently runs her fingers through her past self's hair.

Figure 10: Actual and Virtual Veronica together

This brief, but incredibly tender and vulnerable moment again blends the past and present to a point of indiscernibility, and challenges the conception of later life as a wholly distinct stage from one's youth. Despite her chronological distance from her teenaged self, Veronica still feels the tangible resonances of her traumas, memories, and formative experiences. Rigidly linear conceptions of time cannot capture such an experience of being adjacent to one's younger self.

Applying Deleuze's nonlinear model of time to *She Will* also highlights the radical potential that lies in atemporality. Rodowick aptly describes "the force of time as becoming, a force that continually renews the possibilities for change and the appearance of the new."[20] Conceptualizing time as perpetually changing, evolving, and renewing opens up possibilities for divergent, utopian futures deemed impossible by theories of time based in linearity (and thus

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[20] Rodowick, "Time and Memory," 83.

predictability). In the diegetic context of the witch burnings, and the real-world context of the perpetual suppression of the voices of older women, an indeterminate future is crucial for the formation of radical potentialities that liberate marginalized people. Utopian, divergent futures, as a product of nonlinear time, have the power to break the relentless cycles of oppression that otherwise remain unchallenged by constant, chronological, and predictable constructions of time. Thus, the film evokes the model of queerness^ that I outline at the beginning of this project: its destabilization of linearity and certainty allow for the aging woman to access futures previously unavailable to her. She embraces her queerness^—her Otherness—and wields its unbridled power. Embracing uncertainty, she pushes on into the indeterminate future.

Further, the nonlinearity of Deleuze's model destabilizes the temporal divides between disparate generations. For instance, if one were to follow a normative, chronological timeline, Veronica and Desi would be positioned at opposite poles (youth and later life). Following a Deleuzian model, however, the chronological distance between the pair disappears; when the past exists simultaneously with the present, one is never defined solely by their numerical age. Rather, Veronica in the present is wholly informed and impacted by her younger Virtual selves. The film's embrace of atemporality allows Veronica to shift between her older and younger selves, allowing for a richer exploration of her subjectivity, and a complex construction of her lasting fears, traumas, and desires as she grapples with the forces of time and aging. This slippage between old and young also allows for the formation of a deep connection between Desi and Veronica—their personal similarities override any disparities resulting from their intergenerationality.

Though Veronica is initially very cold and closed-off in her interactions with Desi, as the pair simultaneously experience strange, supernatural happenings, they grow close and begin to

confide in each other. Desi's assault serves as a critical turning point for the dynamic between the two women. Shortly after opening up to Veronica about her mother's illness and death, Desi meets up with Owen, a local man, at a pub. When Desi later walks back to the cabin after beginning to feel unwell, Owen forcefully attempts to coerce her into kissing him. As Desi fights him off, Veronica (who is in the midst of one of her dreams/projections) calmly walks toward them in a white gown, the muddy black sludge slithering along the forest floor next to her. The sludge quickly reaches Owen, eventually engulfing him entirely as Veronica watches from nearby. Her heroic protection of Desi in this moment asserts her power and agency in the narrative, but also strengthens the bond between the two women. Veronica's supernatural elimination of Owen—who serves as a symbol of toxic, aggressive masculinity and patriarchy— makes evident the powerful potential for liberation and retribution that lies in female friendships and unity. At the end of the film, after Veronica has successfully taken revenge against her abuser, she and Desi decide to leave the retreat together. Their successful liberation

Figure 11: Desi and Veronica share a moment

from the oppressive forces that constrain them comes only after their emotional reconciliation. Their mutual support for each other over the course of the film (Desi helps Veronica recover

physically, while Veronica gives Desi the emotional support she needs) ensures that they operate

in a unified pair; one cannot fully function without the other.

Examined through a queer lens, Desi and Veronica's relationship holds a radical coalitive

potential, augmented by the presence of queer subtext in their interactions. Subtle reflections of

queer desire manifest during Desi and Veronica's departure from the retreat. After Veronica's

successful revenge against Eric, Desi returns (against Veronica's orders) to check in on her. Once

Veronica regains some of her strength and energy, Desi drives the both of them away from the

retreat and back to the train station. In the car, Veronica internally reflects upon the nature of

reality, asking herself, "What is reality? Where is it?" before suggesting, "Perhaps it's only ever a

longing."[21] Moments after this internal contemplation, Veronica glances over at Desi and smiles

warmly, then tells her that she's "glad that [Desi] came back." The film's final scene captures the

pair traveling on the train once again, paralleling a sequence from the beginning. But, Veronica's

initial coldness has entirely dissolved into tenderness and warmth; Veronica smiles contentedly

as Desi lays down next to her, her head resting in Veronica's lap.

