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Smoothing the wrinkles: Hollywood, "successful aging" and the new visibility of older female stars

Dr. Josephine Dolan

For decades, feminist scholarship has consistently critiqued the patriarchal underpinnings of Hollywood's relationship with women, both in terms of its industrial practices and its representational systems. During its pioneering era, Hollywood was dominated by women who occupied every aspect of the film making process, both off and on screen; but the consolidation of the studio system in the 1920s and 1930s served to reduce the scope of opportunities for women working in off-screen roles. Effectively, a pattern of gendered employment was established, one that continues to confine women to so-called "feminine" crafts such as scriptwriting and costume. Celebrated exceptions like Ida Lupino, Dorothy Arzner, Norah Ephron, Nancy Meyers, and Katherine Bigelow have variously found ways to succeed as producers and directors in Hollywood's continuing male dominated culture. More typically, as recently as 2011, "women comprised only 18% of directors, executive producers, cinematographers and editors working on the top 250 domestic grossing film" (Lauzen 2012, 1).

At the same time, on-screen representations came to be increasingly predicated on a gendered star system that privileges hetero-masculine desires and are dominated by historically specific discourses of idealized and fetishized feminine beauty that, in turn, severely limit the number and types of roles available to women. As far back as 1973 Molly Haskell observed that the elision of beauty and youth that underpins Hollywood casting impacted upon the professional longevity of female stars who, at the first visible signs of aging, were deemed "too old or over-ripe for a part" - except as a marginalized mother or older sister. Meanwhile, the careers of their similarly aged male counterparts were, and continue to be, shored up by hetero-normative, romantic couplings with much younger female stars, both on and off screen (Haskell 1973: 14). Even more problematically, Hollywood's ostensible reflections on its own gendered and ageist practices represented in films such as *Sunset Boulevard* (1950 Billy Wilder) and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962 Robert Aldrich) do little more than establish older female stars as abject objects of a pathological gaze (Dolan 2013).

This formulation of the pathological gaze derives from Foucault, whose *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963/1974) suggests that the doctor/patient encounter is structured by clinicians who seek the signs of disease and abnormality on a patient's body through prior knowledge of normal, healthy bodies. It is in knowing the signs of the healthy body that the clinician recognizes the symptoms of the abnormal, and can thus diagnose ill health. The clinical gaze is therefore split between knowledge of the normal and that of the pathological. The exercise of power by the clinician suggested here is exacerbated by the medical profession's authority to constitute the terms of the normal that are brought to bear in the scrutiny of the patient's body. Extrapolating from this, films such as *Sunset Boulevard* and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* can be recognized as mobilizing a similar split gaze; a gaze that pathologizes the body of the older female star through its knowledge of youthful feminine norms that enables the signs of aging to be recognizable and readable; and for these signs to be constituted as symptoms of abnormality. Clearly, in its rendering of specific older female star bodies as pathological, this split gaze also constitutes an ideological tautology that serves to legitimate the generalized cinematic invisibility of older female stars.

Notably, other national film industries, such as that of the UK, have adopted Hollywood's narrative conventions in order to compete in the global film market. Thus the reach of Hollywood's pathologizing, ageist and gendered representational system extends far beyond films made in Los Angeles therefore making "Hollywood" a globalised paradigm. Consequently, the pattern of refusing to cast older female stars in significant roles; or casting them as marginal characters; or as abject pathological figures has become a globalized cinematic practice. And, as Simone de Beauvoir (1972), Germaine Greer (1992) and Kathleen Woodward (1999) have variously suggested, the cinematic invisibility of older, post-menopausal women is symptomatic of a broader, highly pervasive and endemic cultural marginality.