These final moments, significantly happier in tone than most of the film, highlight the

possibility of existence outside of the oppressive constraints of hegemonic logics. Desi and

Veronica's freedom after enacting their revenge holds the potential of an alternative, tangible

queer utopia. The film's final shot captures the non-normativity of the world that Desi and

Veronica venture into: as Veronica gazes out the window of the train, the camera follows her

look, revealing an unusual lake landscape. The lake is mirrored vertically, so that its water fills

the top half of the screen, and the sky fills the bottom half. The world—at least as Veronica sees

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[21] Veronica's suggestion that "perhaps [reality] is only ever a longing" strengthens this queer^ reading of the film's ending. José Muñoz asserts that "Queerness is not yet here…We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality" ("Cruising Utopia," 1). Veronica's use of the term "longing" captures this quality of being just out of reach. Reality—or Veronica's utopic version of it, perhaps—is on the horizon, but not quite actualized yet.

Figure 12: Veronica smiles as she looks out the window at the mirrored landscape it—has literally been queered^, flipped upside down, symbolic of the women's victory over the forces of patriarchy that previously confined and constrained them. The strangeness of the lake landscape eschews familiarity, reflecting the infinitesimal possibilities that Veronica and Desi now have as they begin their new, liberated lives.

She Will complexly captures Veronica's empowering journey toward self-discovery, revenge, and liberation. Its heavy reliance on subjective camera positioning and restricted narration allows Veronica's interiority to be conveyed and understood through the form of the film itself. The film critically centers the historically maligned and underrepresented figure of the aging woman, thoroughly exploring her fears and desires without relying on one-dimensional stereotypes or essentialist constructions of gender and age. Veronica's heightened agency—demonstrated through her visions, her embrace of the abject and Otherness, and her abilities to warp space-time—radically affects the film's structure and logics, opening up the potential for subversive conceptions of time and memory that resist rigid chronology, as well as the oppressive systems and normativities it supports and upholds. The film's rejection of a normative temporal structure has resonances in its depictions of Veronica's unique experience of age and trauma, as well as in her bond with Desi, which overcomes the distance of a generation.

Veronica's agency sets her (and Desi) free, effectively demonstrating the invigorating potential of

narratives that embrace radical coalition.

Thank You and Goodnight: Queerness, Affect, and the Aging Woman

Experimental documentary, as a mode of filmmaking, remains largely undefined. Any divergence from the conventions of the "objective" mainstream documentary might be considered a venture into the experimental realm. To more accurately capture the breadth of this experimental mode of filmmaking, Scott MacDonald writes about the "avant-doc," an intersection of documentary and avant-garde film. MacDonald explains, "To reflect upon these intersections refreshes a sense of both documentary and avant-garde filmmaking—however hard these traditions may be to define exactly—as alternative practices to commercial and narrative cinema."[1] Rather than limit the interaction between documentary and the avant-garde to one discrete point of contact, MacDonald explores the possibility of a multitude of intersections. With both modes of filmmaking so expansive and flexible in their definitions, there is no one, singular definition of the experimental film or the avant-doc.

MacDonald's subcategory of the personal avant-doc most closely resembles the film of focus for this chapter, *Thank You and Goodnight* (Jan Oxenberg, 1991). Oxenberg masterfully intertwines surreal, imaginative representations of her subjective memories, fantasies, and emotions with home-video-style documentation of the late life (and death) of her grandmother, Mae. The surreal sequences, guided by Oxenberg's narration, often feature a grumpy-looking cardboard cutout of Oxenberg's childhood self, sometimes paired with a similar cutout of her grandmother. A collection of dramatized, live-action recreations further edges the film into the realm of the avant-garde. Rather than attempt to replicate reality in an objective or realistic manner, Oxenberg's recreations blend elements of humor, hyperbole, fantasy, and the subconscious to produce evocative sequences that metaphorically address her inner emotions and ruminations, particularly regarding aging, death, grief, and loss.

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[1] MacDonald, "Avant-Doc," 50.

One of the more poignant recreations occurs at the end of the film, metaphorically illustrating the liminal transition from death to the afterlife. A motley crowd of characters slowly stagger down the haze-filled corridor of the Lincoln Tunnel, as "People Get Ready" by The Impressions plays. During this sequence, Oxenberg blends humor and surrealism with a lingering sense of melancholy: one scowling man wears a "KISS THE COOK" apron, and another carries a pair of bright red skis. A trio of bear mascots, drinking nips and holding sparklers, cruises by the ambling crowd in a vintage car. Despite the surreal moments of humor within this scene, Oxenberg leaves room for somber reflection and commentary: a young gay couple walks arm-in-arm, presumably symbolizing the unfathomable loss of life as a result of the AIDS crisis. A young child innocently chases after a bouncing ball, and elderly men and women—composing

Figure 13: The gay couple somberly walks through the Lincoln Tunnel

most of the group—weakly shuffle forward. Viewed together, these three sets of characters (the gay couple, the young child, and the elderly) represent the axes of subjectivity explored throughout the film. Oxenberg captures her own lesbian subjectivity, uses a projection of her child self to explore memories and existential quandaries, and preserves the late life of her grandmother. As the viewer watches the characters shuffle toward the end of the tunnel in unison, Oxenberg's invocations of the themes of aging, mortality, illness, and loss become more

tangible; this tangential moment of visualization—and the several others that punctuate the film—brings subtextual symbolism to the surface of the text, using visual dramatization to heighten its affective impact. With these symbolic recreations, Oxenberg symbolically explores her deepest memories, wishes, and regrets, and reckons with her own proximity to death.

Though the documentary is largely constructed from Oxenberg's perspective, it crucially preserves the life and memory of her grandmother, in essence functioning as a highly intimate archive of the subjectivity of an aging woman. The film is ultimately a portrait of, and a tribute to, Mae. The aging woman, as a largely invisible queer^ subject, is at a heightened risk of losing her personal history within the broader, singular hegemonic archive of History, which is deeply embedded in the objectively factual. Thus, these intimate, personal records of life and subjectivity are critical to the cultivation and preservation of a diverse archive of aging female experiences, resistant to monolithization or simplification. Oxenberg's film thus simultaneously disrupts the conventions of normative documentary, and highlights a historically underrepresented subject, contributing to a crucial archive of images of aging. Through her use of experimental documentary form and aesthetics—including surrealism, nonlinear representations of temporality, and an epistemology rooted in affect, rather than logic—Jan Oxenberg creates a subversive, personal, and uniquely queer^ portrait of the aging woman in *Thank You and Goodnight*.

A variety of evocative, fantastical sequences featuring Oxenberg's cutouts punctuate much of *Thank You and Goodnight*, contributing to its unconventional renderings of affect and temporality. Early in the film, Oxenberg, in voiceover, recounts a memorable experience from her childhood: going to the movie palace with her grandmother. Where footage does not exist to document this core memory, Oxenberg recreates the scene, complete with a humorous,

hyperbolic flair. Grand, sweeping camera movements highlight the building's ornate decor, through the curious gaze of Oxenberg's young childhood self. Her cutout appears in the center of the lobby, glancing up at the dizzying pattern of the lofted ceiling. Mae's cutout appears, standing confidently behind her. In voiceover, Oxenberg remarks, "[Grandma] was a big presence in my life back then." A montage ensues, in which Mae's cutout impossibly occupies a variety of roles within the theater: first a box office attendant, then a concessions cashier, and finally, an usher. This sequence marks the film's first major embrace of the unexpected and the surreal, animating Oxenberg's memories and their associated affects. These intermittent returns to childhood also foreground a nonlinear understanding of temporality, rooted in the associative logics of memory. Later in the scene, Oxenberg's cutout is seated in the movie theater, surrounded by dozens of near-identical cutouts of her grandmother, all of which gaze intently at the movie screen. She coyly remarks, "I felt like [Grandma] was all around me." Cutouts of Mae continue to appear in odd locations around the theater (on the face of a statue, on the ceiling), augmenting the absurdity of the sequence. Oxenberg utilizes this strategy several more times throughout the film. These surreal, almost cartoonish sequences repeatedly stand in for her childhood memories—as well as her internal ruminations—that she could not preserve on film.

Although these cutouts are central to many of the film's imaginative tangents, Oxenberg, as previously mentioned, also utilizes fantastical live-action recreations to enhance symbolic imagery, inject humor, or evoke emotion. These tangents, interrupting the more conventional segments of home video footage, also contribute to the film's non-linear logic and temporality. Predictability is eschewed, chronology is disrupted, and the "objective" value of home video footage is challenged, allowing affectual logics to emerge, and thus destabilizing epistemologies rooted in fact and intellect, which tend to dominate the conventional documentary form.

Essentially, the absurd constructedness of these sequences does not detract from their emotionally truthful value, as they occupy an epistemology and a cinematic temporality that lies outside of the constrictive bounds of rigid objectivity.

One of the more outlandish segments begins when Oxenberg recalls asking her grandmother what she [Oxenberg] could do to make her happy. Oxenberg continues, "She said I should get married. I asked her if she had a second choice. She thought for a minute and she said yes. I could try to get on a quiz show." The camera slowly zooms into the staticky screen of an old color television, until the colorful, campy set of a retro-styled quiz show fills the frame.

Figure 14: Oxenberg competes on her surreal, imaginary game show

Oxenberg walks onto the stage, standing behind a makeshift podium humorously constructed out of a walker and string lights. The host asks her, "True or False? You could have visited your grandmother more, but you didn't." Before Oxenberg can answer, a buzzer sounds, and the host moves on to the next question, introducing a new, enticing prize: "that set of Grandma's dishes you always liked!" A Vanna White-esque co-host motions elegantly toward a cluttered set of dishes and various knick-knacks. After a few more unsuccessful attempts to answer questions, Oxenberg confidently presses the buzzer when the host asks, "What's wrong with Grandma?"