It is against this century long backdrop of cinematic marginalisation that a recent proliferation of acclaimed performances by older female stars can be recognized and registered as significant. Since circa 2000 nominations for best actress at the Academy Awards, Hollywood's annual celebration of its own highest achievements, suggest that a female star's fiftieth birthday no longer signals retirement. When Meryl Streep won the best actress accolade in 2011 for *The Iron Lady* (Phylidda Lloyd) it followed nominations in 1999, 2002, 2006, 2008 and 2009 for *Music of the Heart* (Wes Craven), *Adaptation* (Spike Jonze), *The Devil Wears Prada* (David Frankel), *Doubt* (John Patrick Shanley) and *Julie and Julia* (Nora Ephron). Similarly, Helen Mirren's 2006 best actress award for her performance in *The Queen* (Stephen Frears) came to be bracketed by 2001 and 2004 nominations for *Gosford Park* (Robert Altman) and *The Last Station* (Michael Hoffman). Other older female stars who have been nominated for "best actress" are Judi Dench in 2001, 2005 and 2007 for *Iris* (Richard Eyre), *Mrs. Henderson Presents* (Stephen Frears) and *Notes on a Scandal* (Richard Eyre); Ellen Burstyn in 2000 for *Requiem for a Dream* (Darren Aronofsky); Diane Keaton in 2003 for *Something's Gotta Give* (Nancy Meyers); Annette Bening in 2005 and 2010 for *Being Julia* (István Szabó) and *The Kid's Are All Right* (Lisa Cholodenko); Julie Christie in 2007 for *Away From Her* (Sarah Polley); and Glenn Close in 2011 for *Albert Nobbs* (Rodrigo Garcia). This new, and celebrated visibility of older female stars can be, and should be, seen as an important breakthrough indicating that some adjustments are taking place within Hollywood patriarchy and that the signs of age inscribed on the bodies of older female stars are no longer equated with a normalized invisibility and its associated pathologized visibility.

However, a closer study of older female stardom suggests that celebrations of this new visibility need to be carefully qualified. Theorists of stardom (see. Eg. Dyer 1979, 1986; Gledhill 1991) have long suggested that stars cannot be reduced to marketing and promotional strategies; or to the economic success of their films; or to the popularity of a given actress/actor; or indeed to the quality of their performances. Rather, as Dyer suggests, stars need to be understood as "always extensive, multimedia, intertextual" and as complex and polysemic signifying systems that are fully implicated in the circulation and reproduction of dominant discourses and ideologies (Dyer 1991: 3). Crucially, stars function as, "embodiments of the social categories in which people are placed and through which they make sense of their lives, and indeed through which we make our lives – categories of class, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and so on" (Dyer 1991: 18). In other words, stars make discursively produced identities seem as if they are biological, and hence, essential properties of the body.

It thus comes as no surprise that older female stars are typically positioned to embody idealised aging femininity within Hollywood's hetero-normative sexual paradigm, though this is rarely articulated as active sexuality. Mostly, older female stars are cast in roles where

their sexuality is repressed in some way. This occurs through religious convention in *Doubt*, illness in *The Last Station* and *Iris*, age-related lack of opportunity in *Mrs. Henderson Presents*, and the gender and sexual confusions of transvestism in *Albert Nobbs. Notes on a Scandal* is unusual in its depiction of lesbian desire, but this is effectively pathologized through its story of predatory sexual harassment. *Something's Gotta Give* is one of the few films suggesting positive and active female sexuality, although as Sally Chivers (2011: 129-134) observes, the female protagonist, Erica (Diane Keaton), functions largely to secure aging masculinity within age appropriate coupledom and to prop up Jack Nicholson's embodiment of aging virility. Clearly then, apart from opportunities offered to older female stars, little has changed since Haskell first staged her trenchant critique of Hollywood's masculinist representational system.