Suddenly, Mae's voice echoes through the on-stage speakers: she's decided to answer the question herself. Mae first lists diabetes, then cancer. After each answer, a scoreboard dings, and then flips over to reveal Mae's correct response. This segment firmly cements the documentary in the realm of the experimental: generic expectations have been repeatedly breached, and the lines between fiction and reality are blurred.

Alongside this perpetual subversion of generic convention comes a disruption of linear temporality. The narrative structure and order of the film are dictated mostly by Oxenberg's voiceover, and thus, her various chains of thought. Transitions from reality to fantasy (or perhaps the liminal spaces between them) occur when an object, conversation, or location sparks a thought or evokes a memory in Oxenberg's mind. By adopting a narrative structure that mimics the unpredictable nature of human thought—rather than simply adhering to pure chronology or linearity—the film allows for a continual slippage between the past, the present, and even potential futures, challenging dominant models of temporality that strongly privilege the present moment.

Strongly aligning with a Deleuzian model of temporality, which conceptualizes the Actual and the Virtual as equally tangible and consequential (and thus essentially interchangeable), the film devalues the precedence of the present moment, disrupting the dominant hierarchies of chronology that clearly demarcate past, present, and future. By non-chronologically interspersing her memories and fantasies among home video footage, Oxenberg destabilizes the present, mimicking the associative function of the mind. Just as Oxenberg's memories are likely not organized chronologically in her mind, they are not presented chronologically throughout the film. The film does not track the progression of Oxenberg's relationship with her grandmother in chronological order, from childhood to

adulthood, but instead highlights key memories, many of which share an emotional pertinence to (and are thus triggered by) the documentary footage captured in the period leading up to Mae's death. The Virtual sheets of past that are most influential to Oxenberg's experience of the Actual are represented by the memories that hold the power to break out of Oxenberg's past, and interrupt the linear, narrative flow of the film.

In *Thank You and Goodnight*, this interchangeable quality of the Actual and the Virtual manifests in the slippages between past and present that occur when Oxenberg and her family members seem to conversate across time and space. When Oxenberg introduces her family members to the viewer for the first time, she plays footage of them discussing their grandmother's death, after it has occurred. Yet as these clips play, Mae, in voiceover, speaks about each member of the family, as if she had heard what they said, and were present in the same temporal moment as them. Oxenberg's splicing of newer footage with older voice recordings produces an uncanny effect of presence; even though Mae has passed away, her subjectivity and voice are not sequestered in an abstract, inaccessible past. Rather, as demonstrated in the quiz show sequence, Mae seems to possess the power to erupt into the Actual at any given moment, even interrupting Oxenberg's tangential ruminations and fantasies. This ability to persist and linger in the Actual disturbs death's associations with finality and permanence, and exemplifies cinema's unique archival power: subjects are visually captured in a moment of Actuality, which, when screened, allows their presence to linger in the perpetual now. For the aging woman, a figure implicitly tied to themes of mortality and death, the film's rejection of physicality as the sole evidence of one's tangible or material presence disrupts normative conceptions of chronology based in irreversibility. The film instead embraces a model

of radical, enduring presence that enables the aging woman to defy the permanence of total ontological death, and persist tangibly in the cinematic Actual.

Oxenberg's decision to assemble the film non-linearly further disrupts normative understandings of temporality and presence within the documentary genre that constrain representations of the aging woman to her ephemeral state of physical being. Rather than create a documentary structured by her grandmother's death and absence, Oxenberg builds the film around Mae's prevailing presence in the Actual—conveyed through memories, dreams, and utopian fantasies that stem from the everpresent Virtual—even after her physical death. Throughout the film, Oxenberg processes her grief by returning to childhood memories, and attempting to dilate her experience of time, so that her grandmother's absence does not feel so palpable. This return to the Virtual—which is truly just a simultaneous existence within the Actual *and* the Virtual—is most clearly indicated during the segments of the film in which Oxenberg's live-action self and childhood cutout self appear to coexist in the same spatiotemporal locus. One scene toward the end of the film is a particularly relevant example of this concurrency. A few days after Mae's death, Oxenberg and a number of her family members

Figure 15: Oxenberg's cutout cries, holding on to her grandmother's teddy bear

are gathered in a living room. As Oxenberg and her brother, Ricky, engage in a heated conversation about life, suffering, mortality, and the afterlife, Oxenberg's cutout sits quietly on a staircase just around the corner, eavesdropping. As the conversation intensifies, the cutout tightly clutches one of her grandmother's teddy bears, as tears roll down her painted cheeks. It is almost as if Oxenberg simultaneously embodies her adult self and her child self; though she has grown older, her younger self remains an integral part of her, and is ever-present, able to be accessed or conjured at any moment in time. This return to a past, iterative self also enables the symbolic resurrection of lost loved ones. Past moments are not permanently locked away by the passage of time. Rather, as Oxenberg intentionally revisits these impactful sheets of past, she connects the Actual with the Virtual, infusing Mae's presence into the ever-evolving present. This metaphorical reanimation crucially rejects normative constructions of linear chronology that firmly privilege physicality as a prerequisite of presence and embodiment. Mae, more broadly representative of the aging woman, now possesses the means to exist even beyond her physical passing; her later-life existence is not governed or constricted by its proximal relationship to death.

Moments after this emotional moment of recollection, Oxenberg's cutout builds a rocket ship out of an assortment of kids' toys and objects. Oxenberg narrates, explaining that "If [she] could just see [Grandma] one more time she wouldn't waste it. [She] had to see her again." Ricky continues his passionate speech about life and death, and the rocket ship takes off, bursting through the roof of the house and launching into space. At this moment in the film, Oxenberg's childhood self yearns for a resolution. She *must* see her grandmother again. Jose Muñoz's writings on temporality and affect reflect a sense of queerness^ that permeates the cutout's curious, childlike behaviors throughout the film. Muñoz explains, "Queerness is a structuring

and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present."[2] In *Thank You and Goodnight*, Oxenberg's desire to escape the present, and reunite with her grandmother, reflects this model of queerness^. As Oxenberg's cutout builds the spaceship, she yearns for a reality in which her grandmother is still alive, and she can have just one more chance to connect with her. The simultaneous presence of Oxenberg's adult and childhood selves suggests that her psyche is split: she feels pressured to move on from her grief, but she does not want to give up hope that Mae is still out there, somewhere. Kara Keeling elaborates on Muñoz's writings, adding, "[Queerness] is a historically specific, collectively produced, shared sense that insists upon an immanent 'potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.'"[3] Oxenberg's embrace of the absurd and fantastical throughout the film also reflects such a queer^ sensibility. Rather than merely attempting to produce verisimilitude in a manner typical of conventional documentary, she explores other worlds—rooted in the subjective, the interior, and the unconscious—that suggest the utopic, queer^ possibility of another version of reality, which is free from dominant logics that oppress and marginalize queer^ subjects. Oxenberg finally

Figure 16: Oxenberg's cutout & spaceship   *Figure 17:* Oxenberg's surrealist outer space

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[2] Muñoz, "Introduction: Feeling Utopia," 1.
[3] Keeling, "Yet Still: Queer Temporality," 86.

reaches this alternative world as she launches her rocket into space: she has escaped from the confines of a normative reality, finding refuge and comfort in a world structured by the lasting presence of her grandmother, and nearly fulfilling her impossible desire for reunion. As a result of this spatiotemporal rupture, Mae's subjectivity persists, perhaps symbolically rejecting the societal shroud of invisibility conferred onto women throughout their aging process, and after their eventual death.

As Oxenberg travels through this otherworldly, galactic realm, familiar mementos and photographs float through the atmosphere. She seeks to reunite with her grandmother, and ultimately finds her in the sentimental, meaningful possessions she has left behind. Certain objects, in particular, have a significant, recurring presence throughout the film. For instance, Oxenberg first mentions Mae's signature shoes in the film's opening scene, and they are present several more times throughout the film, including during the outer space segment. A trio of ceramic dogs also appears repeatedly throughout the film, particularly in sequences inspired by Oxenberg's childhood memories. The dogs, like the shoes, also materialize near the rocket ship as Oxenberg's cutout navigates through outer space. At the end of the film, Oxenberg and her mother decide who gets which of Mae's possessions—the ceramic dogs are one of the items Oxenberg is eager to take. Though these items were not necessarily integral to Mae's life, they embody her spirit in such a way that allows her to continue living through them.

Ann Cvetkovich emphasizes the emotional significance of seemingly mundane objects in relation to the preservation of personal histories in her essay "In the Archives of Lesbian Feelings: Documentary and Popular Culture." For marginalized communities of all kinds, such mementos are critical to the documentation and perpetuation of personal histories. In the face of a historical record mired in the narrow perspective of white, cis-hetero-patriarchy, diverse

collections of personal belongings serve as crucial symbols of the survival of marginalized

archives of history, particularly those that have been repeatedly omitted and excluded from the

dominant historical record. These belongings, with their distinct and disparate meanings and

associations, reject the notion of history as a singular, homogenous, objective record, instead

embracing complexity and contradiction, and unsettling the dominant phenomenological

hierarchy which asserts "objective," quantifiable records to be the source of indomitable truth,

and subjective, qualitative sources to be unreliable and unuseful to the construction and

maintenance of historical records. Rather than reducing one's understanding of a marginalized

group to a mere set of statistics or demographic observations, archives of personal history

actively foreground emotion, emphasizing the importance of the interior, the subjective, and the

personal to an expansive preservation of queer^ history.