Such masculinist reiterations are not the only problem due to the striking absence from this new visibility of aging stars like Angela Basset and Whoopi Goldberg whose youthful successes have already thrown into relief the acute marginalisation of non-white actresses in the Hollywood paradigm (see eg Tasker, 1988). Whilst Bassett has been sidelined into less prestigious television roles, Goldberg is literally rendered invisible through recent performances in which she is heard rather than seen - as a documentary film narrator; or the voice of Stretch, an animated character in *Toy Story 3* (2010 Lee Unkrich). Such exclusionary practices are highly problematic; not only because they marginalise non-white older stars, but because they also reproduce the ubiquitous and pernicious white, racial privilege that is normalized and rendered ideologically hegemonic through the embodiments of Hollywood's star system. (see eg. Dyer, 1977). If older female stars can be recognised as embodiments of a problematic and discursively produced, white, racial identity, what of old age itself? What does the new visibility of older female stars suggest about contemporary discourses of old age and what particular inscriptions of old age are embodied by older female stars? Moreover, does the new visibility of older female stars suggest that Hollywood has relinquished its pathologizing gaze?

Embodiment and "Successful Aging"

More than twenty years ago, cultural gerontologists were identifying an emergent, regulatory discourse of "successful aging" (Rowe and Kahn 1987, 1997) which Byrnes and Dillway have subsequently summarised as being "the avoidance of disease or disease susceptibility, a high cognitive capacity, and active engagement with life" (Byrnes and Dillway 2004: 67). This model of "successful aging" is now established as the common sense alternative to, and remedy for, those accounts of burdensome and vulnerable old age that underpin gloomy predictions of the economic and emotional costs to the state, to communities, and to families of an aging population. Because of their capacity to naturalize discourse and ideology, stars offer an especially efficient mechanism through which to secure "successful aging" as hegemonic. Through both the characters they play, and their continuing presence in the media circuits of contemporary culture, older stars function to make "successful aging" seem like "common sense."

Indeed, stars can be seen to play a part in the negotiation of "successful aging" itself. When the configuration first emerged it was associated with the promise of a leisured, golden retirement funded by a combination of state and private pensions. However, because of the global recession of 2008, the dream of leisured retirement has been deferred for the duration. Across the west, in the context of nationally variable retirement ages, the raising of official retirement ages has effectively extended working life for both men and women. One result of

this has been the transformation of "successful aging" from being a discourse of leisured retirement to it being a regulatory regime of the body "fit for work." With their continuing careers, all older stars can be seen to embody the deferment of retirement, while powerfully signifying the "fit for work" body. For female stars, however, the alignment between this version of "successful aging" and their old age bodies is not as straightforward as for their male counterparts. Older male stars have always been represented as employed, active, engaged and hetero-virile and therefore readily available to embody the emergent discourses of "successful aging" and hence, deferred retirement. But, in order for female stars to perform this function, they first must be removed from their persistent position of invisibility, or pathologized visibility, and be made available for visible celebration instead. In this context then, the high profile of older female stars at the Academy Awards can be seen as a crucial stage in the achievement of their alignment with, and embodiment of, formulations of "successful aging." However, because of women's complex engagement with paid work under patriarchy, and prevailing assumptions that women do not *really* retire because of continuing domestic responsibilities, there is less urgency that discourses of deferred retirement are ideologically secured through their inscription on the bodies of older female stars. There is no intention here to suggest that the work performed by older female stars does not lock into injunctions for working women to defer retirement from paid work. Rather, my aim is to register how the embodiment of successful aging is deflected through gender difference and the constitution of aging femininity.

The constitution of a feminized "successful aging" is most apparent when it becomes little more than an extension into old age of what Naomi Wolf (1991) terms "The Beauty Myth"; that is a set of normalized and regulatory discourses of ideal feminine beauty which implicitly privilege the appearance of youth over that of old age. This extension can be recognized in many highly publicized red-carpet appearances by older female stars such as Cher, Susan Sarandon, Goldie Hawn and Faye Dunaway, as much as the panoply of Oscar nominees listed above. Similarly, the old age extension of "The Beauty Myth" is reiterated in well-paid endorsements for L'Oreal cosmetics by Jane Fonda and Andie MacDowell who repeatedly assure us that "We're worth it". Meanwhile, stars such as Nicole Kidman, whose curiously unfurrowed, immobile brow suggest that it is never too soon to smooth the wrinkles, foreground the prevalence of cosmetic interventions such as Botox and face lifts that effectively "youthify" the appearance of the female star's aging body, thus enabling them to embody a particularly feminine version of "successful aging."