Cvetkovich argues that such archives:

...must preserve and produce not just knowledge but feeling. Lesbian and gay history demands a
radical archive of emotion in order to document intimacy, sexuality, love, and activism, all areas
of experience that are difficult to chronicle through the materials of a traditional archive.[4]

Though Cvetkovich specifically outlines the importance of such an affective archive in the

context of queer communities—whose personal and collective histories have been suppressed,

lost, or intentionally erased—as a queer^, Othered subject, the aging woman similarly

experiences a loss of personal—and thus more broadly, identiary, history. The aging woman, as a

subject susceptible to historical and societal invisibility, may similarly see the preservation of her

emotions and affects through the archival of personally significant belongings. By highlighting

and physically preserving certain objects—such as the ceramic dogs, the color television, or

shoes—Oxenberg ensures the persistence of her grandmother's spirit, and the continued

expression of her unique identiary affect, through significant material mementos. So long as

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[4] Cvetkovich, "In the Archives," 110.

these objects remain intact and accessible, they serve as affectual icons emblematic of their owner's unique passions, quirks, and interests. When these small, individual collections are archivally combined, and viewed in conjunction, the distinct array of affective symbols form a complex mosaic that preserves the depth, nuance, and complexity inherent to any shared identity. This archive of personal collections—and the unique, personal affects associated with them—resists a singular, static, or overarching rendering of identity. Individual possessions speak only for themselves, embracing contradiction and disparity, rather than merely coagulating into a broader, more comprehensible symbol intended to be representative of an entire demographic. Oxenberg's possession of her grandmother's cherished objects materially archives and indexes Mae's subjectivity, ensuring that her personal and representative identities continue to exist in the Actual. Mementos, vividly triggering memories of times past, serve as a gateway to the Virtual, allowing for the easy permeation of normative temporal boundaries that would otherwise constrain the impact and existence of a person's subjectivity to the duration of their physical, embodied presence. So long as these memories in the Virtual can be accessed, they continue to tangibly exist, blurring the lines between presence and absence and past and present, and perhaps even challenging the finality of death.

Cvetkovich further expands the radical power of the emotional archive to include film[5], asserting, "...documentary film and video extend the material and conceptual reach of the traditional archive, collating and making accessible documents that might otherwise remain obscure except to those doing specialized research."[6] *Thank You and Goodnight* is, in itself, a highly personal and accessible archive of the subjectivity of an aging woman. Mae's interior fears, ruminations, and emotions in the months and days leading up to her death are central to the

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[5] On a purely physical level, celluloid itself, as a preservational medium, also holds an archival function.
[6] Cvetkovich, "In the Archives," 109.

film's narrative. She possesses the agency to speak and be listened to, and the complexities of her subconscious are forever preserved on film. Such representational agency is rare for women of her age, and for her story to be so creatively and poignantly articulated reflects an important shift toward the inclusion of aging women in a cinematic sphere that has historically shut them out. Oxenberg's dedication to producing a nuanced, emotionally resonant representation of her grandmother makes visible—and more accessible—the vibrant subjectivity of an aging woman, while simultaneously contributing to a larger, mosaic preservational archive of aging and womanhood, and documenting her own relationship to aging, death, and loss.

Oxenberg's identity as a lesbian woman also establishes a more direct connection between the film and Cvetkovich's queer archive of emotion. Just before the quiz show sequence, Mae notes that seeing Oxenberg get married would make her very happy. As Mae and Oxenberg converse, a cheerful wedding video, featuring a normative heterosexual couple, plays on a staticky television screen. Oxenberg later reflects that she feels guilty for never being able to fulfill her grandmother's wish. Her feelings of grief, guilt, and remorse are distinctly queer. In a discussion of queer self-representation and the autobiographical documentary, Michael Renov notes, "...these works attempt to situate the artist-subject in the familial order, to witness or account for the difficulties of accommodation within rigid family structures to queer sensibilities and life choices."[7] Oxenberg, existing outside of a conventional, nuclear family structure, intimately documents her grapples with family, identity, and the pressures of conformity. Even if she wanted to get married to a partner, she legally could not: at the time of the film's release, it would be two-and-a-half decades before gay marriage would be federally recognized. Oxenberg's grief, when paired with the idyllic image of the heterosexual newlyweds, seems to manifest most pointedly in her inability to fulfill her grandmother's heteronormative expectation

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[7] Renov, "New Subjectivities," 180.

of marriage and family. Oxenberg would never reach the fundamental, normative milestone of marriage during her grandmother's life. Thus, just as much as the film preserves Mae's subjectivity, it also preserves Oxenberg's markedly queer affects, proactively archiving an interiority that is at risk of erasure or invisibility as Oxenberg inevitably continues to age.

Oxenberg's queer identity, like her grandmother's age, subjects her to marginalization. Expressed in parallel, these positionalities reflect common representational injustices, yet remain distinct from one another. Drawing from the relationship between Mae and Oxenberg, the film illustrates the immense power of queerness^ to liberate not only the aging woman, but the young queer subject. Queerness^ holds an expansive, unifying power: two vastly different subjects (Mae, an elderly heterosexual woman, and Oxenberg, a young lesbian filmmaker), connected as family, each find liberation, agency, and empowerment in the film's surreal, utopic moments of rupture. Powerful potentialities lie in the film's ambiguous symbolic spaces between past and present, life and death, and youth and agedness: Mae's material existence persists indefinitely, and Oxenberg revisits her in dreams, fantasies, and memories. In this realm outside of the confines of hegemonic space-time, both women possess a boundless power to exceed the laws and logics that govern normativity, empowered by their shared possession of queer^ power.

Oxenberg's expressions of unrelenting grief are central to the film's focus on materiality and affect, and further push back against the common, dominant presumption that resolution and closure are the only natural (or "correct") outcomes of the mourning process. In "Photographies of Mourning: Melancholia and Ambivalence in Van DerZee, Mapplethorpe, and *Looking for Langston*," José Muñoz builds upon Freud's foundational concept of melancholia. Though Muñoz's discussion is framed within the context of the perpetual loss and erasure of Black gay culture, his argument may be relevant to any disempowered subject whose subjectivity or history

might fail to be preserved. Muñoz notes, "In Freud's initial definition, melancholia spills into the realm of the pathological because it resembles a mourning that does not know when to stop."[8] Oxenberg overtly references her struggle with this relentless mourning several times throughout the film. Toward the beginning of the film, during one of the fictitious live-action segments, Oxenberg rows a wooden boat in the middle of a river while wearing a bright yellow rainsuit. As a photo of Mae drifts alongside Oxenberg's boat, she pauses to grab it, remarking, "I wanted to be alone with my thoughts of Grandma. To sort things out, to remember, to obsess." Photos, books, and other mementos, all representative of Mae, litter the front of the boat as Oxenberg rows off-screen. Oxenberg's desire to "sort things out" and "obsess" reflects the pressure she feels to resolve or conclude her mourning process. Oxenberg is experiencing melancholia, which stands in direct opposition to a linear, contained timeline of grief. Rather than condemning this prolonged mourning, Muñoz encourages it, viewing it not as an inhibitor of progress, but as an empowering tool for remembrance and identity construction. Muñoz writes, "[melancholia] is a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names—and in our names."[9] In the context of this chapter, one of these battles might be that of cinematic representation: as Oxenberg inevitably ages, she too will struggle to find herself represented on screen. Her identity as a lesbian even further increases her chance of representational marginalization. Thus, she wages a battle for her grandmother—and for her future, aged self—through the creation of this film, and her eventual embrace of a prolonged process of mourning.

By the end of the film, Oxenberg still has not neatly resolved her grief: the film's final shot shows her childhood cutout waving into the dark entrance of the Lincoln Tunnel. After

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[8] Muñoz, "Photographies of Mourning," 64.
[9] Muñoz, "Photographies of Mourning," 74.

several seconds, the screen fades to black, as the cutout continues to wave. The relative

ambiguity of this ending reflects Oxenberg's embrace of a nonlinear mourning process. Had the

cutout stopped waving, Oxenberg might have implied that her mourning process has been neatly

resolved: she has successfully overcome her grief, and thus decided to move on. However, by

fading to black as the cutout continues to wave, Oxenberg suggests that the cutout may do so into

Figure 18: Oxenberg's cutout waves toward the dark entrance of the Lincoln Tunnel

perpetuity—she realizes that she will never truly finish mourning, even as the years pass, and the

inevitable 'train' of death[10] moves closer to her end of the tunnel.

While *Thank You and Goodnight* paints a highly personal, poignant portrait of Mae's late

life, and Oxenberg's enduring grief, it also critically preserves the affects of two subjects

historically marginalized in the realm of cinema: the lesbian, and the aging woman. Oxenberg's

uniquely queer grief structures the film's nonlinear narrative, unseating generic documentary

conventions and disrupting expectations of a linear cinematic temporality. Just as the film serves

as a symbolic archive of Mae's life, its existence as a piece of tangible, physical media allows for

the representation of her subjectivity to persist well beyond the limited span of her physical life.

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[10] As referenced in the lyrics of "People Get Ready," which plays during this scene.