However, the wrinkle-free face that signifies feminine "successful aging" is not solely dependent on cosmetics and surgical procedures. Vivian Sobchak notes an equal dependence on post-production techniques such as air-brushing and computer graphic transformations, what she terms the "second operation of plastic surgery" (Sobchak 1999: 206). The artifice of these transformations has led to consumer protests and legal action on both sides of the Atlantic. In 2012, the UK's Advertising Standards Authority ruled that the L'Oreal campaign faced up by Rachel Weisz was exaggerated and misleading and banned it, although the watchdog agency rejected complaints about a separate L'Oreal commercial for a moisturizer featuring a photograph of actress Jane Fonda (Reuters 2012). It also banned some Photoshopped cosmetics ads featuring Julia Roberts and Christy Turlington. After the National Advertising Division (NAD) of the Council of Better Business Bureaus ruled that a CoverGirl mascara ad was misleading, Procter & Gamble shut down the advertising. The NAD, which can issue rulings but cannot itself enforce them, said it was following the lead of its sister body in the U.K.

Suspicions of the photographic image's unreliability thus engendered makes "live" appearance by older female stars on chat shows and at red carpet events all the more powerful since it ostensibly bypasses the opportunity for "second operation of plastic surgery" and allows for the "successfully" aged body to be effectively displayed. Such "live" appearances also illuminate how the effort of smoothing the wrinkles is not confined to the faces of stars but also extends to bodies that are seemingly unmarked by pregnancy or overindulgence; characterized by slender legs, pert breasts and buttocks and displayed through revealing and figure hugging dresses. While live appearances provide rich sites for exhibiting this feminine version of "successful aging", they pale in comparison when compared to the power of paparazzi images. Famously, in 2008, just months after receiving an Oscar for her performance in the title role of *The Queen*, a globally circulated paparazzi shot of a bikini clad Helen Mirren established her as the idealized benchmark of the older women's body and the embodiment of "senior sexiness" (see eg. *Mail Online* 28 July 2008). The power of such photographs resides in the absence of specific investments in preserving Mirren's image. In the paparazzi paradigm a shot breaking the "magic spell" of "cosmeceutical enhancement" (Sobchak 1999: 202) by revealing the signs of letting go (flab, body hair, stretch marks), the signs of maintenance (leaving the gym, leaving the beauty parlour, leaving the clinic), or signs of surgery (attempts to conceal scars, before and after images) are just as valuable. Therefore, Mirren is completely distanced from those pre or post production enhancements of star imagery that underpin official promotion; thus, the bikini image works as testimony to a "natural" achievement of "successful aging." Once discourse is rendered "natural" in this way, its ideological function is effaced and it readily enters into "common sense."

Crucially, while the discourses surrounding the Mirren bikini shot naturalize the "successfully aged" female body, there is no pretence that it should be effortless. *The Daily Mail* points out, "this was no retouched studio shot, with the only work to transform her toned body having been carried out during gruelling hours in the gym" (2008). Similarly, in 2011 during an interview on NBC's "Today" show, Jane Fonda forged a link between effort and "successful aging" when she rationalised her own election of plastic surgery despite having foresworn such procedures when she had signed as the "aging face" of L'Oreal cosmetics 5 years earlier. In that "regretful" interview she said,

> It's important to exercise when you're younger. But it's like the number one ingredient for successful aging. … It's less about trying to look a certain way as being able to get up and down out of a chair, carry your grandkids, look over your shoulder when backing down a driveway. Staying independent as you can. (Fonda 2011)

It is tempting to accuse Fonda, who had just updated her trademark fitness videos, of dissembling and disavowing her own economic, emotional and psychological investments in "successful aging." But this overlooks the interpellatory power of discourse by conflating the person Jane Fonda, who no doubt suffers all manner of anxieties about her aging body, with the star image Jane Fonda, whose signifying system both exploits and is exploited by ideologies of feminine beauty at their intersection with formations of "successful aging."

"Successful Aging" disrupted

All this echoes Sadie Wearing's formulation of "new aging," which she suggests is characterized by the increased visibility of the older female body and a concomitant desire to disavow the negative connotations of aging per se, while also avoiding the equally negative connotations of an overly youthful appearance epitomized by the damning phrase, "mutton

dressed as lamb." According to Wearing, recent representations of the aging female body attempt to "have it both ways" insofar as they "offer the fantasy of therapeutic rejuvenation while remaining firmly entrenched in a coercive and moralizing policing of aesthetic and gender norms," that, "set the standards of both chronological decorum and time defiance regulating" (Wearing 2007: 304-305). Anxieties about "chronological decorum" are evident in the numerous "best and worst gown" web pages from both fans and "official" sources such as on-line newspapers that are annually published in the wake of each year's Academy Award ceremonies. For instance, adjudications of a failure to comply with time defiance regulation are implicit in Liz Jones's remarks that Meryl Streep's dress had "too much fabric" (*Mail Online* 2012) and highly explicit when Sum and Goto judge the dress to be "dated" (*Time Entertainment* 2012).

But where the adjudications of "chronological decorum" are brought to bear on Streep for the concealment of her flesh, Madonna is judged for the excessive exposure of hers as typified by the question "Should the material girl wear more material"? (Celebuzz website). As Diane Railton and Paul Watson (2012) note, the global circulation of similar discourses constitutes a radical shift from Madonna's image as the "material girl" of the 1980s, when her film and music-derived popularity was at its peak, to her current incarnation as an aging pop diva. Always controversial because of her performance of pornographic gestures and use of fetishistic costume in the representational spaces of her music videos and films, she nonetheless mesmerized with her ability to switch between distinct sexed and gendered identities through her proud display of a well toned body. This served to highlight gender performativity by unsettling naturalised assumptions that muscularity is a biological property of the male body. However, since she reached her fifties, Madonna has been increasingly vilified for exposing her flesh - a "tawdry embarrassment," as Jane Fryer (2012) puts it.

Notably, the discourses surrounding Madonna's exposed flesh sharply contrast to those about Helen Mirren. The latter's "enviable curves and flat stomach" (*Mail Online* 2008) are heralded as an exemplary example of "senior sexiness," Madonna is scorned because of her sinewy arms; gnarled, bony knees and "wrinkled and vein-ravaged hands that reveal she is battling to defy the signs of aging" (2007). Unlike Mirren, Madonna's skin is represented as bearing the signs of aging - it sags, it wrinkles, it is visibly veined. Therefore, it seems, Madonna's transgression of "chronological decorum" is not produced through the exposure of flesh per se, but rather, the terms of transgression are defined through the *type* of flesh on show, and by extension, by the signs of aging thus made visible. In short, Madonna displays the wrong kind of flesh to be allowed the burden of exposure. She apparently embodies an incipient old age that cannot be contained, controlled, managed or concealed by the efforts of exercise or diet or cosmetics.

Two points must be made here. First, the contempt for Madonna's flesh reveals how little has really changed since the production of *Sunset Boulevard* and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* The body of the aging female star can still be rendered the object of a pathologizing gaze if it fails the injunctions of "chronological decorum." This position usefully exposes the extent to which the new visibility of the older female star is contingent on conformity to "successful aging" agendas and contingent on the extent to which the star can embody, and thus naturalize its ideologies. Secondly, the deployment of a pathological gaze onto the body of Madonna illuminates some of the cultural anxieties – both public and personal – that attend the feared collapse of "successful aging." Such anxieties can be recognised in the fantasy film *Stardust*, (Gamain 2007) where Michelle Pfeiffer plays the role of an ancient witch, Lamia, whose youthful appearance is shown to be conditional on constant

replenishment by energy stolen from earthbound, womanly, embodied celestial stars. Notably, as Lamia's energy drains, her youthful beauty literally unravels and peels away exposing the abject crone beneath. In this especially invidious representation of aging femininity that tellingly slides between film and celestial stars, Pfeiffer, like Madonna, can be seen as embodying both the growing hegemony of cosmeceutical enhancement and the surrounding cultural anxieties about its vulnerability. Crucially, both Madonna and Pfeiffer disturbingly foreground anxieties about the provisionality of "successful aging," its propensity to rupture, to break down, to revert to an underlying and inevitable "*un*successful aging" that portends the final stages of life. Here flesh is not pathologized simply because it bears the signs of aging, but because those signs of aging are a potent reminder of our universal mortality.