Muñoz writes, "The autobiography and the portrait do the work of giving voice to the face from beyond the grave; prosopopeia is also a way of remembering, holding on to, letting go of 'the absent, the deceased, the voiceless.'"[11] Building off of this notion of prosopopeia, Oxenberg's film serves as both an autobiographical record of grief, and a loving portrait of her grandmother, constructed in an effort to let go, yet always remember. In a broader representational context, Oxenberg's work empowers Mae to retain her agency and voice even after her physical death, crucially contributing a documentation of female elder subjectivity to a small, but growing, cinematic archive. *Thank You and Goodnight*, with its commitment to experimental aesthetics, and its embrace of an epistemology of affect, subversively embodies a queer approach to aging, death, and the process of mourning, which refuses to submit to dominant expectations of linearity, normativity, and finality.

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[11] Muñoz, "Photographies of Mourning," 65.

Conclusion

Throughout this project, I have attempted to use a combination of feminist and queer theory frameworks to identify the aging woman as a queer^ subject, highlighting a distinct batch of films that diverge from normative representations and constructions of aging female subjects. In these divergent representations lie a potentiality for liberation, though not yet actualized. All of the films I analyzed closely—and the vast majority of those I encountered when screening films for this project—are overwhelmingly white, cis-heterosexual, and upper-middle class. They fail to capture the diverse array of subjectivities and experiences under the umbrella of the aging or older woman. This project is just the beginning of a broader effort to amplify the recognition and analysis of representations of aging women in film; I recognize its shortcomings in its narrow focus and limited scope.

I advocate for the use of an intersectional theoretical framework to more comprehensively analyze cinematic representations of aging women, and of all marginalized subjects. Age, commonly excluded from intersectional analyses, plays a foundational role in one's positionality, and thus must be substantively considered alongside facets like gender, sexuality, race, class, ability, and so on. The more expansively we view subjects' relations to power and privilege, the greater the potential for tangible coalitive unity and allyship. To draw directly from Cohen's work, which has been foundational to my project, I advocate for a rendering of identity and queerness^ in which "one's relation to dominant power serves as the basis of unity for radical coalition work…"[1] Beyond the realm of cinema, this logic can function to unite marginalized peoples across disparate identities, increasing the potential for radical political action and solidarity. I believe in the power of film to create community, and tangibly impact reality.

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[1] Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," 452.

I also want to underscore the importance of cinematic representation to creating and preserving collective hope for potential futures. Creating—and making visible—divergent images of aging is a radical act: it allows us to imagine futures that may have once seemed inaccessible or inconceivable. Aging is a privilege that is not equitably guaranteed. The presence of elder representation for women of color, trans women, and queer women is essential to one's ability to imagine potential utopic futures, free from bigotry, violence, and harm. In "Known Unknowns: An Introduction to Trap Door," Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, And Johanna Burton's speak to the importance of trans* representation, writing "...representations do not simply re-present an already existing reality but are also doors into making new futures possible."[2] Cinematic images tangibly affect our reality, and our capacity to hope, dream, and imagine liberated futures. If we can create—and widely distribute—divergent, radical images of aging subjectivities, we enable them to exist in our actuality. Eliza Steinbock, referencing the false statistic that the average lifespan for trans* women is 35, further speaks to the importance of media to the outcomes and futures thought possible by trans* individuals. Steinbock explains that the statistic—true or not—"encapsulates the affective truth of the mediascape."[3] Essentially, the statistic reflects the ways in which trans* womanhood is depicted (or not) on screen, as well as the resulting affects that are produced in the spectator. If trans* women never see themselves represented on screen beyond the age of 35, what harms might that do? How do visualizations of queerness and transness—particularly for women of color—at elder ages enable viewers to imagine more hopeful outcomes and futures for themselves?

In these final words, I want to acknowledge an assortment of films and television shows that show glimmers of representative potential similar to those centered in this project. These

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[2] Burton et al., "Trap Door," xviii.
[3] Steinbock, "Framing Stigma," 55.

examples span several genres, time periods, and themes. *Going to Mars: The Nikki Giovanni Project* and *The Company of Strangers* each utilize elements of experimental, avant-garde documentary and alternative temporality to capture and preserve the subjectivities of aging women. *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*, *Cloudburst*, and *Two of Us* all feature older queer women as leads, and poignantly explore issues of aging, illness, and companionship. *The Good House* puts a somber, contemplative spin on the mainstream dramedy, complexly exploring the mental health, addiction, and alcoholism of its aging female protagonist.

As narratives centering the voices of aging women become increasingly more common in independent and mainstream European and North American cinema, a more diverse, representative array of older women *must* be afforded the privilege of visibility, in order for the transformative impacts of counter-hegemonic representations to truly be felt. I look forward to the radically divergent representations of aging that have yet to come to fruition, those that lie just beyond the horizon,[4] and hold the queer^ potential to enable our collective participation in utopic futures.

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[4] In reference to Muñoz's rendering of queerness in "Cruising Utopia."

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