In other instances the body of the older female star is inscribed with the cultural anxieties associated with other pathologized signs of aging such as mental decline. In 2007, somewhat disingenuously given that she was just 40 years old at the time, Nicole Kidman became the female face of Nintendo's Brain Training campaign. As such she said, 'I've quickly found that training my brain is a great way to keep my mind feeling young' (June 25 2007). As with the wrinkle free brow, Kidman suggests that it is never too soon to forestall the ostensible declines of old age. This positions "keeping the mind young" is pivotal to the achievement of "successful aging" and as the counterpoint to its opposite, the failing, old age mind associated with conditions such as Alzheimer's and dementia - defined by that loss of cognitive capacity that precludes the active engagement with life crucial to "successful aging".

In recent years, representations of cognitive loss as both feared and fearful have been central to several highly acclaimed performances by older female stars - Judi Dench for *Iris*, Julie Christie for *Away From Her* and Meryl Streep for *The Iron Lady*. In their treatment of older women as disturbed and disturbing, as objects of a pathologising gaze, these films bear striking resemblances to representations of abject femininity in *Sunset Boulevard* and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*. However, where those earlier films were very much a reflection of Hollywood's own neglect of its aging female stars, these more recent films take their bearings from current cultural anxieties about the vulnerable old age that lies beyond "successful aging." Sally Chivers (2011) suggests that these anxieties are managed through a heightening and re-configuring of Hollywood's hetero-normative imperative through the intimacies and commitments of a loving care that supplants sexuality as the glue of coupledom (75). In some ways, this renders these films postfeminist in that they represent masculinity through terms akin to that of the caring "new man," whilst their chronological contemporaneity with Second Wave Feminism "proves" that feminist protest was never necessary in the first place. Equally, the films' reconfiguration of the emotional dynamics of hetero-normative caring powerfully locates the care of the vulnerable elderly as a private, domestic concern in ways that ideologically efface the collective economic and emotional responsibilities of communities or the State.

Notably, this ideological work is produced through the on-screen abjection and pathologization of older female stars. However, this rarely bleeds into the female star's off-screen persona because surrounding discourses emphasize performance and acting ability. As exemplified by Mirren, Christie and Streep this typically culminates in highly publicized Academy Award nominations and associated red carpet appearances where their newly restored glamour forges a clear separation between abjected character and celebrated star whereby the character, and not the star, bears the burden of the pathological gaze. In other words, these stars are not positioned as the embodiment of cognitive loss, and by extension, their ability to embody "successful aging" is not disrupted. This undoubtedly serves the

interests of Hollywood, but it also suggests that "successful aging" has a privileged and protected status in the embodied ideologies of old age.

As this essay highlights, the new visibility of older female Hollywood stars is fully bound up in the production, reproduction and embodiment of a complex nexus of feminised discourses of "successful aging" that incorporates and naturalises ideologies of deferred retirement, cosmeceutical enhancement, and chronological decorum into longstanding formations of normative whiteness. Weaving through this are those pathologized ruptures to "successful aging" occasioned by signifiers of mortality inscribed on the flesh of older female stars and/or reproduced in their performances of abject, cognitive failure and which point to the broader cultural anxieties that attend western demographics of aging. Whilst the dynamic of this nexus serves to protect older female stars from alignment with pathologized abjection, it does so in ways that effectively privilege the terms of "successful aging." Effectively, the new visibility of older female stars is thus rendered *conditional* on conformity to The Beauty Myth's extension into old age and the effacement of potential ruptures to the ideological hegemony of "successful aging."

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